

Latino perspectives on sexual orientation: The desire that we do not dare to name

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The bet for equality is one of the major challenges of the time. The search for equality challenges all. This task involves changes in structures, institutions, and transformations in daily lives which change the practices of diversity on a day to day basis in all actions and aspects of human existence.

Even though homosexuality is heard more than in previous decades and that media present the lives of gays and lesbians more frequently, this does not necessarily translate in changes on attitudes towards these communities, including among university students (Toro-Alfonso & Varas Díaz, 2004). Evidence of this can also be observed in recent debates in the United States and Puerto Rico on the inclusion of gay bashing as part of the legislations on hate crimes (Enkidu, 2005).

The stigmatization of homosexuality has multiple origins, among these there is the association with mental disease and the combination of homosexuality with pre-existing stigmas as pederasty, promiscuity, and AIDS (Cáceres, Frasca, Pecheny, & Terto, 2004). But overall, the stigma of homosexuality is strongly related among Latino communities with the social construction of gender. Latino societies assume the myth that gays internally want to be women and that lesbians desire to be men.

Homosexuality and the contradictions of the masculine desire

The ideology of machismo also exerts its dominion over homosexuals. This is done through de-valuing the homosexual perceived as a male impersonating a woman, renouncing to the social superiority adhered to the penis and passing from being a male subject to a mere object. Being homosexual is more despicable than being a woman because the homosexual has the elements for supremacy and seems not to care or not interested (Fone, 2000; Ramírez, 1995; Ramírez & García-Toro, 2002; Toro-Alfonso & Varas Díaz, 2006). From this perspective, homosexuality is rejected because it breaks the social demand from the family, the sex roles, the competency between men, and the ever existing power relation between men and women.

Homophobia: Social exclusion

Homophobia is manifested as an affective response and in negative attitudes based on myth and stereotypes about relations between people of the same sex (Snively, Kreurger, Stretch, Wilson-Watt, & Chadha, 2004). Homophobia, as racism and misogyny,

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represent a major obstacle for human rights. In fact, some researchers have stated that in our society where racism and anti-Semitism is condemn, and misogyny have lost legitimacy, homophobia still prevail as the last socially accepted prejudice (Fone, 2000).

Studies on sexual orientation have provoked a debate on the origin and development of homosexual desire. From the historical context homoerotic desire have been conceptualized as a disease, as a sin, or as related to legality issues. Besides the research on the gay gene and the search of desire in the brain curves, finally what is left is the complexity of the desire between men who have sex with men. Beyond the social construction of hegemonic masculinity we face the versatility and fluidity of behavior and the psyches of males. Reality seems to state that the male discourse refers to a phallic sexuality which is socially authorized. The body is construed as the place for pleasure and eroticism, transcending the essentialist limits of biology and social order. Beyond sexual orientation or the limits of nature, it is still the desire that we do not mention.

The institutionalization of social difference: Denial of true citizenship

Social institutions in Latin America and the Caribbean show high resistance to social changes and deny acceptance for diversity and complexity in human relations. These societies regularly adhere to particular standards as mechanism of subsistence in a global society (International Association of Lesbians and Gays, 2001; Stychin, 2004). At the same time that human rights movement is internationalized and more countries accept the idea of total protection of citizens, the discourse of gay and lesbian rights is also globalize. In a constant tension of contradictions, people make resistance to the rights of sexual minorities at the same time that defend general human rights. Not until recently “*the issue of gay rights presents questions about human rights in general*” (Stychin, 2004, p.953).

Homosexual discrimination in the United States has been strongly documented (Grief & McClelland, 2003). In Latin America news on gay bashing and hate crimes have been presented by local newspapers and human rights agencies. In Puerto Rico the media have presented several instances of discrimination (Cobas Quevedo, 2005; Sosa-Pascual, 2005). It is these situations that present gay people with no other alternative than clandestine life and hyper-vigilance on the information that “other” have about them. If sexuality and love are important in the development of the subjective identity, in the case of gay people this process is permanently galvanized by secrecy (Pecheny, 2005). It is the secrecy what strangles and diminish the mental health and the possibilities of happiness for Latino gay males.

Migration in many cases represents a way out, not only to the profound circumstances of poverty, but also for the unrealistic search of a social space for tolerance and permissibility (Carballo-Diéguez, 1998; Espín, 1993). The only way to deal with the unnecessary exodus is that “*the marginal and delinquency image of men who have sex with men must be substitute by the dignity of people that the society recognizes as valid in their professional, working, and creative endeavors*” (Ugarte, 1999, p. 90).

Social responsibility

All human beings have a right for real participation and the diversity of sexual identities must not represent an obstacle for safety and happiness. It is due that society establish limits to police interventions and the permissive and tolerant attitude that allows the majority to attack and marginalize homosexuals. The Government and its institutions are doing a weak service to the community when they do not recognize its responsibility. It is important to accept that homosexuals face social, cultural, legal, and economic discrimination only because of their sexual orientation. These clearly hinder their right to mental health and to freely enjoy their life (Carlton, 1999; Mays & Cochran, 2001).

Developing and strengthening social policies for the protection of their rights means to provide access to gay and lesbians to dignified working environments, preventive physical and mental health care, and to the free expression of their sexuality. We must develop spaces to strengthen true participation of the gay and lesbian community in our society. Society must educate itself on the reality and particular needs of these communities (Undall & Palmer, 2004). The traditional control and requirements of society have the intention to eliminate diversity. Psychology has also participated in this effort to demand a particular and unique way of desire (Toro-Alfonso & Varas Díaz, 2006).

However, men who have sex with men seem to have construed a space in the margin to which they have been relegated. There are more than 100,000 Hispanic family groups of same-sex couples in the United States as reported in the last census (Cianciotto, 2000). In Latin America gay men and lesbian women struggle to maintain their right to exist and to demonstrate their love and family values. The desire between Latino men transcends the possibilities of traditional sexuality and takes on beneath the Equator or because the night is young, as means to express and enjoy their desire (Carrillo, 2002; Parker, 1999).

“To acknowledge as homosexual is to accept oneself as different from others. The others are the world... and the world is property of others... the others persecute all or nobody. They are all or no body... Homosexuality becomes synonym of freedom; the impulse is not blind, is critique transformed in action...” (Paz, 1973, P.169).

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