

## LESBIANS, GAYS AND BISEXUALS IN CROATIA: HOW THE STIGMA SHAPES LIVES

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### INTRODUCTION

Research projects on stigma and homosexuality in Croatia have dealt with the attitudes of the majority towards homosexuals. Scholars have not investigated the effects of stigma, faced by homosexuals and bisexuals, from the insider's perspective. Our research, adopting that perspective and focusing on the dynamics and mechanisms of stigma and related processes, is based on the experiences of homosexuals and bisexuals. It offers an inside view of the stigmatised position and stigma management of the LGB population in Croatia. It is the first *victimisation research* on lesbians, gays and bisexuals in Croatia.

Croatian lesbians, gays and bisexuals have faced and experienced many transformations of their social status in the last four years. From 2002 homosexuality has gained media attention and has become visible through the LGB organizations' advocacy for LGB human rights, LGB public manifestations such as Zagreb Pride and Queer Zagreb, and public, political and media discussions about the nature and origins of homosexuality and the extent of rights homosexuals should be ascribed to. Two opposing sides were established through these debates. The right-wing conservatives were defending heterosexual "family values" and attacking homosexuals as the major threat to traditional family values. On the other hand, the left-wing social democrats and liberals were defending LGB human rights. However, these debates were most often reduced to the issue of defending or attacking the "normality" of homosexuals, and failed to address the diversity of sexual and gender minorities, their specific human rights, and their need of protection as vulnerable and discriminated minorities.

The changes in visibility of the LGB community were accompanied with legal recognition of sexual minorities' human rights and protection against discrimination. Since 2003 ten laws have been adopted which include anti-discrimination clauses on sexual orientation.<sup>1</sup> These laws

<sup>1</sup> Electronic Media Act (NN 122/03) <<http://www.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeno/2003/1729.htm>>, Gender Equality Act (NN 116/03) <<http://www.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeno/2003/1584.htm>>.

do not recognize any specific sexual identity or particular need of the LGB population; they only point at characteristics (race, ethnicity, religion etc.) of socially vulnerable groups among which sexual orientation is mentioned as well. Croatian law does not recognize discrimination on the basis of gender, gender identity and gender expression in its legislature. Nevertheless, the legal protections of women's and men's rights are regulated by using the term sex.

In 2003 same-sex relationships were formally recognised in the Same-Sex Partnership Act. It grants only 2 out of 27 rights enjoyed by married heterosexual partners: the right to inheritance of half of the joint assets accrued by the couple and the duty of care for the partner. The law does not afford same-sex unions with the benefits of the national social, pension or health care system. Therefore the value of this law is symbolic rather than practical.

Bearing in mind the fact that public discussions have not shown any awareness of the vulnerability sexual minorities face and the need for their legal protection, we should trace the reasons for the adoption of this legislation somewhere else. Bagić and Kesić (2006) suggested that there are two important reasons for this: the political will of the Croatian government to harmonize its laws with European Union legislation, and the efforts of LGBT activists. Their continuous lobbying and advocacy were also supported by Croatian feminist and peace organizations.<sup>2</sup>

However, most of this legislation still functions at the declarative level. According to the Annual Report on the Status of Human Rights of Sexual and Gender Minorities in Croatia 2005 (Juras and Grđan 2006) the Same-Sex Partnership Act has been applied only once since its introduction in 2003:<sup>3</sup> in 2005 a gay couple, who wanted to move to Canada,

Labour Act (NN 137/04) <<http://www.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeno/2004/2415.htm>>, Law on Croatian Radio Television (NN 25/03) <<http://www.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeno/2003/0362.htm>>, Law on Government Officials (NN 92/05) <<http://www.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeno/2005/1831.htm>>, Law on Scholarship and Higher Education (NN 123/03) <<http://www.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeno/2003/1742.htm>>, Media Act (NN 59/04) <<http://www.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeno/2004/1324.htm>>, Penal Act Modifications and Supplements (NN 111/03, NN 105/04, NN 71/06) <<http://www.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeno/2006/1706.htm>>, <<http://www.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeno/2004/2026.htm>>, <<http://www.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeno/2003/1496.htm>>, Same-Sex Partnership Act (NN 116/03) <<http://www.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeno/2003/1584.htm>> and Schoolbook Standard (NN 63/03) <<http://www.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeno/2003/0749.htm>> (12 September 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Since 2002 Lesbian Group Kontra (Zagreb), Lesbian Organization LORI (Rijeka) and Iskorak—Organisation Centre for the Rights of Sexual and Gender Minorities (Zagreb) have been advocating and lobbying for LGBT human rights together with Woman's Room (Zagreb), Croatian Women's Network (national network of women's organizations) and Peace Studies Institute (Zagreb).

