

Report: Do the right thing; the plausibility of interventions for greater acceptance of homosexuality

Conclusions and final remarks

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For the past 25 years, the Dutch government has pursued an active policy with regard to the emancipation of lesbian women, gay men, bisexuals and transgenders (LGBT's). Over the years, a great number of interventions have been developed to empower this group and to increase social acceptance. One of the questions of this research is to what extent different methods in the field of social acceptance of lesbian women, homosexual men, bisexuals and transgenders can be scientifically endorsed. Also investigated were the conditions that particular strategies need to meet to be successful. The focus was on four strategies: theatre and film, guessing games, knowledge sharing and dialogue meetings. These strategies or tools are segments of (often larger) LGBT interventions and mostly implemented at schools, geriatric centres, community centres and migrant organisations. An intervention or method often consists of a combination of strategies: for example, a theatre show followed by a dialogue meeting where knowledge is shared.

An intervention is a systematic approach to reach a particular goal. Interventions can also be called methods.

Research approach

This research is a *theory-based evaluation* (Lub, 2013). The main research question is: *What do we know of the effect of the four strategies on the social acceptance of LGBT's and what conditions improve their success rate?* The first step was to analyse the argumentation behind methods. Which assumptions are made about which strategies? What are the desired and expected effects and why is this so? The assumptions and their combined workings form what we call 'the change theory'. The change theory tells us how a method aims to generate change. By reading project plans, information from websites and folders and by meeting with intervention developers, we have tried to apprehend this change theory. This was followed by a literature study to look for scientific evidence for the assumptions and identify the necessary conditions for success.



Studying strategies and interventions

To understand the change theories, a great number of interventions that were designed to improve the social acceptance of LGBT were studied. It became clear that the assumptions and goals of the interventions, as well as the different strategies, are not always clear-cut. Goals, for example, are often formulated differently in different documents, and sometimes different goals are mentioned in interviews with intervention developers. Also, goals are often formulated in the same way as process descriptions: the actual activities that are to lead to the goal. For example, the goal is formulated 'breaking the taboo on homosexuality', and this is also the action plan of the intervention. The actual goal or desired outcome of the intervention remains unclear: what has changed so that there is no longer a taboo on homosexuality?

Another interesting find, which was also determined in earlier research 'Regenboog onder de loep' (Pierik & Felten, 2013), is that most interventions focus on acceptance of gay men and lesbian women, while there are hardly any interventions that are specifically designed for bisexuals and transgenders. Based on the goals and assumptions as formulated in manuals, method descriptions and other documents, and according to the interviewed intervention developers, one change theory has been formulated for every method. In reality, multiple change theories can apply to one method, but the focus in this research is on the change theory that was most evident from the descriptions.

Scientific evidence

To investigate the four strategies and their effects, we studied more than 150 scientific studies on the change theories that are (often implicitly) underlying these particular strategies. We also focused on the extent to which these strategies are likely to promote the social acceptance of LGBT people. The focus was on studies which included effect measurements. Unlike studies that measure cohesions, effect studies offer insight in causality: one thing leads to another. These are mostly experiments by social psychologists in laboratory settings, but also a number of field studies. In the latter, the effects of interventions that often include more than one strategy are studied in actual situations. In these field studies however, more often than not, it is not clear which strategy leads to which effect. Here, we can learn more from lab studies. These studies single out a particular strategy and often attempt to create the ideal circumstances to execute a strategy. However, we can never be completely sure that a measured effect will also occur in real life situations or whether the results can be repeated. Therefore, in this report the conclusion that a strategy is effective is never based on one single research, but always on a series of studies.

The studies that were used mostly come from the field of social psychology, which, in the previous century, has seen the rise of a rich tradition of research on 'prejudice'. With 'prejudice', the American Psychological Association (APA) refers to the negative attitude towards a (minority)group or members of a group. Multiple studies on this theme show that virtually all minority groups that are faced with 'prejudice' find themselves in the same situation. Whether it is the need for a different attitude towards African Americans, LGBT people, people with psychiatric problems, people with aids or lawyers, the key question of the studies is always how to reduce the negative bias against members of the group. In this research, a lot of the used studies are not specifically about the acceptance of LGBT people. Various studies show that the process of improving the attitude towards LGBT people is similar to that of other minority groups. As said, there are only a few interventions and studies on bisexuals and transgenders. However, as knowledge on decreasing prejudice and stereotyping for minorities applies generally, the outcomes are also true for LGBT groups.



