

Costs of sexual Orientation Discrimination in Youth

Flores-Perea LM ¹, Pedroza-Escobar D ^{12*}, Sevilla-Gonzalez MDLL ²

¹ *Proyecto aprendo, me divierto y sigo viviendo OSC & Foro de Jóvenes con Liderazgo AC*

² *Sección de Estudios de Posgrado e Investigación de la Escuela Superior de Medicina del Instituto Politécnico Nacional*

Abstract

Background: Homosexuals face stress factors associated with social prejudices such as stereotypes expressions, images, and discrimination with a long history of degradation, marginalization and exclusion. However, few studies focused on the consequences of these behaviors in young people. So the aim of this study was to describe the costs of sexual orientation discrimination in youth. Methods: This is the product of more than seven years of ethnographic work whose first part was presented at the World Youth Festival in Barcelona 2004, under the auspices of non-governmental associations, which was entitled: "The LGB youth: A sociocultural construction on time and space", with the remarkable participation of young people from the lesbian-gay community of Zona Rosa in Mexico City. Results: Discrimination is so entrenched in our society that adolescents and young people who are part of this population face a struggle in which it is difficult to maintain high self-esteem and a stable emotional security and feel valued or appreciated by his family and the nearby community. Conclusion: This research has the potential to be used as a reference for the design of therapeutic strategies in order to promote healthy development and welfare of homosexual people.

Keywords: *Costs, discrimination, sexual orientation, youth.*

Introduction

Discrimination

Homosexuals face stress factors associated with social prejudices [1-3] such as stereotypes expressions, images, and discrimination with a long history of degradation, marginalization and exclusion.

The scientific literature shows that individuals and institutions have perceptions or negative attitudes towards homosexuals and even act or support both stocks and prejudiced against them [3-5]. These topics are defined collectively as homonegativity, homophobia, heterosexism or sexual prejudice [6]. These attitudes reflect the way in which a subject or a social group thinks about either another group or others. And lead to discrimination that is an attitude from a position of superiority that lead either other group or others to be rated as inferior. They are clear or covert attitudes that exist and are present in most subjects.

The problem is to try to identify them and eliminate them, banish them not only from our behavior but our language and culture [7].

Within levels of social prejudice can be described as threefold: I) Cognitive: it refers to evaluative beliefs to people; II) Affective: it refers to the positive or negative feelings towards people, and III) Active-Behavioral: it refers to the willingness to take action for or against people [8]. In any field the same either covert attitudes or deciphered are kept, whether intentionally or inadvertently, are always present. The rejection and stigmatization are learned as cultural acts. Mostly they are not reasoned. In this sense messages or homonegative acts can be perpetrated intentionally or unconsciously; with an accidental connotation or completely out of consciousness of the perpetrator [9].

The indifference taken by different social groups each has to do with identity and is reflected in a myriad of ways. Human beings keep frequently social positions such as indifference, suspicion, rejection, hostility and even aggression based on previously existing conflicts or just by imaginary fear. Thus, harmful experiences contribute to unfair conditions that add stressors to the lives of people and impact their well-being [10]. Recently developed models of stress on minorities to understand the negative health outcomes support our position; these models include stress factors associated to homonegative experiences rather than factors associated with sexual orientation [11-13].

Methods

This research was based on fieldwork in Zona Rosa, Mexico city. Zona rosa is an habitational and commercial area in downtown of Mexico city, this area is preferred and visited (but not exclusively) by homosexuals mainly youth. This research was conducted during seven years of ethnographic work whose first part was presented at the World Youth Festival in Barcelona 2004, under the auspices of non-governmental associations (Proyecto Aprendo, Me Divierto y Sigo Viviendo OSC & Foro de Jovenes con Liderazgo AC) which was entitled: "The LGB youth: A sociocultural construction on time and space", with the remarkable participation of young people from the lesbian-gay community of Zona Rosa in Mexico City and a second period of fieldwork (during the last 2 years since 2014). Open - semi-structured interviews were conducted to young homosexuals in Zona rosa.

The open-semi-structured interviews were designed according to the following items: 1) knowledge about Discrimination; 2) Knowledge about sexual orientation; 3) Knowledge about "gays" and "lesbians" and 4) Personal experiences.