<sup>3</sup> The report was compiled by the Team for Legal Changes of Iskorak and Kontra, which is the common body of Iskorak and Lesbian group Kontra.

registered in order to regulate their property rights and immigration papers. Also in 2005, the first ever judgement was passed by a Croatian court in respect of a homosexual victim: the accused, who had threatened a homosexual person, was convicted and given a suspended sentence of one year imprisonment. Team for Legal Changes also reported that regional police officers seriously violated human rights of sexual minorities. Police officers refused to protect victims from violence, failed to recognize the homophobic character of violence and rejected cooperation with LGBT activists. Additionally, according to the Team, victims were afraid of stigmatization which prevented them from reporting homophobic violence. Furthermore, as the Report suggests, lesbians, gays and bisexuals are not aware of their rights, or of ways to exercise these rights. Therefore most cases have not been reported to the police (Juras and Grđan 2006).

There are several reasons for the poor functioning of the anti-discrimination legislation, including the opportunistic stance of the Croatian government with a view to join the European Union rather than a policy to advance human rights of sexual minorities; the lack of knowledge and awareness of existing anti-discrimination legislation; the absence of realistic social representation of LGB people in the media and in public discourse. However, the most salient reason is probably the fear and mistrust of lesbians, gays and bisexuals towards police, the court system and society as a whole as they fear that they could be repeatedly violated and stigmatized.

Public opinion surveys show that there is a strong division in views about homosexuality. For example, according to a public opinion poll conducted by the Puls Agency in 2002,<sup>4</sup> 47% of respondents would make friends with homosexual persons, while 50% would not. 41% of them believed that the rights of homosexual persons are endangered. About 39% of respondents would also grant the right of same-sex marriage (Palašek, Bagić, and Čepić 2002). Similarly, according to the findings of the Henda Agency in 2005 66% of persons, who are in charge of making business decisions in 202 Croatian companies, replied “no,” when asked whether they would hire a homosexual person who is out (Henda Agency 2005). Based on these findings it is rather questionable to which extent the existing laws can protect sexual minorities. Obviously there is a clear discrepancy between the theory of legislation and the practice of the everyday life experiences of lesbians, gays and bisexuals in Croatia. On the one hand, their rights are formally recognized and protected,

<sup>4</sup> A representative sample of 600 persons was surveyed.

on the other, there is an evident public unease about homosexuality and there are strong homophobic attitudes towards homosexuals. With this discrepancy in mind, we wanted to explore the “true meaning” of LGB everyday life experiences and focus on the ways lesbians, gays and bisexuals handle their sexual minority identities within the heteronormative Croatian society.

#### THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF STIGMA

Since theories of stigma discuss the experiences of undervalued social minority groups and social interaction patterns used by their members, we decided to take these theories as a frame of reference for our study on LGB people’s everyday life experiences. The following sections will provide a short overview of influential social psychological and sociological models of stigma, ranging from Erving Goffman’s classic discussions on stigma (1963) to contemporary models of stigma proposed by Link and Phelan (2001) and Major and O’Brien (2005).

Goffman (1963, 13) defined stigma as “an attribute that is really discrediting,” but he also emphasized that stigma is inherent in interactions between the stigmatized and the stigmatizing persons. The shift of focus from the attributes of the stigmatized persons to the context in which these interactions take place is also evident in Major and O’Brien’s (2005, 395) proposal that stigma “does not reside in the person but in a social context,” and that “it is relationship- and context-specific.” Link and Phelan (2001, 367) redefined and extended this concept by pointing out that stigma includes processes like labelling, negative stereotyping, exclusion, and discrimination. Accordingly power relations and disparity are essential for the comprehension of the nature and reproduction of stigma, stigmatized individuals and communities.

It can be seen that the definition of stigma has become broader through time. Instead of pointing to the devaluated characteristics of persons or a social group, stigma is now referred to as a process that encompasses the value system and its mechanisms of control, together with the dynamics between the stigmatized and those who stigmatize. In this way stigma and stigmatization became synonyms.

