



Creating an identity – safe spaces and events in LGBTQIA+ community: A literature review

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Abstract

Through history, people who are part of sexual minorities were marginalized, abused and for a long time had no or little rights. In order to discover the way that public and semi-public spaces are organized through sexuality, I reviewed the literature on this topic. The idea of queer spaces is quite new and its present how a space, public or semi-public can be, or become safe, inclusive and appropriate for all the people, including the LGBTQIA+. For this literature review I identified 44 articles and books about safe spaces and how to create them and about events, such as prides and the way that those two concepts shape the identity of LGBTQIA+ individuals and the community.

Keywords

Sexual orientation, LGBTQIA+, culture, safe space, identity, literature review

Introduction

All around the world, gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgender people felt even once misunderstood, unsafe, like they do not belong anywhere, like the black sheep of the family. Moreover, in Middle East and African countries they are targets of violence, imprisonment or death sentences (Nadal *et al.*, 2016).

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Safe spaces were needed and wanted in a segregated society that criminalized homosexuality and thought that sexual minorities were deviants. Even though today LGBT+ people are more integrated, and they are treated as human beings, they have their places where they can be authentic and feel safer.

The history of the marches and events for LGBTQAI+ rights stand in the Stonewall riots, when queer people acted and didn't accept the abuses from the police anymore. They responded the aggressions with protests, and their voices became stronger. Since 1969, transgender people, gays, lesbians, and bisexuals fought for their rights and for their place in society.

What I would like to address in this literature review is the importance of welcoming spaces, Prides and cultural events in a community that is more or less still in the closet and quite invisible and how those actions and spaces can contribute to the individual and the community identity.

Methodology

For this paper I have used advanced search on three sources: on the journals of Sage Publication, on HOLLIS, and on Google Scholar for books and articles. I have search for words like safe spaces, culture, LGBTQAI+ in the title and in the keywords and I received over 1000 articles and book. In order to scope out the relevant sociological researches, I got through the abstracts and contents, and I selected 44 articles and books.

Each of the articles was read and I coded them accordingly, and after that I classified them by the topics, and perspectives. The methodology of the selected articles is qualitative as well as quantitative, offering a more complex perspective on this matter.

Since in Romania there is little research on this topic – I found one article about Bucharest, wrote by Romanian authors, I looked at the facts presented especially in North America and Western Europe, but I also found articles from around the world. Regarding the findings, I would like to answer questions as those presented below:

- How events, like Prides can modify the perspective of LGBTQAI+ people so they can feel safer?
- How the safe places like bars, community centres, alternative cultural spaces shape the community and its networks and helps to create a collective identity?

Literature review

The theme of social space and how LGBTQAI+ people negotiate their place is quite new. The academic research on this topic started along with the gender studies and feminist theory, and the idea of intersectional approach (Battle and Bennett, 2007).

Another theory presented in 9 out of 44 articles is the queer theory. This theory emerged in 1990s and challenged the norms, claiming that people cannot fit perfectly on the binary system, and everybody could choose their place in a continuum (University of Illinois, 2018).

“A queer theory, reveals how social relations are arranged spatially, how queerness disrupts and reorders these relations by not following the accepted paths, and how a politics of disorientation puts other objects within reach, those that might, at first glance, seem awry” (Myketiak, 2009). Queer theory can be used on a variety of perspectives, offering a multi- and pluri-disciplinarity to the research topic.

Every day we interact with different people, in the public space, at the workplace, at school or university, at bars and clubs. Sometimes those interactions are hard even for the most ordinary people, furthermore for the people who are not conforming to the norms.

Those day to day interactions were theorized by Erving Goffman as symbolic interactionism (Roe, Joseph and Middleton, 2010).

In terms of symbolic interactions, Anthony Cohen formulated a theory about communities. His view on a term as comprehensive as community is that there is not mandatory for somebody to identify themselves as a part of a community, but it is enough to believe and feel that you belong to it (1985).

According to researchers in domains as sociology, geography, urbanism, public spaces should have the ability to accommodate as many functions as it can and also to create friendly places for everybody (Tonnelat, 2010).

Also, despite the image of space that could seem coherent, scholars “have shown that space is rather negotiable and can encompass conflicts and splits. These conflicts construct meanings and open up new ways of (re)constructing and being in space” (Hartal, 2017).

