

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

Navigating Queer Identities Within
Traditional Armenian Cultural Contexts

A graduate project submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Social Work

By

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Dedication

For my uncle Greg Sadoian, who taught me that life was meant to be lived authentically.

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Abstract

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Purpose: The purpose of this study was to explore how traditional Armenian cultural values impact Queer identity expression. The researcher hypothesized that LGBTQIA2S Armenians minimize or hide their identity due to specific religious cultural values. The researcher asked whether or not there is a correlation between the two variables.

Methods: Participants were recruited on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, where the researcher posted a short summation of the study, their title and contact information, and the link to the study. They began a demographic questionnaire, and then proceed to 2 Likert-scale surveys. The entire participation process took between 15-20 minutes, and the survey was completed on Qualtrics.

Results: There was a weak, positive linear correlation between QI and ACV, with higher levels of familial religiosity being related to lower levels of identity expression (see Table 1). There is a weak, positive linear correlation between QI & family support (see Table 1).

Discussion and Implications: In alignment with previous research (Agabian, 2018; Beukian, 2018), the respondents of this study indicated negative feelings regarding their Queer identity in relation to high levels of familial religiosity, as well as a higher likelihood of hiding their identity. These findings highlight the need for further research on the matter.

Keywords: Armenian, LGBTQIA2S, Queer, Traditional, Cultural, Middle East

Introduction

Research Problem

There are several articles using investigative journalism that focus on how LGBTQIA2S Armenians and their personal experiences within a culture that does not accept them. They also discuss and analyze the various cultural factors and influences that directly affect LGBTQIA2S Armenians and their identity expression. As Agabian (2018) highlights, LGBTQIA2S identities and expression are considered a subculture, and not part of the social norm within Armenian communities; it results in many having what could be considered a second identity in order to minimize risk to their role within sociocultural norms.

In previous literature, there are various factors that are common across articles, providing insight into significant trends and outcomes related to the topic. A majority portion of the existing literature agrees with key factors surrounding this topic. As referenced in separate articles (Beukian, 2018; Hakobyan, 2014; Sargsyan, 2017; Shirinian, 2017), in Armenian culture pre-colonization did not have objections or create legislation and social rules surrounding the condemnation of the LGBTQIA2S individuals within their community. It was not until Armenia was anglicized, where Christianity became the majority religion in the country, replacing spiritual beliefs that supported progressive views in terms of gender and sexuality. Though the country's culture has not been hospitable to the LGBTQIA2S community for a prolonged period of time, the aforementioned articles also highlight how grassroots activism within Armenia and diasporic Armenian communities is creating change within the current sociopolitical structure, and encouraging communities to be open to adjusting their views in a progressive direction.

Purpose of The Study

The purpose of this study was to provide more data on a prevailing social issue faced by LGBTQIA2S adults within their families and communities. Given that the majority of information is based off of interviewing and investigative journalism, the researcher sought to gather data that could accompany past publications and help create a better understanding of the information surrounding the Queer identity expression and suppression within traditional Armenian cultural contexts. The researcher hypothesized that LGBTQIA2S Armenians minimize or hide their identity due to specific religious cultural values; the more traditional of a background they come from the more likely they are to repress a Queer identity. The researcher asked whether or not there was a correlation between the two variables, Queer identity expression and traditional Armenian cultural values.

This study is significant in relation to social work, as it focused on a key human rights issue faced by LGBTQIA2S Armenians in terms of identity, security, familial relationships, and larger community acceptance. The condemnation of Queer identities within this culture can become violent and retributive, putting individuals at eminent risk of physical or emotional harm, and even death. Given that a social worker's job is to maintain the dignity and worth of person, it is directly related to a social worker's mission and key values. The struggle that LGBTQIA2S Armenians face is an issue in which they can make a tangible difference by helping to advocate for individuals fighting to retain their basic rights and obtain acceptance within their larger communities; in this case by way of research.

