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Aesthetic as genetic: The epistemological violence of gaydar research

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Abstract

In recent years, "gaydar" has come under increasing scientific scrutiny. Gaydar researchers have found that we can accurately judge sexual orientation at better than chance levels from various nonverbal cues. Why they could find what they did is typically chalked up to gender inverted phenotypic variations in craniofacial structure that distinguish homosexuals. This interpretation of gaydar data (the "hegemonic interpretation") maintains a construction of homosexuality as both a "natural kind" and an "entitative" category. As a result, culturally and historically contingent markers of homosexuality are naturalized under the guise of gaydar. Of significant relevance to this article's critique of gaydar research is that the hegemonic interpretation is presented as politically advantageous for LGB people by its authors, an undertheorized assumption that risks sanctioning an epistemological violence with unfortunate, demobilizing sociopolitical consequences. This critique is contextualized within current debates regarding intimate/sexual citizenship and advocates, instead, for a queer political ethic that considers such cultural erasure to be politically untenable.

Keywords

critical psychology, epistemological violence, gaydar, intimate citizenship

Gaydar is a colloquialism that in academic writings typically refers to the ability to accurately judge another person's sexual orientation through indirect cues, including adornment, appearance, mannerism/movement, and/or speech/voice (for reviews, see Rule, 2017; Rule & Alaei, 2016). Early in the construct's elaboration, Shelp (2002) distinguished "adaptive gaydar" (developed and practiced by those thought to be motivated to assuage the isolation of growing up queer) and "generic gaydar," which can be learned by anyone. Most definitions acknowledge heteronormativity to varying degrees (Nicholas,

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2004), as gay men and lesbian women tend to be constructed as members of a perceptually ambiguous group for whom cultural invisibility is the norm (Tskhay & Rule, 2013a). Long known, experienced, and discussed among queer people themselves (Barton, 2015), gaydar has of late piqued the interests of mainstream psychologists ("gaydar researchers") who first attempted to establish (empirically) whether we can accurately judge sexual orientation at better than chance levels from nonverbal cues. They have since sought to determine *why* they could find that certain cues are automatically and rapidly processed as either heterosexual or homosexual.

For many queer people, as well as historians and other observers of queer subcultures, the answers may be obvious, if convoluted: particular articles of clothing, hairstyles, groomings, eye-gazes, postures, and other arcane signifiers suggest in-group membership. Their answers centre cultural knowledges that are learned, enacted, and modified through such communicative practices. Gaydar researchers, however, have displayed less interest in these "dynamic cues," as they call them, implicating, instead, more "deeply ingrained" (Rule & Alaei, 2016, p. 445), "innately present" (Rule & Alaei, 2016, p. 445) "basic elements" (Rule, 2017, p. 132). Through methods that seek to eliminate "confounding" "ephemeral and experiential factors" (Rule, 2017, p. 134), such as adornment and mannerism/movement, homosexuals are concluded to share gender "atypical" morphological features ("static cues"), which are detectable even if concealment is attempted (Sylvia, Rieger, Linsenmeier, & Bailey, 2010). These conclusions are believed to substantiate the "gender inversion" hypothesis and related biological explanations of sexual orientation: Because "grossly impoverished" (Tabak & Zayas, 2012, p. 1) stimuli (e.g., photographs of specific facial features) contain sufficient information to, in *some* cases, accurately judge sexual orientation (Rule, Ambady, Adams, & Macrae, 2008), might it be that so-called "face-based gaydar" works by detecting gender inverted phenotypic variations in craniofacial structure that discriminate homosexuals from heterosexuals (Hughes & Bremme, 2011; Skorska, Geniole, Vrysen, McCormick, & Bogaert, 2015; Valentova, Kleisner, Havlíček, & Neustupa, 2014)?

Such reductionist interpretations are bolstered by association with a certain prominent strand of positivist-empiricist sexual orientation research whose intransigent minoritizing discourse has fixed homosexuality as an individual, intrinsic condition (see Hegarty, 1997, 2003). As the distinguishing characteristic of a specific *kind* of person, homosexuality is given a cause—the "gay gene" (Macke et al., 1993), the third interstitial nucleus of the anterior hypothalamus (LeVay, 1991), the maternal immune hypothesis (Blanchard, 2004), other prenatal stresses (e.g., P. Hall & Schaeff, 2008), and so on—and attendant physical characteristics (e.g., Bogaert, 2010; Klar, 2005; Martin & Nguyen, 2004). Culturally and historically contingent markers of subversive sexual subjectivities, such as camp and butch aesthetics, are naturalized under the guise of gaydar whilst other sexualities (e.g., bisexuality) are largely forgotten. Moreover, this biological imperative is presented as politically advantageous by some gaydar researchers. Several articles contain two general kinds of arguments with purported relevance to matters of LGB rights, both of which are predicated on homosexuality's immutability (see Stern, West, Jost, & Rule, 2013).

First, some have argued that gaydar research, having ostensibly proven homosexuality to constitute a "visible minority" (Rule, 2017, p. 136), like race, legitimizes non-discrimination protections.[1] Although rarely elaborated, the implication seems to be

that gaydar could be used to "out" closeted homosexuals, who would then be vulnerable to discrimination. This argumentation begs several heretofore unanswered questions: Do homosexuals not deserve such protections *regardless* of visibility and/or perceptibility? Or, are all homosexuals equally perceptible? And, if so, then how is it that "the closet" came to exist in the first place? Furthermore, if we change what the law says about a particular group to make it say "good things" and not "bad things," as is true of the anti-discrimination/hate crime law strategy, then will those people's lives improve? Or, does this approach to law reform support an individual-rights framing of violence that misunderstands power's operations?

