

"There is LGBTQ life beyond the big city". Discourses, representations and experiences in two medium-sized Spanish cities

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Abstract

Whilst debates on sexual diversity in public space have been extensive, these have tended to focus on large cities as the environments within which to analyse sexual and gender diversity, gradually consolidating an intrinsic relationship between the LGBTQ experience and the big city. This emphasis has led to the LGBTQ experiences of small and medium-sized cities being overlooked, neglecting the complexity of the intersection between the urban and the sex-gender. Grounded on an original ethnographic work, this paper explores the experiences of LGBTQ people living in two medium-sized cities in Spain: Girona and Sabadell, to analyse the interrelationships between these cities and Barcelona as their main LGBTQ-friendly reference; and the perceptions of tolerance and hostility towards LGBTQ expressions in public spheres. The paper reveals that all cities are shaped by sexualized discourses and experiences, and argues that the experiences of LGBTQ people in medium-sized cities needs to be recognized to understand the influence of space in shaping the sex-gender experiences.

Keywords

Sexual diversity; LGBTQ life; public space; medium-size cities; ethnography.

Introduction

This article explores the reality of two medium-sized cities, Girona and Sabadell, located in the Spanish region of Catalonia, building on three analytical axes: (1) the experiences of LGBTQ people residing in these cities, in order to examine the complex relationships between sexual and gender diversity, urban environment and individual and collective experiences; (2) the links and

interrelationships between LGBTQ people of Girona and Sabadell with the city of Barcelona, as a major LGBTQ-friendly reference city in the territory; and (3) the perceptions of tolerance or hostility towards LGBTQ expressions in the public and community spheres in medium-sized cities. These analytical axes are approached in an interconnected way, taking into account the interrelationships between gender and sexuality with other factors that generate privileges and oppressions, which organize both social life and life experiences.

The analysis presented here examines the confluence between public space and sexual and gender diversity in two selected medium-sized cities. The relevance of the study of these cities is based on two main grounds. Firstly, the need to make the experiences, discourses and practices of LGBTQ people visible beyond the big city. In addition, these two medium-sized cities present two very relevant contexts that have been barely studied. Both cities have fewer resources, less administrative volume and less extensive social networks than large cities, yet they both have a socio-political dimension greater than the case of small rural municipalities.

The second reason to select Sabadell and Girona is to observe how these medium-sized cities orbit around the large LGBTQ-friendly city that is Barcelona. Both cities maintain geographic -and also symbolic- links with the capital of Catalonia, although the intensity of these connections differs from one city to another. The shorter distance, greater connections and belonging to the same administrative region, means that social ties between Sabadell and Barcelona are greater and more intense than those between Girona and Barcelona. All this affects the lives of LGBTQ people and the way they represent and experience their relationship with Barcelona. Whilst among LGBTQ people in Sabadell Barcelona is seen as accessible and as a regular leisure and socializing space, for LGBTQ people in Girona the Catalan capital is a place to go to occasionally¹. Whereas the traditional literature on urban hierarchies has focused on the economic competitiveness of cities (Begg, 1999), more recent studies suggest polycentric conceptions that go beyond economic activities (Lüthi, Thierstein and Bentlage, 2013). In this sense, although Barcelona is the economic and symbolic center of reference in the region, there are other urban values that are located outside Barcelona and that allow us to discuss its absolute centrality.

¹ It is worth noting that Girona is 100km from Barcelona, whilst Sabadell is only 25km away. The average price of public transport between Sabadell and Barcelona is € 2.10, while between Girona and Barcelona it is around €17.00. Likewise, the frequency and schedules of transport are greater between Sabadell and Barcelona, than between Girona and the capital.



Figure 1: Map of Catalonia with studied cities and Barcelona marked. Font: Google Maps.

Equally relevant is that whilst these are both medium-sized cities, there are important socio-demographic differences between the two. Girona, capital of the province of the same name, has 99,000 inhabitants according to the Statistical Institute of Catalonia (IDESCAT), whilst Sabadell is a city of 209,000 inhabitants belonging to the Barcelona Metropolitan Area. Girona has a per capita income of € 28,837, somewhat higher than the average for Catalonia (€ 27,540), yet Sabadell has a lower than average income per capita (€ 25,837). However, it is worth noting that although Girona has one of the highest incomes in the region, the city presents significant socio-economic differences depending on the neighborhood. In addition, attached to Girona is Salt, a city of 36,000 inhabitants that has a per capita income of only € 20,100 and a percentage of the foreign population (of Northern-African origin in its majority) that reaches 40%. In recent times, some neighborhood movements (spurred by extreme right-wing parties and organizations) have staged protests of a marked racist and Islamophobic nature, criminalizing and accusing the foreign population of causing the characteristic evils associated with otherness, such as noise, dirt or crime (Lundsteen, 2013).

