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Heterosexuals Do It with Feeling: Heterocentrism in Heterosexual College Students' Perceptions of Female Bisexuality and Heterosexuality

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How people define sexual orientation may have important implications for understanding hostility toward sexual outgroups. This study used an ethnocentrism framework to predict how college students would define 'heterosexuality' and 'bisexuality' and under what conditions they would apply these labels to a woman. One hundred and eighty-nine heterosexual participants (125 female, 64 male) were asked to define either 'heterosexuality' or 'bisexuality.' As predicted, affective feelings and physical behaviors defined 'heterosexuality' whereas 'bisexuality' was defined solely by physical behavior. Participants also read a list of behaviors or emotions a woman had performed with or felt toward either a same-sex or cross-sex individual and indicated whether each of the items would indicate that the woman was bisexual or heterosexual, respectively. The authors confirmed that it took more extreme sexual behavior to label a woman 'bisexual' than it did to label her 'heterosexual.'

KEYWORDS *bisexuality, biphobia, heterosexuality, heterocentrism, ingroups, outgroups*

Humans have a tendency to more highly value groups to which they belong and to see these groups as more diverse than groups to which they do not belong. This tendency to believe that one's ingroup is the litmus test

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by which all other groups are evaluated is called ethnocentrism (Sumner, 1906). The ingroup views itself as morally superior and sees its standards as those that should be universally adopted (LeVine & Campbell, 1972). Extensive research has examined these ingroup–outgroup and ethnocentric biases in the areas of race (Joshi, Liaso, & Jackson, 2006); gender (Joshi et al., 2006); organizations (Meritt, Ryan, Mack, Leeds, & Schmitt, 2010); religion (Galen, Smith, Knapp, & Wyngarden, 2011; Johnson, Rowatt, & LaBouff, 2012; LaBouff, Rowatt, Johnson, & Finkle, 2012); politics (Alabastro, Rast, Lac, Hogg, & Crano, 2013; Munro, Weih, & Tsai, 2010); crime, punishment, and law (Kenworthy, Barden, Diamond, & del Carmen, 2011; Lindholm & Cederwall, 2010); humor (Abrams & Bippus, 2011); and immigration (Mukherjee, Molina, & Adams, 2013). What we explore in this article is the extension of these concepts to heterosexual college students' personal definitions of 'sexual orientation,' specifically 'heterosexuality' and 'bisexuality,' and the behavioral and/or emotional criteria necessary to label a woman 'heterosexual' or 'bisexual.'

Ingroup Bias and Sexual Prejudice

Heterosexuals, especially men, show strong implicit and explicit biases in favor of their sexual ingroup (Anselmi, Voci, Vianello, & Robusto, 2015). This ingroup bias is correlated with prejudice toward the outgroup. Pew Research (2013) reported that one third of sexual minorities have been physically attacked or threatened, and 39% have been rejected by a family member or close friend at some point in their lives. Some researchers have argued that this prejudice stems from biphobia resulting from extremely negative attitudes against any type of same-sex relationship (see Haaga, 1991). According to this view, sexual prejudice is attributable to individual beliefs. However, Herek (2000), taking an ethnocentric perspective, argues that, rather than stemming from personal values, sexual prejudice results from a desire to “demonstrate . . . a person's membership in the group *heterosexual*” (p. 3). The origin of the ethnocentric bias is the need for the “positive social identity” brought about by a salient distinction between the ingroup and outgroup on some relevant and valued dimension (Turner, 1981).

Heterocentrism

The defining of outgroups based on these perceived relevant and valued dimensions has important real-world implications. An intergroup relations framework for understanding the implicit definitions heterosexual individuals hold of bisexual people may provide a better understanding of how labeling and defining a sexual outgroup maintains bias against that group.

As Anselmi et al. (2015) noted, “when heterosexual individuals have to judge non-heterosexual individuals, sexual prejudice represents a special kind of ingroup favoritism” (pp. 40–41). Specifically, in the area of sexual orientation, by identifying bisexual people through their most salient distinguishing characteristic, their sexual behavior (Bauer & Brennan, 2013), heterocentric beliefs in the moral inferiority of sexual outgroups allows individuals to maintain bias against bisexual individuals because of the moral taboos surrounding sexuality (Klassen, Williams, & Levitt, 1989). But this bias is due to an ingroup’s tendency to denigrate the outgroup and not to hate or biphobia per se. In fact, Franklin (2000) concluded that the term ‘hate crime’ may be misleading, as most self-reported antigay behavior was attributable to the desire for social acceptance within the ingroup.

