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Homosexual adolescents and their relations with relatives: a phenomenological study

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ABSTRACT

Aim: to understand the experience of homosexual adolescents in relation to their relatives. **Method:** research based on the social phenomenology of Alfred Schütz. The interview with open questions was used to obtain testimony from 12 homosexual adolescents. The data were organized and analyzed in thematic categories, according to the theoretical-methodological framework. **Result:** the following categories emerged from the testimonies: "Discovering homosexuality by relatives"; "Conflicting family relationship" and, "Being respected and maintaining family ties". **Discussion:** the conflicts experienced by homosexual adolescents in the family environment interfere with the way they express homosexuality in social spaces. Although they experience rejection, prejudice, coercion of freedom, among others, these adolescents expect to be respected in their sexual orientation, maintaining relationships with their relatives. **Conclusion:** the results of this study provide reflections aimed at the inclusion of homosexual adolescents in social settings, considering respect for affective-sexual diversity.

Descriptors: Adolescent; Homosexuality; Family Relations; Qualitative Research; Interpersonal Relations; Nursing.

INTRODUCTION

The experience of homosexuality in adolescence can be a complex issue for both adolescents and their families. This expression of human sexuality, in spite of the greater openness to the discussion of the theme in society, is still configured as a trigger for conflicts within the family and social environment⁽¹⁾.

The hegemonic idea in the social environment argues that the orientation of sexuality should be heterosexual, marginalizing the other manifestations of human sexuality. This marginalization can be problematic in adolescence, the phase of life characterized by changes, uncertainties and identity uncertainty⁽²⁾.

Study shows that homosexual adolescents experience family conflicts when they make their sexual orientation evident⁽³⁾. In becoming aware of homosexuality, the young man faces the fear of the discovery of this sexual orientation by his relatives and society. Thus, in some cases, he adopts denial as a way of self-protection. On the other hand, when family members are aware of homosexuality, young people may experience concrete forms of coercion by family members to adapt them to the hegemonic sexual norm. The physical and psychological violence appear as modalities constantly adopted for this purpose. In turn, the young people go through situations of psychic suffering, uncertainties and fear⁽²⁾.

It is emphasized that the family constitutes an important base of support for the construction of the identity and for the mental health of its members, as long as the family issues are dialogued and the family establishes harmonic and mutual relations between them. However, this does not always occur when the family is faced with the homosexuality of one of its members⁽⁴⁾, which points out the importance of deepening the discussion about the issues involved in the

relationship of homosexual adolescents with their relatives.

The fact that the stigmatization of homosexual orientation creates deeply negative marks in people's lives⁽⁵⁾, especially when it comes to adolescents who do not find the support of their families, motivated this study. Based on the foregoing, the following questions guided this research: how is it for adolescents to experience their homosexuality in the context of family relationships? What does the adolescent with homosexual orientation expect from living with his family? The objective was to understand the experience of homosexual adolescents in relation to their family relationships.

It is considered that the discussion about the meanings attributed to the experience of the adolescent with homosexual orientation towards family relations can support the reflection on this multifaceted reality from the perspective of those who experience it - the homosexual teenager.

METHODS

This research uses a phenomenological approach and is based on the theoretical and methodological assumptions of Alfred Schütz's social phenomenology: social world, intersubjectivity, knowledge and social action - reasons why and reasons for social action⁽⁶⁾.

The social world is regarded as the time and space where human beings share meaningful conscious processes of themselves and of others. Intersubjectivity presupposes the relation of one to the other in the social world, in which mutual influences occur. The collection of knowledge is the amount of previous experiences and information transmitted culturally by parents, teachers and people of direct contact in the social world. Human action is endowed with

intentionality and is related to a project in which man finds meaning, that is, actions are motivated behaviors. The “reasons why” are attached to the past sedimented in the consciousness of the human being, being linked to the amount of knowledge acquired and experienced. The “reasons for” refer to the intentionality that triggers the action and are based on the body of knowledge⁽⁶⁾.

The research scenario was a city in the state of Amapá, with teen participants identifying themselves as homosexuals.

