

Psychological Issues among Spanish Adolescents and Young People when Coming out of the Closet to Their Families

Abstract

Some social settings may make the process of ‘coming out’ more difficult for gay males and lesbian females, and the decision to do so may be even more problematic for adolescents and young people. As a result, some may choose to hide their sexual orientation, leading to emotional suffering. This study aims to analyse the differences in perceived stress, life satisfaction, happiness, and psychological distress experienced by both coming out and closeted young people and teens. The sample included a total of 228 Spanish young people aged 16-23 years old ($M = 19.69$, $S.D. = 1.81$) who identified themselves as gay or lesbian (73.2% women). The results of this study show that people in the closet show greater psychological distress (anxiety and depressive symptomatology) and perceived stress. Although perceived stress is positively related to psychological distress in both groups, the correlation is higher in the closeted group. This suggests that perceived stress has more serious consequences on the mental health of the closeted group than of the ‘coming out’ group. To sum up, the results show the importance of family support for gay and lesbian young people.

Keywords: well-being, lesbian, gay, coming out, sexual orientation, young people.

Introduction

Sexual orientation is defined as the sexual and affective attraction towards other people. The most common sexual orientations are lesbian, gay, straight/heterosexual, asexual and bisexual, although other types have been described, such as polysexual, pansexual or demisexual (Taywaditep, 2020). In the last few decades, a considerable degree of equality has been achieved between the rights of heterosexuals and the rights of lesbians, gays and bisexuals (LGB) in 26 countries. However, sexual minorities are still victims of discrimination, violence and aggression all over the world (Blondeel et al., 2018). This violence and discrimination prevents them from freely expressing their sexual orientation, establishing affective bonds or having free and consensual sexual relationships (Field, 1996). Furthermore, in many countries the human rights of lesbians, gays and bisexuals are not guaranteed. In fact, being lesbian, gay or bisexual is punished with the death penalty in six countries and imprisonment in a further 57 (Mendos & ILGA World, 2019).

According to Taylor (1968), who formulated the Social Penetration Theory (SPT) to explain how human relationships develop, self-disclosure is key to achieving social penetration. More specifically, self-disclosure allows relationships to evolve from initial superficiality to progressive intimacy, although it can also lead to the dissolution of interpersonal relationships. Self-disclosure is a communication process in which people reveal information about themselves to others: for example, their likes, projects, religious beliefs, political ideology, and sexual orientation (Ignatius & Kokkonen, 2007). For this reason, self-disclosure about sexual orientation is critical for lesbians and gays (LG) because it can affect the development of meaningful social bonds with other people. In fact,

according to Baiocco et al. (2012), self-disclosure about sexual orientation is a particular kind of self-disclosure that requires an empathetic and non-judgmental audience, and it is a requisite for obtaining social support and developing a positive identity as a member of a sexual minority. Being able to freely express one's sexual orientation is a sign of social acceptance, which facilitates social integration and self-acceptance (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003).

The term "coming out" has been coined to describe this process of leaving secrecy behind and leaving the "closet", in contrast with concealing a lesbian, gay or bisexual orientation from others and staying inside the "closet" (Hunter, 2017). The term "coming out" was originally coined in the early years of the 20th century to refer to the debut of young women in society at a party or dance (Chauncey, 2008). This term was later extrapolated to the process of no longer hiding one's sexual orientation and entering and integrating into one or more of the gay subcultures. Therefore, according to Scott (2018), at this point the term referred more to an entrance or an arrival than an exit. In fact, the term was first used to talk about gay individuals approaching other gay individuals and did not necessarily imply coming out with other people (Cohen & Chauncey, 1997). According to Scott (2018), the term "the closet" was introduced later, in the mid-1960s, and was based on the metaphor "a skeleton in the closet", which involves a hidden secret associated with social stigma. Gay-rights activists of that period used this expression to show the need to claim one's sexual orientation by "coming out of the closet" instead of hiding it and being ashamed.