Monosexism

It is worth noting that although much research in the past subsumed lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals as one group, research has increasingly identified the unique stigma faced by bisexual individuals. In addition to being a heterocentric society, we are also a monosexual one (Messinger, 2012). Therefore, a bisexual orientation places an individual in the outgroup of heterosexuals and gay men and lesbians who form a monosexual ingroup (Ochs, 1996). In fact, bisexual individuals report high levels of discrimination due to their doubly stigmatized identities (Mulick & Wright, 2011; Ross, Dobinson, & Eady, 2010), which results in their experiencing both direct and subtle hostility (Lehart, Balsam, & Ibrahim-Wells, 2009).

Defining ‘Sexual Orientation’

In addition to understanding the consequences of labeling an individual as either ‘heterosexual’ or ‘bisexual,’ social psychological theory may explain how heterosexual individuals come to define an individual’s sexual orientation in the first place. The dictionary defines the terms ‘heterosexual’ and ‘bisexual’ as “having sexual attraction for” the opposite sex or both sexes, respectively (“Bisexual,” “Heterosexual,” 2015). According to these definitions we determine all sexual orientation the same way for men and women, through people’s internal attraction toward or desire for another. However, the tendency toward heterocentrism would lead us to predict that this is probably not the case in the real world.

Humans tend to attribute more variability to members of groups to which they belong and less variability to groups to which they do not belong (Doosje, Ellemers, & Spears 1995; Park, Ryan, & Judd, 1992). Although the ingroup is heterogeneous, the outgroup is perceived to be centered about a single salient dimension. Thus, heterosexuals would be expected to define their sexual ingroup using salient physical behaviors as well as less salient

factors such as their internal affective feelings. On the other hand, what is expected to be most salient for heterosexuals in defining 'bisexuality' is the outgroup's sexual behavior alone.

Although theoretically supported, empirical evidence to support this prediction is lacking because, to our knowledge, no studies exist that ask heterosexuals to define sexual ingroups and outgroups. However, indirect evidence for this argument comes from the results of one study that asked bisexual individuals to define their sexual ingroup. Rust (2000) found that a majority of bisexual men and women base their sexual identity on the emotional, rather than physical, attraction they feel toward others. In fact, it is common for bisexual individuals to label themselves as such without engaging in any same-sex sexual behavior but, rather, to self-label based on their personal feelings (Gates, 2011; Halperin, 2009; Valocchi, 2005). In addition to understanding how heterosexual individuals define 'sexual orientation,' we wanted to determine the conditions that lead heterosexual college students to label a woman as 'heterosexual' or 'bisexual.'

Determining Sexual Orientation

In the United States, bisexuality is not viewed equally by gender. Most previous research on bisexuality has focused on women (Esterline & Galupo, 2013) and has found that women are allowed, and indeed report, greater sexual fluidity than men (Diamond, 2008; Esterline & Galupo, 2013; Rupp & Taylor, 2010). Because of this, one might expect very different findings in heterosexuals' defining 'bisexuality' in males versus females. For this reason, this study limits its focus to determining sexual orientation in women.

According to the availability heuristic, we estimate the likelihood of an event by how quickly examples come to mind (Myers, 2012). If I am a heterosexual, I am likely to use my own behavior or how frequently I have observed a given behavior to determine whether someone else is heterosexual. For example, if I see a male and female kiss, I will assume that they are heterosexual because I also perform that behavior. The tendency would be to overestimate the frequency with which cross-sex sexual behavior indicates that an individual is heterosexual. But what about determining sexual orientation in a woman who engages in sexual behavior with cross-sex and same-sex individuals? If I am not bisexual, how do I determine if someone else is? Like determining heterosexuality, will any same-sex sexual behavior between normally heterosexual people lead to labeling the individuals as 'nonheterosexual'? Probably not. Previous research has shown that female to female kissing is prevalent and considered "normal" behavior among heterosexual college students (Lannutti & Denes, 2012; Rupp & Taylor, 2010) and does not imply a bisexual (or lesbian) identity (Yost & McCarthy, 2012). However, these studies only examined the act of kissing and no other same sex behaviors in labeling bisexuality in women. If a woman engages in oral

sex and/or stimulates another woman's genitals, would she then be labeled 'bisexual'? What if the behaviors were repeated?

