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*Invisible Affections and Socialization to the Sexuality of Lesbians.
A Case Study in Italy*

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Abstract

The article focuses on the process of socialization and sexuality of homosexual people, examining the specific case of lesbians living in Salerno, a major city in southern Italy. The essay highlights the path that women go through in maturing their sexual identity, taking into account those relational contexts in which they find expression of their most intimate desires and support to deal with the burden of double stigma related to the condition of women and homosexuals. The analysis will highlight how “becoming sexual” means above all accessing a universe of symbolic references typical of the L world – in terms of practices, languages and representations – to which some women often adhere out of need of acceptance, to get out of invisibility, while others distance themselves from them for greater self-determination of their sexual conduct.

Keywords: Invisibility, Socialization, Sexuality, Affectivity, Lesbians.

1. Between invisibility and empowerment: being a lesbian in Italy today

Research on the lesbian population starts by considering a central aspect of their condition, *i.e.*, that they are at the intersection of a double process of stigmatization, regarding both gender and sexual orientation (Crenshaw K.W, 1989). Analogously difficult is their placement within the two movements which most carried their instances: the feminist and the homosexual. In the former, lesbians could share with other women the struggle against patriarchy and male domination, but with divisions due to the persistence, within the movement, of heteronormative orientations and homophobic feelings (Wittig, 2001). These aspects are reversed in the LGBT movement, where lesbians, while finding space to express their claims, are still subordinate and invisible to the predominance of men in the public space (both real and mediated, see Santostefano, 2008). As women, they

suffer the same oppressions regarding the persistence of a patriarchal model that wants them confined to private life: as homosexuals, their invisibility is stressed by the fact that the social representations of lesbianism are still characterized by clichés. Indeed, lesbianism is still confused with a friendship between women, or at most considered an erotic practice among heterosexual women. Alternatively, it is analysed based on the model of male homosexuality, which revolves mainly around sexuality (Chetcuti 2013; Chamberland & Théroux-Séguin, 2009). Faccio & Foffano (2010) ascribe such invisibility to the subordinate position experienced by women. They highlight how in the past male homosexuality was stigmatized as representing “half-men”, whose behaviours, attitudes and mannerisms disappointed the social expectations of virility and masculinity, while homosexual women have been spared these sufferings because their relationships were often clandestine and invisible. Women were not at the centre of the social scene, nor did they adopt attitudes against conventions, and their sexuality has always been considered less transgressive, less scandalous and improper. Therefore, not being forced to contradict society, lesbians were able to keep themselves private.

This hypothesis aligns well with the studies carried out in Italy on the L-population and aimed at distinguishing the peculiarities of their representations and attitudes from those of homosexual men. The condition of the latter, unlike for the other categories included under the LGBT umbrella, has been widely studied.

On the context of Campania, theatre of our research, Corbisiero (2010) took into account various aspects of the sexual identity of homosexual people, including their practices. The survey belies clichés and highlights instead that while sexuality was for both a central component of existence, there were significant differences in their propensity towards stable or exclusive relationships. 73% of lesbians declared to have a stable sexual relationship with their partner, compared to 34% of gays, thus confirming the hypothesis of a greater inclination of lesbians to monogamous and stable relationships, like that of heterosexual women. The choice for a stable relationship can be read as the result of social and cultural conditioning, as it is more frequent among lesbians than among gays in the north than in the south, in large cities, in middle classes and among non-practising Catholics, but also among those who consider their

homosexuality as natural and respectable rather than among those whose personal acceptance is only partial. Moreover, the more open and tolerant is the context, the greater the possibility that self-esteem is preserved and that the most radical choices, such as those of coexistence and parenting, are visibly made (Faccio & Foffano, 2014).

The difference in how women live the homoerotic relationship is evident in their preference, compared to men, for side-lining sexuality in favour of affectivity, an aspect which generates substantial differences in the narration of the sexual self between women and men. On *coming out*¹, indeed, Trappolin (2011) documented that women often recount their experiences and the awareness of their diversity through episodes of falling in love, and the quality of the relationship with the beloved woman, and some also include the theme of their subordination to the interests of men.

