

**Blurring Social Categories Hinders Structural Change: When Cisheterosexual People  
Evade Difference and Dissociate from their Identity amidst Inequality**

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Materials, data and code can be accessed at

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**Keywords:** Diversity ideologies, advantaged identity strategies, intergroup inequality, policy preferences, cisheterosexuality.

## **Abstract**

Facing inequality can bring the differences among social groups to light and propel people to address inequality. However, living in an unequal world and acknowledging it does not necessarily translate into structurally addressing inequality. We examine advantaged group members' attitudes and identity dynamics regarding difference when facing inequality. By investigating the intergroup context of sexual orientation and gender identity, we aim to uncover when and why members of the advantaged social group (i.e., cisheterosexual people) facing inequality deflect from addressing it structurally and prefer individual-level policies instead. Two preregistered, well-powered experiments ( $N = 2364$ ) provided two novel contributions. First, we show evidence of the causal role of inequality in advantaged group members' tendency to evade difference when dissociating from their identity. Second, evading difference could lead to prefer individual-level solutions instead of supporting structural change. Complementing the notion that advantaged groups channel antiegalitarian motives by blatant differentiation, we conclude by arguing that advantaged groups can also channel an antiegalitarian outlook by evading difference and discuss the implications of these findings.

Addressing inequality does not necessarily foster substantive equality. In the realm of sexual orientation and gender identity—SOGI—, for instance, equalising laws aimed at individual freedoms and dignity (e.g., equal marriage, anti-discrimination) have often taken precedence over enshrining collective rights (e.g., sex education, transgender employment quota) (Spade, 2015). While where these equalising laws were passed coincided with the narrowing of SOGI wage gaps (Drydakis, 2022) and increased acceptance towards LGB+ people (Aksoy et al., 2020), these and other inequality indicators stagnated or worsened over time. Recent reports confirm these trends. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has recently revealed enduring structural inequalities based on SOGI in cultural, health, and employment sectors across state members (OECD, 2019, 2020; Valfort, 2017). Also, the Council of Europe recently documented rising human rights violations against LGBTQ people in the region and called for urgent action (Ben Chikha, 2021). In this light, we explore the notion that a formal equality approach to SOGI centering individuals might backfire when it psychologically blurs the social categories of the groups concerned—cisheterosexual and LGBTQ people.

Claiming the achievement of individuals' equality before society once equalising laws are enacted, might thus divert attention from enduring SOGI structural inequality and the need of addressing it. In this study, we examine cisheterosexual people's attitudes and identity dynamics in response to SOGI inequality and assess whether conflating equality with the notion that SOGI 'should not matter' might allow some to reject attempts for addressing inequalities structurally. We do so in the Netherlands, a well-known country for having pioneered same-sex marriage—the most championed liberal project concerning equality of LGBTQ people.

### **Social Categories, Inequality, and Policy Preferences**

People navigate social life by employing social categories. People's usage of social categories denotes differences between those who belong to the category and those who do not when these are seen as larger than the differences among those within the category (Turner et al., 1987). The salience of a social category is thus deemed a relational and comparative process that cements ingroup/outgroup relations (Oakes, 1987) and shapes people's own social identity in turn (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As such, social categories allow individuals to undertake social action by systematizing the social world and, at the same time, orient self-reference by defining the individual's societal position. Which group becomes salient, when, and its meaning thus changes as a function of the dynamic relationship between individuals and the values and norms imbuing their interactional contexts (Turner & Reynolds, 2011). A context imbued by values and norms conflating equality with the notion that SOGI 'should not matter' might thus psychologically reflect into blurring the social categories of the groups at hand and, thereby, hindering social action concerning those groups' features.

Facing SOGI inequality, however, might bring social categories back to the surface. For instance, research on economic inequality in the U.K. showed that Facing it increased people's usage of wealth categories (e.g., rich and poor) (Peters et al., 2022; Study 4). This suggests that social categories' usage in terms of socioeconomic groups was more likely as economic inequality was higher. At the same time, research in Australia and the U.K. showed that reporting higher economic inequality was related to preference for structural-level policy (vs individual-level behavioral policy) to mitigate climate change (Klebl & Jetten, 2024). As such, we reason that facing SOGI inequality might arguably lead some cisheterosexual people to support structural-level policies fostering substantive equality instead of individual-level behavioral ones.

While acknowledging inequality might relate to preferring structural policies to mitigate changes looming as detrimentally affecting humanity as a whole (i.e., climate change), this does not mechanically translate into supporting structural-level policies aimed at addressing *group-based inequalities*. In the racial intergroup setting of the U.S., for instance, cross-sectional evidence has shown that people acknowledging racial inequality were likely to support structural-level change (i.e., by endorsing affirmative action) only when they also acknowledged difference (i.e., by rejecting ‘I don’t see color but people’ tropes) (Mekawi et al., 2020). Moreover, experimental evidence in the U.S. has demonstrated that subtle antiegalitarians can strategically evade difference under the guise of equality to endorse equal treatment and, thereby, deter structural-level change aimed at improving Black people’s lives (Chow & Knowles, 2016; Knowles et al., 2009). While previous work in the U.S. has documented a strong association between holding an antiegalitarian outlook (i.e., right-wing conservatism) with strong beliefs in fundamental differences between gay and straight people (Hoyt et al., 2019), we argue that antiegalitarian motives can be also channeled by endorsing difference evasion in the SOGI context of the Netherlands.

