

RESEARCHING HARD-TO-REACH SOCIAL GROUPS: THE EXAMPLE OF GAY AND LESBIAN POPULATION IN SLOVENIA

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The article¹ discusses the main methodological dilemmas in researching the everyday life of a hard-to-reach social group – gay and lesbian population. It is based on the experiences from the research project on the everyday life of gays and lesbians in Slovenia, carried out by the authors of the paper in the period 2002-2004. The project combined qualitative and quantitative methodology. The quantitative survey consisted of face-to-face structured interviews (questionnaires) carried out on the sample of 443 gays and lesbians. Sampling was done by link-tracing method. The qualitative part consisted of three lesbian and four gay focus groups. While the quantitative survey covered a wide range of aspects of the everyday life (homosexual identity and coming-out; partnership; violence and discrimination; education; working place; GLBT subculture and media; children and family relations), the qualitative research focused on the selected topics (coming-out, partnership, and violence) in order to deepen the information gathered by the survey. In the last part of the article, the authors present the main findings from the research project, focusing on the selected topic: violence.

Key words: gays and lesbians, everyday life, hard-to-reach social groups, survey, focus groups, closet, coming out, partnership



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INTRODUCTION

This article presents the course and dilemmas of the first sociological research done on the population of gays and lesbians in Slovenia. The research was carried out from 2002 to 2004 and was aimed at identifying the current situation in the field, to research the social position, family and social contexts in which gays and lesbians in Slovenia live today. The research comprised two empirical parts. The first, quantitative part included face-to-face structured interviews on a sample of 443 gays and lesbians from all over Slovenia and was carried out from April to June 2003. Sampling was done using the snowball method with the starting sample of 45 respondents. The structured questionnaire covered various aspects of everyday life: coming out, partnership, violence and discrimination, schooling and the work place, the media, and family life. The second, qualitative part of the research, carried out from May to July 2004, included group interviews with 7 focus groups (4 male and 3 female) that included 36 people (53% gays and 47% lesbians). It focused on three selected topics – coming out, intimate partnerships and violence, which according to the survey data appeared to be the most interesting to research in depth and at the same time the most problematic (e. g. high level of violence against gays and lesbians).

The article begins with the introduction of the theoretical context in which the research was designed and the hypotheses from which we started the research. Further, we discuss the methodological issues and the design of the research. Researchers in the field of everyday life increasingly use the combination of quantitative and qualitative methodology in order to grasp the phenomena of everyday life and privacy in depth. The research on everyday life of gays and lesbians was also carried out in this way and we present the reasons for and the course of our chosen procedure. The focus is put on the main methodological dilemmas and experiences – especially those concerning the sampling and the combination of qualitative and quantitative methodology. Experiences from the Slovenian research are compared by those from similar researches carried out mainly in Western countries. The final part of the article concentrates on some basic results from the analysis of violence against gays and lesbians – the topic that appeared to be the common denominator in all the aspects of the everyday life of gays and lesbians.

THEORETICAL STARTING POINTS OF THE RESEARCH AND THE MAIN HYPOTHESES

In developing the concept of this research project and subsequent analysis, we aimed at building a model that would enable us to explain the characteristic features of gays' and lesbians' everyday life in heteronormative society. The starting the-

sis of the research was that societies of late modernity have been experiencing significant social changes both at the systemic level and the level of everyday and private life (Giddens, 2000), and that the homosexual population is part of these social changes (Weeks et al., 1999a, 1999b; Švab, 2005). They contribute to the transformation of intimacy, privacy and lifestyles by creating new forms of living (in partnership or individually) and new lifestyles, and through this they are significantly involved in the reshaping of the traditional social relationships and patterns (family, partnership relations, marriage etc.).

Generally speaking, during the past decades, the possibilities of living openly as a lesbian or gay increased, thanks to the constitution of new spaces of everyday life (Bell, Valentine, 1995; Valentine, 1996). Seidman (2002), for example, thinks that young generations of gays and lesbians increasingly organize their lives beyond the closet. Weeks, Donovan and Hephpy identified two important factors which we have witnessed since the 1980s, and which enable life beyond the closet. One is the already mentioned transformation of intimacy and society at large in the late modernity. The other is the emergence of a discourse on homosexual life that is no longer restricted to sexuality and identity, but shifts emphasis to personal relations, friendships, experiences of intimacy, same-sex parenthood, the rights of homosexual partners and homosexual marriage (Weeks et al., 1999a, 84). As a result, contemporary gay and lesbian activists' agenda is no longer dominated by the individual rights of gays and lesbians, but increasingly by the issue of personal relationships. Homosexual marriages and the related regulation of partner relations and rights, as well as the issue of the adoption of children, are currently heading the political agenda of gay and lesbian movements in Western countries.

Although these social processes are quite obvious, we thought it was necessary to take into account yet another crucial factor influencing the everyday life of gays and lesbians: i. e. the fact that social conventions still have very strong implications for the homosexual population. What we mean by this is the power of heteronormativity constituting the heterosexual social framework of gays' and lesbians' lives, in which the assumption of heterosexuality lies at the root of the operational pattern of all social institutions. In our opinion, heteronormativity has a twofold effect on the everyday life of homosexuals: it generates social exclusion (e. g. explicit and implicit stigmatization, homophobia and violence against gays and lesbians), and it puts pressure on gays and lesbians to adjust themselves to heterosexual social norms and heterosexual behavioral patterns. On the one hand, therefore, hetero-

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normativity operates as a mechanism of exclusion for gays and lesbians, while on the other, it puts pressure on them to imitate heterosexual roles, norms and patterns.

