

Research Article

Sexual Orientation Attributions and Conventional Pre-Existing Values in the Context of Sexual Minorities' Rights

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Abstract

Attributions concerning the origins of sexual orientation are acknowledged as significant predictors of attitudes toward sexual minorities. Sexual prejudice and opposition to same-gender couple's rights are strongly linked with support of traditional values. The current study aimed to test that attributions for sexual orientation are significantly associated with opposition to same-gender adoption rights. Second, this study examined if participants' specific attitudinal characteristics reflecting support of traditional values (e.g., religiosity, political positioning) are strong predictors of sexual orientation attribution beliefs supporting the concept that attributions for sexual orientation may stem from pre-existing conventional beliefs. This exploratory, cross-sectional study was conducted from October 8 until December 20, 2020, via an online survey. A total of 119 respondents aged 18 to 48 years ($M_{\text{age}} = 24.31$; $SD_{\text{age}} = 8.36$) participated in the study. Bivariate correlations were generated to explore the associations among variables of interest. Multiple regression analysis was performed to predict the influences of all variables of interest on etiological beliefs about sexual orientation. This study's findings suggest that attitudes toward sexual minorities' rights tend to be more negative when their sexual orientation is believed to be controllable and that sexual orientation attributions conform to pre-existing context-specific conventional socio-cultural values and norms.

Keywords: sexual minorities; sexual prejudice; sexual orientation; attributions; culture-specific; conventional values, LGBTQIA+; rights.

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Same-gender parent families have been a primary issue in debates about marriage equality for sexual minorities (Herek, 2006). The controversial nature of same-gender parenting stems mainly from the socially dominant belief that two different-sex parents are needed for children's healthy development (Baiocco et al., 2014; Ioverno et al., 2017; Pistella et al., 2016). However, this cultural assumption that mothering and fathering are inherently different as conceptions also represents adherence to more traditional gender role norms. That is males provide resources while females provide nurture (Webb et al., 2017). In addition, parenting evaluations based on gender illustrate the continued socialization of stereotyped gender roles that propose women as the ideal nurturers (Massey, 2007; Webb et al., 2017).

Considering lesbian and gay individuals' stigmatized status it is not unusual for same-gender parents to be the targets of hostility and discrimination (Herek, 2010). Despite the overwhelming data reporting that same-gender parents have similar parenting practices and skills, and therefore are equally fit to raise children as their heterosexual counterparts (Tasker, 2010) distorted perceptions and negative attitudes towards same-gender parenting still prevail (Morse et al., 2007).

Sexual minorities, unmarried couples, and those that are stigmatized due to violation of existing social conventions are among groups that are vulnerable to being discriminated (Aminuddin, 2019). For instance, same-gender parent families challenge the nuclear family structure and the socially accepted heteronormative notion that a female and a male parent are needed for a child's normal development (Golombok, 2000). These stigmatizing beliefs reflect that sexual stigma and prejudice may still exist within the general community attached to any nonheterosexual behavior and identity (Herek, 2009).

According to Brown (1998), much of the hostility to lesbian and gay individuals fostering and adopting has been backed by "common-sense attitudes about children being unable to develop normally within lesbian and gay households" (p.101). This may be because negative attitudes toward lesbian and gay individuals transform into prejudiced beliefs about their parenting efficacy. These negative beliefs may also be reinforced by the notion that children raised by same-gender parents are likely to become lesbian or gay individuals implying that



sexual orientation is a result of parental upbringing, that is sexual orientation is voluntary (Costa et al., 2018).

Clarke (2001) using a thematic analysis of media data identified two main types of arguments opposing same-gender parenting namely immorality of same-gender parenting and secondly, concern for the wellbeing of children raised by same-gender parents. More recent studies focused on the concern that children with same-sex parents may have an increased likelihood to report psychological problems, to develop atypical gender and sexual identities, and to experience stigma and teasing (Hollekim et al., 2012; Ioverno et al., 2017). Thus, the double stigma of non-blood relationships and parents' sexual orientation may hinder same-gender couples' desire to adopt (Farr & Vazquez, 2020).

