People who self-categorize as bisexual pose a challenge to a simplistic notion of linear separability/discreteness, as indicated by beliefs that “bisexuality does not exist.” The authors thus examined whether by blurring intergroup boundaries that challenge monosexuality, bisexual women would evince higher levels of self-assessed creativity. Bisexual women’s self-assessed creativity was higher than lesbian and heterosexual women’s. The latter two groups’ levels were similar (accounting for socioeconomic status). This finding is optimistic to the extent that not fitting easily into group norms might create an opportunity to perceive oneself favorably while challenging heterosexist and monosexist beliefs.

KEYWORDS sexual orientation, bisexuality, psychological essentialism, creativity, socioeconomic status

Sexual orientation has been and continues to be more essentialized (e.g., Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000; Prentice & Miller, 2007) than socially constructed (e.g., Bem, 1996; DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). People who are classified as gay, lesbian or bisexual (LGB; among other, more nuanced, sexual orientation categories) tend to be perceived as having distinct ‘essences,’ or hidden properties that cause alleged differences in physical and
psychological attributes (e.g., Medin & Ortony, 1989). Essentialist thought is associated with an increased tendency to focus on category differences versus similarities, leading to increased stereotyping of nonheterosexuals as belonging to discrete categories that are high in inductive potential (Bastian & Haslam, 2006; Haslam & Levy, 2006). Essentializing sexual orientation serves to reinforce a simplistic but inductively powerful world view in which sexual orientation groups are perceived to be linearly separable (Wattenmaker, 1995), such that there is a clear dividing line between heterosexuals and nonheterosexuals that appears more natural and fixed than socially constructed (for a discussion of essentialism that encompasses naturalness and reification, see Haslam et al., 2000).

People who self-identify as bisexual (e.g., Paul, 1984; Rodríguez Rust, 2000) thus pose a challenge to a simplistic notion of linear separability/discreteness as suggested by social beliefs that “bisexuality does not exist” (see Rodríguez Rust, 2000). This denial of bisexuality is espoused by people who endorse (1) a heterosexist belief—only heterosexuality is a ‘true’ sexual orientation—and (b) a monosexist belief—individuals are either homosexual (i.e., lesbian or gay), heterosexual (straight) or “closeted” people who are engaging in sexual experimentation that may or may not lead to coming out as belonging to an authentic monosexual identity (e.g., Yoshino, 2000). It is, therefore, possible that by blurring intergroup boundaries and by challenging group norms, such as heterosexist and monosexist beliefs, bisexuals (vs. heterosexual and lesbians/gays) would self-assess as possessing higher levels of creativity (see Charyton, 2007).

This prediction is based, in part, on Zinik’s (1985) argument that bisexuals possess higher levels of cognitive flexibility, or perceptions of options and alternatives available in everyday situations, because bisexuals are made to navigate heterosexual and homosexual communities (also see Konik & Crawford, 2004, for a recent demonstration of heightened cognitive flexibility in bisexuals). Thus, bisexuals may be less likely to engage in ‘functional fixedness,’ which is a tendency to persevere with solutions and strategies that serve only one context, thwarting a primary obstacle to creative thought as well as to self-assessed creativity (for the hindering effects of functional fixedness on creativity, see Ollinger, Jones, & Knoblich, 2008).

Gender roles and sexual orientation are orthogonal: gender identity is one’s identification with one’s gender assignment at birth whereas sexual orientation refers to whom one is attracted romantically and sexually (although these constructs have commonly been conflated; see Phelan, 1993). However, given that sexual orientation is predicated on gender, then the blurring of gender boundaries might also be linked with the blurring of a monosexual orientation (see Carter, 1985). In particular, several studies have demonstrated that creative males tend to be more feminine and creative females tend to be more masculine (Torrance, 1995). Psychological androgyny has been linked with overall higher creativity, in that people with high
masculine and feminine traits tend to be viewed as more creative (Jönsson & Carlsson, 2000). Norlander, Erixon, and Archer (2000) compared five gender roles and found that individuals who belonged to what they termed the ‘androgyenic group’ (i.e., individuals with high masculinity and high femininity scores) demonstrated higher creativity on a picture completion task and higher scores on creative attitude than all other gender-role groups (see also Hittner & Daniels, 2002). Analogously to androgynic individuals’ composition of femininity and masculinity, bisexuality can also be conceptualized as aspects of same-gender and other-gender attraction that might be linked to heightened creativity (Konik & Crawford, 2004).

