



## THE EFFECTS OF STEREOTYPES ON EMPATHY AND AGGRESSION IN SOCIAL INTERACTIONS

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### Abstract

*Attitudes are often based onto our beliefs. If our education and our cultural context is seeing some behaviors or sexual orientation as dangerous, then aggressiveness and lack of empathy will take over. Our preconceptions strongly influence how we interpret the reality. As some authors show, our cognitive mechanism are efficient and adaptive, but sometimes error can occur.*

*This paper aims to evaluate the level of aggression and empathy towards people in the LGBTQ community. Stereotypes are summed up in light of the fact that one expects that the stereotype is valid for every distinctive individual in the classification. Generalizations lead to social categorization, which is one reason for bias mentalities and may emerge for various reasons. The research proves that the level of aggression increases and the level of empathy decreases when the subjects face images with people from the LGBTQ community.*

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**Keywords:** *aggressiveness, stereotypes, empathy, LGBT, social education.*

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Oxford English dictionary (Simpson, 1989) defines a stereotype as a "widespread but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular person or thing". Stereotypes are ubiquitous. Among other things, they cover racial groups ("Asians are good at math"), political groups ("Republicans are rich"), sexes ("women are bad at math"), demographic groups ("the people that live in Florida are old") and actions ("flying is dangerous"). The sociological approach to stereotypes refers only to social groups. It considers stereotypes as incorrect fundamental generalizations, the stereotypes being generalized by the degradation of the group traits, reflecting the biases that underlie them or other internal

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motivations (Schneider, 2004). The "approach to social knowledge", rooted in social psychology (Schneider, 2004) gained ground in the 1980s and sees social stereotypes as special cases of schemas or cognitive theories (Schneider, Hastorf & Ellsworth, 1979). These theories are intuitive generalizations that individuals use in their daily lives and involve economies on cognitive resources. Hilton and Hippel (1996) point out that stereotypes are mental representations of real differences in groups allowing easier and more efficient processing of information.

### 1.1. STEREOTYPES

Most researches about stereotypes have focused on the processes involved in activating and applying stereotypes; presently, the researchers are focused on the content of the stereotypes, as well as on the essential dimensions that could explain it (Fiske et. al., 2002). One of the most promising approaches in this domain is Covariance structural modeling - CSM (Cuddy et. al., 2008; Fiske et. al., 2002). According to this model, warmth and competence are two fundamental dimensions that capture the stereotypes of social groups. In addition, two social-structural parameters: relative status of groups and the nature of the intergroup (cooperative or competitive), jointly determine the content of the stereotypes (Cuddy et. al., 2008; Fiske et. al., 2002). Studies on CSM and homosexuals have shown that the general category of homosexual men is perceived as moderate and both warm and competent; studies on lesbians, on the other hand, have shown that the general category is regarded as competent, but not warm (Fiske et al., 2002) because of the resemblance to heterosexual men. Moreover, the CSM studies have failed to explore the role of social-structural parameters in accounting for the stereotype content of lesbians. As a result, no prior search has determined whether the warmth and competence perceived by the lesbians could be predetermined by the perceived status and, respectively, the interdependence. On the base of these findings, the current research aims to clarify the content of the stereotype of lesbians in terms of warmth and competence, considering that lesbians are a group made up of different subgroups and to identify the dimensions that could promote such stereotypes.

### 1.2. HOMOSEXUALITY

The term homosexuality is debated if it functions as an umbrella term that attempts to explain all the contours of the same-sex sexuality. Many consider the terminology omission of women in the term as problematic. Deborah Amory (1997) compares the difficulties of the claimed universality of the homosexual term

with the euro-centric perspective on the term "female" and explains how historically this category only considered the experiences of Western women. The representation of African sexualities can, in other words, be understood when it is explained by the distinct terminology used in Western discourses. Although commonly used in the field of sexual theory, the term LGBT may seem strange to many Africans when they face the need to explain the same sex identities or practices. A term much more recognized by many Africans when describing non-heterosexuality is homosexuality. First, homosexuality as a term describing the same gender relations is widely used in Africa. An example of this is found in the Ugandan newspaper Red Pepper, which published a list in 2014, publishing "200 top homosexual men" in the country (Brydum, 2014). The publication of this list led to the murder of homosexual activist David Kato, one of the homosexuals identified in the work. The people involved in the fight for rights also use the homosexual term in many cases, instead of "LGBT". Ugandan activist Sylvia Tamale uses the term homosexuality frequently when it comes to engaging in sexual debate and gender politics (Tamale, 2011). Given the widespread use of homosexuality, we have chosen to use this term in our study while describing the same gender relations. We will use the "same gender relations" when they are considered more explanatory in context.