The main topics covered in those articles are safe spaces and how to create them in public institutions, such as schools, but also on streets: one of the prime concepts is inclusiveness (Barber, 2007; Vaccaro *et al.*, 2012; Doan, 2015; Sadowski, 2016; Hartal, 2017). It is also talked about the manner that events, as Prides are used as a tool to unite the LGBTQAI+ community and how other activities in these spaces can help LGBTQAI+ people to identify and to feel like they are part of something bigger. Also, the papers are a highlight the interactions between Queer people and those who doesn't identify as LGBTQAI+.

Unlike other communities, the LGBT+ one is heterogenic, and it cannot be located on a specific place. There are gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people in all social structures. Because the prominent perspective of the LGBTQAI+ is that their behaviour is unnatural, or it creates repulsion, they needed special meeting spaces, for they do not felt safe in public.

Also, a LGBTQAI+ person could be member of other marginalized minorities or communities, making her or him the target of multiple discrimination and stigma.

The fact that the LGBTQAI+ community needs special places to meet and feel that they can be who they want to be is a consequence of the discrimination of sexual minorities and the views that their love is illegal.

As it is presented by Stéphane Tonnelat, public space could be seen in a historic perspective or as we see it today. Before, public spaces were describing open spaces, such as street, parks, squares, outdoor spaces, but nowadays, as an evolution of public /

private sectors public spaces could also mean places accessible to the public, not only those managed by the state (2010).

For the majority of people, public spaces seem harmless and they do not have to adjust on the streets, but LGBTQAI+ people often feel like they have to be on guard, especially when they are with someone they love.

The way that we relate to the public space and how we feel about it, is dependent in someone's life, researchers have found (Sanschagrín, 2011).

Ghinea and Manea identify the need to demarcate the difference between space and place. Space is used more as an objective and general concept, while place is a personal and specific one (2014).

The stigma existent in the public space about the LGBTQAI+ community, determined queer people to create their own places. Those exists also today as bars, clubs, gay neighbourhoods, etc.

For example, Stonewall was a refuge, but this sacred place was brutalized by the police, because the stigma and the discrimination was structural (Croff *et al.*, 2017).

It is also shown that safe spaces are needed because the “rates of violence, disproportionate rates of suicide and substance abuse, high dropout rates, and overall alienation continue to affect the lives of LGBT people” (Fox and Ore, 2010).

One of the books of Doan Petra, tries to fill the gap between what was wrote before about development of queer spaces and what is the reality today. Also, he claims that the need of safe spaces for LGBTQAI+ was neglect (Doan, 2011).

A safe space, could influence the wellbeing of somebody; for example the idea of coming out in an inclusive and friendly place, or “being able to (publicly) show physical affection” (Formby, 2012).

Because of the stigma, at the beginning the gays were segregated from the heterosexuals. They had – and they still have – neighbourhoods, clubs, centres, etc. As the line between homosexual and heterosexual spaces became thinner, the use of the segregated spaces has diminished. So, 4 articles talk about gentrification and the effects of their decline. As the “special gayborhoods” disappear, LGBTQAI+ are moving in the areas of the inner city. This happens as LGBTQAI+ people became more visible and they are viewed with an open mind (Doan and Higgins, 2011; Hanhardt, 2013; Nash and Gorman-Murray, 2014; Doan, 2015).

As is mentioned by some researchers a rudimentary way to create a safe space is tolerance. Keleher and Smith conducted a quantitative research on the perspective on LGBTQAI+ community to see if people are tolerant (Keleher and Smith, 2012). LGBTQAI+ people are less likely to feel excluded if their “friends and families, teachers, and dedicated allies” are by their side (Vaccaro *et al.*, 2012).

As the society begun to be more open and LGBTQAI+ people obtained more rights, the line between gay places and ones for heterosexuals is thinner than it was before, and they are not that marginalize that much anymore – so the scholars researched the idea of heterosexual spaces versus homosexual ones.

The idea today is that those spaces and places should be inclusive with everybody.

“Dominant groups rarely need safe spaces. Members of these groups can experience comfort, pride, and security in many contexts and can avoid worrying about being interrogated or harmed by others solely because of their group membership” (Adams, 2018).

