

“IT IS ONLY EXTRA INFORMATION ...”  
SOCIAL REPRESENTATION AND VALUE PREFERENCES  
OF HUNGARIAN GAY MEN

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays the grounds for existence of homosexual identities can be questioned: in an increasing number of societies we can witness that homosexuality loses its identity constructing capacity. In these places homosexuality is not a focal point of social attention any longer, and while same-sex attraction can remain an important factor in organising one's individual life, it will not hinder the social integration of individuals. Thus if homosexuality still has a strong identity constructing capacity in a society, it can suggest that the given society is dominated by exclusive monolithic homosexual and heterosexual identity patterns which can threaten the successful social integration of people.

The presupposition of my research is that the salience of homosexual identities—attributed by outgroups, and internalised by ingroup members—is a social symptom. The (potentially unifying) concept and the practical realisation of homosexual identity can be seen as the product of social stigmatisation and discrimination: the greater the proportion of signs of rejecting individual difference, the more widespread personal and group identities are organised by and around these differences. This type of stigmatisation can be interpreted in general as a social symptom reflecting the rejection of the right to be different.

This paper presents findings of empirical research conducted between 1998 and 2000 in Hungary on the social representation and the value preferences of Hungarian men identifying themselves as gays.<sup>1</sup> In the first part of the paper I will present quantitative research findings on the specific value preferences of Hungarian gay men that could be interpreted as indicators of the existence of homosexual identities. In the second part I will present qualitative findings focusing on the connection between social representation of homosexuality and the development of threatened identities.

<sup>1</sup> These research findings have already been published in Hungarian (cf. Takács 2004).

## VALUE PREFERENCES AS IDENTITY INDICATORS

This part of the article presents findings of a quantitative research project, where I applied the Rokeach test, designed to measure individual value preferences (Rokeach 1973), which does not include any items with direct relation to homosexuality. At the beginning I had a sample of 221 Hungarian gay men (as a result of my own research) and a representative sample of the Hungarian population, with findings of the Rokeach test.<sup>2</sup> At the next step I filtered out from both samples those people living in the countryside and by applying a two-dimensional (age, educational background) weight variable I re-designed the composition of the representative sample to be as similar to my original gay sample as possible. (Table 1 shows the distribution of the four samples according to age, level of education and place of residence.) This way I gained two additional samples: a gay (BPGAY) and a “non-gay” one (WEIGHT), indicating significant differences in value preferences which could not be explained by the different—age, educational background, place of residence—compositions of the samples.<sup>3</sup> Therefore I assumed that homosexuality—remaining the only well-identifiable differentiating mark between the re-designed samples—had to play an important part in interpreting the differences in value preferences apparent when comparing the findings of these samples.

<sup>2</sup> The sample of 221 Hungarian gay men is referred to as “GAY—original.” The representative sample of the Hungarian population is referred to as “ALL—original.”

<sup>3</sup> The re-designed sample gained from “GAY—original” is referred to as “BPGAY.” The re-designed sample gained from “ALL—original” is referred to as “WEIGHT.”

TABLE 1

	ALL-original (%) N = 1521	WEIGHT (%) N = 107	BPGAY (%) N = 132	GAY-original (%) N = 221
AGE				
Under 30	14.9	48.9	50.8	48.9
30-39	13.7	26.5	26.9	26.9
40-49	17.2	16.9	13.1	16.4
50-59	17.0	5.7	7.7	5.9
60-	37.2	1.9	1.5	1.8
Total	100	100	100	100
EDUCATION				
Max. Elementary	40.0	2.4	2.3	3.7
Vocational Training	22.9	7.9	4.7	7.8
Secondary	25.1	36.9	34.9	36.2
University	11.9	52.7	58.1	52.3
Total	100	100	100	100
PLACE OF RESIDENCE				
Village	34.2	0	0	9.5
Town	29.9	0	0	17.6
City	17.0	0	0	13.1
Budapest	18.9	100	100	59.7
Total	100	100	100	100

NOTE: THE DISTRIBUTIONS OF THE SAMPLES ACCORDING TO AGE, EDUCATION, RESIDENCE ARE SIGNIFICANTLY DIFFERENT (ANOVA-TEST).

