

**The problem of prejudice towards transgender and gender nonconforming
students in secondary schools in Luxembourg**

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1. Social Problem

In recent years, the prejudice and discrimination suffered by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth have been more in the focus of socio-political campaigns. With the recent political changes in the US where transgender¹ people are barred from serving in the military service, reversing a policy enacted by the Obama Administration and transphobic government politics in Poland, the issues are contemporary socio-politico-cultural problems that affect many TGNC individuals in the world (Harrison & Michelson, 2019). According to Starr and Zurbriggen, gender may be the most powerful cognitive schemata available according to gender schema theory (2017). Children learn gender schemata from an early age and adapt their cognition to what it means to be feminine or masculine and adapt their behaviour and knowledge based on gender (Starr & Zurbriggen, 2017).

According to Davidson (2014), gender is more complex than the dichotomy concept of men and women. A person's gender identity may or may not be in agreement with their biological sex and may be on a spectrum between cisgender women and cisgender men (Davidson, 2014). It is how they perceive their own gender. Nonetheless, gender is a social identity that has its proper norms and rules from which people deduct information on how they should behave and think. Historically speaking, the dichotomic view of gender led to the pathologising of transgender individuals who did not fit with the norms of the binary perception of gender and it led and still leads to their rejection and exclusion from their society (Huffaker & Kwon, 2016). Transgender people are often the victims of violence because people perceive them as deviant as they flaunt the binary gender roles (Jaurique, 2019). The stigmatisation lead to discriminations such as losing one's employment, being harassed at work, at school and in one's own families (Huffaker & Kwon, 2016).

¹ Transgender and TGNC (transgender and gender-nonconforming) are used as a umbrella terms for this essay, including binary and nonbinary gender identities such as gender-fluid, gender-nonconforming, genderqueer, gender-nonbinary, gender-creative, agender, or two-spirit amongst others.

The hostile school climate experiences by transgender and gender nonconforming students do not only affect their educational outcomes, but it is also contributing to their ill-being, such as anxiety and depression and may lead to suicide (Kosciw et al., 2018). The results from the 2017 National School Climate Survey by GLSEN demonstrate that 44,6% LGBTQ students do not feel safe in their schools due to their gender expression, 87,4% heard negative comments about transgender people and 71% heard negative comments about their gender expression by teachers and school staff (Kosciw et al., 2018). Discriminatory school policies such as prohibiting students to use the bathrooms/changing rooms of their choice, and preventing transgender and gender nonconforming students from using their preferred pronoun and name. (Kosciw et al., 2018). While there is no specific study in Luxembourg on transgender school experiences, 92% of LGBT have heard negative remarks about LGBT, 69% have been victims of such remarks or behavioural attitudes from their peers and 65% have always hidden that they were LGBT (Ministère de la Famille et de l'Intégration, 2018). The consequences of transgender prejudice and discrimination include difficulties to concentrate, not having acquired the necessary school performance competences, lower marks as well as feeling isolated, excluded, depressed and considering suicide. Support from teachers and school staff can work against the negative impact of bullying and harassment with transgender students feeling connectedness and belonging and having more academic success (Greytak & Kosciw, 2014).

There is consistent overlap between homophobic and transphobic attitudes (Mitchell, 2018). Tebbe and Moradi (2012) as well as Nagoshi et al. (2008) found correlations between both prejudiced attitudes. Concerning homophobia, women exhibit lesser prejudice than men (Anzani et al., 2018; Mitchell, 2018). Tebbe and Moradi (2012) replicated a study that proved higher levels of transphobia in men compared to women. Strong and reliable correlations have been found between homophobia and transphobia regarding gender and gender role assumptions, reinforcing similarities in prejudices (Walch et al., 2012). Especially heterosexual men exhibited more negative attitudes

towards gay men than towards lesbian women (Huffaker & Kwon, 2016). These attitudes may stem from the expectation that men need to demonstrate hypermasculinity to prove that there are confident with their gender identity (Nagoshi et al., 2008). Conventional, idealised masculinity is relative to traditional binary gender expectations (Huffaker & Kwon, 2016). Personality characteristics such as social dominance orientation, religious fundamentalism, and right-wing authoritarianism are highly associated with sexual prejudice (Ching et al., 2020; Huffaker & Kwon, 2016; Perez-Arche & Miller, 2021). Herek (2009) proved that sexual prejudice predictors include older age, lower levels of education, politically conservative views, heterosexuality, religious beliefs, and authoritarian opinions. The prejudice addressed to transgender people can be termed transphobia, transnegativity or transprejudice.

