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SOCIAL FACTORS AFFECTING ANTITRANSGENDER SENTIMENT IN A SAMPLE OF GREEK UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

Iraklis Grigoropoulos¹, Panos Kordoutis²

¹Department of Psychology, Technological Institution of Thessalonik, Thessaloniki, Greece
²Department of Psychology, Panteion University of Social and Political Sciences, Athens, Greece

ABSTRACT. Objectives: This study examined the attitudes of Greek undergraduate students toward transgender individuals to identify specific social variables as predictors of negative attitudes. Based on previous research, it appeared that gender, political conservatism, religiosity, and sexual prejudice are useful variables to examine in predicting attitudes toward transgender individuals. The sample (N = 238) consisted of undergraduates at various departments of major universities in Athens, Greece. Methods: The Genderism and Transphobia Scale (GTS) was used along with the Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men Scale (ATLG) and a brief demographics questionnaire. Results: Correlation analysis showed that negative attitudes toward transgender individuals were positively associated with religiosity, frequency of attendance at religious services, political designation, gender, and sexual prejudice. Regression analysis revealed mainly gender and secondly sexual prejudice (as measured by the ATLG) to be independent predictors of attitudes toward transgender individuals. Conclusions: The findings shed light on the current status of undergraduate students’ attitudes toward transgender individuals and reveal important variables that affect these attitudes in a specific sociocultural environment.

KEYWORDS. Transgender individuals, attitudes, prejudice

INTRODUCTION

Attitudes toward transgender individuals are still an understudied area in Greece. The present study examined antitransgender sentiment in a sample of Greek undergraduate students. Greece tops the list of the European Union member states where discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation is particularly widespread (European Commission, 2006; van den Akker, van der Ploeg, & Scheepers, 2013), but to our knowledge, there seems to be no information for gender-variant individuals.

According to the European Parliament’s Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs (2010), there is no mention of transgender persons in Greek law, and it is not clear whether gender-variant individuals are covered by legislation prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or on the basis of sex.

Legal protection for lesbian and gay persons in Greece exists only in the area of employment through the implementation of the Framework Directives 2000/78/EC and 2000/43/EC in the national law through the Act 3304/2005 (Act Against Discrimination) issued in 2005 on the grounds of equal treatment in the field of employment. Thus, gender-variant persons are not protected from discrimination based on gender, gender identity, or gender expression, as Greek legislation does not differentiate “sex” from “gender” (Lesbian and Gay Community of Greece, n.d.).

The term “transgender” refers to people whose gender identity, expression, or behavior is different from those typically associated with their assigned sex at birth (National Center for
Transgender Equality, n.d.). The term “trans” means “across from.” In some societies, people choose their own gender when they come of age and more than two genders are recognized (National LGBTI Health Alliance, 2013). Nevertheless, according to Ansara and Hegarty (2012), it is problematic that transgender research literature relies heavily on categorical notions like “the transgender community,” “transgender people,” “transgenders,” “transsexuals,” or “transpeople.”

Gender identity has been described as an individual’s internal sense of self as being male, female, or an identity between or outside these two categories (Wilchins, 2002, as cited by Nagoshi et al., 2008). According to Bornstein (1994), gender identity is what we feel our gender should be at any given moment—how we feel inside or what we believe ourselves to be. “Gender expression” refers to appearance and behaviors that convey something about one’s gender identity or that others interpret as conveying something about one’s gender identity, including clothing, mannerisms, and communication patterns, among others (National LGBTI Health Alliance, 2013).

Gender roles are what the culture thinks one should do with one’s life, such as qualities, mannerisms, duties, and cultural expectations, according to a specific gender (Bornstein, 1998, as cited by Nagoshi et al., 2008). Even though gender roles are social constructions, they are very real in the world in which we live, so the oppression, shame, and pride experienced by individuals with marginalized identities are very real as well (McPhail, 2004).

This study acknowledges the fact that transgender individuals may use a range of terminology to describe themselves and that in many cases the term transgender is used without consent from many gender-variant individuals. In this study, the term transgender is used as described by the National Center for Transgender Equality.

Hill (2002) defines transphobia in terms of “emotional disgust toward individuals who do not conform to society’s gender expectations” (Hill & Willoughby, 2005, p. 533). But the transphobia concept fails to challenge the notion that is implicit in the terms “trans” and “gender-variant”—that people with self-designated gender lie “across from” or “vary from normative human development”—and it also fails to challenge the assumption that “trans people” and “cisgender or cissexual people” constitute distinct classes of individuals (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012). Nevertheless, this study uses a “transphobia” scale because it is a validated and a frequently used scale in different populations and cultures.

