

## Homosexuality and family of origin: the perspective of male homosexuals\*

### Homossexualidade e família de origem: a perspectiva de homossexuais masculinos

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The aim of the present study is to understand how the process of disclosure of sexual orientation has occurred in the family of young adult male homosexuals, from their perspective. This is a descriptive, cross-sectional and qualitative study. We interviewed 17 homosexual men with an average age of 25.5 years, in April of the year 2014, in the city of Uberaba/MG, Brazil. We used the Life History Method and a semi-structured interview for the data collection. The interviews were analyzed based on content analysis. We have noted that the family is of utmost importance in the face of the disclosure of sexual orientation, both in the beginning and in the unfolding of homosexuality. In conclusion, the disclosure of sexual orientation may vary with each family and mutual support helps to make the process less painful for the whole family.

**Descriptors:** Homosexuality; Family; Sexual behavior.

O estudo tem por objetivo conhecer como se deu o processo de revelação da orientação sexual na família de jovens adultos homossexuais masculinos, a partir da perspectiva destes. Trata-se de um estudo descritivo, transversal e qualitativo. Foram entrevistados 17 homens homossexuais, com idade média de 25,5 anos, no mês de abril do ano de 2014, na cidade de Uberaba. Utilizou-se a Técnica da História de vida e uma entrevista semiestruturada para a coleta dos dados. As entrevistas foram analisadas com base na Análise de Conteúdo. Nota-se que a família é de suma importância diante da revelação da orientação sexual, tanto no início quanto nos desdobramentos da homossexualidade. Conclui-se que a revelação da orientação sexual pode variar de acordo com cada família e que o apoio mútuo colabora para que o processo seja menos doloroso para todo o núcleo familiar.

**Descritores:** Homossexualidade; Família; Comportamento sexual.

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**Descriptors:** Homosexuality; Family; Sexual behavior.

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## INTRODUCTION

**H**omosexuality-related issues, such as the processes of disclosure of sexual orientation, acceptance or not by the family, social experiences, among others, have been understood differently from the way seen decades ago, when they were seen as sexual deviance or disorder, besides being also characterized as sin and crime<sup>1-3</sup>.

Homosexuals question the meaning of what is being established in the social environment and seek for a homosexual norm based on the experiences of each individual in different societies<sup>1</sup>. There is still discrimination against homosexuals and these are put on the margins of society<sup>4,5</sup>.

Today, homosexuality is a theme that encompasses several theoretical and empirical studies, mainly in the area of the human sciences, which aim to investigate such sexual orientation and its various forms of expression, as well as the social impact for those who reveal their sexual orientation. Such social impacts refer to the moment after disclosure, in which the homosexual will have new experiences, so as not to be hiding from the family, for example, which can lead to a series of feelings and situations, and can be considered good or bad experiences, depending on how each family deals with the child's homosexuality.

Another impact to be considered is related to the experiences in society, such as in school, college and work, for example, that can also be affected after the disclosure in a positive or negative way, which will depend, as in the family, on how the subject will be addressed and dealt with over time.

Sexual orientation is understood as the way that each human being understands their desire in each phase of life, which may present one of these characteristics: "asexual' (no sexual attraction), bisexual (attraction to both sexes), heterosexual (attraction to the opposite sex) and homosexual (attraction to the same sex)"<sup>6</sup> (p. 165). Sexual orientation encompasses components of intimate relationships, such as erotic desire, sexual behavior, and romantic attraction<sup>7</sup>.

Sexual orientation "refers to each person's ability to have a deep emotional,

affective, or sexual attraction to individuals of a different gender, of the same gender, or of more than one gender, as well as having intimate and sexual relationships with such persons"<sup>8</sup>.

In the present study, a male homosexual is understood as a man who is "sexually, emotionally or affectively attracted to persons of the same sex/gender"<sup>8</sup>. Sexual orientation is not about a choice or an option, but about what the subject feels about the other, so it is something that cannot be imposed on somebody<sup>2</sup>.

In this way, sexuality can vary in many ways, being different according to the interior of each individual, according to gender, within societies and through a set of social discourses and practices. There is differentiation of sexuality for each individual and, in a social way, it varies from society to society and from gender to gender<sup>9,10</sup>.

In relation to gender, it is a process that has neither beginning nor end, and can be built over time<sup>11</sup>. In other words:

*"gender is a tacit project to renew our cultural history according to our own terms; it is not a descriptive task in which we must strive, but a task in which we have been engaged ever since"*<sup>11</sup> (p.131).