Research outcomes

Out of the four selected strategies, the first strategy, film and theatre, seems to be most likely to be successful. In other words, films and plays that can make the heterosexual audience empathise with gay characters, contribute to a greater acceptance of LGBT's. The second strategy, guessing games, where participants are asked to guess who is the gay person in the panel, is aimed at breaking down stereotypes on homosexuality. This can be done, but has proven to be utterly complex. Therefore, it is not the most successful strategy to promote social acceptance. This is even more true for the third strategy: sharing knowledge with heterosexuals, like the fact that homosexuality is not a choice, and partly biologically determined. This process yields ambiguous results and some studies even assume a negative effect. A similar negative effect can occur with the fourth strategy. In dialogue meetings, both positive and negative opinions on homosexuality are discussed. Experience shows that listening to negative opinions can negatively affect the attitude of participants towards gay men and lesbian women. On the other hand, using dialogue meetings in response to the social norm can have a strong positive effect if the focus is on positive stories about gay people. In the next section we will elaborate on these outcomes.

Empathy in film and theatre high success rate

Among other things, the analysed films and plays show homosexual characters in difficult situations. They find themselves in these situations as a result of being excluded, bullied or discriminated against, or because their homosexuality isn't fully accepted. Purpose of the production is that the audience develops empathy for gay people, which will contribute to a greater acceptance of homosexuality in general. This particular strategy is mostly popular in the field of education. Scientific studies prove that encouraging empathic feelings of heterosexual participants positively affects the acceptance among heterosexual film or theatre audiences. Numerous studies were executed on the healing power of empathy. It has been proven that empathy decreases the negative bias of one group towards another 'deviant' group. The advantage of film and theatre compared to other strategies that focus on empathy, like for example 'real life' contact, is that the audience is swept up in the story which makes it harder to resist the influence of the film or play. Although we cannot say that all films and plays that are aiming for empathy among a heterosexual audience are influential, they do have a considerably higher success rate.

A few conditions need to be met for the strategy to be successful. An important requirement is that the audience of the film or play is given the opportunity to empathize with the negative effects of exclusion and discrimination against homosexuals or with the unfair situations homosexuals find themselves in. It is essential that the audience is encouraged and feels safe enough to empathize. However, without a certain amount of readiness to empathize, for example due to a deep-felt enmity against homosexuals, the positive effects of empathy will not manifest themselves. Another important condition for the interventions to be successful is that the participants have a positive self-image. Without a positive self-image, people will be unable to form a positive image of others through empathizing.

Tackling stereotypes is hard to do

There are a number of interventions wherein participants are asked to guess who is the gay person. The point of the game is that participants are confronted with the fact that the gay person in the game doesn't fit the stereotypical image of a homosexual man or lesbian women. A limited number of

scientific studies shows that this is indeed the case. The next step is that participants start to realize that their stereotypical beliefs about homosexual men and lesbian women are not (always) true. There are numerous scientific studies that claim that it is extremely hard to have people experience that their stereotypical images are unrealistic. When heterosexuals see gay people or see or hear things that contradict their stereotypical image, they usually don't feel like the stereotype is wrong. As it is, the particular gay man or woman is seen as the 'exception'. For example, when participants are confronted with a gay man who, unlike the stereotype, looks tough and masculine, they may think to themselves: this gay man is not like other gay men who behave all feminine. Even if they start liking this particular gay man, their attitude towards all gays won't automatically become more positive. It gets even harder if the general norm in the group is anti-gay; which may cause participants to adjust their answers to the expected negative ideas about gays in the group. Then what? How to refute stereotypical images? First of all, it is important to make sure that heterosexual participants meet as many gay men and women as possible; this way it will be harder to label them as 'exceptions'. At the same time, it is important that stereotypical images aren't turned around completely. This might work for children, but adults will only be reminded of the existing stereotypical image. Ideally, the participants are unaware of the fact that the intervention is aimed at refuting their stereotypical image. This will prevent them from actively trying to hold on to it. It might work to distract the participants by giving them something else to do.

In the end, the goal is to coach participants into seeing that next to 'typical gays', 'non-typical gays' are also representatives of the group. A possible method to achieve this is by asking participants to either focus on the similarities of the gay people they see or divide them into different categories. This exercise will underline the diversity among gays as well as their undeniable togetherness. It is no easy task. Decreasing stereotypes – eliminating them is virtually impossible – is a tough challenge that calls for careful consideration and thorough grounds.

