

Born this Way—or Not? The Relationship between Essentialism and Sexual Minorities’ LGBTQ+ Identification and Belonging

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Authors’ note

The first and third authors use they/them pronouns, the second author uses she/her pronouns, and the fourth author uses he/him pronouns.

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Author contributions

Thekla Morgenroth and Teri Kirby conceived of the overall idea of this paper. Thekla Morgenroth, Teri Kirby, and Thomas Ovet¹ all contributed to the design, materials, and data analysis of Study 1. Thekla Morgenroth, Teri Kirby, and Isabel Gee all contributed to the design, materials, and data analysis of Study 2. All authors contributed to the introduction and discussion sections. The first draft of the manuscript was written by Thekla Morgenroth, with crucial edits from Teri Kirby. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

ABSTRACT

Bisexual people experience lower levels of belonging in the LGBTQ+ community than gay and lesbian people. We investigated one of the factors that may reduce bisexual individuals' feelings of belonging in and identification with the LGBTQ+ community: Sexual orientation essentialism. Across two online studies with participants recruited through Prolific, we tested whether bisexual people endorsed sexual orientation essentialism less than lesbian and gay individuals and, in turn, feel lower levels of identification and belonging with the LGBTQ+ community. Essentialism separated into three dimensions in Study 1 (N = 375): Entitativity, naturalness, and discreteness. Relative to lesbian and gay individuals, bisexual individuals viewed sexual orientation as less natural, in turn reporting lower levels of belonging and identification. They also viewed sexual orientation groups as less discrete, which instead translated to higher levels of belonging and identification. Sexual orientation groups did not differ in their endorsement of entitativity beliefs. In Study 2 (N = 390), we focused on naturalness and replicated findings from Study 1. In addition, lower naturalness beliefs were associated with the belief that one's own views were different from those held by the LGBTQ+ community, which also contributed to lower levels of belonging and identification. Together, these studies contribute to understanding the role of essentialism in intragroup processes and paint a nuanced picture of essentialism in different sexual minority groups.

Keywords: Essentialism, bisexuality, sexual orientation, LGBTQ+, belonging, identification

INTRODUCTION

“No matter gay, straight, or bi...I'm on the right track, baby, I was born this way yeah.”

-Lady Gaga, *Born This Way*, 2011

Despite calling for acceptance of the entire LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and Queer) community, messages such as the one above may not be equally effective for all members. Indeed, bisexual people—the largest group in the LGBTQ+ community—feel lower levels of belonging in the community (Gates, 2011). Because bisexual people have more fluid views of sexual orientation (Diamond et al., 2017) and often discover their sexual orientation later in life than do gay and lesbian individuals (Martos et al., 2015), we propose that they may find messages that essentialize sexual orientation, like the one above, less appealing—with important consequences for identification and belonging.

Essentialism refers to the belief that members of social categories (e.g., race, gender, religious groups) share an unobservable “essence” that makes them similar to each other and different from other groups (Gelman, 2003; Roberts et al., 2017). It encompasses several beliefs, such as believing that group membership is natural (i.e., inborn), immutable (i.e., unchangeable), and informative (i.e., it provides important information about the group members), that there are clear group boundaries, and that the groups have existed throughout time (Haslam et al., 2000). Whereas essentialism endorsement is associated with positive outcomes for gay and lesbian individuals (e.g., Morandini et al., 2015) and with less rigid views of their own sexuality for heterosexual individuals (Morandini et al., 2021), relatively little research has examined essentialism endorsement and its consequences among bisexual individuals.

Sexual Orientation Essentialism

Essentialism has primarily been studied in intergroup contexts and is generally associated with higher levels of prejudice (Keller, 2005). For example, those who hold essentialist views of race or gender/sex are higher in racism or sexism, respectively (Brescoll & LaFrance, 2004; Roets & van Hiel, 2011; Skewes et al., 2018). The picture is more complex for sexual orientation, where some aspects of sexual orientation essentialism (e.g., informativeness) are associated with higher levels of prejudice, while others (e.g., immutability) are associated with lower levels of prejudice (Hegarty & Pratto, 2001; Hoyt et al., 2019).

Among sexual minorities specifically, four dimensions of sexual orientation essentialism have been demonstrated (Arseneau et al., 2013): (1) naturalness (i.e., the belief that sexual orientation is innate, biologically determined, fixed early in life, and universal across time and cultures); (2) discreteness (i.e., the belief that sexual orientation groups have clear boundaries and do not overlap); (3) entitativity (i.e., the belief that group members are similar to each other and group membership is informative, that is, that sexual orientation groups are “groupy”), and (4) Importance (i.e., the belief that sexual orientation is a useful and important category that affects individuals’ sense of self and social interactions).¹ Importantly, the consequences of endorsing essentialist views differs across these different dimensions for sexual minorities. For example, gay men and sexual minority women’s endorsement of naturalness is associated with lower internalized sexuality stigma, while discreteness endorsement is associated with higher internalized stigma (Morandini et al., 2015, 2017).

No research, to our knowledge, has directly compared levels of sexual orientation essentialism between different sexual orientation groups. However, there are several reasons

¹ While these terms partially deviate from earlier terminology used in the essentialism literature, the dimensions share a lot of similarity. For example, “immutability” (Hegarty & Pratto, 2001) is highly similar to “naturalness.” We will use Arseneau et al.’s (2013) terminology to be consistent with findings pertaining to essentialism within the LGBTQ+ community.

to believe that bisexual people may endorse sexual orientation essentialism less, particularly in comparison to gay and lesbian individuals. First, bisexuality does not fit with the dichotomous theories of sexual orientation often implicated in essentialist rhetoric (Bowers-Catton & Hayfield, 2015). In the context of sexual orientation, such dichotomous beliefs are referred to as monosexism: the belief system that only heterosexual and lesbian/gay identities are legitimate and that other identities either reflect confusion or a transitional phase (Klesse, 2011; Roberts et al., 2015). Bisexual individuals, whose very experience does not fit with such monosexist views, are much less likely to endorse them. Indeed, bisexual people not only reject monosexual labels such as “heterosexual” and “lesbian/gay,” but often use multiple labels to describe themselves or reject labels altogether (Galupo et al 2017).