Second, positioning homosexuality as a "natural kind" category (i.e., inherent, immutable, universal, and biologically determined) works to validate "arguments from immutability" (Halley, 1994), which promote homosexuality as an unchosen, uncontrollable orientation. This "uncontrollability defense" is believed to be associated with more tolerant attitudes among heterosexuals toward homosexuals (see Hegarty, 2002; Sheldon, Pfeffer, Jayaratne, Feldbaum, & Petty, 2007). However, the belief that identity groups are fundamentally distinct from each other is *positively* correlated with prejudice against gay men and lesbian women (Haslam & Levy, 2006; Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2002; Hegarty, 2002, 2010; Hegarty & Pratto, 2001). Indeed, biological theories have been mobilized to support the stigmatizing view that gay men and lesbian women are genetically defective (see Brookey, 2001; Haynes, 1995), much like it has been argued that immutability does not necessarily warrant civil rights protections for homosexuals (e.g., Levin, 1996). The proposition that certain gay men's and lesbian women's uniform expressions of homosexuality are entitative and, therefore, confirm the naturalness of LGB identities can both normalize and defend as well as pathologize and condemn (Johnson, 2015).

Most critiques of gaydar research have highlighted its methods (e.g., Cox, Devine, Bischmann, & Hyde, 2016, 2017; Plöderl, 2014).[2] The following critique, however, addresses the consequences of interpreting certain gender nonconforming cues as physiognomic disclosures of essential intergroup differences between the two—and only two, despite one study of gaydar and bisexuality (Ding & Rule, 2012)—orientations. That queer cultural practices exist as expressions (as in "genetic expression") of a "kernel of truth" (an idiom oft-used throughout the literature) regarding the biological basis of homosexuality is but one interpretation of gaydar data among many possible interpretations. Yet, this interpretation has come to dominate, emboldening gaydar researchers to frame as politically advantageous inward-turning justifications that offer homosexuality as natural/normal and, therefore, tolerable. These framings are not only undertheorized but also foreclose alternative, outward-turning cultural and political formations, many of which better recognize that the terms of access to certain rights are not immune to the state's normative injunctions. My critique is informed by critical psychology (Teo, 2015), a movement that has, in part, worked to make known the potentially demobilizing sociopolitical corollaries of the mainstream's preference for a selectively narrow epistemology. Limited reflection regarding ethical-political concerns and praxis (Teo, 2011) can foment, in the case of gaydar research, this notion that the best way to overcome subjection is to remake oneself in the image of what the dominant culture finds tolerable rather than to problematize that culture's self-understanding, including its normative framework of "civic inclusion."

Overview

I first demonstrate how cultural erasure pervades gaydar research. The complexity of gendered and sexual identifications is sifted through a binary epistemic sieve that looks to ambiguous data yet consistently envisions only one conclusion, the "hegemonic interpretation." I then develop a "queer interpretation" of gaydar data and research, which (a) historicizes gaydar research production and (b) draws on alternative, affirmative accounts of queer cultural practices, particularly David M. Halperin's works regarding gay male subjectivity, to expose gaydar research's hermeneutic deficit. His and other compatible accounts theorize the distinctiveness of queer cultural practices without recourse to either entitativity or immutability beliefs. Biological and social ontology are differentiated: the "distinctiveness of the activities, attitudes, feelings, responses, behaviors, and interactions" (Halperin, 2012, p. 133) that compose the sort of gay male subjectivity that is Halperin's focus does not extend in its entirety to every individual who self-identifies as "homosexual" and/or whose sexual desire is oriented toward those of the same gender. Homosexuality's most conspicuous forms, and the social processes that have given rise to them, are recognized as such due to the social meanings we have conferred upon them and not to some defining property of homosexuality that all homosexuals share. Of course, bodies, in their full corporeality, including any markers believed to be shaped by genetic differences and the differential production of hormones, provide the locus and set the terms for the inscription of those meanings. My intention is not to suggest that Halperin's and other "constructionist" accounts are truer, but rather that the "stereotypical" cultural practices propounded by certain sexual subjects—the "look" in the eyes, the "swish" of the hips, as well as other static and dynamic cues—cannot be overdetermined by some simple, one-to-one cause-and-effect, whether biological or social. They deserve richer theorizations within the gaydar literature that grapple with the apposite intellectual traditions (e.g., social theory, queer theory, history, law) that I champion throughout my critique. Furthermore, Halperin's works, which illuminate a specific form of (white, male) queerness, were chosen for their utility in providing an outward-turning antithesis to the hegemonic interpretation, the authors of which have themselves tended to represent homosexuals as white and male.[3] I call this interpretation the queer one, because, following other queer critiques within psychology (e.g., Downing & Gillett, 2011), it aims to challenge the universalizing, minoritizing, pathologizing, and normalizing tendencies of the mainstream's interpretations.