The biological story evokes diverse, sometimes negative, reactions

A much used strategy is telling people about the (partly) biological or genetic component of homosexuality. The strategy is often used in educational settings or at migrant organizations and aims to teach participants that homosexuality is not a choice. Only a few studies have been conducted to test this assumption, but the available results appear to be positive.

The question, however, is whether (negative) attitudes towards homosexuality actually improve once people understand that being gay is not a choice, as this strategy assumes. It seems safe to expect this to be true. Numerous scientific studies show that heterosexuals with a positive attitude towards homosexuality believe that being gay is not a choice. But is this an actual effect? Did these people develop a positive attitude because they know it is not a choice?

The outcomes are not conclusive. A few studies find some effect, but most studies fail to find any effect. A number of studies measured negative effects. With knowledge transfer, the content of the message is crucial. By no means should gay people be depicted as a genetically completely different group of people than heterosexuals. That would most likely harm acceptance. What should be communicated is that homosexuality is unchangeable, that heterosexuals don't just become gay or the other way around. A study among heterosexual men that are unsure about their masculinity did find an effect. The insight that being gay is not a choice could induce a more positive attitude because the target group would feel a distinct difference between themselves and homosexual men and lesbian women. In this case, we should ask ourselves if we are comfortable with the fact that homosexuality is tolerated because of the fact that heterosexuals feel they are distinctly different than homosexuals. Other strategies that result in greater acceptance, but at the same time diminish the differences and

intensify the closeness between gay and straight people, like when the focus is on empathy, might be more suitable for the purpose of 'increasing social acceptance'. Thus, we should not only seriously doubt whether sharing knowledge about homosexuality is likely to be successful, but we should wonder if it is a desirable strategy.

Starting a dialogue not without risk

At dialogue meetings participants are instructed to discuss the subject of homosexuality in a group, and to hear each other out and respect other people's opinions. The groups consist of both straight and gay people. These type of dialogues are considered to be a first step towards a greater acceptance of homosexuality.

Scientific studies show that listening to positive opinions about homosexuality can indeed lead to a more positive attitude toward gays of participants. Next to listening to other people's opinions, reading about or being informed about positive ideas of others about homosexuality can promote acceptance. Positive opinions have a stronger effect if they come from a person who is liked, who is seen as a member of their own group and if the participants strongly identify themselves with this group. Also, peers often prove to be more influential. An opinion is more effective if the group wasn't already aware of this person's positive attitude towards homosexuality. Therefore, the best results are likely to be achieved if the speakers with positive attitudes towards homosexuality are straight.

But what happens if one or more participants in the dialogue share their opinion that gays are repugnant, abnormal and shouldn't be part of society? This is tricky because the effect of this opinion will be negative. By no means should participants get the impression that it is okay to think negatively about homosexuality. It might encourage them to develop their own negative ideas. Only if the social norm in the context is particularly positive with regard to homosexuality, these negative opinions will have little or no effect. If gay people are part of the group, people might be 'less outspoken' and more inclined to keep negative opinions to themselves.

The pressure of the social norm (what people find 'normal') should not be underestimated and, more ideally, be used in a positive way. If at a meeting, society is represented as a place where most people feel positive about homosexuals and that this is normal, this may positively influence participants with ambiguous feelings towards homosexuality. This leads to the conclusion that we cannot assume that a meeting where both sympathizers and those who condemn homosexuality are invited to share their opinions on homosexuality, as is the case at dialogue meetings, will contribute to a greater acceptance of homosexuality. A discussion along the lines of the Dutch 'polder model' where every opinion is valued and respected, including negative ones, doesn't serve the eventual goal to reduce the bullying, exclusion and discrimination of minority groups, such as homosexuals. Many dialogue meetings as well as a range of interventions claim to want to 'open the discussion on homosexuality'. However, research shows that this doesn't necessarily lead to greater social acceptance – or could even cause a turn for the worse. In short, carrying out a positive message about homosexuality and building a strong positive social norm is likely to be more effective than encouraging dialogues where every opinion is heard.

Discussion: future questions

Our research yielded a number of interesting finds, leading to even more questions. Here, we will shortly discuss the most important outcomes.