The key question which is of interest here is how stigmatized persons live their everyday lives and which mechanisms they employ to cope with their stigma. Stigmatized people are aware of their stigmatized status in society. Crocker and her colleagues (Crocker 1999; Crocker, Major, and Steele 1998) argue that members of stigmatized groups develop collective representations, i.e. shared beliefs that include their understanding

of the reasons why their group occupies the specific position in the social hierarchy, awareness that the others stereotype and do not respect their group, and recognition that they could become victims of discrimination. Discrimination is also addressed in the work of Major and O'Brien (2005, 396) who suggest that the mechanisms of stigmatization include discrimination and negative treatment, emphasizing its negative effects on the social status, psychological well-being and physical health of the stigmatized people.

Given all the negative consequences of stigmatization, the question is how stigmatized people manage to live with their stigma. This greatly depends upon the type of stigmatized attribute that the individual carries; some are visible and evident, while some are not easily identifiable. People whose stigma is not evident on the spot can conceal the information about their stigma and try to pass "as normal" (cf. Goffman 1963). Goffman referred to people whose stigma is obvious or known as "discredited persons," while naming those whose stigma is not known or evident "discreditable persons." Visibility is an element of the information control which influences the choice of behaviour strategy stigmatized persons can employ. Less visible stigmas enable stigmatized persons to "pass as normal" or to create enough space for negotiation about revealing their stigmatized identity. Greater visibility, on the other hand, carries a threat of being rejected and hurt, while at the same time it offers the stigmatized person better chances to be fully accepted as a human being.

Besides visibility, Goffman discussed other strategies of information control, including different ways in which persons can reveal or hide their stigmatized identity: a person can voluntarily disclose her/his stigmatized status "thereby radically transforming his situation from that of an individual with information to manage to that of an individual with uneasy social situations to manage, from that of a discreditable person to that of a discredited one" (Goffman 1963, 123). During numerous social contacts, stigmatized persons have to decide how to manage information about their stigmatized attribute: to tell or not to tell, to lie or not to lie, and "to whom, how and where" (Goffman 1963, 57).

Although stigmatized people have to face various difficulties in life that others do not, it would be incorrect to portray them as passive and helpless: they can confront stigmatization constructively by actively redefining the meaning of their experiences as members of a stigmatized community (Oyserman and Swim 2001). In this way they can achieve positive outcomes, rather than just avoiding the negative ones. According to Oyserman and Swim (2001) the best way to study stigma is to take

an insider's perspective and to examine the experiences of stigmatized people from their point of view. In this context the insider's perspective can help researchers to better understand the ways stigmatized people construct their identity and the strategies they use to cope with stigma.

These concepts of stigma and methods of stigma management were applied to a range of stigmatized groups. In this paper we would like to examine to what extent these concepts can be applied to sexual minorities; to what extent lesbians, gays and bisexual persons in Croatia are stigmatized and how they manage stigma in their everyday lives. In order to examine the nature and consequences of stigmatization of homosexual and bisexual people and their stigma management we gathered information about their self-perception of visibility as homosexuals or bisexuals, the strategies of managing information about their sexual orientation, and about violence that LGB people face because of their sexual orientation.

#### THE RESEARCH

The survey of the LGB population was conducted in three Croatian cities: Zagreb, Rijeka and Osijek at the end of 2005. We managed to reach the participants using the chain referral method which is used for researching sensitive issues and "hard to reach" populations (Penrod et al. 2003). The procedure is based upon defining the size and features of the desired sample, the selection of location where the research will be conducted, and the choice of the *locators*. These are members of the studied population who can trace other participants through serial referral, in order to expand the research area outside one's own social network. Respondents, after being asked for informed consent, completed the anonymous questionnaire individually.

A total of 202 participants took part in the research, 101 of these were men (50%) and 98 were women (48.5%). The sample also included one (female-to-male) transsexual person and two gender-unidentified persons. 55.1% of female respondents identified themselves as lesbians, and 43.9% as bisexual. 81.2% of male respondents identified themselves as gay, and 16.8% as bisexual. Average age of respondents was 30 (median: 28), ranging from 15 to 60 years of age. 92.6% of respondents were from Zagreb or other larger cities (mostly Rijeka and Osijek), while only 7.4% came from small towns or villages. 56.4% of respondents had completed secondary school, 39.1% had gained a 2-year HND (higher professional degree) or a university degree, while 4.5% had only completed elementary education. Due to the specific methodology of collecting data, people who are not

out as homosexuals or bisexuals and whose social networks are closed and isolated were less likely to be included in the sample. Some of the LGB people contacted refused to participate in the research because they were afraid of disclosing their personal life. For these reasons the results can only be generalized with caution to the LGB population of the regions where the research was carried out.