The same perspective is illustrated by Ghinea and Manea, as people from a majority does not think that they cannot be authentic in a bar, cannot hold hands or show affection to a love one on public, but LGBTQAI+ people are always in a negotiation with the people around so they don't bother (2014).

Another thing presented on the book “Planning and LGBTQ communities: the need for inclusive queer spaces” is that we need reflect “beyond queer space”, because the LGBTQAI+ community is not only about white gay men who live in closed neighborhood, but more diverse and the cities needs to develop in every corner, including the places of gay people (Doan, 2015).

With the same perspective, Doderer sees gender and space changeable and adaptable. The heterosexual world intertwines with gays, lesbians, bisexuals, queers and transgender people, and they have to create a balance (2011). Another way to expand the integration of LGBTQAI+ people is to encounter the discursive reputation of the landscapes or spaces (Gorman-Murray and Nash, 2017).

One of the papers, using the framework of Foucault theory of governmentality presents the use of public space as a public sex space. The author speaks about risks and idea of auto-surveillance in a mostly heterosexual space. It is also highlights the concept of bioregulation, which “encourages the creation of new gay practices, identities and geographies” (Anderson, 2018).

A tendency of gay people is to heteronormalize their spaces and places and also the events, such as Prides to be acceptable for most of the majority. Five articles discuss this situation and its implications.

In the articles it is point out the fact that people try to heterosexualize their places in order to fit and be tolerable (Browne and Bakshi, 2011), even though, the idea is to challenge the heteronormative structures and to develop alternatives, at the level of the family, school, work, city (Drucker, 2013; Goh, 2018).

One of the consequences of heteronormativity is the tendency of other gay people to exclude people from their community because they don't fit in the mould of what society want (Goh, 2018). LGBTQAI+ people could try to minimize the risks of discrimination and to protect themselves by trying to look “normal” (Formby and Marzetti, 2018).

As it is presented before, the idea is not to try to fit in what society may want, but to challenge it. So, as a solution to heteronormativity and homonormativity is to claim firmly a space. Adler and Brenner created 3 steps in order to claim a territory: “visibility - gay places, especially retail businesses and services run by and for gay people; community activity - fairs, block parties, street celebrations etc., some kind of public, collective affirmation of the people who live in the neighbourhood, even if it is only strolling out in the evening; organization - of businesses and residents to defend the neighbourhood's interests, relate to city government, financially support the community activities which

create and maintain the urban subculture, giving the neighbourhood its distinct character” (1992).

It was also observed that women tend to negotiate better spaces and to manage the places that they have occupied (Gibson and Macleod, 2012).

Safe spaces are not magical responses to all the stigma and discrimination that LGBTQAI+ people faces, but are an useful tool to create a calm environment for this people, but has become a key word for the climate of LGBTQAI+ (Fox and Ore, 2010).

Hartal identify five frames in order to create a safe space; those are fortification, anonymity, inclusiveness, separation for distinct identity groups, and control of unpredictability (2017).

A safe space is good both for sexual minorities and for their allies and can be in public or in private space (Johnston, 2016), and allow this people to look out for each other (Adams, 2018).

In many countries, included Romania there have been anti-bullying programs in schools and in universities, so that LGBTQAI+ students could feel safe in those institutions. Several articles talks about the necessity of safety in schools and how clubs and libraries could also help in the process (Rankin, 2005; Moe, Leggett and Perera-diltz, 2011; Coleman, 2016; Aycock, 2018)

There are also plenty study cases about specific campuses in United States of America about the degree of the safety of their minority students, as “to improve campus climates, there must be a space or spaces that allow for the natural expression and exploration of multiple identities” (Coleman, 2016). But LGBTQAI+ people are in every structure and lately is been researched also the climate on the workplace for a LGBTQAI+ person.

In general, it shows that at work, it is necessary to have three types of actions or interactions that will help people feel that they are part of a community: “endorsing, encountering, and engaging” (Garrett, Spreitzer and Bacevice, 2017). In the selected articles I found a systematic literature review about” the development of careers in LGBTQAI+ community that presents also the dynamics of interactions in the workplace” (McFadden, 2015)

Among findings as the growth of academic interest in LGBTQAI+ topics and in the management it presents the importance of human resources to know about those people and to help to create a better and productive workplace (McFadden, 2015).

