



# Social Representations of Homosexuality During the Childhood of Gay Men

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## Abstract

This work is the result of research and aims to investigate the social representations that gay people have regarding homosexuality, in this case referred to since childhood; For this purpose, a semi-structured interview of 9 questions was developed based on stage 1 of Cass's model (1979), which involves childhood memories, considering SR as a system of values, notions and practices, a network of concepts, images and knowledge. It was applied to 15 self-identified gay men between 21 and 55 years of age, Mexican inhabitants of the state of Coahuila. A content analysis of each subject's interview responses was carried out on the data obtained through the semi-structured interview, which allowed categories and frequencies to be established.

**Keywords:** Social representations, Homosexuality, Childhood

## Introduction

Thus, homosexuals encounter the conflict of assuming themselves as different beings, a sensation that is sometimes increased by rejection and attitudes of contempt from the environment, since by not fitting into said sex-gender triad there is no specific behavioral pattern that can continue, since they do not comply with the stereotype established from the gender role, which refers to a group of socially established behaviors and characteristics, both for men and women;<sup>1-5</sup> gender roles that, throughout individuals' lives, in a process of acculturation, shape us, in large part, due to the biological sex from which it is established how we will be educated and under what guidelines.<sup>6,7</sup>

Building a sexual identity based on a homosexual sexual orientation becomes more complex since the individual perceives himself as different: gay or lesbian, that is, a condition that even in today's society does not receive acceptance nor is it accepted by the families in which the families are formed. people in general, hence the importance of investigating the social representations of homosexuality among gay and lesbian people.

The culture we find ourselves in is heteronormative and homophobic: authoritarianism, value conservatism and political conservatism, traditional gender roles and sexism; religiosity and negative attitude towards feminism<sup>8-12</sup> report that homophobia correlates with authoritarianism, gender ideology, gender differences, religious beliefs and conservative politics; That is, it promotes an attitude of extreme rejection towards gay men and lesbian women, in such a way that these people play a symbolic social role.<sup>13,14</sup>

Feeling good about one's sexual orientation and integrating it into one's personal life promotes well-being and mental health. This integration includes revealing one's orientation to others: family and friends especially, which results in increased social support and this leads to well-being. Hence the importance of disclosure, specifically to the family: knowing how it affects development. of the gay-lesbian sexual orientation that those close to them know their own sexual orientation and what it derives from, since this is the most important protective factor or the greatest risk factor of not accepting the homosexual orientation of the son or daughter and reacting in the same way. inadequately,<sup>15-19</sup> even today young

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people consider that the family is the first place where trust is generated, where they grow and learn to mature.<sup>20-22</sup>

Pérez Acosta<sup>23</sup> states that research on homosexuality presents challenges for the future given the changes that society is undergoing and in particular the lesbian-gay population, especially from the United States since many of them have deficits and biases because The predominance in research is in the explanatory theories of homosexuality from biology, making it necessary to continue with research from the psychological field, from which it will be possible to strip the topic of any ideological, religious or political interest that prevents progress in understanding. of the phenomenon as it is.

The first step in research when studying gay people is the use of qualitative methods to access hidden narrative information within a marginalized population. The second step would be to use the information obtained through qualitative methods to create experimental designs that allow working on relevant topics in this population, such as: gender, spirituality, family, racism, coming out, generational differences, health issues and security, urban and rural realities.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, this work seeks to contribute to the need to know the social representations of homosexuality that gay men refer to in their childhood, since even today the process of recognizing a sexual orientation different from heterosexuality is arduous and painful due to the lack of references, ignorance, feelings of difference and hesitation in confessing homosexuality.<sup>25</sup>

## Homosexual

The term homosexual was coined in the 19th century, first in German as Homosexualität (homosexuality, that is, the condition of homosexual) by the Austrian writer and activist Karl María Kertbeny, who used it for the first time in a letter dated May 6, 1868, sent to his friend, the German writer Karl Hénrich Ulrichs, both considered pioneers on the homosexual topic. The word came to light the following year (1869) in an anonymous pamphlet published in Leipzig, where it declared "for the repeal of the Prussian laws on sodomy, maintaining that private and consensual sexual acts should not be a reason for punishment, nor considered as criminals".

