

## PROXIMITY AND INTIMACY WITH HOMOSEXUALS: WHAT (DIS)EMBARRASSMENT?

**Hélder Meireles Cardeira**

Master of Clinical Psychology; PhD student at the Extremadura University; Estrada Nacional 113 Charneca-do-Bailadouro Touria-Pousos 2410-235 Leiria Portugal (Cellphone: 912221394).  
helder.cardeira@hotmail.com;

**Lisete dos Santos Mendes Mónico**

Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of the University of Coimbra; member of the Institute of Cognitive Psychology and Vocational Development (IPCDVS); member of the Research Group on Psychosocial and Cognitive Processes;  
lisete\_monico@fpce.uc.pt.

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### ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the embarrassment degree due to the proximity and intimacy with people with a homosexual orientation. We conducted a study with a non-probabilistic sample, through an online questionnaire involving 695 subjects, 215 males and 477 females, aged 17 to 60 years. We applied the Rejection at Proximity/Intimacy Scale [30], and we also collected information about beliefs in God, religiousness level and a several sociodemographic variables.

The results show that the biggest source of embarrassment is due to the possibility of having a homosexual son/daughter. Men have higher levels than women, and age has a little influence on levels of embarrassment with proximity/intimacy with homosexuals. The religion showed to have a significant weight in the embarrassment levels, evidencing Catholics and individuals from minority religions with higher levels, as opposed to atheists.

The embarrassment levels showed themselves positively associated to belief in God and the religiousness level in people.

*Keywords:* Homosexuality; Embarrassment; Prejudice; Homossexuals.

### RESUMO

O presente estudo pretende analisar o grau de constrangimento face à proximidade e à intimidade com pessoas com orientação homossexual. We conducted a study with a non-probability sample, through an online questionnaire involving 695 subjects, 215 males and 477 females, aged 17 to 60 years. Aplicámos a Escala de Rejeição à Proximidade/Intimidade (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995),

## PROXIMITY AND INTIMACY WITH HOMOSEXUALS: WHAT (DIS)EMBARRASSMENT?

e recolhemos informação sobre a crença em Deus, o grau de religiosidade e um conjunto de variáveis sociodemográficas.

Os resultados indicam que a maior fonte de constrangimento prende-se com a possibilidade de ter um filho(a) homossexual. Os homens apresentam níveis de superiores aos das mulheres e a idade mostrou ter pouca influência aos níveis de constrangimento com a proximidade/intimidade com homossexuais. A religião mostrou ter um peso significativo nos níveis de constrangimento, evidenciando-se os católicos e os indivíduos de religiões minoritárias mais constrangidos, por oposição aos ateus e aos indivíduos sem religião. Os níveis de constrangimento mostraram-se ainda positivamente associados à crença em Deus e ao grau de religiosidade das pessoas.

Palavras-chave: Homossexualidade; Constrangimento; Preconceito; Homossexuais.

This study aims to analyze the embarrassment degree of Portuguese citizens regarding the proximity and intimacy with people with a homosexual orientation.

We consider the embarrassment is somehow a result of prejudice, in other words, is an adverse attitude towards an individual, just because he belongs to an outgroup, usually assessed uniformly and negatively. The embarrassment can be understood as a result of a particular cultural-historical and political context, learned during social interaction (Lima, 2011).

In the period after the World War 2, "new expressions" emerged about embarrassment, more subtle, since individuals do not want to be prejudiced and, inversely, claim to be inclusive (Lima & Vala, 2004) – we talk about forms of prejudice dubbed modern (McConahay, 1986), subtle (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995), or symbolic (Sears & Henry, 2003). Although individuals do not wish to be prejudiced, yet, they have a dislike or even an aversion to the outgroup, the perceived difference between them and the outgroup. Another aspect is that they do not attribute positive characteristics to outgroup (Lima & Vale, 2004).