The ability to freely express sexual orientation with family members and talk to them about affective relationships, particularly the first ones, is especially important. In

fact, family support during the coming out process in LG adolescents and young adults has a huge impact on their mental health (Heatherington & Lavner, 2008). The retrospective study carried out by Lyons et al. (2020) on lesbians and gays aged 60 years and older showed that people who disclosed their sexual orientation to at least one parent suffered less psychological distress and experienced better mental health and higher identity affirmation in terms of sexual orientation than people who did not. However, rejection by parents and family may predispose young people to poor self-esteem and impair their psychosocial stability, which could also jeopardize future healthy relationships with others (Baiocco et al., 2016). Likewise, a family's refusal to accept an adolescent's LGB sexual orientation has been related to negative family dynamics and less family cohesiveness, which, in turn, may lead to poor psychological health among these adolescents. Several studies have shown that family unacceptance is associated with numerous negative health outcomes, such as higher levels of depressive symptomatology (Mitrani et al., 2017), suicidal ideation (Kulkin et al., 2000), drug abuse and excessive alcohol consumption (Needham & Austin, 2010). Therefore, it seems that hiding one's sexual orientation, or receiving a negative parental response, is related to high levels of psychological distress during adolescence and subsequently in adulthood (Lyons et al., 2020; Riggle et al., 2017).

Several studies have reported that stress levels are higher in adults belonging to sexual minorities than in straight individuals (Krueger et al., 2018; McElroy et al., 2016). In fact, gay and lesbian individuals experience stress in the process of 'coming out' (Rosario et al., 2001), but also because they may be the victims of different types of social discrimination (Almeida et al., 2009). Adults from sexual minorities are more likely to experience prejudice, rejection, and discrimination, which can increase stress (Meyer,

2003). According to Meyer (2003), some LGB individuals in environments perceived as hostile may choose to hide their orientation to avoid the negative consequences of stigma. Although concealment can be considered a coping strategy, it may backfire and generate stress. Obviously, hiding sexual orientation requires an effort that involves omitting information, lying, and creating fictional characters or settings. This situation may contribute to mental health problems (Zheng et al., 2020), and it may be experienced even more negatively in LGB people who also belong to ethnic or immigrant minorities or other minority groups (McConnell et al., 2018; Szymanski & Sung, 2010). In fact, people who belong to several minority groups may experience greater stress due to the sum of the different factors of discrimination, prejudice or stigma associated with each group.

Self-disclosure about sexual orientation can be affected by cultural factors, which may determine the decision to take this step or not. A study carried out with Ecuadorian and Spanish lesbian, gay and bisexual employees (Corlett et al., 2019) concluded that some factors of each country's culture make the experiences of coming out or staying closeted different in each country. More in-depth, the participants who reported to be hiding their sexual orientation used the strategy of discretion and concealment in both Spain and Ecuador, but those from Ecuador were more likely to use the fabrication strategy to conceal their sexual orientation, lying about their lives more than their Spanish counterparts, possibly because of a greater fear of the consequences of showing their full authentic identity. In fact, the study showed that expressing discrimination against LGB individuals is considered politically incorrect in Spain, which leads to more subtle forms of discrimination than in Ecuador and justifies the strategies of discretion and concealment. Likewise, the study carried out by Di Marco et al. (2014) shows that, although Spain has

made progress in the legal protection of sexual minorities, LG individuals do not always identify their workplace as a propitious space to reveal their sexual orientation due to fear of becoming victims of overt acts or subtle discrimination. However, it should be taken into account that there are very few studies in the Spanish context on self-disclosure about sexual orientation, as Corlett et al. (2019) and Di Marco et al. (2014) have underlined. In fact, we know of no studies that have analyzed the consequences of coming out of the closet in adolescents or young Spanish people. But different studies in the Spanish population have revealed violence in educational contexts due to sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression in the university (Dueñas et al., 2021) and relatively high levels of homophobic attitudes in adolescents (Miravet et al., 2018). Therefore, given the previous antecedents, it can be assumed that self-disclosure of sexual orientation is not entirely straightforward in Spanish LG adolescents and young people.