We worked with 2 nongovernmental organizations serving young homosexuals (Proyecto Aprendo, Me Divierto y Sigo Viviendo OSC & Foro de Jovenes con

Liderazgo AC), and we interviewed 50 young homosexuals. Research and content analysis of information through the internet about discrimination in young homosexuals was performed.

Results

Discrimination of Homosexual Identities: Gay and Lesbian

The sexuality is a complex concept where biological, anatomical, physiological and psycho-affective conditions are amalgamated, the sexuality is varied and not limited to an identity; i.e. human beings not only for having a penis or a vagina are determined in their social practices or erotic practices: the reality is that human beings do not hold sex only in order to procreate. Thus, gender does not determine the social attributes; on the contrary, it is the culture that helps to determine them. So then, what it means to have a penis or a vagina is determined by societies and therefore cultures.

In Mexican culture, heterosexism is a belief in the inherent superiority of only one model to love, so that, it has rights to be imposed. Heterosexism generates misanthropy towards those who are beyond the heterosexist model and thus actions seeking the abolition of the different models to love are legitimized themselves.

Homosexual identities are emerging and have globally permeated societies. For example, a lesbian or a gay is more than just a man or woman, who has sex with individuals of the same sex, is a whole network that makes one to reflect on gender and social constructions that have been reinforced around the homo sexualities. We use the term in the plural because homosexuality can operate in different and various ways ; so that in particular the gay issues divides the homosexual world , taking as a reference a part of it and showing a set of values , symbols , beliefs and customs , a lifestyle : the gay identity.

The *gay identity* emerged as a mechanism of self-definition of homosexual men to escape

the pejorative taxonomies that at some point were imposed on them¹. However, from the beginning being a homosexual did not mean being a gay, but, being a gay meant being a homosexual itself. The word gay is used to erase the stigma caused by many other words and their connotations with which alluded to homosexuals, which meant somebody who have sex with individuals of the same sex.

The lesbian and gay identities have two recognized levels in the construction process, but in reality were given as intersected : 1) one is "resistance" generated by those actors who are in devaluated or stigmatized positions or conditions by the logic of domination , so that they build trenches of resistance and survival based on different or opposing principles from those that pervade society institutions; 2) and the other level is "the project" , which emerges when the actors , based on the cultural materials available , build a new identity that redefines their position in society and in so doing , seek the transformation of the social structure.

Homosexuals, as part of a political movement seeking to claim their rights, hinted their *identity project*, but the *gay scene* as a social space have been configured as a resistance identity as a result of the long history of stigma and discrimination. That social space (Though not so Cabal) has been institutionally organized into places and products on the markets with a legitimate recognition for his actors and sets of agents, which can be seen in the community: the gay scene is perhaps for many ignored, but it is still present.

The lesbian and gay identities have been fragmented into more specific identities that are included into those ones, which recall that collective identities have as main characteristic their heterogeneity². Indeed, it

¹ Homosexual is a neologism that originally had negative connotations in Mexican lexic, related to a pathology, disease or genetic disorder.

² In a collective identity the subject recognizes self-characteristics in other people; It identified itself in a few similar attributes, similar situations or *reality status* alike, that make their own experience, interests of the group or collective demands are more or less similar [7].

amalgamates more identities leading to a network, a patchwork of practical ways that can lead us to delve into the world of homo sexualities.

Discrimination to Homosexual Youth

In the second half of the twentieth century we have witnessed the emergence of youth no longer as a taxable person but as lead actor in the public scene. From this, a trend toward *youthing* the society was developed, i.e. society with the *youth culture* was linked; It began to succeed the cult to youth ness and the *young age* became fashionable. On the other hand, it appeared the disturbing image of the *rebel without a cause*, and soon then other equally disturbing identities, featuring a new generation of young people that threatened to undermine the foundations of civilization. Identities that would spread to many countries over the years and did nothing but reflect a number of changes that profoundly altered the social conditions and cultural images of the young people. However were homosexual identities which have been in a permanent struggle for full respect for their human rights.