In Portugal, as in other countries, the sexuality issues were treated mostly in a way dominated by Roman Christianity perspective, sexuality is an act solely for procreation, so that, all other sexual activities are seen as sinful and contrary to God. Throughout history, psychology also contributed to the pathologizing of homosexuality, so it's important to create scientific knowledge up to date and consistent with the ethical principles of scientific competence and responsibility (Código Deontológico; Ordem dos Psicólogos Portugueses, 2011).

Despite of enormous social changes and the production of positive policies around homosexuality theme, such changes tend to remain hostage at a context still dominated by conceptions arising from a history laden, with a more religious morality than ethics and, in essence, heteronormative, which highlights the need for more scientific information (Moleiro, Pinto, & Pereira, 2012). Between different contexts and events, current studies show the existence of prejudice and discrimination toward homosexuals (Falcão, 2004; Green, 1999; Lacerda, Pereira, & Camino, 2002; Rios, 2002). We believe the embarrassment is integrated in the "new expressions of prejudice" (Lima & Vala, 2004), it is important to assess current levels of embarrassment in Portuguese citizens when in proximity and intimacy with people with a homosexual orientation.

## METHOD

### Aims

This study aims to analyze the embarrassment degree regarding the proximity and intimacy with people with a homosexual orientation. The aim is to know how much the individual feels embarrassed, or how would he feel if faced with several situations involving proximity and/or intimacy with homosexuals. We also intend to investigate whether the levels of embarrassment vary according to

socio-demographic data such as age, gender and marital status, as well as the belief in God and the Religiousness level.

### Sample

The sample is defined as non-probabilistic, composed mainly of college students. We obtained 695 valid questionnaires, 215 male and 477 female. Considering the subjects ages, we verified that lies between a minimum of 17 and a maximum of 60 years with a mean of  $M = 24.91$  and  $SD = 7.91$  years. Regarding marital status, we found that 561 (80.7%) are single, 69 (9.9%) are married, 39 (5.6%) living in consensual union and 21 (3.0%) are divorced.

In terms of religion, the majority is *Catholic* (63.8%), followed by *No Religion* (21.3%) or *Other Religion* (7.1%) and, most recently, the *Atheists* (6.7%). As for belief in God, the majority *Always Believed* (54.8%), while 21.7% *Do Not Believe*, but *have believed in the past*. *Never Believed* 18.7% and only 2.9% *Believe Now, but not before*. Given the degree of religiosity, the higher percentage of responses was for *Moderately religious* (33.5%), followed by *Little Religious or Nothing* (around 28%). The *Quite Religious* option has 6.2%, while in *Very Religious* we verified only 2.0%.

### Material

We applied the Rejection at Proximity/Intimacy Scale (RPS), developed by Pettigrew & Meertens (1995), and adapted by Lacerda, Pereira, and Camino (2002), to assess the most egregious aspects of prejudice. In Lacerda's study (2002), were used five items related to daily life, we added two items related to intimacy with homosexuals (friend, coworker, homosexual son, boss, neighbors and children friends). The answers were given on a *Likert* scale, 1 (not embarrassed) to 7 (very uncomfortable).

### Procedures

This study complied with the action principles of research presented in the Code of Ethics of the Portuguese Psychologists (OOP, 2011).

We sent a letter to the Higher Education Institutions to explain the study and request the release of the questionnaires to students. After permission, questionnaires were uploaded in Google doc's platform and subsequently sent by email to all students. It was explained that the questionnaire was designed to better understand the opinions about homosexuality and we assured that all data would be treated with the utmost secrecy and confidentiality.