Moreover, bisexual individuals often discover their sexual identity later in life than do lesbian women and gay men (Martos et al., 2015), so the idea of being “born this way” may not reflect bisexual people’ experience to the same extent. Lastly, bisexual people report less stability in the balance of same to other-sex attraction than lesbians, gay men, and heterosexuals (Diamond et al., 2017), which does not fit with the immutability aspect of naturalness beliefs.

As the experiences of sexual minority women and men differ extensively, so might their levels of sexual orientation essentialism. For example, women of all sexual orientations show considerable levels fluidity in their sexual identities and behaviors across their lifespans (Diamond, 2008), suggesting that lesbian women may show similarly low levels of sexual orientation essentialism as bisexual women and men. On the other hand, bisexual men face particularly high levels of bisexual erasure, that is, the belief that male bisexuality does not exist and that they are actually gay (Matsick & Rubin, 2018; Morgenroth et al., 2021). It is possible that they internalize some of these views and view their sexual orientation as less stable, which may lead to lower essentialism than other sexual orientation groups. Thus,

while it is not clear how gender/sex may affect differences in sexual orientation essentialism of bisexual and lesbian/gay individuals, it is an important factor to investigate.

Essentialism and Belonging

Differences in sexual orientation essentialism between sexual orientation and/or gender/sex groups may have important consequences for their identification with and belonging in the LGBTQ+ community. The social identity approach (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner et al., 1987) argues that identifying with particular social groups provides people with a sense of belonging, a source of self-esteem, and a sense of certainty about who they are and who they are not. However, not all groups serve this purpose equally well. More specifically, groups can only reduce uncertainty when they have clear boundaries, provide information about their members, and when group membership is immutable (see Hogg et al., 2007). We therefore argue that individuals are more likely to identify with groups they view as highly essential. Although ethnicity essentialism and ethnic group identification are positively related (Verkuyten & Brug, 2004), this has not been investigated for sexual orientation essentialism. We argue that, if bisexual individuals indeed have less essentialist views of sexual orientation than lesbians and gay men, they may also be less likely to identify with and feel less belonging in the LGBTQ+ community, as it provides a less useful social category to them.

In addition, essentialism may affect identification with and belonging in the LGBTQ+ community in a more indirect way. Given the widespread essentialist “born this way” rhetoric in LGBTQ+ activism (see Diamond & Rosky, 2016; Hacking, 2002), but also in LGBTQ+ spaces more broadly (Neary, 2019), highly essentialist views of sexual orientation are framed as prototypical of the LGBTQ+ community. In turn, not endorsing such views (or endorsing them to a lesser extent) may lead to feelings of a discrepancy between one’s own views and the views of the LGBTQ+ community and lead to lower identification and belonging. This

prediction is in line with minority stress theory (Meyer, 2003), which posits that one factor increasing minority stress and, in turn, negatively affects mental health outcomes, is the feeling of “otherness” from dominant culture. All LGBTQ+ people experience this otherness from cisheteronormative culture, but bisexual people may experience such otherness even within LGBTQ+ contexts. We argue that lower levels of essentialism among bisexual people can contribute to this feeling of otherness. If this is indeed the case, it points to a potential downside of promoting “born this way” messages due to their negative effects on some of the most marginalized and stigmatized of the LGBTQ+ community.

In summary, we argue that bisexual individuals may have less essentialist views of sexual orientation, which may have important consequences for their identification with and belonging in the LGBTQ+ community. This is problematic, as group identification can provide a range of benefits, including the protection of individuals from social stressors such as discrimination (Doyle & Molix, 2012, Haslam et al., 2009), which sexual minorities still face in many domains such as employment and healthcare (DeSouza et al., 2017; Elliot et al., 2015).

By investigating this question we not only advance knowledge about bisexual people—a marginalized and understudied group—but also contribute more broadly to understanding of groups that do not fit within an essentialized or single-category framework (e.g., multiracial individuals or non-binary gender). While researchers have argued that bisexual people are less likely to endorse essentialist views (e.g., Diamond & Rosky, 2016), this has not been tested directly so far. In addition, this project also makes an important theoretical contribution by focusing on how essentialism affects intragroup processes and outcomes. Taken together, our studies thus helps us understand the role of essentialism for identification and belonging and provides a nuanced understanding of differences in essentialist views within the LGB community.

The Current Project

In this project, we investigated the essentialist views held by bisexual and gay/lesbian individuals and their effects on identification with and belonging in the LGBTQ+ community.² We argue that lower levels of essentialism among bisexual people can affect belonging and identification (1) directly because it makes the group appear less “groupy” and thus less appealing as an ingroup, but also (2) indirectly because it is associated with a discrepancy between bisexual individuals’ own beliefs and those held by the LGBTQ+ community more broadly.

Across the two studies, we tested the following hypotheses, which are illustrated in Figure 1. The two hypotheses represent competing mediation pathways:

H1: Bisexual people will essentialize sexual orientation less compared to lesbian and gay individuals, resulting in lower levels of identification and belonging

H2: There will be a serial mediation pattern, whereby bisexual people report lower levels of essentialism and, in turn, higher discrepancy in essentialism beliefs, which will be associated with lower levels of belonging and identification.

In Study 1, we investigated different facets of sexual orientation essentialism and their relationships with identification and belonging and test H1 for all facets of essentialism. In Study 2, we focused on the facet that emerges as most relevant: Naturalness. We attempted to replicate findings from Study 1 and, in addition, added a measure that tested whether bisexual people perceive a stronger discrepancy between their own views and the views of the LGBTQ+ community compared to lesbian and gay participants (H2). The full materials and data for both studies can be found at https://osf.io/3y29f/?view_only=3e8383f9cd114efeaca33c03b4a471e5

² We use these terms to refer to sexual identity (i.e., self-categorization as bisexual, lesbian, or gay) rather than sexual behavior or attraction as this seems most appropriate in a study that focuses on social identities and group processes.