**Previous Research on Attitudes Toward Transgender Individuals**

Consistent with research in the areas of sexism, racism, and sexual prejudice, the research devoted specifically to transgender issues has revealed that a combination of demographic factors, values, and belief systems predict antitransgender sentiments and behaviors (Willoughby et al., 2010). A useful scale to measure antipathy toward transgender individuals is the Genderism and Transphobia Scale (GTS; Hill & Willoughby, 2005). In particular, the scale measures violence, harassment, and discrimination toward crossdressers and transgender individuals.

Hill and Willoughby (2005) completed a quantitative study to create a scale to measure transphobia. They tested it on three different groups of people and developed the GTS.

Willoughby et al. (2010) completed a multinational study to further test the reliability and validity of the GTS and also explored whether it could be used on different populations and cultures (participants from the United States and the Philippines). They found the GTS to be reliable and valid and that there were differences in attitudes among male and female participants, as male participants were more transphobic than female participants. In addition, they found that more religious people also had higher levels of transphobia.

The GTS represents a useful tool in the study of discrimination and prejudice against gender nonconformists (cf. Hill & Willoughby, 2005). The scale was also positively correlated with the Homophobia Scale of Wright et al. (1999), a variant of Herek’s (1988) Attitudes...
Toward Lesbians and Gay Men Scale (ATLG Scale; in Nagoshi et al., 2008)

Gender was a significant predictor of anti-transgender sentiments and behaviors, with men being more likely to endorse antitransgender views (Willoughby et al., 2010). Women were more comfortable with the idea of having a transgender individual as a coworker or friend and were more likely to allow a transgender individual to work with children as teachers (Landén & Innala, 2000).

In addition, more negative attitudes toward transgender individuals were associated with greater religiosity in the United Kingdom, religious fundamentalism in the United States, and a lack of prior contact with gender-variant people in a Hong Kong sample (Norton & Herek, 2013).

Currently, research in Greece regarding the status of transgender individuals’ rights, access to health care, discrimination, employment, and visibility in communities and media is scarce. There is a lack of awareness of transgender issues in Greece, and even the mere word is completely unknown and unrecognized (Pavlou, 2009).

In Greece, gender is conceptualized in such a way that in most cases, it makes it almost impossible for transgender individuals to express themselves without any problems. Any individual deviation from the “legitimized” societal norms most of the time is regarded as bringing shame to parents and ancestors. Thus, such a person would be perceived as being at least socially deviant and therefore stigmatized and probably delegitimized within society. For example, transsexuality is listed as a psychiatric disorder when it comes to men doing their military service (Pavlou, 2009).

According to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) activists in Greece, transsexuals face serious everyday-life problems, often due to society’s reaction to their gender appearance. Transsexuals face problems finding employment and are subject to violence and harassment from the general public and the police. Some are thrown out of their family homes and are forced to live on the streets (European Parliament’s Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs, 2010).

As there is a limited amount of research in Greece on attitudes toward transgender individuals, the main purpose of this study was to address this omission and identify possible demographic, attitudinal, and contextual factors that may motivate the tendency to oppose transgender individuals. It was expected that the same variables associated with attitudes toward transgender individuals in previous samples (see Norton & Herak, 2013) would also be useful in measuring attitudes among Greek undergraduate students.

This study proposed three hypotheses: (1) Students attitudes toward transgender individuals would be highly correlated with their attitudes toward gay men and lesbians (sexual prejudice); (2) men would have more negative attitudes than women toward transgender individuals; and (3) attitudes toward transgender individuals would be correlated with the same social and psychological variables that have been observed in previous studies in the field. Specifically, this study focused on political conservatism (King et al., 2009, as cited in Norton & Herak, 2013), religiosity (Nagoshi et al., 2008; Tee & Hegarty, 2006), personal contact (Tee & Hegarty, 2006), and gender (Willoughby et al., 2010).

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

We collected data from 245 undergraduate students from various departments in major universities in Athens, Greece (Panteion University, University of Athens, Athens Polytechnic, Economics University of Athens).

Participants were asked to state their gender as “woman,” and/or “man,” and/or “blank text” (How do you currently describe your gender?). Participants had the option to “select all that apply.” Specifically 7 participants did not identify themselves in any way. Thus, the eventual sample included 238 participants—143 women and 95 men.
All participants were nationals of Greece, described their ethnicity as Greek, and identified themselves as White. No participant used more than one selection and no one used the choice of a preferred term (blank text). Because transgender individuals do not necessarily challenge “binary assumptions about sex and gender,” participants might fit a fairly broad range of experiences and identities.