Promoting empathy instead of increasing knowledge?

Giving information and explanations, for instance through guessing games and information meetings, is less likely to positively affect the acceptance of homosexuality than empathy-based strategies like showing films or plays. The arguments that are used in similar strategies (for guessing games: 'gays aren't all stereotypes' and for knowledge sharing: 'gays didn't choose to be gay'), can easily be turned around (for guessing games: 'but all other gays are stereotypes' or with knowledge sharing: 'so gays are a completely different species than we are'). Participants at these type of meetings may try to dispute arguments and start a debate, thereby abjuring the intended effect. By watching a film or play, the participants can lose themselves in the story and start to empathize with a character who is just a little bit different than they are. Research shows that in the end, people not only show greater appreciation for the character from the film or play, but for gay people in general. When it comes to decreasing negative thoughts of one group of people towards another, promoting empathy seems to be more successful than sharing information. Thus, it should be interesting to try to define the additional value of empathy as well as the differences with knowledge-sharing. Is there no need to share any knowledge at all, or should we limit it? And would a combination of empathy and knowledge be even more effective? Maybe it is already being practiced? Maybe, after guessing games there are already discussions on how it makes you feel to be excluded or discriminated against because of your sexual preference (empathy), combined with the explanation that this person, like any other gay person, doesn't fit the stereotypical image (knowledge). As of yet, not enough research has been done to conclude that combining these different strategies in interventions leads to better results.

Distraction

In plays and films, people can 'lose' themselves in the story. This will prevent them from resisting the influence of the play or film which is aimed at reducing their negative thoughts about a particular minority group, thus concludes the chapter on theatre and film. In the chapter on guessing games, we conclude that stereotypical images are more likely to change if the participants are distracted. They appear to be more inclined to let go of their stereotypical images than if they are aware that they are manipulated into changing their ideas. This knowledge combined makes us wonder whether it is relevant for the participants to know the purpose of the interventions. Should they be informed that the strategy is aimed at improving their attitude towards gays? Or should interventions aimed at the acceptance of homosexuality be sold under a different pretext? Or be embedded in larger interventions with extended themes? Answering these questions could provide some practical suggestions to improve existing interventions.

Age and level of education of participants

Many of the scientific studies used students to test theories. In a number of studies some attention was paid to differences in ethnic background, religion en even gender among the participants, but hardly any attention was paid to differences in age and level of education. Thus, there is no way of telling what effects the strategies will have on children or elderly citizens. Do differences in age and education level require different approaches? And what about the effect of religion, ethничal and gender differences on this type of intervention? These are important questions to make sure that (future) interventions and strategies are designed to best fit specific target groups.

Bisexuals and transgenders?

Virtually all of the studied strategies in this research are aimed at the acceptance of homosexuals. Clearly, LGBT is mostly about gay men and, in second place, lesbian women. Bisexuals and transgenders seem to remain invisible. Not only in daily practice, but even in scientific publications LGBT is often narrowed down to homosexuality. Knowing this, an interesting question is whether strategies that have successfully increased gay acceptance, automatically increased the acceptance of bisexuals and transgenders. Also, if the strategy was aimed at gay men, can we safely expect a positive effect on the acceptance of lesbian women or the other way around? Numerous mechanisms seem to have close to the same effect on any minority group. For example, increasing empathy for ethnic minorities seems to work the same way as increasing empathy for gay men and lesbian women. However, if this empathy will spread out to other kindred groups remains to be seen. Ideally, interventions should actively address the specific LGBT groups.

Acceptance versus self acceptance

This research focused on effective strategies to increase acceptance of homosexuality among straight people. At the same time, the outcomes might be useful for the enhancement of acceptance of bisexuals and transgenders. However, the research does not in any way offer information on effective strategies to increase self-acceptance of LGBT people. The process of self-acceptance is another process and the outcomes of this study cannot be used for self-acceptance interventions. Thus, this research does not claim that it is useful to speak to gays about the fact that homosexuality is not a choice. It might be empowering for the LGBT group (Herek, Gillis & Cogan, 2009), but it might as well have the opposite effect: watching a play or movie with an LGBT character who is struggling with negative reactions because of his/her sexual preference, may have a positive impact on a non-LGBT visitor, an LGBT visitor, however, may come to expect and fear similar or more negative reactions. These negative expectations can affect their health and well-being (Meyer, 2003). This may represent a problem in the execution of interventions. For example, interventions for high school students should always be suitable for both non-LGBT people and LGBT people as the latter are often still hiding the fact that they are LGBT (Kuyper, 2015). In this respect, it seems only logical that different strategies should be developed for the LGBT group and the non-LGBT group. What may be right for one person, isn't automatically right for someone else.