The research started with a twofold thesis. We perceive gays and lesbians as a key factor in later modern societies, that is as the generators of changes that undermine traditional heteronormative ties. At the same time, we understand a heteronormative social arrangement as constituting the main social framework for the everyday life of gays and lesbians, and one which frequently produces hierarchy and negative effects by attaching a stigma to homosexuality and hence generating homophobia and violence.

Statistical data, especially the results of measuring the social distance regarding the marginalized groups within the Slovenian public opinion survey (SPOS), show a stigmatized position of gays and lesbians in Slovenia. More than half of the respondents from the longitudinal SPOS do not want a gay or a lesbian for a neighbour. In 1992, 42.5% of respondents said that they did not want to have homosexuals as their neighbours. The following year, this percentage rose to 61.6%; in 1994 it was 56.2%, in 1995 61.2%, in 1998 60.3%, in 1999 44.3%, in 2000 55.1%, and in 2002 50.7% (Toš, ed., 1999, 2002). Although antidiscrimination legislation, which includes prohibition of discrimination based on sexual orientation, was adopted in the recent years in Slovenia, the lack of policies which would sensitize and inform the public about homosexuality, still contributes to the various forms of the exclusion of gays and lesbians in everyday life. They cannot actively participate in public and private life as homosexual citizens (Kuhar, 2006). The failure to form a systemic policy and legislation is also due to a lack of sociological research in the field. Except for the existence of some small-scale surveys that were carried out as research work within graduate and post-graduate theses and two surveys carried out by the NGO Škuc LL on the sample of the Ljubljana gay and lesbian subculture,² the topic was practically not researched until recently.

In this context, the research we carried out aimed at exploring the various aspects of the everyday life of gays and lesbians in Slovenia, focusing on the ways in which heteronormativity of the society implicitly and explicitly influences and shapes their lives. In order to test our twofold hypothesis we employed quantitative and qualitative methodology (discussed and presented below), covering the main aspects of the everyday life of gays and lesbians: coming out, intimate life and partnership, violence and discrimination, schooling and the work place, the media, and family life.

COMBINING TWO METHODOLOGIES: QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE RESEARCH IN RESEARCHING HARD-TO-REACH SOCIAL GROUPS

Methodologists recognize that research on socially hidden and hard-to-reach social groups, including gays and lesbians, is a demanding task. There are two main concerns in this respect: "First, no sampling frame exists, so the size and boundaries of the population are unknown; and second, there exist strong privacy concerns, because membership involves stigmatized or illegal behaviour, leading individuals to refuse to cooperate, or give unreliable answers to protect their privacy" (Heckathorn, 1997, 174). Since the socio-demographic characteristics of these groups are usually not known, the traditional quantitative methods of data collection used with representative samples, e.g. household surveys (Heckathorn, 1997), are not possible in this case or rather, they "cannot produce reliable samples, and they are inefficient, because hidden populations are rare" (Heckathorn, 1997, 174).

Researchers of the everyday life of hidden social groups (Heckathorn, 1997; Salganik, Heckathorn, 2004; Spreen, 1992) occasionally employ qualitative methodologies, for example in-depth interviews, focus groups and the like (Plummer, 1995; Stacey, 2002; Weeks et al., 1999a, 1999b). This approach enables them to study hard-to-reach social groups using smaller samples and to delve more deeply into the explanation of the phenomena. Gamson (2000), for example, noted that, as a rule, research on homosexuality involved qualitative methods. Our research was not an exception in this respect. The qualitative method had a special weight, although for various reasons presented later in the text, in the empirical part of the study we combined both, quantitative (a survey using a structured questionnaire) and qualitative (a focus group interview) methodologies.

One of the main reasons for using a quantitative questionnaire-based empirical method was the lack of virtually any data on the life of the target population. In Slovenia, research in this field has been very limited, so prior to our research there was no integral or empirical study of the gay and lesbian population or their everyday life. In conducting the quantitative survey, we aimed at obtaining the basic statistical data of this social group. However, since this research looked into private and intimate lives, quantitative data would not have sufficed for more detailed interpretations in the later part of the study, so we employed a combination of qualitative and quantitative method. There were other reasons for choosing such a combination of methods, mostly arising directly from the nature of both methodologies, each of which

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has certain advantages over the other as well as certain drawbacks. As both methodologies complement each other very well, researchers conducting empirical studies of social phenomena, and of everyday life in particular, increasingly combine both of them.

The following chapters of the article present the course of the research in both empirical parts, discussing the main dilemmas we were faced with during the research and including some selected data from both parts of the research.

THE SURVEY

Defining the studied population

In conceptualizing the empirical part of our research, we first had to resolve the question of how to define the target population, including the question of how to determine the same-sex orientation of an individual. Such a definition presupposes the existence of fixed and uniform identities, which are ideally divided into three types: homosexual, heterosexual and bisexual. Yet it is not quite clear if this classification refers to the sexual experiences only or to one's emotional makeup as well. *The Dictionary of Slovene Literary Language* describes these categories as a "sexual tendency" towards persons of the same sex, opposite sex or both sexes. However, this classification may cause the researcher a number of difficulties in practice. The first arises from the fact that the definition of sexual orientation and sexual identity is usually subjective and may either deviate from these categories or change over time. A further, even greater problem is a complex relationship between categories such as same-sex orientation, sexual identity and sexual activity. Are certain sexual activities enough to define somebody as a homosexual? How many sexual contacts with a person of the same sex would justify the definition of someone as gay or lesbian? Another important question is whether someone should be considered gay or lesbian although he/she has not yet had any sexual contact with a person of the same sex. Those research studies that seek to locate persons oriented towards the same sex within large samples of the general population (see Sandfort, 1998) frequently ask the respondents whether they have had sexual experience with a person of the same sex in the past. This approach, although relevant to gather information about sexual activities, is limited as regards the topic of homosexuality since one's homosexual orientation is not defined by sexual experience only. To illustrate this dilemma, an individual may perceive his/her sexual identity as heterosexual or homosexual, even if he/she has not yet had any sexual contact whatsoever. In addition, sexual