Barcelona, also a critical city in this analysis, accounts for 21% of the population of Catalonia, without counting the metropolitan area (adding the wider area, it would represent 43% of the region's population). It is the capital of Catalonia and one of the main economic and cultural axes of Spain. In addition, it is a city with a great LGBTQ history, since it was the Spanish city where the first

demonstration for sexual liberation took place in 1977. Even considering the procession of “the Carolinas” of 1931 described by Genet in his famous work *Journal du voleur* (1949) as the first, as Martínez (2017) explains, Barcelona would continue to be the first Spanish city with a public demonstration in favour of sexual diversity. As a multitude of testimonies and investigations have established, the role of this city as a space for the generation of encounters and socialization of sexual and gender dissidents has been critical throughout the last century (de Fluvià, 2003; Huard, 2014; Mérida Jiménez, 2016; Mira, 2004).

The objective of this article is to discuss the experiences of LGBTQ people outside of the big city in order to explore: (i) how are the sexual and gender experiences crossed by space, (ii) in what way has the big city been constructed as the epicenter of LGBTQ lives, forgetting other experiences and expectations produced in small and medium cities, and (iii) to what extent is space critical in constituting otherness, through the construction of the homophobic subject.

Background

The earliest academic approaches from the social sciences and humanities to sexual diversity in public space took place mainly in the 1970s, typically dominated by the sociology of deviation (cf. Goode & Troiden, 1974; Humphreys, 1970; Pate, 1974). It was not until the end of that decade that works addressing sexual and gender diversity appeared, through the revised view of urban studies, as an attempt to overcome the sociology of social deviation (Levine, 1979; Loyd & Rowntree, 1978). Following the development of works such as Loyd and Rowntree (1978) and Weightman (1981), which criticized the lack of studies about rural areas that took into account the role of globalization, in 1983 the work of Castells appeared (1983) opening a whole new field of analysis.

This new approach places the focus of studies on sexuality and gay identity in the urban space which, in the words of Binnie & Valentine (1999, p. 176) “did at least draw urban sociologists 'and geographers' attention to the fact that there was a spatial basis to gay identity”. Following this, throughout the nineties, different works appeared to consolidate the idea that the big city is the “natural” space for lesbians, gays, transgender, bisexuals and queers (LGBTQ).

Along these lines, the “great gay migration” to the big city described by Weston (1995) represented the strategy for gays and lesbians from the United States to join the homosexual experience. In this way, as Bech (1997) points out, large cities became the space for constructing the modern gay identity, with a particular focus on New York City (Chauncey, 1994). Following Hindle (1994, p. 8), “it’s clear [...] that gay communities are overwhelmingly urban and the size of a gay community is largely determined by the size of an urban area”. Gradually, the study of gay identity was expanded to cover other large cities such as Paris, Moscow, Amsterdam, London, Lisbon, Rio de Janeiro and San Francisco (Higgs, 1999).

The proliferation of these studies involved rethinking urban chronicles and stories from the perspective of sexual and gender dissent, while consolidating the idea that there is an inherent relationship between the LGBTQ experience and the big city (Abraham, 2009; Doderer, 2011). Also, with the aim of providing insights of greater specificity, studies started to focus on specific analysis of each subgroup that made up the LGBTQ community, considering the differences - and also common denominators - between gays (Black, Gato, Sanders, & Taylor, 2002), lesbians (cf. Nash & Gorman-Murray, 2015; Podmore, 2001; Pomeroy & Chamberland, 2015), bisexual (cf. Hemmings, 2002; Maliepaard, 2015) and transgender (cf. Doan, 2007).

Over time, more specific topics of analysis appeared, such as those focused on gay villages and forms of consumption associated with the LGBTQ population (cf. Bell & Binnie, 2004; Gorman-Murray & Nash, 2017; Nash, 2013; Nash & Gorman-Murray, 2014; Sibalis, 2004; Smart & Whittemore, 2017). Likewise, the incorporation of the intersectional perspective emerged, allowing a consideration of the interrelation between axes of oppression and resistance in approaching the practices and experiences of LGBTQ people in large cities (cf. Casey, 2016; Davis, 2008; Irazábal & Huerta, 2016; Johnston, 2018; Rosenberg, 2017). In this way, the multiple and interconnected dimensions that shape the daily lives of LGBTQ people become visible. The application of the intersectional paradigm enabled

authors, such as Drucker (2011; 2015), to focus on the study of politicized alternatives to the simplest and most homogeneous identities, from the analysis of the evolution of capitalism.

