Effects of Perceived Sexual Orientation on Workplace Evaluation

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Abstract

Principal Topic

The primary goal of this study is to identify whether people acting in the capacity as an employer have underlying negative bias against individuals they perceive to be gay or lesbian. Studying the influence of sexual orientation in the work place is important because negative prejudice toward someone based on his or her sexual orientation could lead to discrimination in the workplace—discrimination that has negative economic consequences. However, it is very difficult to test for sexual orientation based bias. This is especially true in surveys where people are asked to self-report evaluations of individuals.

Method/Hypotheses

Research questions: (1) In the workplace, do those perceived as either gay or lesbian receive lower ratings on positive work attributes than those perceived to be heterosexual? (2) Do men and women rate individuals differently based on their perceived sexual orientation?

Hypothesis 1: Those perceived to be heterosexual will receive more desirable ratings in the work place than those perceived to be gay or lesbian.
Hypothesis 2:Female evaluators will be more accepting of workers perceived as gay or lesbian, giving them more desirable ratings than the male evaluators do.

Method: The pilot study used an availability sample of undergraduate Sociology 101 students. The main research study will rely on a sample-generating program called MTurk. The sample generated was people in the general population. Participants completed one of four versions of

an online survey. The versions each contained a photo of an office space with a computer that had a screensaver. Each version had a different screensaver; one version depicted a screensaver with a photo of two women kissing their partner (to indicate the owner of the desk was lesbian), another depicted two men kissing in a similar pose (to indicate that the owner of the desk was gay). Another photo depicted a man and woman kissing (to indicate that the owner of the desk was heterosexual) and the last photo was of a waterfall (to indicate that the owner of the desk had a sexual orientation that was unknown). The survey following the photo asked respondents to evaluate the person's desk they were viewing in the photo.

Results/Implications

Differences were found in how people rated those perceived to be gay versus lesbian. In addition, those perceived to be heterosexual, across the board, were rated higher in desirable traits. This indicates that negative prejudice toward non-mainstream sexual orientations is present in the workplace. While gays and lesbians are gaining rights in the fields of marriage equality and non-discrimination acts, this negative prejudice is a detriment to an equal society. A longitudinal study such as this would be beneficial to track social change over the course of several years.

Introduction

Sexual orientation is a controversial issue in society. In recent years, there has been increasing support for the equality of same-sex relationships including the legalization of same-sex marriages in several states (Human Rights Campaign, 2014). As same-sex relationships become more accepted, this study looks at how a person's perceived sexual orientation affects people's views of workers who are perceived to be either lesbian or gay. The primary goal of this study is to identify whether people acting in the capacity of an employer have underlying negative bias against individuals they perceive to be gay or lesbian. Studying the influence of sexual orientation in the work place is important because negative prejudice toward someone based on his or her sexual orientation could lead to discrimination in the workplace—discrimination that has negative economic consequences. Since it is very difficult to test for sexual orientation based bias, and it is especially true in surveys where people are asked to self-report evaluations of individuals, another goal of this study is to apply a unique method for the study of bias against individuals based on their sexual orientation.

Literature Review

Fleming (2007) discusses the expression of sexuality in organizations and how it can be used as a tool for managerial control or if it is used as a tool for the employees to express their own resistance to that managerial control. He conducted an empirical study on a company that had policies that allowed the expression of sexuality openly in the workplace. He found that the expression of sexuality is simultaneously used as, "an aspect of control [by management], an expression of empowerment [for gay men], and an object of derision [for homophobic employees]," (Fleming, 2007, p. 240). Fleming questions, "Where does power end and

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resistance begin" (Fleming, 2007, p. 240)? This question is important because in allowing the expression of sexuality in the workplace, sexuality could be looked at a few ways. Either management allows this expression as a way to control its employees or it is a way for the employees to be free to express themselves in the workplace. He went on to the additional conclusion that this control, empowerment, and resistance to sexual expression is not a simple issue; these are all on a scale on which different people fall and that we need to be aware of these issues in organizations.

