Sexual and gender diversity in small cities: LGBT experiences in Girona, Spain

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ABSTRACT
Big cities have become the preeminent area for studies on sexual and gender diversity. Major Western cities dominate the panorama of stories, discourses and practices regarding sexual and gender diversity in urban studies. However, many LGBT people reside outside of large cities. This paper intends to challenge the hegemony of the ‘big city’ as the intrinsic center of production of discourse on what is meant by ‘LGBT’ and to analyze how social relationships among LGBT people emerge in the environment of a medium-sized city. To this end, ethnographic research, including interviews and participant observation, was conducted for my research. One of the main conclusions from this work is that, despite the fact that big cities play a dominant role in the construction of LGBT lifestyles, aspirations and desires, there are other LGBT narratives outside of big cities that deserve to be considered in order to provide a more complex and nuanced understanding of sexual and gender diversity. This research challenges the assumption that LGBT life outside the big city is associated with isolation, loneliness and discomfort, as we demonstrate that many LGBT people who live outside the big city are content about their everyday lives.

Introduction
Urban studies that have focused on the experiences of LGBT people have done so in the context of big cities (Aldrich 2004; Bell and Binnie 2004; Black et al. 2002; Hubbard and Wilkinson 2015; Kanai 2014; Nash 2013; Sibalis 2004; Higgs 1999; Gorman-Murray and Nash 2017; Nash and Gorman-Murray 2017). Furthermore, in some of these studies, the big city has been presented as the location for LGBT people’s lives, the ‘natural’ destination of sexual minorities from rural areas and small cities eager to find a community of reference to connect with (Weston 1995; Baley 1998; Abraham 2009). Some authors go so far as to claim that LGBT people can only achieve a fulfilling
life in the ‘big city’ (Doderer 2011). Likewise, there are those who suggest that the big city is where the modern gay identity is constructed, and it is what shapes the lifestyle of men who have sex with other men (Bech 1997; Chauncey 1994; Hindle 1994). However, there are at least four problems worth noting in connection with these assumptions. The first is that big city experiences are not uniform for all LGBT people; there are significant differences between the experiences of gay, lesbian, bisexual or trans people which merit further investigation (Nash and Gorman-Murray 2015; Nash 2010; Podmore 2001; Podmore and Chamberland 2015; Doan 2010, 2007; Browne and Lim 2010). The second problem is that differences also exist in the interplay between other forms of oppression (Casey 2016; Callander, Newman, and Holt 2015; Irazabal and Huerta 2016; Rosenberg 2017). Third, not all big cities share the same social and cultural features. Finally, and rather obviously, not all LGBT people live in big cities.

Despite this, the history of sexual diversity in the West, narratives of LGBTQ communities continues to be constructed and associated with big cities. Large international events, June 28 parades, and the spaces of socialization (bars, clubs, shops, neighborhoods) aimed at LGBT populations, help to maintain LGBT visibility as a predominantly big city phenomenon. This has led to the idea that LGBT people who live outside of metropolitan centers have made a poor decision and have yet to find liberation. Wienke and Hill (2013, 1257) observe that ‘the impression is that rural gay men and lesbians are at a disadvantage, both socially and psychologically, when compared to their urban counterparts.’ Likewise, smaller towns and rural areas are presented as more intolerant about gender and sexual diversity than the big cities, where LGBT people appear to find a greater level of acceptance (Binnie 2004). In this way, the classic dichotomy of urban and rural studies are reproduced, with the rural representing the opposite of the urban. It is a dichotomy that has little to do with reality. It has already been challenged in various academic works (Champion and Hugo 2016; Bryant and Pini 2011); and tends to minimize or overlook the role of small cities. Indeed, Halberstam (2005) goes so far as to use the notion of ‘metronormativity’ to refer to the privileges associated with metropolitan centers where such normativities are reproduced. Nevertheless, compound words that include normativity remain problematic. Podmore (2016) believes – in the case of lesbians – that the notion of metronormativity leads to a questionable and reductive dualism between the rural and the urban. Meanwhile, Brown (2012, 2008) criticizes Duggan’s notion of homonormativity (Duggan 2002), considering that the analyses regarding sexual and gender diversity are too complex and contradictory for them to be theorized through a concept that pretends to reconcile a whole mass of situations that are overrun by social reality.
In any case, a gradually increasing number of studies are appearing that dispute the hegemony of the big city as a space for LGBT people. This work calls into question the discourses, representations and practices that associate LGBT exclusively with large urban environments (Bell 2009; Browne 2011; Kuhar and Švab 2014; McPhail 2008; Mcglynn 2018; Herring 2010; Rodó de Zárate 2015; Abelson 2016; Gray, Johnson, and Gilley 2016). These studies represent a change in direction from the conventional concepts of sexuality in urban spaces, focusing on scenarios far from the big cities. Furthermore, by incorporating territoriality into these intersectional analyzes, many of them are broadening and enriching the debate on the relevance of space in the shaping of social, cultural and sex-gender relationships (Johnston 2018).