In this context, given the centrality that the big city has taken, Halberstam (2005) proposed the concept of "metronormativity" to refer to the set of sexual and gender regulations that are built within the framework of large urban spaces. However, this concept has also become the focus of some criticism, such as that by Podmore (2016), who questions its reductionism for reproducing the urban-rural binary logic without attending to the particularities of social groups and their conditions of existence. Likewise, some debates began to emphasize the reality of rural areas, a fact that contributed decisively to (re)signifying sexual and gender diversity beyond their classic spaces of analysis (cf. Annes & Redlin, 2012; Campbell, Bell, & Finney, 2006; Gray, Johnson, & Gilley, 2016; Herring, 2010; Kuhar & Švab, 2014; McGlynn, 2018; Rodó de Zárate, 2015).

However, along the development of this extended debate there are very few works that focus their attention on small and medium-sized cities, as environments within which to analyse sexual and gender diversity (cf. Brown, 2008, 2019; Müller, 2016). In addition, those that make reference to sexuality and urban studies tend to focus primarily on the Anglo-Saxon world, overlooking experiences and sex-gender practices produced in other contexts with unique stories and characteristics. The theoretical production on diversity and urban space is the result of the observation of certain socio-spatial contexts - privileged politically and academically, which hinders its application in other contexts, especially non-western ones. Consequently, studies on sexual and gender diversity in small and medium-sized cities that are not part of the Anglo-Saxon world are of great interest, since they throw light on new realities and experiences that, also, make up the polyhedral universe of LGBTQ.

Methodological approach and ethical issues

The analysis presented here is grounded on the original results of an ethnographic research carried out in the cities of Girona and Sabadell, for which a total of 58 in-depth interviews were conducted 34 with LGBTQ people (17 in Girona and 17 in Sabadell) and 24 with stakeholders² (12 in Girona and 12 in Sabadell) and 4 group discussions with 11 LGBTQ people (5 participants in Girona and 6 in Sabadell) and 13 stakeholders were carried out (8 in Girona and 5 in Sabadell). This was triangulated with the exploration of various participant observation sessions that were held in the socialization spaces for LGBTQ people in each of the cities as well as significant events for the LGBTQ community such as the International Day Against Homophobia or the protest against Orland's attacks in 2016. Whilst the sample for the interviews and focus groups was intended to be as inclusive as possible of LGBTQ heterogeneity, it is important to note that its unique value does not rest on its scope, in terms of representation of a wider world, but on its significance in terms of lived experiences and understandings of what in ethnography is referred to as an emic (inner) perspective. This allows us to unravel the perspectives embedded in the diverse LGBTQ voices of lived experiences, enabling a deeper analysis of critical categories and meanings which reveal structural and cultural patterns, and rationalities, often overlooked by wider macro approaches.

Access to the participants was achieved through personal contacts, connections provided by the public administration and local entities, relationships established during the participant observation sessions in the LGBTQ bar in Girona, and through a personal profile in a gay *dating app* with the description of the project goals. Whilst many potential LGBTQ interviewees declined to be involved in the project, the *dating app* allowed us to improve the knowledge of the social dynamic of gay people in Girona. These strategies were combined with the snowball technique, which allowed the sample to be expanded and diversified, especially among stakeholders. The interviews and focus groups were transcribed and the data analysis followed a guiding themes / indicators examination, allowing us to

² In this research, stakeholders include those in public and professional positions whose responsibilities have a direct impact on the well-being of LGBT people, such as policy makers, professionals in the health, education and public security sectors, as well as lawyers and representatives of civil society organizations.

discriminate the main discussion topics of the research. The questions of the interviews, as well as focus groups with LGBTQ people, included aspects about coming out experiences, intimate relationships, experiences of discrimination and the role of public services, uses of public spaces and social life. Regarding the stakeholders, the questions included issues related to the organization, visibility of sexual and gender diversity, strategies to prevent the discrimination and actions undertaken, including at the legal level, to prevent and combat homo and transphobia in the context of local policies.

All the work followed strict ethical standards related to social research in a respect for human dignity, informed consent and anonymity of the participants throughout the research design, fieldwork, analysis and dissemination of results. All the data related to the identity of the participants has been stored confidentially and securely on the researchers' institutional servers.

The results of the investigation presented here have been articulated in three main axes of discussion: The first axis focuses on the diversity of experiences of LGBTQ living outside the big metropolis. These experiences lead to the second axis, which focusses on the big cities as centers for production of LGBT meanings, based on the analysis of the city of Barcelona as the epicenter. Finally, a necessary third analysis and discussion focusses on the construction of the homophobic subject and its relationship with urban space.