Instruments that were used for the purpose of this article included the following: *Self-perceived visibility*,<sup>5</sup> measured with the Likert type question "How likely do you think it is that people who do not know you recognize your sexual orientation?";<sup>6</sup> *Disclosure of sexual orientation scale* (Pikić and Jugović 2006) consisting of five questions which attempt to measure respondents' awareness of the knowledge their family members (mother, father, siblings), friends, co-workers or peers have of their sexual orientation;<sup>7</sup> *Concealment of sexual orientation scale* (Pikić and Jugović 2006), a Likert type scale consisting of statements assessing the prevalence of correction of appearance and behaviour in accordance with heteronormativity, concealment of sexual orientation, avoiding topics related to one's own homo- or bisexuality, or homo- and bisexuality in general, and topics relating to the Croatian LGBT community and movement in order to avoid potential unease, discrimination or violence in social interactions;<sup>8</sup> *Incidents of violence scale* (Pikić and Jugović 2006) containing 19 items measuring the frequency of violent incidents that persons could have experienced due to their sexual orientation:<sup>9</sup> these incidents of violence were divided into four categories: economic, psychological, physical and sexual violence. Participants were also asked whether they had heard of any LGBT person, whom they did not know personally, but about whom they knew that they had experienced physical violence in Croatia due to their sexual orientation.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Self-perceived visibility is one's own perception of the probability that one's sexual orientation could be recognized by other people.

<sup>6</sup> Participants' answers ranged on the scale from 1 (not likely at all) to 5 = (very likely).

<sup>7</sup> Responses, related to the parents' knowledge of their child's sexual orientation, range on a scale from 1 (I am sure (s)he does not know) to 4 (I am sure (s)he does know). Responses, related to other categories of people, range on a scale from 1 (I am sure that no one knows) to 6 (I am sure all of them know). All questions offer the answer "not applicable" as well.

<sup>8</sup> The scale range from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Cronbach alpha coefficient for the whole scale is  $\alpha = .90$ .

<sup>9</sup> The scale range from 0 (never) to 1 (once), 2 (twice) and 3 (three times or more).

<sup>10</sup> Available answers were: 1 = "No," 2 = "Yes, I heard about one case" and 3 = "Yes, I heard about several cases."



COMING OUT AND STIGMA MANAGEMENT

Corrigan and Mathews argue that “the mark that signals the stigma of homosexuality is not readily transparent” (2003, 237). On the other hand, if a person does not have the appearance that society expects from his/her gender, it is more likely for them to be perceived as homo- or bisexual. Our findings show that the majority of LGB people surveyed (52.7%) believe that it is very unlikely or even impossible for their sexual orientation to be recognized, 26.9% cannot estimate, while 20.4% were of the opinion that their sexual orientation is likely or even very likely to be recognized.

If our respondents have realistic perceptions of their visibility as homosexuals or bisexuals in public, and given that a majority of them consider themselves unrecognisable as such, we can presume that they are not by default—in Goffman’s terms—discredited persons. They can choose how to manage information about their sexual orientation: they can decide whether to engage in or avoid discussions about their emotional or sexual life, to what extent they would like to participate in activities of the LGB community, or show affection toward their same-sex partners in public. According to our results lesbians, gays and bisexual persons are open about their sexual orientation to various extents depending on the different categories of people they interact with. For example, personal friends are much more likely to be aware of the relevant sexual orientation than any colleagues at school or at work (see table 1).

TABLE 1

	Mean	Standard deviation	%						r
			1	2	3	4	5	6	
Siblings	3.77	2.005	19.8	15.0	13.2	9.6	5.4	37.1	.168*
Friends	4.56	1.264	1.5	4.5	10.0	39.3	10.0	34.8	.173*
Co-workers/ Peers	3.37	1.525	13.6	17.2	19.7	30.8	5.1	13.6	.265**

NOTE: DO YOUR SIBLINGS/FRIENDS/CO-WORKERS/PEERS KNOW ABOUT YOUR SEXUAL ORIENTATION? (1 = I AM SURE THAT NO ONE KNOWS, 5 = I AM SURE THAT ALL OF THEM KNOW) AND CORRELATION OF THOSE QUESTIONS WITH VISIBILITY OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION (R). PEARSON’S COEFFICIENT OF CORRELATION (R) IS MARKED WITH \* WHEN SIGNIFICANT AT P < 0.05 AND WITH \*\* WHEN SIGNIFICANT AT P < 0.01.