One issue not yet fully explored is how the big city narrative acts as a producer of subjectivities among LGBT people in small cities. In this article, following perspectives, such as those advanced by Browne (2009) and Kazyak (2011), the aim is to explore the impact of the big city on the subjectivities of people who live in small towns or cities. The focus of our study is the city of Girona, in the north east of Spain, which has a population of 99,013.

We focus on people who live in Girona, rather than those who have left to larger cities. This is not to deny the existence of the so-called ‘sexile’ of LGBT people to big cities, or to other countries, where a greater degree of acceptance of sexual and gender diversity may be found (Guzmán 1997; Martinez-San Miguel 2011). The migratory processes of LGBT people to big cities have been widely documented and discussed (Langarita Adiego and Salguero Velázquez 2017; Fountain-Stokes 2004; Annes and Redlin 2012; Carrillo and Fontdevila 2014; Chávez 2011; Hibbins 2005; Smith 2012). Nevertheless, sexile is not for everyone; not all LGBT people leave their towns for the big city. Reducing small-town LGBT life to the phenomenon of sexile helps to keep the experiences of the LGBT people in such towns and rural areas invisible, which is precisely what this article hopes to challenge and overcome.

**Methodology**

The results presented in this article are derived from a research project called DIVERCITY. Preventing and combating homo- and transphobia in small and medium cities across Europe. Our qualitative work is based on in-depth interviews (involving 17 LGBT people and 11 stakeholders in the city); two discussion groups (one with five LGBT participants, and the other with eight stakeholders) and various observation sessions in the city and in a bar, which was a LGBT meeting place but is now closed, as well as in political organizations of LGBT collectives and associations. The observation sessions consisted of regular visits to the only openly LGBT-friendly bar in the city. During these
visits, contact was made with some of the informants who were later inter-
viewed. Contacts were also made through participation in various public
events of protest and awareness-raising carried out by LGBT organizations in
the city and attendance, as a guest member, of the meetings of Girona City
Council’s LGBT committee, which brings together LGBT organizations and
other social agents of the city to address issues of interest to LGBT people at
the local level. In addition, gay-orientated online social networks (such as
Grindr) were also used in order to initiate contact with potential participants
for the research.

The interviews and the discussion groups were both guided using a semi-
structured script, thus facilitating the organization and monitoring of the
information gathered. In looking for LGBT participants, diversification criteria
were followed in order to find people with a range of different socio-demo-
graphic characteristics, sexual orientations and gender identities or expres-
sions. Diversification criteria were also followed in selecting stakeholders
from a range of professions and types of services, public administrations or
representative organizations. Likewise, the discussion groups themselves
were configured to consider the sociodemographic diversity of the partici-
pants and their sexualities. In the case of the stakeholders, the types of
organizations and the positions of those who participated are listed in
Tables 1 and 2. Both the interviews and the discussion group conversations
were transcribed and coded in order to facilitate content analysis.

Various channels were used to recruit participants. With regard to LGBT
people, emails or telephone numbers of possible participants were provided
by some of the NGOs in the city but also by people we met during partici-
pant observation sessions in the city, both public and online, resulting in
snowball sampling which brought us into contact with new participants. In
the case of stakeholders, access was achieved through the search for specific
services run by local and regional administrations and LGBT organizations.
This research has followed the ethical research standards for social science
and all participants gave their informed consent regarding their involvement.
Any references that may identify the individuals involved have been anony-
mized, when these participants have so requested. The field work was car-
ried out over a period of 14 months between December, 2015 and
January, 2017.

