

How to Emphasize Similarity May Increase Individual Well-being

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Abstract. The text reviewed previous studies about perceived similarity's effect on social support and dehumanization, in which dehumanization may lead to a reduction of social stigma. Social support may increase individual well-being through attractivity and acceptance (leading to social support), reduction of social stigma, and a sense of belonging. This text also discussed possible ways to provide emphasize similarity, including communication and contact, media and policies, and possibly stop internalizing negative stereotypes. The last one requires more research to evaluate the effects of identity threat and a sense of belonging to a larger group. Indeed, emphasis on differences is unavoidable in many circumstances. This text is just a possible direction for future research.

Keywords: LGBTQ+; Social stigma; Well-being; Similarity.

1. Introduction

The inequality LGBTQ+ people are facing had been one of the important topics in sociology. According to a national survey of teenage LGBTQ mental health, a higher percentage of LGBTQ people suffer more from depression, anxiety disorders, and suicidal thoughts than others do [1]. Other than the teenage groups, the LGBs also were proved to have a larger proportion of people having mental disorders than heterosexuals do [2]. Social stigmas and social stress play are one of the most important causes of this problem [2,3]. Social support acts as a crucial resilience factor for LGBTQ+ people working against stress [4]. These studies proved how large social interactions can affect LGBTQ+ individual well-being, and also how theoretically possible solutions of it can be drawn from a sociological perspective.

Some possible change mentioned includes a change in policies, education, and therapies. More attention is drawn to the LGBTQ+ group. However, there is still an increase in gender identity-based hate crimes according to an FBI report. One of the possible issues is that separation from “us” and “them”, is one of the main factors in the formation of social stigma. [5]. Thus, empathy is reduced in the dynamic power system, resulting in “in-group” and “out-group” separation.

One possible solution researcher can increase their learning in the future is the “similarity effect”, in which an increased similarity increases attractivity [6]. In addition, McWhirter and Jecker [7] found that similarity leads to greater acceptance. Thus, it is reasonable to say that emphasizing the similarity between LGBTQ+ people and non-LGBTQ+ people may hinder the formation of social stigma by reducing the separation between “us” and “them” [5], and increase acceptance from the non-LGBTQ+ people LGBTQ+ people. However, there are not many studies in this area yet. Possibility, identity threat, and people's need for group distinctiveness made researchers study less about the positive effect of similarity on LGBTQ+ people. The latter text has refuted this idea by emphasizing that similarity may not increase identity threat and by evaluating the negative effects of group distinctiveness and identity threat. The importance of studying more about it has been emphasized.

This text will discuss in more detail how outside factors like an increase in acceptance and attractivity, reduction of social stigma, and internal factors like an increase in sense of belonging will increase the well-being of LGBTQ+ people. In addition, it will also be mentioned that the possible way to increase individual well-being is by emphasizing similarities like decreasing negative internalized stereotyping (required more study). Media, policy, and education are possible

perspectives where changes can be made to emphasize the similarity between people [8]. After all, more research can be conducted in this area in the future.

2. Literature Review

The inequality LGBTQ+ people are facing had been one of the important topics in sociology. According to a national survey of teenage LGBTQ mental health, a higher percentage of LGBTQ people suffer more from depression, anxiety disorders, and suicidal thoughts than others do [1]. Other than the teenage groups, the LGBs also were proved to have a larger proportion of people having mental disorders than heterosexuals do [2]. Social stigmas and social stress play are one of the most important causes of this problem [2, 3]. Social support acts as a crucial resilience factor for LGBTQ+ people working against stress [4]. These studies proved how large social interactions can affect LGBTQ+ individual wellbeings, and also how theoretically possible solutions of it can be drawn from a sociological perspective.