These results are not surprising since people choose their friends, but cannot choose peers and co-workers at the workplace. In addition, they might not have come out at the workplace, because they fear that disclosure could contribute to discrimination at work or even losing a job.



Mothers were more familiar with the sexual orientation of the respondents than the fathers (see table 2). This could be explained by mothers' greater involvement in interaction with children compared to fathers', and mothers being more often available to children (Lamb et al. 1988, quoted in Maccoby 1999) which is in line with traditional gender roles of women as child bearers and men as breadwinners. Additionally, fathers are persistent in expecting feminine behaviour from their daughters and masculine behaviour from their sons, while mothers tend to treat their male and female children equally (Jacklin, DiPietro, and Maccoby 1984). Besides that, women seem to have less homophobic attitudes than men (Parmač 2005; Herek 1987). Given all that, children are more open to their mothers, as they expect more understanding and support from them.

TABLE 2

	Mean	Standard deviation	1	2	3	4	r
Mother	2.78	1.146	17.7%	25.4%	17.7%	39.2%	.133
Father	2.26	1.143	33.7%	27.6%	17.2%	21.5%	.080

NOTE: DO YOUR PARENTS KNOW ABOUT YOUR SEXUAL ORIENTATION? (1 = I AM SURE S/HE DOES NOT KNOW, 4 = I AM SURE S/HE KNOWS) AND CORRELATION OF THOSE QUESTIONS WITH VISIBILITY OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION (R).

A part of the homosexual and bisexual population builds closer relationships with their friends than with their immediate family members. Friends can provide support in everyday life situations and especially in those which are difficult for LGB people. Lesbians, gays and bisexuals who experienced violence, more often sought help from their friends, rather than from their family (Pikić and Jugović 2006). Additionally, in our sample, there were only 6% of those whose friends were unfamiliar with their sexual orientation as opposed to 43.2% and 61.3% of mothers and fathers respectively who were not familiar with their child's sexual orientation.

Despite the fact that a majority of respondents believed that their sexual orientation could not be recognized, their behaviour still might be discerned. In order to prevent such disclosure and to avoid uneasiness, discrimination or violence, lesbians, gays and bisexuals have employed diverse strategies of concealment. The strategy most frequently used was avoidance of talking about one's own emotional or sexual life. 37.2% of respondents have used this often or always (see table 3). Some other strategies such as keeping quiet about attitudes, thoughts and feelings about homosexuality/bisexuality in general or about the LGBT commu-

nity in Croatia have been used by less than 15% percent of respondents. Since homosexuality is no longer a *taboo* in Croatia, public support for LGB rights can give confidence to LGB people to express their attitudes more freely, despite the fact that the public discussion about homosexuality is conducted in *pro* and *contra* terms.

TABLE 3

	Mean	Standard deviation	%					r
			1	2	3	4	5	
I try to make my appearance conform with what society would expect from my gender.	2.30	1.305	37.3	22.9	20.9	10.0	9.0	-.140*
I behave in the way it is expected from my gender.	2.34	1.240	32.3	27.4	20.4	13.4	6.5	-.084
I keep my sexual orientation secret.	2.96	1.180	11.9	25.4	28.4	23.9	10.4	-.221**
I avoid speaking about my emotional or sexual life.	2.94	1.292	16.1	24.1	22.6	23.6	13.6	-.159*
I give a wrong impression about my love life (e.g. I present my boyfriend/girlfriend as a friend).	2.00	1.312	54.0	16.8	11.4	10.9	6.9	-.187**
I keep quiet about my attitudes, thoughts and feelings about homosexuality/bisexuality in general.	2.11	1.147	38.6	29.7	16.8	11.4	3.5	-.189**
I keep quiet about my attitudes, thoughts and feelings about LGBT movement, community and persons in Croatia.	2.06	1.151	42.1	26.2	18.8	8.9	4.0	-.097

NOTE: STRATEGIES USED TO AVOID UNEASE, DISCRIMINATION AND/OR VIOLENCE (1 = NEVER, 5 = ALWAYS) TOGETHER WITH THEIR CORRELATION WITH VISIBILITY OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION (R). PEARSON'S COEFFICIENT OF CORRELATION (R) IS MARKED WITH \* WHEN SIGNIFICANT AT P < 0.05 AND WITH \*\* WHEN SIGNIFICANT AT P < 0.01.