This article relates to the present study because it addresses perceptions of sexuality in the workplace. Fleming's report that there is a level of resistance to homosexuality in the workplace supports the hypothesis that heterosexual people will receive more positive ratings than gays or lesbians.

Another article was about a study that applied econometric tools in the study of race and gender discrimination based on a person's sexual orientation. According to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, employers are prohibited from discrimination because of an individual's race, color, religion, sex, or national origin (Civil Rights Act, 1964). However, discrimination based on an individual's sexual orientation is still legal in many states. This means there is no legislation in place in many states that prohibits discrimination against individuals who are perceived to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual. There is no federal legislation in place either. The findings from the study demonstrated that the difference in earnings for individuals is affected by their sexual orientation. Behaviorally gay/bisexual men earned up to 27% less than behaviorally heterosexual men (Badgett, 1995). Behaviorally lesbian/bisexual women earned 30% less when compared to behaviorally heterosexual females (Badgett, 1995). The purpose of Badgett's article was to demonstrate the need for adding sexual orientation to anti-discrimination laws.

This study shows that there is discrimination present in the workplace, specifically in wage disparity.

Another article is about a study conducted in Australia examined a group of women schoolteachers who are self-reported lesbians. These women were choosing to "pass" in the workplace. Even though there are anti-discrimination laws in New South Wales, many lesbians report feeling compelled to control their sexuality in the workplace (Ferfolja, 2007). School cultures often discriminate against those who do not conform to the culture, in this case, heterosexual practices. Schools reinforce and perpetuate future generations into heterosexist attitudes through the practices of normalization and punishment. Fitting in is ideal, while sticking out is looked down upon (Ferfolja, 2007). Ferfolja's article concludes that behaving in a manner that reflects the typical heterosexual discourse is almost essential for lesbian teachers to maintain their jobs for fear of ridicule and termination in the workplace. It also shows that there is much work to be done in the education system in terms of acceptance of varied sexual orientations as well as the professional development of teachers. The data shows that compulsory heterosexuality and the naturalization of the heterosexual practices can limit many teachers' understandings of the lives of their colleagues, which in turn affects professional and interpersonal relationships (Ferfolja, 2007).

All of these articles are closely related to sexual orientation. They focus on issues such as being "out" at work and pay differences for people who identify as gay/lesbian compared to heterosexuals. My study focuses on perceptions of people, based on their sexual orientation that could lead to discrimination in the workplace.

Research Questions

In the workplace, do those perceived as either gay or lesbian receive lower ratings on positive work attributes than those perceived to be heterosexual?

Do men and women rate individuals differently based on their perceived sexual orientation?

Hypotheses

Those perceived to be heterosexual will receive more desirable ratings in the work place than those perceived to be gay or lesbian.

Female evaluators will be more accepting of workers perceived as gay or lesbian, giving them more desirable ratings than the male evaluators give.

Sample

The sample consisted of 400 adult internet users of a program called MTurk, a beta program run by Amazon. The program allows survey makers to connect with survey takers. Biographical data was collected from respondents at the end of the survey. Respondents provided their gender and sexual orientation. The sample consisted of approximately half men and half women. The sexual orientation of the sample was greater than 75% heterosexual, approximately 20% bisexual, and less than 10% gay or lesbian. Additional personal information was not collected from the sample.

Methods

Participants were asked to complete one of four versions of an online survey. Each version contained a different photo of an office space with a computer that had a screensaver. A survey following the photo asked respondents to evaluate the person whose desk they were viewing in the photo.