These data indicate that there are significant differences in behaviour, concerning certain dimensions of sexuality, between homosexual men and women, following the current literature on the topic (Barbagli & Colombo, 2007). The search for a stable partner and the relevance attributed to the affective and relational dimension by women, compared to men, can also be partly explained in the need to find in the couple, and therefore in the partner, a model within which to be reflected, in order to affirm their identity, if and when they experience loneliness as a result of the weight of the double stigma. We must also remember that the socialization of sexuality for heterosexual people is made easier on the basis of cultural models learned from the family and other agencies of socialization (*e.g.* the peer group), while more complex is the assumption of homosexual identity for a teenager who needs models of reference that are not always found in their context, where references are heteronormative and full of negative stereotypes about homosexuality (Fidolini, 2015). Therefore, for the subject to assume a balanced identity of their sexual self, it is fundamental that they free themselves from those negative connotations, which, if internalised, strongly affect self-esteem. The confrontation with other homosexual people, and in particular with one's partner, is thus the

¹ For Trappolin (2011) the stories recounting women's coming out include two themes: the closet and the coming out. They can only be distinguished from an analytical point of view since, in the narrative, they are interwoven by the subject.

fundamental path through which the subject acquires sexual identity, since Rinaldi states (2017:6), “becoming sexual means above all learning beliefs, representations, preferences, evaluation systems and practices, assuming specific roles and words within a process of sexual socialization that will take place throughout our lives”. In the couple, the partner, as “significant other”, is a reference to begin the process of socialization to sexuality, since, impersonating the homosexual role, thanks to the presence of an equal other, she can become an observer of herself, reflect on what she is doing, self-regulate about the purposes and compare the role that the other assigns her with her interpretation of this role, in a game of constant references (Kurder, 1991).

Starting from these premises, the following part will examine the first results of ongoing research on the processes of socialization to the sexuality of homosexual people, examining the specific case of lesbians living in Salerno, a city in southern Italy². It examines the relational plots in which their most intimate desires are expressed, as well as support for dealing with the double stigma related to their condition of homosexual women. In addition to the classic channels of socialization, here are also considered online dating application³, with the aim of clarifying how these new communication tools help in accessing the L-world and its symbolic references universe – in terms of practices, languages and representations – but are also an expression of greater self-determination in one’s sexual conduct.

2. Methodological aspects and findings of the case study

The results presented here refer to 20 self-declared lesbians identified through a sampling of convenience and residing in the province of

² The research was carried out in Salerno, a port city south-east of Naples, in Campania, with a population of about 134.000 inhabitants,

³ The online dating application examined here is *Wapa*, considered one of the most popular tools used by lesbian and bisexual women (in the context examined) to find a partner. For further information on the functionalities of *Wapa*, please refer to the following link: <http://wapa-app.com/>

Salerno⁴. The data were collected mainly through biographical interviews and directly involving some women since the first drafting of the research design. In a social scenario where lesbians have little or no say in the construction of the social meanings that concern them, their direct involvement has proved to be fundamental to access without stereotypes the orientations and the maps of education that, at the level of collective life, guide the L-world of the context examined. After having noted the socio-biographical characteristics of the women, the areas explored by the biographical interview were:

- *identity*: aimed at investigating how women relate to their sexual self, to their intimate world, to the expression of their desires in a context in which the visibility of L women is compromised by the double stigma woman /homosexual;

- *relationships*: which examines how the friendship and sentimental bonds are fundamental for the process of socialization to lesbian sexuality and, therefore, to access the L world and its cultural scenarios;

- *space and visibility*: which analyses the spaces dedicated to the expression of LGBT sexuality; within this dimension, we also examined the resources that the web (social networks, dedicated apps) makes available to L women, trying to understand how they have helped the exit from isolation, the construction of emotional and sexual ties with other women;

- *of evaluations and opinions*: in this section we wanted to explore the opinions and evaluations that women express about the L world, trying to understand how heteronormativity, based on male/female, homosexuality/heterosexuality binarism helps to define both implicitly and explicitly how women define and live themselves.

2.1. *Discovering oneself a Lesbian: between homoerotic desires and relational anchors*

My first girlfriend, my first kiss with a woman, was with a classmate of mine. I felt this strange attachment to her: usually, I am a bit cold, but with her, I always sought a physical

⁴ For accessing the field of research and identifying the sample has been paramount the contact with some exponents of gay associations (*Arcigay Salerno*) and the association *Famiglie Arcobaleno* (Rainbow Families). In the identification and selection of the sample, we tried to balance age, place of residence, occupation and educational qualifications of the subjects involved.

contact, even a hug, something that never happened to me with other people. So there the first 'alarm bells' started, so I thought that maybe I was feeling something different. (F, 27 years old).

The experience recounted by the interviewee is emblematic, to the extent that most of the interviews collected suggest that the first entry into the L-world generally occurs by chance, through a friendship, a particular affinity felt for that particular "person" and not on the basis of a general homoerotic desire towards people of the same sex. All the stories examined focus on the "affective", sentimental dimension as an entrance into a world of which little is often known, considering that, unlike male homosexuality, lesbianism in our country, and in particular in the context examined, is invisible. The difficulty, therefore, is often linked precisely to the absence of codes and models of conduct through which to direct oneself in the implementation of one's sexual self.

