

Transgenders and (self-)stigmatization. The benefits of being visible.

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Abstract

Research indicates that many people hold negative attitudes towards transgenders and that transgenders experience stigmatization in the public space, at work and in the immediate vicinity (Keuzenkamp, 2013; Norton & Herek, 2012). Stigmatization has various forms viz *enacted stigma*, consisting of a negative action or treatment, *felt stigma*, the stigmatizing experience that someone has, supposes to have, or claims to be experiencing. In addition, there is *internalized stigma*, or self-stigmatization, which implies that one believes the opinion of others about them is true (Herek, 2007; Scambler & Hopkins, 1986). Self-stigmatization may disrupt life goals (Corrigan, 2012), lead to social isolation and psychopathology (Bos, Pryor, Reeder, and Stutterheim, 2013), limit the social network (Link & Phelan, 2001), lead to lower quality of life, lower self-esteem (Meyer, 2003), depressive symptoms, unemployment and loss of income (Keuzenkamp, 2012).

In this paper we present a qualitative study on self-stigmatization experienced by transgenders in the Netherlands after transition. We also examined the role of social support and coping strategies used by transgenders in dealing with stigma.

In 2015 ten trans men and ten trans women, aged 19 to 75 years, were interviewed. Participants were recruited through networks of transgender people. A semi-structured interview protocol was used. The interviews lasted on average 90 minutes.

The participants reported various acts of enacted stigma after transition. The more passable they were, the less stigma they experienced. Felt stigma was also reported. Many participants indicated that they have fear for stigmatization, which makes them alert continuously. Internalized stigma was observed in some participants, corresponding with feelings of not being heard and accepted. They reported a relatively low quality of life, feelings of loneliness and withdrawal. There were clear differences between the experiences of trans men and trans women. A striking result of this study was the amount in which transgender people seem to be stigmatizing other transgenders.

Transgender people are treated differently by men and women. The trans women in this study report being taken less seriously by men after their transition. Trans men experience an increase in their status in the eyes of men. Women are generally more empathic than men toward both trans men and trans women. The transgenders in this study use various forms of problem-focused and emotion-focused coping to deal with stigmatization. The participating trans women more often use empowerment than trans men. They also are more open than trans men about their trans identity. Openness and social support are experienced as important strategies for reducing the effects of stigmatization.

According to many participants it is necessary to achieve more publicity. Through publicity transgender people become visible. This visibility is important, because it can change the opinion of society about transgenders.

The qualitative outcomes of this study can be used as a basis for more quantitative research. It is recommended to do further research into the effects of openness and social support on (self-)stigmatization. In future studies it seems advisable to distinguish between, trans men and trans women, because of their different situation.