One way of measuring people’s self-beliefs about their creativity is via a method established by Furnham and colleagues’ (Furnham, 2001; Furnham & Baguma, 1999; Furnham, Hosoe, & Tang, 2001) body of work, which has focused on how diverse cultures and groups view their own abilities (self-assessed creativity, e.g., among other psychological factors). We thus chose to pursue this endeavor—focusing on self-assessed creativity—though recognizing that it is also important to consider the role of socioeconomic status (SES) in theorizing and data, which speak to bisexuals’ self-assessed creativity levels. G. Lewis and Seaman (2004) found that there was no difference in bisexuals’ versus LGs’ (lesbian/gay) actual creativity levels when SES was controlled for. They argued and showed that the fact that bisexual individuals tend to be from a higher-SES background explained bisexuals’ higher creativity scores. It is possible that bisexual individuals from low-SES versus high-SES backgrounds would therefore show different patterns in self-assessed creativity, because low-SES individuals have been shown to adopt a model of agency that places a premium on assimilation to norms rather than on individuation and creativity/originality (see Stephens, Markus, & Townsend, 2007).

This investigation is situated in a psychological essentialism paradigm that is relevant to self-categorization/self-assessment. We ask, in particular, whether women who blur intergroup boundaries by self-categorizing as bisexual would also tend to self-assess as higher in creativity while examining the possible effects of SES. We choose to follow Charyton’s (2007) exhortation to examine creativity as it relates to women and cultural variables (in this case, SES; also see Demb, 1992). Irrespective of women’s sexual orientation, women’s (vs. men’s) creative products have been less valued socially despite findings pointing to women as being equal to and sometimes superior in creativity (Baer & Kaufman, 2008). One argument is that women’s creative works have been devalued based on environmental causes, which include differences in adults’ lowered expectations for girls versus boys and ensuing lack of opportunities and resources available for girls and women as compared to men (Helson, 1990; Piirto, 1991). Thus, women’s creativity has been judged to be lower in eminence. These more recent findings echo Amos’s (1978) caution that research on creative
Because this area of research has been a largely uncharted yet important terrain, the current study was designed to (1) examine the potential differential effects of SES and bisexuality on women’s self-assessed creativity following Furnham’s self-estimated ability technique and (2) focus on self-assessments rather than on measures of creative ability. Seminal work in industrial organizational psychology (e.g., Tierney & Farmer, 2002) and education (Beghetto, 2006) has advocated the importance of a person’s belief in her or his own creativity. This emphasis is on creative personal identity, which also reflects how much someone values creativity (e.g., Randel & Jaussi, 2003). Self-assessed creativity is also strongly linked with positive outcomes such as creativity ratings by supervisors (Tierney & Farmer, 2002), creative production (Karwowski, 2011), and teacher feedback on students’ creative ability (Beghetto, 2006; Beghetto, Kaufman, & Baxter, 2011). Thus, examining self-assessed creativity in women with a focus on sexual orientation and SES, by situating it in this current body of work, offers a person-centered perspective to traditional measures of product-centered creativity (see Kaufman, 2006, 2010).

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 2,605 heterosexual, 122 lesbian and 132 bisexual-identified women. Participants attended a public state university in California and participated in the study in exchange for course credit.

