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Sexism and Sexual Prejudice (Homophobia): The Impact of the Gender Belief System and Inversion Theory on Sexual Orientation Research and Attitudes toward Sexual Minorities

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ABSTRACT. The gender belief system (Deaux & Kite, 1987) is a pervasive, often unrecognized belief system that perpetuates bias by being an underlying part of the worldview in many cultures. This paper outlines how the assumptions within the gender belief system and inversion theory result in the enduring stereotype that lesbians are masculine and gay men are feminine, and how this stereotype continues to impact psychological research and attitudes toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals. The purpose is to assist counselors in recognizing sexist and heterosexist bias in
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

research and perhaps within their own worldview and beliefs about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) people.

KEYWORDS. Sexual orientation, gender role expression, stereotyping, gay, lesbian, bisexual

The gender belief system (Deaux & Kite, 1987) is a pervasive, often unrecognized belief system that perpetuates bias by being an underlying part of the worldview in many cultures. This paper outlines how the assumptions within the gender belief system and inversion theory result in the enduring stereotype that lesbians are masculine and gay men are feminine, and how this stereotype continues to impact psychological research and attitudes toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals. The examination of this belief system is consistent with the Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Counseling (ALGBTIC) guidelines for competency in working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) clients (Logan & Barret, 2005). The guidelines include, but are not limited to, the following: competent counselors will (a) recognize how internalized prejudice, including heterosexism, racism, and sexism, may influence the counselor’s own attitudes as well as those of their LGBT clients, and (b) recognize the potential for heterosexist bias in the interpretation and reporting of research results. The purpose of this examination of the gender belief system and inversion theory is to assist counselors in recognizing sexist and heterosexist bias in research and perhaps within their own worldview and beliefs about LGBT people.

We begin by summarizing the gender belief system, a comprehensive set of commonly held opinions and beliefs about gender. Next, we cover the beliefs and assumptions about the intersection of gender and sexuality. We then discuss the ways these implicit and explicit assumptions about gender and sexuality have historically had, and continue to have, an impact on research on sexual orientation and the general population’s attitudes toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. Finally, we offer suggestions for research to differentially evaluate the impact of gender role expression and sexual orientation on attitudes toward others and suggestions for eliminating bias in research.
Gender Belief System

Deaux and Kite (1987) coined the term *gender belief system* to describe a comprehensive set of ideas and beliefs about gender. This belief system includes:

a set of beliefs and opinions about males and females and about the purported qualities of masculinity and femininity . . . stereotypes of women and men, attitudes toward the appropriate roles and behaviors of women and men, and attitudes toward individuals who are believed to differ in some significant way from the modal pattern (e.g. homosexual). (p. 97)

The gender belief system works as a filter through which we perceive characteristics of individual men and women (Deaux & LaFrance, 1998). In other words, this comprehensive belief system shapes the perceptions and attitudes we hold about men and women—including our attitudes toward those who do not to conform to our stereotypes.

Additionally, there is a cultural element to the gender belief system. As Kite (2001) suggests, our perceptions are influenced by social expectations. Thus, one’s perceptions about men and women and what it means to be masculine and/or feminine are at least partially based on beliefs and assumptions about gender within one’s culture.

To fully understand the gender belief system and how it affects our perceptions, it is important to highlight some of the assumptions and beliefs about gender which are elements of this belief system. For example, in her book, *The Lenses of Gender*, Bem (1993) outlined two implicit or “hidden” assumptions which influence how we think about and research gender. Although she was not specifically addressing the gender belief system per se, the assumptions about gender that she identified can assist in explaining the gender belief system. These two hidden assumptions are: (a) biological essentialism (behaviors are the natural and inevitable consequence of intrinsic biological natures), and (b) gender polarization (the social categorization of the world in terms of gender difference including mutually exclusive scripts for being male and females). A third assumption identified by Bem, androcentrism (male experience as the neutral standard or norm), is related to stereotyping in general, but is not explicitly a component of the gender belief system.
Essentialism ties gender to biological sex. Thus, if one knows that a person’s biological sex is female, it is assumed that her gender identity is that of a woman and that she adopts a feminine or at least a “more” feminine gender role. Additionally, essentialism within the gender belief system model includes the belief and expectation that gender is a coherent and congruent construct (Kite & Whitley, 2003). When a person holds one characteristic of a particular gender (e.g., long hair) then the person is expected to have other characteristics associated with that gender (e.g., a caring nature). As discussed more fully below, this congruence extends from gender to sexual orientation, or more specifically heterosexuality. Thus, the above construed female would also be assumed to be sexually attracted to a man.