One of the causes that decrease the individual well-being of LGBTQ+ people is stigma. Stigma may cause structural inequalities, prejudice, and discrimination [9]. Stigma-related stress will also negatively affect well-being [9]. The concept of stigma was first defined by Goffman in the book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* as a discrediting attribute that may make a person “tainted and discounted” [10]. Lastly, Link and Phelan in 2001 defined social stigma as formed by the four steps under a power situation. Firstly, finding the difference. Secondly, labeling differences a stereotype. Thirdly, the separation of “us” from them. And lastly, discrimination and inequality may take place in the stigmatized group through social interactions [5].

Link and Phelan mentioned that in the four steps social stigmas can be formed, changing discrimination and powering people’s minds is the part people should work on because the label of difference and the finding of difference can be an unconscious, unchangeable phrase. There are lots of attempts to change policies, education, and therapies to increase the well-being of LGBTQ people. For example, there are mentions of diverse interventions and the importance of gaining more understanding of LGBTQ+ people in nursing. More attention is drawn to the LGBTQ+ group. According to the result of google scholar, more people are searching for about information LGBTQ+ groups from the 2000s to 2010s. However, there is still an increase in gender identity-based hate crimes according to an FBI report, showing that the discrimination toward LGBTQ+ people is even getting worse. As more people realize the existence of sexual minority groups, the conflict between groups becomes more direct and stronger. This fact makes people start to think if there is a more peaceful and friendly solution to this problem.

One of the possible solutions is that, in 2016, McDonald et al proved that emotional similarity increase outgroup humanization [11]. Thus, it is reasonable to say that an emphasis on similarity between LGBTQ+ people and non-LGBTQ+ people may hinder the formation of social stigma by reducing the separation of “us” from “them” and increasing individual well-being.

To the topic of similarity, there are early studies about how similarity between people may increase possible sources of social support. The “similarity effect” refers to the fact that an increased similarity increases attractiveness [6]. In addition, McWhirter and Jecker found that similarity leads to greater acceptance [7]. These studies have shown that an increased perceived similarity may lead to greater social acceptance and attractiveness and acceptance may increase social support, which is a really important resilience source for LGB individuals [4]. However, there are not many new studies about how will these early studies about the similarity effect possibly affect LGBTQ+ people or minority people in a positive way. There is a study of prejudice decrease as a result of imagined contact between white children and Asian children. The resulting data showed a correlation between similarity and positive attitude change [12].

This seems to be contradictory to the similarity effect, Group distinctiveness, however, is also an important factor for individual well-being. Studies are showing that instead of a group with positive stereotypes people prefer a more distinct group [15]. Part of the reason for this correlation and

tendency is the emotional support and a clearer self-concept a group can provide the individual. Self-stereotyping can be increased in people who strongly identify themselves as part of a stereotyped group. In the group, what others perceived as negative attributes can be considered as characteristics of the group, thus providing oneself with a healthy and stable self-image. In addition, group acceptance increases well-being, and will provide a sense of belonging and social support.[2]

It is important to note that when someone strongly identifies with a group, it will be harder for them to identify with other groups. They will try to differentiate themselves from other groups that are similar to the in-groups and even display out-group derogation. [15]

However, a person can have multiple identities. Reducing the line drawn between one group to another other by emphasizing similarity may enable a person to identify with more groups without leaving the previous one, thus may gain more social support in other groups without losing them from the previous ones. For example, a homosexual person who has experienced school bullying can find a sense of belonging and support from a heterosexual person who has also experienced bullying if there is not a separation of in-group and out-group according to their sexuality. In addition, if an emphasis on similarities will reduce social stigma, people experiencing stigmas may find it less necessary to seek for a stable self-concept in a group as a resilience factor to stress.

3. How Does Emphasize Similarity Positively Affect Individual Well-being?

Emphasizing similarity may positively affect a person's well-being in the ways shown below. As mentioned in many studies, internal and external factors can both be very important to increase a person's well-being. Outside factors include an increase in acceptance and attractivity, which will lead to social support, a very crucial resilience factor. Another outside factor is the reduction of social stigma. The internal factor here includes a sense of belonging to the larger group, where the larger group here does not mean the majority group, but the larger group one fits in.