Procedure

Participants completed this study online. They signed up for extra credit on the Sona Systems website and were then directed to the SurveyMonkey data collection website. Consistent with Furnham’s (e.g., Furnham, 2001) past work, participants were presented with a graph of a bell curve. The mean was labeled on the graph as 100, as were three positive and three negative standard deviations (55, 70, 85 and 115, 130, 145). Participants were told that this represented a normal distribution of human abilities. They were next asked to use this scale to estimate their own creative abilities. Finally, participants completed a brief demographics questionnaire.
RESULTS

Self-Categorized Creativity as a Function of Bisexuality

Self-categorized bisexual women self-assessed as significantly more creative ($M = 114.75, SE = 1.29$) than either self-categorized lesbians ($M = 109.63, SE = 1.34$) or heterosexual women ($M = 104.09, SE = .29$), $F(2, 2856) = 39.13, p < 0.001$. All pairwise comparisons differed significantly on self-assessed creativity, $ps < 0.05$.

Self-Categorized Creativity as a Function of Bisexuality and SES

Bisexuality and SES. We conducted a chi-squared analysis to determine whether bisexuals in our population were also from a higher SES background. Participants’ SES backgrounds were measured by maternal education ($\text{SESm}$). Low $\text{SESm}$ was operationalized as a high school education or less, whereas high $\text{SESm}$ was operationalized as college level education or higher. A one-way chi squared analysis showed that bisexual participants were more highly represented in the higher SES category, as measured by $\text{SESm}$, $\chi^2 = 5.92, p = .015$; these effects were not significant for lesbians ($\chi^2 = 1.04, p = .31$) and heterosexual women ($\chi^2 = 1.30, p = .25$).

Self-perceived creativity as a function of bisexuality and $\text{SESm}$. Some participants did not report maternal education, leaving 2,615 women (61 bisexual, 47 lesbian and 2,507 heterosexual) in the current analysis. The only statistically significant effects were the two main effects. The first main effect involved sexual orientation: bisexuals evinced higher levels of self-assessed creativity ($M = 111.34, SE = 1.99$) than lesbians ($M = 105.37, SE = 2.18$) and heterosexual women ($M = 104.09, SE = .295$), $F(2, 2609) = 6.61, p = 0.001$. The latter groups (lesbian and heterosexual women) did not differ from each other, $p = .562$. This is an important finding that qualifies the results from the previous analysis (see Self-Categorized Creativity as a Function of Bisexuality, above).

The second main effect involved $\text{SESm}$: the high-$\text{SESm}$ group evinced higher levels of self-assessed creativity ($M = 109.52, SE = 1.24$) than low-$\text{SESm}$ ($M = 104.35, SE = 1.55$), $F(1, 2609) = 6.84, p = .009$. There was no interaction effect, $F(2, 2609) = .814, p = .443$. In sum, differences in self-assessed creativity were not found between lesbians and heterosexual women (once SES was accounted for). Of importance, the main difference was between bisexual women and those with monosexual identities (see Figure 1).

DISCUSSION

Gelman and colleagues (see Gelman, 2009, for a review) have extended previous work on psychological essentialism by arguing that a specific type of
essence, namely a ‘causal essence’ (Gelman & Hirschfeld, 1999), is perceived to account for the more surface or secondary properties in human categories. For instance, the essence of being a woman might be linked with hormones and genetics (see Prentice & Miller, 2007). Because the nature of sexual orientation is intimately linked with perceptions of gender, it stands to reason that a dichotomous and binary view of gender might lead individuals who are attracted to members of both ‘opposite sexes’ to identify as being less fixed, more flexible and, likely, more creative. This effect, however, cannot and should not be discussed separately from SES, because bisexuals tend to be associated with higher-SES backgrounds. SES, as measured by maternal education, however, did not seem to account for the association of bisexuality with heightened self-assessed creativity, in contrast to G. Lewis and Seaman (2004).