The gender belief system also reflects an assumption of gender polarization. Gender polarization assumes the unidimensional and bipolar nature of masculinity/femininity. This unidimensionality implicitly takes on a mutually exclusive nature. Thus, what is feminine is not masculine and just as importantly, what is not feminine is masculine (Bem, 1993; Deaux & Kite, 1987; Kite, 2001).

In summary, the gender belief system is a set of culturally-based opinions and beliefs about gender including stereotypes about men and women, attitudes about gender role, and attitudes about those who transgress gender role. The gender belief system contains a set of ideas and assumptions that tends to be comprehensively shared among individuals within cultures. Gender is viewed as a stable construct which is also linked to sexual orientation, and those who have aspects of a particular gender are expected to have other characteristics of that gender as well. Two common major components of the gender belief system (in Western culture and possibly others) are assumptions of gender polarization (masculine and feminine are opposite and mutually exclusive) and essentialism (masculinity and femininity are tied to biological sex). These underlying assumptions within the gender belief system are key to the understanding of inversion theory, the theory leading to one of the major stereotypical belief sets about gay, lesbians, and bisexual people.

**Inversion Theory: The Intersection of Gender and Sexual Orientation**

The term *sexual inversion* and the pathology associated with it first came into use in the late 19th century. In Bem’s (1993) discussion of inversion
and its relationship to gender polarization, she suggested that the term was used to refer to anyone who exhibited cross-gender behaviors, whether these behaviors were erotic in nature or not. Initially, the “inversion” was an inversion of gender identity. During this historical period, sexual orientation was still conceptualized as a component of gender identity. Inverts were men who were feminine and women who were masculine. Because attraction and masculinity/femininity were not seen as separate constructs, masculinity included attraction to women and femininity included attraction to men. Initially, the pathology of inversion was more about being inappropriate to gender role than to whom one was attracted. In other words, even though the term transgendered was not used at that time, it was this population that was being described as pathological.

At the turn of the century Havelock Ellis and John Symonds (1897/1975) and Freud (1905/1986) began to focus on sexual attraction as a component of inversion separate from gender identity. It was in their work that inversion became about sexual attraction rather than gender identity or role. This separation led to the redefinition of the supposed pathology as homosexuality. Gender role characteristics became a secondary component to object of attraction. In his theory of development, Freud (1905/1986) believed that homosexuality was due to over-identification with the opposite sex parent. Because sexual behavior or attraction was the focus of his theory as a whole, inversion took on this new focus. Even though sexual orientation was the characteristic that was specifically said to be inverted away from the norm of heterosexuality, inversion was extended to encompass all other aspects of the gay person’s identity. Thus, the over identification with the opposite sex parent also led to the gay or lesbian person taking on the gender role of that parent. Bisexuality was apparently inconceivable to these early theorists.

Although philosophically these early theorists began the process of separating sexual orientation from gender identity, in their writings, sexual orientation continued to be tied to gender identity, or rather more specifically to masculinity and femininity (Terry, 1990). The assumptions included within the gender belief system were so embedded in the cultural view of gender that even when theorists attempted to separate gender identity, homosexuality, and masculinity/femininity, their writings continued to encompass all components in association with one another (e.g. homosexuality caused by over-identification with opposite sex). In essence, inversion theorists assumed a false tautology between gender role expression and sexual orientation. For them, masculinity was equated with attraction to women and femininity was equated with attraction to men. As
a tautology, the reverse also held true—attraction to women was equated with masculinity, and attraction to men was equated with femininity. In other words, incongruence between gender role and biological sex became part and parcel of what it meant to be homosexual. Inversion theory and the assumptions regarding the congruence of gender and sexuality that underlie the gender belief system are therefore responsible for one of the more enduring stereotypes about gays and lesbians—that they display characteristics of the opposite sex.

This inversion stereotype has pervaded psychological research and popular culture both explicitly and implicitly (Kite & Deaux, 1987; Whitley, 2001). In the late 1970’s, gender identity and sexual orientation began to be defined as separate constructs (Shively & DeCecco, 1977). Despite the general acceptance of this separation of constructs in the literature today, research questions abound that assume that gay men are like women and that lesbians are like men in some manner. The gender belief system and inversion theory have led to the placement of traditional gender role conformity and heterosexuality as the norm with violations/deviations from these so called norms, the effect to be studied.

