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Advancing research into the social psychology of sexual orientations and gender identities: Current research and future directions

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Abstract
Over the past decades, LGBTQ+ issues have been at the centre of politics, social movements, and human rights discussions across the world. Consistent with these developments, there is a growing interest in social psychological research into sexual orientation and gender identities. The emerging research not only taps recent societal developments and the effects of these on LGBTQ+ people; but also focuses on very old research questions of stereotypes and prejudice that are still relevant today. In this special issue, we bring together nine papers addressing several of these issues using qualitative, correlational, and experimental methods with sexual majority and minority samples across different cultural contexts. We discuss the current state of the field and how further research could enhance our understanding of LGBTQ+ issues.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, LGBTQ+ issues have been at the centre of politics, social movements, and human rights discussions, and the site of major transformation across the world. It is not surprising, therefore, that LGBTQ+ people, the social processes that surround them, and the contexts in which they live, are becoming more and more the focus of interest for psychological study (Hegarty & Rutherford; 2019; Nadal, 2019; Salvati et al., 2020). On the one hand, improvements to specific rights, such as same sex marriage legalization in the US, Taiwan, Australia, and Northern Ireland, have been linked to more positive LGBTQ+ attitudes in society and favourable outcomes for the well-being in LGBTQ+ communities. On the other hand, the same progressive trends have elicited backlashes in various contexts. For instance, many areas in Poland have been declared LGBTQ+-free zones; trans-people are no longer allowed to change their names or gender markers in official documents in Bulgaria; pride marches were banned in Georgia and Turkey; transgender people were banned from serving in the military in the US. Social change and resistance inevitably co-occur.

The last report on State-Sponsored Homophobia, published by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association (ILGA) in 2020, pointed to the following worrying data: 36% of United Nations (UN) Member States criminalize or de facto criminalize consensual same-sex sexual acts (59% of African and 52% of Asian UN Member States); 22% of UN Member States have laws and regulations that restrict freedom of expression in relation to sexual orientation and gender identity, including criminalizing offences against morality and religion, limiting sex education curricula, prohibiting promotion or propaganda of homosexuality, censorship in media and movies, and so on (37% of African and 40% of Asian UN Member States); only 30% of UN Member States have broad legal protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation, but the high percentage is concentrated in Europe (68%); and finally, only 18% of UN Member States recognize legal equality of relationships for two people of the same gender and/or have extended the definition of marriage to include same-sex couples in their legislations.

Moreover, the last annual review of the Human Rights Situation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex people by ILGA-Europe in 2021 warns of a substantial growth of opposition against trans rights across Europe, having a wide and negative impact on legal gender recognition. Indeed, in several countries (among others, Austria, Hungary, Russia), opposition forces are growing by countering the protection against discrimination and self-determination for trans people in...
the name of the women’s rights or “the protection of minors”. The same report also highlights a worrying rise in abuse and hate speech against LGBTQ+- people both from politicians and the general population, and overall, on social media too.

Considering the wide variability across national contexts, the social psychological study of sexual orientations and gender identities is essential in direct connection to the struggles of LGBTQ+ movements, legal changes, and national differences. In this increasingly polarized social and political climate, research on LGBTQ+ communities has become even more necessary regarding the stigma surrounding their identities, social movements to improve their status, and intra- and intergroup contexts to increase their well-being. This research continues to grow, and there are now several interdisciplinary journals specifically focused on LGBTQ+ issues. The great interest in this topic among scientific journals, researchers and readers is evidenced by the increasing number of special issues on LGBTQ+ themes of recent years (Hegarty & Rutherford; 2019; Nadal, 2019; Salvati et al., 2020; Serrano Amaya & Rios Gonzalez, 2019). However, most of these are hosted by scientific journals in sociology, clinical, health, developmental or miscellaneous psychology, whereas special issues focusing on LGBTQ+ research from a more specific social psychological perspective is still warranted.

