

The Impact of Gendered Friendship Patterns on the Prevalence of Homophobia among Belgian Late Adolescents.

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*S U M M A R Y*

**ABSTRACT**

In order to assess the determinants of homophobia among Belgian adolescents, a shortened version of the Homophobia scale (Wright, Adams & Bernat, 1999) was included in a representative survey among Belgian adolescents (n = 4,870). Principal component analysis demonstrated that the scale was one-dimensional and internally coherent. The results showed that homophobia is still widespread among Belgian adolescents, despite various legal reforms in the country aiming to combat discrimination of gay women and men. A multivariate regression analysis demonstrated that boys, ethnic minorities, individuals with high levels of ethnocentrism and an instrumental worldview, Muslim minorities, and those with low levels of associational involvement scored significantly higher on the scale. While among boys an extensive friendship network was associated with higher levels of homophobia, the opposite phenomenon was found among girls. We discuss the possible relation between notions of masculinity within predominantly male adolescent friendship networks and social support for homophobia.

**Keywords:** homophobia, prejudice, masculinity, adolescents, Belgium

## INTRODUCTION

During the past decades, the prevalence of negative stereotypes against homosexuality has been reduced substantially in most Western societies (Andersen & Fetner, 2008). Nevertheless, concern remains about the occurrence of negative stereotyping attitudes among substantial proportions of the population (Štulhofer & Rimac, 2009). It is feared that the negative stereotypes toward homosexuality will adversely affect the well-being of homosexual men, lesbian women, and transgendered persons (Winter, Webster, & Cheung, 2008). While various studies are available on the prevalence of homophobia among specific subsamples of the population (e.g., Lingiardi, Falanga, & D'Augelli, 2005; Kan et al. 2009), precise measurements have not yet been introduced in general population surveys. This renders it difficult to assess the prevalence of anti-gay stereotyping and prejudice among the general population. In this article, we report on the *determinants* of homophobia among a representative sample of 4,870 Belgian adolescents. Analyzing a large and representative sample allowed us to investigate social determinants of *homophobia* in a more reliable manner than has been done to date. Following Wright, Adams and Bernat (1999) homophobia can be defined as a cognitive, affective and behavioral negative reaction to gay and lesbian individuals.

In the analysis, we focused on adolescents, since longitudinal research has demonstrated that, especially among younger age cohorts, negative attitudes toward homosexuality have diminished (Andersen & Fetner, 2008). Therefore, we can expect that levels of homophobia would be rather low among this age group. Since we also know that patterns of prejudice tend to be remarkably stable throughout the life-cycle, we can assume that these adolescents will continue this attitudinal pattern in the decades ahead. Furthermore, it has been shown among adolescents that homophobia is associated with bullying practices directed toward homosexual teenagers (Lewis & White, 2009). In experimental studies, high scores on the *Homophobia scale* have been linked to aggressive behavior toward homosexual men (Bernat, Calhoun, Adams & Zeichner, 2001).

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## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

A shortened Homophobia scale (Wright et al., 1999) was included in the Belgian Youth Survey (BYS) 2008. The survey was conducted among 12<sup>th</sup> grade pupils in secondary schools in Belgium, both within Dutch and French speaking schools. The Belgian Youth Survey is a bi-annual research effort (the first wave was conducted in 2006 and the second in 2008). Partly, the 2008 survey was based on a panel design (with the same participants interviewed in 2006 and 2008), but in 2008 new participants were also recruited in a class context. For the purpose of the current analysis, we included all BYS 2008 participants that completed the questionnaire in a class context ( $n = 4,870$ ). Response rates for BYS were 64 per cent at the school level (i.e., 64 per cent of the schools that were contacted participated) and 99 per cent at the class level. In practical terms, almost all pupils within the selected classes participated in the survey as it was conducted during school hours. A response analysis indicated that the survey participants were representative for the 18-year-old population of Belgium with regard to gender, language, region, and education type (Hooghe, Quintelier, Claes & Dejaeghere, 2009). There were no significant differences between the results for Dutch and for French schools in the country. The survey was conducted in adherence with the Belgian legislation on privacy and informed consent of participants.