Lesbians, gays and bisexuals do not have many social settings in Croatia where they can socialise. Outside Zagreb, Rijeka and Osijek there is no LGB infrastructure. In Zagreb there are two organizations and several informal groups offering discussions, sport activities and choir singing. LGB people can also socialise at places like libraries, night clubs and saunas and in events such as the Zagreb Pride, the Queer Zagreb Festival and occasional exhibitions.

Regular or temporary social settings, created by the LGBT initiatives and organizations, provide lesbians, gays and bisexuals in Zagreb with more opportunity to connect with other LGB people compared to other regions in Croatia. There are only a few activities in Rijeka and Osijek, such as Zagreb's Queer Festival occasional exhibition tours to Osijek and Rijeka. In Rijeka there is also a lesbian organization with its reach-out activities to the lesbian community. In all other parts of Croatia everyday life of LGB people is limited to virtual communication through web forums, chat rooms on web-portals and web-sites, and socialising within small, informal groups.

Our findings indicated that only 0.5% of the respondents have refrained from visiting LGBT places (gay clubs, LGBT organizations and groups) in Croatia in order to avoid unease, discrimination or violence. For the same reasons, 20.9% avoided public LGBT manifestations in Croatia (e.g. Queer Zagreb or Zagreb Pride), while 43.8% did not kiss or hold hands with their same-sex partner in public (see table 4).

TABLE 4

	LGBT places	LGBT manifestations	Kissing/holding hands in public
Yes.	71.8%	33.3%	24.4%
No, I do not, in order to avoid unease, discrimination and/or violence.	0.5%	20.9%	43.8%
No, I do not, but for some other reason.	27.7%	45.8%	31.8%

NOTE: DO YOU VISIT LGBT PLACES/ATTEND PUBLIC GLBT MANIFESTATIONS/ HOLD HANDS AND KISS IN PUBLIC?

It is clear that LGB people feel more secure inside the clubs and organizations than in public places or at manifestations where there is a greater possibility of stigmatization. Furthermore, people who live outside Zagreb do not have much opportunity to visit these places or participate in manifestations. This is why 27.7% of respondents do not visit LGBT places, while 45.8% do not attend LGBT manifestations for other reasons than fear of unease, discrimination or violence.

Why do lesbians, gays and bisexual persons engage in some behaviour that could reveal their sexual orientation, while at the same time they avoid others? According to Major and O'Brien's (2005) stigma is relationship- and context-specific, therefore LGB people make different decisions regarding disclosure of their sexual orientation according to the

type of social setting or the specific person they are interacting with. They probably regard sharing information about their sexual orientation with their friends as more important than sharing it with their co-workers. Lesbians, gays and bisexuals can also hypothesise that discussing homosexuality in general would not reveal their sexual orientation as, for instance, talking about one's own sexual or emotional life would. They can additionally consider kissing with the same-sex partner in the streets as more risky than going out to a gay club. All of these points out that LGB people choose how to manage a given situation according to their appraisals of the situations or persons.

In order to understand how the concealment and disclosure depend on the perceived visibility of stigma, we examined the correlations between perceived visibility of stigma and measures of concealment and disclosure of one's sexual orientation. We hypothesized that, paraphrasing Goffman, people who think that their sexual orientation is less visible can control the information about their sexual orientation to a greater extent than those who believe that their sexual orientation is more visible. Our findings supported this hypothesis; lesser visibility tended to be correlated with more use of concealment strategies (see table 3). People with a lower degree of visibility tended to be less open to brothers or sisters, friends and co-workers (see table 1). On the other hand, there was no correlation between self-perceived visibility and openness to parents (see table 2). The fact, that parents do not recognize their child's homosexuality could be partly attributed to the point that until recently homosexuality was a taboo, so it was less likely for them to be informed about it or to be in touch with an openly homosexual or bisexual person. Where they did recognize or assume that their child might be homosexual or bisexual, they had problems accepting that fact. Unlike friends and siblings who were more likely to talk about homosexuality, parents tried to avoid discussing it or asking their child about it. Generational gap and economic dependence of children could be additional reasons why children do not reveal their sexual orientation to their parents.