Literature Review

Traditional Armenian Cultural Values

Previous research analyzes the conservative ideology popular within the culture, and discusses how far right political ideology, which also has a strong conservative backing, has created more hostility and animosity that is aimed at the Armenian LGBTQIA2S community (Shirinian, 2019). She states that this far right fringe group contributes to falsified information about LGBTQIA2S individuals meant to portray them in a poor light, convincing others that they are a danger to the current social structure. Another article by OpenDemocracy (2016) elaborates on the physical and psychological dangers that this type of ideology creates and fosters, further contributing to the harm and sometimes death LGBTQIA2S Armenians face when they do not hide their identities. These risks and the psychological and physical toles they can take on a person largely contribute to the hiding of one's belonging to the Queer community.

Cultural Progression and Acceptance

Past research states that another key factor within this ideology is a blanket disapproval for Western ideals, with these groups linking alternative sexual and gender identities to the perversion of Westernized countries in reference to religious laws and legislations (OpenDemocracy, 2016). Comparatively, an article focusing on the characteristics and results of Armenian feminist values also highlights how non-Westernized feminism within the community has positively contributed to furthering progressive ideals, giving credit to the fact that non-Westernized political tactics are used (Tlostanova, Thapar-Björkert, & Koobak, 2016). In contrast to the previous articles, Sargsyan (2018) asserts that Armenia as a country and its larger diasporic communities are ready for significant sociopolitical change where LGBTQIA2S identities would be treated as a social norm. This is in conflict to the previous articles, that give

credit to current social justice movements advocating for positive social change, but they also acknowledge that due to the sociopolitical structure within Armenian society, this change will have to be slow and gradual.

Gender Roles and Expectations. Past research provides contrasting statements that reference domesticity in relation to female gender roles, and how they are important factors within Queer Armenian women's lives. The author goes on to assert that regardless of sexuality or gender identity, their domestic roles are an integral part of their identity as a whole (Shirinian, 2018). The article is in conflict with other literature on the topic because it uses a blanket assumption, much like Sargsyan's (2018) article, in that it retains a black and white view of what Armenian cultural values are, without regard to progress and the natural evolution of the culture. This helps to highlight the need for more research on the subject, as to gain a better understanding of current values and feelings within the culture.

Sociopolitical Influence. Previous research also makes a connection between post-Cold-War life within Armenia. Shirinian (2018) asserts that the state control that proceeded Soviet leadership, with the major reasoning behind disapproval of LGBTQIA2S individuals being due to fear of the disappearance of traditional family units, and the survival of the population as a whole. Armenia's idea of the typical family is rooted in traditional gender roles and ideals, and given that Armenia has been a country in turmoil for several years, the idea of extinction is a powerful tool. The looming threat of the Armenian people disappearing and archaic biblical gender roles create a volatile environment for those who identify under the LGBTQIA2S umbrella.

Methods

Sample

The sample for this study consisted of adult Armenians who identify under the LGBTQIA2S umbrella who lived in the U.S. The researcher sought this population because the literature shows a correlation between Armenia's traditional cultural values and increased mental distress in LGBTQIA2S Armenians (OpenDemocracy, 2016). Participants were recruited from social media sites Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter.

Data Collection Procedure

First, a short informational script was posted to the social media sites, and from there participants were able to click a link that took them to the beginning of the survey and Participant Information form. Participants were directed to read the form and to verify their consent before they were allowed on to proceed. Once they had consented, participants completed a demographic questionnaire, followed by two measurement scales that measure Queer identity expression and traditional Armenian cultural values. All recorded responses are anonymous and no identifying data was collected. An approval from IRB (Institutional Review Board) was obtained prior to data collection.

Measures

Demographic Variables

The first portion of the survey was the demographic portion, with questions asking subjects' background information, such as gender identity and sexuality, age, income level, generational immigrant status, level of education, and religious beliefs were included in the questionnaire. The distribution and the characteristics of the demographic variables were reported in descriptive analysis, and the important predictors of LGBTQIA2S identity suppression investigated in the subsequent analysis. See Appendix B for all survey items.

Queer Identity Expression

Queer identity expression was measured by a 7 item, 5-point Likert scale to assess participants overall identity and identity expression as an LGBTQIA2S identified individual. The items were based on agreement or disagreement with each statement, and asked participants about their identity expression, how they felt others within their family and community perceived them, and how they felt about their overall identity as a person a part of the LGBTQIA2S community; the scale is not standardized and was created by the researcher. The researcher chose to create their own scale because they felt existing scales would not be able to adequately measure the variable due to its specificity.

