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Predictors of Attitudes toward Transgender Men and Women

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Abstract

This study examined whether induced empathy affected attitudes toward transgender individuals, as well as personality and demographic variables related to those attitudes. Across two samples, participants who were higher in empathy and contemporary consciousness and lower in right wing authoritarianism held more positive attitudes. Similar attitudes were reported for both transgender men and transgender women.

Introduction

Although there has been a good deal of research on attitudes toward gay men and lesbian women (Evans & Chapman, 2014; Jewell & Morrison, 2012), researchers have only recently started examining attitudes toward transgender people. Many transgender individuals report feeling rejection, discrimination, victimization, and violence. As a result of such occurrences, transgender individuals have a much higher suicide rate (41%) than the national average of less than 2% (Haas, Rodgers, & Herman, 2014). Transgender women are at a higher risk of violence in public places and have few places where they feel secure (Perry & Dyck, 2014).

Empathy can improve feelings toward stigmatized groups (Batson et al., 1997). The goal of this study was to examine the effects of empathy and personality/ demographic variables on attitudes toward transgender individuals. We were further interested in whether a difference existed between attitudes toward transgender men vs. transgender women.

Vignette

At birth, I was assigned to the male gender, and was named Samuel. When I was young, I felt lost in my own skin. While my parents were dressing me in t-shirts and shorts, I wanted to wear dresses. I was given toy cars to play with, but found myself wanting to steal my sister's Barbie dolls. I felt different, but for a long time, could not attach a name to this feeling. When I was 12, I realized that I was transgender; even though I had the body of a boy, I felt like a girl. I battled with this self-realization for years before telling anyone. When I turned 18, I decided to outwardly express who I felt I was inside. When I informed my mom of my true identity, she couldn't handle it. She had always seen me as her little boy, and could not accept me as the woman that I am. My mom went from being my best friend to a near stranger overnight, spiraling me into a deep depression. As I realized that my entire life was changing, and I would potentially lose more of my support system, the downward spiral continued. If you would have asked me then where I'd be now, I would have answered, "Dead." Luckily, I found the number for a suicide hotline, because I was losing faith that I had anybody to turn to. It's been nearly two years since my mom and I have spoken. I desperately want her to know Samantha, the real me, but I don't think she would answer if I called.

Method

- 241 community participants (60% females, M age = 35, SD = 9.26)
- 215 UNI college participants (61% females, M age = 19, SD = 1.02)
- Participants read one of four vignettes (i.e., a definition of "transgender," a personal story of a transgender female or male, or a control story)
- Demographic information
- Empathy Toward Transgender Individuals (Batson et al., 1995; 5 items; α = .97, .97)
"Please indicate to what extent you feel compassionate toward transgender individuals."
- Empathy scale (Davis, 1980; 23 items; α = .93, .87)
"Before criticizing somebody, I try to imagine how I would feel if I were in their place."
- Political-Economic Conservatism (Pratto et al., 1994; 3 items, α = .92, .93)
"How would you describe your views on current social issues?"
- Right Wing Authoritarian Scale (RWA; Zakrisson, 2005; 15 items; α = .93, .80)
"Our country needs a powerful leader, in order to destroy the radical and immoral currents prevailing in society today."
- Social Dominance Orientation (SDO 7; Ho et al., 2015; 16 items; α = .95, .89)
"An ideal society requires some groups to be on top and others to be on the bottom."
- Contemporary Critical Consciousness (CCC; Shin et al., 2016; 21 items; α = .92, .88)
"Reverse racism against Whites is just as harmful as traditional racism."
- Christian Orthodoxy Scale (Fullerton & Hunsberger, 1982; 24 items; α = .99, .96)
"The Bible is the word of God given to guide man to grace and salvation."
- Transgender Biology (Harton, 2016; 1 item)
"Being transgender is determined by biology."
- Transgender Attitudes and Beliefs - Interpersonal Comfort (Kanamori et al., 2016; 14 items; α = .95-.97)
"I would be comfortable working for a company that welcomes transgender (wo)men."
- Transgender Attitudes and Beliefs - Sex/Gender Beliefs (Kanamori et al., 2016; 11 items; α = .94, .91)
"Humanity is only male or female; there is nothing in between."
- Transgender Attitudes and Beliefs - Human Value (Kanamori et al., 2016; 5 items; α = .95, .91)
"Transgender individuals should be treated with the same respect and dignity as any other person."