It seems that homosexual and bisexual people with a lesser self-perceived visibility can "pass" as heterosexuals in more social settings compared with people who assume that their sexual orientation is more recognisable. While Goffman claims that people whose stigma is visible do not have a possibility of choosing whether to conceal the information about it or not, it is still debatable whether visibility can be chosen. Do LGB persons have control over the visibility of their sexual orientation in public? We argued before that they are not passive in the process of choosing the strategies of concealment and disclosure; on the contrary,

they actively choose to what extent they will be visible. Choosing to be visible becomes one's strategy of information control, in this case, of disclosure.

### HOMOPHOBIC VIOLENCE

Garnets, Herek, and Levy (1990) argue that the gay community is victimised by every single attack on a homosexual or bisexual person. Such violence creates a climate of fear because of which lesbians, gays and bisexual persons feel the urge to hide their sexual orientation. According to our findings 93% of respondents knew about at least one or more people, not known to them, who had experienced physical violence in Croatia due to their homo- or bisexuality. Given that the awareness of the existence of violence against lesbians, gays and bisexuals is common to almost all the respondents, it is not surprising that a considerable part of them hides their sexual orientation or avoids showing affection in public.

Since some models of stigma suggest that negative treatment and discrimination can be experienced due to one's stigmatized status (Major and O'Brien 2005; Link and Phelan 2001; Crocker, Major, and Steele 1998), we examined whether and to which extent lesbians, gays and bisexuals in Croatia experience violence because of their sexual orientation. According to our categorisation of violence, we divided the sample into three subgroups: the persons who did not experience violence, persons who experienced verbal violence, and persons who experienced assaults and deprivation of liberty.<sup>11</sup> In the period between 2002 and 2005 one third of respondents had experienced assaults and deprivation of liberty, 18.3% had experienced verbal violence, while 48.7% of respondents had not experienced any ill treatment because of their sexual orientation.<sup>12</sup>

A man began to follow me at the gay cruising area. He continued following me even after I left that place, and then he approached me and started to insult me. I felt terrible, scared and ashamed. A bus came and I got on, while he stayed there (Male respondent aged 39).

After the Gay Pride I did not participate in, a young man stopped me in the street and

<sup>11</sup> Verbal violence includes all verbal incidents: threats, insults, blackmail and unwanted sexual suggestions. Assaults and deprivation of liberty include various physical and sexual assaults, stalking, destruction of property, being thrown out of one's home, being deprived of physical safety and control of movement.

<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed overview of findings about different forms of violence experienced by LGB persons see Pikić and Jugović (2006).

asked me if I had participated in the Gay parade. I said I hadn't, but he said that I looked as if I had. I told him that that was his problem, and after that he punched me in the head. I fell and lost consciousness for a moment. A friend helped me to get up and we left. I felt bad and humiliated. I kept looking behind my back on the street for days, fearing a repeat attack or meeting that person again (Male respondent aged 29).

Following experiences of sexual orientation related violence, LGB persons may start associating their homosexual or bisexual identity with feelings of fear and lack of safety (Garnets, Herek, and Levy 1990). Homophobic violence leaves traces not only in the feelings and beliefs but also in the behaviour of the victims. According to our results, those who have already experienced violence employ different concealment strategies: respondents who had experienced verbal violence hid their sexual orientation to the least extent, and they rarely avoided talking about their emotional life compared with persons who had not experienced violence, and who had experienced severe physical violence (see table 5).

Accordingly, three groups of respondents can be distinguished. The first group includes those who have experienced verbal violence as well as being characterised by not hiding their sexual orientation and openly expressing their views on homosexuality and the LGBT movement. In this case it appears that these characteristics may have contributed to their having experienced verbal violence and vice versa. Those who are cautious and have not experienced violence belong to a second group. They most probably avoid violence by the simple act of hiding their sexual orientation. The third group includes those who hide their sexual orientation, and have experienced severe physical violence. We cannot know to what extent they had been open about homosexuality before they experienced violence. However it is likely that they hide their sexual orientation because they have experienced violence and/or fear to experience it again.