The context
The city of Girona is the capital city of the Province of Girona. The city is
home to a large proportion of the province’s most important services, such
as district hospitals, public administration and the area’s public university,
which makes it an important hub for the people from the rest of the
Table 1. Socio-demographic details of the LGBT people who were interviewed and/or participated in the group discussions (* denotes people interviewed/ # denotes discussion group participants).

| Name             | Category | Gender identity | Age | Education            | Occupation | Origin     | Marital situation | Years in Girona |
|------------------|----------|-----------------|-----|----------------------|------------|------------|-------------------|-----------------|
| Carles           | Gay      | Men              | 25  | Higher education     | Professional | Catalonia  | Single            | 25              |
| Neus             | Lesbian  | Women            | 31  | Higher education     | Professional | Catalonia  | Single            | 31              |
| Pol              | Gay      | Men              | 32  | Secondary            | Technician | Catalonia  | In partnership    | 3               |
| Ricardo          | Gay      | Men              | 52  | Primary              | Technician | Honduras   | Single            | 13              |
| Diana            | Trans    | Women            | 41  | Primary              | Technician | Catalonia  | Single            | 3               |
| Maxi             | Gay      | Men              | 41  | Secondary            | Technician | Brazil     | Married           | 6               |
| Nora             | Lesbian  | Women            | 58  | Primary              | Personal service worker | Catalonia | Married          | 23              |
| Sara             | Lesbian  | Women            | 35  | Higher education     | Professional | Spain     | Married           | 2               |
| Marc             | Gay      | Men              | 48  | Higher education     | Unemployed | Catalonia  | Single            | 48              |
| Lucia            | Trans (partner Carlota) | Women   | 51  | Secondary            | Technician | Spain     | Married           | 28              |
| Carlota          | Bisexual (partner Lucia) | Women   | –   | Unknown              | Unknown    | Catalonia  | Married           | Unknown         |
| Ona              | Lesbian  | Women            | 26  | Higher education     | Professional | Catalonia  | Single            | 3               |
| Maria            | Bisexual | Women            | 23  | Secondary            | Professional | Catalonia  | In partnership    | 2               |
| Laura            | Bisexual | Women            | 55  | Higher education     | Professional | Spain     | Married           | 6               |
| Claudia          | Lesbian (partner P148) | Women   | 24  | Secondary            | Elementary occupation | Catalonia | In partnership    | 5               |
| Carlota          | Bisexual (partner Claudia) | Women   | 30  | Secondary            | Elementary occupation | Catalonia | In partnership    | 5               |
| Arnau            | Gay      | Men              | 40  | Higher education     | Manager    | Catalonia  | Single            | 40              |
| Sofia            | Lesbian  | Women            | 40  | Secondary school     | Technician | Catalonia  | Single            | 20              |
| Martín           | Gay      | Men              | 30  | Primary school       | Services worker | Catalonia | Single            | 30              |
| Pau              | Gay      | Men              | –   | Higher education     | Professional | Catalonia  | In partnership    | 6               |
| Mireia           | Lesbian  | Women            | 22  | Higher education     | Unemployed | Catalonia  | Single            | 5               |
| Joana            | Queer    | Queer            | 19  | Secondary School     | Student    | Catalonia  | Single            | 2               |
province when it comes to administrative arrangements, cultural and leisure activities, study or work. The city is known for its strong support for Catalan independence, and its streets are replete with slogans and posters demanding the independence of Catalonia, as well as the release of Catalan political prisoners. Elsewhere in Catalonia, the city of Girona is generally seen as a markedly bourgeois city that has a high purchasing power. GDP per capita for the year 2016 is, in fact, significantly higher in the city (€38,200 p.a.) than it is in Catalonia as a whole (€30,200 p.a.), according to the Statistical Institute of Catalonia (IDESCAT). However, the city is home to people from very different social groups, with different economic means. Although the quantitative economic data indicates that the city is prosperous, Girona has neighborhoods where levels of poverty remain very high and which are far-removed from the picture of bourgeois contentment attributed to the city. Furthermore, there is the adjoining town of Salt (pop. 29,836) which, while having its own municipal council, has very close economic and social ties with Girona. Even so, the GDP per capita of Salt is considerably lower (€30,000 in 2016), being more in line with the average figure across Catalonia.