I next embed the two stated sociopolitical implications of gaydar research within the extant literature on intimate/sexual citizenship (see e.g., Plummer, 2003). This body of work has produced informative debates regarding the proliferation of sexual practices in the late 20th and early 21st centuries, including the potential significance of these practices to moral and political transformations of the social order. I argue that the hegemonic and queer interpretations present us with two divergent approaches to intimate/sexual citizenship. Advocates of the former accede to existing civil/legal rights frameworks as sites of political consolidation through conduct- and/or identity-based claims to equality and national belonging. Advocates of the latter voice skepticism toward couching calls for citizenship in terms of inclusion, progress, and universality, as such couching is believed to obscure the state's production of heterosexuality as one of the norms of a

properly gendered, racialized, and sexualized citizenry. Their participatory resistance formations centre social and/or cultural rights, as well as racial and economic justice, with an eye to transforming the conditions facing highly vulnerable queer and trans people. My focus is on the heteronormativity that has ossified the hegemonic approach, such that it now predominantly maintains the hierarchization of sexuality into a pyramid-like model [that stretches] downwards from the apparently Nature-endowed correctness of heterosexual genital intercourse to the bizarre manifestations of 'the perverse' (Weeks, 2010, p. 5). I end by imploring us to consider the "epistemological violence" (Teo, 2008, 2010, 2011) of academic discussions and political commentaries that support climbing, rather than dismantling, that pyramid.

The hegemonic interpretation

Gaydar researchers have generally posed two central questions: Are gay men—and, belatedly, lesbian women (Rule, Ambady, & Hallett, 2009; Tskhay, Feriozzo, & Rule, 2013), bisexuals (Ding & Rule, 2012), and tops and bottoms (Tskhay, Re, & Rule, 2014; Tskhay & Rule, 2013b)—unambiguously perceptible? And, which cues assist their identification? Commonly studied cues include "actions" (i.e., movements made with one's body or limbs) and "appearance" (i.e., face-based gaydar research). Although recent work has paid greater attention to individual differences among perceivers/judges/raters, my critique attends only to gaydar researchers' interpretations of the cues that raters are believed to encode when perceiving "targets" from stimuli containing no vocal information.

Among the early studies (e.g., Berger, Hank, Rauzi, & Simkins, 1987), "weak" social constructionism ("closet essentialism"; Kitzinger, 1995) surfaces as the epistemology of choice: gay men and lesbian women are presented as two monolithic groups for whom culture imparts merely exogenous influence on the appearance of either. For example, Ambady, Hallahan, and Conner (1999) found that the average judge rated gay men and lesbian women as "more gay" than their straight counterparts from "thin slices" of dynamic nonverbal behaviours. Compared with the eight still photographs condition, accuracy was significantly greater in the 10- and 1-second silent video clip conditions. In addition to photographic information (e.g., hairstyle, clothing, jewellery, body shape), it seems, other similarly cultural aspects of appearance (i.e., the video clips' dynamic information) enrich detection. However, this difference has since been principally framed as notable for suggesting that judges can detect gender inverse cues from stimuli that are "expunged of static appearance information" (Rule & Alaei, 2016, p. 445). "[T]he social environment" (Ambady et al., 1999, p. 546) is invoked to advise that a "liberal, tolerant environment" (p. 546) within which gay men and lesbian women are "motivated to reveal … their sexual orientation" (p. 546) may prevent a straight person's gaydar from being "fooled" by "prevalent stereotypes" (p. 546). Homosexuality, as such, is offered as natural essence, as if the identifiability of its universal, pre-cultural form has been encumbered by the vicissitudes of time and space.

More recent attempts to establish whether other sexualities are likewise perceptible have concurred: lesbian women are presented as fundamentally distinguishable from straight women, despite Rule, Ambady, and Hallett's (2009) recognition of extensive individual differences in both the expression and impact of that heterogeneous, non-female

specific collection of traits we call "femininity" in the West. Although bisexuals were rated as non-significantly different from their gay, and significantly different from their straight, counterparts, Ding and Rule (2012) dichotomously propose that "there may be no differences between the faces of bisexual versus gay and lesbian individuals" (p. 172) or else subtle, relatively imperceptible, differences that form independently of "the socially salient straight–gay dichotomy" (p. 172); and visual distinctions between those who prefer insertive versus receptive anal intercourse are accounted for as "valid" displays of masculine and effeminate traits (Tskhay & Rule, 2013b). The closet essentialism of these kinds of interpretations appears to have "come out" in articles that began examining whether accurate identification is assisted by "naturally occurring" (Rule et al., 2008, p. 1027) facial cues.

Face-based gaydar

This is the guiding logic: if participants can accurately identify sexual orientation from "impoverished" target stimuli (photographs, sometimes black-and-white, of faces with certain features erased, of faces with no muscle contraction, of isolated facial features, and so on), then it must be that sexual orientation is morphologically expressed through the face (or specific facial features) and, therefore, innate (e.g., Rule et al., 2008; Rule, Macrae, & Ambady, 2009). Whatever is displayed on or through faces is presumed to be naturally occurring, like secondary sex characteristics, rather than indicative of a life's worth of self-reflexive identificatory negotiations involving both embodied sexual subjectivity and social realities. These gaydar researchers—even those who otherwise accept that we perceive others through the dynamic, continuous interaction of social categories, stereotypes, and high-level cognitive states, in addition to the low-level processing of facial, vocal, and bodily cues (Freeman & Ambady, 2011)—universalize the faces of sexual minorities. Thus, for example, the title of Tskhay et al.'s (2013) article can announce that facial features influence the categorization of women's sexual orientation, even though it was targets' hairstyles that significantly improved perception. Likewise, that participants could perceive sexual role preferences from photographs of the faces of self-identified tops and bottoms is attributed to hormonal differences, whilst self-presentation is cast as biasing as opposed to clarifying (Tskhay et al., 2014). Notably, far less explanatory ink has been spilled on straight faces.

