

# **The Relationship between Experienced Discrimination and the Level of Empathy in Members of the LGBT Community**

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## **Abstract**

**Introduction:** *Even though the positive effects of empathy as well as the negative ones of discrimination are well known and supported by scientific studies, the relationship between the two concepts and the way in which they interact was not thoroughly investigated. Experiencing discrimination can affect the empathic abilities of people, and this study aims to find evidence in support of this. The LGBT community in Romania is an appropriate starting group for this investigation because they often become victims of discrimination.*

**Objectives:** *Exploring the relationship between experienced discrimination and the level of empathy for members of the LGBT community.*

**Methods:** *A number of 342 participants filled out an online survey containing scales for measuring their empathy level and their experience of discrimination, 245 (71.63%) of which were LGBT, and 97 (28.36%) were heterosexual cisgender individuals, making up the control group.*

**Results:** *The statistical analysis did not succeed in identifying any differences in the means of the groups, correlations or regression equations that were statistically significant.*

**Conclusions:** *The main limit of this study that can explain the results is the usage of a general discrimination scale that does not adequately measure the specific discrimination encountered by LGBT people. The survey also contained open-ended questions pertaining to the research objective, and their analysis suggests the presence of a complex relationship between the two variables whose investigation is justifiable.*

**Keywords:** *LGBT community, sexual orientation, gender identity, positive empathy, discrimination*

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## **I. Introduction**

In my professional experience, working with LGBT individuals, I have encountered the theme of discrimination many times, and in the attempt of identifying positive aspects or resources deriving from this negative experience, clients often mention their increased empathy level as a direct consequence of discrimination. Those experiences allow them to better understand and resonate with the suffering of others. Many arguments were brought forth that supported this relationship, so I have decided to investigate it using the scientific method.

### **1.1. Empathy**

Empathy is considered an ability that brings meaningful benefits to an individual's life, including raising the success chance of therapy conducted by psychologists, social services, and doctors, as well as improving the quality and lifetime of interpersonal relationships, stimulating prosocial behavior, promoting altruism, and inhibiting aggressive reactions (Yalcin & DiPaola, 2018). The authors of a meta-analysis (Teding van Berkhout & Malouff, 2016), focused on identifying the efficacy of empathy training methods define empathy as "understanding the emotions of others, experiencing them, or having an appropriate response to their emotions". Alongside this definition, they summarize the debate about empathy in the scientific community as being centered on categorizing it as a cognitive process (intellectual, consisting of assuming another person's perspective and understanding their emotions) and as an affective process (based on an appropriate emotional response to another's emotions).

The results of the meta-analysis support the idea that empathy can be developed, both at a cognitive and affective level. Another study that researched the efficacy of a training program for nurses targeting empathic communication showcases favorable results, further supporting the possibility of developing empathy (Shao et al., 2018).

Modern literature looks at empathy from a multimodal perspective, which includes cognitive, affective and behavioral factors. In another study, the authors claim that the neurological correspondent associated with the concept of empathy is the anterior insula of the brain, and through a neurofeedback technique, people can self-regulate their empathy level (Kanel et al., 2019). Another recently launched idea is the difference between empathy regarding positive emotions, which creates a pleasant feeling, as opposed to empathy regarding negative emotions, which is felt as

a painful experience, with varying amounts of intensity (Andreychik, 2019). At the same time, negative empathy motivates behaviors meant to help others, but also increases the risk of burnout in fields that deal with suffering people. On the flipside, positive empathy has a crucial role in dealing with those negative side effects, by providing satisfaction to professionals through their interaction with patients or clients whom they helped.

In regards to empathy in the LGBT community, a study added on previously discovered data that homosexual men have a higher empathy level than heterosexual men, by using a sample of 182 men (Sergeant et al., 2006). However, those studies only look into homosexual men, and do not provide data concerning other parts of the LGBT community. Gay individuals usually prefer having a gay psychotherapist because they feel like they would be able to find more empathy with them, aiding in developing their psychotherapeutic relationship, but also because they can be protected from the internalized heterosexism of cisgender heterosexual people (Cerbone, 2011).