Few studies have specifically examined the relationship between the self-disclosure of sexual orientation and subjective wellbeing levels among young and teenage gays and lesbians. Still, coming out seems to be a watershed moment for the general well-being of adolescents and young people in different contexts. More specifically, according to Ryan et al. (2010), adolescents and young people who disclose their LGB orientation to their family and receive acceptance are more likely to report higher levels of self-esteem, social support and general health, and these positive characteristics are long-lasting. However, the self-disclosure of sexual orientation among adolescents may be influenced by the perception of hostility and negative consequences, and is therefore affected by one's social networks and communication lines (Lasser & Tharinger, 2003). Pretending to be heterosexual and concealing one's LGB sexual orientation may generate a sense of protection against

violence and discrimination, but may also involve internal stressors, including feelings of sadness (Dewaele et al., 2013). It should be taken into account that low levels of satisfaction with life are related to depressive symptoms (Dueñas et al., 2020; Morales-Vives & Dueñas, 2018) and psychological discomfort in the general population of adolescents and young people (Kumar, 2016; Marino et al., 2018; Okwaraji et al., 2018). Therefore, the negative feelings associated with not disclosing one's sexual orientation may also lead to lower levels of life satisfaction and increase depressive symptomatology in young people. The lack of research and literature on LGB adolescents and young people compared to other types of adolescents and young people means that the specific needs of this population cannot be effectively addressed (Mustanski, 2011).

The issues discussed above have also been studied in adults. Several studies have shown that self-disclosure of sexual orientation is associated with higher levels of subjective wellbeing. For example, a study of adult lesbians reported higher life satisfaction among those who had come out of the closet (Li et al., 2013). Likewise, a study of adult gay individuals also showed that self-disclosure of sexual orientation and community support from other LGBTI+ people was related to high levels of life satisfaction (Wong & So-Kum Tang, 2003).

Some studies also show that self-disclosure of sexual orientation increases the perception of happiness, even in societies where coming out of the closet is perceived as extremely difficult (Biswas & Chaudhuri, 2018; Tamagawa, 2018). In fact, going through this process of personal and family recognition generates feelings of relief, pride, freedom and self-acceptance. This shows the positive effects of being able to come out of the closet, because higher levels of happiness involve lower levels of psychological distress (Lincoln

et al., 2010; Loton & Waters, 2017), and lower levels of anxiety and depressive symptomatology (Besser & Zeigler-Hill, 2014; Rasim, 2015).

Most studies on the self-disclosure of sexual orientation and its relationship with well-being variables such as happiness or life satisfaction have been carried out on adults, and not on young people. Moreover, very few studies have been carried out in the Spanish population, and even fewer with adolescents and young people. For this reason, the main objective of this study is to analyse the differences in the variables of perceived stress, life satisfaction, happiness, and psychological distress among two groups of young Spanish LGs (coming out and closeted). Considering the literature discussed above, we expected to find higher levels of psychological distress, higher perceived stress and less life satisfaction in closeted youth. According to previous studies, coming out of the closet could contribute to higher levels of happiness among sexual minorities in hostile societies (Biswas & Chaudhuri, 2018; Tamagawa, 2018). For this reason, it was not expected to find differences in the happiness variable because the sample of this study is from a society that is not very hostile, with equal laws for straight and LG individuals.

Method

Participants

The sample included a total of 228 teenagers who self-identified as lesbian and gay individuals (73.25% girls) and were living in the provinces of Barcelona, Girona and Tarragona (Spain). Participants ranged from 16 to 23 years old ($M = 19.60$, $S.D. = 1.81$). They were required to answer a dichotomous question (yes/no) regarding self-disclosing their sexual orientation. A total of 50.44% reported having come out of the closet with at

least one member of their nuclear family, and the rest reported that they were closeted.