### **Measures**

The Belgian Youth Survey included a shortened version of the Homophobia scale (Wright et al., 1999). While the original Homophobia scale included 25 items, only eight of them could be included in the general survey, most of them focusing on the cognitive and behavioral rejection of homosexuality. Some of the items of the original scale were not relevant for the daily life experiences of 18-year-olds and were not included in this shortened version. The items on the scale were translated back and forth between English, French and Dutch to ensure complete comparability. While strongly reducing an attitudinal scale is never a preferable option, it has to be remembered that the Homophobia scale has never been included in a general population survey, in which various research interests have to be accommodated. While the fact that the scale had to be shortened might have some disadvantages from a methodological point of view, one can claim this is compensated for by the fact that this was the first time the scale was

included in a large representative survey. Furthermore, the diagnostics of the reduced scale were still excellent, as the scale is strongly one-dimensional, with high factor loadings and a strong internal consistency, as the principal component analysis (unrotated) reported in Table 1 demonstrates. The scale proved to be one-dimensional both for boys (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ : .90) and for girls (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ : .88). This level of internal consistency is remarkable for a balanced attitudinal scale, with three positive and four negative item formulations. Therefore, we can conclude that this shortened Homophobia scale offers a valid operationalization of the attitudinal component of homophobia in a mass survey (Table 1). The scale (range: 0-100) resulted in an average score of 37.89. Among boys, the average was 44.41; among girls, the average score was 31.50 ( $p < .001$ ).

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## **DISCUSSION**

The relative high scores Belgian adolescents obtained on the shortened version of the Homophobia scale might come as something of a surprise. As far as we know, the scale has never been used before in a more general population survey on a large sample, so we do not have reliable indicators of homophobia across the population. The fact that Belgium has a very liberal legislation with regard to homosexual behavior apparently does not imply that prejudice against gay women and men would have disappeared in Belgian society. Given the current state of research, we do not know whether the findings in this study can be generalized toward other groups and societies. Previous research, however, indicates that Belgium is an average Western society with regard to levels of prejudice. Furthermore, the country of origin of ethnic minorities in Belgian society does not suggest that these findings would be atypical for other Western countries as the same ethnic minorities are also present in other Western European countries.

On a methodological note, we have demonstrated that (a shortened version of) the Homophobia scale can be used in a general population survey, and that the test characteristics of the scale were highly valid. The scale was one-dimensional and internally coherent. Second, the determinants of the score on the Homophobia scale were clear. We found high scores among boys and ethnic minorities, Muslim believers and those with ethnocentric and instrumental attitudes. Educational aspirations also had a strong impact on homophobia. The finding that

homophobia was especially high among adolescent Muslim believers is in line with international research on Islam and negative prejudice toward gay women and men (Bereket & Adam, 2008).

The most important finding, however, was the interaction effect between size of the friendship network and gender. While among boys, a stronger integration into (presumably dominantly male) friendship networks was associated with higher scores on the Homophobia scale, the reverse was the case for girls. The fact that the effect was different for girls and boys renders it extremely unlikely that this pattern could be explained by contact with persons identifying as homosexual. For both genders, one can assume that the likelihood that one has homosexual friends expands with the size of the peer network. However, for boys we see a positive relation with homophobia, and for girls a negative relation. So, we can conclude that this is not just a matter of contact, but rather the effect of the norms and cultural codes that are prevalent within that network of friends.

The question therefore arises whether peer groups among adolescent boys actually support, or at least condone, the development of homophobic attitudes. This was clearly not the case for girls, where integration in friendship networks did not have a significant effect on homophobia. The norms of masculinity that are practiced in friendship networks of male adolescents apparently can contribute to the development of prejudice against homosexuality. In line with earlier research (e.g., Hesp & Brooks, 2009) it can be assumed that within teenage male peer networks, norms of masculinity are being fostered that are antithetical to the development of tolerant attitudes toward homosexuality. Theoretically this is an important finding because other forms of prejudice tend to be related to indicators of social isolation, while for homophobia we can identify specific subcultures that seem conducive to the development of this form of prejudice. Efforts to reduce levels of homophobia among mostly male adolescents, therefore, will have to address the norms that are prevalent in predominantly male friendship networks and that might be conducive to practices like bullying or other forms of hostile behavior toward sexual minority groups.

The current analysis did not allow us to fully explain the causal mechanism that is responsible for the occurrence of this interaction effect. Other studies have demonstrated, however, that among male peer friendship networks, norms of masculinity are strongly endorsed and developed (Oransky & Marecek, 2009). Some of the earlier research has even shown that homophobia can serve as a bonding mechanism among heterosexual male adolescents (Nayak &

Kehily, 1996). The current analysis can be combined with these insights: the more boys are integrated in friendship networks (and the literature on same-gender friendship patterns during adolescence allows us to assume that these networks will be composed predominantly of other boys) the higher their scores on the homophobia scale. The norms of masculinity that are being developed in these networks and that seem to be conducive to bonding behavior within these networks apparently have a positive effect on homophobia. Among girls the reverse can be observed, as a stronger integration into friendship networks is associated with lower scores on the Homophobia scale. This shifts the research toward the question what is the precise content of the norms of masculinity that are being developed within these friendship networks.