The survey was composed of twenty-one questions that assessed how the survey taker felt about the work related ability of the person whose desk was depicted in the photograph. Most of these questions ask about specific traits or actions that can be considered qualities of a good employee (such as integrity). Several of the questions ask about traits or actions of a bad

employee (such as stealing from the company).These questions were all constructed the same. They asked, "To what extend do you think this person is… (Trustworthy, reliable, punctual, etc.)." The survey taker would then rate the person on a Likert scale. Response options were "Very, Somewhat, Neutral, Not Very, Not at All, Don't Know, and No Response." There were a total 100 responses to each survey version for a total of 400 responses.

Data[1]

Table 1: Summary of Responses to the Nature Version (Control)

Form One-Nature	Very	Somewhat	Neutral	Not Very	Not at All	Don't Know	No Response	Total Responses
Is trustworthy?	25	36	22	11	3	3	0	100
Is reliable?	26	36	24	8	3	2	1	100
Is punctual?	33	27	17	12	4	6	1	100
Is efficient?	33	34	17	7	5	3	1	100
Is capable of being a leader?	29	26	24	9	9	2	1	100
Is creative?	24	35	21	13	5	2	0	100
Is professional in appearance?	35	28	17	12	4	2	2	100
Is educated?	45	28	18	4	2	3	0	100
Has intergrity?	22	40	23	9	3	2	1	100
Is loyal?	21	45	17	9	3	5	0	100
Has potential?	19	44	23	7	4	2	1	100
Meets deadlines?	28	30	20	12	3	6	1	100
Gets along with coworkers?	24	36	21	6	3	8	2	100
Has management potential?	19	45	19	11	2	3	1	100
Responds well to authority?	28	31	23	10	2	3	3	100
Would work weekends?	14	29	34	11	4	8	0	100
Would work late?	13	31	24	13	10	7	2	100
Would work through lunch?	11	25	36	12	6	10	0	100
Would leave work early?	11	20	23	26	10	7	3	100
Would steal from the company?	8	14	21	9	34	8	6	100
Flaunts their sexuality?	6	10	24	16	22	12	10	100

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[1] All numbers in the data section are percentages

Table 2: Summary of Responses to the Heterosexual Version

Form Two-Heterosexual	Very	Somewhat	Neutral	Not Very	Not at All	Don't Know	No Response	Total Responses
Is trustworthy?	28	29	18	13	8	3	1	100
Is reliable?	18	41	14	13	7	5	2	100
Is punctual?	20	24	24	15	12	4	1	100
Is efficient?	31	21	21	12	9	4	2	100
Is capable of being a leader?	21	22	16	20	14	6	1	100
Is creative?	20	28	20	14	9	8	1	100
Is professional in appearance?	22	24	18	16	10	8	2	100
Is educated?	30	34	16	5	10	3	2	100
Has intergrity?	17	29	21	15	9	6	3	100
Is loyal?	22	23	23	16	10	3	3	100
Has potential?	19	38	20	9	9	3	2	100
Meets deadlines?	17	28	21	14	11	7	2	100
Gets along with coworkers?	22	24	27	11	11	4	1	100
Has management potential?	17	30	19	17	9	6	2	100
Responds well to authority?	22	27	18	21	7	3	2	100
Would work weekends?	9	21	17	24	20	8	1	100
Would work late?	11	20	17	19	21	10	2	100
Would work through lunch?	13	18	17	19	20	12	1	100
Would leave work early?	10	22	25	14	16	11	2	100
Would steal from the company?	7	15	17	21	20	16	4	100
Flaunts their sexuality?	15	25	17	14	15	11	3	100