ASSUMPTIONS IN RESEARCH

Biological

Inversion theory has implicitly influenced biological research with the study of so called “neuroendocrine masculinization and feminization of the brain” and studies of brain anatomy hypothesizing similarities between heterosexual female and homosexual male brains (LeVay, 1991). Children with non-traditional gender role interests have been used as subjects in studies of biological causation (Berenbaum & Hines, 1992) and familial genetic influence (Zuger, 1989). Studies by Bailey and Zucker (1995) and Green (1987) 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. In fact, despite caution on methodological and theoretical grounds (Bailey, 1995) and contradictory evidence (Ritter & Terndrup, 2002), the works of the aforementioned authors are leading to the use of prehomosexual and probably prehomosexual to refer to children with gender role incongruent behaviors. Gottschalk (2003) provides a detailed critique of biolog-
Personality: Masculinity/Femininity

The gender belief system has influenced the ways in which difference and sameness has been studied in women and men. Early researchers’ conceptualizations of masculinity/femininity conformed to a bipolar view (Terman & Miles, 1936). The more contemporary plethora of research on masculinity/femininity and instrumentality/expressivity has created a body of knowledge that accepts these constructs as coherent and measurable. Even though they are accepted as consistent constructs, there are many definitions and instruments developed to measure them. The most widely used descriptions of the constructs of masculinity and femininity have been conceptualized by Bem (1974) and Spence and Helmreich (1978) as separate dimensions. People scoring high on both masculinity and femininity are described as androgynous. However, some contemporary authors contend that masculinity/femininity can be viewed as a bipolar construct as well as separate dimensions (e.g., Lippa, 2001), and even researchers using the dimensional approach sometimes interpret their results in ways that are consistent with a bipolar conceptualization, particularly when it conforms to traditional stereotypes of gays and lesbians.

Researchers have conducted numerous studies on masculinity and femininity in gays and lesbians using personality traits (Finlay & Scheltema, 1999; Taylor, 1983), physical features (Dunkle & Francis, 1990), and vocal and visual cues (Berger, Hank, Rauzi, & Simkins, 1987). In one of the earliest and most commonly cited studies, Bell, Weinberg, and Hammersmith (1981) based their findings on interviews conducted in 1969–70 with 477 heterosexual men and women, and 979 gay men and lesbians. Although their study explored a variety of characteristics and issues related to LGB people, a portion of their work looked at masculinity and femininity.

Bell and his colleagues (1981) reported their results in a manner that supported stereotypes despite interpretation later in their book that acknowledged diversity in gender role expression among lesbians and gays. Based on measures of interviewer descriptions and self descriptions of participants, 54% of the lesbians in their sample were classified as “masculine” (p. 205) and 44% of the gay men were classified as “effeminate” (p. 198). Despite these findings, individual statistics were often reported in a way that reflected common stereotypes. For example they reported:
Far fewer homosexual than heterosexual men reported having enjoyed boys’ activities (e.g., baseball, football) “very much” (WHMs [White Homosexual Males]: 11%, WHTMs [White Heterosexual Males]: 70%).

A minority of the respondents, homosexual or heterosexual, said that they had enjoyed stereotypical girls’ activities “somewhat” or “very much” (e.g., playing house, hopscotch, jacks); these responses, however, were given by more homosexual than heterosexual men (WHMs: 46%, WHTMs: 11%). (pp. 75–76)

These statistics were reported in a way that compared gay men to heterosexual men and emphasized the stereotypical findings by including “somewhat” and “very much” responses when considering feminine activities while only including “very much” responses for masculine activities. Additionally, although they acknowledged that a minority of all respondent males enjoyed stereotypical girls’ activities, they went on to compare gay and straight responses without reporting the total number that would put the minority in perspective. When reporting on lesbian preferences, only the “very much” category was reported. They state:

Fewer of the homosexual than of the heterosexual women said they enjoyed typical girls’ activities (e.g. playing house, hopscotch, or jacks) very much (WHFs [White Homosexual Females]: 13%, WHTFs [White Heterosexual Females]: 55%).

More of the homosexual respondents said they enjoyed typical boys’ activities (e.g., baseball, football) very much (WHFs: 71%, WHTFs: 28%). (p. 147)

Furthermore, Bell et al. (1981) reported that they had found a powerful link between gender nonconformity in childhood and the development of homosexuality. Gender nonconformity was defined as a combination of traditional and nontraditional play interests combined with self described masculinity or femininity. For women they reported that “[a] majority of the homosexual females, but a tenth of the heterosexual females described themselves as having been very masculine while they were growing up (WHFs: 62%, WHTFs: 10%)” (p. 149). The women did not differ in their interest for non-gendered activities, but these percentages were not re-
ported. Non-gendered activities for both sexes were excluded from the definition of the gender nonconformity variable. For men they reported, “Few homosexual respondents said they were ‘feminine’ while they were growing up” (p. 80), but Bell et al. went on to state, “Most of the heterosexual men, however, said that they had been ‘very’ masculine, while only a fourth as many homosexual men said so (WHMs: 18%, WHTMs: 67%)” (p. 80). Given their own classification that 44% of the gay men were effeminate and 54% of the lesbians were masculine, the “powerful connection” only holds true for a minority of gay men and a little more than half of the lesbians.