### 1.3. AGRESIVITY

Hostility, acts of aggression and violence against homosexuals and lesbians are widespread. With all this, the research on the perpetrators of anti-gay violence has been limited, more often descriptively, showing, of course, that men report hostility and greater animosity towards homosexuality than women (D'Angelli & Rose, 1990). The criminals of aggressive acts are, usually, young adults or in their early twenties, who mainly target individuals who perceive them as homosexual men (Harry, 1990). Aggression and violence directed against homosexuals were attributed to homophobia. Homophobia would be properly defined both in terms of negative affect, as well as in the behaviour of homosexuals, rather than in the attitude of homosexuality. In addition, valid laboratory measures of aggression would need to supplement self-report measures (Gatej, Rizeanu, Manolache, 2019; Rizeanu, Cucui, 2018). More importantly, it is essential to determine whether homophobic men are specifically more aggressive towards homosexual men than non-homophobic men or if they are generally more aggressive, which have not been determined empirically.

### 1.4. EMPATHY

Empathy means the recognition of the feelings of others, the causes of these feelings and the possibility of participating in an individual's emotional experience without becoming part of it (Keen, 2007; Rizeanu, 2013). Empathy should characterize health professionals and patient communication to achieve the desired outcomes of healing (Pembroke, 2007). It is a learned ability or attitude of life, which can be used to try to come in contact with someone, to communicate and to understand someone else's experiences or feelings (Halpern, 2003; Rizeanu, 2014).

Empathy can be expressed in terms of joy, sadness, excitement, pain and confusion. In the field of health, empathy allows health professionals and patients to work together (LeCompte, 2000).

A possible means of reducing prejudice against LGBQ youth is the development of targeted interventions to increase empathy and the pursuit of prospects. Batson (1997) identified a three-step model for how empathy can reduce prejudice against a stigmatized group. This process begins with the adoption of an individual's perspective within that group, which leads to a growing empathy for that individual. As a result of this growing empathy, it tends to develop a higher value of the individual's well-being, which leads to more positive feelings and beliefs towards the individual's group. Empathy is expected to improve attitudes only if someone is empathetic in response to a need that seems to refer to group membership, for example, discrimination against LGBTQ members because of their orientation. Perspective-based interventions have proven to be widely applicable as a means of improving attitudes toward members of an external group (Galinsky, Ku & Wang, 2008; Shih, Wang, Bucher & Stotzer, 2009). Taken as a whole, this research suggests that the involvement of young people in activities that motivate empathy and the perspectives about the LGBQ people can be a way to reduce prejudice.

## **2. OBJECTIVE AND HYPOTHESES**

### **2.1.OBJECTIVE**

The objective of this study is to show that stereotypes and prejudice can lead to social aggressiveness and less empathy.

### **2.2.HYPOTHESES**

1. There is a significantly statistical difference between the level of aggressiveness before and after visualizing images with subjects that are part of the LGBT community.

2. There is a significantly statistical difference between the level of empathy before and after visualizing images with subjects that are part of the LGBT community.

### **3. METHOD**

#### **3.1. PARTICIPANTS**

For this study we have used two samples, each of 50 subjects that were randomly selected from the population of students from two universities. In the first group there were 31 male subjects and 19 female subjects. Their age was between 20 to 56 years old. In the second group there were 29 male subjects and 21 female subjects. Their age was between 21 and 62 years old. All of them declared a heterosexual orientation.

#### **3.2. INSTRUMENTS**

Aggression Questionnaire –AQ (Buss and Perry, 1992) was developed to evaluate not only how aggressive someone is, using the total score, but also how his aggressiveness manifests, which determines through the subscale scores.

Questionnaire Measure of Emotional Empathy – QMEE (Mehabrian and Epstein, 1972) is a test which consists of a series of 33 statements to which the subject must express his agreement, respectively disagreement.