Table 3: Summary of Responses to the Gay Version

Form Three-Gay	Very	Somewhat	Neutral	Not Very	Not at All	Don't Know	No Response	Total Responses
Is trustworthy?	11	24	15	19	21	7	3	100
Is reliable?	12	18	20	23	15	10	2	100
Is punctual?	12	18	22	14	22	8	4	100
Is efficient?	18	12	26	17	17	6	4	100
Is capable of being a leader?	8	17	23	14	27	7	4	100
Is creative?	11	22	20	14	25	6	2	100
Is professional in appearance?	10	17	13	19	26	12	3	100
Is educated?	17	20	21	12	17	8	5	100
Has intergrity?	12	14	21	16	22	12	3	100
Is loyal?	12	16	25	16	19	7	5	100
Has potential?	17	19	24	14	14	10	2	100
Meets deadlines?	16	19	22	15	15	10	3	100
Gets along with coworkers?	20	20	13	18	17	10	2	100
Has management potential?	13	21	23	13	17	10	3	100
Responds well to authority?	11	26	17	16	16	9	5	100
Would work weekends?	6	21	24	16	19	11	3	100
Would work late?	7	21	28	14	17	8	5	100
Would work through lunch?	5	14	24	22	19	13	3	100
Would leave work early?	9	19	17	26	14	13	2	100
Would steal from the company?	9	12	19	19	24	14	3	100
Flaunts their sexuality?	22	22	19	15	11	9	2	100

Table 4: Summary of Responses to the Lesbian Version

Form Four-Lesbian	Very	Somewhat	Neutral	Not Very	Not at All	Don't Know	No Response	Total Responses
Is trustworthy?	3	29	22	19	19	7	1	100
Is reliable?	5	26	23	24	13	9	0	100
Is punctual?	7	22	20	21	19	10	1	100
Is efficient?	7	24	18	18	27	3	3	100
Is capable of being a leader?	6	15	27	19	25	5	3	100
Is creative?	15	16	21	21	21	5	1	100
Is professional in appearance?	6	25	19	15	27	8	0	100
Is educated?	11	34	15	15	15	9	1	100
Has intergrity?	7	17	25	21	17	12	1	100
Is loyal?	7	20	23	15	23	9	3	100
Has potential?	8	31	19	22	15	5	0	100
Meets deadlines?	9	26	19	23	17	5	1	100
Gets along with coworkers?	8	22	26	21	17	5	1	100
Has management potential?	3	27	19	23	20	8	0	100
Responds well to authority?	4	21	25	21	21	7	1	100
Would work weekends?	5	25	18	18	25	8	1	100
Would work late?	6	25	16	21	21	9	2	100
Would work through lunch?	10	17	20	16	30	6	1	100
Would leave work early?	10	26	22	18	9	13	2	100
Would steal from the company?	6	14	24	23	17	15	1	100
Flaunts their sexuality?	33	20	15	15	10	6	1	100

Analysis of Findings

A Chi-square test was performed on the responses to show if there is a difference between the responses across the versions. The results of these tests show that there was a statistically significant difference most of the time between the heterosexual versions and the gay and lesbian versions. For example, for almost all questions, tests revealed a statistically significant difference (P-value <0.05). The only questions that did not yield a significant difference were "To what extend do you think this person would work late", "To what extend do you think this person would leave work early", and "To what extend do you think this person would steal from the company" (P>0.05). In other words, people responded similarly to these questions regardless of the version of the survey they took.

In this section, five questions were chosen for analysis. These questions were picked to show in depth how participants responded to the survey. These five questions show how responses varied slightly across the questions, but still show similar results.

For the question, "To what extent do you think this person is trustworthy" more positive responses were received on the nature and heterosexual versions of the survey than the gay and lesbian versions (See Figure 1). On the nature version, 61% of respondents answered favorably, meaning they rated the person whose desk they were viewing as "very" or "somewhat" trustworthy. On the heterosexual version, 57% of respondents answered favorably. On the gay version, 35% answered favorably. On the lesbian version 32% answered favorably. Conversely, the gay and lesbian versions received higher unfavorable ratings on trustworthiness. On the nature version, 14% responded negatively, meaning their response was "not very" or "not at all". On the heterosexual version 22% responded negatively. On the gay version 40% responded negatively. On the lesbian version, 38% responded negatively. The rest of the respondents answered one of the following: "neutral", don't know", or "no response". Based on the responses, the control (the nature version) and the heterosexual version received more responses that are positive while the gay and lesbian received more responses that are negative.