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identity may change over time. In everyday life, sexual and other identities frequently intertwine, or succeed one another. Some individuals who today self-define as homosexuals may have once perceived their sexual identity as heterosexual. Similarly, there are people who live as homosexuals and have homosexual experiences but never assume homosexual identity, and so on. In our opinion, the concept of fluid identity (Ule, 2000) more appropriately reflects the situation, so we left it to the respondents to define their sexual orientation. Those who self-defined as gays or lesbians were included in the study.

Defining the target population is a first step in the research process, and it is especially important at the stage of sampling. We have already mentioned the problem of the absence of socio-demographic data on the homosexual population, meaning that we did not know what their share in the total population of Slovenia was or what the structure of this population was, in terms of socio-demographic characteristics. This prevented us from establishing a representative sample and, consequently, from extrapolating conclusions to the entire homosexual population. However, the primary purpose of the survey in our study was not to determine, for example, the share of the homosexual population, but to obtain information on the everyday life of gays and lesbians in Slovenia. This information was the basis for the qualitative part of the study in which we examined individual topics.

Sampling – dilemmas and procedure

There are two methodologies used in research on hidden social groups: descending and ascending (Atkinson, Flint, 2001). The first is used primarily when attempting to define the size of the homosexual population. Some researchers employing this method try to establish the sexual orientation of the respondents either by indirectly asking questions about the gender of their sexual partners, about their sexual activities, or by asking directly about their sexual orientation. Some base their estimates on the population censuses or on the sex of a partner in the same household (Diamond, 1993; Sandfort, 1998; Black et al., 2000).

As people are usually reluctant to talk openly about their sexual practices and orientation, especially if they belong to the socially stigmatised social minority, we opted for an ascending sampling strategy. We chose qualitative sampling based on mutual trust, intimate social networks consisting of friends or similar, and primarily self-identification. We included those respondents who self-identified as gays or lesbians. By using the ascending approach, we also wanted to over-

come the basic problem of the limited accessibility of this population. In fact, many gays and lesbians have come out only to the family and narrow, informal social circles consisting, for example, of close friends, while some have come out only to a few persons. The reason is a high level of homophobia, the risk of social stigma and of becoming a victim of violence. All these factors essentially determine the accessibility of this social group.

One way to reach hidden social groups is through social networks. This enables researchers to use snowball sampling, or the link-tracing method (Spreen, 1992) as a qualitative sampling method especially useful in studies involving smaller target groups where the establishment of contacts presupposes a certain level of trust (Atkinson, Flint, 2001). The philosophy of the link-tracing method is based on the assumption that the members of hidden or hard-to-reach groups may be located through the social networks to which they belong, or in other words, that the initial sample of respondents will have links that may be used to access other individuals in the target population. In snowball sampling, a randomly chosen sample serves as initial contacts, although in practice the easiness of access virtually always determines the initial sample (Goodman, in Heckathorn, 1997). This sampling procedure is therefore not without drawbacks: "First, inferences about individuals must rely mainly on the initial sample, since additional individuals found by tracing chains are never found randomly or even with known biases; second, chain-referral samples tend to be biased toward the more cooperative subjects who agree to participate; third, these samples may be biased because of masking, that is, protecting friends by not referring them, an important problem when a population has strong privacy concerns; fourth, referrals occur through network links, so subjects with larger personal networks will be oversampled, and relative isolates will be excluded" (Erickson, in Heckathorn, 1997, 175). To overcome these drawbacks, Heckathorn proposes the so-called respondent-driven sampling to study hidden populations as a new form of chain-referral sampling (Heckathorn, 1997). The sampling method is used for two purposes, to recruit the subjects into the research and to sample the population studied. The author argues that using the suitable incentives we can reduce the biases of chain-referral samples, especially biases resulting from voluntarism, masking and differences in the sizes of personal networks (Heckathorn, 1997, 176-177).

The failure to locate (isolated) individuals who are not members of social networks or belong to small, tightly closed networks, and the danger that by using this method we re-

cruit respondents from just a few, readily accessible social networks were also the main concerns in our research. We were especially concerned that the sample would be oversampled by the Ljubljana gay and lesbian subculture and that isolated individuals, especially from other parts of Slovenia, will be missed. Atkinson and Flint (2001) propose that these weaknesses may be overcome by increasing the sample. In order to avoid this risk, it is necessary to engage several social networks, so that the results may not reflect the experience of just one network, or that one kind of experience may not be overemphasized. On the basis of data about geographical spread of the sample, covering various parts of Slovenia, including urban as well as rural parts, and by increasing the sample size in comparison with previously carried-out surveys (Velikonja, Greif, 2001, 2003) that had samples of 172 (in 2001) and 205 respondents (in 2002), we assume that we managed to include several social networks. In addition, during the survey, in face-to-face interviews, it was revealed that we managed to include also those individual gays and lesbians that had not been a part of the wider/larger social networks of gays and lesbians. For example, some came out only to a few friends.