Attribution of cause

Stigma is increased when the individuals who are affected are viewed as accountable for their situation. Specifically, attribution theory examines how people try to explain why things happen. As Boysen and Vogel (2007) suggest, attribution of differences can influence one group's attitudes towards another. In attribution theory, causes for a specific event or situation may be considered as either external or internal, stable or unstable, and controllable or uncontrollable (Weiner, 1985). According to Weiner's attribution theory, some people may believe that sexual orientations are biologically determined and beyond someone's control whereas others may consider that gay and lesbian individuals choose their sexual identity (Tygart, 2000). This perceived controllability of sexual identity indicates a level of choice and responsibility which is usually associated with negative evaluation of gay and lesbian individuals (Weiner, 1985; Whitley, 1990). Thus, opposition to sexual minorities' rights is strongly related to the assumption that lesbian and gay individuals choose their sexual orientation, whereas advocacy for sexual minorities' rights is frequently related to biological origins of sexual orientation (Haider-Markel & Joslyn, 2008). Recent research findings report the relationship between learned etiology of homosexuality and higher opposition to children's adjustment in same-gender families in antithesis with those who believed in the genetic etiology (Vecho et al., 2019). Consequently, attributions concerning the origins of sexual orientation are currently acknowledged as significant predictors of attitudes toward sexual minorities (Reyna et al., 2014).

Correlates of sexual prejudice

Past research findings show that sexual prejudice and opposition to same-gender couple's rights are strongly linked with support of traditional values e.g., religion (Callahan & Vescio, 2011; Lewis, 2009; Hegarty, 2002; Henry & Reyna, 2007). Specifically, research data

exploring the socio-demographic and attitudinal correlates of negative attitudes towards same-sex parents show that male gender (Costa et al., 2018; Frias-Navaro &Monterde-I-Bort, 2012), lower education levels (Costa et al., 2018), higher levels of political conservatism (Webb et al., 2017) and poor interpersonal contact or exposure one has with sexual minorities (Costa et al., 2015) emerged as main predictors of negative attitudes toward same-sex parents. Additionally, believing that sexual orientation is a matter of choice (Rye & Meaney, 2010) is associated with negative attitudes towards sexual minorities' rights. Also, religious institutions may strengthen the belief that same-gender is controllable which subsequently reinforces sexual stigma and negative attitudes to same-gender parent families (Costa et al., 2018). This study examines the interconnection between attributions for sexual orientation and support of traditional values resulting in greater antipathy towards same-gender couples.

The current study

Heteronormative culture-specific societal beliefs about sexual minorities could also be considered as a possible minority pressure factor (Grigoropoulos, 2022). Therefore, more studies are needed from different cultural contexts to reflect the impact of societal influences on sexual minority individuals' decisions and experiences. Even though the values of family and parenting are overemphasized in the Greek socio-cultural context at the same time they are denied to same-gender couples. This means that, although same-sex couples can now enter into a civil partnership in Greece, same-sex marriage is not currently legal (Chalkidou, 2020). Furthermore, even though same-sex couples have the right to foster children according to the new child adoption law (law 4538/2018) joint adoption by same-sex couples is currently prohibited. This underlines the current heteronormative concept of family formation based on narrow definitions of parenting and continuing the differentiation between same-sex and opposite-sex parented families. Discriminatory practices such as formal sanctioning through legislation for same-sex couples are characteristic of prejudice toward sexual minorities (Ioverno et al., 2017). This emphasizes the need for research to examine the possible context-related socio-cultural predictors of prejudice towards sexual minorities rights.