On the basis of ANOVA-test results,<sup>4</sup> in the four samples there was no significant difference in the preferences of two terminal values (*satisfaction of well-done work, self-respect*) and four instrumental values (*courageous, responsible, forgiving and independent*), indicating that these six values seem to be preferred by everyone in all of the samples approximately the same way irrespectively of age, level of education, place of residence and gay identification. Comparing the WEIGHT and BPGAY sample pair,<sup>5</sup> six additional terminal values (*material well-being, equality, exciting life, freedom, social recognition, salvation*) and three additional instrumental values (*imaginative-creative, intelligent, polite*) seemed to be equally important or unimportant for both populations, indicating that these value preferences depend more on one's place of residence (living in Budapest), one's age (being under 30) and (higher than average) educational background than one's gay identification. (However, according to the ANOVA variance-analysis results the Budapest gay sample indicated more homogeneous value preferences concerning age and educational level categories than the WEIGHT sample.)

<sup>4</sup> Level of significance = 0,05.

<sup>5</sup> Independent Samples Tests: t-test for Equality of Means; *Equal variances assumed* option.

By examining the preference of terminal values in the four samples (see table 2), we can find the greatest difference in the evaluation of the following ones: *family security*, *national security*, *inner harmony*, *true friendship*, *true love* and *beauty (in nature and art)*—*family security* and *national security* being much less, while *inner harmony*, *true friendship*, *true love* and *beauty (in nature and art)* being much more preferred in the gay samples than in the other ones.

TABLE 2

ALL (original)	WEIGHT	BPGAY	GAY (original)
3 family security	4 peace	3 inner harmony	3 inner harmony
3 peace	5 family security	4 true friendship	4 true friendship
5 happiness	6 happiness	4 happiness	4 happiness
5 material well-being	6 inner harmony	4 true love	4 true love
7 inner harmony	7 true love	7 peace	6 peace
8 national security	8 material well-being	7 freedom	7 material well-being
9 true friendship	8 true friendship	7 material well-being	8 freedom
9 satisfaction of well-done work	8 freedom	10 exciting life	9 family security
9 freedom	9 wisdom	10 family security	10 satisfaction of well-done work
10 self-respect	10 national security	10 wisdom	10 wisdom
10 social recognition	10 satisfaction of well-done work	10 satisfaction of well-done work	10 self-respect
11 true love	11 exciting life	11 self-respect	11 exciting life
12 wisdom	11 self-respect	11 enjoyable life	11 enjoyable life
12 equality	13 social recognition	12 beauty (nature, art)	12 equality
13 enjoyable life	14 enjoyable life	13 equality	13 beauty (nature, art)
13 exciting life	14 equality	14 social recognition	13 social recognition
15 beauty (nature, art)	16 beauty (nature, art)	14 national security	14 national security
17 salvation	18 salvation	18 salvation	18 salvation

NOTE: TERMINAL VALUES IN THE FOUR SAMPLES (MEDIAN).

Lower preference of *family security* by gay respondents can be explained in two dimensions: on the one hand, if their family environment reflects the negative social perception of homosexuality, as is often the case, it can become a potential source of tension between them and their family members. On the other hand, legal and practical difficulties in establishing one’s own family and living together with a same sex partner as well as the present day normative family definition, often limited to the classic heterosexual nuclear family, can prevent gay respondents from considering *family security* as a value to be achieved. In this context *true friendship* and *true love* can be seen as logical substitutes for the often problematic and institutionally denied *family security*.

Interpreting the favourable perception of *inner harmony* and *beauty (in nature and art)* in the gay samples, and that of *national security* in the non-gay samples, we can use Inglehart’s materialist-post-materialist value orientation model. According to Inglehart advanced industrial societies can be characterised by a shift from materialist (or *survival*)

values, emphasising the importance of national security and the maintenance of social order, among other things (cf. Inglehart 1997, 112),—to post-materialist (or *well-being*) values emphasizing self-expression instead of deference to authority, tolerance of other groups and the perception of exotic things and cultural diversity as stimulating and interesting, not threatening (cf. Inglehart 2000, 220).

This value orientation model can also be applied to interpreting the different perception of two instrumental values in the WEIGHT and BPGAY samples where the most salient difference can be seen in the preference of the values of *loving*, *cheerful*, *open-minded* and *disciplined* (see table 3). In this context high preference of *open-mindedness* and low preference for being *disciplined* can indicate post-materialist value orientation (in the BPGAY sample), while high preference for being *disciplined* and low preference for *open-mindedness* can be seen more as features of materialist value orientation (in the WEIGHT sample).

