THE SOCIAL STUDY | LISTEN LEARN CHANGE

The Social Study Second Conference

4 December 2026

Hoek 38, Rue de Louvain 38, Brussels

PROGRAMME

9:00 Welcome and coffee/tea

9:30 Introduction

Marc Swyngedouw (KU Leuven)

9:40 The Social Study today and tomorrow: Infrastructure usage and panel refreshment strategy

Audrey Vandeleene (ULB) and Amelie Van Pottelberge (UGent)

10:00 **Session 1: Commissioned Questionnaires research**

Chair: Juliette Crespin Boucaud (UNamur)

1. **Who Decides When Things Become Difficult? Family Involvement in Mental Health Decision-Making** – Amina Yakhlaf (UAntwerp)
2. **From Perception to Action: Cognitive, Motivational and Ideological Moderators of the Link Between Perceived Ethnic Discrimination and Intentions to Challenge It** – Katrín Árnadóttir (KU Leuven), Jasper Van Assche (ULB), Claudia Diehl (University of Konstanz), Karen Phalet (KU Leuven)
3. **Minoritized identities as potential drivers of intended action to challenge ethnic discrimination through experiences and awareness of inequity** – Eren Aslı Tekin (KU Leuven), Katrín Árnadóttir (KU Leuven) and Karen Phalet (KU Leuven)

11:00 Coffee break

11:30 **Session 2: Commissioned Questionnaires research**

Chair: Dimokritos Kavadias (VUB)

1. **Nature connectedness in Flanders: measurement and relevance** – Charlotte Noël (Research Institute for Nature and Forest (INBO)) and Dries Verlet (Statistics Flanders)
2. **What is the relationship between perceived and measurable features of the lived environment?** – Benoît Lebrin (KU Leuven), Olena Holubowska (University of Neuchâtel), Céline Van Migerode (KU Leuven) and Juliette Le Corguillé (KU Leuven)
3. **Mapping experienced ageism across the life span: An intersectional analysis of the Social Study 2024 in Belgium** – Eva Vangilberge (ULB), Bram Vanhoutte (ULB), Liesbeth De Donder (VUB)

12:30 Lunch break

13:30 **Session 3: Commissioned Questionnaires research**

Chair: John Lievens (UGent)

1. **Dangerous Words? How Voters Evaluate the Democratic Threat of Hostile Political Rhetoric** – Jérémy Dodeigne (UNamur), Chiara Vargiu (VU) & Alessandro Nai (UvA)
2. **Public Opinion and Parental Attitudes Towards Sexuality Education in Belgium** – Nina Van Eekert, Lise Rosquin and Cecil Meeusen (KU Leuven)
3. **How to catch the wind of change?** – Dries Verlet (Statistics Flanders), Ann Carton (Statistics Flanders), and Geert Molenberghs (UHasselt)

14:30 **Keynote lecture: From Questions to Conclusions: Where Does AI Fit in Survey Research?**

Thomas Robinson (London School of Economics)

15:30 Coffee break

16:00 **Session 4: TSS Early-stage researcher award winners**

Chairs: Ellen Van Droogenbroeck (VUB) and Koen Declercq (UCLouvain)

1. Junior award winner: Eduardo Antonio Bracho Montes De Oca (UCLouvain / Universiteit Gent / Sciensano) – **What do Belgians value in telework? A discrete choice experiment on hybrid work arrangements, autonomy and sustainable employability**
2. Senior award winner: Katrín Árnadóttir (ULB / KU Leuven) – **Solidarity-based action with/for migrants: Antecedents, shifts, and actual behavior**

16:30 What's next?

Jean-Benoit Pilet (ULB) and Bart Meuleman (KU Leuven)

16:45 Reception and networking

More information and registration:

https://thesocialstudy.be/2026/10/22/the-social-study-second-conference/

ABSTRACTS

Who Decides When Things Become Difficult? Family Involvement in Mental Health Decision-Making

Amina Yakhlaf (UAntwerp)

Medical decision-making is often conceptualized as an interaction between the patient and healthcare professional, yet treatment decisions are frequently embedded in wider family relationships. This study examines preferences for family involvement in mental health decision-making and investigates whether these preferences vary according to depression severity and migration background.

Using data from The Social Study, respondents were presented with a vignette describing either mild or severe depression and asked about their preferred role of family members in treatment decisions on a five-point Likert scale. We then recoded these responses into three categories: patient-led, shared with family, or family-led decision-making. We examined differences by vignette severity and migration background and used ordered logistic regression models to test whether familial norms, social support networks, institutional trust, and healthcare satisfaction were associated with preferences for family involvement. Mediation analyses further explored potential mechanisms underlying migration-related differences.