The concept of gender emerged with the influence of the feminist movement in the 1970s<sup>8</sup>. The purpose of the definition of gender is to distinguish the breadth of what is biological and of the social dimension, based on the idea that in the human species there are males and females; however, it is through culture that the way of being man and woman consolidates. So,

*"gender means that men and women are products of social reality and not the result of the anatomy of their bodies"*<sup>8</sup> (p. 9).

And, in the face of sexuality and its variations, the family also presents different facets. The family is understood as a group of people whose relationship is based on the bonds of affinity or coexistence, not necessarily presenting a degree of kinship or consanguinity<sup>12</sup>. Thus,

*"the family must be studied from a cultural, historical and intergenerational perspective"*<sup>13</sup>(p. 258).

The family represents the first relations in childhood, being structured by its possibilities and impositions, since each

family has its context and history, varying from culture to culture, besides the fact that each member that composes it carries their own history, which directly affects child rearing, either in order to impose what is understood as right or wrong, or to open up to the new changes experienced by each one<sup>14</sup>.

And, after disclosure of sexual orientation, families may find it difficult to accept the homosexual son or daughter, since the family is part of a context surrounded by beliefs, social constructions, and taboos that can delay the acceptance of homosexuality<sup>3</sup>.

Accepting the homosexuality of a child is part of an arduous process, since parents create expectations about their children's future, fears and uncertainties still during gestation, and do not consider the hypothesis of having a homosexual child<sup>15</sup>. It should be emphasized that sexual orientation is not under the control of parents and even if rules and plans are drawn, homosexuality can be part of the family nucleus, being unpredictable and inherent to the development of each member that composes it<sup>3</sup>.

Importantly, the family is seen as a support place, in which homosexuals, facing the disclosure of sexual orientation, expect to receive embrace, since society often shows prejudice and discrimination in these cases. However, families are not always able to play the role expected of them, since many homosexuals live clandestinely, excluded and rejected within their own families, which is called intra-family homophobia.

On the other hand, there are families that face differently the process of acceptance of homosexuality, embracing the child into the family and offering all the support and affection they want at the moment<sup>9,16,17</sup>. The objective of this study is to understand how the process of disclosure of sexual orientation in the family of young adult male homosexuals has occurred, from the perspective of these men.

## METHOD

This is a descriptive, exploratory and cross-sectional study based on the qualitative research approach. Data collection occurred

between the years 2014 and 2015, in the city of Uberaba, Minas Gerais, Brazil.

We interviewed men who declared themselves homosexuals, who have maintained a stable dating/marriage relationship for at least two years.

Two instruments were used, namely the Life History Method and the Semi-structured Interview. The first is a free research technique that seeks to investigate how one constructs explanations and descriptions for their own trajectory, listing moments, events, situations and relationships that are considered relevant for the construction of their identity<sup>18</sup>.

The semistructured interview was developed by the researchers based on the objectives of this study, containing questions related to the participant's life history, their love experiences, developmental processes related to homosexuality, stable dating experience, future perspectives in terms of affective relationships, as well as their relationships with the family of origin.

Initially, through the researchers' social network, contact was made via telephone with the possible participants, explaining about the theme and the objectives of the research. After acceptance, individual and face-to-face interviews were scheduled. The meetings were held in the residence of the respondents and also in private rooms in the psychology school-service of origin of the authors.

In all situations, the ethical standards for research involving human beings were respected, using fictitious names for the participants. The interviews had average duration of one hour and were audio recorded with the consent of the participants. Then, they were transcribed in full and literally for later analysis, composing the *corpus*.

The transcribed interviews were analyzed horizontally, that is, in an integrative way. Subsequently, content analysis was performed, which is composed of research techniques that systematically give the description of messages and attitudes related to the statement, as well as the inferences about the data collected.

This study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the Federal University of the Triângulo Mineiro (Protocol No. 2162).

relationship was 3.6 years (SD = 2.48), according to Table 1.

For characterization of the sample, we surveyed age, schooling, profession, religion, age at which the young person assumed homosexuality for the family and time of relationship (Table 1).