In one of the first studies of its kind, Rule and Ambady (2008) found that sexual orientation could be judged from faces shown for "durations as fast as 50-ms" (p. 1103). They conducted a second study, similar in method to the first, except that target images were selected from "tagged by others" Facebook photographs (as opposed to personal advertisements) to demonstrate "that the results of the [first] study were not biased by self-presentation" (p. 1103). Certainly, a candid photograph may not depict a target in his preferred manner, but it is still a photograph of a man in the world, appearing and conveying. Both kinds of photographs are reported to have been altered "to exercise further control" (p. 1103) over self-presentation. For the personal advertisement photographs, this meant including only directly oriented faces free of "facial alterations" (e.g., jewellery, glasses, facial hair), cropped from their original context, with "extra-facial information" (e.g., neck) removed. Does this restricting of stimuli to decontextualized, unadorned,

neck-less photographs eliminate that which the authors describe as the "exaggerated representation [or] caricature [of] the target's sexual orientation" (p. 1104)? Or, does it make a show of doing so? These photographs—both posed or otherwise—nevertheless contain the confounding possibility of self-presentation, as well as other "ephemeral and experiential factors" (Rule, 2017, p. 134), which could include age (Tskhay, Krendl, & Rule, 2016), emotional expressiveness (Tskhay & Rule, 2015a), internalized homophobia (Tskhay & Rule, 2015b), and race (Johnson & Ghavami, 2011).

Rule, Ishii, Ambady, Rosen, and Hallett (2011) likewise sought to obviate "the influence that culture *might have* [emphasis added] on the accuracy of judgements of sexual orientation" (p. 1500)—phrasing that supposes "learned differences in expression" (p. 1500) might not contribute any necessary influence. This article details comparisons of three cultural groups claimed to vary in their "acceptance and tolerance of homosexuality" (p. 1500). Headshots of Japanese (low acceptance), American (moderate), and Spanish (high) targets were rated by participants from each of those countries. The perceivers distinguished gay from straight faces at significantly greater than chance levels across all targets and perceivers, although response bias and accuracy varied, often significantly, as a function of target and perceiver culture. Variability, however, is secreted, as the data are concluded to "[show] universality for judgements related to social categorization and group membership" (p. 1505), which is attributed to the "legibility" of sexual orientation across cultures. Cultural differences are described as producing "variation *within* universality" (p. 1499), camouflaging the "biological or genetic influences on the expression of sexual orientation" (p. 1500). Readers are primed to accept that "cultural universality" supports biological theories regarding "the origins of how sexual orientation comes to be expressed by individuals" (p. 1500). Yet, the interpretation that "cross-cultural consensus" may be due, in part or predominantly, to the globalization of sexualities (Altman, 2001) is just as plausible. The relative mobility of certain Western constructions (and enactments) of queerness (Puar, 2002), for example, could produce homogenizing effects, to say nothing of the international similarities among queer cultures that have emerged from parallel processes of nation-level, market-based sex-cultural differentiation (Jackson, 2009).

Maneuvering to establish the cross-cultural legibility of sexual orientation functions as further corroboration of homosexuality's phenotypic imperviousness to what is presented as the elaborate façade of cultural difference. This is symptomatic of face-based gaydar research's minimization of the social meanings that constantly (re)shape our perceptions, which is fostered by the assumption that the more you reduce a target/person—to a static body, to an emotionless face, to an "eye region"—the better you can know them (as opposed to yourself or your culture). As one of several examples, that "participants were able to accurately judge sexual orientation from just women's eyes" (Rule, Ambady, & Hallett, 2009, p. 1249), particularly given "that the primary lateral contractions of the orbicularis oculi muscles were not visible" (p. 1249), is taken to mean that "the nature of the face allows perceivers to decrypt an individual's sexual orientation" (Rule, 2017, p. 133). But what can we know from eyes? Are gay eyes bigger or smaller than the average with which we are apparently comparing them? Flatter or rounder? Is something more reflexive, if not volitional, at play? As Rule, Ambady, and Hallett (2009) once admitted, "it remains unknown what aspects of the face and its features may underlie these judgements" (p. 1250).

Gender atypicality

It did not remain unknown. According to Freeman et al. (2010), participants can distinguish gay men and lesbian women because of "gender-inverted cues that are relatively fixed and uncontrollable" (p. 1320) and materialized in certain "inbuilt features" (p. 1328). This hegemonic interpretation presents a version of the "black hole" hypothesis (Weeks, 2010, p. 56): when in doubt, suggest any "cause" that could be "locked" in the brain prenatally by a process of genetic and/or hormonal determinism. As one example, Johnson, Gill, Reichman, and Tassinary (2007) had participants judge computer-generated avatars of walking bodies with manipulated waist-to-hip ratios (tubular for "men" vs. hourglass for "women") and movements (shoulder swagger vs. hip sway). Gender atypical "walkers" (e.g., tubular, yet swaying) were perceived as homosexual and vice versa. Although motion implies intention—Is it so preposterous to believe that a man might *choose* to swish?—the authors conclude "early gender nonconformity … to have a biological basis" (p. 322) that fixes or "portends later sexual orientation" (p. 322), such that social judgments are informed by cues that "have a foundation in the human body" (p. 322). In contrast, participants themselves have interpreted gender-atypical appearances common among certain sexual minority individuals to be communicative in intent (Lick, Johnson, & Gill, 2014).