Participant age ranged from 18 years to 52 years, with a mean age of 22 years (SD = 4.5 years). Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Participants were approached individually by a field researcher while waiting for classes, in student cafeterias, the library, etc. The researcher first informed and then waited—but did not supervise—for the completion of the questionnaire somewhere near and then debriefed those who participated.

No other information was requested from participants. Participants were provided with an envelope to ensure that their answers were anonymous along with a copy of the consent form (the study was approved by the institutional review board at Panteion University).

Materials

Participants were asked to complete a brief questionnaire on basic demographics and questions referring to the presumed correlates of attitudes and then they responded to the GTS and subsequently to Herek’s (1988) ATLG Scale. The procedure lasted approximately 5 min.

Definition of transgender

Participants were provided with a lay definition of transgender individuals: people whose gender identity, expression, or behavior is different from those typically associated with their assigned sex at birth (National Center for Transgender Equality, n.d.).

The definition was intended for an audience with limited experience with transgender issues and was meant to convey concepts of gender variance to an audience that often makes few distinctions between sex and gender. Participants were not asked whether they fit this description.

Religiosity

In the brief demographics questionnaire, participants reported their religion (if any) with an open-ended measure, and then two items measured religiosity factors. In the first measure, participants were asked to self-identify as religious on a scale ranging from 1 = not at all religious to 5 = strongly religious (Ahrold, Farmer, Trapnell, & Meston, 2011; Tee & Hegarty, 2006). The participants rated, on a similar scale ranging from 1 = never to 5 = frequently, their frequency of attendance at religious services (Herek & Glunt, 1993; Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2002; Olson, Cadge, & Harrison, 2006).

Political self-designation

Participants were asked to self-identify as political conservatives (described as more conventional social beliefs, approval of authoritarian aggression to maintain social order, and submission to government authority) or as not conservative (described as resistance to conformity and tradition, no approval of authoritarian aggression to maintain social order, and no submission to government authority). Respondents indicated on a bipolar scale, ranging from 1 = extremely not conservative to 7 = extremely conservative, whether they “think of themselves politically as conservatives or not conservatives.”

Interpersonal contact

To explore the degree to which exposure to transgender individuals influences attitudes, participants were asked to indicate whether they have personally met a transgender individual (cf. King et al., 2009, as cited in Norton & Herek, 2013).

Attitudes toward transgender individuals

One frequently used scale for assessing transphobia is the GTS (Hill & Willoughby, 2005; Willoughby et al., 2010). The GTS is a
32-item scale that measures “violence, harassment, and discrimination toward cross-dressers, transgenderists, and transsexuals” (Hill & Willoughby, 2005, p. 531). The GTS was used to measure attitudes toward transgender individuals. This measure has two factors: transphobia/genderism (25 items) and gender bashing (7 items) and consists of 32 items with a 7-point Likert response scale, ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Higher scores on the GTS indicate higher levels of transphobia, genderism, and gender bashing (Hill & Willoughby, 2005).

It should be pointed out here that there are a number of psychometric problems with the GTS, as well as gaps in establishing the construct validity of the measure. In terms of psychometric properties, Hill and Willoughby (2005) intended their scale to measure not just transphobia, but also genderism (negative evaluation of gender nonconformity) and gender bashing (assault/harassment of gender nonconformists). The three resulting subscales of their 32-item measure, however, were not developed through factor-analytic procedures. The extremely high intercorrelations among the Transphobia/Genderism, and Gender-Bashing subscales (ranging from .73 to .84), which were confirmed in factor analyses of the scale items with the later college student sample, suggest that there is no discriminant validity between these subscales (Nagoshi et al., 2008).

The scale has also the limitation of measuring transphobia against those who are transgender and/or transsexual (Hill & Willoughby, 2005) instead of anyone who is or is perceived to be gender-nonconforming.

Attitudes toward lesbians and gay men

Attitudes toward lesbians and gay men were assessed using Herek’s (1988) ATLG Scale. The scale is composed of two subscales of 10 statements each, one for attitudes toward lesbians and one for attitudes toward gay men. All statements are rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The overall scale (20 statements) has yielded an alpha greater than .85 for college students (Herek, 1984, 1988). Possible scores range from 20 (highly positive attitudes) to 100 (highly negative attitudes).

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Scores on the total 32-item GTS ranged from 56 to 224 points (224 = highest level of discrimination), with higher scores indicating more negative attitudes toward transgender individuals. The mean score was 155.85 (SD = 36.80), indicating that participants do tend to hold negative attitudes, as measured by this scale. Almost all participants stated that they were either Christian or Orthodox Christian (which in Greece is practically the same thing) and nine participants gave no answer.

