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Debunking the 'gaydar' myth

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Two people dress up as Gaydar bots during San Francisco's 2014 gay pride parade. Scott Schiller/flickr, CC BY-NC

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Kids are often told that you can't judge a book by its cover.

Even so, people often believe they can rely on their gut to intuit things about other people. Stereotypes often influence these impressions, whether it's that a black man is dangerous, a woman won't be a good leader or a fashionable man is gay.

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Stereotypes related to gay men and lesbians often operate under the guise of "gaydar" rather than stereotyping. "Gaydar" (a portmanteau of "gay" and "radar") is a term that first appeared in the 1980s and refers to a "sixth sense" for identifying who is gay. Like many purported intuitions, however, gaydar often relies on stereotypes.

While many people believe stereotyping is wrong, calling it "gaydar" merely provides a cover for using stereotypical traits – like someone's fashion sense, profession or hairstyle – to jump to conclusions about someone being gay. Nonetheless, some researchers have published studies that, at first glance, appear to show that people have accurate gaydar.

In some recent work, my colleagues and I have been able to demonstrate how the perpetuation of the gaydar myth has unintended negative consequences. We've also identified a mathematical flaw in some previous gaydar research, calling into question the results.

Stereotyping in disguise

My colleagues and I suspected that even people who would normally try to refrain from stereotyping might be more likely to use gay stereotypes if they are led to believe they have gaydar.

To test this idea, we conducted an experiment. We told some participants that scientific evidence says gaydar was a real ability, led others to believe that gaydar is just another term for stereotyping and said nothing about gaydar to a third group (the control).

Participants then judged whether men were gay or straight based on information ostensibly taken from social media profiles. Some of the men had interests (or "likes") that related to gay stereotypes, like fashion, shopping or theater. Others had interests related to straight stereotypes, like sports, hunting or cars, or "neutral" interests unrelated to stereotypes, like reading or movies. This design allowed us to assess how often people jumped to the conclusion that men were gay based on stereotypically gay interests. Those who were told gaydar is real stereotyped much more than the control group, and participants stereotyped much less when they had been told that gaydar is just

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another term for stereotyping.

These patterns provided strong support for the idea that belief in gaydar encourages stereotyping by simply disguising it under a different label.

What's the big deal?

In some ways, the idea of gaydar – even if it's just stereotyping – seems useful at best and harmless at worst. But the very fact that it seems harmless may actually be responsible for its most pernicious effects. Using gaydar as a way to talk innocuously or jokingly about stereotyping – "Oh, that guy sets off my gaydar" – trivializes stereotyping and makes it seem like no big deal.

But we know that stereotypes have many negative consequences, so we shouldn't be encouraging it on any level.

First, stereotyping can facilitate prejudice. In a study on prejudice-based aggression, we had participants play a game that involved administering electric shocks to a subject in the other room. Participants learned only one thing about this other person, either that he was gay or simply liked shopping (people tend to assume men who like shopping are gay).

In one condition, therefore, the participants knew that the man was gay and in the other they might have privately inferred that he was gay though it wasn't confirmed, but that wasn't known to anyone else (who might have accused them of being prejudiced).

These conditions are especially important for a subset of people who are covertly prejudiced: They're aware that they're prejudiced and ok with it, but don't want others to know. We can identify these people with some well-established questionnaire measures, and we know that they express prejudice only when they're able to get away with it.

As we predicted, these covertly prejudiced people tended to refrain from shocking the man who was confirmed as gay, but delivered extremely high levels of shocks to the man who liked shopping. If they

had shocked the first man, people could accuse them of prejudice ("You shocked him because he was gay!"). But if others accused participants of prejudice in the second condition, it could be plausibly denied ("I didn't think he was gay!"). In other words, stereotyping can give people opportunities to express prejudices without fear of reprisal.

Second, stereotypes – even innocuous ones – are troublesome for a number of reasons: They lead us to think narrowly about people before we get to know them, they can justify discrimination and oppression, and, for members of stereotyped groups, they can even lead to depression and other mental health problems. Encouraging stereotyping under the guise of gaydar contributes – directly or indirectly – to stereotyping's downstream consequences.

But what if gaydar is actually accurate?

Some researchers say that stereotypes about gay people possess a grain of truth, which could lend credence to the idea of having accurate gaydar.

In these studies, researchers presented pictures, sound clips and videos of real gay and straight people to the participants, who then categorized them as gay or straight.

Half of the people in the pictures, clips and videos were gay and half were straight, which meant that the participants would demonstrate an accurate gaydar if their accuracy rate were significantly higher than 50 percent. Indeed, participants tended to have about 60 percent accuracy, and the researchers concluded that people really do possess an accurate gaydar. Many studies have replicated these results, with their authors – and the media – touting them as evidence that gaydar exists.

Not so fast…

But as we've been able to show in two recent papers, all of these previous studies fall prey to a mathematical error that, when corrected, actually leads to the opposite conclusion: Most of the time, gaydar will be highly *inaccurate*.

How can this be, if people in these studies are accurate at rates significantly higher than 50 percent?

There's a problem in the basic premise of these studies: Namely, having a pool of people in which 50 percent of the targets are gay. In the real world, only around 3 to 8 percent of adults identify as gay, lesbian or bisexual.

What does this mean for interpreting the 60 percent accuracy rate? Think about what the 60 percent accuracy means for the straight targets in these studies. If people have 60 percent accuracy in identifying who is straight, it means that 40 percent of the time, straight people are incorrectly categorized. In a world where 95 percent of people are straight, 60 percent accuracy means that for every 100 people, there will be 38 straight people incorrectly assumed to be gay, but only three gay people correctly categorized.

Therefore, the 60 percent accuracy in the lab studies translates to 93 percent inaccuracy for identifying who is gay in the real world (38 / [38 + 3] = 92.7 percent). Even when people seem gay – and set off all the alarms on your gaydar – it's far more likely that they're straight. More straight people will seem to be gay than there are actual gay people in total.

If you're disappointed to learn that your gaydar might not operate as well as you think it does, there's a quick fix: Rather than coming to a snap judgment about people based on what they wear or how they talk, you're probably better off just asking them.

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