Inclusion criteria were adolescence, aged between 18 and 19 years and living with relatives. It is assumed that at the end of adolescence the participants are more assured of their sexual orientation, besides being able to respond legally for their participation in the study.

To recruit the participants, the technique of snowball sampling⁽⁷⁾ was used. An adolescent who was part of the relationship with the main researcher (doctoral student), from participation in university extension projects, was initially contacted. After the interview, this adolescent indicated others and so on, obtaining a total of 12 participants. All the statements were used, with no sample losses.

When they were invited to participate in the study, the adolescents received information about the study proposal, its objectives, ethical issues involved and the importance of its participation.

The interview with open questions was used to access the context lived by homosexual adolescents in relation to their relationships with their relatives. Before starting the interview, the adolescents were asked to sign the Informed Consent Form.

The encounter with the homosexual adolescents occurred in several places, including the dependencies of a public university, in a reserved room. This was permeated by empathy,

as it left them at ease to answer the following guiding questions of the interview: considering your homosexual orientation, tell me about your experience with your relatives. What do you expect from living with your family? To characterize the participants, questions were included in the interview script that sought personal and socio-demographic information about them.

The adolescents were interviewed from September to October 2015. The testimonials were recorded on MP4 voice recorder and the average interview time was 40 minutes.

The number of participants was not previously defined, and the statements were finalized when it was observed that the content was sufficient to allow the deepening, comprehensiveness and diversity of the process of understanding the object studied, as established for the qualitative research⁽⁸⁾.

In order to ensure anonymity, adolescents were identified by the letter “A” (Adolescent), followed by the number corresponding to the order in which the interviews were conducted (A1 to A12).

The organization and analysis of the results were carried out as recommended by studies of Alfred Schütz’s Social Phenomenology⁽⁹⁾: attentive and careful reading of all transcribed material with the purpose of grouping the significant contents of the testimonies. This reading aimed to identify the convergence of meanings for the construction of the categories that emerged from the experience of homosexual adolescents in the relations with their relatives. The set of categories was discussed based on the theoretical-methodological and thematic reference.

Considering that homosexual adolescents are included in a social group considered to be vulnerable, it was made explicit to them the preservation of their rights of freedom, privacy and confidentiality to participate or not in the study, as well as the choice of environment

for conducting the interview. The project was approved under Opinion No. 1,197,641/2015. CAAE: 45984815.7.0000.0003.

RESULTS

Twelve homosexual adolescents, aged 18 years (four participants) and 19 years (eight) participated in the study. As for the religion, one said to be pagan, another said not to believe in God and the others declared themselves as Catholics. All were university students, with an average family income of six minimum wages and lived with their relatives.

The categories "Discovery of homosexuality by relatives" and "Conflict family relationship" express the reasons why of the experience of homosexual adolescents in relation to their relatives. The life projects of adolescents regarding the experience of homosexuality in the family context (motives for) are described in the category "being respected and maintaining ties with the family".

Category 1- Discovering homosexuality by family members

The discovery of adolescent homosexuality led many relatives to react negatively to this situation: they stopped talking to them and, according to the adolescent, exteriorized their cultural and religious prejudices. In some cases, the discovery was accompanied by feelings of disappointment generated by the loss of the expectation of the child to follow the social heteronormativity that provides for the constitution of the traditional family:

My mother said that she already knew and had already realized. Her first reac-

tion was to cry a lot. She said I should look for a church. [...] then she kept talking: Aren't you going to give me a grandchild? A1.

[...] It was very difficult for me and my parents. [...] My family is very religious, but I could no longer hide my feelings. My mother said that I would kill my dad in such disgust if I remained gay. My godfather, the priest, came to give me advice and said that if I did not change, it would destroy my family. I had to change; otherwise I'd bear this guilt forever. A2.