In addition to the heteronormative, and in several cases highly oppressive social-cultural context of Greece (Grigoropoulos, 2022), societal norms place an additional significance on gender roles, with the female parent perceived as most important for child-rearing (Chalkidou, 2020). Moreover, Greece is a country where the Orthodox Church plays a central role in determining what is socially desirable and what is morally wrong and therefore profoundly influences sexuality and marriage issues (Grigoropoulos, 2022). Thus, even

though the Christian community is not a homogeneous one sharing opposition to sexual minorities, historically had a profound impact on the fight against equal rights for sexual minorities (McLean-Farrell, 2014). The current study had two primary aims within a specific cultural context. Firstly, to determine that attributions for sexual orientation significantly correlate with opposition to same-gender adoption rights. Secondly, to examine if participants' specific demographic and attitudinal characteristics reflecting support of conventional values (e.g., religiosity, political positioning) are strong predictors of sexual orientation attribution beliefs supporting the concept that attributions for sexual orientation may stem from pre-existing conventional beliefs (Henry & Reyna, 2007).

Method

Procedure and Participants

This exploratory, cross-sectional study was conducted from October 8 until December 20, 2020, via an online survey. Convenience sampling was used as the survey instrument was distributed through social media (e.g., Facebook and LinkedIn) and posts on different social networks and forums. The online survey instrument was anonymous, and respondents showed their consent by ticking the consent checkbox at the beginning of the survey. Inclusion criteria were a) acceptance to participate, and b) were at least 18 years old. The process lasted approximately 8–15 minutes. This study followed all ethical instructions and directions of the institution to which the researcher belongs to.

A total of 119 respondents aged 18 to 48 years ($M= 24.31$; $SD= 8.36$) participated in the study: 88.2% (105) identified as female and 11.8% (14) as male. All of the respondents considered themselves to be heterosexual. Regarding respondents' education level, 82.4% (98) held a university degree, 13.1% (17) had a postgraduate degree and 7.6% (9) had a high-school diploma. For this sample, power analysis was conducted using G* Power (post hoc). G* Power provided statistical power to the regression model used in this study (Faul et al., 2009). For multiple regression (four predictors) the analysis (two-tailed) showed a power of 0.89.

Measures

Socio-demographic and attitudinal variables

In the brief-demographic section of the survey instrument, respondents gave background information such as their age (reported by participants in a numerical entry box), gender (male, female, transgender, other- descriptor of gender participants felt comfortable with), sexual orientation (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, other), educational level (below high school, high school diploma, university degree, postgraduate studies), political positioning



(left, Centre-left, Centre, Centre-right, Right), religiosity (how frequently do you attend religious services?; 1= *never* to 5= *very often*) and self-report contacts with LGBTQ+ individuals (reported in a numerical entry box).

Etiological beliefs about sexuality

The eight-item instrument Beliefs about the Etiology of Sexual Orientation (BESO) was used to examine participants' beliefs about the origins of sexuality (Frias-Navaro et al., 2018). The BESO scale consists of two 4-item subscales, namely genetic etiology (GE; e.g. "The homosexual sexual orientation is an inevitable behavior that depends on genetics") and learned etiology (LE; e.g. "I think same-sex parents influence the sexual orientation of their children"). The response options ranged from 1 = strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree. The subscale's item responses were summed to derive total scores. Higher scores signified stronger beliefs in genetic or learned etiology. The Cronbach's alpha values of the two subscales were .81 (genetic etiology; 4-items) and .84 (learned etiology; 4-items).

The Attitudes Toward Same-Sex Couples as Adoptive Parents Scale

The Attitudes Toward Same-Sex Couples as Adoptive Parents Scale (ATSCAP) was used to assess attitudes toward lesbian and gay couples adopting (Spivey, 2006). Accuracy for the Greek socio-cultural context has been verified through back-translation. Specifically, the ATSCAP was translated from English into Greek by the researcher and backtranslated into English by another colleague researcher holding a Ph.D. in English literature. The two versions of the questionnaire were compared. There were not any major discrepancies between the original and the back-translated versions and the minor ones were revised (Van Widenfelt et al., 2005). The ATSCAP is a 25 item Likert scale ranging from 1= strongly agree to 6 = strongly disagree. Scores for the ATSCAP may range from 25 to 150. Higher scores indicate more favorable attitudes. The ATSCAP reported a reliability coefficient of .96 (Spivey, 2006). The ATSCAP comprises of two subscales, the Gay Couple sub-scale (GCS) comprising items 2a through 13a, and the Lesbian Couple Sub-scale (LCS) comprising items 2b through 13b. Scores on the subscales ranged from 12-72, with higher scores indicating more favorable attitudes (see Spivey, 2006). The Cronbach's alpha value of this scale was .72 (25 items).