With regards to gender identity and sexual orientation, all the participants identified themselves as cisgender and monosexual. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the sample.

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Measures

Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10; Kessler & Mroczek, 1994). We used the Spanish version validated by Alonso et al. (2010) which assesses psychological distress (anxiety and depression). The 10 items of this questionnaire ask about the emotional states that the person has experienced within the previous four weeks. Each item has a five-point response scale (1 = Never, 5 = Always). In our study, the estimated reliability was adequate ($\alpha = .89$).

Perceived Stress Scale (PSS-4; Cohen et al., 1983). We used the Spanish version of this scale developed by Herrero & Meneses (2006). It is a 4-item scale, with a response range from 1 (never) to 4 (always) which measures the perception of stress. The questions focus on feelings and thoughts during the previous month. In our study, the estimated reliability was adequate ($\alpha = .70$) considering the small number of items on the scale. In fact, it is similar to the reliability reported in the Spanish adaptation ($\alpha = .72$) by Herrero and Meneses (2006).

Satisfaction with life scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985). We used the Spanish version developed by Atienza et al. (2000), which is a valid and reliable instrument for

measuring overall life satisfaction in the Spanish population. The scale is a single-factor measure of life satisfaction based on five items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = totally disagree, 5 = totally agree). In our study, the estimated reliability was adequate ($\alpha = .91$).

Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). We used the Spanish version developed by Extremera & Fernández-Berrocal (2014), which has adequate psychometric properties. The scale has four items on a 7-point Likert type scale, and it assesses overall subjective happiness. In our study, the estimated reliability was adequate ($\alpha = .88$).

Procedure

We obtained informed consent from all the participants, in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. The participants were recruited by snowball sampling (Snijders, 1992) through social media platforms such as WhatsApp groups and Facebook. The inclusion criteria to participate in the study were: 1. accepting the informed consent; 2. having a sexual orientation other than straight (gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, etc.); 3. living in Spain, and 4. not being under psychiatric, psychological or pharmacological treatment. Several participants were excluded from the study because they self-identified as straight, they were not living in Spain, or they did not provide their consent to participate. Participants completed the questionnaires online by means of a survey designed for this purpose. Confidentiality and data protection were guaranteed, and the questionnaires were completely anonymous, as was explained in the introductory section of this survey. Each questionnaire included information about the response format and the procedure for completing it. Participants were asked about their sexual orientation

and gender identity, and they were allowed to choose from a variety of options that described different queer identities. They could even write a personal option if they considered that none of the others described them. Once the participants had finished the questionnaire, the website allowed them to share it with other people on the social networks, in order to progressively increase the sample.

The data were analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 26.0). To examine the differences between the gender and self-disclosure instruments administered, *t* tests were applied using Cohen's *d* to estimate the effect size, which was categorized according to the following criteria: $0.2 < d < 0.5 =$ small; $0.5 < d < 0.8 =$ medium; and $d > 0.8 =$ large (Cohen, 1988). Pearson correlations were calculated to examine the relationship between psychological distress and the other variables. The effect size of correlations was categorized using the following criteria: $0.1 < r < 0.3 =$ small; $0.3 < r < 0.5 =$ medium; and $r > 0.5 =$ large (Cohen, 1988).

Results

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics for each variable in gays/lesbians who were either closeted or had come out. As can be seen, those who were closeted reported higher scores than those who had come out on psychological distress and happiness, with small effect sizes according to Cohen (1988), but there were no differences in satisfaction with life. Girls reported higher scores on life satisfaction than boys, $t(89.3) = -2.23$, $p = .028$, $d = 0.37$, with a small effect size according to Cohen (1988), but there were no significant differences in the other variables.