One corollary from the above theorizing, and consistent with Dweck (1975), is that bisexuals might perceive social categories to be more mutable (see also Haslam et al., 2000; Rips, 1989), which is fodder for future research. A promising paradigm to examine beliefs in mutability has been proposed by Taylor, Rhodes, and Gelman (2009), who used a ‘switched-at-birth’ paradigm, such as depicting a baby mouse raised entirely by dogs (Gelman & Wellman,
1991) or a human male baby raised by women only (Taylor, 1996). The aim was to assess whether the target would be judged to develop origin-versus adoptive-category-typical traits. Data indicated a developmental shift from relying on origin essentialism for social and biological categories to considering environmental effects on social categories (i.e., gender). Would bisexuals perceive a human male baby raised by women only to exhibit more adoptive than origin essentialism traits? This would indicate that bisexuals may also be prone to viewing some social categories as socially constructed even when the same categories have been espoused as biological and fixed (for race, see Shih, Bonam, Sanchez, & Peck, 2007).

Another future direction is to explore the mediation of the current findings. One possibility is that personality serves a mediating role in the relationship between heightened self-assessed creativity in bisexuals versus in monosexuals. Most work on creativity and personality uses the Five Factor theory of personality (Goldberg, 1992; McCrae & Costa, 1997). Openness to experience, one of the Big Five, is particularly relevant to creativity as well as to self-assessed creativity. The factor is split into facets: openness to fantasy (a good imagination), aesthetics (artistic), feelings (experiencing and valuing feelings), actions (trying new things, many interests), ideas (curious, smart, likes challenges) and values (unconventional, liberal).

There is a near-universal finding that openness to experience is related to a wide variety of creativity measures, ranging from self-reports of creative acts (Griffin & McDermott, 1998), self-estimates of creativity (Furnham, 1999), verbal creativity (King, McKee-Walker, & Broyles, 1996), creativity ratings of stories (Wolfradt & Pretz, 2001) and autobiographical essays (Dollinger & Clancy, 1993) and creative activities and behaviors throughout life (Soldz & Vaillant, 1999). McCrae (1987) examined the subcomponents and their relationship to several different divergent thinking measures. All subcomponents were significantly correlated; the smallest correlation was found for actions. These relationships stayed significant (although weakened) even when McCrae controlled for vocabulary scores and years of education.

Another promising future direction is to use bisexuals’ heightened self-assessed creativity in the context of promoting bisexuals’ resiliency in the face of social stigma. Expressive writing has been shown to be a helpful coping mechanism (Frisina, Borod, & Lepore, 2004; Smyth, 1998). Specific expressive writing interventions have been demonstrated to help nonheterosexual people cope with stress related to sexual orientation (R. J. Lewis et al., 2005; Pachankis & Goldfried, 2010), but these findings have been focused on LG individuals. Given that bisexuals self-assess as higher in creativity, a creative writing and expressive writing approach (Kaufman & Sexton, 2006) to promoting resiliency, situated in the literature connecting creativity and resiliency (Metzl, 2009; Punamäki, Qouta, & El-Sarraj, 2001), is an encouraging future direction.
The current findings, including the possible mediating role of openness to experience, suggest research on other individuals who blur intergroup boundaries. In a seminal memoir, the poet Langston Hughes expressed a counterpoint to what has been colloquially referred to as the ‘one-drop’ rule: “You see, unfortunately, I am not black. There are lots of different kinds of blood in our family. But here in the United States, the word ‘Negro’ is used to mean anyone who has any Negro blood at all in his veins. In Africa, the word is more pure. It means all Negro, therefore black. I am brown” (Hughes, 1940). Like sexual orientation, racial categorization has also been and continues to be highly essentialized (e.g., Haslam et al., 2000; Prentice & Miller, 2007) versus socially constructed (Tate & Audette, 2001). People who self-identify as biracial or multiracial thus pose a challenge to such a simplistic monoracial notion (see Shih et al., 2007), perhaps in a manner akin to bisexuals. Based on this theorizing and the current data, it would be useful to investigate whether biracial and multiracial individuals would self-assess as more creative than Whites despite not being ‘White enough’ (see Sanchez & Bonam, 2009). Instead of viewing the world via a ‘Black’ or ‘White’ dichotomous lens, like Hughes, some biracial and multiracial individuals may perceive shades of ‘Brown.’ In particular, Black/White and Latino/White individuals’ self-categorizations of creativity might be higher than those of self-defined Whites and respective self-defined Blacks/Latinos because these individuals hold dual memberships (see Johnson, 1992; Shih & Sanchez, 2005) that are neither completely White nor completely ‘minority’ (see Sanchez & Bonam, 2009), and thus blur racial group boundaries while defying the notion of linear separability.