Study 1

METHOD

Participants

We based our target sample size on a power analysis conducted on G*Power (Faul, Erdfelder, Buchner, & Lang, 2009). We originally planned to examine the interaction between essentialist beliefs and sexual orientation and found that in order to achieve adequate power (80%) to detect a small interaction effect (a small increase in R^2), we would need 395 participants. To account for the exclusion of participants, we recruited 425 participants via the Prolific participant recruitment website. After excluding 49 participants who did not meet the sexual orientation requirements and one participant under the age of 18 years, the final sample consisted of 375 participants (123 bisexual women, 64 bisexual men, 73 lesbian women, 103 gay men, 5 bisexual participants who used a label other than female or male (e.g., non-binary), 1 bisexual individual who did not indicate their gender, 4 gay participants who used a label other than female or male (e.g., agender), and 2 gay participants who did not indicate their gender). The majority of participants were White (82.40%) and either American (28.80%), British (42.93%), or came from various other European countries (17.33%). The average age was 31.83 years ($SD = 10.65$) and ranged from 18 to 69.³ The average age at which participants had realized their current sexual orientation was 14.59 years ($SD = 5.89$).

Procedure and Measures

The study was introduced as examining beliefs about social groups. After indicating their consent, participants were asked about their beliefs about sexual orientation, followed

³ Because bisexual participants ($M = 29.80$; $SD = 8.86$) were younger than lesbian and gay participants ($M = 33.97$; $SD = 11.92$), $t(372) = 3.85$, $p < .001$, we ran all analyses that examine differences between lesbian/gay and bisexual participants controlling for age. Controlling for age did not change any of the results, so we reported the analyses without age as a covariate, for consistency across studies.

by measures of identification and belonging on response scales that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Lastly, participants provided demographic information.⁴

Essentialism. We used items from Arseneau et al.'s (2013) Sexual Orientation Beliefs Scales (SOBS), which is comprised of 49 questions tapping into essentialist, constructionist, and constructivist thinking about sexual orientation—the latter two reflecting low levels of essentialism. To reduce study length, we deleted 24 items that explicitly erased bisexual identities (e.g., “Sexual orientation is a category with distinct boundaries: A person is either gay/lesbian or heterosexual”) or measured a construct other than essentialism (e.g., “Using terms like “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual,” and “heterosexual” only reinforces stereotypes”). Additionally, we added three items to assess the awareness of sexual orientation in childhood (e.g., “Most sexual minorities know about their sexual orientation even in childhood”), as this was not included in the original measure, but might be an important aspect of naturalness beliefs among sexual minorities. Items were preceded by the prompt “In my opinion...”

Belonging and Identification. We measured participants' feelings of belonging in the LGBTQ+ community ($\alpha = .94$) using four items (e.g., “I feel like I belong in the LGBTQ+ community,” adapted from Walton & Cohen, 2007). We then measured identification using the group-level Self-Investment subscales from Leach et al.'s (2008) identification measure. This scale contains items pertaining to solidarity with the group (e.g., “I feel solidarity with the LGBT community”), identity satisfaction (e.g., “Being part of the LGBT community gives me a good feeling”), and identity centrality (e.g., “Being part of the LGBT community is an important part of how I see myself”) and was highly reliable ($\alpha = .95$).

⁴ In addition to the measures reported here, we measured the extent to which participants believed essentialist beliefs were held by the LGBTQ+ community. We used this measure to examine perceived discrepancies in views, relevant for H2. We also measured self-stereotyping. Details about these measures as well as results pertaining to these measures can be found in the online supplement.

RESULTS

Factor Analysis

We first ran an exploratory factor analysis on the essentialism items using maximum likelihood extraction with promax rotation, following the procedure suggested by Costello and Osborne (2005). The scree plot suggested three factors (see Fig. 2), so we next ran two additional factor analyses—one set to two factors and one set to four factors—in order to determine which of the three analyses yielded the most interpretable solution. A three-factor solution yielded the most interpretable result. We based our factors on the structure matrix (see Table 1) and only retained items that had loadings above .32, in line with Tabachnick and Fidell (2001). If an item loaded onto more than one factor, we only kept it if the difference between factor loadings was at least $|.20|$.

Based on these results, we calculated three sub-scales, which correspond to three of the four factors established by Arseneau et al. (2013): entitativity ($\alpha = .88$), naturalness ($\alpha = .81$), and discreteness ($\alpha = .75$). We did not find their fourth factor, importance, in our data, perhaps because we only included two of the items loading onto that factor in their data. In our data, both of these items loaded onto the entitativity factor (see Table 1).

Testing of Hypothesis

Descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations are shown in Table 2. Participants rated sexual orientation as highly natural, but not particularly entitative or discrete.

First, we tested whether bisexual participants endorsed essentialism less than lesbian and gay participants using a MANOVA with sexual orientation as the independent variable and the three measures of essentialism as the dependent variables. We found a significant effect of sexual orientation, $F(3, 357) = 11.51, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .09$, showing that bisexual participants viewed sexual orientation as less natural, $F(1, 359) = 29.29, p < .001, d = .58$, and less

discrete, $F(1, 359) = 7.64, p = .006, d = .28$, than did lesbian and gay participants. They did not differ in their entitativity beliefs, $F(1, 359) = 1.26, p = .262, d = .08$ (see Table 2).

Next, we tested whether these differences in essentialism would translate into lower levels of identification and belonging (H1). We ran two mediation analyses using the PROCESS macro for SPSS (v3.2, Model 4; Hayes, 2018) with sexual orientation as the predictor (0 = lesbian/gay, 1 = bisexual), entitativity, naturalness, and discreteness as parallel mediators and belonging and identification as the outcomes. Results are illustrated in Figs. 3 and 4.