### **1.2. Discrimination**

Discrimination is defined as "an unjustifiable negative behavior towards a group of people or their members, which can include both direct actions, as well as decisions and judgements regarding those members" (Ramiah et al., 2010). Many negative effects were identified associated with discrimination impacting the victims, such as increased risk of mental health problems, a lower socio-economic status, socio-emotional distress, etc. (Benner et al., 2018). A meta-analysis (Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009) investigated the effect of perceived discrimination on physical health and managed to identify a number of somatic problems such as hypertension, breast cancer, obesity, substance abuse, etc., with those effects being explained by the stress response mechanism.

The official data provided by the APA claims that between 42% and 68% of LGBT individuals suffer discrimination at the workplace, this frequency rate being over 90% for transgender people. Between 11% and 45% of homeless youth identify as LGBT, and 20% of gay men live under the poverty line, in contrast with 15% of heterosexual men (*Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Persons & Socioeconomic Status*, 2010).

When looking at the data from Romania, a survey carried out at the request of the European Commission (Directorate-General for Justice and Consumers, European Commission & TNS Opinion & Social, 2015) found that only 36% of Romanians agree

that LGB people should have the same rights as heterosexual people, as opposed to the European average that year of 71%, and only 24% claim that there is nothing wrong with same-sex relationships, with 67% being the European average. 42% of Romanians say that they would feel uncomfortable having an LGBT work colleague, and 66% would feel uncomfortable if one of their children was in a same-sex relationship. Only 17% would feel comfortable with the idea of seeing homosexual couples holding hands in public. Similar statistics are found when looking at transgender people: 43% would feel uncomfortable with a transgender work colleague, 67% having a child in a relationship with a transgender person, and 54% do not agree that transgender people should be allowed to change their ID to match their identity.

A study led by ACCEPT Association meant to investigate the attitudes of high school students towards LGBT people and the experience of LGBT teens in high school (Costache, 2016) found the following results: 1 out of 4 participants consider LGBT people to be “inferior beings”; 1 out of 2 would be disturbed to have a gay classmate, and 1 out of 3 to have a lesbian classmate. The study also found that boys are much more likely than girls to have discriminatory and aggressive behaviors towards LGBT people. 61% of LGBT teens were victims of or witnesses to acts of aggression, and 65% claim that teachers make homophobic comments during classes. 96% of all the participants consider the terms “homosexual” and “lesbian” to have a negative meaning and are used with hurtful intent.

The Romanian division of the British Council partnered with ACCEPT Association for a survey investigating the LGBT community in Romania, that would help develop a handbook for youth workers focused on diversity (Macovei et al., 2010). In this survey, 68.2% of participants claim to have suffered different forms of discrimination or exclusion based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. 50% were insulted, 30% threatened with physical violence, 25% were excluded or avoided, and 25% were sexually abused. 49.5% claim that the majority of discrimination occurs outdoors, in public.

### ***1.3. The relationship between empathy and discrimination***

A single study has been identified that researched the relationship between the two concepts. Entitled “Effects of early adversity and social discrimination on empathy for complex mental states: An fMRI investigation” (Fourie et al., 2019), the study claims that social discrimination has an associated effect

comparable with other types of psychological stress on the human psyche. Participants in the study with higher levels of perceived discrimination had stronger empathy responses than those with lower levels. At the same time, the different experiences of distinct reasons of discrimination have different effects on people’s minds, with disadvantaged minorities suffering more from discrimination than more privileged groups. Another interesting discovery is the fact that viewing a non-apologetic abuser creates a much weaker compassion response in people with high perceived discrimination, signaling the differences in rapport with victims and abusers. Another study found a negative correlation between empathy level and homophobic attitudes of heterosexual men towards homosexual men (Castiglione et al., 2013), even if their social circles included gay men. Therefore, a low level of empathy is also a factor for discrimination in abusers.