TABLE 3

ALL (original)	WEIGHT	BPGAY	GAY (original)
5 honest	6 responsible	4 intelligent	4 intelligent
6 responsible	6 intelligent	5 honest	5 honest
7 courageous	6 honest	5 loving	5 loving
7 intelligent	6 courageous	7 courageous	6 open-minded
9 clean, tidy	8 logical	7 responsible	7 courageous
9 helpful	9 disciplined	7 open-minded	8 responsible
9 disciplined	9 imaginative, creative	8 cheerful	8 cheerful
9 polite	9 independent	8 helpful	8 helpful
10 independent	10 helpful	8 imaginative, creative	8 clean, tidy
10 cheerful	10 loving	8 clean, tidy	8 imaginative, creative
10 loving	10 clean, tidy	9 independent	10 logical
10 logical	11 open-minded	9 logical	10 independent
11 open-minded	12 forgiving	12 forgiving	12 forgiving
11 imaginative, creative	12 cheerful	13 disciplined	13 disciplined
11 ambitious	12 capable	13 polite	13 polite
12 forgiving	13 polite	14 capable	14 capable
12 obedient	14 ambitious	16 ambitious	16 ambitious
12 capable	16 obedient	17 obedient	17 obedient

NOTE: INSTRUMENTAL VALUES IN THE FOUR SAMPLES (MEDIAN).

Higher preference for the other two instrumental values *loving* and *cheerful* in the gay samples can also make more sense if we think of the earlier mentioned reasons for unfavourable perception of *family security*, and the much more favourable perception of its “substitutes”: *true friendship* and *true love*.

As we could see, the examined Hungarian gay samples showed specific value preferences that could be interpreted as indicators of the existence of homosexual identities (or segments of them). These specific

features included preferences concentrating on individual attachments, like *true friendship* and *true love*, which can be seen as alternatives to the often lacking *family security*; a special kind of more *post-materialist* value orientation where quality of life concerns include *inner harmony* and a certain degree of social and individual acceptance of homosexuality; and consequently a greater emphasis on *open-mindedness* being a value of special significance especially among those suffering from prejudice and discrimination, including Hungarian gays.

However, this (quantitative) method of analysis—besides indicating the existence of gay identity segments reflected by specific value preferences—cannot provide any insights into how gay respondents interpreted their own relation to the social category of homosexuality. For more information on this matter we have to bridge the quantitative research findings with qualitative ones.

#### SOCIAL REPRESENTATION AND THREATENED IDENTITIES

In my qualitative empirical examination of the changing social representation of homosexuality in Hungary the broader framework of analysis included theories of social identity and social representation.<sup>6</sup> The common sense content of social representations (being synonymous with social beliefs and social attributions) reflect the ways in which individuals and groups interpret reality, and these reality interpretations serve as a base for building up individual and group identities. The interaction of social representations and identities is a central feature of Breakwell's theory on identity processes (cf. Breakwell 1986): in order to understand identity threats—hindering the effective functioning of identity processes—as well as strategies applied to cope with these threats, it is necessary to examine social representations.

Therefore I interpreted homosexuality as a possible base for developing threatened identities in which process the social representation of homosexuality plays a very important part. My analyses indicated that the social category of homosexuality gains its identity constructing capacity mainly from the negative contents of the social representation of homosexuality, which negative contents appeared as identity threats for my respondents.

This qualitative research was based on 49 semi-structured interviews conducted with men identifying themselves as gay.<sup>7</sup> My main intention

<sup>6</sup> An earlier version of this chapter has already been published in German (cf. Takács 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Average age: 33 (range: 19-69). Educational background: 23 had a university or college degree; 23 finished secondary and 3 finished elementary school. Place of residence: no exact data available—but more than 50% from the capital. Marital status: 43 single; 1

was to present *typical cases* in order to reconstruct general patterns of behaviour and self-perception from the life stories of respondents.