**RESULTS**

We interviewed 17 men who declared themselves homosexual. The mean age was 25.5 years (SD = 5.568) and mean time of

**Table 1.** Characterization of participants. Uberaba, MG, 2015.

Fictitious name	Age	Schooling	Profession/ Occupation	Religion	Age that assumed homosexuality for the family	Time relationship	of	Living with the partner
Ricardo	20	Incomplete higher education	Student	Agnostic	16	2 years and 4 months	4	No
Fernando	27	Complete higher education	Interior designer	Catholic	26	2 years and 1 month	1	No
Alex	26	Complete higher education	Personal Dept. Assistant	Catholic	26	2 years and 1 month	1	No
Luiz	21	Incomplete higher education	Student and English Teacher	Spiritist	17	3 years and 3 months	3	No
Ronaldo	23	Incomplete higher education	Caregiver of Elderly People	Agnostic	21	2 years and 1 month	1	Yes
Juliano	28	Complete higher education	Teacher	Catholic	15	2 years and 1 month	1	Yes
Douglas	31	Graduate studies	Dentist	Catholic	20	3 years		Yes
Davi	22	Incomplete higher education	Student	Spiritist	16	2 years and 6 months	6	No
Roberto	35	Complete higher education	Administrative manager	Catholic	26	3 years		Yes
Vitor	21	Incomplete high school	Unemployed	Agnostic	18	3 years and 3 months	3	No
Mateus	21	Complete high school	Cashier	Agnostic	16	3 years and 3 months	3	No
Renato	21	Incomplete higher education	Student	Spiritist	19	3 years		Yes
Luciano	24	Incomplete higher education	Sales Assistant	Agnostic	22	3 years and 6 months	6	Yes
Mário	29	Complete high school	Businessman	Spiritist	16	10 years		Yes
Daniel	40	Incomplete higher education	Accountant	Spiritist	24	10 years		Yes
Mauro	23	Incomplete higher education	Student	Agnostic	16	4 years and 6 months	6	Yes
André	23	Incomplete higher education	Typist	Catholic	18	4 years and 6 months	6	Yes

When questioned about the family of origin - father, mother and sibling (s) -, the reports of the participants indicate that the relations are varied, from very close to very distant, which configured in diverse reactions before the disclosure of the sexual orientation.

During the disclosure process, Fernando lived an unexpected situation in which his father was the one who helped his mother to go through the process of accepting homosexuality. Luiz lived something similar with his father, reporting that he did not hide the son's homosexuality from anyone. However, with Juliano's mother, the initial impact was shock and denial of the son's homosexuality, but over time the mother had elaborated and their relationship improved after *almost four months without talking* to him.

As seen, families reacted in different ways to the disclosure of sexual orientation, as can also be observed in the cases of Alex and Mauro. Alex says that his mother offended him and expressed words of non-acceptance of his homosexuality. In contrast, Mauro reports that:

*she [mother] cried a lot, she did not discriminate against me at all, she did not reject me as a son. (...) She said that she always wanted to have a gay friend and nothing would have been better than this friend being her son.*

In addition to cases where there was initial rejection and acceptance soon thereafter, according to participants, some families chose not to comment on the subject.

The children are self-proclaimed homosexual; however, the family prefers to postpone the conversation about homosexuality, as quoted by Ronaldo, Douglas and Luciano. All three comment that their respective families know, but do not speak openly about issues related to sexual orientation. Luciano chose not to talk openly with the family because he did not feel they were receptive and understands that *there is still a certain block about talking about it*.

For David, the only one of the 17 respondents who has not yet told his parents, homosexuality will remain hidden for a while due to the fact that his parents have already shown signs that they do not accept it. And since he is financially dependent on his parents, he chose not to reveal it for

understanding that *family is a complicated thing*.

Unlike the other interviewees, Roberto realized that it was:

*a natural process in my family, and I never sat down to talk to them [parents] about anything related to sexuality.*

Vitor and Mário reported about the importance of their families in the face of their love relationships, as the bonds grow closer and stronger, providing a more harmonious relationship between the couple and the family. Vitor considered that *family is the main factor of dating to be easy*.

Some siblings were of great importance in the disclosure process because they helped the homosexual brothers to feel embraced in the face of revelation, although in the beginning it was a difficult process for them as well, and some others chose not to interfere with their brother's life. Matthew says that his older brother do not talk to him. Renato realized that:

*(...) of all the people I've told in my family, my sister was the one who suffered the most. (...) Today I have a very great relationship with my sister (...).*

Similarly, regarding the sisters, Daniel and Andrew also reported that although there was rejection by them at the beginning, relations have changed and strengthened nowadays, as was mentioned in Renato's speech.