In the 19th century this medical model represented a significant improvement in attitudes towards homosexuality because before Ulrichs and Kertbeny, homosexuality was seen as a mere evil or moral degeneration that should be severely punished, often by pillory or death. The medical model contributed, at least, to considering it a treatable disease; Today, of course, we can see the abuses that arose from that mentality of the medical model: homosexuality as pathology.<sup>26</sup>

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The culture we find ourselves in is heteronormative and homophobic: authoritarianism, value conservatism and political conservatism, traditional gender roles and sexism; religiosity and negative attitude towards feminism.<sup>8-12</sup> In their review, Jeremy, Beatrice, Eli and Walter<sup>27</sup> report that homophobia correlates with authoritarianism, gender ideology, gender differences, religious beliefs and conservative politics; That is, it promotes an attitude of extreme rejection towards gay men, in such a way that these people play a symbolic social role.<sup>13,14</sup>

Homosexual sexual orientation is marked by prejudice and discrimination,<sup>28,29</sup> which has an impact on both a personal and social level: at a social level they are reflected in everyday and unfounded stereotypes that only limit job opportunities. Raising children and recognizing relationships, which is why many gay people try to deny or hide their sexual orientation, which has serious consequences for health and well-being.

Homosexuality, understood as the emotional, romantic or sexual attraction towards people of the same sex-gender,<sup>30</sup> including sexual orientation as indicated by the American Psychological Association (2011):<sup>31</sup> emotional, romantic, sexual or lasting affection toward others, is easily distinguished from other components of sexuality that include biological sex, sexual identity (the psychological sense of being a man or woman), and the social role of sex (respect for cultural norms of feminine and masculine behavior). .. people may or may not express their sexual orientation in their behaviors.

Andrade<sup>32</sup> regarding social psychology and homosexuality points out: The homosexual person generates a high interest and a broad need for explanations that lead to understanding a problem. In the socialization process, each socio-cultural organization explicitly determines the forms accepted as exemplary and necessary for each sex: the assignment of gender models of masculinity to men and femininity to women, determining the formation of social life and daily interactions. where it is assumed that all people are heterosexual and that men, masculine and heterosexual, must fulfill the roles assigned to them, and women, feminine and heterosexual, fulfill what is expected. This is how society keeps control of the gender role of each person, because there is a personal identity that is not at the same time and therefore a social identity.<sup>33</sup>

## Social Representations

Giménez<sup>34</sup> points out that all reality is represented, that is, appropriated by the group, reconstructed in its cognitive system, integrated into its value system, depending on its history and the social and ideological context that surrounds it. And it is this

appropriated and restructured reality that constitutes reality itself for the individual and the group. If so, all reality is represented, appropriated by and from the members of a group and reconstructed in a cognitive system that constitutes reality itself for the individual.

Social Representations are expressed in judgments, opinions, beliefs, knowledge and attitudes, forming an organized and structured corpus of knowledge and images with a central core of information and beliefs that serve as bases for imagination, affects, personal orientations and social interactions,<sup>3,4,35-37</sup> these being not only a content but a mode of internal organization of the cognitive and social aspects of the members of a group social.<sup>38</sup>

For Jaramillo<sup>37</sup> the Theory of Social Representations has two “emblematic” exponents, who collect and condense the classic traditions of Durkheimian sociology, social psychology and anthropology, they are Serge Moscovici and Denisse Jodelet. For whom Social Representations have a double component: a cognitive one and a social one: the first has the function of stabilizing and consolidating the content of the representation, the second makes communication, production and reproduction of collective identities possible.

In general, Social Representations from the classical perspective of Moscovici and Jodelet would be organized and hierarchical models of collective knowledge expressed in judgments, opinions, beliefs, knowledge and attitudes, which in turn are materialized in the various forms of communicative interaction; These function as “codes for social exchange” and, as codes, they are useful to subjects to order, classify, identify, communicate and name the different aspects of their world and their individual and group history.

For his part, Rodríguez<sup>4</sup> analyzes the original definitions of Social Representations by Moscovici<sup>35</sup> and Jodelet<sup>3</sup>:

1. System of values, notions and practices that provides individuals with the means to orient themselves in the social and material context to master it [...] proposing the members of a community as a means for their exchanges and as a code to clearly name and classify the parts of their world, of their individual or collective history. He highlights that SRs are systemic, guiding, and codifying the world and stories, as a “system of interpretation”, are means for sociocultural orientation and for communication, common codes that allow symbolic exchanges.
2. Network of interacting concepts and images whose contents continually evolve through time and space. How the network evolves depends on the complexity and speed of communications as well as the media communication available. And their social characteristics are determined by the interactions between individuals and/or groups, and the effect they have on each other as a linking function that maintains them. In this second approach, new elements stand out: they are constructed, shared,

social, changing, dynamic, with pragmatic purposes.