Although the family was initially surprised by the discovery of the adolescent's homosexuality, many family members adopted a more understanding attitude towards their sexual orientation and highlighted important care measures for their health and personal life:

[...] my mother [...] spent about nine months without talking to me. I started talking to my mom not long ago. [...] we have a very good relationship today. [...] she began to guide me to prevent me in my relations [...]. She told me to be very careful and still, not to hurt my heart. A5

[...] my grandmother sat next to me, talked to me and said that she already knew that I had not liked girls since I was a child. She said that that boy I take home is not only my friend and that, for her, there is no problem, and that I can bring anyone who is good. A6

Category 2 - Conflicting family relationship

Most adolescents live in an atmosphere of conflict generated by internalized homophobia within the family. This environment is permeated by threat, blackmail, offense, physical and verbal aggression, coercion of freedom, as well as moral and religious judgments by parents and relatives.

When my mother found out, she cried a lot and I cried too, [...] I love my mom. She told me she would rather see me pregnant than see me with girls, that she did not want that for me. She told my father and he even beat me [...]. My sister says she's homophobic, that she cannot stand seeing two people of the same sex relating to each other, that this is wrong and against our religion [...] I get sad and afraid to be excluded from the family in times of meetings for being homosexual. A3

One day my mother took the cell phone, discovered it and asked: "What is this story that you are dating a girl? If I ever dream that I have a gay daughter I'm going to throw myself in front of a truck". A7

I had a cell phone and my mother took it away. She also took out the internet, referred me to a psychologist and forbade me to leave for a long time [...] she changed me from school. A10

Category 3 - Being respected and maintaining ties with family

When questioned about what they expect from living with their relatives, the adolescents

expressed the desire to be respected in the family as homosexuals.

I expected them to accept and respect me. [...] I wanted their minds to be more open, but unfortunately it is not. A9

As for my brother-in-law who is prejudiced, conservative, macho, I hope that in the course of time we can talk, tap on each other's shoulders and shake hands. In relation to my father, I imagine that everything can improve because it can't get any worse. With my sisters everything is fine and with my mother I hope it gets better and better. A12

Despite difficulties in accepting their sexual orientation, adolescents recognize the importance of family relationships. So, they have the expectation of maintaining these ties, living close to or with the family.

[...] I want to keep in touch with my family, always, because I love them, [...] maybe I will not leave the house. Today my mother is my friend. I talk to her a lot. I hope our relationship improves more and more. A2

[...] I hope to keep the relationship with my family, even with all the suffering. I don't want to get away, especially from my mother. A4

I intend to live with my mother, in the same place or not, but always to be close because I always think she gave up her personal life for us, the children. I never want to leave her. A11

DISCUSSION

It was evidenced in the present study that family members, upon discovering adolescent homosexuality, had negative reactions, culminating in conflicts within the family. When the manifestation of homosexuality occurs for children, there is often a breakdown in family dynamics. The discovery of homosexuality by parents is usually accompanied by dramatic tensions that can break the bonds of solidarity that the family tends to tie. At first, rejection marks the interaction between the young person and the domestic group⁽²⁾.

To fulfill the preconceptions of heteronormativity prevalent in society, families tend to invest heavily in their children becoming heterosexual and matching gender performances to biological sex. They use strategies ranging from total silence regarding sexual diversity, the production of stigmata, to the segregation of homosexuals. This to enhance and value experiences and modes of existence that they consider leading to heterosexuality and thus banish what they think leads to sexual and/or gender dissent⁽¹⁰⁾.

The results of the present study show that the discovery of homosexuality by the parents is very turbulent, being crossed by control, surveillance, persecution, invasion of privacy, prohibitions, threats, blackmail and even aggression. Research conducted in the countryside region of São Paulo, Brazil, showed the difficult situations experienced by male homosexuals, including when telling their families about their sexual orientation. Although there were other homosexual people in their families, reports of rejection were more frequent than those of acceptance and open dialogue about homosexuality. In general, this difficulty arose mainly in the relationship with the father. When the family did not have the knowledge of the sexual orientation,

the difficulty of the homosexual was around disguising their behaviors and feelings⁽¹¹⁾.

A study conducted with parents of homosexual adolescents from the American Midwest showed that the revelation of their children's homosexuality was accompanied by great tension, surprise and emotionality, as well as concern for their well-being in relation to social prejudice. Some parents described that one of the first reactions they experienced in the face of the revelation of their children was the feeling of breaking the image they had created for them, encompassing, among other things, marriage and grandchildren⁽³⁾.