In sum, we found evidence that bisexual women’s self-assessments of creativity were higher than those of lesbians and heterosexual women. Like Konik and Crawford’s (2004) data and discussion on cognitive flexibility in bisexuals, our beguiling finding was that differences in self-assessed creativity were not found between lesbians and heterosexual women (once SES was accounted for). The main difference was between bisexual women and those with monosexual identities: a finding that held even for bisexual women who came from lower-SES backgrounds. The current findings are novel as well as optimistic to the extent that not fitting easily into group norms might create an opportunity to adopt a more flexible and fluid lens toward the self (ergo a heightened sense of creativity), which is a form of empowerment, especially for people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. The empowering aspect of ‘trespassing’ on monosexual turfs is crucial for a culture that thrives on diversity.

NOTES

1. Ludwig’s (1995) book-length historiometric investigation of eminent creativity provides fodder for the idea that people in the arts were more likely to be homosexual or bisexual (it is worth noting that several scholars have criticized his methodology, i.e., Schlesinger, 2009)
2. It is important to note, however, that Demb’s (1992) review of the literature on the link between homosexuality and artistic interests was inconclusive.

3. We selected maternal education as an index of socioeconomic status because it has emerged as a leading factor in determining socio-economic status as a social status versus as an economic position (e.g., see Bradley & Corwyn, 2002) (for use of parent education, see Spencer & Castano, 2007). The mother is usually the primary caregiver and her interactions with offspring have been shown to better predict a variety of important intellectual and behavioral outcomes. For example, maternal but not paternal involvement predicts a child’s achievement, teacher-rated competence, and self-regulation (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989).

4. We use this phrase colloquially to highlight popular conceptions.

REFERENCES


Avi Ben-Zeev is Professor of Cognitive Psychology at San Francisco State University (SFSU). He received his PhD degree from Yale University in 1997. Previous to his tenure at SFSU, Dr. Ben-Zeev was a faculty member in the Cognitive and Linguistic Sciences Department at Brown University and in the Psychology Department at Williams College. Dr. Ben-Zeev’s scholarship has centered on explicating cognitive underpinnings of social categorization and stereotyping, especially in regard to identifying contextual factors that cause stigmatized individuals to underperform intellectually (i.e., social identity threat). He has published and edited several books, such as Complex Cognition: The Psychology of Human Thought (with Dr. Robert Sternberg), and a variety of research articles in journals, such as Psychological Science, Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, and Cognitive Science. More recently, Dr. Ben-Zeev has been investigating how basic categorization processes associated with essentialist thought are implicated in the perception of social-artifactual categories as “natural.”

Tara C. Dennehy is a doctoral student at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She received her MA from San Francisco State University in 2011. Tara’s research interests are broadly located at the intersection of cognitive and social psychology with a focus on examining basic processes and their implications for stereotyping, prejudice and social inequity.

James C. Kaufman, PhD, is Professor of Psychology at the California State University at San Bernardino, where he directs the Learning Research Institute. He is the president-elect of Division 10 of the American Psychological Association and is the founding editor of the newest APA journal, Psychology of Popular Media Culture. He has written/edited more than 20 books, including the Cambridge Handbook of Creativity and Creativity 101.