For the question, "To what extent do you think this person is capable of being a leader" respondents favored the nature and heterosexual versions over the gay and lesbian versions (See Figure 2). On the nature version, 55% of respondents answered favorably. On the heterosexual version, 43% answered favorably. On the gay version, 25% answered favorably. On the lesbian version, 21% answered favorably. More respondents answered neutrally to this question than to any other question on the lesbian version (27%). There was also a high amount of neutral responses on the gay version (23%). For negative responses, the nature versions received 18%,

heterosexual received 34%, gay received 41%, and lesbian received 44%. The important thing to point out here is that the heterosexual version still received more positive and less negative responses than the gay and lesbian versions. While the difference is smaller in this case, there is still a disparity.

For the question, "To what extent do you think this person is professional in appearance" respondents favored the nature version over all others (See Figure 3). The heterosexual version still received more positive responses than the lesbian and gay versions. On the nature version, 63% of respondents answered favorably. On the heterosexual version, 46% answered favorably. On the gay version 27% answered favorably. On the lesbian version 31% answered favorably. Given that the photos used for this study were of couples kissing for the heterosexual, gay and lesbian versions, it is be expected that photos may have been viewed as unprofessional. This could explain why the nature version is rated the highest. A photo of a waterfall may be considered as a more appropriate screensaver than two people kissing. However, this does not explain the difference in negative responses. The nature versions received 16% negative responses. On the heterosexual version, 26% responded negatively. On the gay version 45% responded negatively. On the lesbian version, 42% responded negatively. This suggests that even though the heterosexual photo was viewed by approximately one fourth of respondents as not professional, the gay and lesbian versions were received more negatively.

For the question, "To what extent do you think this person flaunts their sexuality", the gay and lesbian versions received more "very ratings than the heterosexual and nature versions (See Figure 4). The intent of this question was to see if gays and lesbians were perceived as flaunting their sexuality more than heterosexuals were. On the nature version, 6% responded that the person flaunts their sexuality "very". On the heterosexual version, 15% were viewed as

flaunting their sexuality. On the gay version, 22% were viewed as flaunting their sexuality. On the lesbian version, 33% were viewed as flaunting their sexuality. When combining the "very" and "somewhat" categories, this difference goes down slightly, but this difference is still present. The heterosexual version was viewed as flaunting sexuality more than the nature. This could be because the couple in the heterosexual version is in an intimate pose, while the nature version is not depicting a relationship at all. The difference between the heterosexual, gay, and lesbian versions is noteworthy. They are all depicted in an intimate position with a partner, yet the heterosexual version is viewed as flaunting sexuality the least of the three. This could be because heterosexuality is the dominant institution in the United States, and is therefore viewed as "normal". The lesbian version is viewed as flaunting the most, more than the gay version even. This may have to do with the gender differences of the people in the photo. When comparing both "very" and "somewhat" responses these differences get smaller.

For the question, "To what extent do you think this person is reliable", the nature and heterosexual versions received more favorable ratings (See Figure 5). The nature version received 62% favorable ratings. The heterosexual version received 59% favorable ratings. The gay version received 30% favorable ratings. The lesbian version received 31% favorable ratings. These findings demonstrate that a person who is perceived as heterosexual is viewed as more reliable than someone who is perceived as gay or lesbian. Furthering the point, the gay and lesbian versions received more negative ratings than the heterosexual or nature versions. The nature version received 11% negative ratings. The heterosexual version received 20% negative ratings. The gay version received 38% negative ratings. The lesbian version received 37% negative ratings.

In all five questions, those perceived to be gay or lesbian received less positive ratings on positive worker qualities and more positive ratings on negative worker qualities. On the heterosexual and nature versions, more positive ratings were received on the positive worker qualities and less positive responses on the negative worker qualities.