Bell and colleagues also stated:

This is not to say that all the homosexual respondents displayed atypical gender traits or interests while they were growing up. About half the homosexual men appear to have been typically “masculine,” both in personal identity and in interests and activities (and nearly a quarter of the heterosexual men were not conforming in these respects). Likewise, only about a fifth of the lesbians and about a third of the heterosexual women were highly “feminine” while they were growing up... gender nonconformity does not inevitably signal future homosexuality. (1981, p. 188)

One could argue that the Bell et al. (1981) study was a product of its time. However, more recent work is not immune to bias from an underlying and possibly unrecognized gender belief system. In a review conducted for this article, 75 journal articles citing the Bell et al. study were selected randomly from the Social Sciences Citation Index from 1995 to 2005. Twenty-eight of the 75 studies cited the gender nonconformity or childhood play interests results. Of these more than one half (16) presented results in a stereotypical or skewed manner, for example, “[This finding] supports a strong association between cross-sex behavior in childhood and adult homosexuality” (Haslam, 1997, p. 863) and, “In their youth gay men experience gender-inconsistent interests” (Jellison & McConnell, 2003, p. 160). The other 12 studies’ citations were relatively neutral or used language such as “less likely” or “some homosexual men and women.” This tendency in reporting is not limited to the citing of Bell et al. (1981).

Reviews of studies of masculinity/femininity in gays and lesbians reveal that often when measuring masculinity/femininity in relation to sexual ori-
entation, lesbians were more likely to have higher masculinity scores but not lower femininity scores (androgyny) than heterosexual women (Finlay & Scheltema, 1999). Furthermore, gay males were more likely to rate higher on femininity or androgyny (not necessarily lower on masculinity) (Taywaditep, 2001). However, the research questions and results in many studies were written, and cited by others, in a way that supported the underlying inversion stereotype that gay males are more feminine and lesbians are more masculine, not that they demonstrate androgynous characteristics.

Several recent studies illustrate this point. Lippa (2000) developed a predictive measure of “Homosexual-Heterosexual Diagnosticity” wherein the author stated “reliable gay-heterosexual diagnosticity measures . . . and similarly, reliable lesbian-heterosexual diagnosticity measures could be computed for women, based on participants occupational and hobby preferences” (p. 922). The author went on to further equate “gender diagnosticity” with these constructs. Haslam (1997) used the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2 (MMPI-2) Masculinity-Femininity scale as “an indirect but empirically reliable indicator” of male homosexuality despite research to the contrary (Green, 2000; Wong, 1984). In a study of attitudes toward gays and lesbians and gender role behavior, Schope and 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 stereotypical assumptions about lesbians and gay men that stem from (or are a part of) the gender belief system and inversion theory are pervasive and continue to influence research. This in turn may contribute to perpetuating the stereotypes both among those conducting research and to consumers of research. Hegarty and Pratto (2004) explored the meanings and inferences people make from research that compares men and women and heterosexuals with lesbians and gays. Using vignettes of fictional research studies about stereotype-consistent and stereotype-inconsistent findings, they found that people placed higher value on the results of stereotype-consistent findings. Their research may help explain why the inversion stereotype persists and leads to literature citations that focus on the stereotype-consistent results in spite of results within the same study that minimize or qualify the findings (as described above).

The enduring stereotypes about gender role and sexual orientation also influence beliefs and attitudes toward people who violate gender roles expectations—gay or straight. Furthermore, people tend to make
stereotypical judgments about others based on relatively little information (Schneider, 2004).

ASSUMPTIONS AND ATTITUDES IN POPULAR CULTURE

Appearance

Researchers have evaluated whether it is possible to reliably identify the sexual orientation of another based on observation. Linville (1998) found that sexual orientation could be accurately judged on brief speech samples. Ambady, Hallahan, and Conner (1999) found that their participants were accurate in identifying sexual orientation most of the time. However, Berger et al. (1987) found that when using 2- to 3-minute video clips with sound, participants could determine sexual orientation at no better than chance levels. Caroll and Gilroy (2002) and Shelp (2002) evaluated lesbians’ and gay men’s abilities to identify others’ sexual orientation with mixed results. Presumably, there is nothing inherent in appearance (i.e. a particular shape of nose) that allows one to identify another’s sexual orientation; however, most of these researchers did not explore other variables influencing perceptions. 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.