In the family space, the tensions between homosexual teenagers and the figures of parents and other family members who seek to heterosexualize their behavior leave this space not always as a quiet environment for family relations⁽¹²⁾.

If, on the one hand, heteronormative culture triggers conflicts in the home environment of the homosexual adolescent, religious values also contribute to the crystallization of heterosexual behavior as a social norm and serve as a fuel to intensify conflicts between family members and adolescents. Religious institutions, especially the more orthodox ones, from their rites and beliefs, institute which behaviors are socially and morally allowed to lead the lives of individuals. Through their religious enunciations, heterosexuality is reinforced as the only legitimate and natural form of affective-sexual relationship^(10,13).

American study showed that the Christian Church was identified as influencing a black community, regarding standards and values, including the experience of sexuality by its faithful. Within this Church, homosexuality is interpreted from Christian dogmas and biblical interpretations, being considered as sin and abomination that hinders divine salvation. In this way, young people faced significant conflicts between sexuality and religion, resulting

in shame, confusion and fear of the religious consequences of being a homosexual⁽¹⁴⁾.

As discussed above, it is observed that the family excels by the coherence between sex, gender, sexual practice and desire in the perspective of heterosexuality, and religious institutions, most of the time, condemn sexual practices that transgress this norm⁽¹³⁾. It should be noted, however, that the family can provide support in relation to their homosexuality, providing strength for the young person to feel good about himself, even if he experiences vulnerable situations⁽¹⁵⁾. Religiousness and spirituality, in turn, can usually be positively integrated into psychological well-being, satisfaction in living, happiness and optimism⁽¹⁶⁾, as well as acting as a protective factor capable of promoting physical and mental health, resilience and quality of life in different social contexts⁽¹⁷⁾. In this sense, both the family and the religious institution, in welcoming these young people, may be contributing to the improvement of their lives.

Although most of the family members react negatively to the revelation of homosexuality by the adolescent, in the present study, some of their relatives were more tolerant towards the expressed sexuality. A US study showed that, among black adolescents who voiced sexual orientation to the family, most got some degree of acceptance and support from family members, especially mothers and grandmothers. Acceptance levels have varied between never or rarely discussing the subject and accepting, but not tolerating the fact that the child maintains relationships with people of the same sex. No full acceptance, tolerance and support from the family were found⁽¹⁴⁾.

The question of acceptance of children's homosexuality is also related to the difference in terms of temporality between the processes of acceptance of mothers and children. While the children experience their homosexuality

procedurally, in a movement of discovery, the mothers usually live this moment more punctually. This difference is important to understand the acceptance of the mothers, who need to re-elaborate their conception on the sexuality of the children since for them, until that moment, they were heterosexual⁽¹⁸⁾.

It is emphasized that the acceptance of adolescent homosexuality by the family can contribute to increase confidence and positively reinforce their sexual identity. Research carried out in the State of Goiás, Brazil, evidenced the family support for the experience of sexuality as a fundamental factor for the well-being of people facing homosexual orientation. It also stressed that families can contribute to fighting and overcoming prejudice established by society, functioning as an institution to protect homosexuals against external hostilities⁽¹⁵⁾.

The experiences of homosexual adolescents in relation to their relationship with relatives and other people in their social world, such as school and religious institutions, permeate a relationship of intersubjectivity that is not always positive and generates harmonious relationships. Most of the time, these relations reveal the heterosexist beliefs, values, and idealizations that are part of the knowledge of the social actors involved.

In this sense, what adolescents have learned from family, friends, school and religious institutions is an element that makes up their knowledge about homosexuality. The collection of knowledge and their experience as homosexuals determine their way of acting in the social world, providing elements that allow them or not to assume before the family and society in general their sexual orientation. This knowledge base can also be a trigger for conflicts with themselves and with others or, depending on the situation, allow homosexual adolescents to live their sexuality in a positive way.