A complementary line of research looks to establish atypical cues as not only static but also set by at least early childhood. Rieger, Linsenmeier, Gygax, and Bailey (2008) used home videos of children (adults at the time they conducted their study) to confirm their hypothesis that those who later identified as gay or lesbian would be rated as more gender nonconforming in overall body movement and speech compared with those who later identified as straight. Gender nonconforming children are reinscribed as "prehomosexual children"—provided examples include a boy dancing to 1980s music sung by a woman and a girl assembling an electric train. Of course, gay male diva worship and butch lesbians exist, but the authors propose that it and they do because there is "in fact a core to masculinity and femininity … that is to be found in gender-related interests … gender-related appearances … and perhaps sexuality (sexual orientation)" (Lippa, 2005, p. 67). With the masculinity and femininity of traits and behaviours assumed to be set in this way, individual and communal interpretations of a gendered habitus are neglected. Diminishing over 200 years of queer cultural practices fuels a speculative developmental model of sexual orientation that essentially begins and ends in utero. Rieger, Linsenmeier, Gygax, Garcia, and Bailey (2010) have elsewhere concluded that, "although [their results] could reflect nature or nurture, or both, [they] agree with those who have surveyed relevant research and found innate explanations to be more promising" (p. 136), which begs the question: If not "correct" or "truthful" (as is the empiricist's goal), but rather "promising," then why promising?

A queer interpretation

The hegemonic interpretation's roots can be traced to the bifurcation of mainstream psychologists who study LGBT individuals into those who operate within the "stigma paradigm" and those who operate within the "gender identity disorder in childhood (GIDC)

paradigm" (e.g., Rieger et al., 2008, 2010). The former denotes a shift, following the declassification of homosexuality as a mental disorder, toward attributing "particular features of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender … development to the influence of external stigmatization processes rather than inherent pathological factors" (Hegarty, 2009, p. 895). The latter, from which gaydar research, with its focus on gender inversion, has grown, (re)turned to prioritizing gender over sexuality in its pathologization of sexual "deviance" (Sedgwick, 1991). By the 1970s, research on gender nonconformity had combined the experiences of homosexual, intersex, and trans individuals into a single category of study and clinical intervention: "feminine boys" (Tosh, 2015). Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, researchers were already beginning to study gender-variant boys to understand the antecedents of later non-normative identities and behaviours, often "treating" those same boys by encouraging more typical (masculine) identifications and behaviours in hopes of averting atypical adult psychosexual outcomes (Bryant, 2006). The GIDC paradigm has been little informed by the stigma paradigm and is one of the latest incarnations of the notorious tradition of linking gender inverse expressions of adult sexual identity to childhood gender nonconformity.

The disciplinary power these "therapies" unfortunately continue to wield appears more potent at our current moment in time, yet what has stuck after all these years is the belief that inverted congenital gender differences underpin the essence of homosexuality (see Bryant, 2008). Differences in levels of circulating hormones, it is said, cause brains to develop in either a masculinized or a feminized manner, producing mental and behavioural differences between the sexes and, in cases of "normal" development, the orientation toward opposite-sex partners. Genetics, too, has been of interest:

> Genes could play an important role in the development of the unconscious behaviors such as those that are detected by gaydar … if genes play such an important role in the development of these unconscious behaviors, it means that these behaviors emerge from specific developmental programs in the brain—programs that could easily differ between men and women and between gay and straight people. … This indicates the importance of biological programs in the development of unconscious gendered behaviors, and raises the real possibility that the atypicality of these behaviors in some gay people arises, not through imitation, but because the underlying biological programs are themselves sex-atypical. (LeVay, 2011, pp. 243–244)

With culture erased (here, in its place, we find the euphemism "imitation"), gay and lesbian brains can be *the* reasons why "pre-gay" boys and girls are respectively less and more aggressive than "normal" boys and girls (Blanchard, McConkey, Roper, & Steiner, 1983); why straight men and lesbian women are more adept than gay men and straight women at throwing a ball at a target from a few feet away (J. Hall & Kimura, 1995); why gay men's verbal fluency is superior to the other three groups' (Rahman, Abrahams, & Wilson, 2003); why they are less likely than straight men to have committed acts of sexual coercion (VanderLaan & Vasey, 2009); why they are "over-represented" in professional dance (Bailey & Oberschneider, 1997); and so on. The "stereotype about 'feminine' gay men and 'masculine' lesbians … contains a substantial kernel of truth" (LeVay, 2011, p. 125), because the average homosexual brain is a patchwork of gender-inverted traits, some of which appear detectable by gaydar.

Biological explanations are so inexorably yoked to sexual development in the literature that what most of this data mean has come to appear virtually self-evident. Yet, the faith that such explanations uncover universal truths about homosexuality, including its natural, undiluted expression, like any other hypothesis, is conjectural, not conclusive. Many other intellectual traditions (e.g., Ken Corbett's relational psychoanalytic case studies and essays, sociological understandings of LGB identity formation, the stigma paradigm), even entire disciplines, have interpreted non-normative sexualities and their associated "cues" differently. These other interpretations are less likely to reduce the variability and fluidity of queer identifications to a single, stable orientation; or to normalize queer cultural practices; or characterize queer agency as an automatic product of inner propulsions; or to neglect homosexual subjection; or to pathologize gender variance; or to conflate queer expressions of masculinity and femininity with *straight* masculinity and femininity, such that queer bodies are rendered intelligible only within a framework that has established heterosexuality as its ontological ground.