### ***1.4. Utility of the research topic***

As presented in section 1.1., the positive effects of empathy, as well as the efficacy of training programs meant to develop it, make the investigation of the relationship between empathy and discrimination important, and understanding this relationship can facilitate the development of a training program based on the experience of discrimination. By profusely understanding the mechanisms through which the two concepts interact, we can utilize those mechanism within the training, as well as in other psychotherapeutic endeavors, in order to improve the quality of life of people who suffered discrimination. The capacity to take a negative experience, to give it another meaning, and to develop your empathic abilities based on it can prove to be a very beneficial technique in the life of any client.

In order to work around the bias of LGBT individuals that prefer an LGBT psychotherapist, a fact which can cause problems in the cases in which a person has a limited number of therapists to choose from that does not include such a therapist, a training program for psychotherapists can be developed that can facilitate a more profound understanding of the discrimination the LGBT community faces in order to better empathize with their specific problems. The same type of training can aid the authorities responsible for the development and enforcing of laws meant to protect people from discrimination (Angeles & Roberton, 2020). Moreover, the scientific gap in studies that analyze the relationships between the two concepts is a main reason for their research, even at an incipient level.

### **1.5. Research Objectives**

O1. To carry out a statistical analysis on the relationship between the level of empathy and the experience of discrimination for members of the LGBT community, compared to non-LGBT people.

O2. To study the opinions of the LGBT community about the effect of their experience of discrimination on their level of empathy through a qualitative analysis.

### **1.6. Research Hypothesis**

H1a. We assume that there are statistically significant differences in empathy levels when comparing LGBT and non-LGBT people.

H1b. We assume that there are statistically significant differences in discrimination levels when comparing LGBT and non-LGBT people.

H2. We assume there is a statistically significant relationship between the level of discrimination and the level of empathy.

H3. We assume that an increased level of discrimination is a statistically significant predictor for the level of empathy for LGBT people.

## **II. Methods**

### **2.1. Participants and procedure**

Opportunity sampling was used in order to facilitate a higher number of participants, with no eligibility criteria utilized for inclusion in the study. Informed consent has been given prior to filling out the survey.

The study gathered 342 participants, with ages between 14 and 62 ( $M = 28.6$ ,  $SD = 9.29$ ). Out of those, 134 (39.18%) claimed they identify as male, 183 (53.51%) as female, and 25 (7.31%) selected another gender identity. Regarding sexual orientation, 139 (40.64%) identify as homosexual, 61 (17.83%) as bisexual, 104 (30.41%) as heterosexual, and 38 (11.11%) as another sexual orientation. It should be noted that a part of heterosexual people are transgender individuals attracted to the opposite gender and will be included in the LGBT group.

After accounting for this, 245 (71.36%) of the participants make up the LGBT group, and 97 (28.36%) make up the control group of heterosexual cisgender people.

### **2.2. Instruments**

In order to measure the level of perceived discrimination, "The Everyday Discrimination Scale" was used in its original variation (Williams et al., 1997), validated with a Cronbach's Alpha of .74 (Krieger et al.,

2005). The scale has 9 items and aims to measure everyday discriminatory behavior that occurs in minor events of daily life, looking at: being treated with less courtesy and respect than other people, receiving poorer service in restaurants and shops, other people treating them as not being intelligent, or implying they are better than them, feeling scared of them or treating them unfairly, using derogatory language or insults, and bullying or threats. A 1 (never) to 6 (almost daily) Likert scale was used for scoring, with the items being translated in Romanian by the author.

The level of empathy was measured using the Empathy factor from the IPIP Scale, which measures the 45 AB5C facets, and has a Cronbach's Alpha of .70 (Markey & Markey, 2009). The Romanian translation was taken from the study carried out for translating and validating the IPIP scales, the translated version having a Cronbach's Alpha of .47 (Iliescu et al., 2015). For scoring, a 5-step Likert scale was used, between 1 (strongly disagree) and 5 (strongly agree).

Alongside the scales administered, participants were invited to answer 2 more optional questions that would facilitate a better understanding of the community's opinions, which would be subjected to a qualitative analysis. The questions were "What can you tell us about your experience with discrimination? How did it manifest, how did you cope with it, how did it change you?" and "Do you believe your experience with discrimination determined you to become a more/ less empathetic person? If so, does this apply in relation with all people, or only certain groups (aggressors, colleagues, members of your community, etc.)?". Out of all participants, 178 (52.04%) chose to answer those questions.