Scores on the 25-item Genderism/Transphobia subscale ranged from 34 to 175 (189 being the highest level of discrimination), with a mean score of 113.40 (SD = 31.81). Scores on the 7-item Gender-Bashing scale ranged from 12 to 46 (49 being the highest level of discrimination), with a mean score of 42.45 (SD = 8.07). Results on both subscales indicated a medium endorsement of genderism/transphobia and gender-bashing attitudes.

Scores on the total 20-item ATLG Scale ranged from 20 to 99 (100 = highly negative attitudes), with higher scores indicating more negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. The mean score for the total scale was 49.57 (SD = 16.44).

Correlation Analysis

Table 1 provides the intercorrelation matrix between the measures of the study. As shown in the table, the measure of attitudes toward transgender individuals and its subscales were positively correlated at the .01 alpha levels. Furthermore, attitudes toward transgender individuals were positively associated (moderate relationship) with self-identification as religious, frequency of attendance at religious services, political designation, gender, and attitudes...
toward gay men and lesbians. These results indicate that individuals who have more negative attitudes toward transgender individuals tend to be men, individuals who identify themselves as more religious, and individuals who hold negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men.

A one-way analysis of variance was used to examine differences in attitudes toward transgender issues between men and women. Results showed that men ($M = 166.62, SD = 30.09$) held significantly more negative attitudes than did women ($M = 138.55, SD = 39.57), $F(1, 236) = 36.57, p < .01$.

**Multiple Regression Analysis**

Multiple linear regression analysis was used to examine the association between predictor variables and the GTS. The assumptions of regression analysis were tested and were not violated (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001; see the Appendix for more details).

Attitudes toward transgender individuals served as the criterion variable, and gender, political self-designation, self-identification as religious, frequency of attendance at religious services, personal contact with a transgender individual, and the ATLG Scale served as simultaneous predictors.

The analysis showed that gender ($B = 12.96, p = .000$) and the ATLG Scale ($B = 1.7, p = .000$) were significant predictors of attitudes toward transgender individuals. Increases in gender and on the ATLG Scale were associated with more negative attitudes toward transgender individuals. As a set, the variables accounted for 22% of the variance, $F(7, 206) = 82.08, p < .001$ (Table 2).

**DISCUSSION**

Identifying correlates of prejudice toward particular social outgroups is an important step in examining how such prejudicial attitudes can be reduced.

The main aim of this study was to examine the attitudes of Greek undergraduate students toward transgender individuals and to identify specific social variables as predictors of negative attitudes.

Because there has been little research in this area, particularly in Greece, appropriate predictor variables also required an examination of the literature on predictors of sexual

### TABLE 1. Pearson Correlation Matrix for Study Variables

<table>
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<th>Variable</th>
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<td>1. Self-identification as religious</td>
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<td>2. Frequency of attendance at religious services</td>
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<td>3. Political conservatism–liberalism</td>
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<td>4. Gender</td>
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<td>5. Personal contact with a transsexual individual</td>
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<td>.38**</td>
<td>.46**</td>
<td>.26**</td>
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<td>6. Personal contact with a cross-dresser</td>
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<td>7. Genderism and Transphobia Scale</td>
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<td>.25**</td>
<td>.30**</td>
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<td>.36**</td>
<td>.34**</td>
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<td>8. Transphobia/Genderism subscale</td>
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<td>.98**</td>
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<td>9. Gender-Bashing subscale</td>
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<td>10. Attitudes Toward Gays and Lesbians Scale</td>
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<td>.31** .38** .46** .26** .84** .84** .48**</td>
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* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$.
prejudice as it correlates positively with anti-transgender sentiment (Nagoshi et al., 2008).

We focused on five variables that have been found to be important in previous research regarding attitudes toward LGBT individuals. These five variables were: political conservatism (King et al., 2009, as cited in Norton & Herek, 2013), religiosity (Nagoshi et al., 2008; Tee & Hegarty, 2006), personal contact with sexual minorities (King et al., 2009, as cited in Norton & Herek, 2013; Tee & Hegarty 2006), gender (King et al. 2009, as cited in Norton & Herek, 2013; Landén & Innala, 2000; Nagoshi et al., 2008; Willoughby et al., 2010), and attitudes toward lesbians and gay men (Carroll, Gilroy, & Ryan, 2002; Grossman & D’Augelli, 2006; Levahot & Lambert, 2007).

In general, results showed that in a Greek undergraduate sample, mainly gender and secondly sexual prejudice (ATLG Scale) predicted negative attitudes toward transgender individuals. The results of the regression analysis only partially supported our initial hypotheses because political self-designation, self-identification as strongly religious, and personal contact did not have any predictive value.