The survey was carried out with a face-to-face interviewing using a structured questionnaire. The questionnaire contained 88 questions, plus 9 questions for respondents with children. It was divided into seven thematic sets: demographic data, homosexual identity and coming out, intimate partnerships, violence and discrimination, gay and lesbian subculture and the media, and children, by which we aimed at measuring various aspects of the everyday life of gays and lesbians. The filling in of the questionnaire lasted 35 to 70 minutes on average. The final sample consisted of 443 respondents.

In selecting respondents for our sample, we first drew a list of 45 "initial" respondents, who were invited personally or who responded to our advertisements and public invitations. These appeared on gay and lesbian web pages and magazines. The first contacts were established through e-mails, in which we asked for permission to give their contacts to 25 interviewers, all of whom received special training on how to carry out the survey. Most of these interviewers also had their own contacts. Some of them were themselves gays and lesbians and, as insiders, they had easier access to potential participants who could not be located using conventional methodological approaches.

The snowball effect then worked as expected: during the initial weeks, the number of participants increased, and then the social networks began to close down, although many re-

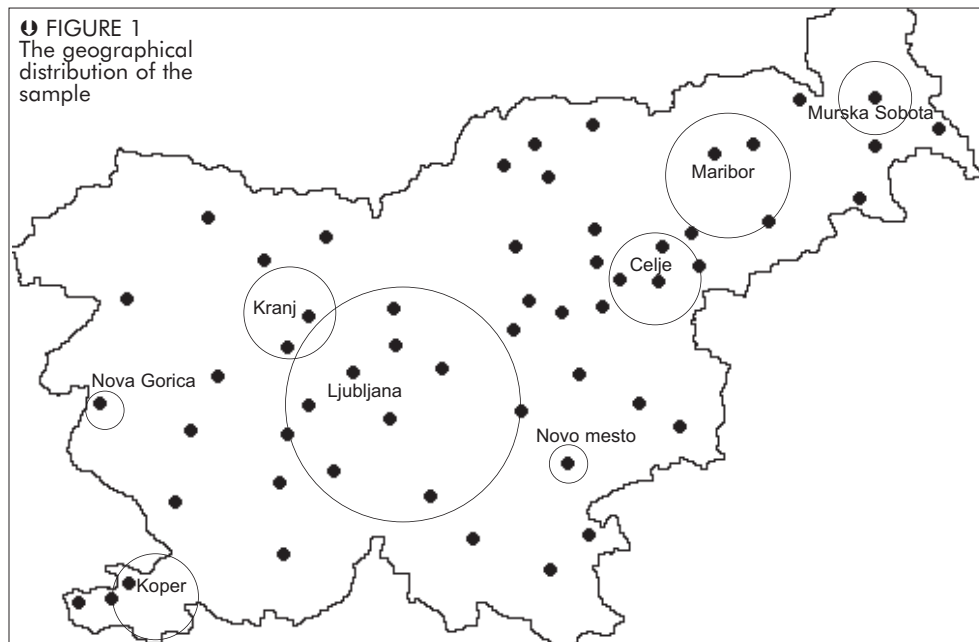
mained open even after the completion of the survey. In fact, we had to end the survey for financial reasons, rather than for the lack of potential respondents. The table below shows the course of the sampling procedure.

➤ TABLE 1
Sample formation
by weeks

	Number of respondents
Week 1	55
Week 2	84
Week 3	67
Week 4	50
Week 5	26
Week 6	11
Week 7	15
Week 8	25
Week 9	17
Week 10	23
Week 11	15
Week 12	19
Week 13	7
Week 14	11
Week 15	5

Initially, most respondents were from Ljubljana and its surroundings, but later the sample branched out, so we were able to reach out to other parts of Slovenia. We therefore managed, at least to a degree, to overcome the shortcomings of previous research studies (Velikonja, Greif, 2001, 2003), where the sample was mainly recruited from the Ljubljana gay and lesbian subculture, meaning a specific social network characterized by urban concentration and gay and lesbian activism. The following are indicators upon which we assume that the link-tracing method opened the door to gays and lesbians belonging to social networks not included in previous studies: 48% came from other parts of Slovenia (outside Ljubljana or its surroundings); 12% of our respondents stated that they never visited a gay or lesbian club or any other such gathering place in Slovenia; 13% were unfamiliar with the work of gay and lesbian activists in Slovenia; and 11% were not aware of any gay or lesbian media or of the Slovene GLBT web page.

The recruitment was based on personal trust. All respondents were requested to ask their homosexual friends to join in. This proved to be a good method, since those respondents who had already completed the questionnaire could relate their experience to potential new participants. In this way, we managed to win over individuals who would probably never have responded to our invitation of their own accord.



Demographic characteristics of the survey sample

Other studies on homosexual population (see Sandfort, 1998) have found that homosexual population differs from the "general" population in the following details: the percentage of males (gays) is larger than that of females (lesbians); the majority of this population is concentrated in urban centres; their educational level is on average higher than that of the general population and, quite expectedly, as a rule these individuals are less often married.