Armenian Cultural Values. Armenian cultural values were measured by a 7 item, 5-point Likert scale that used agreement scales measuring agreement or disagreement with statements relating to traditional Armenian cultural values, their upbringing within the culture, and how accepting they perceived their family and overall community to be of LGBTQIA2S Armenians; the scale is not standardized and was created by the researcher. The researcher chose

to create their own scale because they felt existing scales would not be able to adequately measure the variable due to its specificity.

Results

Data Analysis

Among the 93 surveys collected, thirteen cases were deleted due to missing values on either variable. Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) 27 was used to perform descriptive analysis and to test underlying assumptions for path model.

Descriptive Analysis

Table 2 presents characteristics of the sample. 55% of the respondents identified as cisgender female in terms of gender. About 45% of respondents identified as Gay in terms of sexuality, with those identifying as Queer ranking second at 27.5%, with 58% of respondents indicating they had earned a bachelor's in terms of educational attainment. Overall, almost half (45%) of respondents identified as Atheist or Agnostic, with 37.5% identified as Christian. Respondents of this survey were primarily identified as Armenian or Armenian American at 78.8%, with those who identify as Armenian and another ethnicity at 21.3%. 53.3% of respondents were between the ages of 25-39, and 45% were 18-24 years of age. This study's respondents were primarily first generation and low income (\$0-45,000/yearly), with 50% of participants identifying as first generation and 43.8% identifying as low-income.

Correlations. Table 1 shows the Pearson correlation coefficient for Queer identity expression and traditional Armenian cultural values variables. As presented in the table, Queer identity expression and traditional Armenian cultural values have a linear relationship ($r = 0.334$, $p < 0.001$). The direction of this relationship is positive, as a higher score in the traditional Armenian values scale increases the score for the Queer identity scale; a higher number indicates higher levels of familial religiosity and lower levels of Queer identity acceptance. Familial religiosity and familial cultural values were positively associated ($r = 0.585$, $p < 0.01$), with respondents who reported higher levels of familial religiosity also indicating more conservative

familial values. Perceived level of support from family was positively associated with Queer identity expression ($r = 0.257, p < 0.021$). These correlations suggest that traditional Armenian cultural values may be an important correlate of Queer identity expression.

Discussion

In alignment with previous research studying the effects of traditional Armenian cultural values on the Queer identity expression of LGBTQIA2S Armenian adults (Agabian, 2018; Beukian, 2018), the respondents of this study indicated negative feelings regarding their Queer identity in relation to their family's level of religiosity; there was a positive, linear relationship between family religiosity and queer identity. What's more, is that the respondents who indicated more conservative values (i.e. anti-Queer) within their family when they had also indicated a high level of familial religiosity reported low levels of familial support having to do with their Queer identity, as shown by the analysis between the ACV variable and statements measuring familial support. Respondents reported less acceptance of their Queer identity in relation to traditional cultural values, and indicated that they would be more likely to hide their identity if their family was less accepting, as supported by descriptive analysis of the QI variable and agreement statements measuring feelings about their Queer identity as it relates to their family's cultural values. This study is significant in relation to social work, as it focuses on a key human rights issue faced by LGBTQIA2S Armenians in terms of identity, security, familial relationships, and larger community acceptance. The condemnation of Queer identities within this culture can become violent and retributive, putting individuals in eminent risk of physical or emotional harm, and even death in some instances. Given that part of a social worker's job is to maintain the dignity and worth of person, the researcher saw this issue as being directly related to a social worker's mission and key values. As social workers, the struggle that LGBTQIA2S Armenians face is an issue that they can make a tangible difference by helping to advocate for and with individuals who are fighting to retain their basic rights, and to obtain acceptance within their own families and community; in this case by way of research.