Hypotheses

Because of the prevalence of some female-to-female sexual behavior in American young adult culture, we predict that, when given a list of escalating sexual behaviors, it will take evidence of more extreme behavior for heterosexual college students to label a woman 'bisexual' than it will for them to label her 'heterosexual.' Further, we predict that heterosexual college students will self-define 'heterosexuality' in terms of internal affective emotions and external sexual behavior, whereas, they will define 'bisexuality' exclusively in terms of sexual behavior.

METHOD

Participants

We surveyed a convenience sample of 189 undergraduates (64 males, 125 females) enrolled at two Southern California universities. Participant age ranged from 16 to 47 years with a mean age of 23 ($SD = 4.84$); 55.6% self-identified as Hispanic/Latino/Mexican American, 18.5% White, 9% Asian/Asian American, 6.3% Filipino/Pacific Islander, 4.8% African American, and 5.3% "other" (Percentages do not add to 100 due to rounding). Fifteen individuals self-identified their sexual orientation as homosexual or bisexual and were eliminated from most analyses leaving a final sample of 174 heterosexual college students.

Procedure

Participants were recruited without compensation from nine classes at two universities. The professor in each class asked students to volunteer to complete the survey and return it during class. Before the survey was distributed participants signed an informed consent form. Participants then completed one of two randomly distributed surveys (heterosexuality survey, $n = 95$, bisexuality survey, $n = 94$). The survey took approximately 5 to 7 minutes to complete. Participants handed in their survey and were thanked and verbally debriefed.

Measures

Demographics. Participants provided information on their age, sexual orientation, race, and gender. Sexual orientation was measured by a single item that asked, "When thinking about your sexual orientation do you see

yourself as someone who would prefer to be with someone of..." The response choices were "the opposite sex," or "the same sex as yourself, or "with either or both sexes."

Behavioral statements. Two surveys were developed; one assessed perceptions of female heterosexuality, the other of female bisexuality. Each survey contained an introduction which included the following statement: "The woman you are about to read about is between the ages of 18–28 and has previously dated men. All physical acts described in the survey were voluntary." Each survey contained a list of eight sexual statements regarding a sexual behavior the woman had engaged in with a same sex (bisexuality survey) or cross-sex (heterosexuality survey) individual. The statements were randomly presented on the survey but are presented here in a hierarchy from least to most intimate beginning with a single occurrence of each behavior and then indicating multiple occurrences of each. The statements, respective of survey type, were, "She kissed another woman/a man," "She had oral contact with another woman's/a man's breasts/nipples," "She touched another woman's/a man's genitals," "She had oral contact with another woman's/a man's genitals," "She kissed another woman/a man more than once," "She had oral contact with another woman's/a man's breasts/nipples more than once," "She touched another woman's/man's genitals more than once," and "She had oral contact with another woman's/man's genitals more than once." Following each item respondents assessed the woman's sexual orientation on a 5-point scale. For the heterosexuality survey the scale points were 1 (*definitely not heterosexual*), 2 (*probably not heterosexual*), 3 (*somewhat heterosexual*), 4 (*probably heterosexual*), and 5 (*definitely heterosexual*). The bisexuality survey was measured on the same 5-point scale where the poles indicated 1 (*definitely not bisexual*) and 5 (*definitely bisexual*). For clarification the bisexuality survey contained an additional statement that read, "If you select 1, definitely not bisexual, you are indicating that the woman is heterosexual. There is no option to label her lesbian." For each survey the eight items were combined to form a single measure of physical behaviors ($\alpha = .89$ for bisexuality survey; $\alpha = .89$ for heterosexuality survey).

Emotional statements. Two emotional items were also included with the sexual behavior statements in each survey. The emotional statements, by survey type, were, "She has had desires to be with another woman/a man" and "She has felt she was in love with another woman/a man." Respondents again assessed the woman's sexual orientation on the same 5-point scale shown above. These items were collapsed to form a single emotional measure for each survey type ($\alpha = .52$ for bisexuality survey; $\alpha = .83$ for heterosexuality survey).