The demographic data drawn from our sample revealed similar results as those obtained by other researchers. Sixty-six percent of the sample was male, compared to 34% female. This does not necessarily indicate that the number of lesbians in the general population is smaller. Despite the fact that other researchers have also noted fewer lesbians in their samples, which may indicate a greater social isolation or invisibility of lesbians (as a consequence of the fear of social exposure or stigma), in our case this may be partly attributed to the sampling procedure itself. The initial sample included more gays than lesbians, and the consequence was that we located and mobilized more gay social networks, indeed not homogenous in terms of gender, but still predominantly gay. The ratio did not essentially change even after we began to encourage both researchers and respondents to make an effort towards recruiting more lesbians. A similar problem awaited

➔ TABLE 2
Geographical
dispersion of
the sample

us when shaping focus groups. The fact is that more lesbians than gays refused to participate in focus group interviews. Despite these difficulties, when shaping the focus groups, we did have control over the ratio of men to women, thanks to the relatively high share of both male and female respondents willing to take part in the second part of the study.

The majority of respondents from our research live in larger urban centres, i. e. Ljubljana or Maribor (62.1%). More than half of the respondents had moved to a bigger urban centre at some point in time (54.4%). In most cases, the reason for moving was education or job, while in 4.5% of cases the main reason was problems with the family or the environment because of the respondent's sexual orientation.

Somewhat more than 14% of respondents were from the countryside, and a similar percentage came from smaller towns (Celje, Kranj, Nova Gorica etc.) or from a smaller place (categorized between the smaller town and the countryside).

	%
Larger city	62,1
Smaller town	12,6
Place	10,8
Countryside	14,2

Researchers generally attribute this greater concentration of gay and lesbian population in urban areas to the greater anonymity characteristic of these environments. In urban areas, the possibilities for shaping a "homosexual lifestyle" are especially numerous, because of the lower degree of social control and the presence of infrastructure supporting this lifestyle. The same can be said of our sample. Although somewhat less than 5% of respondents mentioned that the main reason for moving to an urban center was their sexual orientation, the sample consisted of a large percentage of young people attending university courses in Ljubljana or Maribor, where they live temporarily and may decide to remain for good, because of their sexual orientation, among other reasons.

The educational level is above the Slovenian average (55% have secondary education, 28% have university or higher education, and 4% have a master's or doctoral degree). As expected, a great share (95%) of respondents have never been married. We assume that this data among others indicate that those gays and lesbians who are currently married were not included in our research to a large extent due to the fact that they are the most socially hidden and hard-to-reach among the homosexual population.

The majority of respondents were between 21 and 40 years old, so the findings primarily reflect the experience of this age group.

➔ TABLE 3
The structure of
the sample by age
and gender

	Male (%)	Female (%)
16 to 20	25	15
21 to 25	90	61
26 to 30	70	43
31 to 40	85	28
41 and over	22	4

We should emphasize that the distortion of the sample may have occurred; it is possible that higher-educated gays and lesbians living in urban centres were more willing to speak about their sexual orientation than homosexual individuals from other demographic groups. However, the main purpose of the quantitative part of the study was to identify the main determinants of the family and social contexts of gays' and lesbians' everyday life. We have already pointed out that the absence of data on the socio-demographic characteristics of this population made it impossible to generalize the findings to the entire gay and lesbian population. According to quantitative methodology standards, the sample was not representative. The data are therefore generalized to the studied sample only, and only this population is described. However, on the basis of the data collected, primarily the size of the sample, its geographical distribution and the correspondence between our socio-demographic data and the findings of other studies, it is possible to assume that we came close to our goal, which was to include as diverse as possible a gay and lesbian population coming from various social networks.

THE QUALITATIVE PART OF THE STUDY – FOCUS GROUPS AS A COLLECTIVE RESEARCH METHOD

A structured survey questionnaire, like the one used in the first part of our study, does not allow for in-depth questions and answers. Therefore, we decided for a more detailed analysis of the questions identified using qualitative methodology. It was established that several issues required a more in-depth discussion; these were the coming out process, intimate partnerships and violence.

In deciding for a qualitative method to employ, we chose focus groups for several reasons. One of these was purely pragmatic, i. e. time constraints, given that the research project was limited to two years. The focus group method makes it possible to interview more people within a shorter span of time. This approach also enables greater concentration on se-

lected themes, as it involves a guided discussion with a selected group about their experiences with and views on selected topics (Krueger, Casey, 2000). Focus groups are a form of group interviewing, although the two are distinctly separate, because one outstanding feature of the focus group is interaction within the group. This enables the researcher to collect a wide spectrum of information on the subject discussed (Lito-ssetiti, 2003). The main purpose of the focus group approach is to gain insight into the views, feelings, experiences and reactions of the participants, which would not be possible using other methods (Gibbs, 1997). The purpose of the focus group is "not to measure viewpoints, but to understand them" (Brečko, 2005, 115).

Interaction is an important element of all focus groups, because participants may pose questions to one another, which enables them to reflect on and re-assess their views on particular experiences (Barbour, Kitzinger, 1999). A focus group makes mutual reflection on the part of all participants possible, including the moderator, and at the same time it is possible to observe interaction within the group. In our research, this last element proved especially useful with those focus groups that included intimate partners who had differing interpretations of the same event, and groups where participants knew each other. Nevertheless, their narratives were mainly prepared and well thought out beforehand, since we were exploring the subjects that they had already considered extensively in the past and discussed in their social environments.

We chose the focus group method also because it is a collective research method used in the study of complex individual and shared life experiences (Madriz, 2000). The homosexuals are a social group whose strong common denominator is the social stigma attached to homosexuality by the predominantly heteronormative society. A focus group interview enables a strong identification with the group, and through it makes participants more ready to talk. Precisely because of this, the focus group method has an important emancipatory sub-tone.