Discussion

Workers perceived to be gay or lesbian received more ratings that were negative than the workers perceived to be heterosexual or those whose sexuality was unknown. Specifically, non-heterosexual workers were rated lower on most positive work attributes than heterosexuals and the control (nature). However, they received similar ratings to perceived heterosexuals on "working late", "leave work early", and steal from the company." There was no significant difference between how men responded to the survey and how women responded, even though research suggests that women tend to be more accepting than men are (LaMar & Kite, 1998). The respondent's own sexual orientation also did not play a significant role in how people responded to the survey. The difference between how heterosexual and bisexual people responded was not significant. There were not enough people identified as gay or lesbian to compare results.

It is noteworthy that bisexual respondents followed the same response trends as heterosexuals in their responses. One may expect bisexual people, since they are attracted to both sexes, to be more accepting of all sexual orientations. However, their responses were very similar to heterosexual responses. They were just as critical on the gay and lesbian versions of the survey. This may be because they live in a heteronormative society and they may hold some of the same heteronormative values that heterosexual people have.

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The results of this survey indicate that heterosexuality is still dominant today. Heterosexual people have privilege; this privilege can be seen in the results of this survey. Even when everything was controlled for in this study, there was a significant difference in the results for the perceived heterosexual survey version compared to the perceived gay and lesbian survey versions. This indicates that when a person sees who they perceive to be a heterosexual person, they have more positive thoughts about that person than if they saw someone who is gay or lesbian.

The findings suggest that gays and lesbians could potentially be discriminated against at work. If the perceptions people have of gays and lesbians are negative, or less positive than heterosexual people, this could lead to acts of workplace discrimination, discrimination that is illegal in some states (Human Rights Campaign 2014). This survey attempts to measure a person's bias or prejudice toward a specific group of people. This survey suggests that gays and lesbians may experience more prejudice than heterosexual people in the workplace may. Because of this, people who are perceived as gay or lesbian may experience someone acting on their prejudice in the form of discrimination in the workplace. This could lead to a lower rate of pay or loss of a job.

People who are viewed as trustworthy, reliable, etc. have more opportunities in the job market. People, who are perceived by an employer as having these desirable traits, without even meeting the person, can give that person an advantage over people who are perceived not to have these traits. This survey indicates that a person who is perceived as heterosexual will be perceived as having these traits more often than people who are perceived as gay or lesbian.

Research limitations

A Chi-Square was used to determine significance. This is slightly problematic because Chi-Squares are non-parametric. This is considered problematic because the results may be calculated as more significant than they actually are. Given the very low P-values, this may have been the case. Although, the p-values do not have to be that low for the social sciences. They only have to be below 0.05. Since the data is still below the accepted 0.05 it would be safe to say that the data is significant even though the test is not as accurate as others are. The ideal situation would be to run ANOVA. This will be done in the future when resources are available.

This research looks exclusively at heterosexuals, gays, and lesbians. It does not look at how bisexuals are viewed in the workplace. Given the way this study was constructed, major adjustments would be necessary to study bisexual people. Since bisexual people are attracted to both men and women, it would not be possible to portray someone as being bisexual. They could be perceived as heterosexual, gay, or lesbian. In order to portray someone as bisexual, this study would have to portray the person as being attracted to both males and females. Given that the photos are meant to portray the person with their significant other, bisexuals would have to be portrayed with both a man significant other and a woman significant other. This would create problems because the bisexual person would be portrayed as being in a nonexclusive relationship or a relationship with more than one person at a time. This would cause a problem in the study because all of the others are portrayed as having only one significant other.

This study also does not look at people who are asexual or pansexual. A similar problem arises when trying to study these because it is difficult to portray the person sexual orientation correctly when using only visual cues.

Future Work

In order for this study to be complete, further analysis should be done. This analysis would consist of calculating the statistical significance as well as checking for a correlation between responses within the data set.