PLEASE INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Table 3 presents the Pearson correlations between psychological distress and the other variables in the general sample, the closeted subsample, and the subsample that had self-disclosed their sexual orientation. All of the correlations between the study variables were statistically significant. In the general sample, psychological distress was positively correlated to perceived stress, with a large effect size, and negatively correlated to satisfaction with life and happiness, with a medium and large effect size, respectively. In closeted people, psychological distress was positively correlated to perceived stress, with a large effect size, and negatively correlated to satisfaction with life (medium effect size) and happiness (large effect size). Finally, in people who had come out, psychological distress was negatively correlated to satisfaction with life (small effect size) and happiness (large effect size), and positively with perceived stress (large effect size). However, the correlation between psychological distress and perceived stress was higher for closeted people (.70) than for people who had come out (.57).

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Discussion

The main objective of this study was to determine the differences in levels of perceived stress, life satisfaction, happiness, and psychological distress in young Spanish people who had come out and those who were closeted. The data revealed significant differences between these two groups in psychological distress, with higher levels in the closeted group. This means that closeted young people experience higher anxiety and depressive symptomatology than the other group. This result is consistent with previous studies that found higher levels of psychological distress in adults who hide their sexual

orientation (Lyons et al., 2020; Riggle et al., 2017). Being closeted involves having a hidden life or holding back important personal facets, which makes it difficult to develop a positive sexual identity, and limits the development of true affective relationships and friendship with others (Baiocco et al., 2012). It should be taken into account that having positive affective relationships is a milestone in young people's social development. Furthermore, being able to freely express sexual orientation facilitates both self-acceptance and social acceptance (Corrigan & Matthews, 2003). In contrast, non-self-acceptance of one's sexual orientation implies self-stigma, which has been related to poor mental health in sexual minorities (Reyes et al., 2015). Therefore, according to these results, young LG people who conceal their sexual orientation from their families could be more prone to higher psychological distress, and experience higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptomatology.

Closeted young people scored higher on perceived stress, which is consistent with previous literature (Gortmaker & Brown, 2006). In fact, LG adolescents are more likely to experience different types of social discrimination (Almeida et al., 2009), which can also increase their perceived stress. But, according to the results of the current study, this perceived stress is even higher in those young people who remain closeted. Therefore, coming out of the closet at least to one family member helps to reduce this perceived stress, despite the social discrimination that may be the consequence in some contexts.

Previous studies have shown that coming out of the closet may lead to higher levels of happiness in hostile societies (Biswas & Chaudhuri, 2018; Tamagawa, 2018). Considering the positive measures and laws that have been taken to protect their rights, the Spanish context is not very hostile to sexual minorities so we did not expect to find

significant differences in happiness between the two groups. In fact, Spain is one of the European countries that most accepts the LG community (Poushter & Kent, 2019), which is another sign of this positive context. However, the 'coming out' group obtained higher scores in happiness than the closeted group. Therefore, the relationship between happiness and coming out of the closet is also evident in contexts such as Spain, which is not particularly hostile. Nevertheless, we did not find significant differences in life satisfaction between the two groups, although several studies in adults have shown greater life satisfaction among those who had come out of the closet (Li et al., 2013; Wong & So-Kum Tang, 2003). One possible explanation for this is that these previous studies were carried out in adults, who lived for many years in a more complicated context than young people nowadays. In fact, equal legal rights for sexual orientation minorities has had an important and positive role in the quality of life and wellbeing of LGB people, which has meant a big step forward for many adults. This social change may be contributing to greater life satisfaction among adults than among young people, because young people did not live the previous situation. Moreover, adolescents and young adults are characterized by greater emotional instability and identity problems (e.g., Morales-Vives et al., 2013; Vigil-Colet et al., 2013), which may also explain why life satisfaction does not increase at these ages. However, further studies should be done on teens and young people, in different contexts and countries, to achieve a better understanding of the relationship between life satisfaction and coming out of the closet in this stage of the life cycle.