3. A kind of knowledge, socially constructed and shared, that has pragmatic purposes and contributes to the construction of a common reality in a community. Here SRs involve the interaction of intrinsically social meanings since they are determined by the interactions of the members of the group that elaborates them and because they are configured in interactions with other groups; The property of being social is precisely what gives them their specificity with respect to other cognitions. These are the two key components of SR: the cognitive component and the social component, highlighting that their most general functions are communication and action.

The central idea found in the notion of social representation is that of a particular way of knowing what is real, shared by a community of individuals; but not only this, but also that it is a mode of knowledge constructed collectively in the form of naive or common-sense knowledge intended to organize behaviors and guide communications.

### Cass model

Cass<sup>1,39-41</sup> assumes that “identity is acquired through a development, a process that navigates between the congruence and incongruence that exist between the individual's interior versus environment, that is, the consistency or inconsistency between how people see themselves and their perception of how others see them, which shapes the course of homosexual identity formation. Cass's model<sup>42</sup> has its epistemological foundations in social constructivist psychology and the psychology of knowledge.

Cass (1979, 2015)<sup>1,42</sup> proposed six stages of development on the path to full integration of gay or lesbian identity within a global self-concept. Growth occurs when people try to resolve the incompatibility between the perception of self and others, thus moving from the lower stage to the higher stage. These six phases are: Confusion, Comparison, Tolerance, Acceptance, Pride, and Synthesis.

#### Stage 1: Confusion

The process begins with identity confusion. People become aware that the information about homosexuality they have acquired directly or indirectly somehow applies to them. As individuals begin to personalize information: the heterosexual identity that has been assigned begins to feel discordant, creating emotional tension often in the form of anxiety and/or confusion. These unpleasant emotions affect individuals in a way that creates confusion in their private and public lives. Privately, individuals label their thoughts, feelings, and fantasies as possibly being gay or lesbian.

### Social Representations and Homosexuality

Negative representations about homosexuality,<sup>43</sup> for example,

have an important impact on homosexual people themselves, since “obedience” to such representations turns out to be an uncritical response to the laws, social norms and physical authorities,<sup>44</sup> is a process of appropriating representations in a way that affects the formation of concepts and individual associations.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, the theory of Social Representation becomes of capital importance in this topic, since it questions the social order, since it explains the dominant behavior in the status quo, it also facilitates communication and merges new ideas in social thought and confirms the total concept of yes because of personal and group identification which generate the representation of the self.<sup>46</sup>

## Method

The method is qualitative since among the lines of research in social representations that have historically been formed, some establish emphasis on the constituent aspect, methodologically resorting to the use of qualitative techniques: especially in-depth interviews and content analysis, being their classic representatives Jodelet and Moscovici, also known as the processual approach, rests on qualitative postulates and privileges the analysis of the social, culture and social interactions, in general.<sup>47</sup>

Ferrel<sup>48</sup> points out that the population of exclusively homosexual men ranges from 4% to 17%, which complicates the selection of the sample for studies, which is why he opted for the snowball technique to select his subjects, not only not only because of the percentage previously mentioned but also because of the lack of knowledge of the total population, in such a way that known gay people were contacted, they were presented with the work project and their participation was requested, those who accepted were asked to recommend other people who have similar traits of interest to collect data, the same manner was followed until a sufficient number of subjects were obtained. The interview was in a single exhibition.

Martínez-Salgado<sup>49</sup> regarding sampling in qualitative research assures that in this field there are no rules to decide the size of the sample and, if one had to be stated, it would be “it all depends.” It depends on the purpose of the study, what is useful in achieving it, what is at stake, what makes it plausible, and ultimately even what is possible. Thus, in order to judge whether a sample is adequate, one must know the context of the study.

The precept requires collecting data until saturation occurs, meaning the point at which a certain diversity of ideas has already been heard and with each additional interview or observation other elements no longer appear. As long as new data or new ideas continue to appear, the search should not stop.

The sample consists of 15 self-defined gay men between 21 and 55 years of age, Mexican inhabitants of the state of Coahuila.

Semi-structured interview with 9 questions based on stage 1 of the Cass model,<sup>1</sup> considering SR as a system of values, notions and

practices, a network of concepts, images and knowledge.<sup>2,3</sup>

A content analysis of each subject's interview responses was carried out on the data obtained through the semi-structured interview, which allowed categories and frequencies to be established.