This analysis was not possible at this time due to lack of resources. When starting this study, the limiting resource was funding. Therefore, free survey software was utilized. This software has its limitations, including access to the individual survey responses as well as a limit to the number of responses. Even if access to the individual surveys were possible, it would take a great deal of time to code all of the responses into statistics software because the program used does not code the data. It would have to be done by hand. Given recent funding for this study, new data can be collected using software that is more advanced.

If this study was to be conducted in the future, it could greatly benefit from a few things. First, a larger, more varied sample could give a better representative picture of what society thinks as a whole about the subject of sexual orientation and professionalism. Second, this study could be performed in a longitudinal manner, repeated every few years, to track how these views change. This second option is important because it could measure how societal views change over time.

Conclusion

While general social trends in recent years have been moving more toward equality across sexual orientations, the present research suggests that we are still a long way from true equality, at least in the workplace. Those perceived to be heterosexual, across the board, were rated higher in desirable traits than those perceived to be gay or lesbian. This indicates that negative prejudice toward non-mainstream sexual orientations is present in the workplace. While

gays and lesbians are gaining rights in the fields of marriage equality and non-discrimination acts, this negative prejudice is a detriment to an equal society. Overall, in spite of changing public opinions, this study indicates that there is still a long way to go on the road to equality for all.

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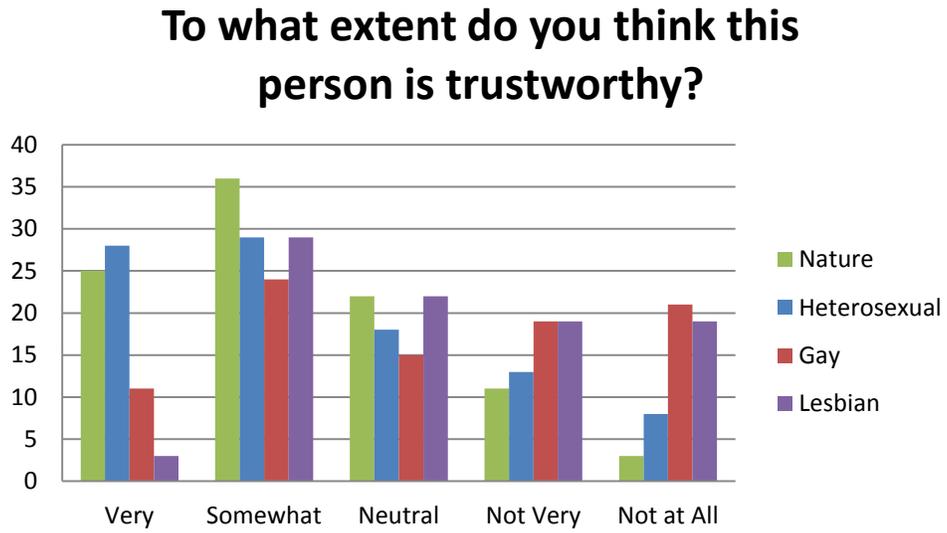multidimensional perspective. *The Journal of Sex Research*, *35*(2), 189-196. Retrieved