Transphobia denotes “emotional disgust towards individuals who do not conform to society’s gender expectations”, including “masculine women, feminine men, cross-dressers, transgenderists, and/or transsexuals” (Hill & Willoughby, 2005, p. 533). McDermott (2018) criticised this definition as he regards it as implicating that the negativity comes from transgender individuals who seem to be gender divers compared to societal norms. Instead, he proposed the term *transnegativity* which is “any prejudicial attitude, discriminatory or victimising behavioural action overtly or covertly directed towards an individual because they are, or are perceived to be, trans” shifting the responsibility on the discriminating people (McDermott et al., 2018, p. 2). *Transprejudice* is “societal discrimination and stigma of individuals who do not conform to traditional norms of sex and gender” (Sugano et al., 2006, p. 217). For King et al. (2009), transprejudice includes “the negative valuing stereotyping and discrimination of transgender individuals” (p. 20). Davidson (2014) perceived transprejudice as giving the core blame of the prejudice to the violating of gender norms. The causes of transgender prejudice can be explained using intergroup threat theory by looking closely at intergroup anxiety, threats and negative stereotypes.

2. Theoretical Explanation

Stephan and Stephan are at the origin of the *Integrated Threat Theory* (ITT) (Croucher, 2017; 2000). They posed that ITT is based on the fact that fear, anxieties, and ignorance create prejudice in people and that people are afraid of threats to their way of life (Stephan & Stephan, 2000).

Integrated threat theory is based on four threats: realistic threats, symbolic threats, *intergroup anxiety* and *negative stereotypes* (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). These threats are used to predict attitudes towards outgroups; when negative affect associated is with outgroups, prejudice may come to exist (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). These four threats were later reduced to two, realistic and symbolic threat as intergroup anxieties and stereotypes are subsets of both threats under the nomenclature *Intergroup Threat Theory* (Stephan & Renfro, 2003).

Intergroup anxiety is when individuals experience fear before interacting with outgroup members because they think that either a member in their ingroup social circle would be angry with them or that they would say something wrong to the member of the outgroup (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). In the last case, contact causes anxiety which has related cognitive, affective, and behavioural effects in the individual and for the future interaction with outgroup members (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). For interaction with transgender people, this may be that one is not sure of how to talk to a person who is transgender out of fear of offending them, but it may also relate to how the individual's ingroup members may react to contact with transgender or gender nonconforming outgroup members. Nonetheless, intergroup anxiety affects the sexual minority group too, when they get in contact with the sexual majority group. Intergroup anxiety is anticipatory, as it relates to how future interactions with outgroup members may have negative consequences such as being negatively impacted by the evaluation of the ingroup or the outgroup (fear of rejection) or effects on the self (feelings of embarrassment, discomfort, sense of group identity) (Stephan & Stephan, 1985).

Reasons for intergroup anxiety could be outgroup schemata held by members, especially stereotypes, perception of ingroup-outgroup differences which may cause prejudice. (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). Ingroup members may be ignorant of the values and norms of the outgroup which creates negative stereotypes which can trigger anxiety.

Behavioural consequences of intergroup anxiety are avoidance of the stigmatised group and even rejection in order to minimise negative outcomes. Anxiety encourages normative behaviour, which may be formal and superficial in order to reduce the experienced anxiety (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). Motivation biases are affected when anxiety increases. Individuals who feel their self-esteem threatened engage in ego-defensive and ego-enhancing behaviour by, for example, justifying negative behaviour towards the outgroup members (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). Emotional reactions as a consequence of intergroup anxiety can be either positive or negative, such as disgust (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). Disgust, anger and anxiety can lead to negative attitudes and can be enacted in acts of violence (Parrott & Zeichner, 2005). Navarette and Fessler (2006) saw disgust as promoting outgroup exclusion and avoidance as well as increasing negative moral intergroup attitudes. Oftentimes, being perceived as not masculine enough or being perceived as gay increases feelings of anxiety in the ingroup (Huffaker & Kwon, 2016), a symbolic threat to their moral values of gender essentialism.