The pressures to conform to social expectations regarding gender and sexual models considered more appropriate for girls than boys can prove even more oppressive in contexts, such as those examined, where the families' control on young women's emotional and sexual conduct is quite common and is underpinned by educational models still markedly distinct by gender, for males and females (Iovine & Masullo, 2016). In the absence of such models, it is the heteronormative references that guide the first sentimental experiences of young women (Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994). These models constitute a point of reference to evaluate not only themselves but also other women, so the female sexuality is never expressed directly, explicitly, in a relational game that tries to avoid, even in the relationship between women, the negative stereotype associated with those who live their sexuality more freely.

In my opinion, the aim is always that, to sleep with someone, but it is as if the woman feels less guilty by building this sort of relationship/knowledge (...) among women there is always this cultural heritage for which, if the woman sleeps with you on the first date, she is a "whore" (C., 28 years old).

Getting to know other lesbians in this context is not an easy task, since, as many of the interviewees point out, there are few meeting places for LGBT people and those mostly in Naples. Other homoerotic spaces emerge,

especially for women, mostly coinciding with the informal contexts of friendship networks and sports-related places. These two modes, often mentioned in the interviews, constitute the prevalent ways to meet other women in Salerno:

At first, I lied to myself saying: 'no, well, it's only with her. I don't like women!' Being, at first, something I didn't accept. What's more, not having other friendships like that, I felt a little lonely, very much so. Then, thanks to women's football, I met people who are currently my best friends, even lesbians, people older than me who have helped me a lot, orienting me. I had, therefore, various experiences 'so-and-so', until I had this most important experience with my ex (F., 27 years old).

As highlighted in the literature, access to the L world generally takes place precisely from the first relationships established with other women, that facilitate for the interviewees the process of *coming out* inside and outside the LGBT community. The couple shares strategies to "cope" with the difficulties experienced outside, both with the family and with the wider society regarding their acceptance of themselves and the social stigma associated with homosexuality. It is in the centrality assumed by the affective dimension, and therefore by the relationship, that the ways to "define oneself" as a lesbian are generally acquired, following new terms and words detached from previous heteronormative references.

Since we are going into details, I am not ashamed to tell you that I thought I was a whole other kind of person in bed with a woman, I was really convinced. With her I discovered that I was the opposite, it took away many sex-related taboos due to my cultural heritage (S., 23 years old).

Several interviewees refer to little-diversified groups of friendships between women, characterized by a strong density of exchanges and relationships, which in the long run entail, as we can see in the following passage, some critical issues:

I have never met a friend of a friend, nor have I dated a friend of a friend, because I do not like this kind of business. I don't like intersections between people, intersecting stories, where everyone knows everything about everyone else and you are constantly subjected to other people's judgment (C., 24 years old).

As we will see further on, for some women the use of new media (such as dating apps), is not only an alternative way to access the socialization spaces of the L-world, but often also an escape from little-diversified friendship networks, made heavier by the social control exerted by the group and the pressure to conform to the more or less explicit rules. Using a dating app allows women to avoid other people's judgment, leading to a self-determined definition of oneself and unencumbered sexuality, free from stereotypes.

2.2. *Becoming "sexual": socialization to sexuality and the use of the new media*

Since its inception, the web has been an important resource for the L-people interviewed. Mailing lists, chats, blogs, are the first references of meaning for some women, through which they face fundamental discussions to define themselves, to "become sexual", to overcome internalized homophobia, to face the stigma resulting from their sexual diversity, conflicts with families, partners. Such discussions are not confined to the virtual world but are often the prelude to the formation of significant friendships and love relationships.

So many words spent, millions of bits and thousands of emails exchanged for a decade with a thousand women scattered throughout Italy. Ten years of virtual exchanges but not only that. Almost immediately meetings were organized, one every year, which lasted from Friday afternoon to Sunday evening. From North to South. A person or a group looked for a welcoming place and we saw each other together for a full immersion of reflections and entertainment for some, love encounters and new conquests for others. (G., 52 years old).

The use of anonymity online and in apps such as *Wapa*, is, for some of the interviewees, a needed step to enter a world of which little is known, to come into contact with "sharable" representations of an otherwise unreachable lesbian culture, either in real life or through the traditional media. These possibilities are given through websites and applications promoting meetings between people of the same sex. The interviews also highlight that this path is common both to the more mature women and to the younger ones and that the dating apps are suitable for different uses.

Some use them as a channel to explore their sexuality, as first access to the L-world, and often end their use as soon as they form a stable relationship. Others continue to use them, and from a necessary channel,

they become instead a preferential instrument for searching for new sexual partners.