Results

- People who were higher in empathy toward transgender individuals, dispositional empathy, and contemporary critical consciousness, and lower in right wing authoritarianism and who believed that transgenderism is biologically influenced reported more positive attitudes toward transgender men and women (Table 1).
- There were no differences in empathy or attitudes by condition in either sample, suggesting that the vignettes did not influence attitudes (Table 2).
- The community sample was higher on dispositional empathy (M = 5.06, SD = .76 vs. M = 4.91, SD = .62), d = .22, p = .023, contemporary critical consciousness (M = 4.56, SD = 1.17 vs. M = 4.26, SD = .88), d = .30, p = .003, transgender woman comfort, transgender man comfort, and sex/gender beliefs (Table 2).
- The UNI sample was higher on right-wing authoritarianism (M = 3.62, SD = .77 vs. M = 2.95, SD = 1.35), d = .67, p < .001, social dominance orientation (M = 2.89, SD = 1.02 vs. M = 2.41, SD = 1.35), d = .41, p < .001, and Christian orthodoxy (M = 5.5, SD = 1.63 vs. M = 3.86, SD = 2.24), d = .86, p < .001.
- There were no significant differences between the community and UNI samples for human value (Table 2).

Discussion

Similar to previous findings on attitudes toward lesbian women and gay men, right wing authoritarianism predicted negative attitudes toward transgender people. In contrast, dispositional and specific empathy predicted positive attitudes toward transgender people. This finding supports previous findings that empathy improves attitudes toward stigmatized groups. A belief in a biological influence on being transgender also predicted positive attitudes toward the population.

UNI college students held slightly more negative attitudes toward transgender people than the community participants. This result could be because the community participants were generally more politically liberal. UNI students (most in this study were first year students in their first semester) may also have limited experience with transgender populations, which can result in more negative attitudes. Educational programs implemented at the high school level promoting awareness and an understanding that being transgender is biologically influenced may help to reduce prejudice.

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Table 1
Standardized Beta weights and R² values

Measures	Sample	Trans Woman Comfort	Trans Man Comfort	Sex and Gender Beliefs	Human Value
Empathy toward Transgender Ind.	Community UNI	.42*** .47***	.44*** .47***	.31*** .34***	.13 .22*
Empathy Scale	Community UNI	.15* .10	.09 .10	.07 .07	.30*** .30***
Transgender Biology	Community UNI	.10 .03	.08 .04	.18*** .11*	.04 -.05
Christian Orthodoxy Scale	Community UNI	-.09 -.07	-.09 -.09	-.03 -.02	-.01 -.09
Political Orientation	Community UNI	.02 .06	-.06 .06	-.06 .03	.05 -.14
RWA	Community UNI	-.23** -.15	-.25** -.20**	-.37*** -.34***	-.24* -.20*
SDO7	Community UNI	-.06 -.05	-.20 -.10	.06 -.04	-.21* -.16
CCC	Community UNI	-.01 .08	.09 .02	.29*** .18*	-.12 .06
Gender	Community UNI	.10 .04	.06 .04	-.03 .08	-.04 -.03
R ²	Community UNI	.60*** [.49, .65] .62*** [.50, .67]	.58*** [.47, .64] .66*** [.56, .71]	.77*** [.71, .80] .65*** [.54, .70]	.36*** [.22, .43] .39*** [.24, .46]
Adjusted R ²	Community UNI	.58*** .59***	.56*** .64***	.76*** .63***	.33*** .36***

Table 2: Means and (standard deviations) by condition across measures

Measure	Sample	Samantha	Samuel	Definition	Control	η^2	Sample Cohen's d
Manipulation Check	Community	5.38 (1.43)	5.20 (2.09)	5.14 (1.64)	4.77 (1.60)	.02	
	UNI	4.53 (1.46)	4.23 (1.79)	4.06 (1.80)	4.23 (1.57)	.01	.38 [.19, .56]
Trans Woman Comfort	Community	5.43 (1.62)	5.31 (1.81)	5.74 (1.38)	5.42 (1.65)	.01	
	UNI	5.09 (1.13)	4.80 (1.52)	4.97 (1.48)	4.99 (1.41)	.01	.52** [.33, .71]
Trans Man Comfort	Community	5.47 (1.41)	5.40 (1.74)	5.63 (1.43)	5.32 (1.71)	.01	
	UNI	5.06 (1.12)	4.67 (1.46)	5.00 (1.49)	5.07 (1.40)	.01	.35** [.16, .54]
Sex and Gender Beliefs	Community	4.89 (1.58)	4.59 (1.76)	5.12 (1.61)	4.61 (1.62)	.02	
	UNI	4.40 (1.36)	4.18 (1.40)	4.42 (1.36)	4.47 (1.34)	.01	.35* [.16, .54]
Human Value	Community	6.29 (1.10)	6.22 (1.36)	6.67 (.80)	6.43 (1.00)	.03	
	UNI	6.52 (.70)	6.10 (1.26)	6.22 (1.04)	6.51 (.85)	.03	.30 [.11, .49]

* p < .05, ** p < .01, *** p < .001; Higher Political Orientation = Liberal; Higher Biology = Due to biology

* p < .01, ** p < .001