Berger et al. (1987) found that people fared no better than chance at accurately guessing targets’ sexual orientation. However, when they asked participants to give reasons for their guesses, masculine/feminine appearances were significant cues identified. Dunkle and Francis (1990) studied the effect of facial masculinity/femininity on attributions of sexual orientation and found that masculine female faces and feminine male faces were more likely to be judged respectively as lesbian and gay. Furthermore, Madson (2000) found that androgynous appearing people were more likely than others to be assessed as gay or lesbian. Wong, McCrery, Carpenter, Engle, and Korchynsky (1999) found a significant link between perceived masculinity or femininity and assumed sexual orientation consistent with the gender belief system.

In summary, it is common for people to adhere to the stereotype that gender role expression is tied to sexual orientation, particularly that masculine women are lesbians and feminine men are gay. In addition, those who violate traditional gender roles in appearance or personality tend to illicit negative attitudes from others.
Attitudes Toward Gender Role Transgressors

The effects of sexism and expectations for women’s behavior are well documented in the literature. More recently, some researchers have begun to focus on the effect of expectations for men to adhere to traditional male gender roles (e.g., the journal *Men and Masculinities*). Historically, the “rules” have relaxed somewhat from the time 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.

Research on society’s attitudes toward gender incongruent people indicates negative attitudes toward people who act in a gender nonconforming manner, and that these attitudes are developed early in life (Lobel & Menashri, 1993). In their study looking specifically at child development of stereotypes, Levy, Taylor, and Gelman (1995) showed that although flexibility in gender role transgressions increases with age (e.g., who can play with trucks), evaluative flexibility remained stable and in some cases even became more negative with age (e.g., who should play with trucks). Many parents also tend to have clear expectations about gender role behavior in their children and they directly and indirectly transmit these values (Witt, 1997).

These attitudes persist into adulthood and become intermixed with assumptions about homosexuality. In fact, we had a difficult time finding literature on gender role violations that did not also address assumptions about sexual orientation. This represents another example of the pervasiveness of the gender belief system. Martin (1995) found that college student’s ratings of desirable personality traits in boys and girls fell along traditional lines. Nielsen, Walden, and Kunkel (2000) examined reactions to 640 acts of gender role violations by their college students and found a range of negative reactions, including assumptions about homosexuality, admonishments to change behavior, and advice to women that they would not be able to attract men.

Research has also demonstrated that helping professionals are not immune to gender role expectations. Broverman, Broverman, Clarkson, Rosenkrantz, and Vogel’s (1970) groundbreaking work on gender role expectations of clinicians found that though mental health professionals’ conceptions of a mentally healthy adult did not significantly differ from a mentally healthy man, the clinicians were significantly less likely to attribute characteristics of a mentally healthy adult to women. They stated “a double standard of health exists for men and women, that is, the general
standard of health is actually applied only to men, while healthy women are perceived as significantly less healthy by adult standards” (p. 5).

Waisberg and Page (1988) looked at psychologists’ attitudes towards patients. Their study showed that while males with anxiety were seen as only slightly more disturbed than females with anxiety, depressed males were seen as considerably more disturbed than females suffering from depression. Females who exhibited the “male” disorders of alcoholism and antisocial behavior were perceived as more disturbed than the males with those disorders. More recently, Harris, Moret, Gale, and Kampmeyer (2001) found that therapists’ expectations about sex and expressivity/instrumentality influenced ratings of these behaviors in clients, with gender congruent behaviors rated as more significant.

Another line of research on gender role transgressions has explored whether punishment for gender role transgression is harsher for men or women. Among children, it has been found that “transgressions in the masculine gender role domain might be viewed as being as serious as transgressions of moral rules” while “feminine transgressions may sometimes be viewed as comparable to transgression of social conventions” (Levy et al., 1995, p. 529). In other words, a young boy acting as a “sissy” is immoral whereas a young girl that is a “tomboy” is just breaking the social norms. Studies looking at adults have also found that men may be punished more harshly than women for gender role transgressions. Davies (2004) looked specifically at negative attitudes toward gay men. After questioning 517 men and woman regarding sexism, male role norms, and male sexuality, the author found that indeed negative attitudes existed toward gay men and that these attitudes were a subcomponent of the larger construct of traditional gender role norms.