Girona has very few LGBT organizations and, as in the rest of Spain, the representative capacity of such organizations and their ability to attract members is in decline. In 2012, Girona City Council created the LGBTI Municipal Council, a consultative body dealing with local LGBTI issues that comprises representatives of local LGBTI organizations, councilors from the political parties represented in the city hall, labor union representatives and representatives of some of the city’s institutions, such as the University of Girona, among others.

Table 2. Main details of the stakeholders who were interviewed and/or participated in the group discussions (* denotes people interviewed/ + denotes discussion group participants).

| Name      | Role in service | Service                          |
|-----------|-----------------|----------------------------------|
| Martina * | Police          | Autonomous Police                |
| Esteban * | Doctor          | Heath Center                     |
| Guillermo * | Psychologist | Youth Health Service            |
| Aitana * | Service coordinator & Psychologist | HIV detection and guidance |
| Xavier * | President of local section | Gay NGO |
| Lucas * | School director | Primary School                  |
| Miguel * | Owner | LGBT Business                     |
| Marta * | Decision maker | City council                   |
| Ernesto * | Social worker | City council                    |
| Aniol * | Journalist | Local media                     |
| Manuel * | Prosecutor | Justice Services                |
| Alejandro + | Women Section coordinator | Union                       |
| Eudald + | Regional coordinator of LGBT issues | Ministry of Labor, Social Affairs and Family |
| Anna + | Police (Victims Support coordinator) | City Council            |
| Carla + | Victim support services | Ministry of Justice |
| Dolores + | Psychologist | Institut Català de les dones    |
| Carmen + | Psychologist | Health network                  |
| Nestor + | Social services coordinator | City council |
| Isabel + | Coordinator of Health program | City council |

Table 2. Main details of the stakeholders who were interviewed and/or participated in the group discussions (* denotes people interviewed/ + denotes discussion group participants).
Official discourse and action concerning sexual diversity is limited in the city, and tends to only involve symbolic celebrations of special days for the LGBT community, such as the International Day Against LGBT-phobia (May 17th), LGBT Pride Day (June 28th), or World AIDS Day (December 1st). The fact that Girona is only 100 kilometers away from Barcelona means there is mutual influence between the cities. Many LGBT people travel to Barcelona for work or study but also at weekends to openly experiment with their sexual identity or gender expression. However, the one and a half-hour drive, the expense and restricted schedules of public transport – the last train from Barcelona to Girona leaves before 10:00 in the evening – reduces the influence of Barcelona on Girona; and means, for example, that a ‘night out’ in the big city is not always viable.

Girona is a small city and forms of social control are very significant in the lives of people, since there is little anonymity among the inhabitants of the city. Friends or acquaintances are almost always to be found in public areas. In short, sexual expressions that are not heterosexual or gender identities that are not cisgender, are rarely visible in the city, although they have increased in recent years.

Construction of sex-gender narratives and practices: over-representation of the big city?

Urban environments produce a set of narratives that help to shape each city’s way of life. These narratives, which have a markedly heterosexual focus in terms of production and control (Bell and Valentine 1995), are configured via countless cultural, social, economic, demographic and environmental elements, among others. In recent decades, LGBT narratives have become more visible, especially in big cities. Big cities provide increased opportunities in terms of leisure, socialization, anonymity and sexual partners (Hubbard 2012). However, above all, they tend to centralize the representations, discourses and practices of what is considered ‘LGBT’. In other words, despite the manifold experiences and lifestyles of LGBT people, the manner in which such narratives are conceptualized and propagated is permeated by the idea of the big city. There are numerous narratives that postulate the big city as the only option for making life livable for LGBT people. For example, in the words of Castells (1983, 138), San Francisco is the place ‘where homosexuals migrate for a few hours or many years to find themselves and to learn a language of freedom, sexuality, solidarity, and life – to ‘come out’ and to become gay’. Not only is the city turned into a space of socialization, liberation and anonymity, but it also becomes a place of political statements and the creation of LGBT subjectivities and the production of ‘what we are’. In short, big cities have become the places that define what is known as LGBT.
It is in the big cities where collective demands, the agendas of equality, lifestyles and media spaces promoting visibility are being constructed. That is why so many LGBT people see migration to the big city as an opportunity to participate in what they are meant to be, or should be, in order to achieve happiness or to join the community that, supposedly, they belong to. In the case of Girona, the idea of the big city and what it represents is associated fundamentally with Barcelona, 100 kilometers away, and 38 minutes by train.