### Data analysis

After coding and data computerization, we performed the statistical treatment through the computer program *Statistical Package for Social Sciences* (SPSS), 20.0 *Windows* version. In the statistical analysis we used the work of various authors. To the question of *measures in psychology and selection criteria of technical data analysis* we focused on Andrews, Klem, Davidson, O'Malley, and Rodgers (1981), as well as Kenny, Kashy, and Bolger (1998), and on Quivy & Campenhoudt (1998). Whereas the study of the measures reliability, and *descriptive* and *exploratory data analysis*, as well as *multivariate analysis of variance* we rely on Alferes (1997), Almeida and Pinto (1995), Cohen (1998), Gil (1999), Howell (1997), Maroco (2003), Pereira (2008), Pestana and Gageiro (2000), Pinto (2009), Reis (1999, 2000), Stevens (1996), and Tabachnick and Fidell (2001).

### Results

#### Reliability and Descriptive Analysis of Rejection at Proximity/Intimacy Scale

In Table 1 we present the mean (M) and standard deviations (SD) of the *Rejection at*

## PROXIMITY AND INTIMACY WITH HOMOSEXUALS: WHAT (DIS)EMBARRASSMENT?

*Proximity/Intimacy Scale* (RPS), as well as the correlations of items constituents of the RPS scale, with the set of items evaluators, and the value of the coefficient of internal consistency without the item for each element.

The value found, .921, illustrates an extremely high consistency, given the low number of items (7). Furthermore, when analyzing the total coefficients without each item, we found that none of the items decreases the reliability of the entire, so, all items reveal themselves indispensable to good internal consistency.

Table 1 – Mean (*M*), standard deviation (*SD*), total-item correlation, internal consistency coefficients, of Cronbach without the respective items and their age correlation of the Rejection at Proximity/Intimacy Scale (RPS)

RPS Items	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Correlation total-item	$\alpha$ total without item
1. Having a homosexual friend (assumed)	1,58	1,2	,795	,908
2. Having a homosexual coworker	1,54	1,2	,809	,907
3. Having a homosexual boss, with the	1,59	1,3	,815	,905
4. See homosexual couples dating	2,82	1,8	,686	,918
5. Having a homosexual son/daughter	3,06	2,0	,716	,917
6. If your son/daughter had friendships with	1,83	1,5	,822	,902
7. Living with homosexuals (assumed)	2,28	1,8	,796	,905
Global RPS ( $\alpha = .921$ )	2.10	1.5		

Given the average scores, we found that the embarrassment level associated with each item is below the midpoint of the scale, showing a low level of embarrassment. However, as can be seen, *Having a homosexual son/daughter* (item 5) is the major source of embarrassment, followed by *See Homosexual couples dating* (item 4) and *Living with homosexuals* (item 7). Items that indicate minor source of embarrassment related to the homosexual are: *Having a homosexual coworker* (item 2), *Having a homosexual friend* (item 1) and *Having a homosexual boss, with the appropriate expertise* (item 3). Figure 1 shows graphically the mean scores.

Figure 1 – Items means scores of the Rejection Proximity/Intimacy Scale (RPS)