The personality of a child cannot be developed healthy without living with self-esteem, without having feelings of security in their emotions, without believing in the goodwill of others and without being provided with a space in which a child can live happy and safe, where a child can grow as a full human being [12]. These elements are essential and necessary for the emotional well-being and development of children, but often are affected when they live in environments where prevail vilification, in tolerance, an environment full of conduct statements and offensive acts of discrimination. And it is clear that a healthy development cannot occur in environments where while some of the children learns that it is not acceptable to receive *mistreatment*, another children assimilates that is allowed to mistreat people who are considered different.

Nowadays, discrimination is everywhere and it is observed and it is lived from an early age. And, particularly, it is manifested to those who show a sexual orientation and

gender identity such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, transvestites and intersex (LGBTTTI) [4]. Discrimination is so entrenched in our society that adolescents and young people who are part of this population face a struggle in which it is difficult to maintain high self-esteem and a stable emotional security and they cannot feel valued or appreciated by their family and the nearby community. Most of the young LGBTTTI people is *in the closet*³, hide their condition to others and perhaps themselves, thereby hiding an important part of their life, because they are afraid of what might happen if they tell the truth.

Nowadays it is usual to find LGBTTTI teens who have never heard of homosexuality, bisexuality or transgenderism, so they cannot give a name to their feelings and perceptions. They just know they are different and that their difference is unacceptable.

A smaller proportion of LGBTTTI teens are who acknowledge their sexual orientation to the important people in their lives and sometimes they are only classified as a gay or a lesbian. These young face many of the same fears of their peers who hide their status and are also an apparent target to homophobic abuse. Hidden or not, LGBTTTI young people know they live in a society that largely condemned them only for their sex-gender orientation. Once your sexual orientation or gender identity is known (or are suspected to be known) it is approached as if it were the most important issue of the person, without taking into account other aspects of the person.

Added to this problem is the integration of the young people of this community into ghettos, which are spaces that have specific socialization dynamics and sex - affective relationships, and which were also stripped of everything, and the sexuality or identity is just seen such as a dead end. In these contexts, the teens assume risky practices in the search for belonging to a group, which affects their communication with family [14,

15], with old friends and peers [3] and with co-workers [16]. In that sense, it would seem that this discrimination has two faces: one, that of heterosexuals to the young LGBTTTI people and the other, the self-segregation into ghettos of this sector of the population, resulting in not giving them the integral value of people with full rights, as if they ceased to exist and were not members of a social environment within which express the same doubts and needs than their heterosexual peers.

LGBTTTI teens learn to be viewed as less than people; so the quickest way to feel safe is lying about themselves, as if caught will have to survive in a hostile world that often fears and despises them. In schools, for example, and from an early age children learn the forms and codes of discrimination through jokingly murmurings [3,9]: “Do not wear in pink since you might look like a queer”; “Pussy”; “Do not cry, only women cry”. Lessons are learned whenever it is discovered that one of the surest ways to launch an insult is accusing someone of being a homosexual.

Not always the children know what those words mean, but they know the pejorative power of this language; they know it tends to belittle people considered different. So, the lessons are learned every time it is tolerated a discriminatory joke of sexual orientation or gender identity; also when adults speak and act as if everyone in the world were heterosexual, or should be. Such manifestations of homophobia seem to have no consequences. However, as long as they are expressed (and if not found any obstacle) hostility and fear grow regarding to the power to dominate our lives, so that the possibilities of human understanding diminish. And worse, the adult-consent of discrimination puts young people of this population not only to an emotional risk but sometimes physical. *It should be noted that not all LGBTTTI people live this discrimination with extreme physical violence, but all are at risk of experiencing it.* Moreover, such direct expressions of hostility are only the most obvious indicators of an atmosphere permeated with fear. Violence is manifested in several ways, some are less tangible than physical brutality, and

³ This term is often used to who does not assume publicly or privately its sex-gender orientation.

others may be expressed in words and actions or through silence, indifference and neglect, injuring the heart and spirit of a young person [13].

Discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity is socially so imbued, many people do not perceive the mistreatment of young LGBTTTI people as something wrong, it is not considered as violence, but only a natural response to this people [9]. Who cares about the harm done to people who are not considered fully human beings? However, there are often cases where discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity is expressed through physical violence. For example, in places where LGBTTTI teens dare to express their sexual orientation, they are humiliated, beaten and subjected to cruel treatment. In extreme cases they are thrown out of their homes or cloistered, and forced to take treatments that damage their body, mind and spirit, so that the full exercise of their rights is eliminated.