Patient-led decision-making remained the dominant preference, but willingness to involve family increased as depression became more severe. Migration-related differences were particularly pronounced in the mild depression condition, with respondents born outside Belgium showing greater preferences for family involvement. Familial norms and the availability of trusted social ties were associated with these preferences, although they did not fully account for migration-related differences.

The findings suggest that preferences for family involvement are both socially embedded and context-dependent. They highlight the importance of understanding patient autonomy not necessarily as deciding alone, but as allowing patients to determine whether, whom, and how they want others involved in medical decision-making.

From Perception to Action: Cognitive, Motivational and Ideological Moderators of the Link Between Perceived Ethnic Discrimination and Intentions to Challenge It

Katrín Árnadóttir (KU Leuven), Jasper Van Assche (ULB), Claudia Diehl (University of Konstanz), Karen Phalet (KU Leuven)

In many increasingly diverse societies, members of ethnically, racially, and religiously minoritized groups – such as Muslims and people of color in majority-White and non-Muslim European societies – face persistent discrimination. Yet, discrimination often goes unchallenged, for instance because individuals view unequal treatment based on group membership as isolated incidents rather than a systemic issue that needs to be addressed as such, or because they lack the personal motivation to act. Alternatively, some individuals may acknowledge discrimination but refrain from acting because they endorse group-based hierarchies, believing dominant groups deserve preferential treatment.

Against this backdrop, this preregistered study examines under which conditions perceptions of ethnic discrimination translate into intentions to challenge it and promote minority inclusion. Drawing on data from "The Social Study" (TSS) – including a dedicated module with newly developed measures commissioned by some of the authors, we surveyed a probability sample of individuals residing in Flanders (N = 2,581, 18-92 years, Mage = 49.98, SDage = 18.16, 53.4% women, 46.6% men). Perceptions of ethnic discrimination were measured using relatively concrete scenarios (e.g., an employer opting not to hire a Muslim employee over concerns customers won't like it). Intended action was measured both in terms of intended "interpersonal" actions (e.g., supporting a victim, confronting the perpetrator) and "institutional" actions (e.g., attending protests, supporting anti-discrimination policies). Furthermore, we tested three individual-level moderators of the association between perceived ethnic discrimination and intended action to challenge it, representing cognitive, motivational, and ideological factors, respectively: (i) awareness of systemic disadvantage of Muslims in Belgium, (ii) personal commitment to challenge discrimination and racism, and (iii) Social Dominance Orientation (SDO).

As hypothesized, the positive association between perceived ethnic discrimination and intended institutional action was stronger among individuals with higher systemic awareness, higher commitment to challenge discrimination and racism, and lower SDO. In contrast, perceived ethnic discrimination was positively associated with intended interpersonal action regardless of these individual factors, suggesting that distinct psychological processes may drive everyday interpersonal interventions versus action aimed at challenging discrimination at a broader institutional or societal level.

Minoritized identities as potential drivers of intended action to challenge ethnic discrimination through experiences and awareness of inequity

Eren Aslı Tekin (KU Leuven), Katrín Árnadóttir (KU Leuven) and Karen Phalet (KU Leuven)

Ethnic discrimination – defined here as the unequal treatment or outcomes for ethnically minoritized groups – is a systemic feature of intergroup relations with designated 'migrants' or 'Muslims' in European societies (Safi, 2020). Looking beyond minoritized groups solely as possible targets of discrimination, our analyses center minoritized identities (e.g., based on ethnicity, gender or sexual orientation) as potential drivers of resistance to systemic inequities. Bridging identity processes with literatures on critical consciousness and allyship, we expect that minoritized persons (i) will more likely be exposed to discrimination, either firsthand as primary targets, or vicariously when close others are targeted (experiential route); and that they (ii) will more likely be aware of structural inequality in society (awareness-based route), both of which will make them more likely to take action to challenge ethnic discrimination or to mitigate its consequences.