Yet the focus group method inevitably has some drawbacks as well. First, the interview does not take place in an environment in which social interaction usually occurs. Furthermore, an assistant has to be present, and for some participants this may be distracting, so it is difficult to assess how authentic a social interaction within a focus group actually is (Madriz, 2000, 836). In our research, the presence of an assistant in our focus groups did not appear to be disturbing, although we are aware that some gays and lesbians would have preferred individual interviews. We assume that in our

case the individuals who consented to take part in the focus group were mainly homosexuals who had already come out, meaning homosexuals who had no difficulties with their homosexuality in this respect and were therefore ready to talk about it. Several gays and lesbians refused to participate in focus group discussions, explaining that they did not want to speak about their sexual orientation within a group, but they were willing to accept an individual interview. One reason frequently stated was the fear that the group would include a person to whom they had not yet come out, or a person whom they knew well and in whose presence they would not like to answer certain questions (e. g. a former partner, an acquaintance etc.). Owing to the high level of anonymity and data protection, we could not guarantee the individuals that a group would not include a person they knew, so they were not included.

Focus groups were segregated by gender for two reasons. When contacting lesbians and gays who were willing to participate in focus groups, we asked them whether they preferred the moderator to be male or female. While most gays did not have preferences as to the gender of the moderator, lesbians mainly opted for female moderators. Accordingly, we decided that both the moderator and the assistant participating in lesbian focus groups should be female, and we assumed that participants' readiness to talk would be greater if the focus group as a whole was homogenous in terms of gender.

Focus groups interviews, seven in all, were carried out in May and June 2004.³ Four interviews were with male and three with female groups. There were 36 participants in total, most of whom had already filled out the questionnaire by that time. In fact, all respondents who participated in the quantitative part of the study were invited to participate in the second, qualitative part. We invited seven to eight participants to each focus group, but eventually the average size of a group was five participants. This means that three participants per group at the most, who had initially confirmed their participation, later changed their minds. Focus groups usually consist of seven to ten people (Krueger, Casey, 2000, 6). However, compared to market research where focus groups are used most frequently, in our case smaller groups proved to be an advantage, because the research subjects were of a more intimate nature. Had the focus groups been larger, we would have risked a situation in which some participants would not have the opportunity to express their views and experiences. Madriz has come to a similar conclusion when using focus groups to study the everyday life of Latin American and Afro-American women. In her opinion, smaller groups were better suited, since the moderator could avoid the problems of guid-

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ing the discussion and channelling it to the research subject (Madriz, 2000, 845). In our example, focus groups consisting of four to five participants proved the most effective, while in the groups consisting of eight participants, the maintenance of the focus turned out to be a more difficult task for the moderator and the assistant, on the one hand, and the participants, on the other. In addition, it was not possible to go into depth for each of the subjects discussed. Here, we present data from one of the researched topics – the violence and discrimination against gays and lesbians.

VIOLENCE AGAINST GAYS AND LESBIANS

"I'm not afraid of physical violence. A physical pain is a kind of pain I know how to cope with. But emotions escape, and you cannot trap them. If you are in pain, there are medication and pills. But when it comes to emotions, I don't know... "

(Vanja, female, 19, on the fear of homophobic violence)

In his study on the closet in America, Steven Seidman (2002) says that today the young generations of gays and lesbians organize their life beyond the closet, which only a decade ago was an inescapable part of the day-to-day life of a homosexual. Our research only partly confirmed this thesis. It needs to be stressed that for gays and lesbians in Slovenia, the closet is still a reality in most aspects of social life. We assume that these differences between research findings reflect differences in the cultural environment. In more liberal environments, in which the level of homophobia and violence against gays and lesbians is lower, the possibilities for coming out of the closet are greater than in environments where homophobia is still quite prominent, as it is in Slovenia. It seems that in Slovenia the closet is increasingly less present in narrow social circles. In other social contexts, the closet continues to be a social structure for the oppression of gays and lesbians.

The "Survey on Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation" conducted in 2001 by NGOs ŠKUC LL in collaboration with ILGA Europe pointed to a high level of violence against the homosexual population in Slovenia. One in two respondents stated that he/she had been a victim of violence or harassment on the basis of sexual orientation (Velikonja, Greif, 2001).

Our research confirmed these findings.

➔ TABLE 4
Have you ever been
the victim of violence
provoked by your
sexual orientation?

	%
Yes	53
No	47

Fifty-three percent of respondents answered affirmatively. There were no statistically significant differences between genders in the group who stated that they were the victims of violence and who recognized a particular type of behavior as violence. Fifty-two percent of men and 56% of women in our sample stated that their sexual orientation was the cause of violence.⁴ The most common form of violence experienced by gays and lesbians (in 91% of cases) is psychological violence, followed by physical violence (24%) and sexual violence (6%). A look at the perception of violence shows that more women than men identified psychological violence, and that more men than women were the victims of physical violence.

The most unsafe space for both lesbians and gays is the public space (the street, bars and the like), and in most cases attackers are strangers. Our research also suggests that the geography of homophobic acts is gendered; lesbians are more often than gays the victims of violence in private life.⁵ While gays frequently mentioned their school mates as perpetrators of violent acts (in 30.3% of cases), lesbians were probably socially less visible in this context. Violence in school usually involves peer group pressure, where the designation "faggot" is frequently used to disqualify individuals who cannot, or do not want to, follow the standards (e. g. gender roles) inside a group, or whose behavior is constructed as such. On the other hand, lesbians more frequently than gays experience various forms of violence inside the immediate or extended family. While violence against men is more transparent (public), violence against women is frequently hidden or hushed up. Nevertheless, both gays and lesbians are most frequently the victims of violence in public spaces.