Another factor present in the speeches of Ricardo, Fernando, Mário, Mauro, Alex was intra-family homophobia, more specifically from the father and siblings. The young men reported that they have suffered from the denial of homosexuality on the part of the fathers; they have gone through death threats, psychological pressure, which, in the daily life of these interviewees, caused emotional and psychological disorders, affecting the love, work and friendship relations. Ricardo says that:

*(...) he [father] does not accept it; he has already said that if he discovers that any of his children were gay he would kill the child, (...) my father is extremely homophobic.*

Based on these results, the analysis of the interviews will be carried out in two thematic categories, namely (a) The parents' reaction after disclosure of the child's sexual orientation: the process of denial and possible acceptance; and (b) Family and

homosexuality: intra-family homophobia and support to children.

## DISCUSSION

Content analysis was used due to the need to overcome the uncertainties resulting from hypotheses and assumptions and to provide the accuracy of enriching the reading through the understanding of meanings and for the need to unveil the relations that are established beyond what was said. That is, to understand the way the homosexual person understands the reception of the disclosure of sexual orientation to the family based the assumption that it was a difficult and delicate process for all those involved and that the families somehow embraced or rejected their children<sup>19,20</sup>.

Issues such as revealing sexual orientation and telling about a gay relationship, the impacts caused on the family and the parents' views on this process, among others related to the gay relationship and the family's reaction, emerged in the analysis process<sup>15,16,21-25</sup>.

### Parents' reaction to the revelation of the son's sexual orientation, the process of denial and possible acceptance

It is assumed that people with homosexual orientation are present in all types of homes and families, and are part of religious, ethnic and socioeconomic groups<sup>27,28</sup>.

The disclosure of homosexuality occurs according to the degree of emotional closeness with the family of origin, of which the first person to know is usually the mother, and then the siblings<sup>15</sup>.

In some cases, not many changes are perceived in the family scenario of the interviewees and they continued to maintain a good relationship with them, unlike other participants, where the homosexual is seen as an enemy, even receiving threats of being expelled from home<sup>17,29</sup>. At this moment, homosexuals start to hide their orientation due to the need to act in a way expected by society and, in these cases, by the parents, which reinforces the idea that even when the homosexual has come out, he has not always done it for all<sup>25</sup>.

Juliano, in reporting that his mother stayed almost four months without talking to him after the revelation, tells this is common, since the family thinks they knew the child intimately and, for following a heterosexual family model, becomes shocked when faced with a case of homosexuality in the family. This happened in the family of Mauro, whose family members believed to know intimately their being and then were faced with this new reality<sup>9,15,23</sup>.

It is worth stressing the importance of family support in the face of the revelation of sexual orientation since it is a delicate moment in the individual's life. However, in many cases, it does not happen instantaneously, but the acceptance process can be achieved<sup>3,15</sup>, as in the case of Luiz, where his father helped him in this process and, besides, helped his mother to go through this moment.

Thus, acceptance is not always immediate because when a son or daughter causes some kind of disappointment to their parents, these latter stay with the feeling that all the hopes and expectations nourished for their child for so many years, perhaps even before their conception, have disappeared, and they do not see the achievement of what they had designed for the child. Thus, fear also arises as to how society will receive their child, and in some families, religion can also interfere in this process, either by helping parents accept their children or by saying that it is a sin, which further damages the family relationship<sup>10,15,26,30</sup>.

Even families that had a negative reaction at the beginning can, over time, become more tolerant and receptive with their children and their partners<sup>4,21,24</sup>, as is the case of Alex.

Another point is related to the fact that homosexuality is veiled in the family, as in the case of Fernando, where everyone knows, but does not accept that his partner visits their house. Unlike Ricardo and Mauro, Fernando's family is still going through the process of reconciliation with the son and acceptance of his partner. This is one of the reasons why the disclosure of sexual orientation poses a challenge to the individual, who fears the

reaction of the family and society, besides the anguish of not matching the heterosexual pattern.

Homosexuality can cause internal conflicts, since the individual will not correspond to a rationalizing society that restrains possible threats to minority groups, including the protection to the patriarchal family standard. It can also cause external conflicts, as, for example, homosexuality being a family secret<sup>9,21</sup>. Thus, this highlights the important role of the family of origin in the face of the revelation of the son's sexual orientation, also understanding that it is not a temporary moment to be lived, but rather, that it requires a series of care and attentions so that all those involved receive the support they need for the moment.