Recommendations: What to do?

One of the outcomes of this research is that attention for LGBT doesn't automatically lead to greater acceptance. Some strategies are clearly more likely to succeed than others and some strategies even harm acceptance. 'It won't hurt to try it' is by no means a recommended strategy in this field. However, we were able to identify a number of important specific conditions for strategies to be successful. The findings were translated into a number of recommendations for intervention developers, policy makers and researchers.

Intervention developers

There are two important lessons that intervention developers can distil from this study. First of all, it is important to systematically and carefully build up or adjust interventions. Be thorough and specific when formulating goals and subgoals. What is the desired result? Is the aim to break down



stereotypes or to increase acceptance? By carefully and concretely describing the situation one wishes to reach, there will be more focus to achieve this result. After this, one can start investigating possible strategies with the highest chance of success. By using the outcomes of this study to predict the effectiveness of different strategies, well-considered choices can be made. Then, the intervention can be further developed according to the conditions for success. Next to new interventions, existing interventions can be reconsidered and improved in the same way. Theatre makers, for example, could from the very start of a new play (during the writing and directing phase) take time to predict whether a story has the potential to instigate empathy with a non-LGBT audience. Organizers of dialogue meetings can investigate if they can make sure the general tone during meetings is positive. Finally, it is strongly recommended that intervention-designers seek collaboration with scientists and policy makers. Make sure interventions are carefully described, well-founded and evaluated and that results are measured. This way, active effort is made to improve interventions, which will seriously increase the chances of greater acceptance of LGBT.

Policy

The first challenge for policy makers is to formulate clear-cut goals in LGBT policy. This policy affects several target groups and contains multiple possible goals. Each goal requires a different strategy. Developing LGBT policy involves a lot of choices. It should be clear that opting to focus on the promotion of LGBT social acceptance makes for a complex assignment. Research shows that solutions that appear to be logical at the start may turn out to be anything but that. This means that policy makers shouldn't embrace practical 'solutions' all too fast. Wiser would be to develop a policy which allows intervention-developers to think and act carefully before they choose a strategy to promote acceptance. Developing a well-designed intervention with a high chance of success takes time and money. The same goes for evaluating and measuring results. Only by following these stages will policy goals be realized and will efforts be more likely to contribute to greater acceptance of LGBT. Thus, policy makers should offer room for learning and improving practices. They could even include it in the conditions for their subsidy and tender policy, for example by asking for a motivation for the proposed strategy based on available knowledge and by formulating requirements for the effect-evaluation.

Research

In the Netherlands (or abroad), only limited research has been done on the effectiveness of executed interventions to increase acceptance of LGBT people. However, based on existing other scientific research we can draw a number of careful conclusions on the possible success rate of interventions. This study indicates which strategies are more likely to be successful than others. A logical next step would be to analyse the effectiveness of a number of promising interventions. This requires, among other things, an experimental research design with an experimental group and a control group, with participants that are assigned at random and with a pre-test and post-test. The only way to determine the effectiveness of a specific intervention is to conduct a study among a specific and clearly described target group of the intervention. And it will pay itself back as municipalities and the national government, as well as educational and care organizations all spend time, money and effort on a greater acceptance of LGBT. In education, the investment is obligatory: it is formulated in the key objectives that every school addresses the subject of sexual diversity. The way of addressing it is up to the schools. However, this research clearly shows that institutes should be careful about how they address the subject. Focusing solely on LGBT may harm acceptance more than enhance it.



Therefore, in the coming years, focusing on research on what really works to increase acceptance of LGBT, is an important assignment.

Finally

Although nowadays working with effective strategies is a more and more common practice, the Netherlands has a rather poor tradition of evaluation researches to justify the use of particular strategies. It is often said that measuring impact and results is a complicated and laborious process when it comes to social issues. This research shows that by using only existing knowledge, a lot can be learned on what works and what doesn't. Hopefully this will lead to improved methods, a more effective use of tools for the most promising interventions, and an end to methods with little chance of success or even counterproductive results.



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