LGBTQ experience(s) outside the big city

"Experience" is a word of Latin origin (*experientia*) that refers both, to the fact of having known, witnessed or lived something, and the knowledge acquired throughout life through relationships and social practices. Abuse of the concept can blur its limits and reduce its potentials of analysis. In this work when we refer to experience, beyond the widely discussed psychological explanations (Lambie & Marcel, 2002), we do so from the plural (experiences) sense, recognizing the endless meanings and

representations that permeate social events. In this sense, experiences can be contradictory, liberating and oppressive at the same time, and although they refer to the individual, they are not reduced to the subject or their practices, but are determined by social and cultural patterns in a specific context. Experience is the embodied intersection between individual, society and culture. A status that makes it evident that the separation between mental, social and cultural is neither clear nor possible. Thus, experience is the starting point for the constitution of discourses, representations and practices of subjects. Therefore, an in-depth analysis of experiences that pretends to be categorical will inevitably lead the researcher to an aporia, the aporia of experience. However, if we take experiences as situated narratives to analyse the circumstances of the subjects, it will allow us to understand who does what, why, where, how and when. In this paper, we do not seek to construct categories, but rather to describe circumstances that help us to understand the relationships between gender, sexuality and space.

Therefore, we understand that self-representations are identity practices that, as Anthias (2006) proposes, must be situated and contextualized in a certain space. In this regard, it is worth differentiating, as Low (2000), does, between social production of space and social construction of space. The first refers to the material, technological and economic factors that give rise to the material context, while the second is linked to the concrete experience of this context, made up of memories, images, representation, exchanges and uses (Low, 2000, pp 127-128).

In the present analysis we focus on the confluence between experiences, sexual and gender diversity, and small and medium-sized cities, in order to study discourses, representations and practices from a situated perspective. With this, we take into account that an explanation provided – or a discourse, is not a literal reproduction of an experience as it implies a process, more or less reflective, of re-composition of memories, desires, and multiple experiences, always located in a social and cultural context. Thus, we understand that interviewees' accounts are very varied regarding their LGBTQ "experiences" in medium-sized cities. Some of them recognize several limitations related to the

possibilities of expressing themselves freely, integrating into a sex-gender community or overcoming constant exercises of social control in a close environment: "Sabadell is like a town. As soon as you get a little out of normality everyone notices and looks at you"³ (Transgender woman / lesbian, 31 years old, Sabadell).

However, there are also those who find positive elements in living in a medium-sized city, such as being close to a more natural environment, more affordable prices than those of a large city such as Barcelona, or the ease of getting around within the city. The following quote from the city of Girona demonstrates this view:

"It is the city that has empowered me. When I lived in [hometown] I got divorced and I felt useless, I couldn't go anywhere. I came to Girona, I bought a car and everything fell into place. I got into social life" (Lesbian woman, 35 years old, Girona).

As this last quote shows, the experiences – positive or negative – in relation to the residential environment that LGBTQ people describe are not limited by sexuality and gender only, but also by other elements that condition the interpretation of lived events and ways of “exercising the city” (Bautista, 2010: 210). In this sense, the intersectional interpretation is essential to unravel the way in which the multiple oppressions interact – as well as potentialities and privileges – that shape the polyhedral experience of LGBTQ people (Jubany, 2020). This implies an exploration of the interaction between gender, sexuality, racialization, age, economic, cultural and social capital, and other categories of differentiation and hierarchy in the lives of people (Crenshaw, 1989).

Thus, for example, for the woman cited in the previous quote, the fact that she was coming out of a sentimental break was decisive in perceiving Girona in an emancipatory way and a place full of opportunities. Hence, the intersectional approach is also critical in understanding that the forms of discrimination and exclusion in our society are many and very complex, and so are the forms of

³ All translations are made by the authors from the original quotes that are in Catalan or Spanish language.

resistance and the intersections between them (Jubany, Güell & Davis, 2011). Cities become places of significance that channel personal experiences and make urban resources available to the subject, but the subject (re)models them, (re)signifies and (re)uses them, according to their own needs, possibilities and circumstances. That is why some LGBTQ people in medium-sized cities do not need to move to a big city to experience sexual liberation, nor do they want to develop their daily lives around specific LGBTQ spaces:

“My social life is based on the traditional spaces of Sabadell, such as my theatre company and la ‘colla castellera’ [a human castle-building group]. I’m not at ease with the LGTB associations nor the LGTB leisure spaces because I don’t like the ‘labels’. There is no need to group in sectors, each one defends their own interests” (Gay man, 41 years old, Sabadell).

