

PhD project outline

1. Preliminary title

The role of sexual orientation in suicidality. Exclusion mechanisms of social integration among LGB adolescents and young adults.

2. Research question

How does sexual orientation affect suicidality in LGB adolescents and young adults?

3. Links to the thematic focus of PROWEL

Suicide, or the desire for it, not only represents a heavy fate for the immediate environment, but suicide calls into question the democratization of general satisfaction and thus problematizes the relationship between the individual and society. According to Bründel, Durkheim saw suicide as the disruption of the relationship between the individual and society and, on the basis of his integration and anomie theory, explained to what extent the degree of integration of an individual into society and the acceptance of its norms and rules could be regarded as a measure of the risk of suicide (cf. Bründel 1993, 45). An instructive point of departure is Durkheim's emphasis on the social creation of suicide. It allows a perspective which opens up the sociological approach as an important extension to research on suicidality. With the issue of suicidality, not only subjective well-being is addressed, but also institutional influences that build enormous pressure on individuals. It allows to work out how individuals navigate within their immediate environment and how they deal with the social demands placed on them.

4. Research goals/abstract

The issue of suicidality among LGB adolescents and young adults represents a complex nexus. This topic allows to reflect on the vulnerability of the adolescent phase, gender identity, sexuality, sexual orientation, and psychological and social well-being.

This dissertation project intends to better understand the mechanisms in which sexual orientation is viewed as an insurmountable obstacle to living in a society. Insights will be gathered about the processes that make sexual orientation an exclusion criterion for integration into society. In this way, the academic knowledge about gender as a fundamental structural principle of social order is to be broadened and, in connection with this, gender normative constraints which are particularly valid for LGB persons are to be highlighted.

5. State of relevant research/research gap/originality

Studies show that LGBT individuals are more affected by suicidal behavior than heterosexual and cisgender individuals. Risk factors include difficulties in the family, bullying, more difficult social contacts, structural discrimination, and individual discrimination (Haas et al. 2011; Yıldız 2018; Gorse 2020). The adolescent phase in particular is characterized by particular vulnerability in this regard. Although deaths in adolescence are basically rare, suicide is nevertheless a more frequent cause of death in these deaths compared with older age groups. In 2012, the cause of death in Switzerland of 31.9% of young men and 13.2% of young women was suicide (Schweizerisches Gesundheitsobservatorium 2015, 60). A Swiss study concluded that homosexual and bisexual male adolescents would have a suicide attempt rate five times higher than heterosexual male adolescents (According to Wang et al. based on Bundesamt für Gesundheit 2016, 14).

Suicidality among LGBT individuals, despite initial findings, remains an understudied phenomenon and needs more research. In this regard, Haas et al. emphasize both the need to clarify the conceptual definitions of suicidal behavior for research purposes and the need to analyze the specific living conditions of LGBT people in greater depth in order to better understand their involvement in the process of suicidal behavior (cf. Haas et al.).

By focusing on sexual orientation in adolescence, the following dissertation project aims to contribute to a better understanding of the processes of suicidality. This should help to improve the living conditions and health of sexual minorities in the longer term.

6. Theoretical frame

Current scholarly engagement with gender fundamentally assumes that gender is a construction through complex social processes (cf. (Babka and Posselt 2016; Gildemeister and Hericks 2012; Jagose and Genschel 2005). In this regard, Babka and Posselt explain that gender theoretical approaches are primarily dedicated to the social practices, mechanisms, and institutions that have produced gender and ask to what extent these gender relations are stabilized, naturalized, and socially codified (Babka and Posselt 2016, 14). Complementing this, they emphasize that since the 1990s queer theoretical voices have increasingly problematized the separation between biological and social gender and, linked to this, the "entire normative order, which is essentially based on the binary oppositions of man/woman and heterosexuality/homosexuality" (Babka and Posselt 2016, 14). Judith Butler, in particular, should be mentioned here. With her writings she has, as Babka and Posselt say, formulated a wholehearted problematization of the basic assumptions of feminist and gender theoretical positions. She would argue that not only the social sex (gender), but also the (supposedly) natural sex (sex) is ultimately also produced and stabilized via performative acts (cf. Babka and Posselt 2016, 36). Butler's reflections,

according to Gildemeister and Hericks, examine the question of how gender identity (gender), sexuality (desire) and biological sex (sex) are interrelated. For Butler, everyday belief assumes that gender identity and sexuality are predetermined by a sexual body and thus all three dimensions are interconnected. For Butler, however, this connectedness is a discursive positing (cf. Gildemeister and Hericks 2012, 212).

These assumptions of gender and queer theoretical perspectives place the developmental phase of adolescents and young adults in a context that assumes a high degree of structural interconnectedness and presupposes an embedding in normative beliefs. Particular hurdles arise for young people who recognize during their own developmental phase that they do not fit normative categories of the majority society. This is true for LGBT youth and young adults. Already difficult questions concerning their own sexual and gender identity become a dilemma. This dissertation project wants to focus specifically on sexual orientation and thereby problematize the historically and culturally created categories of "homosexuality" and "heterosexuality" (cf. Jagose and Genschel 2005, 19–22). The shaping of a sexuality (desire), which is not oriented towards heterosexuality, is to be understood as a potential for conflict. Butler assumes that heterosexuality plays a stabilizing role for gender norms. Thus, a causal connection between sexuality and gender is erroneously assumed, which is used especially in homophobia to declare faulty gender identities (cf. Butler 2013, 27).

Based on this, the question arises to what extent a tension between sexual norm conception and non-heterosexual sexuality can initially be established and furthermore asked how it could be contextualized in the suicidal process of LGB youth and young adults.

7. Methodological approach

This dissertation project takes place within the framework of an SNF funded research project. There is the possibility to use the collected data material of the SNF project for the dissertation. The SNF project wants to understand data sampling and analysis as a circular research process following Grounded Theory according to Corbin and Strauss (1990). In doing so, great openness should initially characterize the entry into the research field. There will be n=40-50 interviews conducted over the course of the 4 year project. This number is composed as follows: Interviews with adolescents and young adults who are homosexual (males and females = 8-10), bisexual (4-5), transgender (4-5), and heterosexual (4-5) and their social environment (20-25). Participants will be interviewed using problem-centered interviews according to Witzel (1985) and asked about the process leading up to the suicide attempt (min. one attempt in the last 12 months. max. total of three attempts).

For the present dissertation project, it remains to be clarified whether independent data material will be added to the already collected data material in order to investigate the own research

interest. In this context, the dissertation project is understood as a qualitative research project. At the same time, it should be ensured that suitable analytical procedures are chosen for a secondary analysis of the data material. An orientation phase in the first semester of 2021 will serve this purpose. The more difficult research conditions, caused by Covid-19, which affect the access to the field, shall also be taken into account by this.

References

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