

'Born this way' beliefs may not be the key to reducing homophobia

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In recent years, the argument that sexual orientation is innate has become a principal component of the advocacy for the rights of sexual minorities.

That belief may not be the most effective way to promote more [positive attitudes](#) toward lesbian, gay and bisexual people, according to new research from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Patrick Grzanka and Joe Miles, both UT assistant professors of psychology, recently published a study in the *Journal of Counseling Psychology* challenging the notion that the belief that people are born with their sexual orientation—a belief that has proliferated in the past 20 to 30 years, particularly among social and biological scientists—is the key to improving attitudes toward lesbian, gay and bisexual people.

"This research is not about figuring what makes a person gay or straight," Grzanka said.

Rather, the researchers seek to understand how a person's [beliefs](#) about sexual orientation may affect how they view [sexual minorities](#). Their newest findings suggest that the belief that sexual orientation is inborn is not what distinguishes people who hold negative or positive attitudes toward gay men.

For the study, Grzanka, Miles and co-author Katharine Zeiders of the University of Missouri surveyed two groups of college students. They

used their previously developed sexual orientation beliefs scale, which attempts to capture a wide variety of beliefs such as the idea that sexual minorities are fundamentally different from straight people or that sexuality is based in biology. Most respondents believed sexual orientation is inborn and unchangeable, but it's what else they believed about sexual orientation that distinguishes them.

For example, the researchers looked more closely at respondents who had negative attitudes about gay men. Even among those who believed gay men are "born that way," those who also believed gay men are "all the same and act the same way" were more likely to hold prejudicial attitudes toward [gay men](#), Grzanka said.

"We suggest that this demonstrates the limited capacity of 'born this way' arguments to reduce homophobia," he said.

Grzanka said their study may help activists, educators and other researchers better understand that people's beliefs about the nature of sexual orientation should be considered within the context of other beliefs, since it is the sum of their beliefs that shapes their attitudes toward sexual minorities. Understanding this will help advocates more effectively foster acceptance of sexual minorities and create a safer and more welcoming society.

Grzanka noted that beliefs about the nature of sexual orientation have profound implications for science, policy and the law. Arguments that sexual orientation is inherent and unchangeable have been used in landmark court cases to serve as the foundation for civil protections and privileges, such as marriage, and to challenge harmful faux-medical practices, such as so-called sexual orientation "conversion therapy."

"And yet there is little scientific evidence to suggest that the categories we use today in the United States—categories that are historically quite

new—originate in the body at all," he said. "I think social scientists, lawyers, biological researchers and activists all need to examine why it is that many of us are so deeply invested in biological explanations of sexual orientation, particularly when they appear to have limited efficacy in terms of promoting more positive attitudes toward sexual minorities."

Next, Grzanka and collaborators will explore how targeting different kinds of [sexual orientation](#) beliefs people hold may be better at promoting more positive attitudes toward lesbian, gay and bisexual people.

"'Born this way' arguments have been the cornerstone of LGBT advocacy against horrific attempts by physicians, clergy and psychologists to turn sexual minorities into heterosexuals," Grzanka said. "We are contributing to the ongoing political and scholarly conversations about whether biological arguments are enough to actually improve attitudes toward sexual minorities."

Provided by University of Tennessee at Knoxville

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