It is quite possible that the young LGBTTTI people are the most frequent victims of violence motivated by hatred, but neither the criminal justice system nor society have recognized the seriousness of this problem. Whenever adults in general (but especially those in positions of government, legislative, judicial, religion and family responsibility) keep silence or shirking cases of homophobic abuse, new generations learn that it is acceptable to tolerate violence and even participate in it. The damage is greater when adults with some authority have homophobic behavior.

Indifference to the destructiveness of homophobia can have another fatal consequence, but it is predictable: suicide. This is a frequent event taken by many LGBTTTI young people. They experience a huge pain, an endless isolation and great despair for not being accepted as they really are; consequently, they see nothing beyond damage and loss (family and friends speaking). When these young people resort to suicide and survive, fear of telling someone about it comes to them, believing that this revelation would mean more rejection.

Conclusion

Final Thoughts: Costs of Sexual Orientation Discrimination in Youth

The social reality shows that there are many social prejudices in Mexico City affecting discrimination; because sexism is still deeply rooted; increased by religious positions in a country predominantly self reported as a Catholic country [17]. And the costs of this discrimination for the LGBTTTI youth are as follows:

Physical and Verbal Abuse

It is perhaps the main result of discrimination, reported in the scientific literature. Abuse includes such reactions as physical and verbal threats, physical injury, harassment and even murder.

Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse has been consistently reported as an experience of homosexuals. Most research studies regarding sexual abuse have been conducted in adults but report that the abuse occurred during childhood and adolescence. This report mainly involves a family member [18, 19]. It is believed that the perpetrators are aware of or suspect the sexual orientation or gender identity of the victim before committing this kind of abuse [19].

Homonegative Macroaggressions and Subtle Experiences

As mentioned previously there are micro aggressions and subtle or covert homonegative experiences which reflect the way in which a subject or a social group thinks about another or others: micro insults, micro attacks or micro invalidations [9]. Aggressions masked by the educational level of the aggressor.

Homonegative Experiences and Mental Health Consequences

The homonegative experiences have been associated with problems such as depression and anxiety [20]; dysphoria [12]; somatization and stress [21]; anger [19]; and low self-esteem. They can last until adulthood in the form of post traumatic disorders [22].

Suicide

It is as previously mentioned a frequent act that young LGBTTTI people take, people who experience a huge pain, an endless isolation and great despair for not being accepted as they really are; consequently, they see nothing beyond damage and loss. To mention a few cases in 2009, Carl Walker-Hoover eleven years old in the United States resorted to suicide as a result of years of bullying; In 2010, Tyler Clementi jumped off a bridge after his roommate posted a video of Tyler intimating with another man. Seth Walsh, Raymond Chase, Cody Barker, Justin Aaberg, Billy Lucas, Asher Brown, all killed themselves as a result of homophobic harassment in 2010.

Auto Segregation in Ghettos: Drug Use and Unsafe Sex

This problem concerns the integration of the young people of the community in ghettos, which are spaces that have specific socialization dynamics and sex - affective relationships, and where also, the LGBTIII teens assume unsafe sex or risky practices in search for belonging to a group; such as drug use [23], and other situations that prepare them for life on the streets [24] and the people on the street are committed to a "survival mode" which keeps them in a vicious circle of sex work, risky practices and drug use.

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In this setting, people with political and community leadership, and in particular the rulers have the responsibility to ensure a safe and humane environment for all young people, regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity, and to promote an inclusive deal through public policies, for everyone. Thus, it is important the acknowledgement of installation of public agencies dedicated to the well-being of sexual diversities. However, it is necessary to review the actual involvement of the affected people, both the implementation and the design and evaluation of such policies, programs and projects that concern them. Since non-heterosexual people is incorporated as servants in different instances means a large step, but does not guarantee the effective participation of sex - generic diversities. The goal is that the issues of sexual diversity is not addressing isolated, but incorporated into the general adoption of policies. It is clear that there are obstacles ahead, so we must be prepared to face the fears and stereotypes that obstacle the way toward a constructive change in society.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare not having any potential conflict of interest.

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