Open-ended question. A single open-ended question followed the statements, which, respective of survey type, asked, "What is your definition of bisexuality/heterosexuality?" Responses that defined 'sexual orientation'

in terms of emotions or affect (e.g., “having strong feelings for someone of the opposite sex”) were coded as 1, those that used behavioral terms (e.g., “someone who engages in sex with people of the opposite sex”) were coded as 2, those that contained behavioral and emotional indications were coded as 3, and if the definition did not clearly fit into one of e.g., “a bisexual is someone who plays for both teams”) it was coded as 4. One researcher and one volunteer who were blind to the study hypotheses coded the open-ended responses. Inter-rater reliability for the open-ended questions was found to be acceptable ($\alpha = .90$ for each survey type). Sixty-one percent of the responses were classified as either solely physical or emotional, one third as physical and emotional, and 5% as no clear category.

RESULTS

Extremity of Behavior

A split plot ANOVA (survey type x the 10 statements) was performed examining which sexual behaviors and feelings would more strongly classify a woman as heterosexual versus bisexual. A significant main effect and interaction were found between survey type and the statements, $\lambda(9, 178) = 14.62, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .425$, power = 1.0 and $\lambda(9, 178) = 10.525, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .347$, power = 1.0, respectively. Planned contrasts revealed significant differences between survey type (heterosexual vs. bisexual) on four of the eight physical and both emotional items (see Figure 1 for means of statement ratings by survey type). The six significant differences were, “She kissed another woman/a man,” $F(1, 167) = 47.97, p < .001$; “She had oral contact with another woman’s/a man’s breast/nipples,” $F(1, 167) = 4.90, p < .05$; “She touched another woman’s/a man’s genitals,” $F(1, 167) = 8.98, p < .01$; “She kissed another woman/a man more than once,” $F(1, 167) = 11.19, p < .002$; “She is in love with another woman/a man,” $F(1, 167) = 14.65, p < .001$; “She has desires for another woman/a man,” $F(1, 167) = 69.48, p < .001$. As shown in the figure, the results indicated, as predicted, that it took more extreme sexual behaviors to label the target woman as ‘bisexual’ than it did to label her ‘heterosexual.’ Specifically, participants were not equally likely to label the woman ‘heterosexual’ or ‘bisexual’ until there was oral-genital contact or, except for kissing, the sexual behaviors were repeated.

Open-Ended Question

The open-ended question following the statements was analyzed using an independent *t* test for differences in response patterns by survey (heterosexuality vs. bisexuality). Using only open-ended responses that were categorized as solely emotional (1) or physical (2), results revealed a significant difference in the overall open-ended response pattern for each survey, $t(105)$

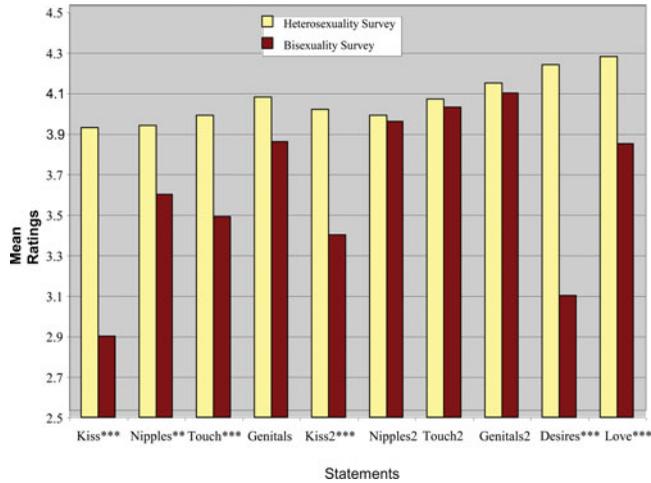


FIGURE 1 Mean ratings of statements by survey type. *Note.* Kiss = She kissed another woman/man; Nipples = She had oral contact with another woman's/man's nipples/chest; Touch = She touched another woman's/a man's genitals; Genitals = She had oral contact with another woman's/a man's genitals; Kiss2 = She kissed another woman/a man more than once; Nipples2 = She had oral contact with another woman's/a man's breasts/nipples more than once; Touch2 = She touched another woman's genitals more than once; Genitals2 = She had oral contact with another woman's genitals more than once; Desire = She has had desires to be with another woman/a man; Love = She has felt she was in love with another woman/a man. ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