In June 2020, the European Association of Social Psychology (EASP) sponsored its first LGBTQ+ event: “Building an LGBT European Social Psychology”. This event laid the foundations for constructing a network of junior and senior social psychologists from Europe and beyond. In the wake of this event, an LGBTQ+ Studies pre-conference at the EASP General Meeting was being organized before both were suspended due to the coronavirus emergency. Thus, the current special issue was a perfect opportunity to give more presence to LGBTQ+-research within social psychological knowledge, and to promote interest and commitment in the social psychology community to participate in such a knowledge growth. Indeed, social psychology can offer a particularly insightful perspective by providing a theoretically grounded response to issues surrounding sexual and gender identities. Furthermore, through the special issue, we hope to provide new insights that promote social progress and policies that seek to apply the insights of the articles contained herein. We are especially hopeful that the contributions could foster the development of both prevention strategies and psychological well-being promotion programmes for LGBTQ+ individuals in several life contexts.

2 | What we already know: The current state of LGBTQ+ research in social psychology

As exemplified above, recent societal developments in relation to LGBTQ+ issues have inspired researchers to examine the underpinning social psychological mechanisms behind such changes. For instance, there have been articles on Australian same-sex marriage debate (Anderson et al., 2020; Ecker et al., 2019; Thai & Dellers, 2020; Verrelli et al., 2019), US-supreme-court ruling (Tankard & Paluck, 2017; Perrin et al., 2018), gay and lesbian experiences of discrimination and well-being during the election campaign of Trump (Garrison et al., 2018), and increasing anti-LGBT sentiments in Poland (Soral et al., 2018).

However, the growing volume of research is not limited to recent societal events, and instead is part of a larger trend in which LGBTQ+-related research has become more visible in several areas of social psychology, including: social cognition (Carnaghi et al., 2021); antecedents and consequences of homonegativity (Bettinolli et al., 2020) and internalized sexual stigma (Salvati, Pellegrini, et al., 2021b); minority stress model (Meyer & Frost, 2013); self-concept and identity processes such as coming out (Mitha et al., 2021; Hinton et al., 2021); stereotypes and gender roles (Petsko & Bodenhausen, 2019; Salvati, Passarelli, et al., 2021; Valsecchi et al., 2020); objectification, and dehumanization processes (Breslow et al., 2020; Di Battista et al., 2020; Engeln-Maddox et al., 2011; Szymanski et al., 2019); social change and collective action to promote LGBTQ+ rights and gender equality (Chan & Mak, 2020; Earle et al., 2021); interpersonal and intergroup relationships (LaCosse & Plant, 2019; Paterson et al., 2019); same-sex couples and parenting (Costa et al., 2019; Rosenthal et al., 2019); sexual relationships and use of dating apps (Anderson et al., 2018; Cao & Smith, 2021; Guschlbauer et al., 2019; Hinton et al., 2019); intersectionality including multiple minority status (Anderson & Koc, 2020; Koc & Vignoles, 2016, 2018; Stragà et al., 2020); leadership (De Cristofaro et al., 2020; Fasoli & Hegarty, 2020; Pellegrini et al., 2020); social contexts as protective or harmful environments (Baams & Russell, 2021; Bagci et al., 2020); effects of Coronavirus emergency on LGBTQ+- people (Drabble, & Elia-son, 2021; Solomon et al., 2021). Overall, these studies have shown that there is higher acceptance of LGBTQ+- people around the world and more recognition of their rights; however, such progress shows a lot of variation across different countries and it is also vulnerable. Changing social structures and governments could easily bring back old-fashioned prejudices, or forms of discrimination and stigma could change in ways that make these harder to recognize and respond to appropriately. Combined, these circumstances highlight the need for more social psychological research. Hence the idea for this special issue emerged.