For belonging, we found a negative indirect effect through naturalness, $B = -.15 [-.28, -.05]$, such that bisexual participants lower levels of belonging were, in part, explained by their lower endorsement of naturalness.⁵ The indirect effect through discreteness was positive and significant, $B = .06 [.004, .14]$. Bisexual participants endorsed discreteness beliefs less than lesbian and gay participants. However, opposite to our predictions, discreteness beliefs were negatively related to belonging, indicating that bisexual participants' lower endorsement of discreteness beliefs contributed to higher levels of belonging. The indirect effect through entitativity was not significant, $B = -.06 [-.17, .04]$.

Patterns for identification were similar such that there was a negative indirect effect through naturalness $B = -.16 [-.28, -.07]$ and a positive indirect effect through discreteness, $B = .10 [.03, .19]$, but no indirect effect through entitativity, $B = -.06 [-.16, .04]$.

We ran exploratory analyses and found that all results regarding naturalness beliefs were moderated by gender and driven by male participants, such that bisexual men, but not bisexual women, perceived sexual orientation as less natural than their heterosexual counterparts. Details regarding these analyses can be found in the online supplement.

DISCUSSION

⁵ Values in brackets refer to 95% confidence intervals

In this study, we found evidence for three facets of sexual orientation essentialism among sexual minority participants. Similar to findings reported by Arseneau et al. (2013), items loaded on to the factors entitativity, naturalness, and discreteness. Of these three factors, naturalness (i.e., the belief that sexual orientation is innate, immutable, and historically and culturally invariant) emerged as the one most consistent with our predictions. Bisexual participants endorsed naturalness beliefs less than lesbian and gay participants and these differences in naturalness beliefs explained differences in belonging and identification.

Exploratory analyses revealed that these patterns were driven by men: bisexual men had lower naturalness beliefs than gay men, but bisexual and lesbian women were similar in their naturalness beliefs. These patterns highlight the importance of an intersectional study of gender and sexual orientation (Crenshaw, 1989).

Bisexual participants also endorsed discreteness (i.e., the belief that there are distinct sexual orientation groups with clear boundaries and no overlap) less than lesbian and gay participants, which surprisingly translated into higher identification or lower feelings of belonging—perhaps because viewing sexual orientation groups (e.g., bisexual people, gay men, lesbians) as discrete is more strongly associated with self-segregation within the LGBTQ+ community.

Lastly, while entitativity beliefs were associated with group identification and belonging, there was no significant difference in entitativity beliefs between the different sexual orientation groups and bisexual people did not perceive their own beliefs as different from those held by the LGBTQ+ community.

Study 2

Given that Study 1 showed the clearest effects of naturalness beliefs, we focused on this type of essentialism in Study 2. In addition to attempting replication of Study 1, we tested whether bisexual people perceived a stronger discrepancy between their own views and the

views of the LGBTQ+ community, thus enabling us to test H2. Additionally, we recruited equal numbers of bisexual women, bisexual men, gay men, and lesbian women, to ensure that each group's views were equally reflected in the results.

METHOD

Participants

We collected data via the Prolific website, aiming for a sample size of 400 (100 bisexual women, 100 bisexual men, 100 lesbian women, and 100 gay men). After excluding participants who did not meet inclusion criteria or who were under the age of 18 years, our final sample size was 390 and consisted of 96 bisexual women, 95 bisexual men, 98 gay/lesbian women, and 101 gay men. The average age was 28.95 years ($SD = 9.61$), ranging from 18 to 65, and was comparable across gender ($M_{women} = 29.25$, $SD_{women} = 9.35$; $M_{men} = 28.66$, $SD_{men} = 9.88$) and sexual orientation groups ($M_{bisexual} = 28.21$, $SD_{bisexual} = 9.50$; $M_{lesbian/gay} = 29.67$, $SD_{lesbian/gay} = 9.70$). The majority of participants were White (81.54%), non-Hispanic (93.33%), and either American (33.59%), British (33.33%), or came from various other European countries (25.13%). Participants indicated that they realized their current sexual orientation on average at 14.79 years ($SD = 5.70$).

Materials and Procedure

After indicating their consent, participants were asked to imagine a scenario in which they overhear a conversation between four people on a train and write about the content of this conversation. We used this methodology to increase immersion and make it easier for participants to respond to our measure of discrepancy (for examples of similar methodologies see Apfelbaum et al., 2016; Crisp & Turner, 2009; Everett et al., 2015).

During the conversation described in the prompt, it became clear that the group consisted of gay men and lesbian women (e.g., one of them says "As a lesbian, I find it difficult to imagine being sexually attracted to a man"). We focused on gay men and women

because they are the most prototypical members of the LGBTQ+ community. Participants then read that the conversation moved to the topic of whether or not people are born with their sexual orientation, but were not given any information about what the individuals believed. Next, they were asked to imagine the conversation and write down the content of the imagined conversation.

After two minutes, participants were able to move on to the rest of the survey. We measured discrepancy in views by asking participants to reflect on their response and indicate the extent to which they feel like these views are different from their own using the items “These people have very different views about sexual orientation than I do,” “I have very similar thoughts as these people about sexual orientation” (reverse coded), “If I were part of this conversation, we would agree about a lot of things” (reverse coded), and “If I were part of this conversation, we would disagree about a lot of things” ($\alpha = .94$) on a 7-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.”