One way some proponents of biological explanations attempt to acknowledge the complexity of sexuality is by claiming to grant variation and discordance between sexual orientation (sometimes, "sexual attraction") and the supposedly distinct categories of sexual identity and sexual behaviour, the latter two of which are conceded to be more readily shaped by social processes. However, scientific evidence has yet to confirm that desire and attraction are not entwined with identity and behaviour (Johnson, 2015). Even if confirmed, gaydar researchers take photographs of individuals who self-identify as "gay" (or, less frequently, "lesbian" and "bisexual") and then regard those identities as if they were the *same* as biologically determined orientations. This misrepresentation circumvents sustained, critical engagement with the aforementioned traditions as well as with others who have studied gaydar and focused far less on the unavailing origins of sexual orientation (e.g., Gaudio, 1994; Nicholas, 2004; Smyth, Jacobs, & Rogers, 2003; Woolery, 2007).

Halperin's writings on gay male subjectivity substantiate the gaydar research finding that certain gender nonconforming cues are perceived as distinctively gay, but without capitulating to the imprimatur of nature. We read "gay" ways of dressing, moving, looking, speaking, and so on, as gay, because they communicate an archetypical sensibility that *some*[4] gay men have come to embody (see also Bronski, 1984; Dyer, 2004; Koestenbaum, 1993; Miller, 1998; Sontag, 1966). Unlike stereotypes, which are understood to transmit a fixed un-truth about a group of people, gay archetypes represent "a common culture, a particular outlook on the world, a shared sense of self, an awareness of belonging to a specific social group, and a distinctive sensibility or subjectivity" (Halperin, 2012, pp. 6–7). Approaching homosexuality as "a question of sensibility, or affect, or identification, or subjective positioning, or gender dissonance … a relation to femininity" (Halperin, 2002, p. 28), Halperin's analysis traces a process of counter-acculturation through which those men who may already experience homosexual attractions come to acquire various visually identifiable corporealizations of queer affect, habitus, identification, and so on. The emotional and erotic meanings of these gay men's feminine identifications is explored as collective, social phenomena, which opens us to "a kaleidoscopic range of queer … wishes and sensations and pleasures and emotions" (Halperin, 2012, p. 69) that are invested in the practices in which they engage and the objects with which they connect. All this could also show on faces.

The "physiognomic differences" (Rule, 2017, p. 133) concluded to distinguish homosexuals could be explained just as convincingly following Halperin's and other allied accounts. Personality has been found to influence facial appearance, sometimes playing a causal role in its development (see Zebrowitz, Collins, & Dutta, 1998). Although we tend to think of facial structure as fixed, there is in fact some plasticity (Rule, 2015). Our faces contain many small muscles, which allow their features to move and change quite dynamically (Rule, 2017). If expressive habits are reflected in faces, then certain gay men's faces could yield distinct forms through this "Dorian Gray effect." As the abovementioned counter-acculturation process sediments over time, the ensuing sensibility/subjectivity becomes materialized through the face, producing those "static" cues—not only facial groomings or hairstyles, but also individual features, ways of "holding" one's face, and so on—that participants in face-based gaydar studies have been able to read as "gay." Indeed, emotional expressions can direct judgments of sexual orientation (Tskhay & Rule, 2015a). Furthermore, Rieger and colleagues' postulation of early determinacy does not confound less essentializing interpretations. Certain "prehomosexual" boys' gender nonconformity has elsewhere been more affirmatively theorized as variance "[arising] from the multilinearity and interaction of psychological processes that are born of gender's and sexuality's intertwining" (Corbett, 1998, p. 353). This is not variance as phenotype, but rather as an expression of gender that contradicts and moves beyond the conventional categories of masculinity/femininity, despite a symbolic system that renders the slightest possibility of such a sensibility/subjectivity abject. Disentangling our interpretations from biological imperatives frees us to recover the agency of those whose lives have been narrowly delimited yet ambitiously normalized by heteronormativity-as-essentialism.

Epistemological violence

Gaydar researchers are attuned, with varying degrees of nuance, to the political uses of their work. Many articles stress gaydar's "tremendous social implications" (Freeman et al., 2010, p. 1318), sometimes with designated "social implications" sections (e.g., Rieger et al., 2010), which have tended to frame the hegemonic interpretation as politically advantageous. Because homosexuality is (a) entitative and (b) natural, homosexuals (a) should be granted non-discrimination protections and (b) should not be oppressed, as their orientation is "uncontrollable." These lines of reasoning are rarely critically interrogated by gaydar researchers, an unfortunate oversight given that contextualization within the extant intimate/sexual citizenship literature reveals the said framings to be less than unequivocally advantageous.

Traditionally, claims to citizenship have been based on ensuring three sets of rights: civil/legal, political, and social (Marshall, 1950). This Marshallian analysis, which posits a progressive historical movement from civil to political to social rights in Western nation-states, has instigated much scrutiny and debate, with notable critiques arguing that such a narrative imposes a liberal male subject as the normal/universal citizen. The modern invention of citizenship is now better recognized to have been "constituted in terms of rights and entitlements obtained (by some men) in the public sphere (along with prerogatives located in the private)" (Stychin, 2001, p. 287). Dependent on the practices through which social differences are (re)invented, the status of citizenship carries deeply

gendered implications (Walby, 1994), among others. Regarding sexual/intimate citizenship, the adjudication of sexual rights, to whom they are granted or denied, and the struggles therein, are inseparable from heteronormativity (see also Evans, 1993; Plummer, 2001; Weeks, 1998). Only certain kinds of sexual subjects—those less inclined toward separatism (versus assimilation) or transgression (versus normalization), those who present more respectably, and so on—are brought into the fold. Within the Canadian context, wherein much gaydar research has been produced, gay men and lesbian women have won the rights to civil, political, and social citizenships, yet the legacy of their struggles is marked by ongoing ambivalence and contradiction (Cossman, 2002). Although some lives have been improved by reform, the inclusion of LGB persons into what Langdridge (2013) has described as "the privileged heterosexual matrix of (white, middle class) coupledom" (p. 730) excludes most queers, inevitably producing relations of dominance among differently located sexual subjects (see also Berlant, 1997; Eng, 2010; Harper, McClintock, Muñoz, & Rosen, 1997; Warner, 1999).