3 | What we still need to know: The contributions of this special issue

The current special issue collects nine contributions from researcher teams from all over the world, who tried to respond to LGBTQ+-research questions through the lens of social psychological theory, drawing on multiple studies and several methodologies, using different analytical strategies, and by collecting data from large samples of various sexual orientations and gender identities, ethnicities and nationalities, age, and employment status. This made it possible to overcome some of the major limitations affecting social psychological research, namely, the use of single studies, samples with low statistical power, and samples characterized by poor representativeness, often made up of wealthy heterosexual white students. The nine articles of this special issue address many of the topics mentioned above and provide important future research directions.
Specifically, Bettinsoli, Napier, and Carnaghi (2022) investigated whether the perception of gay affluence might lead people to be less concerned about anti-gay discrimination, via the beliefs in a gay agenda through three correlational and experimental studies (Ntot = 2162). The myth of gay affluence describes people’s idea that gay men and lesbian women are more affluent compared to their heterosexual counterparts, although the reality showed that gay and lesbian individuals face significant economic disparities compared to heterosexual ones. The authors showed that portraying gay people as affluent can lead individuals to deny discrimination, above and beyond anti-gay attitudes. This is mediated by the belief that there is a ‘gay agenda’ backed by powerful lobbyists. Such beliefs can have deleterious effects on efforts for social change and the promotion of rights for sexual minorities.

Morgenroth, Kirby, Cuthbert, Evje, and Anderson (2022) investigated the bisexual erasure hypothesis in relation to people’s perceptions of bisexual targets’ attraction patterns. Across three experiments (Ntot = 787), they tested whether bisexual men are perceived as more attracted to the same sex/gender, and bisexual women are perceived as more attracted to the opposite sex/gender. They presented participants with fake online dating profiles of “Sam” who identified as bisexual. They manipulated the gender/sx of the dating profiles with pictures and with explicit reference to their gender/sx. Then participants were asked to respond to a number of measures tapping same-sex/opposite-sex attraction patterns. The meta-analytical results showed that bisexual men were perceived to be more same-sex attracted than bisexual women. Moreover, bisexual men were judged to be more likely to choose someone of the same sex/gender for sexual encounters (but not romantic encounters) compared to bisexual women. However, no such pattern was found for bisexual women. These findings provide evidence for the unique bias faced by bisexual individuals and might explain why bisexual men are labelled as “actually gay” by others.

Schernerhorn and Vescio (2022) aimed at testing whether an imagined sexual advance from a gay man would constitute a threat to a straight man’s masculinity, leading to negative affect and compensatory acts. Through four experiments and a cross-cultural replication (Ntot = 1407), the authors indicated that perceiving a sexual advance from a gay man might sequentially lead to increased public discomfort, anger, and both non-aggressive and aggressive compensatory reactions. Compensatory reactions ranged from ideological reactions (e.g., hostile sexism, anti-gay prejudice) to avoidant attitudes (e.g., greater likelihood to physically distance from the gay man, decreased empathy for gay men and for women), and to the likelihood to engage in and the justification of semi-violent and violent behaviours.

Owumalam and Matos (2022) investigated, across three experimental studies (Ntot = 1475), whether heterosexual men downplayed their compassion more (vs. less) when they were cued to the masculinity (vs. femininity) of a male gay victim. Two alternative hypotheses were tested. On the one hand, the reactive distinctiveness hypothesis assumes that straight men would downplay their compassion more, when cued to a gay victim’s masculinity than their femininity. On the other hand, the feminization-threat hypothesis assumes that compassion downplays would be more visible when straight men are cued to a gay victim’s femininity. The results seem to support more strongly the reactive distinctiveness thesis, while the feminization-threat thesis received partial support when considering feminine (vs. masculine) straight, but not gay victims.

Kántás, Farágó, and Kovacs (2022), through a correlational and an experimental study (Ntot = 1152), aimed at exploring the mediating effect of modern sexism between sexual orientation and (prospective) children’s occupational interests, traits, and activities, considering the moderating effect of the perceived stability of the gender hierarchy. The authors showed that gay people were more likely to endorse gender-nonconforming occupations and activities for boys and girls through modern sexism, regardless of the perceived stability of the gender hierarchy. Heterosexual people generally tended to have gender-conforming parental preferences, although it also depended on the child’s gender. Modern sexism was found to be an important mediating mechanism. All groups were more flexible about boys’ gendered behaviour (but not the occupation preferences), while all participants—except for gay participants—supported more traditional gendered behaviour (but not the occupation preferences) for girls.