However, other people have other needs and some do demand specific LGBTQ resources, to promote their well-being and meet their needs in their place of residence. These demands are of all kinds: an LGBTQ unit at the city council and specific public policies, bars and pubs, festivals and exhibitions, awareness campaigns on sexual and gender diversity. As the following words show, this need for specific LGBTQ spaces and resources is expressed mostly among transgender people and among those homosexual people who are in the process of coming out:

“There is nothing here in Girona. Due to ignorance, or because it does not reach them, here the City Council does not carry out any activity, nor does it give any type of information or support to people like me. [...] If I am out of a job I have it difficult because of my age, but also because I am a transsexual person and it is very difficult even if you show that you are prepared, it is very difficult. And the City Council does nothing” (Transgender woman/heterosexual, 51 years old, Girona).

“I would have liked to have spaces to meet other lesbian women during my coming out process [...] In that moment you're lost: you don't know anyone, you don't know where to go” (Lesbian woman, 41 years, Sabadell).

On the other hand, there are some narratives that reveal some scepticism about the possibility that satisfactory LGBTQ lives exist beyond the big city, mainly related to the supposed difficulty of access to sexual relations. As the ethnography reveals, not all LGBTQ people residing in medium-sized cities experience problems in terms of sexual opportunities. In the case of Sabadell, the social and geographical proximity to Barcelona allows short escapes with relative regularity without the need to migrate to the big city. The people of Girona, when they think about emigrating to Barcelona, consider multiple and varied factors, such as job opportunities, access to housing or social and cultural interests.

Thus, whilst sex is still an important element, especially for gay men, it is not the only, nor necessarily the main, motivation for migration. Among the gay men interviewed, there is, with minor nuances, a consensus that in the cities studied they have been able to access sexual relations with other men without major problems: “I really like sex, and when I search, I find” (Gay, 41 years old, Girona), and:

“Of course I have flirted, but I wish it happened every week. When you go to Piccolo [in reference to an openly LGBTQ-friendly pub in the city, now closed], there is always some guy you like, another one you have hooked up with another day, and this one introduces you to that one, etc.” (Gay man, 40 years old, Girona).

In the case of lesbian, bisexual and transgender people, the study does not show a relevance of the sexual issue with the same intensity as with gay men. In any case, whilst sexual relations can be an important element of life satisfaction, reducing the experiences of LGBTQ people to this, and hence establishing a directly proportional relationship between the number of sexual relations and sexually

satisfactory experiences, leads to an overly simplistic analysis. Apart from assuming a reproduction of the prejudice that associates gay sex-love life with emptiness, frivolity and promiscuity, this analysis does not correspond to the expectations, experiences and discourses of LGBTQ people in the small and medium-sized cities studied.

A third element related to the constitution of LGBTQ experiences has to do with the collective representation - and visibility - of sexual and gender diversity in urban settings. In this sense, some changes in LGBTQ social representation at global and national levels have facilitated the emergence of LGBTQ "experiences" at local level. These new representations, which combat and transcend the stigmatizing representations made since heterosexism and cisgenderism have been possible thanks to the struggles of political activism, the increase in LGBTQ visibility in the media, legal developments such as the inclusion of love rights (marriage and adoption) and the uses of new technologies. New empowering representations have generated emerging ways of seeing "the LGBTQ" and "seeing themselves as LGBTQ", also in small and medium-sized cities. In short, contexts and environments are complex, so the reductionism of the pairs of opposites "urban-LGBTQfriendly" and "rural-LGBTQphobic" must be overcome. As Coleman-Murray (2007) pointed out, it is indeed possible to live LGBTQ experiences outside of the large cities.

Discussion about the experience of a big city

Currently, Barcelona concentrates, together with Madrid, most of Spain's social and economic activity directed at the LGBTQ population: the celebration of the international festival of gays and lesbians, CIRCUIT, the organization of the Barcelona Pride, and the departure and entry port for LGBTQ cruise ships in the Mediterranean, saunas, bars, hotels and restaurants, etc. Regarding public policies, the city council has deployed a wide set of policies and measures, including a five-year strategic plan and the creation, in 2019, of specific facilities aimed at LGBTQ population of 1,255 m². In addition, the consistory's political position is in tune with the claims of the main LGBTQ entities. The history of the city, the concentration of resources for LGBTQ socialization and the

deployment of specific public policies, make the city a reference space for LGBTQ people, not only at national level, but also internationally. In the collective imagination of sexual and gender diversity in Catalonia, Barcelona occupies a central place. Consequently, many LGBTQ people from different origins - national and international – have tended to settle in this city.