Gay men also have negative attitudes toward gender incongruency in males (Taywaditep, 2001). Although some gay men may display gender incongruent behavior in childhood, most begin displaying more masculine behavior in adolescence and adulthood. This may be, as Taywaditep (2001) surmises, because of societal pressure. For those who do not submit to this pressure, more ridicule is found, specifically from those who should be allies forged by similar battles.

Although these studies are important, it is also vital not to minimize the effect of societal reactions on gender transgressions in women. The “rules” may have relaxed, but there is still subtle discrimination not often captured in attitudinal research (e.g. negative reactions to assertive women). Furthermore, there is a line that women are expected not to cross. Although masculine characteristics are often more valued than feminine character-
istics, a woman is not allowed to be too masculine. For instance, Forbes, Adams-Curtis, Holmgren, and White (2004) found that hyper-muscular woman were perceived by both men and women as violating gender role norms as well as having a more masculine and less feminine gender role identity than the average woman. They also found that men perceived hyper-muscular women not only as unfeminine, but to also have lesbian tendencies as well. In addition, “both men and women perceive hyper-muscular women as less intelligent and educated, less socially popular, less sexually and romantically attractive, less likely to be a good mother, and less likely to engage in prosocial behaviors” (p. 499).

In summary, research on gender role transgressors indicates that negative attitudes toward those who violate traditional gender roles are still prevalent in contemporary culture. Although many people make assumptions about sexual orientation based on gender role expression and gender transgressors are often assumed to be gay or lesbian, there is also evidence that gender role expression influences attitudes toward individuals known to be gay or lesbian as outlined below.

Research Next Steps: Separating Gender Role Expression from Sexual Orientation

This review of the literature highlights the influence the assumptions contained within the gender belief system and inversion theory have had on research about LGB people. In addition we reviewed the literature related to assumptions and attitudes in popular culture. In general, there is a widespread belief that people should adhere to gender roles at least to some degree, and that those who do not adhere to appropriate gender roles must be gay, lesbian, or bisexual. The pervasive effect of the gender belief system and inversion theory creeps, and sometimes barges, into research methodology and interpretation in ways that lead to inappropriate support of stereotypes.

This review demonstrated the pervasiveness of stereotypes related to the gender belief system and inversion theory. However, we found little research that clearly attempted to differentially evaluate the impact of gender role expression and sexual orientation on attitudes. Early work in this area indicated that negativity toward gays and lesbians resulted from a belief that their behavior was incongruent with their sex (Millham & Weinberger, 1977) but appears to have received little attention or replication in the literature. In fact, it appears that although early research indicated that stereotypes around gender role expression in gays and lesbians are not
always accurate (see Bell et al., 1981), and the gender belief system and its impact on assumptions about sexual orientation were identified in the late 1980’s (Kite & Deaux, 1987), the direction of research moved toward evaluating characteristics within individuals that lead to or correlate with negative attitudes toward sexual minorities. For instance, attitudes toward women and sex roles have been linked to negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians (Herek, 1988, 2000; Kite, 1994; Kite & Whitley, 2003). This research also provides indirect support for the hypothesis that at least a portion of sexual prejudice is due to expectations about gendered behavior, or sexism. It appears that the association between the gender belief system (which perpetuates sexism), inversion theory, and sexual orientation has been addressed in the theoretical literature, with some empirical work as noted above. However, empirical studies in this area are needed to further advance a reduction in bias and stereotyping. The gender belief system underlies bias and stereotyping based on gender, and the addition of inversion theory extends this bias to gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals.

Research that seeks to directly determine whether gender transgression is a source of prejudice against gays and lesbians is beginning to emerge. The works of McCrery (1994), Sirin, McCrery and Mahalik, (2004), and Corley and Pollack (1996) provided information on the impact of gender role transgressions on attitudes toward gays and lesbians. In addition, studies completed by Schope and Eliason (2004) and Horvath and Ryan (2003) sought to differentiate whether gender role transgression or known sexual orientation were greater sources of prejudice.

McCreary (1994) tested two different theories to explain the tendency for people to hold more negative attitudes toward gender role transgression in men: the sexual orientation hypothesis and the social status model. The social status model states that masculine behavior is more highly regarded than feminine behavior, so males who transgress are persecuted more than women. According to the sexual orientation hypothesis, gender roles are equated with sexual orientation more strongly in men than women. Therefore, acting in a gender incongruent manner is considered more of a homosexual act for a man than for a woman. McCreary could not support the social status model, but did find sufficient support for the sexual orientation hypothesis. However, the social status model was supported in a later study by Sirin et al. (2004) who found that regardless of trait or behavior based descriptions, the male gender transgressors were given lower social status than the female transgressors.