## Results

### Awareness

8 of the men remember feeling attracted to people of the same sex at an age ranging from 4-7 years, 4 at an age ranging from 8-12, and 3 from 13-16, they even remember feeling different:

**Subject 2:** well in fact I did feel that I was different because society was all men and women and I thought I was also going through a stage

**Subject 13:** Attraction to the male body of the men who appeared on the television programs I watched with my mother.

**Subject 14:** I watch a movie with the little mermaid and I feel very identified with the protagonist and I feel attracted to Prince Erick

**Subject 15:** At the age of 6 I was already attracted to boys and since then I feel secure in who I am.

### Social Knowledge

8 of the men interviewed remember having considered it as something negative, 4 as something positive and 3 do not remember having given it any type of evaluation.

**Subject 3:** I felt like a more feminine child, well, at that moment I felt afraid, truly terrified of what they were going to discover about me in my house.

**Subject 8:** Nervous, confused, I knew that something was not, that is, it was not the same, something was different (those who speak in the negative refer to it as strange)

**Subject 7:** No, it was fear, if we are generally afraid of what we don't know, the unknown, then for me it was something very unknown.

**Subject 11:** Well, it was really cool, the attraction to the children was more, I had one or another little friend who touched me just a little bit and it excited me... yes.

**Subject 14:** I felt excited, I felt that I could have a story like that of the protagonist and it gives me a lot of hope because in the end she has her happy ending and I thought that she could have one just like her.

### Heterosexual disagreement

11 recognize that this brought them problems, generally isolation, and even though 4 subjects do not point it out, 13 mention not having shared it with anyone out of fear:

**Subject 1:** It made me very introverted, very withdrawn from society, friends and everything.



**Subject 3:** On one occasion I was leaving school and in Acapulco, on the coastal part, Miguel German, my mother had to cross, a group of gays and transvestites was coming and I remember that my mother was driving, she stopped the car and with her hand she lifted her up. and I shouted in a very aggressive way I shouted God have mercy on you freaks.

**Subject 4:** Asking God to take away my gayness, I started to become very lonely and I always tried to hide behind my studies, to be very studious.

**Subject 7:** I even remember that they yelled things at me, and it was like, well, you know, you know what they mean. That faggot and the mother, well... well maybe yes, I don't know what it means.

**Subject 11:** Yes, well, certain Bullying at school.

## Discussion

What was pointed out by Burroway,<sup>26</sup> the negative consideration (8 subjects refer to it) of homosexuality since the 19th century, at least, seems to be perpetuated since the majority of the subjects interviewed have a negative social representation of homosexuality, which is introjected from early age (8 subjects point it out), as pointed out by the subjects interviewed, living and having behaviors that are not favorable for the same people

The results allow us to confirm the current culture as heteronormative and homophobic,<sup>8-12</sup> marked by prejudices and discrimination,<sup>28</sup> since of the 15 subjects, 11 indicate that discovering themselves different from what is established brought them negative consequences.

It is possible to confirm what Cass<sup>1,39-41</sup> pointed out regarding the global self-concept that gay people have of themselves: it involves a process that navigates between the interior of the individual versus the environment, between confusion, emotional tension and anxiety, unpleasant emotions affect individuals in their lives, as indicated by 13 of the 15 subjects who did not dare to share their awareness for fear of negative consequences. such as the isolation that 11 of those interviewed point out.

## Conclusion

The results indicate that people discover that they dissident from normative heterosexual sexuality at an early age and even with this, the majority continue to learn that homosexuality is something negative. This social consideration leads gay men to quickly develop a negative social representation. which has a personal and social impact: at a social level they are reflected in the limits of coexistence that the subjects present and the absence of recognition of relationships, suffering harassment, and family, school and community bullying, experienced most of the time. fear, which led them to deny or hide their sexual orientation.

It is interesting how a child, in trying to explain the situation to himself, finds elements to do so in a children's fantasy film, which gave him tranquility and happiness even with respect

to discovering himself attracted to the male figure in a society where the common people are men. with women. Developing an alternative representation of his homosexuality compared to the one presented to him by the society in which he found himself.

This resistance of the minority opens lines for future research that can explain it. The genetic model of Moscovici<sup>35</sup> could be taken up, an alternative proposed to the functionalist model of social influence, that is, to the American model, emphasizing the persuasive processes exerted by groups. minorities or the proposal of Gonzalez<sup>50</sup> who analyzes the implementation, development and effects produced by the sociocognitive conflict in terms of social influence, since this knowledge can reveal determining information regarding the processes of modification of social representations. and minority social influence.

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## Conflict of Interest

Regarding the publication of this article, the authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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