While intergroup anxiety, realistic and symbolic threats are an affective reactions to the outgroup, negative stereotypes are cognitive in origin (Corenblum & Stephan, 2001). According to Stephen, Renfro and al.'s experiment, negative stereotypes have greater impact on outgroup's unfavourable evaluation than attitudes. Negative stereotypes may be due to a lack of information if the ingroup's beliefs are based on common assumptions about outgroup members (Croucher, 2017). Oftentimes, outgroups are seen as hostile, aggressive, unclean or irresponsible by the majority group (Corenblum & Stephan, 2001). TGNC individuals may be seen as deviants as a result of their gender

diversity (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). Other stereotypes include that transgender or nonbinary individual have a mental illness or are confused (Gazzola & Morrison, 2014).

Intervention targeting the reduction of prejudice therefore needs to focus on both affect (reducing disgust as well as encouraging empathy and compassion) and cognition (education about transgender and nonbinary gender identities).

3. Theoretically-grounded Intervention

Allport's (1954) *contact hypothesis* based on *intergroup contact* has been the foundation of many research based interventions for nearly seven decades. Earlier research focused on the reduction of racist prejudice, but Pettigrew and Tropp's (2006) metaanalysis of 515 studies showed the success of intergroup contact when it was applied to many other minority groups. It has proven successful in the reducing of homophobic tendencies as well as decreasing transgender prejudice more recently (Flores et al., 2018; Walch et al., 2012). Contact hypothesis is based on the premise that positive intergroup contact can reduce prejudice and negative stereotypes between groups (Dovidio et al., 2010). Allport proposes four conditions that need to be fulfilled for successful prejudice reduction: "equal status, intergroup cooperation, common goal, and support from authorities" (Hoffarth & Hodson, 2018). Nonetheless, Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) proved that even without these four optimal conditions, positive intergroup contact decreased prejudices.

Contact hypothesis is direct contact between ingroup and outgroup members. As personal contact is not always possible, indirect contact such as virtual contact, imagined contact, parasocial contact, and extended contact have impacts on prejudice through media representation and the Internet (Dovidio et al., 2010). Virtual contact enables the meeting of people in an anonymous way and encourages self-disclosure in a safe space; parasocial contact through media representation of transgender individuals helps people to change their attitudes; imagined contact through mental representation and social perception which encourages imagining intergroup contact has also shown

positive results on prejudice reduction; and extended contact is promising as it is less anxiety provoking compared to direct contact (Dovidio et al., 2010).

There are several group and personal factors that can affect intergroup contact. Cognitively speaking, Allport (1954) saw a lack of knowledge about outgroups as a cause of prejudice. In fact, increasing knowledge about outgroups may relieve intergroup anxiety (Stephan & Stephan, 1985). This can lead to the establishing of new intergroup behavioural norms and a reduction of cognitive dissonance and therefore a change of stereotypical attitudes (Leippe & Eisenstadt, 1994). Affective mechanisms work on threat and intergroup anxiety reduction through empathy and perspective taking to reduce prejudice between the groups.

As a minority group, transgender people are not as likely to self-disclose their identity to others (Hoffarth & Hodson, 2018). Especially in schools, TGNC students may hesitate to reveal themselves as transgender or nonbinary for fear of repression (Kosciw et al., 2018). In this case, direct contact may not be as evident to establish. Indirect contact could then be an alternative.

Walch et al. (2012) compared a transgender speaker panel with a lecture presentation covering transgender topics (cognitive intervention). Both methods reduced prejudice, but the transgender panel showed a greater reduction (Walch et al., 2012). Case and Steward (2013) applied three different techniques: a letter from a trans man to his parents (affective intervention), information list about transgender people (cognitive intervention) and a documentary about transgender college students (media based intervention). There was a reduction of negative attitudes and mythical beliefs, and the interventions proved equally successful. McDermott et al. (2018) combined a transgender biographical film and a panel presentation and they achieved similar results to Case and Steward (2013) and Walch et al.'s (2012) experiments.

The participants in the intervention would be on the one side the school staff, teachers and the school members, and on the other side the students in their respective classes. Dessel (2010)

acknowledged that previous research had shown that intergroup contact can change prejudicial attitudes in educators during which they can critically enquire their own attitudes. First, the teachers need to be educated to reduce their prejudice or stereotypical misconception about TGNC people by confronting themselves with gender identities and their respective feelings (Szalach, 2004). Then they can support the intervention with their students. For the teachers, the intervention is a speaker panel with transgender individuals and experts who are presenting short videos on transgender people and fact-based information. Walch et al. (2012) mentioned that the structure, content, and process of speaker panels may play a role in their success, but limited research is available on their composition. However, having intergroup contact as a basis for the speaker panel may encourage a change with a positive outcome (Walch et al., 2012). For the students, the intervention includes fact-based information as well as a letter from a TGNC teenager to their parents that is discussed in class. An additional interventional part is media made by transgender or gender nonconforming influencers on video platforms which may also encourage identification with TGNC teenagers. Young people perceive these videos as entertaining, emotional and funny, but they also see them as role models (Zimmermann et al., 2020). In how far the inventions are successful in reducing prejudice is measurable.