Attempts are often made to transpose the big-city conceptions of LGBT life to smaller cities too, by constructing success stories based on the phenomenon of migration. This is the case of Pol, one of our participants who, when talking about an ex-partner who migrated to Barcelona said that ‘he went off to live in Barcelona and become totally free’. However, we need to ask whether such liberation can be an immediate, permanent and individual act? When LGBT people get off the train in Barcelona, are they already liberated? Can liberation be reduced to a distance of 100 kilometers? In reality, liberation is a subjective exercise associated with values, expectations and experiences, but which, in turn, is mediated by social, cultural, geographical and diachronic contexts. There is, therefore, no unique form of liberation, no definitive state of being ‘liberated’, and no unique space to become so. The big cities are not an essential element of sexual liberation for LGBT people. Big cities are still a possible scenario for the accumulation of experiences and identity construction, but both can also occur in other spaces. Indeed, Girona itself can become be a space where others can find ‘liberation’, as is the case with Pau, who considers his arrival in the city from his homeland as helping him to be more open since: ‘When I arrived six years ago, I saw many lesbians, I mean, lesbian couples who were holding hands. That was a big surprise for me, and a very pleasant one.’ In terms of productivity, we could say that Girona exports sexiles, but it is also welcoming of LGBT people from other territories. This statement is not intended to put those who leave and those who arrive on an equal footing in order to finally defend some kind of self-regulation in LGBT migration, but rather to challenge the idea that LGBT people from small cities migrate en-masse to the big city to become part of the dynamics of such places, because the reality is that there are also LGBT people in small cities and rural environments. What happens is that their experiences are not made visible. That is to say, it is false that migration is an inevitable life project for LGBT people. Some people do migrate as a means to find sexual liberation, but many others cannot conceive of spending their lives among the great urban sprawl.

The big city in the West is seen as a dynamic place, while the small city, in contrast, is thought to be static and stuck in the past. However, the reality is that the dynamics of social transformation affect all urban environments, regardless of their size. Over the years, no society remains the same
(Podmore 2016). Changes arise throughout the different phases of our lives, our personal experiences and social relationships, as they do through political initiatives, the demands of LGBT organizations and transformations in laws, among other things. In this sense Laura refers to this change in Girona when she explains that: ‘Nowadays, yes, I do sometimes give Rebecca a kiss, or I take hold of her like this [makes a gesture with the hand] and, before, I couldn’t do that naturally. I think there has been a lot of progress in Girona and in Barcelona as well.’ In fact, Xavier recounts that Girona in the 1980s was a gloomy, provincial city, with no gays or lesbians visible at all: ‘The gays and lesbians of Girona either lived a double life or lived outside the city […] . People used to go to Barcelona at weekends and then return on Monday as if nothing had happened. Things have been evolving; the whole of Catalan society has evolved.’ Many of the other people interviewed also mentioned these changes, highlighting the major transformation and significant increase in visibility compared to earlier periods.