Corley and Pollack (1996) studied attitudes toward lesbian couples based on stereotypical versus nonstereotypical descriptions. Their study was:
designed to investigate whether leading subjects to believe that lesbian couples do not necessarily adhere to stereotypes of interpersonal relationships would promote more positive attitudes toward lesbians. We expect this to occur for those participants with traditional as opposed to nontraditional sex role values. (p. 5)

They used three depictions of lesbian couples: (a) a “stereotypical lesbian couple” that mimicked a heterosexual couple having one masculine and one feminine partner (M-F), (b) a couple who matched stereotypical descriptions of lesbians in general (i.e., masculine) (M-M), and (c) a non-stereotypical couple where both were feminine (F-F). They found that traditional males who had read the non-stereotypical vignettes (F-F) had more positive attitudes toward lesbians than participants given the stereotypical (both M-M and M-F) depictions. These results were sustained at a one-week follow-up. The results for non-traditional males were reported as not significant. For females both traditional and non-traditional, initial results indicated more positive attitudes from the F-F vignette; however, the effect a week later was not sustained. Although Corley and Pollack (1996) attempted to create attitude change that was only partially supported and sustained, their results do point to differential attitudes based on gender role expression with many participants indicating more positive attitudes toward lesbians who do not conform to stereotypical roles for lesbians in their relationships. In brief, when both women adhered to traditional gender roles and were feminine they were viewed more positively by most study participants.

Schope and Eliason (2004) attempted to complete a direct evaluation of the differential impact of gender role expression and known sexual orientation on attitudes toward gays and lesbians. They used vignettes of two gay men and two lesbians, and varied their masculinity or femininity to evaluate whether people held more negative attitudes toward gender role non-conforming targets. Although they concluded that the mere knowledge that the target was gay or lesbian was the most important predictor they did not use straight, gender non-conforming targets in their design. Their conclusions were based on negative evaluations of all the targets. They further found that gender role had a significant impact on ratings on some variables with non-conforming targets being rated more poorly.

We found only one study that incorporated the use of sex, masculinity/femininity, and sexual orientation to determine the impact of each variable on attitudes. Horvath and Ryan (2003) used resumes where the three
constructs varied and all other information was kept comparable across targets to evaluate attitudes and hiring discrimination. 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). They did not find significant differences in ratings based on masculinity/femininity overall, but in relation to some variables feminine heterosexuals were rated lower.

In summary, sexism and belief in traditional gender roles are associated with negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians. In addition, research has consistently demonstrated that because of the pervasive effect of the gender belief system and inversion theory, many people continue to hold stereotypical views of the relationship between gender role expression and sexual orientation. However, there is mixed empirical evidence on the differential impact of gender role expression and sexual orientation on attitudes toward gender role transgressors and lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. Further research is needed that uses sound theoretical and empirical methodology to differentiate between gender role expression and sexual orientation to illuminate and eventually reduce stereotyping. The specific purposes and benefits of this research are outlined below.

**Value of Further Research**

Despite movement in counseling and psychology that recognizes the social construction of gender and acknowledges that people have a variety of biological or genetic predispositions that may or may not be tied to biological sex, research on sexual orientation is often based on the underlying assumptions found in the gender belief system and inversion theory. Stereotypes that link gender role expression and sexual orientation persist. In addition to using appropriate methodology and reducing bias in research as suggested below, more research is needed in order to understand more thoroughly the relationship between attitudes toward gender role conformity and sexual orientation. Are negative attitudes formed simply on the violation of gender-based norms? How are judgments of sexual orientation that are made based on physical characteristics related
to gender expectations? Many questions need to be explored in order to understand the phenomenon of gender role incongruence, stereotyping, and beliefs about sexual orientation. This type of research could ultimately lead to educational programs to reduce sexual prejudice if more evidence empirically demonstrates sexism as one of the bases for sexual prejudice.

For instance, for those adhering to the stereotypes linking gender role expression and sexual orientation, same sex sexual attraction and behavior may continue to be seen as a gender role violation. However, many people who consider themselves non-sexist when considering women’s issues, but who nevertheless show some negative attitudes toward LGBT people may show decreases in prejudice if they come to understand that their prejudice is seated in their implicit expectations for how men and women are supposed to act. For example, a group for which this type of research may decrease prejudice is those who intellectually do not have a problem with gay people but who nevertheless vote against gay marriage. To accept gay marriage may be an acceptance of the ultimate gender role violation. In a society moving toward more egalitarian gender roles, demonstrating to those with these somewhat subtle prejudices that their feelings about gay people are tied to vestiges of traditional gender role could create cognitive dissonance that may change attitudes.