That claims to sexual/intimate citizenship are not only potentially transforming of dominant modalities of citizenship *but also* normalizing, regulatory, and exclusionary is not the impression one is left with upon reading about the political advantages of gaydar research. There are unwritten disadvantages. First, mobilizing for LGB civil/legal rights based on the identifiability of the homosexual face and/or other gender atypical traits exemplifies the shift in the discourse of sexual rights throughout the Global North in the 1970s and 1980s toward identity-based rights claims (Richardson, 2000), which were characterized by an "ethnic" model of homosexuality that emphasized a unitary identity (Seidman, 2001). In concert with then-burgeoning neoliberalism, this shift ended up laying the groundwork for the development in the 1990s of many of today's gay and lesbian civil rights lobbies, which have tended to endorse an "equality" that is "disarticulated from material life and class politics, to be won by definable 'minority' groups, one at a time" (Duggan, 2003, p. xviii). These lobbies reflected the interests of the most assimilated, gender-appropriate, politically mainstream portions of the gay and lesbian population, such that equality has not necessarily entailed the right to just any sexual self-expression. The modality of citizenship produced herein is privatized, depoliticized, and de-eroticized. Access to core institutions, such as marriage, family, and the military—indeed, citizenship itself—is granted to those "good," respectable, law-abiding subjects who espouse the values of "ordinary" citizens and whose demands for equality are couched in terms "of '*sameness*,' rather than 'equality in difference'" (Richardson, 2004, p. 392). This path of visibility maintains connections between sexual regulation and what is ultimately a market-based sense of freedom (Jakobsen, 2005). This is the downside to identity-based rights claims: when we erase our identificatory diversity and instead offer ourselves as entitative, unity in the active, public pursuit of rights becomes disciplinary (see Bell & Binnie, 2000; Phelan, 2001) and inclusive of only those who are already positioned to fulfill such standards.

Second, the uncontrollability defense's common-sense appeal bypasses the ethical and moral cases for justice whilst conceding that the choice to participate in homosexual acts, both sexual and cultural, is an immoral one. You may not be able to "control" your orientation, but you can control its expression. Not unlike early 20th-century conduct-based sexual rights claims, which positioned homosexuality as "tolerable only as

long as it did not leak across the boundaries of the private into the public" (Richardson, 2004, p. 404), this defense identifies the public sphere with a dominant "family values" natural/normative heterosexuality. Non-heterosexuals may pass through on condition that their "deviant" conduct, including any non-sexual signification of the said conduct, remains hidden. The private-in-public visibility of (certain) homosexuals in mainstream cultural life is grounded in a politics of tolerance wherein "those who wish to engage in sexual acts … with members of their own gender are granted the right to be tolerated as long as they … do not seek public recognition" (Richardson, 2000, p. 110) or else are recognizable in public as homonormative homosexuals (see Duggan, 2003). This benevolence is "contingent upon ever narrowing parameters of white racial privilege, consumption capabilities, gender and kinship normativity, and bodily integrity" (Puar, 2007, p. xii). Dissident queers are marked by their capacity to be intolerable. They have endured the limits of the private sphere from which numerous subaltern counter-publics nevertheless continue to emerge. Labouring to align homosexuality with nature/normality leaves unproblematized the assumption that what is "natural" is both ethically acceptable and politically unchangeable.

An LGBT politics that establishes appeals for intimate/sexual citizenship on the grounds of sameness benefits only a minority of sexual minorities, as rallying around an essential or unitary sexual identity in this way is almost always complicit with heteronormativity (Hegarty, 1997, 2002). Interpretations less inclined to naturalize difference, such as the above-elaborated queer one, can prove fertile for the cultivation of a radically different political ethic. Here, cultural erasure would not be an option, not when numerous regimes, practices, and ideologies continue to organize our world around the presumption of heterosexuality. Considering the prior structuring of sexuality by several techniques distinctive to modern societies redirects our attention away from integrationist legal strategies toward the ways in which our identities and their expressions have been subjected by/to interdependent systems of meaning and control. This ethic buoys a broad-based progressive-left movement that aims to destabilize the hierarchies of respectability that saturate our world so as to open and hold space for those stigmatized subjects who have been marginalized by the mainstreaming of gay and lesbian liberation politics (Halperin & Traub, 2005). As such queer activism evolves to resist the delineation of a proper subject of or object for what was intended to be its "subjectless" critique (Eng, Halberstam, & Muñoz, 2005), other categories of difference and the intersections therein have garnered greater prominence within the movement's overarching commitment to a non-normative and anti-identity stance. Hybridity, mestiza consciousness, disidentification, mixedness, among other queer of colour concepts, inculcate a model of citizenship that looks to demonstrate a disjunction between queer and trans people and the nation. The hope is to reach across the divides of social difference "to re-value stigmatised identities, to embrace openly and legitimately hitherto marginalised lifestyles and to propagate them without hindrance" (Pakulski, 1997, p. 83), whilst acknowledging each of our relations to power, broadly defined (Cohen, 1997). Our differences are the solution to our troubles.