Drawing on data from "The Social Study" (TSS; Van Pottelberge et al., 2025) – including a dedicated module with newly developed measures commissioned by the current authors, we surveyed a probability sample of individuals residing in Flanders (N = 2,581; Mage = 49.98, SDage = 18.16; 12.8% with a migration background, 53.2% women, 6.9% sexual minorities). We first examine minoritized identities along ethnic lines, hypothesizing that ethnic minorities with a migration background will be more likely than ethnically privileged individuals to take action against ethnic discrimination, through experience- and awareness-based pathways. Next, we extend the analyses to ethnic majorities' minoritized identities as potential catalysts for allyship. Adopting an intersectional perspective, we consider that ethnic privilege may intersect with other minoritized positions (e.g., gender- or sexual orientation-based). Drawing on the concept of intersectional allyship (Curtin et al., 2015), we propose that these minoritized positions may enable ethnically privileged individuals to recognize interlocking systems of oppression beyond their ingroup, making them more likely to challenge ethnic discrimination, via the same experience- and awareness-based pathways (cf. Figure 1).

To test our hypotheses, we will test path models with minoritized identities at Time 1, and with experiences of discrimination, awareness of systemic inequity, and intended actions at Time 2. Intended action is measured both in terms of intended "interpersonal" actions (e.g., supporting a victim, confronting the perpetrator) and "institutional" actions (e.g., attending protests, supporting anti-discrimination policies). Predictors are minoritized identities, measured as self-identified ethnic origin (migration background, based on country of birth and parentage), social class (subjective SES), gender (men vs. women, other), and sexual orientation (heterosexual vs. sexual minority). Discrimination experiences were measured as (1) self-reported firsthand discrimination experiences on any ground and (2) witnessing ethnic discrimination. Awareness of inequity was measured as perceptions of relative privilege, disadvantage, and inequality in interethnic relations.

Preliminary findings associate both ethnically and otherwise minoritized identities with higher levels of discrimination experiences (firsthand and witnessed) and awareness of inequality, which were in turn linked to intended actions (interpersonal and institutional). Future analyses will explore multiple grounds and various appraisals of discrimination experiences. To conclude, we find preliminary support for (1) extending the role of minoritized identities beyond the ethnic minority–majority binary to include gender, sexual orientation, and class identities intersecting with ethnic privilege, and for (2) experiential and awareness-based pathways linking minoritized identities to critical action against ethnic discrimination. This pattern of findings suggests that minoritized identities may foster intersectional allyship against discrimination, arguably by exposing interlocking systems of oppression within and beyond one's ingroup.

Nature connectedness in Flanders: measurement and relevance

Charlotte Noël (Research Institute for Nature and Forest (INBO)) and Dries Verlet (Statistics Flanders)

Nature connectedness refers to the extent to which people consider nature to be part of their identity. Previous research shows that a strong nature connectedness is not only associated with better physical and mental well-being – such as more life satisfaction and fewer feelings of depression or anxiety – but also with greater support for nature conservation and more environmentally friendly behaviour. Nature connectedness is therefore important both for the well-being of people and for the protection of nature. Until now, however, figures on the degree of nature connectedness in Flanders were lacking.

Based on a survey of more than 3,000 Flemish people via The Social Study, we measured (1) Based on the Inclusion of Nature in Self Scale (INS) and the Nature Connection Index (NCI), how nature-connected the Flemish are and (2) which characteristics characterize the nature-connected Flemish people. In addition, we investigated the relationship between nature connectedness and (3) well-being, measured through general life satisfaction and feelings and thoughts about environmental and climate problems, and (4) environmentally friendly behaviour and attitudes towards different animal species in Flanders and in their own living environment.

The results show that about half of the Flemish people experience a high degree of nature connectedness. Older generations feel more connected to nature. In addition, the analyses provide two important insights. Firstly, a higher nature connectedness is related to higher general life satisfaction. At the same time, people with a high degree of nature connectedness also report significantly more climate anxiety, existential concerns, and negative feelings about environmental and climate issues. A strong connection with nature therefore seems to not only make people more resilient, but also makes them more sensitive to the consequences of the ecological crisis. Secondly, a higher connection to nature is associated with more environmentally friendly behaviour and greater support for the presence of different animals – but not invasive alien species - in Flanders and in one's own living environment.

What is the relationship between perceived and measurable features of the lived environment?

Benoît Lebrin (KU Leuven), Olena Holubowska (University of Neuchâtel), Céline Van Migerode (KU Leuven) and Juliette Le Corguillé (KU Leuven)

It is well-documented in social sciences research that people's behaviors, attitudes, and levels of satisfaction—such as voting behavior or opinions on migration—vary across space. This highlights the importance of people's lived environment in shaping how they think, act, and feel. These spatial patterns are often interpreted through an urban–rural lens and analyzed using data collected for administrative purposes or generated through GIS models or travel-time calculations. As a result, empirical studies often link social outcomes to measurable features of the environment. While these methods produce standardized and replicable results, they often neglect a crucial element: how people subjectively perceive their lived environment.