4. Assessment of Success

Pre-tests and post-tests will be employed to measure the degree of prejudice in school staff and students (explicit and implicit attitudes).

A translated Hill and Willoughby's (2005) Gender and Transphobia Scale with a seven-point Likert-type scale will be used for the school staff. Case and Stewart (2013) discovered that item 19 was not reliable as a measure which will be excluded. Depending on the age of the students, Nagoshi et al.'s (2008) transphobia scale, adapted and translated, being a shorter nine items five-point Likert scale may be more appropriate for the younger students. The results of the transgender and/or transphobia scales will be quantitatively assessed. Previous measures in research experiments

showed reduced outgroup biases in explicit attitudes which will be expected here as well (McDermott et al., 2018). The post-test will be done immediately after the intervention and nine months later a second post-test. Research showed that there is a “rebounding” effect and that prejudice levels augmented after several years, although they remained lower than before the intervention (Wallick et al., 1995, p. 839).

An Implicit Association Test (IAT) measure implicit attitudes which can reveal underlying negative attitudes (Hogg & Vaughan, 2018). Axt et al. (2020) mentioned that indirect measures have already been used in research to assess implicit attitudes towards TGNC people. In their study, they used either images of prominent cisgender and transgender personalities; and/or textually based IAT using words (relating to transgender and cisgender people) to evaluate antitransgender attitudes (Axt et al., 2020).

A decrease in prejudicial attitudes and negative stereotypes is the expected result. The combination of speaker panel/personal letters, education, and informative videos may promise greater results as they affect both the cognitive and emotional components of prejudice. However, little research has assessed long-term changes in prejudicial attitudes, especially concerning transgender attitudes.

5. Strengths and Limitations

Speaker panels are easy to organise, time and cost effective interventions (Walch et al., 2012). In schools, the setting for speaker panels is already given. They could be part of teacher training programs and recognised as training by schools. Class sizes in secondary schools seem appropriate as well as easy to implement for small group interventions using educational material and discussing the letter written by a transgender adolescent to their parents. As students already know each other (as a class ingroup), they may be less afraid of sharing their opinion. When

prejudice intervention is executed at school, it could reach a wider audience and from an early age. Project weeks could be about transgender identities and encourage a sense of community. Dessel (2010) posed that individual views are constructed socially in complex interactions with people which allow for simultaneous realities and the creation of new realities. However, intergroup-based intervention could also increase negative attitudes depending on how receptive the people are and if the intervention was well constructed. Nonetheless, research showed overly positive changes in attitude towards transgender individuals (Case & Stewart, 2013; McDermott et al., 2018; Walch et al., 2012). However, depending on how strong gender essentialism is amongst staff and students, interventions could create negative intergroup contact experiences. Therefore, the interventions need to be tailored to the school community as well as to the students' ages.

It would be easy to implement the pre-tests and post-tests in schools, especially the post-test after nine months towards the end of the school year. The classes would stay the same and the long-term impact could therefore be easily measured. More so, more repetitive interventions using texts about transgender issues could be regularly discussed which could be an entirely different research project measuring in how far repetitive interventions function compared to one-time ones. For teachers, education on transgender matters should be during preservice training (Dessel, 2010). Another aspect that should be implanted would be adapting course books used in schools so that gender identities are displayed in a positive way and that gender essentialist ideas are not encouraged.

While policies are in place in Luxembourg that prohibit discrimination and TGNC favourable laws have been voted, the social reality is still a different one. Gendering is taken more seriously by the ministry of education, but it still confronted with political oppositions (Keup & Meisch, 2020). Visibility of transgender issues are still low and even more widespread training opportunities and more frequent interventions are needed for a better life quality of TGNC individuals in Luxembourg. When teachers and school staff are not afraid of tackling the issue and intervene, then their students

will not be afraid (Dessel, 2010). Essentially, school support is giving TGCN students life as it makes their school safer and improves their quality of life (Perotti & Westheimer, 2002).

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