Consistent with previous research, men are far more negative and intolerant toward transgender individuals (cf. King et al., 2009, as cited in Norton & Herek, 2013). This particular result might also reflect a fear of loss of male social power for any nontraditional gender manifestations, whether of gender roles, gender identity, or sexual orientation, in traditionally male gender attributes (Nagoshi et al., 2008).

Further, as hypothesized, attitudes toward transgender people (GTS) were correlated with sexual prejudice (ATLG Scale), which emphasized adherence to rigid conventional norms.

Political self-designation did not have any predictive value despite the fact that the LGBT community has a notably bad relation with the Greek Orthodox Church, which is the predominant religion dogma of the country. Generally, it is difficult for LGBT-labeled people to practice religion at the level of local communities. The Orthodox Church accepts LGBT people in church (in the case they repent for their sinful life) but does not accept their practice. In the best of cases, a paternalistic approach is adopted (Pavlou, 2009).

Regarding personal contact, Greeks in general tend to have a less diverse range of friends and acquaintances than is evidenced for the European Union as a whole (e.g., only 16% declare to have friends or acquaintances who are homosexuals; Pavlou, 2009).

Clearly, this study has limitations, which should be considered in the interpretation and generalization of the findings. The lack of differentiation between distinct religious ideologies is unlikely to reflect the diversity of religious approaches regarding transgender individuals.

Further, people who self-identify as politically conservative might have negative attitudes in some domains (e.g., fiscal spending, public funding for social services, etc.) and positive views in other domains (e.g., rights of gay and lesbian people, rights of transgender individuals).

Researchers also examined whether previous contact with a transgender individual would predict scores on the GTS. Findings did not indicate that greater contact with transgender individuals could predict lower scores on the GTS.

It is very likely that the use of a single item to assess contact yielded limited data about the nature of the respondents’ contact experiences. Researchers have already suggested the need to further explore contact experiences with questions such as whether the relationship was of equal status (which is an important variable with respect to the contact hypothesis) and questions regarding the nature of the relationship and whether attitudes become more favorable as individuals report contact experiences with several different individuals (Herek & Glunt, 1993). Further, the question assessing personal contact only asked about direct
contact with a transgender individual. Thus, participants did not have to specify the amount of contact, and as a result, there was not enough information to understand better the role of contact on attitudes (cf. Herek & Glunt, 1993). Thus, these data cannot shed any meaningful light on the question this study was trying to address regarding the role of contact in reducing prejudice.

One more limitation is that although student samples (a convenience sample) can yield useful insights, they have important limitations for prejudice research as they are restricted on relevant demographic and developmental variables (e.g., education level, age, social class). Hence, there is no guarantee that our student sample will hold a mix of views and opinions. There may also be important regional differences that were not reflected in this particular sample. Consequently, caution is needed in making generalizations to the community as a whole.

Overall, these findings shed light on the current status of undergraduate students’ attitudes toward transgender individuals and reveal important variables that affect these attitudes in a specific sociocultural environment.

Because attitudes toward transgender individuals in Greece seem to have complex cultural roots and are affected by different variables, more research data are needed from future studies regarding personal and institutional dimensions and a comparison between them. Future research should try to explore if individuals’ basic beliefs and values (religion, political self-designation, gender, sexual orientation, and sexual prejudice) can serve as predictors of attitudes toward transgender issues.

As there is a need to conceptualize gender in new ways that are less focused on binary categories, attention should also be given to institutions such as education, family, and state to understand how identity policies are regulated. There is an absence of public funding of LGBT social and political activities. No state policy-oriented good practices or antidiscrimination campaigns exist up to now. This means that there is a lack of information and awareness of the wider public, as well as a lack of available data regarding discrimination on the grounds of gender variance. As the LGBT organizations well put it, professionals’ (medics, public and police officers, teachers, and others) training and people’s education at all levels is the major challenge. “Ignorance is the enemy” (Pavlou, 2009, p. 28).

Education combined with legislative protection would identify negative attitudes and discrimination toward transgender individuals as unacceptable, and as such, it would compel people to modify their behavior. This could be achieved through research regarding antitransgender sentiment and prejudicial emotions, cognitions, and behaviors.

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**APPENDIX**

Visual inspection of data plots showed that variables had normal distributions. The assumptions of no multicollinearity and independence of errors were checked using the available procedures from the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (collinearity diagnostics and Durbin-Watson test). Each of the variance inflation factors was close to 1, suggesting a lack of multicollinearity. The value for the Durbin-Watson test was 1.632 suggesting that the assumption of independence has been met (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001).