Rice, Hudson, and Noll (2022) examined the nature of sexual health-specific stereotypes towards gay men and lesbian women as well as the role of these assumptions in prejudice and discrimination. Specifically, through five studies using correlational designs with quantitative and qualitative data (Ntot = 1407), they showed that gay men were more closely associated with risky sexual behaviour and sexual transmitted infections (STIs) than heterosexual men, lesbian women, or heterosexual women, and more closely associated with promiscuity than heterosexual or lesbian women. Furthermore, gay and lesbian individuals were more likely to be implicitly associated with promiscuity and STIs than their heterosexual counterparts. The overall valence of participants’ descriptions of stereotypes about the sexual health of gay men was more negative than that of descriptions for the other groups, while the valence of responses about the sexual health of lesbians was more negative than about heterosexual men and heterosexual women. Participants felt the most prejudice, and were the most discriminatory, against gay people with STIs, compared to straight people with STIs, as well as compared to either gay or heterosexual people without STIs.

Evangelista, Lido, Swingler and Bohan (2022) investigated the campus climate in relation to prejudice, inclusion, and belonging in the UK and the Philippines using both mixed methods, a large quantitative investigation, and interviews and focus groups (Ntot = 3019). They found that LGBT+ students reported higher levels of harassment experiences on campus, more negative perceptions of campus climate (for LGBT+ inclusivity), lower levels of well-being, and higher levels of drop-out intentions. Although these effects also showed cross-national context differences, the effects were overall less favourable for LGBT+ students. Moreover, qualitative findings showed how campus can be a field for growth as well as regression for students. The authors also noted how LGBT+ students had different ways to cope with the non-inclusive campus climate in different national contexts, probably driven by the lack of recognition of LGBT+ student groups and policies in the Philippines. Finally, the authors made
several useful suggestions to increase campus belonging and inclusion through specific policies and programmes that target LGBTI+ students rather than non-specific inclusion activities done for ticking a list.

The first empirical evidence for "The Best Little Boy in the World" hypothesis, which suggests that young sexual minority men cope with stigma by strongly investing in achievement-related success, was brought by Pachankis and Hatzenbuehler in 2013. In this special issue, Blankenship and Stewart (2022) extended this work by testing whether this hypothesis equally applies to both sexual minority men and women, and other domains of success. Across two studies using correlational methods (Ntot = 412), they tested this idea in domains of academic-related contingencies of self-worth (Study 1) and extrinsic life aspirations and occupational values (Study 2) with both college students and an MTurk sample. They used an internalized sexual prejudice measure instead of external stigma measures such as anti-gay laws or society-level measures of LGBTQ+ acceptance. They found that internalized sexual prejudice predicted higher academic contingencies of self-worth equally both for sexual minority men and women at college (Study 1). Similarly, among the MTurk workers, internalized sexual prejudice predicted higher competition-based contingencies of self-worth, higher extrinsic occupational values (e.g., financial rewards), and higher extrinsic life aspirations (e.g., popularity, positive image) both for sexual minority men and women at similar levels. This is a nice extension of the hypothesis for showing (a) this effect is valid for other sexual minorities not only for male sexual minorities, and (b) how subjective feelings of stigma could have important consequences for psychological processes of sexual minority individuals.

Uysal, Uluğ, Kanık and Aydemir (2022) examined the underlying predictors of heterosexual feminist women's participation in solidarity-based collective action for LGBTQ+ rights. Across three studies using correlational methods (Ntot = 1065), they found that feminist identification as a politicized ingroup identity and strategic intra-minority alliance consistently predicted collective action for LGBTQ+ rights among heterosexual feminist women. In Study 3, they included two other identifications to measure women's identification with their gender and their sexual orientation beyond feminist identification, and they found that feminist identification was still a positive predictor of collective action, while heterosexual identification was a negative (albeit weak) predictor of collective action and women identification was not a significant predictor. They argued that this could be due to the high status of heterosexual identity and therefore higher motivation to protect the interests of the advantaged group. On the other hand, perceived discrimination towards LGBTQ+ was also a positive predictor of collective action only in Study 2. This relationship was significant perhaps because the data for Study 2 were collected around the Pride celebrations in Turkey when the LGBTQ+ group experienced severe oppression from the government and their disadvantage was very salient for other groups. This inconclusive finding clearly requires further investigation.

