

Gay homoconjugality in Portugal: a case study

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Abstract: Based on a qualitative interview of a non-heterosexual young men living in homoconjugality, the article aims to analyze his biographical pathway, representations, values and the way in which these variables intersect and shape the conjugal and family dynamics. The findings reveal that the variables mentioned above come together with homophobia, heteronormativity and others structural constraints of Portuguese society to configure the conjugal relationship and both the conjugal and parental transition. Nevertheless, this is a case study that aims to shed light to the importance of the individual. Because, in Cardenal words "the social is inscribed in the individual" and vice-versa [1].

Key – Words: same-sex couples – homophobia – homoconjugality – individual trajectories and biographies – family dynamic

1 Introduction

This research has a qualitative methodological approach within a case study of a young male living in a homosexual conjugality. Our project is focused on biographies, family dynamics and experiences from the social actors' point of view. In this way we interview Luís and analyze his interview as a unique and interesting history. It is also important to note that this case study happens in a rural area of Portugal where this issue is less normalized/social accepted than in bigger cities as Lisbon or Porto.

The principal purpose of this study is to understand the trajectory and the everyday family dynamics of a young gay couple and to analyze the micro power processes inside the homoconjugal relationship. In this sense, we wonder if there is a uniqueness in homosexual couples towards more egalitarian and democratic operative family dynamics. Getting to know Luís and Rafael through a case study analyses could give us some clues to the answer.

2 Case Presentation

Luís, 30 years old, lives in a homoconjugal relationship for two years in a rented house in Guarda. He is a computer technician and a master's student. His boyfriend, Rafael is 23 years old and is still a student, doing a degree in communication and multimedia. Luís demonstrates a strong, assertive and independent personality, valuing these aspects in his life and reflecting the processes of deinstitutionalization and family privatization [2; 3; 4; 5].

Luís: "I like my job, but more than liking my job, I like being independent (...) it gives me a lot of sense of accomplishment and even meaning to my life."

At the biographical level, Luís lived with his grandparents, his legal tutors. He never speaks of his mother and has no contact with his father. Luis received a traditional Catholic education and attended the seminary. He was a practicing Catholic, but today he considers himself an agnostic, without neglecting to value some of the values derived from the education he received. A turning point in this matter was the quit of the seminar and the entrance to the science course.

Luís: "Then I went to the sciences course and I began to think and observe the world, to realize that there are more things, more values and other ways of living our lives."

Authors such as João Ferreira de Almeida [6] talk about identity *bricolage* to describe and explain how subjects adopt a mixture of normative orientations, a result of contemporary reflexivity and tendencies of individualization [7; 8].

Sexual Orientation and Loving Experiences

With regard to love relations and the transition to conjugality, Luís began by dating girls. However, his discourse shows that these relationships may have been driven by heteronormativity and internalized homophobia [9; 10; 11]. In fact, he refers that he already had some doubts and uncertainties about his sexual orientation and, that heterosexual relationships were not satisfactory and did not work out.

Luís: "Deep down, I knew ... I was just wondering if I could save some time ... and even liked my girlfriend, Sara, but I could not ... Then I had a boyfriend who lasted a year and from that I was sure. "

Regarding his relationship with Rafael, he does not hide his orientation or conjugal relationship before the circle of friends of the couple, college colleagues and work. According to Einarsdottir, the private space may not be protective for LGBTQI people [10]. Instead, it can be configured as an extension of public space where non heterosexuals choose to pass as straight. In this context, Luís is a paradigmatic case. In his circle of friends, co-workers and college, his relationship with Rafael is known. Nevertheless, at his grandparents' home his relationship with Rafael is hidden. We can interpret this as a question of internalized homophobia the fear of not being accepted by significant others or causing them hurt. Luís assumes *a priori* that the revelation of sexual orientation would cause great suffering and disgust to his grandparents. According to Miguel Vale de Almeida, internalized homophobia corresponds "to that which the victims of homophobia itself (...) carry within themselves as a mechanism of containment, self-censorship, objection, fear (...)" [11].

Luís: "... I will probably wait for the death of my grandfathers, I know it may seem horrible to say this, but I did not want to give them heartbreak, to deceive them, my grandmother is very fragile."