#### THE HUNGARIAN "HOMOSEXUAL SITUATION" IN THE 1980S

By using the findings of a qualitative research conducted in 1983 (cf. Kaszai 1983) I was able to compare to a certain extent the social situation of Hungarian homosexual men before and after the political system change.<sup>8</sup> On the basis of this comparison the social representation of homosexuality in the early 1980s seemed to be much more negative than that of today. In describing the Hungarian "homosexual situation" in the early 1980s the following seemed to be the key words: concealing self-identity (as a consequence of the impossibility of coming out in the given social environment), "illusory normality" (i.e. being compelled to play the "normal heterosexual roles"), self-hatred, and escape (in certain forms of "emergency exit," such as nominal marriage, emigration, or even suicide).

In the 1980s the social situation of Hungarian gays was characterised by cognitive isolation which could be experienced in several dimensions. For example, more than half (almost 70% of the fathers and more than 50% of mothers) of the respondents' parents did not know about their son's homosexuality. The main reason for this was the fear of rejection by the family. Therefore most gays could come out only among other gays. Keeping one's homosexuality secret seemed to be a major survival strategy. Because of limited social visibility of homosexuality, gays could meet only in certain bath houses, on the street, in a *presszó* (cafeteria), private parties and in public toilets. The main motivation of meeting other gays was finding sexual partners, as developing and maintaining a long-term, more visible, "normal" relationship seemed to be unrealistic or even unthinkable in the given social environment.

According to about 80% of the respondents the social perception of homosexuality was very negative in 1983: only the "decent" ones could count on a certain degree of social acceptance or toleration—where being a "decent homosexual" was interpreted as keeping homosexual preferences secret—but for many, giving the life long performance of illusory

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married; 5 divorced (among them the 4 oldest respondents aged 50–69)—19 respondents reported to be in a steady relationship with another man.

<sup>8</sup> This qualitative research was based on 49 in-depth interviews conducted with Hungarian men identifying themselves as *homosexuals* or *men-loving men* in the early 1980s. (Average age: 30. Educational background: 17 had a university or college degree; 26 finished secondary and 6 finished elementary school. Place of birth: Budapest—31; outside Budapest—18. Place of residence: Budapest—44; outside Budapest—5. Marital status: 30 single; 5 married; 8 divorced; 6 provided no information.)

normality seemed to be too high a price to pay for successful social integration. It was a general belief that in foreign countries—in Western Europe, the US and even in East-Germany—, where gays did not have to spend their lives *in the prison of leading a double life*, the situation of homosexuals was better than in Hungary; though some negative foreign examples—such as the Soviet Union and Romania—were also mentioned.

Social rejection and discrimination were also experienced by the respondents in several fields. These included the negative public opinion about homosexuality, promotion related and other problems in the workplace—for certain positions having a “normal family background” was a precondition—, housing difficulties for single men, a missing legal framework for same sex couples to live together, lack of the socio-cultural infrastructure for homosexuals—there were no gay-friendly places to go out, no organisations to turn to—and the practice of the police that in certain criminal cases one’s homosexuality automatically made one a potential suspect.

In comparison to the 1980s the social representation of homosexuality has changed significantly. On the one hand, present day findings include positive aspects of homosexual life that were completely absent in 1983. On the other hand, with the improvement of the socio-cultural infrastructure and visibility of homosexuality, the social representational space of homosexuality became more extensive and articulated: gay and lesbian organisations can openly represent their interests; gay bars, regular lesbian parties, and LGBT cultural festivals can provide people with various more overtly functioning settings for entertainment and social life than the previous secret scenes (such as public toilets). In 1996 a legal framework was established for same sex partners to live together, though it is more similar to common law marriage than registered partnership (having more symbolic significance than practical advantages). However, in the family and workplace environments—though to a somewhat lesser degree—the previously also well-known identity threats, to be grasped best in the dynamics of secret-mongering and exposure, could be still detected.

Examination of the terminology used by respondents to define themselves also indicates that the social representational space for same sex relations has become extended. In the 1980s respondents defined themselves almost exclusively as *homosexuals* or as *men interested in men*. By the late 1990s a gradual separation in meaning could be detected between the word “meleg” (gay) and “homoszexuális” (homosexual)—where “meleg” was seen by most of the respondents as expressing a more useful, freely chosen, less limiting framework for the homosexual way of



existence—, while some respondents reported attempts to neutralise the traditionally negative connotations of the term "buzi" (Hungarian swear word—similar to faggot, queer). These developments in language use can be seen as expressions of the strengthening claim for a more free self-determination among Hungarian men attracted to same sex partners.