Our project aims to compare people's perceptions of their environment with researcher-defined operationalizations that are commonly used in quantitative research and policymaking. Specifically, we focus on four dimensions: a) whether people characterize their neighborhood as urban, suburban or rural, b) how they perceive the level of diversity of their neighborhood, c) how they perceive accessibility to destinations of daily activities, and d) how they perceive accessibility to spaces of social interaction.

Through this approach, we seek to answer the following research questions: To what extent are people's perceptions of their lived environment aligned with measurable characteristics of their environment? Which socio-economic groups exhibit the largest gaps between perceived and measured characteristics? To tackle these questions, we are drawing on questions placed in the June 2026 wave of the social survey, gauging people's subjective assessments of their local environment. The responses are then compared with administrative data and GIS-based measures, allowing us to analyze where and how strongly perceptual and measured representations diverge.

Mapping experienced ageism across the life span: An intersectional analysis of the Social Study 2024 in Belgium

Eva Vangilberge (ULB), Bram Vanhoutte (ULB), Liesbeth De Donder (VUB)

Background: Recent empirical evidence demonstrates the pervasiveness of ageism across the life span, affecting not only older adults but also younger and middle-aged individuals. Ageism is one of the last socially condoned forms of discrimination in society and encompasses stereotypes, prejudices, and discriminatory behaviors based on a person's actual or perceived age. Importantly, experienced ageism rarely occurs in isolation; rather, it intersects with other forms of discrimination and their underlying systems of oppression, potentially amplifying these effects. The objective of this study is to map experienced ageism through an intersectional lens across the life span.

Methods Data come from The Social Study 2024 (n = 4,080), combining the core study with a commissioned questionnaire including the eight-item Perceived Ageism Questionnaire (PAQ-8). A confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) assessed the scale, followed by a comparison between a linear regression with interaction effects and a Multilevel Analysis of Individual Heterogeneity and Discriminatory Accuracy (MAIHDA; variables: age, gender, migration background, and subjective social position).

Results After minor adjustments, the CFA showed acceptable fit and supports the use of PAQ-8 across all age groups (CFI = 0.949, TLI = 0.940, RMSEA = 0.056, SRMR = 0.062). Experienced ageism was highest among younger (15-24 years; B = 0.55) and older adults (75+ years; B = 0.22) and individuals with a low subjective social position (B = 0.43). Women reported slightly higher levels of experienced ageism than men (B = 0.05), while migration remained insignificant. MAIHDA indicated that most variation was explained by additive rather than intersectional effects (PCV = 95%).

Conclusions Experienced ageism occurs across the life span but is most pronounced among individuals at the younger and older ends of the age spectrum and those with lower socioeconomic standing. Although strong intersectional effects were not observed, differences between social positions remain evident, underscoring the importance of an intersectional perspective when studying ageism.

Dangerous Words? How Voters Evaluate the Democratic Threat of Hostile Political Rhetoric

Jérémy Dodeigne (UNamur), Chiara Vargiu (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam) and Alessandro Nai (University of Amsterdam)

Hostile rhetoric has become increasingly prominent in contemporary democracies, as elite polarization has extended beyond policy disagreement to encompass inflammatory language, personal attacks, and explicit expressions of prejudice against rival groups. This shift toward toxic discourse coincides with episodes of political violence worldwide, raising concerns about the extent to which elite communication may foster supporters' radicalization and propensity for violence. Drawing on a fine-grained measurement framework comprising 16 indicators from the Political Hostility Scale(PHoS-16), this study examines how voters perceive varying levels of hostile rhetoric and the extent to which they view such rhetoric as a threat to democracy. The study relies on a conjoint experiment with a Belgian representative sample (n=3,776, covering 2,459 Flemish respondents and 1,317 French-speakers respondents). All 39,344 vignettes of hostility vary along four main attributes: (1) escalating levels of hostile rhetoric (PHoS-16 indicators); (2) party affiliation of the perpetrator and (3) party affiliation of the victim, and (4) gender of the victim. The results reveal confirm four hypotheses regarding heterogeneity in hostility perceptions across individual-level political attitudes (respondents' left-right positioning), socio-demographic profiles (gender and age of respondents), party cueing (party proximity with the perpetrator and the target), and affective polarization (social distance towards targeted outgroups). Contrary to our hypothesis, varying understanding of democracy (liberal, majoritarian, or authoritarian views) has hardly any effect on respondents' evaluation. Finally, our papers confirms cross-regional variation (hostility being perceived are less dangerous in Flanders than in Wallonia-Brussels), which suggest evidence of mainstreaming of norms erosion with normalization of PRRP rhetoric across different political contexts.