➔ TABLE 5
Perpetrators
of violent acts

Who was the perpetrator of a violent act?	Male (%)	Female (%)	Total (%)
Strangers (e. g. on the street, in bars etc.)	63.2	57.1	61.0
Parents or relatives	19.1	38.1	25.8
Friends or acquaintances	21.1	26.2	22.9
Colleagues at work	12.5	9.5	11.4
Schoolmates	30.3	8.3	22.5
Neighbours	7.9	3.6	6.4
Police	3.3	1.2	2.5
Doctors	2.6	4.8	3.4
Partner	3.3	1.2	2.5
Other	6.6	8.3	7.2

Public spaces are suffused with heteronormativity; e. g. no one will ever take notice of a heterosexual couple holding hands, but a homosexual couple holding hands "stands out."

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"I expected more negative responses [when I walked with my boyfriend holding hands], but in fact that didn't happen. Someone yelled across Prešern Square 'Damned faggot!' so everybody heard it, and everybody looked. But I thought to myself: 'Well, they cannot do anything to me, not in broad daylight.' But, then it haunts you. I start to think why he said that. I want to understand why people react in such a way. How much I will dare depends on how intense my relationship with my boyfriend is. I do not have any explicit desire to demonstrate my love in the streets. Although, I would like to do it, in a way, but then I say to myself, I'd rather not, we can be together at home, or when we hike in the mountains, or wherever." (Patrick, male, 20)

The public space cannot be understood as sexually neutral or non-defined by specific assumptions about sexuality; the street is heterosexualized. Every attack on lesbians and gays reproduces and re-constitutes the public space as a heterosexual space.

It is possible to claim that most focus group participants adjusted to the heterosexuality of the street or public spaces by using a degree of mimicry. While in privacy or in the narrow circles of friends they dare to express their intimate relations with their partners, these relationships are translated in the street into "mere friendships." This image is dropped only in exceptional moments when there is no special threat around. It seems that spontaneous expressions of intimacy in public spaces are much less characteristic of gays and lesbians than of heterosexual couples, since gays and lesbians are generally always aware of the environment and the heteronormativity underpinning it. Another reason why expressions of intimacy are rare is the fact that homosexual couples begin to doubt that, given the circumstances, these gestures can be spontaneous.

"There was a wish in the beginning, but since you always experience fear, it blocks you. It blocks everything [...] You think about holding hands so intensely that everything loses its basic purpose of some spontaneous expression of love, and in the end it seems absurd. So even when I take him by the hand, I feel as if I was holding a piece of wood. We hold hands like two ... I don't know what. We are not relaxed. We hold hands and walk along the street like two paraplegics, and we just wait for that remark. [...] Whenever I have a wish to take him by the hand I ask myself: 'Well, what is this now? An activist gesture? Will it be spontaneous?' And in the meantime we have reached the end of the pedestrian mall." (Borut, male, 30)

Mimicry is frequently a result of conformity. Some focus group participants stated, for example, that the norms of the society in which one lives had to be respected and that it would not be sensible to challenge them. At the same time they know

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that it is social pressure itself that makes them convinced that they would feel uncomfortable expressing their feelings. Although statements like the one above can be interpreted as a form of protection against homophobic reactions, they are also a sign of internalized homophobia and social control over identities, i. e. being aware of which identities are socially acceptable and rewarded and which are marginalized. Boštjan, a participant in a focus group, for example, concluded that you should first present yourself to people as a human being worthy of respect, instead of allowing them to judge you by your sexual identity:

"It's not good if that [homosexuality] is the first thing they learn about you. That is the first impression. Will you go to a job interview unshaven and untidy, or will you take care to appear smart?"
(Boštjan, male, 31)

The stigmatized images of and ideas about homosexuality influence not only the (homophobic) reactions of people responding to the presence of gays and lesbians in their environment, but also gays and lesbians themselves. Socialization in circumstances in which socializing agents do not supply information about homosexuality, or where this information comes with a stigma attached to it, creates fertile ground for the internalization of homophobia. It is a fear of oneself, of one's sexual desires, conduct and identity, and it leads to various forms of self-violence. Some respondents described the violence they inflicted upon themselves because of the social pressure towards "normality" as incomparable with the violence practiced by others. If society continually sends a message that you are sick, deranged, and not normal, you start to believe that it is true, and it becomes realistic, particularly in terms of its consequences. This led some gays and lesbians to use various forms of self-violence in an attempt to become "normal" and socially acceptable. In so doing they did not question (homophobic) social norms and expectations, while at the same time their environment did not offer support or understanding, or so they assumed.

CONCLUSION

While there is a tradition of sociological empirical research of the everyday life of gays and lesbians in America and in some Western European countries, this field is almost not researched in Slovenia. The study presented in this article is the first sociological research of this scope into the everyday life of gays and lesbians here. In this context, we had to deal with many contentious issues. One among these, perhaps the most important, was how to locate the hidden social minority about

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which we knew practically nothing apart from the fact that it copes with a number of difficulties perpetuated by an expressly homophobic society.