### **2.3. Data collection procedure**

Participants filled out an online survey on Google Forms, which was shared on Romanian LGBT groups and NGO-s. The cisgender heterosexual participants from the control group were allies of the community that follow LGBT groups and NGO-s. The survey could be filled out in both English and Romanian, in order to accommodate a higher number of participants, and 20 (5.85%) completed the survey in English and 322 (94.15%) in Romanian. The average time for filling out the form was 5 minutes.

## **III. Results**

### **3.1. Descriptive Statistics**

The scores for the discrimination scale have  $M = 20.83$ ,  $SD = 8.56$ , with a Cronbach's  $\alpha = .90$ , and for

the empathy scale  $M = 28.39$ ,  $SD = 4.263$ , with  $\alpha = .67$ . The discrimination scale has skewness value of 1.13 and kurtosis of 1.75, and the empathy scale has skewness =  $-0.9$  and kurtosis = 1.24. Even though 3 out of the 4 values are outside the normal distribution limit ( $-1.1$ ), due to the big sample size (324), and based on the Central Limit Theorem, we can claim that normal distribution rules are applicable.

Table 1. Average scores, standard deviations, internal consistency

□	M□	SD□	α□	Skewness□	Kurtosis□
Empathy□	38.39□	4.263□	0.676□	-0.9□	1.24□
Discrimination□	20.83□	8.564□	0.909□	1.13□	1.75□

### 3.2. Inferential Statistics

*H1a. We assume that there are statistically significant differences in empathy levels when comparing LGBT and non-LGBT people.*

*H1b. We assume that there are statistically significant differences in discrimination levels when comparing LGBT and non-LGBT people.*

The data gathered was analyzed using JAMOVI software, and for the first two hypotheses, the independent samples t test was used, using a significance threshold of .05. Levene's test of equality of variances had an associated probability of .002 for empathy and .00 for discrimination, which means we reject the equality of variances. As such, the variances ratio was calculated, and for empathy is had a value of 1.86 and for discrimination 2.22, both values being lower than 5, meaning we will consider the variances to be homogenous.

Therefore, for hypothesis 1a regarding the level of empathy, there was no statistically significant difference  $t(340) = .325$ ,  $p = .745$ ,  $d = 0.0390$ , LGBT people having  $M = 38.24$ ,  $SD = 4.578$ , and non-LGBT  $M = 38.51$ ,  $SD = 3.354$ . For hypothesis 1b regarding the level of discrimination, there was no statistically significant difference  $t(340) = -1.697$ ,  $p = 0.091$ ,  $d = -0.2036$ , LGBT people having  $M = 21.33$ ,  $SD = 9.292$ , and non-LGBT people  $M = 19.59$ ,  $SD = 6.235$ .

Table 2. Results of the independent samples t test

	t	df	p	Mean difference	SE difference	Cohen's d
Empathy	0.325	340	0.745	0.166	0.512	0.0390
Discrimination	-1.697	340	0.091	-1.739	1.025	-0.2036

*H2. We assume there is a statistically significant relationship between the level of discrimination and the level of empathy.*

For hypothesis H2, a Pearson correlation test was used for scores in the empathy scale and those in the discrimination scale. A negative correlation was obtained, which was not statistically significant  $r(342) = -0.067$ ,  $r^2 = .0044$ ,  $p = .214$ .

Table 3. Results of the Pearson linear correlation test

Discrimination		
Empathy	Pearson's r	-0.067
	p-value	0.214

*H3. We assume that an increased level of discrimination is a statistically significant predictor for the level of empathy for LGBT people.*

For this hypothesis a simple linear regression was calculated to predict the level of empathy based on the level of discrimination. The equation was applied only on the LGBT group and the result was not statistically significant,  $F(1, 243) = 1.18$ ,  $p = 0.277$ ,  $R^2 = 0.00485$ .