**Myth and reality of violence outside the big city**

Although LGBT representations, discourses and practices are over-represented by big city ideas, this does not mean that all such practices and representations are simply replicated in all the cities around the world; they also involve reintegrating and resignifying local notions of sexuality in socialization processes (Cáceres Feria and Valcuende del Río 2014; Vasquez del Aguila 2014). Personal trajectories, social class and origin must also be taken into account (Manalansan 2015). In terms of sexual diversity, the big city becomes universal and individual at the same time, without one contradicting the other. That is to say, the big city may be the space for LGBT representation but the way this representation occurs is different in each city (Muller 2016). Sitges, for example, with a population of 28,969 is a town in which gay tourism has a very significant economic and social impact (Instituto de Estadística de Catalunya 2019). The town is represented in the collective imagination as being very LGBT-friendly with high numbers of tourists, especially gay, who come to the town in summer in search of spaces of socialization, representation and recognition. In contrast, despite having a significantly higher population than Sitges, Girona is not perceived as particularly LGBT-friendly. This is because the representation of sexual diversity has been constructed in totally different ways in Sitges and Girona. Therefore, when considering the sexual representation of urban geographies, we must reflect not only on the Western dynamics constructed in big cities, but also the local dynamics that construct the social and cultural character of each territory.

In this sense, there is no doubt that the size and type of the city you live in has a considerable influence on the way relationships and experiences between people are shaped. Nevertheless, what is problematic is the idea
that there exists a direct relationship between the size of the town and the degree of hostility towards LGBT people. None of the people interviewed recounted any actual physically violent situations; however, all of them have suffered, at some point in their lives, have experienced some degree of discrimination and distress motivated by the fact that they are LGBT people. Some report distressing situations in the public space: ‘I was saying goodbye to a girl, like, “Bye. Hope it all goes well” and I gave her two or three little kisses here [she points to her neck], okay? And a waiter who saw us said “You made me all horny just looking at you’ (P2). Other people have avoided talking about their gender identity in family settings in anticipation of negative consequences: ‘My family does not know about it. But if they did know, I wouldn’t get any support. [...] They say really bad things about trans people. If I tell them I’m one … who knows what’ll happen!’ Other participants talked about discrimination in the workplace, such as Marc, who described his experience in the company he worked for, where he heard a constant stream of derogatory comments relating to sexual and gender diversity and ‘you couldn’t express yourself as you really were. You had to hide; they made jokes and you had to keep it hidden. [...] But you end up getting used to hiding it because, if you don’t, what can you do?’ Another work-related problem was described by Pau. He is a social worker and, in his work, he frequently hears homophobic and racist comments, and he is directly affected by the homophobes but, he says, ‘you have to put up with it because you are the professional. You could maybe say something but, at the end of the day, you are the one attending to that person’. There are also those who have experienced discrimination in school environments, such as Pol, who lived through episodes of bullying at school for years. There were even forms of violence dressed up as teaching good manners, such as when Neus, was told by a relative to ‘be more feminine’ to help her make her sexuality more coherent with her gender. Yet, despite the distress caused by such episodes, none of the participants established a direct relationship with the size of the city. In fact, Diana explains that, in Girona ‘I have not had any problems beyond the typical one of people who look at you on the street because they don’t know what is going on. But that is just as typical here as it is in Barcelona.’ The manner in which violent episodes arise is highly varied, and affected by a range of circumstances and contexts, but in our study no data was found associating hostility towards LGBT people with the fact they took place in a small city. This leads us to believe that the root of anti-LGBT feeling is not in the size of the city but in the patriarchal structures, the logic of binary gender and the heterosexuality imposed on social relations. Migrating to Barcelona, away from their hometown environments, may mean escaping from some of the violence and hostility which can occur in the proximity of family or local communities, but in no way does it free the
individuals from the social structures that support such violence and hostility.

Livable lives in small cities

The stories of our participants were not restricted to violence motivated by their sexual orientation or how they felt or expressed their gender. They also recounted episodes of solidarity, understanding, mutual recognition, as well as pleasure and well-being. Therefore, we should ask ourselves: To what extent does the context of being in a small city influence these experiences? What are the particularities of LGBT experiences in small cities?