$= -2.33$, $p < .001$, $r = .292$, such that heterosexuality ($M = 1.54$, $SD = .40$) was defined more by emotional attributes than bisexuality ($M = 1.81$, $SD = .40$). No significant difference was found between surveys for those who defined sexual orientation using physical and emotional terms such that, of the people who used emotional and physical terms in defining sexual orientation, it did not make a difference if they were defining heterosexuality or bisexuality.

Post hoc Analysis

To provide further evidence for our predictions, we performed a post hoc analysis on the small subsample of self-identified homosexual and bisexual participants. We split the data file by participant sexual orientation (gay, lesbian and bisexual men and women, $n = 8$; heterosexual men and women, $n = 82$) and conducted an independent samples t test. Although the sample sizes were uneven and one sample was very small, the t test has still been shown to provide reliable results for sample sizes of five or fewer as long as the variances between the groups are equal (deWinter, 2013). In looking only at the bisexuality survey, we found that Levene's test for equality of variances was nonsignificant, indicating that the samples met the assumption of equal variances. The results revealed no difference between the sample

groups on the ratings of the physical items. However, a significant difference was found on the emotional items, $t(88) = -2.711$, $p < .009$, $d = 1.0042$. The results indicate that, although both groups were equally likely to define the woman as bisexual based on her sexual behavior, nonheterosexuals ($M = 4.37$, $SD = .74$) were more likely than heterosexuals ($M = 3.84$, $SD = .84$) to define the woman as bisexual based on the less salient emotional characteristics of love and desire. There were no significant differences between bisexual and gay male and lesbian participants and heterosexual participants in their ratings of the behavioral and emotional items on the heterosexuality survey.

DISCUSSION

This study found that heterosexual college students do not use the same criteria to define heterosexuality and bisexuality. Participants defined heterosexuality with emotion based words to a significantly greater degree than they did bisexuality. According to our knowledge of intergroup perception, not only do people tend to see more homogeneity in the outgroup, they also tend to define an outgroup by its most salient distinguishing characteristic. In the case of bisexuality, that characteristic is sexual behavior. Boyer and Galupo (2015b) found that there is even an expectation that bisexual women engage in public same-sex behaviors to “prove” their bisexual orientation. Thus, heterosexual individuals define bisexual people by what they do and not by how they feel.

The results also confirmed that it took more extreme sexual behavior to label a woman ‘bisexual’ than it did to label her ‘heterosexual.’ Specifically, it was found that college students did not consider kissing, even if it was repeated, to be an indication of a bisexual orientation. Given that 69% of college students have witnessed female-to-female kissing and did not believe it called into question the women’s sexual orientation (Yost & McCarthy, 2012), this finding is not surprising. In our study, a woman wasn’t as equally likely to be defined ‘bisexual’ as ‘heterosexual’ until she engaged in oral contact with another woman’s genitals or the sexual behavior was repeated. On the other hand, as predicted, participants labeled an individual ‘heterosexual’ based on any and all sexual behaviors performed with a cross-sex individual. Our findings confirm what Hyde and Jaffee (2000) stated, “everyone is heterosexual unless proven otherwise” (p. 287).

Implications

Individuals that are outside one’s ingroup in a society are often defined, not by individual characteristics or personality traits, but rather by stereotypes that the ingroup bestows upon them. Heterosexuals often consider bisexuality deviant (McGeorge & Carlson, 2011). Even though kissing between

women is considered normative and acceptable, casual sex between two women is still considered inappropriate (Boyer & Galupo, 2015a). Based on the ingroup-outgroup research, we posit that these negative reactions arise because heterosexual individuals define bisexual individuals solely by their sexual behavior rather than by the emotions they feel. If, as discussed in the introduction, heterosexuals define bisexual men and women and gay men and lesbians by their sexual activity and, if these behaviors carry negative cultural connotations (Klassen et al., 1989), it stands to reason that we would observe high levels of prejudice against bisexual individuals and gay men and lesbians.

