

# Newly published research explores beliefs about sexual orientation

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How to assess what people believe about sexual orientation is the focus of newly published research led by Patrick Grzanka, honors faculty fellow at Barrett, the Honors College at Arizona State University.

As opposed to attitudes about sexual minorities, this study explores what heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals believe [sexual orientation](#) actually is. Through a series of studies, the researchers asked participants in a large [online survey](#) and on a university campus to rate their endorsement of ideas such as "It is impossible to truly change one's sexual orientation" and "Individuals choose their sexual orientation."

"We found that when we factored the issue of 'choice' into the spectrum of sexual orientation beliefs, things got really complicated in very interesting ways," said Grzanka. Previous research in this area tends to group beliefs about sexual orientation into two opposing, mutually exclusive "buckets," according to Grzanka: beliefs that sexuality is socially constructed versus beliefs that sexual orientation is an essential, natural part of the self. Grzanka and his colleagues, however, found that their participants exhibited a range of beliefs that did not fit easily into the "social constructionist" and "essentialist" camps.

These findings are especially important, said Grzanka, because beliefs about what sexual orientation is are strongly connected to how people perceive sexual minorities. In other words, beliefs about the nature and origins of sexual orientation may strongly predict positive or [negative](#)

[attitudes](#) toward sexual minorities.

Accordingly, their paper, which was recently published in the *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, introduces a new survey instrument to assess these beliefs called the "Sexual Orientation Beliefs Scale" ("SOBS"). Grzanka, who was recently named outstanding faculty member of the year by ASU's office of LGBTQA Services, envisions the scale being used in social research, advocacy and policymaking regarding sexual minorities, as well as by psychologists and sociologists with an interest in sexual orientation and sexual identities.

"The dream when you create an instrument such as this is that people will find it compelling and want to use it to study what people believe and to ultimately help improve attitudes toward [sexual minorities](#) and influence contemporary social policy. That is what we hope will happen with SOBS," he said.

The research was partially funded by a Sol and Esther Drescher Memorial Faculty Development Grant from Barrett Honors College. In addition to Grzanka, co-investigators were psychologists Julie Arseneau from the University of Maryland, College Park; Joseph Miles from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville; and Ruth Fassinger from John F. Kennedy University. Undergraduate honors students in Grzanka's Social Action Research Team at ASU served as research assistants, and they collected and compiled hundreds of surveys for the project.

"Development and Initial Validation of the Sexual Orientation [Beliefs Scale](#)," authored by Grzanka, Arseneau, Miles and Fassinger, is available online at [psycnet.apa.org/psycinfo/2013-16748-001/](http://psycnet.apa.org/psycinfo/2013-16748-001/). In terms of impact, the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* is the top journal in counseling and the fifth-ranked journal in the entire area of applied psychology.

Provided by Arizona State University

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