#### IS IT GOOD TO BE GAY (IN PRESENT DAY HUNGARY)?

According to about a third of my respondents it is good or relatively good to be gay in present day Hungary, while more than half of them expressed the view that it was not a good thing to be gay in Hungary. A third type of view could also be identified according to which being gay or not gay is not an important factor when deciding whether it is good or not so good to live in Hungary:

Why? Is it good to live in Hungary at all? Sometimes it is good, sometimes it isn't but it doesn't necessarily depend on your being gay (András, 38).<sup>9</sup>

Naturally we have special problems which straights don't have, but the number of these is much less than our common problems (Noffir, 19).

When evaluating the Hungarian situation my respondents mentioned several points of comparison: most importantly the past (*it is better nowadays than it used to be years ago*), one's social position (*it is easier for people of higher social position than for ordinary people*) and geographical location (*it is easier in Budapest than in the countryside; when being faraway from home than when living close to one's family, it is better here than in the countries East of Hungary but worse than in the West*).

From the interviews it turned out that gay life in general can be seen as a good thing for several reasons: in comparison to *straight life* it means a more interesting, more exciting life, more sensitivity, more working capacity and creativity. One typical explanation for these was that "they transform into intellectual creativity what they had to suppress in themselves" (Endre 50).

When highlighting positive aspects of gay life, respondents emphasised their needs for alternatives to the normative (heterosexual) masculine gender role:

I have very good relationships with women. I have no aggression, no 'bull fighting' in my life. . . . I think, I am much more open emotionally than the straight guys I know. They just look and can't understand anything (Bálint, 22).

It is a well known fact that men earn more than women, so a household consisting of

<sup>9</sup> A pseudo-name and the age of respondent follow each quotation.

two men can earn even better, not to mention the fact that they don't have to provide for a wife (Gabi, 24).

I really don't feel like living as an ordinary heterosexual man: working, having a beer in the evenings, wife, children, and weekend house—being locked in this “male compartment” (Kálmán, 69).

To see more, to feel more . . . the option that I can cry on the street and no one can fucking say anything about it, because “yes, I am a crying fag and what the fuck do you have to do with it.” You see, I am sure that men do like to cry too (Rudolf, 33).

I personally love it that I am not pressured by the must of founding and maintaining a family. I do what I like and I even have enough money to do so. Does it sound strange? Well, everything is relative: while others stay at home on childcare allowance, I work and pay tax; while others would like to prohibit even my simple existence on behalf of god, I support them with my tax payments. Everything has its price (TS, 32).

They also emphasised their need for community membership. This need was rooted in personal experiences of disadvantages related to a—sometimes multiple—minority existence.

I am much more ambitious than the others. Like other second order citizens, for example, a young gypsy or women in general, I have to catch up from a disadvantageous position (Simon, 19).

We develop a sort of defensive and offensive alliance, exactly because we are social outcasts. It's good to know that you are not alone with your problems, and common problems keep people together (Miklós, 44).

I am Jewish and I am gay which means a strange outsider/observer position for me, while living in the middle of this straight, Goy [non Jew] mass. This status provides me with sensitivity to other people's sufferings and the ability to enjoy the comicality of otherness (Ruben, 48).

A possible positive aspect of gay life was described by respondents as experiencing the joys of finding oneself in the—sometimes exhausting—search for a self-identity.

For me it is good to be gay because I can be what I would like to be. So I can be myself (Szabi, 28).

Being gay is a tiring training but it can make you more open-minded (Viktor, 41).

Paradoxically, social rejection can educate gays: they can encounter social issues and phenomena which they wouldn't know about otherwise. For us self-discovery is a matter of survival, while straights are provided with prefabricated patterns to follow on almost every level of life reflected by the media, by family, convention, morality etc. (TS, 32).

The possibly positive aspects of gay life in present day Hungary were described in three main dimensions: on the social level—in the context of the gender role system—they were expressed in the form of criticising the somewhat stereotypically described heterosexual masculinity ideal; on the intergroup level as the need for community formation and belonging; and on the personal level as the necessity of self-analysis.