We then measured naturalness beliefs ($\alpha = .86$), feelings of belonging with the LGBTQ+ community ($\alpha = .94$), and identification ($\alpha = .95$) using the same items as in Study 1.⁶ Lastly, participants provided demographic information.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics for bisexual and lesbian/gay participants and bivariate correlations are shown in Table 3. We ran an independent-samples *t*-test to test whether bisexual participants endorsed naturalness views less than lesbian and gay participants and found that this was indeed the case, replicating findings from Study 1, $t(387) = 2.64$, $p = .009$, $d = .27$. Next, we examined discrepancies in beliefs and found that, as predicted,

⁶ In addition, we measured the naturalness beliefs participants believed the group in the scenario held, self-stereotyping, belonging with the group they imagined, ingroup respect, and positive affect. More information about these measures and respective results can be found in the online supplement.

bisexual participants reported a larger discrepancy in beliefs than lesbian and gay participants, $t(388) = -2.86, p = .004, d = .29$.

Mediation by Essentialism and Discrepancy in Views

We used the PROCESS macro for SPSS (v3.2, Model 6; Hayes, 2018) to test whether there were indirect effects of sexual orientation (0 = lesbian/gay, 1 = bisexual) on belonging and group self-investment through naturalness beliefs alone (H1) as well as through naturalness beliefs and, in turn, discrepancy in beliefs (H2). Both of these hypotheses were tested within the same model. We ran this analysis twice, once with belonging and once with identification as the outcome variable. Results are illustrated in Figs. 5 and 6.

In line with H2, we found an indirect effect of sexual orientation on belonging through naturalness beliefs and, in turn, the perceived discrepancy in beliefs, $B = -.06 [-.12, -.01]$. As in Study 1, the indirect effect through naturalness beliefs only was also significant, $B = -.07 [-.15, -.01]$, while the indirect effect through discrepancy in beliefs only was not, $B = -.06 [-.15, .01]$. In other words, bisexual participants' lower endorsement of naturalness beliefs was associated with lower levels of belonging, both directly and through discrepancy in beliefs. The same was true for group identification. The indirect effects through both mediators, $B = -.05 [-.11, -.01]$, and through naturalness beliefs only, $B = -.07 [-.14, -.01]$, were both significant, but the indirect effect through discrepancy in beliefs only was not, $B = -.05 [-.14, .01]$.

We once more ran exploratory analyses and found that all results were moderated by gender and driven by male participants. In other words, bisexual and lesbian women did not differ in the extent to which they essentialized sexual orientation, but bisexual men essentialized sexual orientation less than gay men. Details regarding the analyses can be found in the online supplement.

DISCUSSION

In line with predictions, we found that bisexual participants endorsed naturalness beliefs less than lesbian and gay participants and perceived a larger discrepancy between their own beliefs and the beliefs of other members of the LGBTQ+ community. We found support for both hypothesized indirect effects: through naturalness beliefs alone and through naturalness and, in turn, discrepancies in beliefs. In other words, bisexual individuals endorsed naturalness less, which was associated with a (1) lower belonging and identification, and (2) larger perceived discrepancy between their own views and the views of other LGBTQ+ individuals, and in turn, lower belonging and identification.

As in Study 1, we found that the differences between bisexual and lesbian/gay participants were driven by bisexual men. They essentialized sexual orientation less than gay men did and in turn felt lower belonging and identification, while bisexual and lesbian women showed similar levels of essentialism. Given that these findings were not hypothesized, they should be interpreted with caution, but given the consistency across both studies, these patterns open up interesting questions for future research.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Across two studies, we found that bisexual individuals endorsed sexual orientation naturalness beliefs less than lesbians and gay men, which was associated with less belonging in and identification with the LGBTQ+ community. In both studies, these patterns were driven by bisexual men. We have shown that essentialism plays an important role not only in inter-group contexts, where it is often investigated, but also in intra-group contexts. More specifically, we found that higher levels of some facets of ingroup essentialism (i.e., naturalness and entitativity) can contribute to identification and belonging and that lower levels can make individuals feel a lack of belonging, partially because these views are believed to differ from those held by the LGBTQ+ community more generally.

These findings are in line with the literature on sexual orientation essentialism more broadly in that they highlight that sexual orientation essentialism is a complex construct with different facets contributing differently to positive and negative outcomes (see Hegarty & Pratto, 2001; Hoyt et al., 2019). More specifically, similar to Morandini et al. (2015, 2017), who studied internalized stigma, we found that endorsement of naturalness beliefs had positive effects for sexual minorities (in this case for identification and belonging), while endorsement of discreteness beliefs had negative effects.

The findings that bisexual people endorsed discreteness and naturalness beliefs less than lesbian and gay participants is also in line with findings that bisexual people discover their sexual orientation later in life, often reject sexual orientation labels, and experience their sexual orientation as more fluid (Diamond et al., 2017; Galupo et al., 2017 Martos et al., 2015). Thus, we find empirical support for the theoretical argument that assertions about the immutability of sexual orientation marginalize the experience of many bisexual people (see Diamond & Rosky, 2016).

Our exploratory analyses regarding gender demonstrated that the effects were driven by men. In other words, bisexual men in particular viewed sexual orientation as less natural and perceived their views as more different from those held by the LGBTQ+ community. While we had not predicted these effects and they should thus be interpreted with caution, these findings highlight the importance of applying an intersectional lens when investigating group differences (see Crenshaw, 1989). Our study cannot speak directly to why bisexual men in particular may essentialize sexual orientation less. It may be that because they face high levels of bisexual erasure (Matsick & Rubin, 2018; Morgenroth et al., 2021) they internalize some of these views and thus view their sexuality as less stable, which is in turn reflected in their naturalness beliefs. Future research should investigate this question further.

Implications

Our findings have important practical implications. “Born this way” messages are often used in LGBTQ+ advocacy. However, our findings indicate that such messages could be a double-edged sword for bisexual people, particularly for bisexual men. On the one hand, if such messages are framed in an inclusive way that increases bisexual people’s naturalness beliefs, it could increase their identification with and belonging in the LGBTQ+ community. On the other hand, such messages may also further highlight discrepancies of bisexual people’s experience and those of lesbian and gay men and therefore reduce feelings of belonging and identification, adding an additional source of minority stress for bisexual people (see Meyer, 2003).