As several studies reveal [11; 12; 13] hiding homosexuality becomes more difficult in the transition to parenthood. Until then, the relationship is not assumed to relatives. They can always think that it is a relation of friends who share a house. We know that Luís has a feeling of disgust at not being able to share a fundamental part of his life (both loving and sexual) with his significant others. To protect them, especially his grandmother, whom he considers more, fragile, he prefers not to tell.

Luís does not want to displease his grandmother who, compared to his grandfather, has more expectations about her grandson becoming a father. Hence, Luís says that his grandfather would possibly have a more tolerant attitude, but still "One thing are the «others» and another thing is our own family."

Transition to conjugality and conjugal life

When we consider the transition to conjugality, the process of sentimentalization and privatization of conjugal family becomes more and more visible, since it is the feelings that inaugurate, perpetuate and give meaning to the conjugal relationship. This is the case of Luís and Rafael, whose feelings and relational dynamics fit in the «pure relation» and «confluent love» concepts, replacing the «romantic love» concept in the current context of increasing dominance of intimacy [8].

When we consider the conjugal trajectory, we can say that, in this case study, it follows the same patterns as the relationships of late modernity. There is no differentiation, at the representations level, between dating and cohabitation [14]. Thus, in the conception of Luís, the boundaries between the courtship and the experience of conjugality under one roof appear quite diluted. They met in the place where they study, became friends and, from the moment they relate sexually, they start to take on the role of boyfriends.

Living together is not something much planned, but it is happening gradually, and is seen as an absolutely normal consequence of dating. The progressive formation of the couple in an informal way is one of the aspects in line with the trends of deinstitutionalization and individualization of family life [14].

Due to the difference in ages and life experiences, Luís and Rafael are clearly in unequal positions.

Luis is more independent because he has lived alone for a long time and has a paid work, while Rafael has recently moved from his parents' house to study at the polytechnic institute.

They also have very different experiences, to Rafael this is the first homosexual experience and relationship whereas for Luis there have been other previous experiences. In this sense, there are inequalities of power within the relationship, since both have different economic, symbolic and relational resources. According to Paplau "when one person is more dependent or involved than the other, the more dependent partner is expected to have less power" [15; 17].

Luis's autonomy contrasts with Rafael's economic dependence on his parents and boyfriend. Luis attributes this to a question of personality, but he does not fail to recognize the importance of paid work as a condition of personal autonomy. In Luis's words, he is more assertive, sociable and independent, well settled, while Rafael is shyer and more dependent than Luis. He also does not go out much alone, or with his friends, almost always goes out with Luis and with Luis's friends.

Luis says that they tend to do everything together and, at first glance, we might be led to think that in this matter we are facing a perfectly balanced and undifferentiated division of domestic tasks. However, through the analysis of Luis's discourse, one realizes that it is he who directs the way things are done and distributed, because of his personality and ascendant, he has greater argumentative power in the relation.

In fact, there is a tendency to be equally egalitarian, but the adaptation of both to instrumental routines and also to the expressive side of conjugal life is not made without tensions and daily "struggles". Resistance and displeasure with housework seem to be characteristic of both Rafael and Luis.

At the representations level there is, on Luis's speech a clear emphasis on the «self» that seems to overlap with the «we» (couple). However, they also present some fusional practices, because he ends up spending almost all of his free time with Rafael. This seems to happen because Luis also tries to adapt and be flexible to the tastes, preferences and personality of his boyfriend.

There is a tendency towards companion values, mainly, through a relational ethics, and importance given to negotiation and communication, but at the same time, Luis presents an almost paternalistic discourse regarding his boyfriend.

Luis: "I have a lot of patience to explain things to him and try to understand his side."

3 Conclusion

The truth is that if non-heterosexual persons and their families are not the only protagonists of the transformations of private life, the study reveals that they play an undoubtedly important role on the deinstitutionalization and individualization of family relations in Portugal. In fact, if Luis and Rafael are almost like heterosexual couples, at the level of values, representations and practices, with the same age and background variables, it is important, however, to mention that these characteristics show the specificities and difficulties inherent to the experience of non-heterosexuality in Portugal. By this we mean that there are in fact unique characteristics of homosexual couples, while there are aspects that bring them closer to other heterosexual couples, with the typical challenges of Portuguese society.

Knowing that this study serves more to question and to problematize than to properly give answers, it seems essential to develop these questions in future investigations. Hence, future research should have broader empirical support, focusing on more diverse populations - male and female homosexual couples, different social backgrounds, and with a plurality of routes, arrangements, and family situations.

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