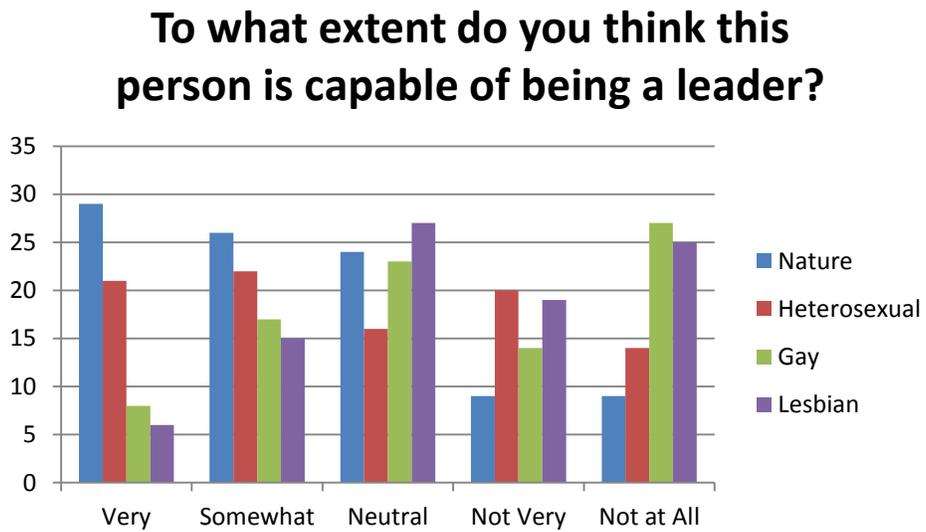from http://www.jstor.org/stable/3813671

Fig. 1

To what extent do you think this person is trustworthy?

Legend: Nature, Heterosexual, Gay, Lesbian

Categories: Very, Somewhat, Neutral, Not Very, Not at All

Fig.2

To what extent do you think this person is capable of being a leader?

Legend: Nature, Heterosexual, Gay, Lesbian

Categories: Very, Somewhat, Neutral, Not Very, Not at All

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Fig.3

To what extent do you think this person is professional in apperance?
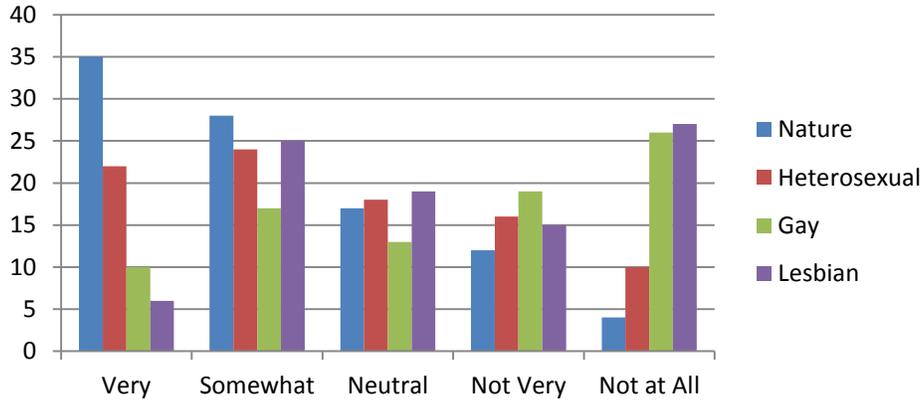
Fig. 4

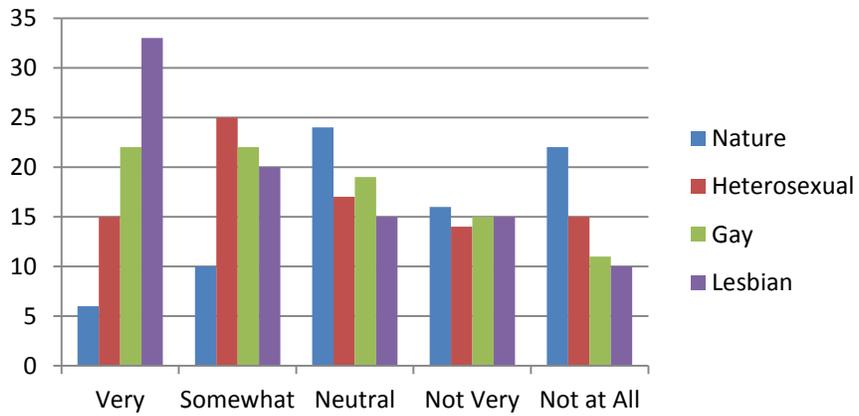**To what extent do you think this person flaunts their sexuality**

Fig. 5

To what extent do you think this person is reliable?