Our findings also make an important theoretical contribution. Essentialism has largely been investigated in intergroup contexts such as its relationship with prejudice (e.g., Hoyt et al., 2019) or how it is used strategically in response to discrimination and marginalization (e.g., Morton & Postmes, 2009). We have shown that essentialism has important intragroup consequences in that it is directly linked to belonging and identification.

Lastly, our findings have implications for how we interpret terms such as “the LGBTQ+ community.” We have used this term throughout the paper to refer to all sexual and gender minorities. However, our findings show that (1) the extent to which people feel belonging in this community and (2) the extent to which the LGBTQ+ community is even seen as “groupy” differs between different sexual orientation groups and different groups at the intersection of sexual orientation and sex/gender. It is thus useful to question whether the term “LGBTQ+ community” truly reflects all its supposed members’ views.

Limitations and Future Directions

Given the cross-sectional nature of our data, we cannot make strong causal claims regarding the models we tested. Bisexual individuals may feel lower levels of belonging for other reasons (e.g., because they face stigma from within the LGBTQ+ community) which

affects their essentialism beliefs.⁷ While it is not feasible to experimentally manipulate sexual orientation, future research should manipulate levels of different facets of essentialism and test its effect on belonging and identification. It is, however, important to keep in mind that it may be hard to do so when bisexual peoples' lived experience (e.g., their feeling that they were not necessarily "born this way") does not align with these views. Focusing specifically on some aspects of naturalness (e.g., cultural and historical invariance; lack of choice over sexual attraction) could prove useful in that regard.

While the multinational nature of the studies is a strength in many respects, including generalizability of the study to multiple cultures, it is possible that participants' conceptualization of the LGBTQ+ community may differ from each other. The LGBTQ+ community has different levels of visibility and accessibility in different countries (e.g., Buyantueva, 2018; Oswin, 2014). Indeed, some of the free responses to the scenario in Study 2 indicated that the idea of talking openly on a train about sexual orientation was not realistic for some participants. Therefore, a replication of the study where country of residence is restricted may provide a clearer pattern, but would restrict the generalizability of the study.

These two studies suggest the potential for several future research directions. For example, similar research questions could be investigated for other identities that fall in between or outside of other social categories, such as non-binary or multiracial individuals. Gender may be a particularly interesting context here, as different gender groups such as cis women and men, trans women and men, and non-binary individuals may endorse different facets of essentialism with different consequences. For example, cis women and men may emphasize biological components of gender more than trans and non-binary people, but trans and cis women and men may be similar to each other but different from non-binary people in

⁷ When running this model, the indirect effect was not significant for any of the facets of essentialism in Study 1, but was significant in Study 2.

terms of discreteness beliefs. These patterns may have important consequences for intergroup attitudes and support for different policies (e.g., unisex bathrooms vs. gender/sex-segregated bathrooms), but also for belonging and identification with the categories such as “trans,” which is often used as an umbrella term that includes both binary and non-binary identities.

Additionally, it would be interesting to consider the role of age in the processes described in our paper. A growing number of young people embraces more fluid labels of gender and sexuality, including a range of new labels (e.g., demisexual, i.e., feeling sexually attracted to people one has an emotional bond with). It will be interesting to see how essentialist views change as such labels become more mainstream, and what the consequences of these changes will be for identification and belonging.

Conclusion

While the idea of being “born this way” has become a message of empowerment and liberation for LGBTQ+ people, and while much of the conversation on LGBTQ+ rights has focused on the origin of sexual orientation, this rhetoric does not fit equally well for all members of the LGBTQ+ community. Indeed, while endorsement of naturalness was generally high among all groups, they were particularly high among the most prototypical and least marginalized groups within the LGBTQ+ community (gay men and lesbian women) and particularly low among bisexual men. Perhaps it is time to shift the focus away from whether or not LGBTQ+ people are “born this way” and onto the rights and respect they deserve, regardless of how and when they discovered their identity (see Diamond & Rosky, 2016).

Declarations

Ethics Approval

Both studies were approved by the University of Exeter Psychology Ethics Committee and were performed in accordance with the 1964 Helsinki Declaration.

Informed Consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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Figures

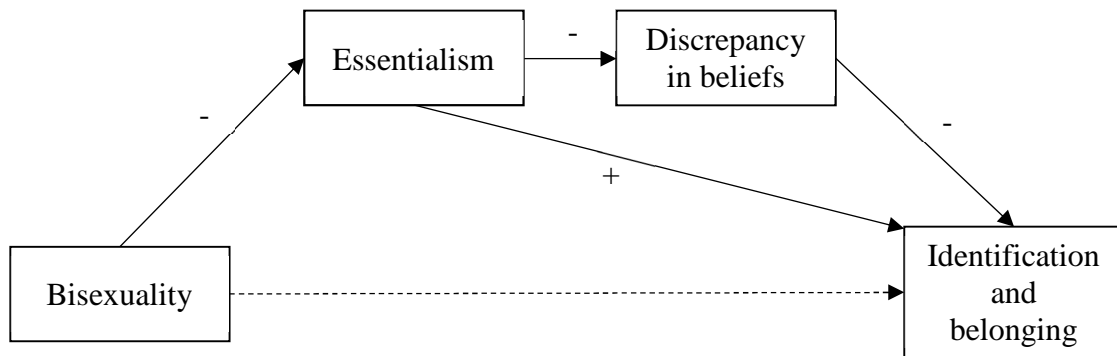
Figure 1*Illustration of the Hypotheses*