To answer these questions, we need to reflect on at least three elements which, in my view, are essential to understanding the specific case of Girona. We also need to reexamine some of the myths associated with small cities in terms of sexual and gender diversity. The first element is the high degree of public exposure to acquaintances, and the resulting social control among co-inhabitants. Although it is difficult to measure the exact extent of public exposure among the inhabitants of a city, in reality, people in Girona are quite commonly seen or recognized by someone they know in public spaces. This significantly affects how LGBT people express themselves in public, since there is constant surveillance regarding gender norms and sexual orientation. The LGBT people of Girona know this and thus deploy a set of measures that favor anonymity, or at least contribute to invisibility: not showing affection in public, avoiding certain attitudes, behaviors or practices that may ‘betray’ their sexual orientation or gender identification, or not going to places in the city that are associated with LGBT people. Nevertheless, this level of control and recognition also provides a greater sense of security for some LGBT people in the city because it also limits the options for aggression in public places. If an attack occurs, it is much easier to identify the perpetrators than it would be in a big city, because there is an increased chance that the victim or a bystander will be able to identify them. And this is not an insignificant factor if we take into account that, according to a survey by the Fundamental Rights Agency (2014), 53% of the most serious hate crimes committed in Europe against LGBT people take place in cafeterias, restaurants, pubs, clubs, public transport, street, squares, car parks or other public spaces. In contrast, the public visibility of LGBT people tends to permeate a large part of their social life, although it is true that coming out is a complex, recurring experience for all LGBT people and ‘the closet is structured in such a way that you are never simply either in or out’ (Eribon 1999). In small cities like Girona, LGBT people have more difficulties with resignification once their sexual orientation or gender identity is known by their wider social circle, since it can soon become **vox populi** and affect their professional career or
hinder access to jobs, for example. In this sense, Arnau, a top executive in the city admits that he must ‘tread very carefully’ at work with the idea of being gay. Social control regarding sexuality and gender is a lived reality for some of our interviewees in Girona. Foucault (1976) assures us that the only possible history of sexuality is one of its control and regulation. In the same vein, Plummer (1984, 228) claims that ‘there is no society where sexual experiences proceed untrammelled by social regulations – complete sexual freedom exists exclusively in the libertarian’s dream and the moral reformer’s nightmare’. For this reason, thinking of social control as a small-town issue, is little more than another way of negating the complete set of controls that operate across society as a whole.

The second of the elements we must analyze concerns access to sexual relationships and interactions. It should be pointed out, however, that the importance given to sexual relationships varies significantly among the participants, depending on whether they are lesbians, gays, bisexuals or trans, as well as on other aspects, such as age, the person’s visibility, and other interests. For example, Maria, a bisexual woman reports that, for her, ‘sex is unimportant regarding the person; what’s important is the person themselves, their values, what they feel about me’. In contrast, among gay men, sex is ever present. Carles explains that ‘Fucking is easy. The complicated thing is having a drink afterwards.’ Along the same lines, Maxi, who has a very active sex life, says he has no problems finding sex whenever he wants it in Girona. Also, Pau declares that ‘the biggest community in Girona is the sexual community […] just go on Grindr [the mobile dating app for men] and you can meet half of Girona. If you want sex, you’ll get it right away.’ Another participant, Martín, said much the same thing. The difficulty in finding sexual partners in a small city has long been used to explain sexile to a big city, but what many of the participants in this research are saying shows that, in a city like Girona, men who want to have sex with other men can do so without any great difficulty; they see access to sexual relationships as a relatively simple activity. Of course, in both large and small cities, the internet and mobile apps have become the principle tools for finding sexual partners. Therefore, although sex remains an important issue, especially for men who have sex with other men, people who live in small cities have strategies that allow them access to sexual relationships.

The third element we now discuss is the idea of LGBT loneliness associated with small cities, which is found in many of the narratives generally about LGBT life. We must first acknowledge the many obstacles that LGTB people have had to face in trying to make the best of their lives in Girona, and that some have found it too difficult to construct LGBT support networks and, consequently, have gone into sexile in Barcelona. It is, nevertheless, also true that others have organized their social life without their sexual
orientation or gender identity creating difficulties. While LGBT places of socialization and representation in the big city include LGBT bars and organizations promoting sexual liberation, in cities such as Girona, LGBT people seek other strategies that allow them to live their lives outside the classic LGBT circuits. Many of the people interviewed have found other spaces and groups with whom to share their affinities and pursuits, where they can express themselves freely as LGBT people, regardless of whether the group is wholly or partially LGBT, or predominantly heterosexual. In other words, LGBT people also find areas of solidarity in social networks that are not exclusively LGBT orientated. The so-called ‘LGBT community’ as a place of refuge is not really an option for many of the inhabitants of the city. However, this does not mean they are condemned to social isolation. Assuming that the ‘natural’ space for LGBT socialization is confined to LGBT bars and collectives, often rooted in the big city, is a mistake that, once again, makes invisible many other experiences and, to paraphrase Butler, livable lives. As Carles says ‘Girona is a city that doesn’t make LGBT social life difficult, but it doesn’t promote it, either’.