For some of the younger women who begin to explore their sexuality, the chats are also a strategic choice for getting in touch with women who live far away, thus limiting the risks of exposure in their home environment.

She lived in Catania. But, you know, sometimes the distance is also useful, especially at the beginning, because it limits the intrusiveness, leads you to discover things as you go, you get there with more awareness, maybe someone living nearer your hometown would have been a problem, you would not have chosen her. I travelled there to meet her in person and somehow, more or less unconsciously, it was comfortable for me, no one knew my business and I could freely live the story. And then she showed me an environment, in Catania, completely uninhibited from this point of view (A., 36 years old).

A substantial difference emerges concerning the modes of interaction and communication between women and men who use such applications. Women's interactions on the *Wapa* dating app are never too explicit or direct and tend to focus, according to the interviewees, on aspects related to personality, interests and hobbies, and hardly fall on sexual practices. The communications are mainly aimed at finding a stable partner – indeed a greatly emphasized aspect – and sex is rarely disengaged from sentimental perspectives to the point that an interviewee points out in the interviewer his lack of perspective:

Your questions are very “masculine”. In fact, you (referring to the interviewer) are focusing mainly on the sexual sphere, therefore on sex, sexuality and this is not a dominant aspect. Women are still women, they were still girls and the aspect that prevails most is the feeling. This, even if it is commonplace, is also and above all truth. Of course, you will find women in whom the sentimental aspect is more developed than others but the key is that it is not sex (B., 42 years old).

The stress on the emotional aspects of relationships can also take on another meaning, as a woman who explicitly seeks sexual adventures is considered in the online environment as “a bad one”. An interviewee claims that it is not uncommon to find what is defined “poly-love”, expressed in the coexistence of multiple relationships, the succession of

multiple monogamous relationships that begin and end in a short time frame.

2.3. The cultural universe of reference: between heteronormativity and widespread stereotypes

The social representations of the interviewees are elaborated through social networks and interactions on the Internet, thus accessing the orientations and the “educational maps” that guide individuals – at the level of collective life – in their search for the requisites for carrying out specific roles within concrete relationships.

There is a widespread negative representation of people who are only looking for sex, considered as a drift that characterizes, according to older women, the younger generation. The latter, on the other hand, tend to emphasize psychological and behavioural aspects that particularly characterize women met on social networks, frequently mentioning “pathologizing” terms that frame some women as “psychopathic”, “obsessive”. Several young women point out that they are not looking for “lesbian dramas”, *i.e.*, as explained later by the interviewees, particularly intrusive L-people who frequently contact someone even in the face of an obvious lack of interest.

Also interesting is the lexicon used on meeting apps, useful for deciphering the specific language of the L-community and identifying some of the most common relational practices. The interviewees describe profiles and conversations on social issues as contexts abounding in references to one’s character, rather than to their body, using words and sentences from films, books, or poems that are often the pretext from which to strike a conversation.

Particularly stigmatized, in both face-to-face and online interactions, are women who do not conform to the stereotypical model that defines socially accepted femininity, thus defined by most as “masculine” or a “trucker”. Deviance can pertain to the various expressions of the paraverbal language, such as tone of voice, gestures, type of clothing. Even for lesbians, therefore, the traditional binary genderist male/female model is the element from which to evaluate the identities that are found both online and offline. Yet dating applications can also be a place to express a different way of understanding female sexuality: the virtual allows for more freedom and,

therefore, subverts stereotypes that see female sexuality as hetero-determined and framed only in terms of affectivity.

Conclusions

The interviews highlighted some of the aspects of the condition of women in Salerno, confirming part of the results of previous researches that examined the condition of lesbians in the broader Italian and regional context (Barbagli, Colombo, 2007, Corbisiero). The interviews showed that in an area characterized by few resources and spaces of aggregation for LGBT people, the homosexual affectivity of women remains mostly invisible, confined to networks full of sociality among women and the use of online platforms such as chat and applications specifically devoted to same-sex relationships.

From the interviews emerge the important role of love and friendship relationships in shaping and conditioning women's intimate desires, in making them practically possible and in acquiring those cultural scenarios (*i.e.* representations, typical patterns of behaviour, specific languages) of an otherwise unknown L-world.

The interviews revealed the important role played by new communication channels, such as social networks and dating apps. These channels are suitable for several purposes: for some, they are the first access to the L world, a "temporary" way (therefore soon abandoned) to discover themselves and give voice to their desires, contributing to the formation of friendships and love relationships that are paramount for their socialization to L-sexuality. For others, these resources are only "parallel" worlds to broaden the networks of relationships, to diversify knowledge, also allowing to affirm a more self-determined way of being "sexual", free from the widespread stereotypes about lesbians in the reference environment.

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