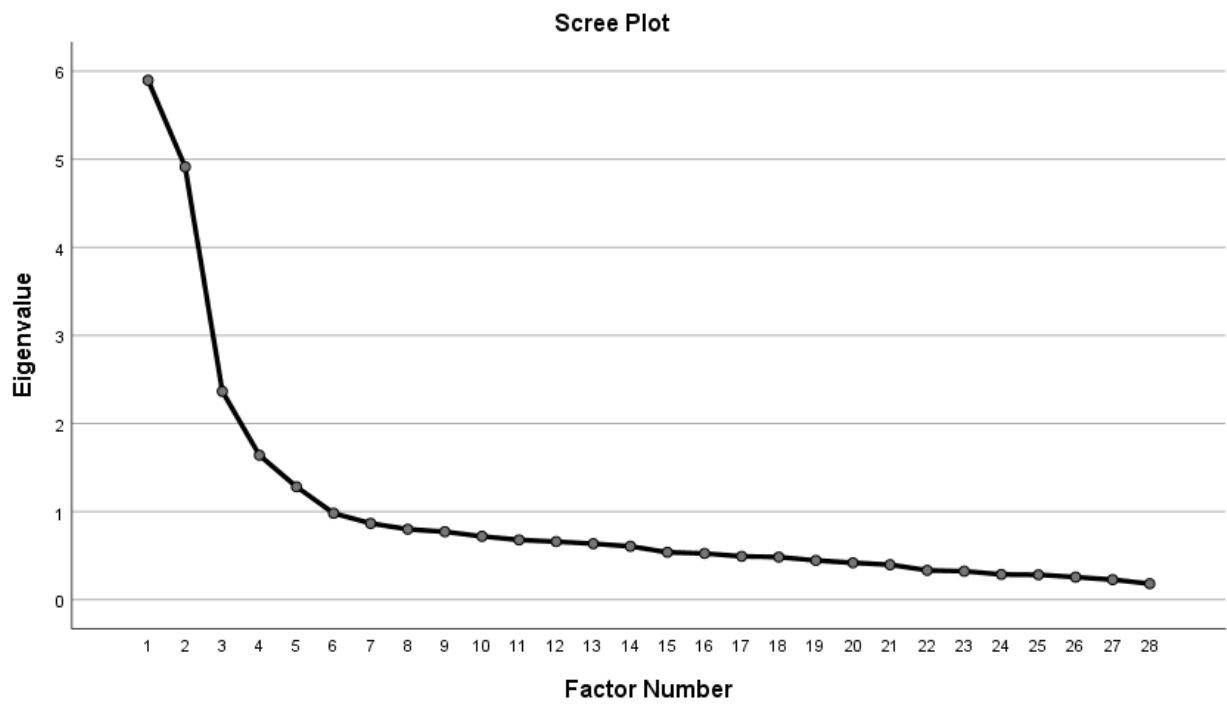
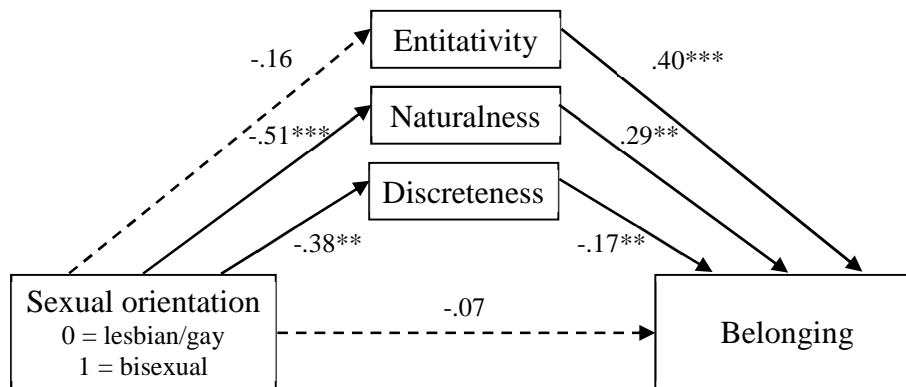
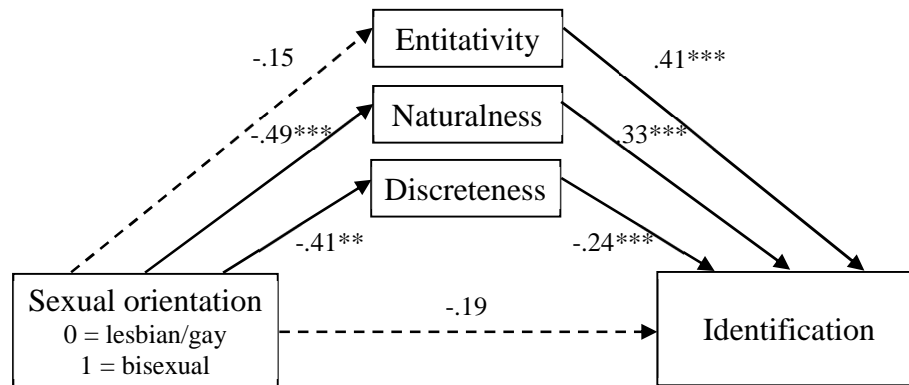
Figure 2*Scree Plot of Exploratory Factor Analysis*

Figure 3*Results of Mediation Analysis Predicting Belonging*

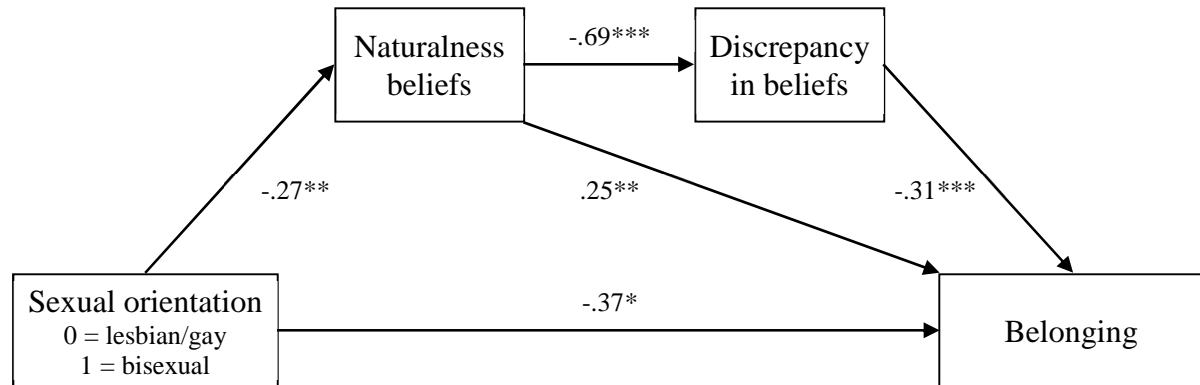
Note. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