Negative correlations were found between psychological distress and life satisfaction and happiness in both groups. In fact, previous studies in young people show that psychological distress is strongly related to life satisfaction and self-esteem (Bozzay et

al., 2014; Freire & Ferreira, 2020). On the other hand, perceived stress is positively related to psychological distress in both groups, although the correlation is higher for the closeted group. This suggests that the perceived stress experienced by the closeted group has more serious consequences on their mental health than the perceived stress experienced by the 'coming out' group, leading to higher anxiety and depressive symptoms. This result shows the importance of family support for young lesbian and gay individuals. In fact, closeted young people may experience emotional discomfort because of their need to conceal their preferences, affective relationships and even friendships from their family, which can lead to anxiety and depression.

The current study focused on young LG individuals, but further studies should be done to compare these results with those obtained in young straight individuals. Regarding the limitations of this study, the variables were assessed with self-report measures, which do not provide such complete and in-depth information as other procedures (for example, interviews). Therefore, further studies should use measures that provide a more complete assessment and a better understanding of the self-disclosure process and its psychological consequences. Another limitation of the study is the lack of information about the kind of families that closeted participants had, in comparison with the other participants. LG individuals with hostile or non-supportive families may decide to remain in the closet to avoid the negative consequences of self-disclosure within this family environment. For this reason, further studies should consider the role of the family context. In fact, hostile families may generate considerable distress, so part of the emotional discomfort of some closeted participants could be explained by the family context and not just by being in the closet.

To sum up, the results of the current study show that growing up in environments conducive to freely expressing sexual orientation increases psychological well-being, promotes mental health, and protects young gays and lesbians from anxiety and depressive symptomatology in stressful situations. In fact, this study shows the importance of family for sexual minority adolescents, which has practical implications in the field of family counselling. These results seem to encourage Spanish teens and youth to self-disclose their sexual orientation to at least one member of the family because of the positive impact it has on mental health and psychological wellbeing. However, this is a personal decision, and no one **should** be forced to self-disclose, especially when the context may be hostile or the family non-supportive.

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Table 1

Demographic characteristics of the sample

Variable		<i>n</i>	%
Gender	Cisgender women	167	73.25
	Cisgender men	59	25.88
	Refuse to answer	2	0.87
Sexual orientation	Lesbian	167	73.25
	Gay	61	26.75
Self-disclosure of sexual orientation	Coming out	115	50.44
	Closeted	113	49.56
Personal situation	Student	207	90.78
	Employee	9	3.95
	Unemployed	12	5.27

Table 2

Descriptive statistics by overall sample and by self-disclosure of sexual orientation

Scales	Overall sample (<i>n</i> = 228)		Closeted (<i>n</i> = 113)		Coming out (<i>n</i> = 115)		Comparison between Closeted and Coming out groups		
	Mean (<i>S.D.</i>)	Range of scores	Mean (<i>S.D.</i>)	Range of scores	Mean (<i>S.D.</i>)	Range of scores	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Psychological distress	26.56 (7.49)	11 - 44	27.82 (8.22)	11 - 44	25.32 (6.49)	12 - 39	<i>t</i> (212.7) = -2.55	.012	0.34
Perceived stress	10.89 (1.95)	5 - 16	10.59 (2.03)	5 - 16	11.19 (1.84)	7 - 16	<i>t</i> (226) = -2.33	.021	0.31
Life satisfaction	16.14 (5.16)	5 - 25	15.88 (4.79)	5 - 25	16.40 (5.52)	5 - 25	<i>t</i> (226) = 0.75	.453	-
Happiness	19.31 (5.17)	4 - 28	18.37 (5.71)	4 - 28	20.25 (4.40)	5 - 28	<i>t</i> (210.5) = 2.77	.006	0.37

Table 3

Pearson correlations between psychological distress by overall sample and self-disclosure of sexual orientation

	Psychological distress		
	Overall sample	Closeted	Coming out
Perceived stress	.65 ^{***}	.70 ^{***}	.57 ^{***}
Satisfaction	-.31 ^{***}	-.40 ^{***}	-.21 [*]
Happiness	-.63 ^{***}	-.65 ^{***}	-.58 ^{***}

*** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$