4 Limitations of this special issue

We would like to address some limitations of this special issue. First of all, even though we aimed to attract and represent research addressing issues related to the social psychology of the LGBTQ+ community, the majority of our articles focused on issues related to the experiences of gay men. Out of nine articles, two articles specifically focused on gay men, four articles focused on gay men and lesbian women together, two articles broadly focused on LGBTQ+ issues, while only one article focused on bisexual people. This ratio probably corresponds to the dominance of existing research about gay men in the field, as well as the visibility of gay male researchers, and therefore maintains the relative scarcity of research about the other groups that constitute the LGBTQ+ acronym. For this reason, we make a specific call for a shift in research towards groups that are not adequately represented in the body of social psychological work on LGBTQ+ issues. Moreover, and regrettably, in this special issue we have no articles addressing issues faced by trans people. Even though we received four proposals on such issues, these were single-study articles and were therefore also less strong in relation to the publication criteria for the European Journal of Social Psychology. Accordingly, we did not invite these contributions for further consideration. This is a serious concern and we hope that there will be more research investigating and tackling the issues faced by trans people. Otherwise, we need to be more careful when we talk about "LGBTQ+ research" because most visible research in the field represents gay and lesbian in the acronym, and largely ignores trans people, as well as various other the identity groups contained under "+". This can lead to the experiences of trans people, and those whose identities fall outside heterosexual–homosexual and male–female binaries, to become invisible and ignored. Future special issues should perhaps also relax the typical multi-study criteria for publication to give space for research with under-researched and hard-to-reach populations that may (for very good reasons) not be able to meet this particular standard.

Another limitation concerns the sexual orientation of samples. Even though we aimed to provide a space for the social psychology of LGBTQ+, the samples represented in this special issue are largely heterosexual. Only one article includes exclusively sexual minority samples, three other articles include both sexual minority and heterosexual samples, while five articles only have heterosexual samples. Given the nature of the research questions, these samples are appropriate to increase our insights into the issues faced by the LGBTQ+ community; however, it also shows the dominance of majority voices on issues regarding the minoritized LGBTQ+ community. Another limitation regards the origin of the samples. The majority of the articles have samples from the US, the UK, and Canada. Three articles have samples from relatively disadvantaged countries including Hungary, Turkey, and the Philippines. On the one hand, we can acknowledge that recruiting LGBTQ+ people may not be easy for most researchers, especially in contexts where LGBTQ+ people may not be open about their identities. On the other hand, we must consider other structural barriers for
why research with LGBTQ+ people might be limited. As a field, it is our task to find ways to recruit samples of LGBTQ+ people that are not limited to certain geographic or cultural contexts. Perhaps collaborations across different research labs and having discussions about how to achieve recruitment of LGBTQ+ participants in traditional cultural contexts (e.g., Koc, 2016) might provide solutions.

Finally, we would like to acknowledge some of the methodological limitations of this issue. Although we managed to receive several studies using correlational and experimental designs, we only had one article including qualitative data as part of a mixed methods study. It is important that we also do more qualitative work that gives voice to the experiences of marginalized individuals and space to their own interpretations of their experiences. In addition, we had no article with a longitudinal design that might provide insight into the dynamic fluctuations of gender and sexual identities. The reason for this might be similar to the other limitations that it is hard to recruit LGBTQ+ samples. Overall, we need to make stronger efforts to voice the experiences of each member group of the LGBTQ+ and we need to do this by employing multiple methods. Otherwise, we will only have research focusing on how the majority perceives or interacts with LGBTQ+ people and we will miss out on their own experiences.

5 | A look to the future of LGBTQ+ social psychology

We proposed this special issue in the hope that it could contribute to giving more presence to LGBTQ+ issues within social psychological knowledge, while also offering a useful cue to deepen and expand the study of social processes and contexts. Although more research is needed, results presented here provide new insights by advancing knowledge on LGBTQ+ issues as well as constituting a good starting point for promoting social progress in practice. Here, we propose a number of other areas where we believe more research is needed to advance the field of social psychology of sexual orientations and gender identities in future directions.