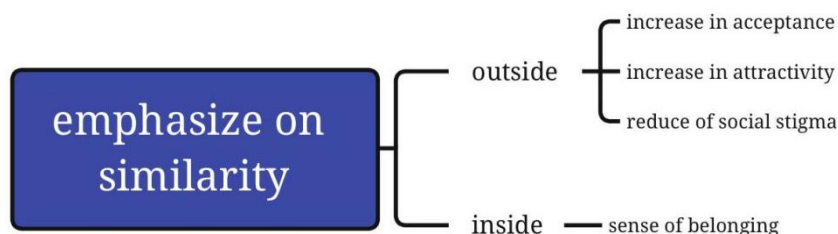


Fig. 1 Ways Emphasize on Similarity Increase Well beings

3.1 Outside factors

Firstly, as shown in Figure 1, the similarity effect may increase attractivity [6], and similarity will also lead to greater acceptance [7]. These two factors will contribute to social support, which is a crucial resilience factor for LGB individuals [4]. A resilience factor can be defined as a factor for individuals to cope with stress. With a stronger source of resilience, people can cope with stress better and thus increase well-being.

Secondly, as mentioned in the background, according to Link and Phelan's definition of social stigma in 2001, one of the four steps in the formation of social stigma in the power situation is a separation of "us" from "them". At this step, dehumanization takes place. For example, during slavery, African Americans are considered as "not fully developed humans" with a genetic defect in intelligence. By doing this, many white people dehumanized African Americans and put a social stigma on them. There is already evidence presented showing that emotional similarities reduce dehumanization [11]. Thus, by emphasizing the similarity between the formation of social stigma will be hindered from one of the steps. As a result, discrimination, structural inequalities, and prejudice caused by social stigma [9] will decrease. These three factors have very direct negative effects on individual well-being.

3.2 Internal factor: A Sense of Belonging

Emphasizing similarities can increase individuals' sense of belonging to the larger group since the line between the inner group and the outer group is not emphasized. Sense of belonging is used as one of the factors contributing to social support's use as a resilience source. The sense of belonging here is in a different context. It is not about individuals finding distinctive small in-groups and gaining social support within the group (though this is also a factor contributing to individual well-being), but individuals gaining belongingness from the larger environment.

For example, people who finished serving their sentences probably will have problems assimilating the unfamiliar social interactions. On the one hand, it is a result of the changes in times. People may lose their sense of belonging to society. Unable to integrate into society, they have a sense of distance from others and may suffer from that. Since they may feel that they are different from others, they may feel self-loathing and self-abandonment. Thus, they can find ways to get back to prison or give up on their life. If they have a small group of people who has the same experience, people in the group will feel better. They may find friends, social support, and solutions to some practical problems. However, if he/she emphasizes the similarity between himself/herself and others in the present society at the same time, he/she can also feel more comfortable by gaining a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging with the world does not conflict with the person's membership in his/her small groups and may continue to gain support in smaller groups.

4. How to Provide and Emphasize Similarity

4.1 Stop internalizing negative stereotype

One of the ways to increase similarity perceived by oneself and others is by stopping internalizing negative stereotypes of a group. However, this factor requires more study to prove its practicability. An example of this factor would be, internalizing the stereotype that women are bad at math has been proved to have negative effects on working memories, and self-evaluation and thus really decreases one's academic performance in math [13]. In this case, stopping internalizing negative social stereotypes will reduce the difference perceived by oneself and others, thus increasing the similarity perceived.

Firstly, increasing emphasis on similarity may not necessarily affect the group distinctiveness but may enable people to identify with more groups as mentioned in the review.