Other research explored the relationship between labour and LGBTQAI+, through the participation with the organization Pride at Work, which help both in the labour movement and in the LGBTQAI+ movement (Kelly and Lubitow, 2015). Other spaces that are considered to be safe are bars and club. Croff et al. describes them as “safe havens” (2017).

Before it was legal, the parties happened at the houses of members of the community, but it also existed informal meeting places and underground clubs. Today as a consequence of the openness of the society, in some communities has been noticed that the number of gay bars have been reduce. In other communities it was the oposite (Croff et al., 2017).

Two of the articles, in the context of how safe are bars, talks about the massacre at the Pulse Nightclub (Croff *et al.*, 2017; Adams, 2018).

In a paper from Namibia it is presented the way that it was created a safe space as a resource centre, that it is used for information, and also for different cultural events (Swartz, 2006).

Prides are also places where people came outside to fight for their rights and to celebrate the victories. It is a place where you also want to feel and be safe. It has been observed that people who are part of two or more marginalized groups tend to be more vocal than the others (Battle and Bennett, 2007; Gibson and Macleod, 2012).

Spaces, public or semi-public are used for LGBTQIA+ people for a way to curdle the community through social events, cultural events, etc., and the LGBTQIA+ culture have expanded (Ghinea and Manea, 2014). Those cultural events help the community be together and offer comfort (Mundy, 2015). Regarding the Prides and cultural and social events that precede them, they started as riots and protests to fight for their rights

The fact that prides are viewed as parties or protests is observed also by Formby (2012). Pride is still a tool to the silenced ones and to the marginalized ones. Prides also bring people together, and for some of them it is the single time of the year when they come out to demand their rights. Prides creates a sense of community, helping and supporting individuals (Formby, 2012). Prides could be seen as an emotion and through it you can discover across culture and leadership (Ratcliff, Miller and Krolkowski, 2012).

To organize an event that big – in some cities – and to ensure that it will be safe for all the participants is a hard task. Nevertheless activists and volunteers examine all the possibilities and does not try only to organize around similarities, but also differences and they are using them as a cultural anchor (Ghaziani and Baldassarri, 2006)

Through events like Prides, the city landscape is reused, reconstructed and represented, creating an atmosphere for leisure and socialize (Caudwell and Browne, 2011).

Another paper about the way of creating an identity by prides applies the framework of the theory of “Pierre Bourdieu of class positioning and cultural capital to a case study of conflicts between the working class organizers of an urban LGBT pride celebration and the local gay press, gay government and gay professional community” (Ward, 2003).

Even Prides have become marketized, elitist at some point, and more of a parade, they have kept their spirit. They are still used as a tool for social change, to fight the abuses, to challenge the current situations (Ratcliff, Miller and Krolkowski, 2012).

On the same time, Prides can be a political tool for rights demands. They are still used as a protest march and in some places in the world is one of the single moments when the community is visible.

Also, they can create an environment for those who are in the closet and are afraid, or they have been victims of abuses because of their sexuality, or gender identity. Those marches are statements for LGBTQIA+ people that cannot be on the streets that they are not alone and someone is fighting for those who are silent too (McFarland Bruce, 2013).

Initially, as it was presented above, Pride was started by those who may seem invisible such as transgender women of colour, but today, it is shown that Prides are dominated by white gay men, who have resources, a high education, especially young. A research made in six European countries has come to the conclusion that the people that participate at Prides are not a relevant sample, and mostly is the elite. They also conclude that there are differences between the countries and elites (Peterson, Wahlström and Wennerhag, 2018).

Another problem with the Prides nowadays as it is documented on the articles is the fact that in the western countries, the march has become more of a parade, and different corporates come every year, together with the community to show their support.

Although this could look as a good thing, there are researches that found out that some queer groups are against it, because is trying to heteronormalize the pride and to move from values that have been set up in the first place (Peterson, Wahlström, & Wennerhag, 2018).

Conclusion

In conclusion, safe spaces and events such as Prides are a part of every LGBTQAI+ people and are necessary in an environment where people are still discriminated and abused due their sexual orientation and gender identity.

The idea of creating and identity came as a collective process, as we, as individuals collect different parts and experiences to create our own image. In the articles cited the perspectives are multiple, diverse, and contradictory – from radical opinions on Prides and queer spaces to mild views on those matters.

There are still gaps on this topic, but as researchers have showed, the interest in LGBTQAI+ issues is growing.

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