### **Advantaged Identity Strategies and Difference Evasion**

Whether advantaged group members evade difference or stress it to channel antiegalitarian motives might hinge on how they manage their advantaged social identity. Classic social-psychological work posited that people managed their social identity to achieve or maintain a positive self-esteem. In turn, it followed to answer how oppressed and disadvantaged group members managed their social identity to achieve positive self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In doing so, advantaged group members were often posited to derive their self-esteem from directly identifying with their already advantaged social status and, thereby, *differentiating* themselves from other groups by the social comparison process of categorization. In other words, antiegalitarian motives were deemed to be coupled with

increased differentiation. We complement previous work equating antiegalitarianism with differentiation by drawing on work broadening the scope of advantaged identity strategies (Goren & Plaut, 2012; Leach et al., 2001; Shuman et al., 2024). As such, we exploratorily address the notion that some cisheterosexual people might channel antiegalitarian motives by dissociating from their advantaged social identity and, thereby, endorsing difference evasion. In particular, we speculated that some cisheterosexual individuals facing SOGI inequality might dissociate (e.g., ‘I don’t have a gender identity, I’m just normal’) and to endorse difference evasion by *not employing SOGI categories* but also by *emphasizing sameness* (e.g., by describing another person’s life and their own as ‘just being an average, normal person’). In downplaying and blurring their own and others’ social identities in response to SOGI inequality, cisheterosexual people may lean toward individual-level behavioral policies over structural-level changes to address inequality.

Drawing on economic inequality and diversity ideologies literature, Study 1 hypotheses were as follows.

H1. Cisheterosexual people will show lower difference evasion in higher inequality than in lower inequality.

H2. Right-wing political orientation will positively predict difference evasion.

H3. Right-wing individuals will endorse *greater* difference evasion in response to higher SOGI inequality in comparison to lower SOGI inequality, reflecting the role of evading difference as a coping mechanism amidst SOGI inequality.

H4.a. Endorsing higher difference evasion in response to SOGI inequality will increase support for individual-level behavioral policy rather than for structural-level change (e.g., ‘Running a campaign to reduce individuals’ prejudices against LGBTQ+ people’ over

‘Establishing a Ministry of Equality to provide material support, networking and advocacy opportunities to LGBT+ individuals’).

H4.b. Conversely, lower difference evasion in response to SOGI inequality will increase support for structural-level change.

### **The Present Research**

In Study 1, we implemented a 2x2 between-subjects experimental design drawing on previous work manipulating perceptions of socioeconomic inequality (Peters et al., 2022). Our design involved, firstly, manipulating participants’ perceptions of SOGI inequality in the Netherlands by comparing it to other European countries (i.e., Higher Inequality vs Lower Inequality), followed up by introducing participants to a person’s life in the Netherlands (i.e., Queer vs Cishet Character). The SOGI inequality manipulation was pre-validated in a Pilot Study ( $N = 200$ ) (see the supplemental materials). Extending on Study 1 findings and enhancing experimental validity, Study 2 implements a 3x2 between-subjects design by incorporating a Control condition.

Expanding on the original experimental paradigm by Peters et al., (2022), we operationalize difference evasion both as scale (adapting color evasion measure by Knowles et al., 2009) and by uncovering participants’ categories usage when describing another person’s life and their own through computational text analysis. As such, *higher* (lower) *difference* evasion would be reflected in *higher* (lower) *scale’s scores*, in *employing* (not employing) *sameness* categories, and in *not employing* (employing) *SOGI* categories. Diverging from our preregistered analysis plan and echoing calls to complement scales with participants’ meaning-making (Bauer et al., 2017), we included throughout our analyses difference evasion both as scale and as social categories, participants’ reported SOGI inequality, and character’s identity condition. In our opinion, this approach has two

advantages that make our analyses more robust. Firstly, we control for potential interaction effects between variables and experimental manipulations. Secondly, we explore whether and how difference evasion as scale might relate to categories' usage depending on context of social comparison (i.e., Inequality Condition and Character's Identity). We thereby opted to ran multiple regression analyses for most of our hypotheses instead of ANOVAs as preregistered.

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## Study 1

### Methods

#### Participants

769 participants were recruited on the online survey platforms *Prolific.co* and *Cloudresearch*. Data collection on *Prolific.co* took place from June 21<sup>st</sup> to September 19<sup>th</sup> 2023, and on *Cloudresearch* from 24<sup>rd</sup> June to 21<sup>st</sup> July 2023. Participants were recruited from different sources to broaden the scope of participants' demographics as those from *Prolific.co* were significantly younger ( $M = 28.01$ ,  $CI\ 95\% [26.39-29.64]$ ) than those from *Cloudresearch* ( $M = 40.38$ ,  $95\%\ CI\ [38.98, 41.78]$ ). Participants were paid €2,60 on average for their time. 205 participants were excluded ( $N = 96$  did not pass the quality check,  $N = 1$  was younger than 16 years old, and  $N = 109$  self-identified as LGBTQ). Deviating from the preregistered exclusion criteria, participants between 16 years old and 18 years old were