However, here, increasing similarity perceived by reducing differences will affect the original group's distinctiveness. It is necessary to indicate that, it is normal and helpful for an individual to try to fit into a minority group and to gain social support from it. It does help individuals to increase their well-being. People need a clear social identity and tend to look for group distinctiveness because intergroup distinctiveness can reduce identity threats. Even when compared with a positive group, people tend to identify with a group that is considered more negative but is more distinct [15]. However, in the process of reducing identity threats, there may be increased self-stereotyping and discrimination against the out-group. The possible negative results of the former can also be illustrated by the "women poor at math's negative stereotype", which may make people behave worse and feel inferior, and strengthen the difference between groups by making a stereotype real. The latter (discrimination against the out-group) will turn things into a negative cycle. People tend to dislike others who dislike themselves. Thus, hatred between groups may increase. In addition, the power system is very dynamic. It is possible for there to be small situations or situations in the future where a minority group holds more power than the group that is usually considered the majority group, and thus the majority group may experience discrimination. This negative cycle of "harming out-groups" may continue. The argument here is that for some minor groups, self-stereotyping and negative cycles may have a more negative impact on well-being than identity threat. However, it is difficult to support this sentence with concrete evidence. More academic research related to this topic can be done in the future.

4.2 Communication and contact

Firstly, in the study about decreasing prejudice as a result of imagined contact between white children and Asian children. There is presented a correlation between similarity and positive attitude change [12]. Thus, contact may increase perceived similarity. There is another example from a youtube video called “Straight Men vs 1 Secret Gay Man” [14]. One of the seven people is a homosexual man, and the others are heterosexual men. Then the seven people need to vote out the homosexual man to gain the money. Although the straight people successfully earned the prize, many of them felt shocked after the game because they didn't see who is the homosexual person. Finding that gay men are different and more similar than one may think is an example of discovering the commonalities between the two groups through contact and communication.

4.3 Media and Policies

Nowadays, many media and policies emphasize differences instead of similarities. For example, every ethnic group needs to appear on TV. This imperceptibly emphasizes the group line between different races. It also strengthens the stereotype of a group. For example, most Chinese people usually do not have lifting eyes, but many TV shows and movies will choose characters with this characteristic. It is necessary to emphasize differences, especially when some people's rights are not guaranteed and need additional help. For example, the poor people in some mountain villages need to be better supported through a process of distinguishing between the poor and the non-poor. However, it has also been mentioned that the emphasis on differences has side effects on the division of the in-group and out-group. The division of such groups may lead to conflicts and dehumanization of other groups. But only the group with less power will be discriminated against. In a more equal, and more ideal world in the future or in some power situations where the problem of inequality has been alleviated, perhaps emphasizing on similarity will be a better solution. It is still a topic that requires more research.

5. Conclusion

The text mainly discussed how the emphasis on similarity may positively affect the individual well-being of LGBTQ+ people. Many LGBTQ+ people face discrimination and threats to mental health. Reviews about research on social stigma, formation, and reduction of social stigma, similarity effect, studies related to similarity effects, and some possible sources of resilience have been done. Group distinctiveness and identity threat have also been discussed and it is argued that emphasizing on similarity itself will not decrease group distinctiveness, but the reduction of differences may do. Further research needs to be done on evaluating the negative effects separately of distinct groups and identity threats. Emphasizing similarity may positively affect a person's well-being by increasing one's attractiveness, and social acceptance, and reducing social stigma put on the individual. These are the outside factors. For the inside factors, emphasizing similarity will provide individuals with a sense of belonging to larger groups. Possible ways to create similarities include efforts on media and policies, an increase in communication and contact, and arguably a decrease in internalizing negative stereotypes (this one requires further study).

This article is mainly based on logic and theories. The flaw is that there is not an experiment to prove a direct causation relationship between emphasis on similarity and an increase in well-being in LGBTQ+ cases. In addition, in some regions where minority groups need help more urgently, emphasizing similarity cannot make the situation better because inequality exists, negative stereotypes exist, and social stigmas will continue to exist. Emphasizing similarity cannot increase the well-being of these people like policies that specifically support these groups of minorities may do. This article is more about possible research directions in the future.

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