Table 4. Results of the linear regression test

Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Overall Model Test			
			F	df1	df2	p
1	0.0697	0.00485	1.18	1	243	0.277

Omnibus ANOVA Test

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
Discrimination	24.8	1	24.8	1.18	0.277
Residuals	5090.1	243	20.9		

Note. Type 3 sum of squares

Model Coefficients - Empathy

Predictor	Estimate	SE	t	p
Intercept	39.0708	0.7333	53.28	<.001
Discrimination	-0.0343	0.0315	-1.09	0.277

## IV. Discussion

### 4.1. Interpretation of statistical data

None of the hypotheses tested was supported by the data. The level of empathy does not differ between the two groups, which indicates that even though other studies found a higher level of empathy in homosexual men than in heterosexual men (Sergeant et al., 2006), this is not applicable for the rest of LGBT community. The sample of this study only included 9 heterosexual cisgender men, so that specific hypothesis could not be tested. Another possible explanation for the similar levels of empathy could be the high number of

female participants from the control group, who tend to have higher scores than men (Di Tella et al., 2020). Moreover, a self-report scale was applied that had obvious desirable results which led to higher scores ( $M = 38.9$  out of a possible total of 45).

Surprisingly, the level of discrimination did not differ between the 2 groups either, a fact which highlights a number of problems. The first one would be the mistake of not controlling for other discrimination factors. Many of the participants from the control group reported discriminatory experiences related to sexism, race, or nationality in the optional questions. Therefore, there is no real control group that did not encounter discrimination, or no covariate to control the investigated relationships.

The second problem would be that the discrimination scores for the LGBT group can be lower due to the scale utilized. This scale was devised for any form of discrimination irrespective of reasons, but the LGBT community has certain particularities which the scale does not take into consideration. For example, LGBT identity is not as obvious in daily life for strangers, and as a consequence, discrimination can take on a more discrete form (generally homophobic remarks that are not directly addressed to the individual). At the same time, discriminatory experiences can manifest as very intense in a very short window of time (the scale only looking at day-to-day discrimination, not major life events). Being kicked out of your home, being physically harmed, sexually abused or mistreated, those are not a part of the item set of the scale, but they have a major contribution to a person's experience with discrimination and to their mental development. Originally, the scale was chosen to cover a large spectrum of experiences, but mostly due to the high validity and empiric support. Even though other scales were identified that specifically targeted LGBT discrimination, those did not have a demonstrated validity or fidelity (Morrison et al., 2019). Based on hypotheses 1a and 1b, and the problems found through their analysis, the results of the following hypothesis cannot be considered valid. Therefore, hypothesis 2, which assumed there is a relationship between the level of discrimination and the level of empathy, as well as hypothesis 3, which assumed that the level of discrimination can predict the level of empathy in LGBT people, were both rejected.

#### **4.2. Interpretation of qualitative data**

Out of those who chose to answer the optional questions, (33.14%) claimed within their answer that

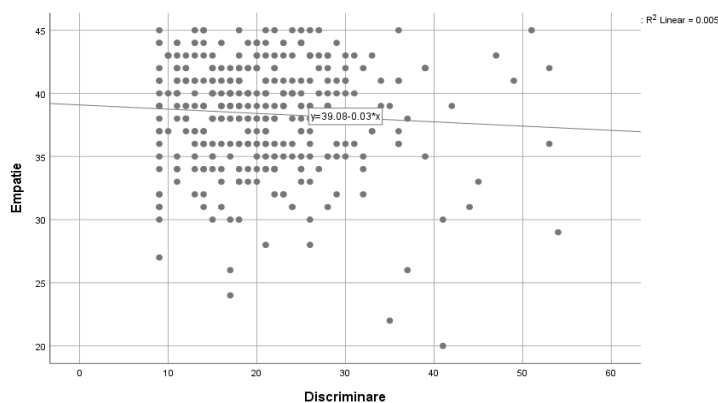
they do not believe their experience with discrimination had any effect on their empathy level, and 98 (55.06%) claimed that it determined them to become more empathic, the remaining 21 (11.50%) being inconclusive (either people claiming they are uncertain or comments unrelated to the question). None of the answers given indicated that they believe discrimination has clearly inhibited their empathy, even though this idea is present in some answers.