Still, the majority of respondents—more than half of them—stated that it was not good to be gay in Hungary. The main reasons for this included prejudice, rejection, conservatism, lack of healthy mentality in society: the fact that “homophobia is a characteristic part of the majority identity” (JD 31). About half of the respondents suffered physical or verbal mistreatment at least once in their life because of their homosexuality. In six cases problems at the workplace were mentioned: when one’s homosexuality was discovered, one was fired, did not get the promised promotion or became isolated. In one case the husband’s homoerotic attractions were used against him in a divorce, in another case one was banned from his religious community when discovered, and in one extreme case one got imprisoned with homosexual charges (when still living in Romania). Many respondents reported cases of verbal abuse. For example, many complained that people use the term “buzi” as a swearword without any personal reference but this practice is still a very bothering one:

“hülye buzi” [stupid fag]—people say this automatically. It shouldn't bother me but in fact it does bother me because it is not good what it implies (Koppány, 24).

Usually public coming out led to negative experiences. Therefore some people in the sample came to the conclusion that it was better to keep homosexuality in the very private sphere and avoid any kind of *indecent* forms of behaviour in order to be tolerated.

In my view, those who have bad experiences are also responsible for the bad treatment themselves. It is because of their provocative behaviour. I think, people are much more tolerant than gays would imagine (Béla 48).

I didn't have any bad experiences but you wouldn't be able to tell from my appearance that I am gay. I always behave in an appropriate way (Jakab, 47).

Avoiding “extravagance” in manifesting one’s gayness still seemed to be a useful coping strategy for many. Of course, extravagance can be interpreted in different ways:

The situation is not too bad, but of course, I am not marching on the streets with a banner saying that I am gay (Feconi, 22).



## CHALLENGING IDENTITIES

In foreign countries it tends to become trendy to be gay. This is a bit extreme. You shouldn't parade it (Lindoro, 20).

The presupposition of these camouflage-strategies is private homosexuality, which can be opposed to another approach: seeing homosexuality as a public matter.

Being gay has several dimensions: it is in someone, it is practised by someone, it is done in a self-conscious way. The practical realisation can be done within a relationship or in an activists' group . . . in my view, if you take this matter seriously in present day Hungary, you must become an activist (János, 36).

Most of the respondents followed the community building actions (such as organising Pride marches and LGBT cultural festivals) of activists with a certain reservation, but they seemed to agree about the importance of coming out, i.e. the possibility to reveal one's gay identification in gradually broadening circles of friends, family members, colleagues and others. While coming out was interpreted as an issue of individual choice (shifting from private to public homosexuality, at least to a certain degree), becoming aware of one's homosexuality was seen by many as a matter of accepting a biologically determined fact.

In the context of coming out identity threats were represented by doubts about one's "true homosexuality" raised by oneself or by others including friends and parents with "comforting" remarks such as *it is only a temporary phase, or you will grow out of it*. Stereotypical misconceptions of what it means to be gay could not only contribute to non-accepting attitudes of others, but also be internalised by gays themselves. However, rejection of the stereotypical homogenisation of gayness was also present in the interviews:

Being gay is not my primarily important feature—it is only extra information. First of all I am a human being, a healthy, individual human being (Sobieski, 25).

## CONCLUSION

Reports of respondents evaluating their own social situation supported the supposition that the social representations of homosexuality in present day Hungary can be interpreted as identity threats to gays. These reports included references to fears and negative experiences gained in family or workplace environments. The search for and completion of self-identity were mainly hindered by the rejecting social atmosphere, rooted in the belief that the homosexual and the heterosexual catego-



ries can be rigidly separated from each other, and—consequently—in the discriminatory social practices affecting homosexuals (expressed in institutional settings, such as legislation). This interpretation was echoed by those respondents who emphasised that the conceptual unity of homosexuality—seen as the symmetrical counter pole of heterosexuality—, and assumptions about the homogeneity of homosexual representations should be challenged. Therefore in this context it is a valid statement that sexual practices can have identity constructing capacities only via the social meanings attached to them.

Interpreting homosexual identity as a type of threatened identity and examining the identity threats reflected by the social representations of homosexuality raised the question whether homosexual identity would at all exist without the threatening social environment. In this context homosexual identity seems to be much more a social fiction produced by social discrimination than one of the main supporting pillars of individual self-identity.

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