Public Opinion and Parental Attitudes Towards Sexuality Education in Belgium

Nina Van Eekert, Lise Rosquin and Cecil Meeusen (KU Leuven)

Objective: School-based sexuality education (SE) promotes young people's sexual health and well-being and is supported at the highest political levels. However recently, debates around sexuality SE have become more strident: e.g. in 2023 in Wallonia, a new law mandating four hours of SE across primary and secondary education sparked widespread vocal protests and even led to arson in primary schools. It however remains unclear to what extend SE is supported or opposed by the general population. Therefore, it is exactly this we examine in the current study; by identifying "profiles" of preferences for SE and investigating how these preferences are embedded in broader religio-ideological belief frameworks. Additionally, since parents are central in debates on SE, we specifically zoom in on the parental population aiming to understand how parents perceive and navigate their responsibilities amidst the growing polarization on SE by examining both their attitudes towards school-based and engagement in home-based SE.

Method: We rely on the data collected by The Social Study on our commissioned questionnaire ($n \approx 4000$, $n_{parents} \approx 1200$), which focuses on attitudes towards SE and parent-child communication on sexuality. We further draw on TSS' 2024 Core Study Questionnaire data to investigate how attitudes towards SE and parental practices are related to background characteristics (gender, age, place of residence, educational background), religion (religious denomination and religious practice) and broader ideologies (operationalized for example by benevolent sexism).

Results: Within the Belgian population we identified four profiles of attitudes towards SE, with different views on (1) the legitimacy of schools in SE, (2) on whether CSE should be optional and culturally accommodated, (3) on conservative gender and family values in SE and (4) sex-positive SE. We found that profile-membership is related to differences in place of residence, religious affiliation, wokeism attitudes, attitudes towards sexual and gender diversity and conspiracy thinking tendencies. Moreover, we learn that parents' engagement in home-based SE is topic-specific and is strongly associated with parents perceived knowledge and comfort to discuss certain sexuality related topics. Moreover, parents who agree schools are reliable to provide SE seem to be more likely to engage in home-based SE.

Conclusions: In light of recent opposition to school-based SE in Belgium and similar developments internationally, this study offers timely insights into the current landscape of attitudes towards CSE. We assessed the depth and distribution of attitudes towards CSE and observed the value of interpreting attitudes towards CSE in light of broader ideologies and societal phenomena, such as backlash reactions and anti-gender campaigns. We further zoomed in at parents' position in the ongoing debates on SE, their attitudes towards school-based SE and parental practices of home-based SE and, since they are pivotal in young people's access to SE, which equips young people with the knowledge and skills needed to make safe, informed decisions that support their physical, emotional, relational and sexual wellbeing. Based on our results, we advocate for a collaborative approach between schools and parents to maximize young people's access to information that is crucial for their positive sexual development.

How to catch the wind of change?

Dries Verlet (Statistics Flanders), Ann Carton (Statistics Flanders), and Geert Molenberghs (UHasselt)

Many of the current studies based on The Social Study are cross-sectional in nature. The extensive possibilities of the survey are used by linking specific question modules with data obtained from the recruitment and core questionnaire. Now that the panel is fully up and running, measurements over time are also taking place. Like numerous national and international surveys, this allows us to analyze changes over time. In this context, we can refer to surveys such as the Eurobarometer, the European Social Survey, or the surveys of Statistics Flanders. Such surveys allow us to make statements about the differences in attitudes and behaviors over time for average populations. They allow us to map trends over time.

The longitudinal nature of The Social Study is also an important reason for setting up this data collection infrastructure. A unique feature of The Social Study is that it allows us to measure changes over time at the level of the respondents. In this respect, an important quality of TSS as a panel is methodologically highlighted, the fact that one has repeated measurements over time. As far as the analysis of the data is concerned, this poses new questions and challenges for researchers. Ideally, we have two or more measurements of all respondents. In practice, however, we acknowledge that the panel itself is not static. Not everyone who participated in a first measurement also participates in the follow-up measurement. In addition, there are also respondents who did not participate in the survey for the first time, but did participate in the follow-up measurement. In this presentation, we want to reflect on this issue and discuss a way to tackle this in statistical analyses, using longitudinal data analysis methodology and missing-data results. We take into account a diversity of types of survey questions and their information level.