Yet, despite the centrality of Barcelona in terms of its many resources and its power to condition the imaginary on sexual and gender diversity, it is obvious that not all LGBTQ people in Catalonia reside in the capital, nor do they all perceive Barcelona as a space that would favour their personal well-being. Taking this into account, the research conducted shows that the different distances of medium-sized cities, such as Girona and Sabadell, from Barcelona, determine the uses and links with the big city. For some LGBTQ people in Sabadell, geographical proximity allows them to enjoy the resources of the big city on a regular basis. On the other hand, in Girona the distance and cost of transport makes links with Barcelona weaker, which means that LGBTQ life is more articulated in this medium-sized city.

Some LGBTQ people make strategic uses of the city, either to search for spaces for socialization, to use cultural resources or to carry out anonymous sexual encounters. But this does not mean that all their encounters with "the LGBTQ" are limited to the big city, but rather that some people participate in what we could call "hybrid experiences", in which the local (in terms of the city of residence) bonds with what happens in Barcelona. This way, LGBTQ people in the cities studied re-signify the centrality of Barcelona, as they adapt it and transform it to their local contexts and life experiences. In both Sabadell and Girona, the centrality of Barcelona is in the discursive production of LGBTQ people. Whilst for the residents of Sabadell the links are close, for those of Girona the centrality of Barcelona is often more discursive than practical. In fact, many LGBTQ people in Girona build their identity, practices and discourses in their own environment, without resorting to Barcelona (Langarita, 2020).

Moreover, the centrality of Barcelona also has its limits. Both Girona and Sabadell turn out to be “friendly and desirable” cities for many LGBTQ people, who find affordable prices, spaces without crowds, and interesting social and cultural facilities. In other words, LGBTQ people not only choose their places of residence based on their sexual orientation, but also on other personal preferences:

“We like Girona, it is big but it is not Barcelona [...] We go out to eat, have a beer, go to the movies, shop, go to the beach or for a walk in the mountains” (Lesbian woman, 25 years old, Girona).

On the other hand, “sexile” has been mainly conceptualized as a migratory movement towards the big city, conceived as an escape route towards anonymity, gender-free sexual expression, the political struggle and LGBTQ leisure (Annes & Redlin, 2012; Guzmán, 1997; Langarita & Salguero, 2017; Smith, 2012). However, medium-sized cities can also be destinations for sexiles. In the case of Girona there are people who sexile to this city from other Catalan territories, and who have no intention of migrating to Barcelona. This is the case of a 41-year-old transgender woman, born in a town on the coast of Catalonia, who decides to move to Girona due to the high cost of living in Barcelona:

“I had thought to go to live in Barcelona. What happens is that, in Barcelona, all the jobs I found had a salary of 800 or 900 euros. In Barcelona with 900 euros you don't pay a single flat. So when the job came up in Girona, I came to live here” (Transgender woman/heterosexual, 41 years old, Girona).

The social construction of fear of LGTBphobia. Socio-spatial alterity and symbolic violence

For many LGBTQ people, being able to show affection in public spaces - kissing, hugging, holding hands, etc. - without fear of being assaulted, insulted or belittled is essential for the development of their sexual orientation and / or gender identity. This is, thus, a factor of weight when choosing the place of residence and / or the areas of leisure and socialization. It is important to highlight that it is the fear of suffering violence and discrimination, and not so much the lived experiences, that

configure the feelings of security and insecurity in relation to a certain territory (Moran & Skeggs, 2004: 173). It is a fear that is not at all unfounded, since violence and discrimination against LGBTQ people are present in all spheres of social life (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2013).

As it has been pointed out, most of the interviewed people consider that both Sabadell and Girona are not particularly hostile cities towards this type of public expressions. However, some of them establish differences between the city centre, which is seen as a safe territory, and some peripheral neighbourhoods that are perceived as particularly dangerous⁴. If in the collective imagination the big city is linked with respect for diversity and the small municipality with intolerance, a similar dichotomous distinction is established between the centre and the peripheral neighbourhoods of the cities analysed:

“There are people who to 'come out of the closet' go to the centre of Sabadell to walk and hold hands” (Gay man, 32 years old. Sabadell).

This territorial perception is based on the configuration of a socio-spatial alterity, which is inexorably linked to intolerance towards sexual and gender diversity. We understand that, as Puar (2007) sustains, in the same way that heteronormativity requires a homosexual other to establish itself, homonormativity needs a homophobic other to make sense. In the case at hand, homophobic alterity is constituted from ethnic, economic and cultural markers, and is located in certain neighbourhoods with lower incomes and higher rates of unemployment and immigration, rather than in central areas of Girona and Sabadell:

⁴ The neighborhoods identified by the informants as "dangerous" are: The Font de la Pòlvora, Santa Eugènia and the neighboring town of Salt, in Girona; and the neighborhoods of La Plana del Pintor, Creu de Barberà, Ca n'Oriac or Can Puiggener, in Sabadell.