In order to facilitate further research the following section specifically focuses on attending to research guidelines already in place that address suggestions for minimizing the impact of assumptions held within the gender belief system and inversion theory. In addition, we offer some specific questions that both researchers and consumers of research can ask themselves to assist in eliminating the tendency to link or equate gender role expression with sexual orientation.

**Suggestions for Critically Reviewing Literature and Conducting Non-biased Research**

How can we as researchers, and counselors who are consumers of research, prevent the pervasive effect of the gender belief system from influencing future research and interpretations of research? First, we must face our own biases and assumptions about the intersection of gender and sexuality. Specifically we must be aware of how the gender belief system has had an impact on inversion theory and therefore stereotypes about lesbians and gays. As we read or design research, we must be continually aware of how these issues and our assumptions potentially influ-
ence the way we frame our questions, design our research, and interpret our results. The reader is challenged to evaluate her or his own beliefs with the following questions: What is the basis of my “gaydar?” Do I expect my gay/lesbian clients or research participants to be gender non-conforming? Do I wonder if my gender non-conforming clients or research participants are lesbian/gay? As a consumer of research do I critically evaluate studies around their assumptions about sexual orientation and gender?

**Research Guidelines**

Herek, Kimmel, Amaro, and Melton (1991) provided an extensive description of how heterosexist bias may potentially impact each step of the research process and offer suggestions for ways researchers can avoid such bias. Their suggestions, which are based on the final report from the American Psychological Association’s Task Force for Non-Homophobic Research (1986), include: being aware of whether the research question reflects cultural stereotypes of lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people; distinguishing sexual orientation from other variables such as gender identity and gender-role conformity; and ensuring that any comparison groups used are appropriate to the research question and design and therefore do not confound sexual orientation with other variables. Similarly, the AGLBIC competencies noted at the beginning of this paper (Logan & Barret, 2005) include guidelines for conducting research on or with LGBT persons. These competencies include formulating research questions that acknowledge the inclusion of LGBT participants yet are not based on stereotypic assumptions regarding these participants; consideration of legal and ethical issues involved in research with LGBT participants; acknowledgement of the methodological limitations involved in research with LGBT participants; and as previously mentioned, recognition of the potential for heterosexist bias in the interpretation and reporting of research results. These guidelines and competencies remain the standard for all researchers who are studying LGBT issues and attitudes. However, in light of our position in this paper, we would like to expand several of these guidelines to highlight the potential bias resulting from inversion theory as well as the distinction between sexual orientation and gender role expression.

First, as stated above, we must continually monitor our own biases and assumptions as we are framing our research question. In this case, the overarching issue is to be aware of how the gender belief system has impacted inversion theory with regard to the stereotypes we have about lesbians and
gays. Some questions we might ask include: How might inversion theory be having an impact on the way I am asking my question? For example, is it appropriate in my research to be comparing lesbians to men and gay males to women, or am I making those comparisons because of the influence of inversion theory? Secondly, have I taken into account the distinction between sexual orientation and gender role expression in my research design and analysis? If, for example the research question is on attitudes towards LGBT persons and/or on prejudice reduction, are my gay confederates or vignettes perpetuating stereotypes based on inversion theory? Am I designing my project so that it more accurately represents the diversity of gender role expression that exists in the LGBT community? In this type of design, one must ensure that the persons portrayed in case examples are not based solely on stereotypic representations of gay and lesbian persons but represent both persons that confirm gender stereotypes as well as those that disconfirm our gender stereotypes of LGBT persons. Finally, if the distinction between sexual orientation and gender role expression was not taken into account during the design phase of the research, are results interpreted acknowledging the potential confounding between these two variables?

Summary

The gender belief system is prevalent within the worldview of many, and has an impact on our expectations for women and men. Gender is viewed as a stable construct which is also linked to sexual orientation, 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. We have also outlined how the gender belief system and inversion theory are constructs that perpetuate sexist gender stereotypes, especially for gender transgressors and LGBT people. Further research is suggested to explore the differential impact of gender role expression and sexual orientation on attitudes toward LGBT people. This research is an important next step in reducing stereotyping and bias. Furthermore, we offered suggestions for critically reviewing existing literature for this type of bias, and for conducting non-biased future research.
NOTE

1. The gender belief system and inversion theory also impact transgendered people, and much of our discussion will apply to this population. However, the issues for transgendered people are more complex and warrant a full consideration in a separate manuscript. Therefore, rather than including transgender people in name only, we acknowledge that our current focus is on LGB individuals at this time. However, when referring to the sexual minority community, we include the transgendered population (hence LGBT).

REFERENCES