TABLE 5

	Never experienced violence (N = 96)		Experienced verbal violence (N = 36)		Experienced assaults and/or limitations of freedom (N = 65)		p
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
I try to make my appearance conform to what society would expect from my gender.	2.49	1.390	1.94	1.145	2.28	1.244	> .05
I behave in the way it is expected from my gender.	2.48	1.328	2.17	1.056	2.25	1.199	> .05
I keep my sexual orientation secret.	3.22a	1.178	2.36b	1.073	2.86a	1.130	< .01
I avoid speaking of my emotional or sexual life.	3.24a	1.301	2.33b	1.095	2.88a	1.279	< .01
I give a wrong impression about my love life (e.g. I present my boyfriend/girlfriend as a friend).	2.23a	1.395	1.50b	1.000	1.91ab	1.247	< .01
I keep quiet about my attitudes, thoughts and feelings about homosexuality/bisexuality in general.	2.34a	1.247	1.75b	1.025	2.02ab	1.008	< .05
I keep quiet about my attitudes, thoughts and feelings about LGBT movement, community and persons in Croatia.	2.32a	1.244	1.64b	0.867	1.95ab	1.082	< .01

NOTE: DIFFERENT SEXUAL ORIENTATION CONCEALMENT STRATEGIES IN THREE GROUPS WITH DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES OF SEXUAL ORIENTATION VIOLENCE BETWEEN 2002 AND 2005. THE KRUSKAL-WALLIS H TEST WAS EMPLOYED FOR TESTING THE SIGNIFICANCE OF DIFFERENCES AMONG GROUPS WITH DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES OF VIOLENCE DUE TO THE UNEQUAL SIZE OF THE THREE GROUPS. IN ORDER TO EXAMINE WHICH GROUPS ARE DIFFERENT IN RELATION TO OTHER GROUPS, WE USED THE MANN-WHITNEY'S U TEST. THERE IS STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE AT  $P < 0.05$  BETWEEN MEANS LABELLED WITH "A" AND "B" WHILE MEANS LABELLED WITH "AB" DO NOT DIFFER FROM THOSE LABELLED WITH "A" AND "B."

Our data reflects violence experienced in the last four years prior to the research, while the answers on concealment strategies are related to the time when the survey was conducted. Thus we cannot draw conclusions about dynamic relations between violence and the application of concealment strategies. In order to clarify the processes affecting victims' behaviour, and especially their decisions about hiding their sexual



orientation longitudinal studies and/or in-depth interview studies need to be conducted with people who have experienced homophobic violence.

### CONCLUSION

In this paper we applied different theoretical concepts of stigma juxtaposing them with our empirical findings of the experiences of lesbians, gays and bisexual persons in Croatia. Discussing our findings we have shown that Goffman's concept of information control can be applied to the LGB community in Croatia even some forty years after the model of stigma management was formulated. It can also be seen that members of the LGB community are aware that they could become victims of discrimination or violence, as Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998) suggested when discussing the collective representations of the stigmatized communities. In line with Crocker and her colleagues (1998), our results show that a significant number of respondents avoided talking about their private life or did not kiss or hold hands with their same-sex partners in public because of concerns that they could experience unease, discrimination or violence due to an open manifestation of their sexual orientation. This caution is evidently reasonable when one is a member of a stigmatized community. According to Major and O'Brien (2005), discrimination and negative treatment are mechanisms of stigmatization and our findings support their thesis given that a significant part of our respondents had experienced violence just because somebody had assumed them to be bisexual or homosexual.

Having in mind that over 50% of our respondents experienced some type of violence we can conclude that damaging consequences of the stigmatization of sexual minorities are present in Croatian society, where the strength of heteronormativity indicates conservative social tendencies. As long as it remains that way, everyday life experiences of LGB people will be confined within the circle of stigmatization, strategies of sexual orientation disclosure or concealment and their consequences. Our research findings indicate that lesbians, gays and bisexuals do not feel free or secure in their family environment as they hide their emotional life from their parents. A majority of them conceals sexual orientation in the workplace because of fear of discrimination. Contrary to heterosexuals who can talk openly about their romantic relationships in daily conversations, homosexuals and bisexuals do not have the "luxury" of sharing information about their loved ones. LGB people need to think twice about public manifestations of their relationships since the streets are not safe for them. On the other hand, heterosexuals take these mani-

festations, such as holding hands in the streets, for granted. Lesbians, gays and bisexuals avoid showing signs of emotional bonds, affection and care toward their partners in public places because they fear that somebody could harm them. In spite of all these problems, lesbians, gays and bisexuals in Croatia face their challenges and grasp their opportunities to build communities and create spaces where they can feel safe and free.

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