“In many suburbs there is less tolerance than in the centre. I would say that 70% are immigrants, Moroccans, sub-Saharan people, and the few national people who live there are quite marginal people” (Gay man, 52 years old. Sabadell).

“Salt at night makes me a little scared for the people of Morocco more than anything, who are the ones who cause the most problems”. (Gay man, 52 years old, Girona)

As the ethnography illustrates, the alterity constituted by the immigrant (especially, Moroccans and sub-Saharan in the case of Girona) is intimately associated with intolerance towards LGBTQ expressions. Homogenized representation of such alterity embodies a culture incompatibility with respect for sexual and gender diversity: “(immigrants) do not see it as natural (homosexuality) because of the education they have, because of the culture they have” (Lesbian woman, 40 years old. Sabadell).

This culturalised alterity, constituted by the immigrant, intersects with another of a socio-economic nature. The gay man from Sabadell tells us about “quite marginal people”, while the transgender woman from the same city sustains that “neighbourhoods do not accept homosexuality as much because they are much more working class neighbourhoods”. The relational and distributive nature of discrimination must therefore be addressed, also explaining its spatial dimension by being rooted in concrete social and material conditions (Valentine, 2010). This is the configuration of a LGBTQphobia process in which main factors generating social oppressions and inequalities -such as racialized identity, religion or social class; intersect and serve to consolidate existing social hierarchies.

Particularly relevant here are the arguments of Klett-Davies (2019: 112) regarding how “the geographical 'othering' connects heteronormativity and homonormativity with fear of LGBTQ phobia, to show how the discourse within LGBT communities has shifted from being the ones who are 'being othered' to being the ones who partake in 'othering'”. This alteration of LGBTQphobia,

defended by some LGBTQ people, and by many people who are not - carries a double danger that needs to be reviewed.

Firstly, it presupposes that intolerance towards LGBTQ expressions is located in certain territories and embodied in certain individuals, as opposed to a “we” (located in the centre of the cities) that is supposed to be free of prejudice and is LGBTQ friendly. Secondly, this alterisation contributes to the consolidation of xenophobic and racist movements, especially islamophobic, increasingly present in our societies. Thus, following Puar (2007), such supposed intolerance towards LGBTQ can be understood as yet another pretext for the construction of a demonized representation of the immigrant, characterized by intolerance towards diversity, cultural backwardness and fundamentalism.

Aside from underpinning the moral superiority of the autochthonous population over foreigners, the perception that intolerance and discrimination towards LGBTQ expressions reigns in certain peripheral areas carries the danger of becoming a “self-fulfilling prophecy” (Merton, 1949). In the case debated here, the conviction that some neighbourhoods are intolerant deters manifestations of sex-gender diversity from occurring in these neighbourhoods, thus preventing their inhabitants from becoming familiar with diversity:

“With the theatre company that I am with now we do a show [on gender-gender diversity] in a central square next to the town hall. When I ask my classmates to do the performance in Can Gambúsia [neighbourhood outside the centre, they tell me that they don't know if it will be the same. And if I tell them to do it in Can Puiggener [peripheral neighbourhood identified as hostile], they tell me: ‘they will lynch us there!’” (Gay man, 41 years old. Sabadell).

“I do not know. Now I’ll look like... like a racist, and it’s not like that, right? But I think [...] in the middle of the high street of Salt you kiss a guy, and you will hear “fag” for sure. Well, maybe not, huh?” (Gay man, 25 years old. Girona).

On the other hand, the fear of displaying homo-affectivity in public not only obeys the prejudices towards that socio-cultural alterity located in certain areas, but also has an endogenous component that is often omitted in personal experiences. The experience of LGBTQ people is shaped by insult (*l'injure*), that is, as Eribon (2012) explains, those performative utterances (insults, ridicule, contempt) that at the time of pronouncing separate the "normal" from the "stigmatized", and condemn the latter to living within the margins - and managed - by the dominant ideology. The effect of the insult is twofold, as it is inscribed both, in the bodies and minds of LGBTQ people.

The first effect of the insult is of a body nature. The heterosexual and cisgender regime shapes a whole "political anatomy of the body" (Foucault, 1976) with sanctions for those bodies that do not conform to sex-gender normality. This is why many LGBTQ people have learned to model - or even suppress - words, gestures and acts in the fear that their social expression may lead to discrimination and violence. A learning that, over time, ends up embodied and reproduced in a mechanical way:

"You get used to a certain inhibition or non-display [...] There is a situation of semi-concealment that you are normalizing, and a number of things that survive: before giving a kiss or a hug, you look around. There is a certain repression" (Lesbian woman, 47 years old. Sabadell).