Many answers included the idea that they feel more empathy towards persecuted people, but less empathy towards abusers or people who discriminate. A few people also mentioned that they feel more empathy towards abusers as well, because they are trying to understand how that behavior comes from their own frustrations and problems. As a mechanism for this change, some people identified a deeper understanding of the experiences others go through, since they have felt the negative effects of discrimination for themselves, and they would not wish it on others.

Out of the people who did not agree that discrimination affected their empathy, some said that being empathetic is part of their personality and it would have been just as strong regardless of the discrimination they suffered. A minority claimed that, if anything, discrimination might have made them even less empathic, since they had to become more distant from other people in order to protect themselves from the negative emotional effects of discrimination.

Those results indicate the existence of some moderating variables for the effect of discrimination on empathy, which can include: coping mechanisms, resilience, social support, and even extent of discrimination (suggesting a non-linear relationship, probably quadratic).

*Figure 1. Correlation graphic for the level of empathy and discrimination*



#### **4.3. Research limits**

Using a scale for measuring discrimination that does not account for specific problems and particularities of the discrimination suffered by LGBT people is the main limit of this study. Another limit is the lack of control over discrimination reasons, such as sexism, racism, etc., and especially the added effect of being a part of 2 or more discriminated groups. At the same time, opportunity sampling in the online environment does not provide an optimal control of the sample used. The non-LGBT control group being formed of mostly females is another important limit, especially considering that the majority of LGBT respondents are cisgender homosexual men. In addition, we have the lack of analyses that account for the different sexual orientations and gender identities, since they can have vastly different experiences with discrimination, transgender people being generally more obvious with their identity, which attracts more discriminatory behavior.

#### **4.4. Future study directions**

The purpose of this study was an exploratory investigation of the relationship between the two variables. Even though the hypotheses were not accepted due to the limits of the study, the qualitative analysis of the open questions indicates the presence of a complex relationship between experienced discrimination and the level of empathy. A future study can be improved by using a more robust theoretical framework, which controls for other variables, extends the sample to include other people that can suffer from discriminations, and that investigates other possible relations of mediation, moderation, and non-linear relationships.

#### **V. Conclusions**

While the present paper did not succeed in supporting its hypotheses, it does provide a strong basis for the study of the relationship between the level of experienced discrimination and the level of empathy, for both LGBT people, and other minorities. While the statistical analysis of the data did not support any of the hypotheses, this is due to the limitations of the instruments used, not because of the lack of a statistically significant relationship. Further evidence must be gathered in order to support or deny the hypotheses presented.

The main contribution of this study is the qualitative data it gathered from members of the

LGBT community, succeeding in acquiring the opinions of numerous and diverse individuals. From their answers, the conclusion can be drawn that a relationship between discrimination and empathy exists, and it only remains to gather the data required to detail the strength and direction of this relationship, as well as the factors that influence and explain it. Participants brought forth strong arguments that their experience with discrimination made them become more empathic than they would have been if they had not experienced it, while a smaller number claimed it did not change their empathy levels, or, if anything, it led them to being less empathic. This diversity of answers leads us to believe that the relationship can be either positive or negative, depending on certain moderating factors, such as social support, socio-economic status and background, mental health issues and even the specific type of discrimination encountered. Furthermore, the relationship between the two variables could be non-linear, with medium levels of experienced discrimination leading to higher empathy levels, but higher discrimination leading to lower empathy levels. This hypothesis would need to be investigated in order to ascertain the true nature of the interaction between the two constructs.

Understanding this relationship is not only paramount to helping a disadvantaged and discriminated group by providing them with yet another tool to help them cope with and give new meaning to their negative experiences, but it would also help fill up a gap in our knowledge. A practical implication benefiting all people would be the development of empathy training programs that could be based on the experience of discrimination, as met by the individuals themselves, or their peers.

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