

Determinants of stigmatization of Transgenders in Flanders (Belgium) and the Netherlands

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Research indicates that many people hold negative attitudes towards transgenders and that transgenders experience stigmatization in the public space, at work and in their personal life (Keuzenkamp, 2013; Norton & Herek, 2012). However limited attention has been paid to identifying the determinants of these negative attitudes.

In this study we investigated factors influencing the emotional and behavioral attitudes towards transgenders. We included both characteristics of the transgender and characteristics of the perceiver.

An experimental design was used in which we manipulated two transgender characteristics, namely onset (early vs. late) and visibility (high vs. low) using four different descriptions (vignettes) of a transgender female neighbor. Each respondent was presented with one of the four vignettes and then asked questions about their emotional and behavioral attitudes towards this transgender neighbor. Next, they had to fill in a questionnaire about social dominance orientation, genderism, social desirability and contact, using reliable and valid scales, followed by some items about their own personal and demographic characteristics.

Respondents were members of the respondent panel of Thesistools (an online tool for distributing surveys). A total of 296 persons aged 18 to 81 years old, of whom 68% females, participated in this study.

First, we investigated the influence of the manipulated characteristics of the transgender person (onset and visibility). No significant effects were found of onset and visibility on the emotional and behavioral attitudes of the respondents towards the transgender neighbor.

Second, we examined the influence of personal characteristics and opinions of the respondents on their attitudes towards the transgender neighbor. We found effects of the respondents' opinion about personal responsibility and biological origin of the transgender condition. We also found effects of genderism (the belief in a strong duality between the sexes) and social dominance orientation (the belief in inequality between social groups) on the respondents' attitudes towards the transgender neighbor. These results indicate that attitudes towards transgenders are part of a broader social meaning system.

Furthermore, there was less fear in respondents who had some kind of contact with transgenders than those who had no contact.

Also, female birth sex and a homosexual or bisexual orientation were associated with positive attitudes.

The overall conclusion of this study is that using this vignette research method, no effect of onset and visibility on stigmatization could be found. The main determinants of attitudes towards transgenders found in this study were contact with transgenders and gender characteristics and social ideologies of the perceivers.

For this reason, it is important to provide occasions for people to come into contact with transgenders, personally or in an indirect way, e.g., via the mass media. The effect of social ideologies suggests that educational projects and awareness campaigns around broader social topics (social equality, diversity, gender) could also influence the attitudes towards transgenders.