#### **3.3. EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN AND PROCEDURE**

This research was done in an experimental environment inside the University. The two groups were asked to fill in the aggressiveness and the empathy test for the beginning. In the case of the experimental group after this step they were asked to watch a series of images that contained LGBT persons and couples. After the third step was made to reveal our research questions: the subjects were asked to fill in once again the two psychological assessments, the aggressiveness test and the empathy test. In the case of the control group the same procedure was performed with the difference that the subjects were exposed, voluntarily, to a series of images that contained neutral stimulus like nature or cities pictures. All the subjects were voluntarily involved in this research and they were assured about the fact that the personal data are confidential and will be used just in scientific purposes.

### **4. RESULTS**

In the case of the experimental group the results are showing a mean of 1.00 before the LGBT images were presented. The results are showing an initial level of physical aggressiveness at 27 of the participants, 13 of verbal aggressiveness and 10 of them presented a level of anger. None of the subjects had hostility as main aggressive trait.

Table 1 - Agressiveness\_preliminary

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Physical aggressiveness	27	54.0	54.0	55.0
Verbal aggressiveness	13	26.0	26.0	85.0
Anger	10	20.0	20.0	100.0
Total	50	100.0	100.0	

The initial measurement of the experimental group showed that 27% of the subjects had a moderate level of Physical aggressiveness, 13% had a moderate level of Verbal aggressiveness and 10% a moderate level of Anger.

After visualizing the experimental images, the level of aggressiveness increased significantly to a mean of 3.00 units. From the 50 subjects, 35 had a level on anger, 10 had a high level of hostility and 5 of them a high level of verbal aggressiveness. None of the subjects showed a high level of physical aggressiveness. These results could be influenced by the level of education and many cultural filters.

Table 2 - Agressiveness\_after experimental images

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Anger	35	70.0	70.0	90.0
Hostility	10	20.0	20.0	15.0
Verbal	5	10.0	10.0	100.0

aggressiveness				
Total	50	100.0	100.0	

Regarding the empathy test, the initial results had revealed the following structure of the experimental group: 44 have shown a high level of empathy, 4 a medium level and 2 of them a low level.

Table 3 - empathy\_preliminary

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Low level	2	4.0	4.0	5.0
Medium level	4	8.0	8.0	80.0
High level	44	88.0	88.0	100.0
Total	50	100.0	100.0	

After the images were presented, the results changed dramatically: 22 presented a low level of empathy, 19 a medium level and just 9 had a high level at this parameter.

Table 4 – empathy after experimental images

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Low level	22	44.0	44.0	82.0
Medium level	19	38.0	38.0	18.0
High level	9	18.0	18.0	100.0
Total	50	100.0	100.0	

In order to test our hypothesis in a scientific way, we have introduced all the data regarding the experimental group in the IBM SPSS® software. The results of the t test procedure for paired samples revealed significantly differences for the level of aggressiveness on an upward trend ( $p=0.01 \leq 0.05$ ,  $t=-6.89$ ).

Table 5 - Paired Samples Test

Independent Samples Test									
	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
AGRESSIVENESS	51.004	.057	6.899	49	.000	-1,350	.875	-1.760	-.940

For the level of empathy we have performed the same statistical procedure. The results of the t test procedure for paired samples revealed significantly differences for the level of empathy, unfortunately in the way of a decreasing trend. ( $p=0.01 \leq 0.05$ ,  $t=8.54$ ).

Table 6 - Paired Samples Test

Independent Samples Test									
	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
EMPATHY	51.004	.057	8.542	49	.000	1.450	.759	1.095	1.805



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The control group does not show any differences at all between the two moments of testing.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

The idea of this research started from the reactions we saw around us to different people when it came to LGBTQ members or when they were watching pictures with them. Given the reactions of those around us, the purpose of this research was to demonstrate if there are stereotypes and prejudices related to people with other sexual inclinations. The results obtained validated our two hypotheses and are supported by other researches carried out over the years by researchers (Phalet & Poppe, 1997; Poppe & Linssen, 1999; Cuddy, Fiske & Glick 2008; Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002).

Often, to define certain aspects, we use stereotypes, so by categorizing and comparing information we manage to simplify a complex reality. Prejudices are also a global tendency towards a favorable position or not towards an aspect. Thus, corroborating the two tendencies of stereotypes and having prejudices, we can realize what makes it difficult for some people to succeed in appealing to their empathy vis-à-vis an aspect as vast and difficult to digest as homosexuality.

*Received at: 07.02.2020, Accepted for publication on: 20.02.2020*

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