Figure 4*Results of Mediation Analysis Predicting Identification*

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

Figure 5

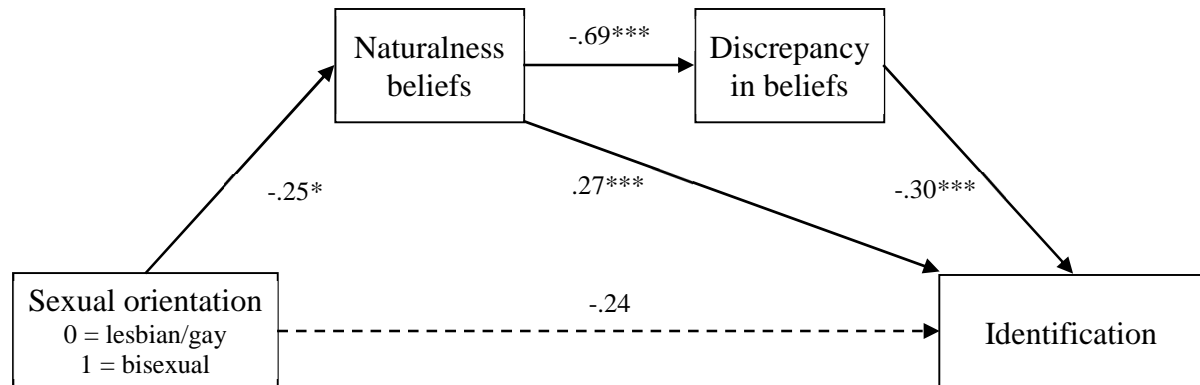
Indirect Effect of Sexual Orientation on Belonging through Naturalness Beliefs and Discrepancy in Beliefs



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

Figure 6

Indirect Effect of Sexual Orientation on Identification through Naturalness Beliefs and Discrepancy in Beliefs



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

Tables

Table 1*Structure Matrix of Three-Factor Solution*

Item	Entitativity	Naturalness	Discreteness
Knowing a person's sexual orientation tells you a lot about them	.79		
People who have the same sexual orientation are very similar to one another	.76		.39
It is possible to know many aspects of a person once you know their sexual orientation	.72		
A person's sexual orientation is an important attribute	.66		
There are more similarities than differences among people who have the same sexual orientation	.64		
It's useful to group people according to their sexual orientation ^a	.63		
Individuals with the same sexual orientation seem to be connected to one another by some invisible link	.62		
Sexual orientation is an important characteristic of people	.62		
If you don't know a person's sexual orientation you can't really say that you know that person ^a	.60		
If someone comes out as non-heterosexual (gay, bisexual etc.), they probably had this sexual orientation all along		.76	
Sexual orientation is innate		.67	
Individuals choose their sexual orientation	.39	-.61	
Sexual orientation is set early on in life		.60	
It is impossible to truly change one's sexual orientation		.57	
The existence of different sexual orientations is natural		.55	
Social and environmental factors are the main basis of an individual's sexual orientation ^b	.43	-.54	
People generally know their sexual orientation early in life ^b		.52	.37
People have control over changing or keeping their sexual orientation ^b	.46	-.51	
Most sexual minorities know about their sexual orientation even in childhood		.48	
The percentages of people in different sexual orientation groups are roughly the same all over the world		.43	
Something deep inside a person determines their sexual orientation		.42	
If someone comes out and discloses their sexual orientation, they probably knew about their sexual orientation for a very long time		.42	
Biology is the main basis of an individual's sexual orientation		.41	
The idea that individuals have a "sexual orientation" is a social invention ^b			
Sexual orientation is a category with clear boundaries: A person is either gay/lesbian, bisexual/pansexual, or heterosexual	.35		.77
A person has only one true sexual orientation			.77
It is possible to "partially" or "somewhat" belong to a sexual orientation category			-.50
People may reasonably identify as two sexual orientations at the same time			-.46

Note. Extraction Method: Maximum Likelihood. Rotation Method: Promax with Kaiser Normalization. Values below .32 are not shown.

^a These items were originally part of the importance subscale.

^b These items were not included in the final scales.

Table 2*Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations by Sexual Orientation**(Study 1)*

Variable	Bisexual participants		Lesbian and gay participants		Correlations			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	2	3	4	5
1. Entitativity	3.12	1.22	3.22	1.20	.01	.18**	.29***	.33***
2. Naturalness	5.08	0.95	5.60	0.82	-	.15**	.16**	.21***
3. Discreteness	3.04	1.24	3.39	1.30		-	-.05	-.12*
4. Belonging	4.42	1.45	4.64	1.72			-	.84***
5. Identification	4.61	1.32	4.89	1.40				-

Note. All measures are on 1-7 scales.

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

Table 3*Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations (Study 2)*

Variable	Bisexual participants		Lesbian and gay participants		Correlations		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	2	3	4
1. Naturalness beliefs	5.21	1.14	5.48	0.86	-.55***	.32***	.36***
2. Discrepancy in beliefs	2.51	1.40	2.14	1.17	-	-.37***	-.39***
3. Belonging	4.96	1.56	5.52	1.46		-	.83***
4. Identification	4.68	1.40	5.08	1.38			-

Note. All measures are on 1-7 scales.

*** $p < .001$.