Statistical analysis

A between-subject, correlational design was employed. IBM SPSS Statistics, version 19, was used to analyze the data. Data screening techniques were used before the main statistical analysis. Bivariate correlations were generated to explore the associations among variables



of interest. Next, hierarchical multiple regressions were performed to predict the influences of all independent variables on etiological beliefs about sexuality. Alpha level was set at 0.05.

Preliminary analysis

Data screening techniques were used before the main statistical analysis. The normal range for skewness and kurtosis is considered to be between +2 and -2 for normal distribution according to the criteria by George and Mallory (2010) and that assumption is satisfied, as the values for skewness were found between -0.63 and 1.39 and for kurtosis between -0.625 and 1.57. No outliers were detected.

Results

Descriptive results

As regards the first question the correlations between the variables, learned etiology, genetic etiology, and attitudes toward same-sex couples as adoptive parents show that higher levels of learned etiology are associated with less favorable attitudes towards same-sex adopting couples ($r(117) = -.53, p < .01$) denoting more opposition to same-sex couples as adoptive parents. Learned etiology was positively associated with age ($r(117) = .30, p < .01$), religiosity ($r(117) = .47, p < .01$) and political positioning ($r(117) = .30, p < .01$) while was negatively associated with contact with LGBTQ+ individuals ($r(117) = -.28, p < .01$). Genetic etiology was negatively associated with religiosity ($r(119) = -.26, p < .01$). There was not a significant linear correlation between genetic etiology and attitudes toward same sex adopting couples. Descriptive statistics and correlations among the variables are shown in Table 1.

Table 1.
Means, standard deviations, and correlations among variables (N = 119).

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	M(SD)
1. ATSCAP										87.99 (12.23)
2. GE	.141									15.09 (3.56)
3. LE	-	-								9.50 (3.98)
4. Gender	.532**	.356**								
5. Age	.118	-.068	-.033							
6. Religiosity	-	-.058	.303**	.044						24.35 (8.36)
7. Political positioning	.269**	-.269**	.479**	-	.097					2.18 (1.00)
8. Contacts with LGBTQ+ individuals	.284**	-.178	.412**	.120	-.192*	.392**				2.81 (.655)
9. Educational Level	-.168	-.178	.412**	-.092	.192*	.392**				2.76 (1.58)
	.268**	.085	-	.023	-.108	-.100	-			
			.282**				.092			
	-.112	-.027	.008	.084	-.007	-.089	-	-		
							.018	.078		

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$



Multiple regression analysis

Multiple linear regression analysis was conducted to examine the effects of participants' specific demographic and attitudinal characteristics on sexual orientation attribution beliefs (Table 2).

Table 2.

Results of hierarchical regression analysis predicting learned etiology (N = 119).

	B	SE B	β	95%CI
Age	.098	.036	-.205**	.02, .16
Religiosity	1.412	.321	-.354***	.77, 2.04
Political positioning	1.305	.496	.215*	.32, 2.28
Contact with LGBTQ+ individuals	-.294	.107	-.204**	-.50, -.08

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

The assumptions of regression analysis were tested and were not violated (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001). The data met the assumption of independent errors (Durbin-Watson value = 2.02). Specifically, tests to see if the data met the assumption of collinearity indicated that multicollinearity was not a concern (Age = 0.95, VIF = 1.04; Religiosity = .84, VIF = 1.18; Political positioning = .82, VIF = 1.21; Contact with LGBTQ+ individuals = .79, VIF = 1.28).