The survey (the quantitative part of the research) confirmed the findings of some other (foreign) surveys (Sandfort, 1998). We traced the main problems gays and lesbians as individuals face during the process of coming out, a high level of violence and the problems of gay and lesbian couples. While conducting the survey it became clear that the complex experiences of everyday life could not be simply measured on the scale from 1 to 5 or by the answers "yes" and "no". That is why we instantly decided to carry on the research further and explore some aspects of everyday life by qualitative methodology.

An important factor in carrying out the research as such was the highly interested target population. This was obvious already at the beginning of the research project, especially in the high response rate, the number of the interested gays and lesbians that were prepared to contribute their views and experiences to the research. An important factor in the sampling procedure was also that some interviewers were gays and lesbians themselves, meaning that as insiders they were able to activate their own social networks very quickly. Readiness to co-operate continued during the whole process of sampling and even continued after the survey was finished. The high motivation from the part of respondents confirmed our assumption that the whole research also functioned as a socialization and emancipatory process for many gays and lesbians involved. Many of them reported (especially later in the focus groups) that they found the research to be an opportunity to speak out about their own personal experience of oppression due to their sexual orientation.

NOTES

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² "On Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation" (N = 172), conducted in 2001 in collaboration with ILGA Europe, and "On Registered Partnership" (N = 205), completed in 2002. See Velikonja and Greif, 2001, 2003.

³ In our research on the everyday life of gays and lesbians we carried out 7 focus groups with 19 men (53%) and 17 women (47%). All interviews were held in Ljubljana, but participants came from various

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parts of Slovenia. The majority were from Ljubljana and Maribor (81%), 6% were from smaller towns, 8% from bigger towns and 6% from the countryside. The average age of the participants was 27; the youngest one was 19 years old, and the oldest 40. The structure of focus groups by educational attainment was as follows: 58% were secondary school graduates, 28% were university graduates, 6% had only primary or lower secondary technical education, and 3% were vocational school graduates. Most of the participants (53%) were university students (both undergraduate and graduate); 31% were employed, 8% were secondary school students, and 8% were unemployed. At the time of conducting focus group interviews, the majority of participants had a same-sex partner. Some focus groups included both partners.

⁴ $p=0,476$.

⁵ Let us stress here that this difference may perhaps be attributed to the sensitivity to the issue of violence; lesbians more frequently reported violence against privacy, because they perceive this type of violence as violence.

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Istraživanje teško dostupnih društvenih grupa: primjer gej i lezbijske populacije u Sloveniji

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U članku se iznose glavne metodološke dileme u istraživanju svakodnevnog života teško dostupnih društvenih grupa – gej i lezbijske populacije. Članak se temelji na iskustvima autora stečenim tijekom istraživačkoga projekta o svakodnevnom životu gejeva i lezbijki u Sloveniji, koji se provodio od 2002. do 2004. godine. Istraživanje je kombiniralo kvalitativnu i kvantitativnu metodologiju. Anketa je provedena na uzorku od 443 gejeva i lezbijki. Uzorak je sastavljen metodom 'link-tracing'. Osnovu kvalitativnoga dijela istraživanja čine 3 lezbijske i 4 gej fokusne grupe. Dok se kvantitativnom anketom pokrio širi aspekt svakodnevnog života (homoseksualni identitet i *coming out*/iskorak, partnerstvo; nasilje i diskriminacija; obrazovanje; posao; GLBT supkultura i mediji; djeca i obiteljski odnosi), kvalitativno istraživanje usredotočilo se na odabrane teme (*coming out*/iskorak, partnerstvo i nasilje), s ciljem da se prodube podaci dobiveni anketom. U zadnjem dijelu članka autori izlažu glavne rezultate istraživanja, usredotočujući se na jednu temu: nasilje.

Ključne riječi: gejevi i lezbijke, svakodnevni život, teško dostupne društvene grupe, fokusne grupe, *closet*, *coming out*/iskorak, partnerstvo

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Erforschung schwer zugänglicher Bevölkerungsgruppen: Fallbeispiel Schwulen- und Lesbenpopulation in Slowenien

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Im Artikel werden die methodologischen Hauptschwierigkeiten bei der Erforschung des Lebensalltags schwer zugänglicher Bevölkerungsgruppen dargelegt – im konkreten Fall der Schwulen- und Lesbenpopulation. Die Angaben beziehen sich auf Erfahrungen, die die Autoren im Verlauf ihres Forschungsprojekts über den Lebensalltag der in Slowenien lebenden Schwulen und Lesben gemacht haben (2002–2004). Die Untersuchung, der eine kombinierte qualitativ-quantitative Methodologie zugrunde lag, wurde unter 443 Gays und Lesben durchgeführt. Die Probanden waren anhand von „link-tracing“ zusammengestellt worden. Die Grundlage des qualitativen Teils der Untersuchung bildeten 3 Lesben- und 4 Schwulen-Fokusgruppen. Mit einer quantitativen Umfrage wurde der Großteil des Lebensalltags abgedeckt (homosexuelle Identität und Outing, Partnerschaft; Gewalt und Diskriminierung; Bildung; Beruf; LGBT-Subkultur und Medien; Kinder und Familienverhältnisse). Eine qualitative Umfrage konzentrierte sich auf einzelne Themen (Outing, Partnerschaft und Gewalt), um Erkenntnisse darüber zu vertiefen. Im letzten Teil des Artikels werden die Hauptergebnisse der Untersuchung mit Fokus auf das Thema Gewalt dargelegt.

Schlüsselbegriffe: Schwule und Lesben, Lebensalltag, schwer zugängliche Bevölkerungsgruppen, Fokusgruppen, Closet, Outing, Partnerschaft