Given the biographical situation marked by the homophobia in which the adolescents are inserted, and their amount of knowledge coming from the influences of significant people such as parents, teachers, friends and religious leaders, added to their own experiences with homosexuality, the adolescents participating in the present research seek to move towards the transposition of homophobia and social stigma to achieve the freedom to experience their sexuality.

In the present study, when interviewed about their life projects, considering homosexuality and their trajectory in relation to homophobia internalized in the family and in society, adolescents envisage being respected in their sexual orientation, especially by the family.

It should be noted that, in the case of homosexuality, the family presents itself as the main source of aid and simultaneously as a source of suffering. Adolescents coexist with the fear of disappointing parents and of not belonging to the family group. However, when the family welcomes, this support is seen as paramount for the safety and well-being of the young homosexual⁽¹⁵⁾.

The family should be a kind of solidarity network in which the youth finds support and receives stimuli to strengthen their development. However, the family and its pre-established norms can prove to be mechanisms of coercion of the individual to conform to the social and/or familiar norm⁽¹⁹⁾.

Despite the conflicts expressed by adolescents in the family relationship, they wish to maintain affective ties with their nuclear family. The study that analyzed the process of revealing the homosexuality of youngsters in the family context in the parents' perception showed that this process occurs in four complementary phases, ranging from resistance and distance to the elaboration of the meaning of having a

homosexual child and of welcoming him. In this last phase, parents find reasons to consolidate affective bonds, to reframe previous homophobic knowledge, to construct new ideas and meanings around homosexuality and to welcome the child⁽²⁰⁾.

The reception phase is the moment in which the parents interpret the experiences lived in the process of revelation and construct the conception of the reasons for the consolidation of the affective bonds, seeking the union of the family⁽²⁰⁾. If parents can reach this stage, they can provide the children with the project of maintaining family ties, increasing the chances of experiencing a positive expression of their sexuality.

In the present study, adolescents envision the desire to be free to express their sexual orientation, which would bring the feeling of more belonging to the family environment. A study carried out in Southern Brazil pointed out several problematic conditions for the experience of homosexuality, highlighting, among them, family rigidity as one of the major obstacles. In most cases, there is an incoherence between the discourse and the acceptance of homosexuality by the family, who claims to have accepted, but forbids any homosexual manifestations in the family environment. This characterizes a pre-conceived bias in the family that is in favor of differences and, in practice, ends up reproducing countless prejudiced behaviors⁽¹⁵⁾.

The social phenomenology as a theoretical-philosophical reference that grounded this study brought the relevance of the intersubjectivity inscribed in the relations between homosexual adolescents and their relatives. These relationships are marked by the influence of the social context that adopts heteronormativity as the guiding thread of affective-sexual relations, allowing little space for affective-sexual manifes-

tations considered dissidents. Such circumstances end up marginalizing and imposing suffering on sexual minorities, placing them in situations of vulnerability even in adolescence.

This study brings relevant contributions regarding the delineation of the conflicting relationships of homosexual adolescents with their relatives that can have negative repercussions in their development. On the other hand, a limitation is the fact that it was carried out with a group of adolescents from families that are part of a community in the State of Amapá, northern region of Brazil. This is because their results may diverge from investigations carried out in other regions that present a diverse sociocultural context, which prevents the generalization of their findings.

CONCLUSION

The relationships of homosexual adolescents and their families are marked by conflicts that interfere with the way homosexuals express homosexuality in the family environment and other social spaces. Although they experience rejection, prejudice, coercion of freedom, among others, these adolescents expect to be respected in relation to their sexual orientation and wish to maintain family bonds.

It is hoped that the results of this study will provide reflections on the inclusion of homosexual adolescents in different social settings, especially in the family environment, considering respect for affective-sexual diversity.

It is important to highlight the need for inclusion of actions aimed at promoting the mental health of homosexual adolescents and their families, as far as adolescent health policies are concerned.

The possibility of further studies that seek to value the subjectivity of adolescents and their

families in the face of homophobia and sexual stigma could also be considered, since it may contribute to a better understanding of their demands and expectations and thus provide support for professional actions with a view to minimize the psychic suffering resulting from identification with this sexual orientation considered dissenting.

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