We inhabit a world wherein ordinary people commonly look to scientific expertise for the "truth" about their own and others' sexualities. Even if "only" a discursive accomplishment and not gaydar researchers' "actual" political beliefs, their

reification of "purely conjectural" (Blanchard, Cantor, Bogaert, Breedlove, & Ellis, 2006, p. 412) explanations of homosexuality's assumed entitativity and immutability hazards promoting the psychological essentialism of "homosexual" within the public imaginary. These kinds of lay theories accentuate apparent intragroup similarities among gay men and lesbian women (Prentice & Miller, 2007) in the eyes of the general populace for whom entitativity beliefs are associated with anti-gay prejudice, whilst legitimizing a minoritizing mode of homosexual self-understanding. Coupled with political anecdotes purporting to demonstrate gaydar research's relevance to LGB rights, such cultural erasure further promulgates an approach to intimate/sexual citizenship that is rife with regulatory ideals about the right and wrong ways to be homosexual. Ironically, these articles are being published at a time when our theories of queer activism increasingly implore us to view the non-normative sexual field as so dispersed as to require us to galvanize our commitment to critiquing multiple social antagonisms, in addition to sexuality. These contemporary queer "arguments from intersectionality" undermine the mainstream/"official" gay and lesbian movement's mono-faceted solutions to the key multifaceted problems facing queer and trans communities (Spade, 2011). If we take seriously this argument that such a compartmentalizing, comparative approach to what are inseparable systems of subjection prioritizes only certain already-privileged gay men and lesbian women (Hutchinson, 2000), then we might reconsider the political utility of proving LGB individuals to be just as perceptually obvious as other "perceptually obvious groups" (Rule, 2017, p. 130) and, therefore, just as worthy of state recognitions and protections.

Now, what sort of politics should we be advocating? Do we want to effectively exclude the most vulnerable of queer and trans people? That is for you to decide. To publish refereed academic journal articles that essentialize homosexuality and frame entitativity and immutability as politically relevant and promising is not only to "*describe* what appears to be, [but also to] subtly *prescribe* what is desirable" (Gergen, 1973, p. 311). When we choose and then describe/prescribe a potentially detrimental interpretation, out of many possible equally plausible interpretations, regarding a vulnerable group in the name of science and knowledge, we risk committing a form of ("violent") action that can bring harm, or "epistemological violence" (see Teo, 2010). This can be true of an interpretation itself as well as of its specific policy recommendations. Rather than "transcend the particulars of the [authors'] subfield" (American Psychological Association, 2010, p. 36), gaydar researchers' political musing regurgitates lay and/or culturally dominant commentaries without further unpacking those commentaries' origins or their underlying cultural, economic, personal, and political interests. Yet, both the lay (e.g., Hegarty, 2002, 2010; Jayaratne et al., 2006; Sheldon et al., 2007) and culturally dominant (e.g., Germanotta & Laursen, 2011) commentaries are worrisomely short-sighted, not "promising" (Rieger et al., 2010, p. 136), as I have argued. As researchers of sexuality, rather than concern ourselves with *personal* explanations, such as the biological causes of any given sexual practice, why not more directly engage a hermeneutic enterprise that works to challenge heteronormative subjection and intersecting systems of meaning and control?

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Notes

1. Most of these analyses require historical and interdisciplinary knowledge that is rarely invoked, so it is unclear why it is that racialized groups are "very perceptually obvious" (Rule, Ambady, & Hallett, 2009, p. 1245). To say it is because of "clear and obvious physical markers" (p. 1245) alludes to empirical race psychology and its tendency to naturalize culturally and historically produced racial differences.
2. As first observed by Plöderl (2014), most studies do not reflect the real-world base-rate of gay men and lesbian women—a difficult to estimate figure (Savin-Williams, 2006). This "base-rate fallacy" suggests gaydar accuracy may be overestimated (for a reply, see Bruno, Lyons, & Brewer, 2014). Additionally, many studies recycle existing data sets, which Cox et al. (2016, 2017) speculated might betray a systematic stimulus confound (for another reply, see Rule, Johnson, & Freeman, 2017).
3. The majority of studies examine only male sexuality. Commonly used target stimuli (i.e., photographs of faces) seem to be of the faces of *white* men, mainly. Race—including the racial and/or ethnic makeup of the targets—is seldom addressed substantively (Rule & Ambady, 2008; Rule et al., 2008, 2011), if at all (e.g., Freeman, Johnson, Ambady, & Rule, 2010; Tskhay & Rule, 2013b), except to compare/contrast sexuality, in compartmentalizing fashion, with other "individual differences" (typically, age and sex, in addition to race) that are presumed to be automatically categorized (e.g., Johnson & Ghavami, 2011). A database of photographs that were originally culled and standardized for the Rule and Ambady (2008) and Rule et al. (2008) studies—neither of which mentions race—has been reused elsewhere, notably in Ding and Rule's (2012) study of the perception of bisexual orientation, which compared the database photographs of gay and straight men with photographs of bisexual men that they downloaded and "standardized using the same parameters as those used in the creation of the gay and straight photo sets" (p. 167). They required the bisexual targets to be white—perhaps to maintain standardization with a white photo set. The studies that do explicitly mention race overwhelmingly describe targets as white (e.g., Hughes & Bremme, 2011; Rule, Ambady, & Hallett, 2009; Stern et al., 2013; Tabak & Zayas, 2012).
4. Across all studies, gaydar accuracy is nowhere near 100%—some estimates are as low as 16% (Plöderl, 2014)—and "perceptions of masculinity/femininity do not perfectly correlate with sexual orientation" (Rule, Bjornsdottir, Tskhay, & Ambady, 2016, p. 1689), so this interpretation is not meant to be inclusive of all gay men.

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