Unlike previous explanations for biphobia, this study has argued that it is not hate toward sexual minorities per se that results in prejudice but the perception of sexual minorities as a “sexual” outgroup. Negative attitudes are maintained by the bias inherent in the ingroup’s perception of outgroup members. This study found that heterosexual college students hold very narrow definitions of bisexuality centered around sexual behavior whereas they define their own sexuality in broader terms centered around their feelings of love and desire. This heterocentrism fosters a belief that heterosexuality is morally superior because it is associated not just with baser sexual behaviors but with the more “pure” ideas of desire and love.

Reducing Prejudice Against Bisexual Individuals

Bisexual individuals are more likely to report mood or anxiety disorders and lifetime suicidality than heterosexual individuals (Brennan, Ross, Dobinson, Velhuizen, & Steele, 2010; Kerr, Santurri, & Peters, 2013; Steele, Ross, Dobinson, Veldhuizen, & Tinmouth, 2009) and gay men and lesbians (Steele et al., 2009). If we are correct that prejudice against bisexual people stems from heterocentrism then interventions that have been used to reduce ethnocentric bias against other outgroups should also be effective in reducing prejudice against sexual minorities. These interventions include: increasing contact with the outgroup (Allport, 1954), changing social norms (Zitek & Hebl, 2007), and increasing knowledge of and empathy for out-group members (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). The last strategy is considered to be the strongest for reducing overt discrimination and has direct implications for public policy. When prejudice is considered socially unacceptable or when policies are created to sanction acts of discrimination, people’s attitudes often change, becoming more tolerant (Oskamp, 1991). Therefore, it is imperative that greater efforts be made to affect change in public policy regarding the rights of all sexual minorities.

Implications for Further Research

The findings of this study raised several important implications for further research that the authors are currently examining in a second study. This study is examining heterosexuals’ definitions of ‘heterosexuality’ and ‘bisex-

uality' and the behaviors and emotions they use to apply these labels to a woman. However, given that same-sex sexual behavior is more common and acceptable in women (Diamond, 2008), would we find this same pattern of escalating behavior being necessary if the person engaging in the behavior were male? If, as we proposed, heterocentrism is at the root of heterosexuals' cognitions regarding sexual minorities, we would expect the hypotheses to be confirmed with these individuals as well. However, might the greater social stigma against male–male sexual behavior produce different results?

Further, it is important to examine how sexual minorities view the sexual majority in terms of defining sexual orientation and what behaviors or emotions are necessary for a sexual minority to label an individual 'heterosexual', 'bisexual,' and 'gay/lesbian.' We predict two possible findings. The first is that sexual minorities will define 'heterosexuals' in the same way as heterosexuals define sexual minorities: as homogeneous and centered around some observable characteristic. The second, more plausible expectation is that sexual minorities will define 'heterosexuals' in more heterogeneous terms because of their membership in a heteronormative culture. Because individuals of all sexual orientations are exposed to these normative influences, sexual minorities should have greater awareness of the perceptions of heterosexuality. Some support for this was found in the post hoc analysis that found no differences between heterosexual and bisexual /gay men and lesbian participants in their ratings of the behaviors and emotions that would define someone as heterosexual.

Finally, in this study's sample, one third of respondents, regardless of survey type, defined sexual orientation using physical and emotional terms indicating that, despite our findings, some people do not differentially define heterosexuality and bisexuality. It may be worth exploring if these individuals would show lower levels of biphobia than people who define 'bisexuality' solely in terms of physical behavior.

Limitations

It is important to note some limitations in this study. First, the sample was a convenience sample, thus limiting the generalizability of the results. Further, college students are generally considered more tolerant of sexual minorities than other heterosexual groups and the results may be skewed in that direction (McCormack, Wignall, & Anderson, 2015). It could be the case that definitions and labeling of individuals' sexual orientations would be even more extreme in the general population. Despite these limitations, this study is the first, to our knowledge, to identify how heterosexual college students define 'heterosexuality' and 'bisexuality' and what behaviors and emotions will lead them to apply these labels to a woman. Our findings strongly

support the efficacy of using an ingroup–outgroup ethnocentric theoretical framework to better understand the origins of biphobia.

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