As outlined in the limitations, we need more research into the social psychology of trans people. Even though visibility of trans people and public awareness about transgender or gender-variant people have increased, trans people continue to face negative attitudes, harassment, and discrimination (Lombardi, 2009; Miller & Grollman, 2015; Stotzer, 2008). Some key issues trans people experience include health disparities, civil rights, and safety issues. There is some emerging research looking at how identity related factors such as affirmation protect well-being against discrimination (Doyle et al., 2021), how relationships can be a resource for coping (Lewis et al., 2021), and how existing models like Minority Stress Model (i.e., Meyer, 2015) can help understand experiences of trans people (Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Scandurra et al., 2015). More research is needed to understand and change the stereotypes and prejudice against trans people, and to identify the social mechanisms they find useful for their identities, health, and well-being (see Sherman et al., 2020).

We need more research on collective action among LGBTQ+ individuals. There are many ways to cope with stigma and discrimination. Most research focuses on identifying and teaching ways to build resilience among already marginalized LGBTQ+ groups to cope with the stigma (Bourguignon et al., 2020; Colpitts & Gahagan, 2016; Schmitz & Tyler, 2019; Woodford et al., 2018). However, resilience alone without the improvement of societal structures only further increases the difficulties experienced by LGBTQ+ people (see Koc, 2021; Meyer, 2015). Therefore, it is important to focus on resistance among LGBTQ+ people both to help their psychological well-being and to improve their status (Chan & Mak, 2021; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Koc et al., 2022).

We need more research on the psychology of LGBTQ+ in the organizational context. Previous studies show that bias against LGBTQ+ people in the workplace still remains (e.g., Barron & Hebl, 2013; D’Augelli & Grossman, 2001). Surveys show that one in four LGB employees reported workplace discrimination; but this number increases to one in three when the employees are out at work (Sears & Mallory, 2011). Several studies have tried to identify ways to increase LGBTQ+ people’s positive workplace experiences (Baker & Lucas, 2017; Lim et al., 2019; Melson-Silimon et al., 2020). More research is needed to understand the organizational climates that can enhance the experiences of LGBTQ+ people, help them to be out and authentic at workplace, or identify ways they can break the gay glass ceiling (e.g., Aksoy et al., 2019; Koc et al., 2021; Salvati et al., 2021b).

We also need more research on the social psychology of changing dynamics of romantic relationships among LGBTQ+ people. One interesting topic is non-traditional relationships like consensual non-monogamy. Even though it has become more popular among LGBTQ+ people (Steward et al., 2021), its effect on the community has not yet been explored extensively. For instance, going beyond the emerging research about gay and bisexual fatherhood (e.g., Carneiro et al., 2017), novel research can explore how consensual non-monogamy, (co-)parenting, and children’s outcomes are related to one another. Moreover, previous research shows that being in a relationship can be a protective factor for mental health among gay men (Hinton et al., 2019); future research can investigate how non-traditional relationship forms affect psychological functioning and well-being.

Overall, we highlighted some gaps in the research by both focusing on what is missing in this special issue and what we would like to see developing in the field. We acknowledge that there are more topics to consider (e.g., safer sex practices, stigma around HIV-positive people, ageing and LGBTQ+ identity, intersectionality with other marginalized or privileged identities), and we hope this special issue will contribute to the existing literature and inspire more work in the social psychology of LGBTQ+.
and gender identities and helped us write this introduction. Of course, we also extend our acknowledgement to all the authors who decided to send their contributions to this special issue and to all the reviewers who agreed to review the numerous manuscripts received. Almost 60 proposals for contributions to this special issue were initially received, testifying to the growing interest and commitment of the scientific community towards LGBTQ+ issues. As guest-editors we were delighted and honoured to have had the opportunity to offer an editorial space to LGBTQ+ social psychology, hoping that spaces like this will be more and more numerous. Thanks again to everyone for the trust placed in us.

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