

## ABSTRACT

The measure of a man: A critical methodology for investigating essentialist beliefs about sexual orientation categories in Japan and the United States

by

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Methods for studying laypeople's beliefs about sexual orientation categories have evolved in step with larger theoretical and epistemological shifts in the interdisciplinary study of sexuality. The dominant approach to measuring laypeople's sexual orientation beliefs over the past decade was made possible through an epistemological shift from a nature vs. nurture paradigm to a social constructionist theoretical model of *psychological essentialism* (Medin, 1989; Medin & Ortony, 1989; Rothbart & Taylor, 1992). Despite this shift, I argue that the forced-response scale-based survey methodologies typically used to operationally define essentialist beliefs about sexual orientation at best only partially realize the social constructionist potential of this underlying theory. By critically reconstructing this theory of psychological essentialism from an epistemological stance rooted in discourse, I developed a methodology reliant not on investigators' but rather laypeople's own mobilization of culturally shared discourses of sexuality. In testing this methodology, I focus on one theoretical dimension of psychological essentialism—*inductive potential*, or the extent to which shared knowledge about category membership allows for inference of a wealth of associated information about specific category members. I explored this critical methodology through a mixed-method empirical

investigation of laypeople's inductive potential beliefs in relation to two components of sexuality: *sexual desire* and *romantic love*. I sought to answer two research questions:

- 1) To what extent, and in what ways, do laypeople discursively mobilize inductive potential beliefs about differences in homo/heterosexual men's sexual desire and romantic love?
- 2) To what extent, and in what ways, is laypeople's discursive mobilization of those inductive potential beliefs explained by laypersons' gendered and/or cultural contexts?

In Study 1, I primed cultural discourses of sexuality and sexual orientation prior to an impression formation task. Students from four-year public universities in the Tokyo (N = 197; ages 18-23) and New York City (N = 208; ages 18-25) metropolitan areas read a series of fictional diary entries featuring a male college student (the target) describing his attraction to either a female or male classmate. Each participant then manually drew a Euler diagram comprised of circles representing their impressions of the relative importance (circle size) and interrelationships between (circle overlap) six identities associated with the target. To the extent participants engaged in inductive potential beliefs, I predicted that: (H1) participants will perceive sexual desire as *more* centrally defining of a same-sex attracted male target relative to an other-sex attracted male target; and (H2) participants will perceive romantic love as *less* centrally defining of a same-sex attracted male target relative to an other-sex attracted male target. Fitting multiple circle size and overlap outcomes to separate generalized linear models, I found a consistent pattern of support for both predictions. Cultural and gendered differences added additional nuance to these experimental patterns: Japanese participants associated men with greater sexual desire and less romantic love relative to their US peers, regardless of perceived sexual orientation. Additionally, US and Japanese men, compared to women, appeared to associate these two components of sexuality more frequently with men's social roles. As such,

while these results strongly suggested the presence of participants' inductive potential beliefs about sexual orientation categories, they also pointed to important variation across culture and gender.

In an effort to discursively unpack the inductively rich meanings associated with these additional gendered and cultural patterns as well as validate my interpretations of the results of this experimental manipulation, in Study 2 I engaged separate peer focus groups in New York City (N = 20; ages 19-25) and Tokyo (N = 21; ages 20-24) in discursively interpreting the Euler diagrams previously produced. Based on thematic analysis of distinct discourses related to essentialist notions of sexual orientation, I identified three themes concerning the ways these sexual orientation discourses are culturally understood in the US and Japan; the work of those discourses in their imbrication with other distinct discourses of cultural identity; and the culturally specific ways laypeople voiced resistance to these sexual orientation discourses. Taken together, these findings from Study 1 and 2 implicate sexual orientation as an inductively potent discourse in laypeople's construction of beliefs about male sexuality across cultural contexts and genders. While these results agree with past research, they also point to a need for methodologies such as that developed in this dissertation project sensitive to the ways culturally embedded and intersectional discourses inform beliefs about male sexuality. Such methodologies may provide researchers, activists and policymakers much needed insight in tailoring efforts to address persistent stigma and discrimination.