However, the insult is also embedded in the minds of LGBTQ people, producing some acceptance of their sex-gender subalternity. This is one of the effects of the symbolic violence conceptualized by Bourdieu (1990). Symbolic violence is, as Bourdieu argued, inevitable and insensitive to victims since it belongs to the natural order of things. This is a violence able to generate a logical and moral consensus, imposing a legitimate view of the social order, which is shared even by those who harm the most. In this way, some LGBTQ people end up accepting it as something relatively normal, as a lesser evil – the glances of disapproval or the sporadic insults at the public demonstrations of sex-gender diversity:

“People are holding hands wherever they are [...] Some will look at them in a strange way, in some cases they will say 'butterfly' [...] butterfly? Well butterfly then and end of the story. In that sense, I don't worry. ”(Gay man, 52 years old. Sabadell).

As we see, the feeling of fear - or security - is driven by both, exogenous factors (that socio-spatial alteration) and endogenous factors (the internalization of LGBTQphobia). Also, both factors are determined by personal resources. Cultural capital, economic capital and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1998), as well as affective networks that have a significant influence on experiences and perceptions of LGBT people. In this way, people with high economic, cultural and social capital have greater resources to face possible violence and discrimination than those without such resources. These resources (re)configure the fear of experiencing violence and discrimination in certain social settings.

Conclusions

As has been argued and shown throughout this article, to understand how sexual and gender diversity experiences are crossed by spaces, we must look beyond the common line of studies that place their focus on the big city, to explore how LGBTQ people's experiences and expectations are produced in small and medium cities. It is by taking into account the LGBTQ life in those socio-spatial contexts, traditionally overlooked by both political and academic debates, that the theoretical production on diversity and urban space can be representative of its full complexity.

This approach allows us to understand how the life of LGBTQ people living outside large cities is also determined by the construction of the homophobic subject and by the sexualised discourses. Yet, it also reveals how LGBTQ people's life in small cities are not necessarily condemned to ostracism or unhappiness, but rather filled with a general sense of fulfilment related to the different motivations that prompt people to live out of the big city.

Through this analysis this paper puts into question the common assumption that the big city is the inherent space of sexual liberation, as stated in the 1980's and 90's. Although large cities have

historically been the focus of academic attention of urban and sex-gender studies, when we turn our attention to other scenarios we discover that there are other lives to be lived and other legitimate experiences. These experiences often contradict the rural / urban dichotomy as well as the hegemony of the big city as the only possible space for sexual and gender liberation. As the results of the study presented have shown, in Catalonia sexile to Barcelona is neither a generalizable nor a unidirectional phenomenon. Migratory movements to Barcelona are mediated by the combination of different personal, social and economic interests and resources, in which the search for sexual and gender liberation may be one of them, but not necessarily the main or the only factor.

The experiences and stories put forward in this article show that LGBTQ people can build their lives successfully in medium-sized cities. They can, in short, generate valuable experiences that need to be recognized and emphasized to understand the influence of space on the shaping of sex-gender experiences. To assume that the space for LGBTQ experiences is only the big city is to overlook the complexity of the intersection between the urban and the sex-gender.

The big city, in this case Barcelona, is a symbolic point of reference, of production of experiences and dialogue for many LGBTQ people in Catalonia. However, its uses are very varied and do not always coincide with the centralist logic of large cities. Urban scholars, as well as those of gender and sexuality, cannot fall into the discursive logic in which western cities are the epicentre of vital experiences because, as this paper shows, the relationships between large urban centres and small and medium-sized cities it is much more complex and deserves to be discussed and evaluated as such.

Moreover, as has been argued, such complexity must also be approached from an intersectional perspective, in order to reveal how the conditions of existence, as well as personal experiences, are determined by the interrelation of gender and sexuality with other factors that generate inequalities and privileges. The interrelation of these factors (re)shapes the way LGBTQ people experience and perceive the city, forcing us to overcome the simplistic logic that identifies the big city as the privileged - and desired - space for LGBTQ people and small and medium-sized territories as

rejection spaces. Aspects such as peace of mind, more affordable prices, proximity to services and affective networks are all elements that positively affect the (self) perceptions of LGBT residents in the medium-sized cities studied.

Equally, the interrelation between personal resources - in addition to prejudices - (re)shapes perceptions about the danger of experiencing violence and discrimination in the urban environment. In this sense, the alleged real threat is identified with a socio-spatial alterity that is inherently assumed to be intolerant and dangerous. It is in this sense that we must recognise that violence is not always localized in space, but is also a-problematically internalized through mechanisms of symbolic domination, the effectiveness of which motivates us to perceive socio-spatial order as something logical, natural and ultimately acceptable.

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