Family and homosexuality: intra-family homophobia and support for children

Homophobia usually begins within the family<sup>16</sup>. It is a serious social problem and has its characteristics according to what each society thinks<sup>31,32</sup>. Homophobia can be understood as:

*"fear, repulsion, or irrational hatred of homosexuals, and, by extension, of all those who manifest sexual orientation or gender identity different from heteronormative patterns"*<sup>8</sup> (p. 21).

And, as experienced by Ricardo and David, many individuals hesitate to assume homosexuality for their parents, thus avoiding a clash in relationships<sup>16,22</sup>. Ronaldo's father is also very receptive to his son's boyfriend and always asks about him when he stays a while without visiting him. Mario's father, now deceased, did not accept his son, and there were constant verbal and physical quarrels and assaults and, so:

*"prejudice is articulated in the family context as a mechanism to legitimize violence and, consequently, causes the rupture of the bond, temporary or permanent separation between young lesbians and gays and their families"*<sup>16</sup> (p. 68).

The family is the institution in which values, beliefs and emotions are passed on, being such characteristics lived in the daily life and being incorporated spontaneously by its members<sup>16</sup>.

Thus, heteronormativity is part of the functioning of the family, and forms of

repetition of discrimination and violence are repeated and rooted, in some cases. One can understand the family as a system that:

*"operates in the micro context of kinship and cohabitation, reproducing hierarchical and oppressive models"* (p. 69).

From such a statement, one can state that the family builds the way people see and live in the world, including issues related to prejudice and homophobia. As reported by the interviewees Fernando, Mauro and Alex, intra-family homophobia has mostly originated from the father and siblings, who, in addition to verbal aggression, in some cases also caused physical assault and threat of death by a father who does not know about his son's homosexuality.

Psychological violence is the most common in cases of disclosure of sexual orientation, being characterized by damage to self-esteem and socialization, since it can denigrate, humiliate, terrorize and ignore the individual<sup>31</sup>, as in the case of Matthew, Daniel and André, who received threats from family members and were isolated and rejected by their siblings after disclosing their sexual orientation.

In the cases of Douglas, Luciano, and Roberto, homosexuality is ignored in their families; no one talks about it, although everyone knows it. These reports also present a type of psychological violence, more specifically by ignoring homosexuality and acting as if all in the family were heterosexual<sup>16,32</sup>.

In contrast, Vitor and Mario discussed on how rewarding it is to be able to feel the support of the family not only at the time of disclosure of sexual orientation, but also because they have welcomed their partners. The interviewees reported that their families accept the love relationship and that this facilitates for the maintenance thereof.

Hiding sexual orientation and internalized homophobia adversely affect the lives of homosexual couples, which can lead to a decrease in the level of marital satisfaction, mental health, intimacy and well-being of these individuals<sup>23,33</sup>.

Thus, this reinforces the idea that the family and its support is of paramount importance in the face of the revelation of

sexual orientation, both in the beginning and in the unfolding that homosexuality presents<sup>16,34</sup>.

## CONCLUSION

On the objective of the study, which was addressing the perspective of young adult male homosexuals on the process of revealing their sexual orientation to the family of origin, we can say it was achieved, since it was possible to know the experiences of homosexuals after the revelation of homosexuality in the family.

In the reports, a range of experiences was observed, some of them similar and others different, that could compose and bring up a series of questions related to the studied subject, such as the perception of the young people in the face of revelation for the parents, the ways in which each family reacted, the ways each homosexual experiences his affections in society, among others.

One of the limitations was the fact that only homosexuals were interviewed, but it may have been of great value also to know the point of view of their family of origin, such as the father, mother and siblings, and this may be carried out in a further study. Another limitation was the fact that it was a cross-sectional survey, that is, with only one meeting, but if more meetings had been held, other points could be discovered that may not have been revealed at the time of the interview.

In general, we could learn about the acceptance process that has already taken place or is still in process, as well as understand how homosexuals interviewed understand the family's reaction to their sexual orientation. In short, new studies are necessary to enable us to listen to the family of homosexuals in order to know their views about the subject.

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#### CONTRIBUTIONS

**Geysa Cristina Marcelino Nascimento** conducted the interviews, transcribed and analyzed in full all the data collected, developed the writing of the article. **Fabio Scorsolini-Comin** researcher supervisor, analyzed in full all the data collected and performed the critical review of the article.

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