In previous literature, there are various factors that are common across articles, providing insight into significant trends and outcomes related to the topic. A majority portion of the existing literature agrees with key factors surrounding this topic. As referenced in separate articles (Beukian, 2018; Hakobyan, 2014; Sargsyan, 2017), culture pre-colonization did not have objections or create legislation and social rules surrounding the condemnation of the LGBTQIA2S individuals within their community. It was not until Armenia was colonized and anglicized, where Christianity became the majority religion in the country, replacing spiritual beliefs that supported progressive views in terms of gender and sexuality. This is consistent with the study's results showing a positive, linear correlation between traditional Armenian cultural values, in this case the religious aspect, and Queer identities as shown by descriptive analysis and Pearson correlation ($r = 0.334$, $p < 0.001$).

Another article by Tamar Shirinian (2019) further analyzes the conservative ideology popular within the culture, and discusses how far right political ideology, which also has a strong conservative backing, has created more hostility and animosity that is aimed at the Armenian LGBTQIA2S community. She states that this far right fringe group contributes to falsified information about LGBTQIA2S individuals meant to portray them in a poor light, convincing others that they are a danger to the current social structure. Another article by OpenDemocracy (2016) elaborates on the physical and psychological dangers that this type of ideology creates and fosters, further contributing to the harm and sometimes death LGBTQIA2S Armenians face when they do not hide their identities. This ties in with the study by way of political ideology and how it has affected not only Armenian culture, but how Queer Armenians navigate their lives according to their identities. In contrast to the previous articles, Sargsyan (2018) asserts that Armenia as a country and its larger diasporic communities, are ready for significant

sociopolitical change where LGBTQIA2S identities would be treated as a social norm. This is in conflict to the study given the current political and religious climate within the Armenian community; many are ready for change but those who oppose change still outnumber them. However, the results of this study lend some support to the theory, as exemplified by the weak positive, linear correlation between Armenian Cultural Values and agreement statements measuring familial religious ideology as it pertains to the LGBTQIA2S population ($r = 0.585$, $p < 0.01$). These results show that the correlation between anti-Queer views within the Armenian community and the level of religiosity could progress to a point where there is no correlation; i.e. an Armenian being religious will not align closely with anti-Queer views. The results of this study show that conservative, anti-Queer values and strict religiosity are still the norm within Armenian culture, but that there is a promising notion of progress and change.

The implications for this study in relation to social work policy, research, and education suggest that not only is further quantitative research necessary to fully understand the issue, but while Queer Armenians face certain unique challenges, the most prominent issues they face are similar to other religious ethnic communities, and therefore practicing professionals can use their past knowledge and cultural competence to work with members of this community successfully. Both the strong and weak positive correlations found between variables and agreement statements measuring Armenian Cultural Values and Queer Identity signify that there is still a long way to go within the Armenian community till the larger LGBTQIA2S community within it feels safe, accepted, and as if they belong in their own culture, and that while progress may be slow, it is happening and will continue.

Limitations

There are three major limitations that could be addressed in future research. First, the study used a convenience sampling and snowball sampling to assure adequate sample size. Second, the sample size of 80 is also a limitation, as it allows for data successful analysis, but is not large enough to generalize the findings to a larger population. Lastly, the data analysis includes only the two Likert-scales, and does not factor in the demographic factors that may contribute to certain results. To address these limitations, future studies should focus on gathering a larger sample size, as well as using simple or systematic sampling in order to ensure a truly unbiased, random sample that can be generalized to the larger population effectively.

Conclusion

The anti-Queer sentiments that LGBTQIA2S Armenians face not only alienates them from their own communities, it also puts them at an innate risk concerning their physical safety, as well as their ability to function socially regarding acceptance by their family and larger community, and the ability to find and maintain employment and housing if they are seeking to stay within their ethnic community after disclosing their Queer identity. The researcher hypothesized a correlation between Queer identity expression and traditional Armenian cultural values, and the results align: traditional Armenian cultural values and familial religiosity are positively correlated with decreased Queer identity acceptance as well as Queer identity expression. The results highlight the need for more activism and education within the Armenian community to help foster acceptance and decrease the negative, violent happenings to the Queer Armenian community. The implications of this study are that while negative views of Queer individuals are still a prevalent issue within the larger Armenian community, they are not unshakeable and they are not permanent if progress continues and is encouraged.