However, for some of the people interviewed, Girona is still ‘a very straight and conservative city’ (Nora). Many of them still find difficulties or limitations in expressing their sexual orientation or gender identity in certain areas of their lives, they are also aware that if they lived in a large city, they would have to face other kinds of challenges. That is why LGBT people find a variety of reasons to live in a small city like Girona. There are experiential reasons, described by Sara, for example, when she says Girona ‘has produced the most wonderful and the most painful things of her life’, showing that, for her, the links with a territory do not depend on its beauty or its material resources, but above all on the relationships that have been established there. There are environmental reasons: ‘It is so green and there are no buildings. We live in an area with a small forest next door, it doesn’t feel like we are in a city; no cars, no noise at night, it is very quiet. I’m in love with Girona!’ (Claudia). There are practical reasons, since there are plenty of public services, restaurants, bars, etc., and it is easy to maintain contacts with daily social networks: ‘I can afford myself the luxury of meeting up with my friends almost every day. I go to the bar on my own and I always meet friends’ (Arnau). There are reasons related to safety, since some feel that ‘there aren’t really any problems of discrimination’ (Ona). There are geographical reasons, because it means you can live a quiet life in a small city relatively close to Barcelona. As Neus says ‘Girona is not perfect but there are many things I like. I know the city, I can manage here, and I really like the surroundings.’ Yet, Pau emphasizes that in Girona ‘there is no gay neighborhood with a concentration of LGBT people, like there is in Barcelona or Madrid. We are more spread about here, and I find that logical […]’. In
Girona you can’t feel part of a community [of LGBT people] because there is no community.’ So, the dominant discourse associated with the LGBT community is connected to the imaginary of the big city, yet has a tenuous connection with other experiences of sexual and gender diversity among people who do not aspire to live in large urban environments.

**Conclusions**

The dominant discourse that associates LGBT communities with large metropolitan centers works to make invisible, disparage and underestimate the experiences of LGBT people who do not live in these social settings. LGBT experiences are highly diverse, they occur in multiple locations and cannot be reduced to an only large urban center. The hegemony of the big city in academic study and discussion of sexual and gender diversity must be reconsidered to include other contexts where the ‘LGBT community’ can be found; it must include places where such a community is neither operative nor, indeed, representative of the diversity of experiences, discourses and social practices. Experiences of sexuality and gender are not only shaped by the recurrent questions that permeate sociology, anthropology or feminist and LGBT studies which, depending on the disciplinary or political view, prioritize the typical variables of social class, gender, age, sexual orientation or culture. When analyzing the dimensions of power that shape sexual and gender relationships, as Johnston (2018) pointed out, we must also incorporate urban and territorial references as variables that shape the experiences and circumstances of LGBT people. Integrating territorial references implies considering the global and local dynamics of each urban context as it intersects with class, race, gender and sexual orientation. Only then can we carry out a more careful and rigorous analysis of social realities.

Finally, this research allows us to abandon the idea that *sexile* is the inevitable course of action that LGBT people must take if they are to cope with their sexual orientation or gender identity. Although we recognize that many LGBT people end up choosing life in the big city, it is not necessarily the obligatory destination of them all, nor is it something that all LGBT people residing in small cities or rural areas desire. There are many factors involved in choosing where to live and although sexual and gender issues play a fundamental role, they are not the only ones involved. Social control permeates the experiences of LGBT people. However, attempting to devise a scale that measures such social control as greater or lesser depending on the size of the city in question is, besides being tendentious, ineffective for this type of research. The subjectivity of each person in their own context plays a key role and this must be factored in, if a rigorous analysis is to be made. Therefore, it is time to put an end to the negative predictions of what awaits
LGBT people who do not reside in large cities. Despite the difficulties, many of them find sufficient reasons to live in small cities where they find their spaces of socialization, of coexistence and also, sometimes, of recognition.

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