Results of the multiple linear regression indicated that there was a collective significant effect ($F(4,115) = 17.285, p < .001$). The total proportion of variance explained by all the independent variables was 38% (adjusted $R^2 = .387$). According to the standardized regression coefficient, religiosity ($\beta = .354; p < .001$), contacts with LGBTQ+ individuals ($\beta = -.204; p < .01$), age ($\beta = .205; p < .01$) and political positioning ($\beta = .215; p < .05$) were significantly related to learned etiology. Thus, higher levels of religiosity, less contact with LGBTQ+ individuals, older age, and conservative political positioning predicted learned attributions for sexual orientation.

Discussion

Attributions for sexual orientation are most significant in legal and social battlegrounds over sexual minorities' rights. Genetic/biological attributions advocate more equal treatment of sexual minorities in antithesis with learned attributions (Frias-Navarro et al., 2014; Reyna et al., 2014). The first aim of this study was to replicate previous research indicating that attributing sexual orientation to genetic factors predicted greater tolerance towards gay rights policies (Hegarty & Pratto, 2001). The second aim of this study was to examine if support of traditional values (e.g., religiosity, political positioning) are strong predictors of sexual orientation attribution beliefs suggesting that attributions for sexual orientation may stem from already existing conventional belief systems that oppose sexual minorities.



Specifically, first it was examined the association between attributions for sexual orientation and attitudes towards same-gender couples' adoption rights. Next, to test the study hypothesis that value-oriented ideologies (religion) and conservative ideological systems (political positioning) would associate and predict attributions for sexual orientation and subsequently account for much of the power of attributions to predict opposition to equal gay rights (e.g., adoption) we performed a multiple regression analysis. In line with previous studies proposing a strong relationship between attribution for sexual orientation and opposition to gay rights (Reyna et al., 2014) this study's findings show that believing that sexual orientation is learned is significantly associated with greater opposition to same-gender adoption rights.

This finding is in line with the attributional theory of stigma (Weiner et al., 1988) suggesting that attitudes toward sexual minorities and their rights tend to be more negative when their sexual orientation is believed to be controllable (e.g., personal choice) (Frias-Navarro et al., 2018). Further, this study's results suggest that certain attitudinal characteristics (e.g., religiosity, political positioning) have a strong relationship with the learned sexual orientation attribution resulting in higher levels of opposition to lesbians and gay rights probably through the notion that sexual minorities violate traditionally important social norms and values which for example may be determined by religion. These findings propose that sexual orientation attributions may align to existing values and moral-oriented ideologies (e.g., religion) and traditional, conservative ideological positions. Gouveia et al. (2014) argue that normative values (e.g., religiosity) gather the need to preserve social values and norms tending to safeguard conventionality. Therefore, it is most significant to acknowledge the impact of normative values, as they may work as a cognitive background influencing our attitudes and consequently the ways we perceive the world (Gouveia, 2019). In the same line, groups or individuals whose behaviors and life outcomes are considered as contrary to one's (religious) values and (conservative) ideologies may be treated with opposition and prejudice (Callahan & Vescio, 2011). Thus, when it comes to assessing social groups, attributions for sexual orientation may reflect preexisting intergroup prejudices implying that the degree someone believes that sexual orientation is chosen is strongly associated with assumptions that sexual minorities violate one's significant social codes of conduct.

Even though the current cross-sectional study cannot unravel the causal sequence it reports that sexual orientation attributions can be predicted from specific context-related conventional and already linked to sexual prejudice pre-existing beliefs and values. All in all, it is most important to better understand the role and the links between sexual orientation attributions and preexisting belief systems in the context of sexual minorities' rights to develop

interventions that weaken the opposition towards sexual minorities' rights and sexual prejudice.

Limitations

The cross-sectional design and the limited convenience sample size comprising mainly of women restrict the conclusions that can be drawn. Participants volunteered to participate in this study, so we need to account for some predisposition to participate. We also have to account for social desirability bias on a sensitive topic as this study was based on self-report methods.

Conclusions

Nevertheless, this study adds to research concerning prejudice towards sexual minorities and their rights focusing on the interrelationship between sexual orientation attributions and significant personal pre-existing beliefs as predictors of sexual prejudice. This study also expands the research to new countries with distinct cultural norms and backgrounds.

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Competing Interests

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