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Appendix A

Findings Tables

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Study Variables

Variable	id_comp	val_comp	MFIR	IFSBMF
1. id_comp ^a	—	.334**	—	.257*
2. val_comp ^b	.334**	—	0.62	—
3. MFIR ^c	—	.585***	—	—
4. IFSBMF ^d	.257*	—	—	—

^a id_comp= identity composite score

^b val_comp= values composite score

^c MFIR= My family is religious

^d IFSBMF= I feel supported by my family

*p < 0.021 **p < 0.002 *** p < 0.001

Table 2
Demographic Characteristics

Demographic category	n	%	M	SD
<u>1. Age</u>				
18-24	36	38.7		
25-39	43	50.2		
40-59	01	18.2		
<u>1. Education</u>				
GED/High School	16	17.2		
BA	47	46.2		
MA	13	1.1		
Age			21.25	.524
Education				

Appendix B

Survey Instruments

Queer Identity Expression Measurement

I tend to keep to myself when it comes to my gender and/or sexual identity.	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Somewhat Disagree	3 Neutral	4 Somewhat Agree	5 Strongly Agree
I would feel accepted in a setting where everyone knew my sexuality and/or gender identity.	1 Strongly Agree	2 Somewhat Agree	3 Neutral	4 Somewhat Disagree	5 Strongly Disagree
I feel like I fit in with the larger U.S. Queer community.	1 Strongly Agree	2 Somewhat Agree	3 Neutral	4 Somewhat Disagree	5 Strongly Disagree
I am proud that I am a part of the Queer community.	1 Strongly Agree	2 Somewhat Agree	3 Neutral	4 Somewhat Disagree	5 Strongly Disagree
My Queer identity feels like a burden.	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Somewhat Disagree	3 Neutral	4 Somewhat Agree	5 Strongly Agree
My Queer identity is important to me.	1 Strongly Agree	2 Somewhat Agree	3 Neutral	4 Somewhat Disagree	5 Strongly Disagree
I think that people perceive me as being a part of the Queer community.	1 Strongly Agree	2 Somewhat Agree	3 Neutral	4 Somewhat Disagree	5 Strongly Disagree

Armenian Cultural Values Measurement

I was taught to accept people who identify as Queer	1 Strongly Agree	2 Somewhat Agree	3 Neutral	4 Somewhat Disagree	5 Strongly Disagree
My family is religious	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Somewhat Disagree	3 Neutral	4 Somewhat Agree	5 Strongly Agree
My family is accepting of my identity	1 Strongly Agree	2 Somewhat Agree	3 Neutral	4 Somewhat Disagree	5 Strongly Disagree
My family believes that being Queer is a sin	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Somewhat Disagree	3 Neutral	4 Somewhat Agree	5 Strongly Agree
I feel supported by my family	1 Strongly Agree	2 Somewhat Agree	3 Neutral	4 Somewhat Disagree	5 Strongly Disagree
I see Armenian culture as generally accepting of different genders and sexualities.	1 Strongly Agree	2 Somewhat Agree	3 Neutral	4 Somewhat Disagree	5 Strongly
I feel as if disclosing my identity has or will harm my relationship with my family.	1 Strongly Disagree	2 Somewhat Disagree	3 Neutral	4 Somewhat Agree	5 Strongly Agree

Demographic Questionnaire

1. What is your gender identity?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Cisgender female b) Cisgender male c) Transgender female d) Transgender male e) Non-binary/Genderqueer/Gender non-conforming f) Other: _____
2. What is your highest level of education?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) High school/GED b) bachelor's degree c) master's degree d) PhD e) none of the above
3. In terms of sexuality, how do you identify?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Queer b) Gay c) Bisexual d) Straight e) Asexual f) Other: _____
4. What is your religion?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Christian b) Muslim c) Jewish d) Catholic e) Atheist or Agnostic f) Other: _____
5. What generation of immigrant are you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) 1st generation b) 2nd generation c) 3rd generation d) 4th generation or later
6. How old are you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) 18-24 b) 25-39 c) 40-59 d) 60+
7. What is your socioeconomic status?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) Low (\$0-\$45,000) b) Middle (\$45,001-\$92,000) c) High (\$92,001+)