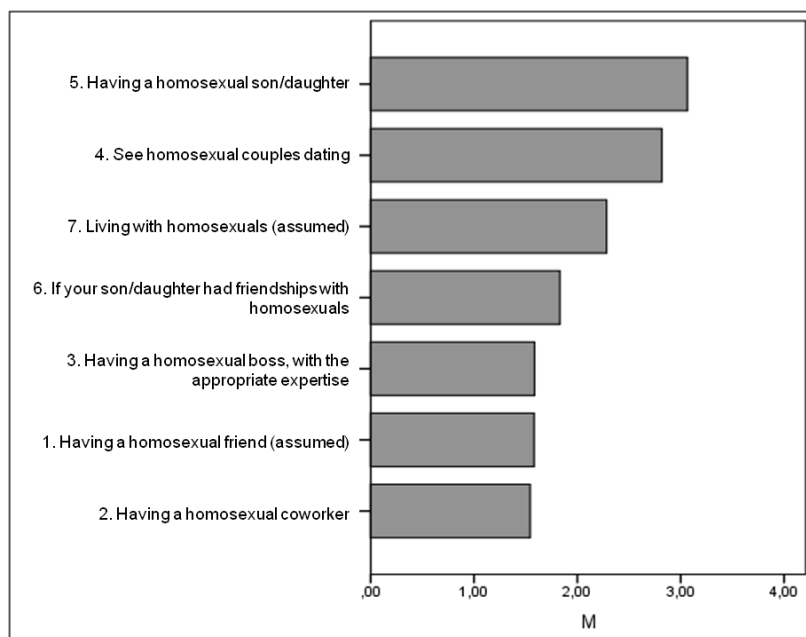


Table 2 - Mean scores and standard deviations of the Rejection Proximity / Intimacy Scale (RPS) based on gender: Student's t-test for independent samples and correlations with age

	Gender				t (690)	r age
	Male (n = 215)		Female (n = 477)			
	M	SD	M	SD		
<i>Global RSP</i>	2,48	1,69	1,93	1,10	5,14***	,057
<i>Items</i>						
1. <i>Having a homosexual friend (assumed)</i>	1,94	1,63	1,42	1,00	5,19***	,051
2. <i>Having a homosexual coworker</i>	1,97	1,70	1,35	0,93	6,14***	,048
3. <i>Having a homosexual boss, with the appropriate expertise</i>	2,01	1,79	1,39	1,03	5,75***	,047
4. <i>See homosexual couples dating</i>	3,10	2,14	2,69	1,73	2,69**	-,049
5. <i>Having a homosexual son/daughter</i>	3,37	2,25	2,93	1,93	2,63**	,056
6. <i>If your son/daughter had friendships with homosexuals</i>	2,20	1,86	1,66	1,32	4,40***	,074*
7. <i>Living with homosexuals (assumed)</i>	2,78	2,17	2,05	1,69	4,79***	,114**

\* p = .05    \*\* p = .003

## PROXIMITY AND INTIMACY WITH HOMOSEXUALS: WHAT (DIS)EMBARRASSMENT?

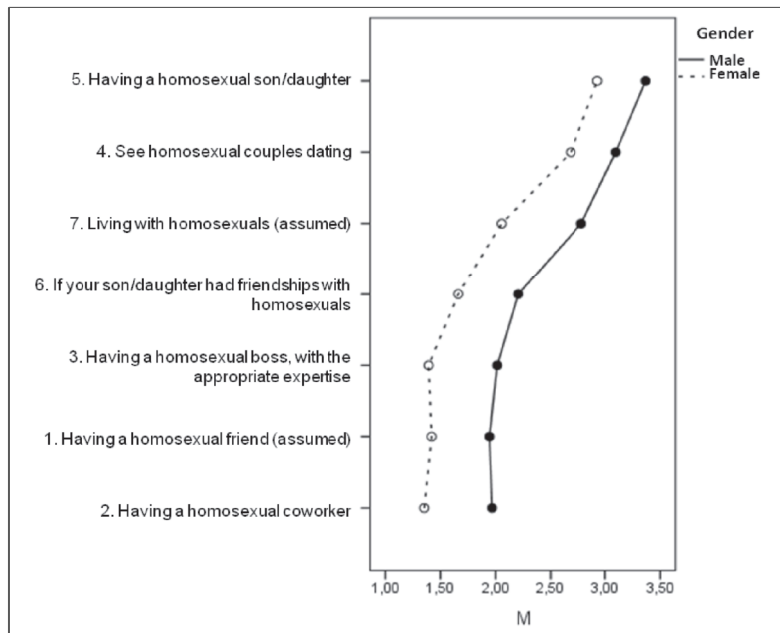
To test the differences between genders, we used the Student's t-test to independent samples, having as independent variable (IV) male and female, and as dependent variables (DVs) gender mean scores obtained, respectively, in each of the scales analyzed (see Table 2).

As can be seen, all differences are statistically significant, indicating a significantly higher embarrassment for men, on all items (see graphic, Figure 2).

Given the correlations with age, only two relations are statistically significant. These correlations indicate that with increasing age (the oldest people), most people feel uncomfortable with "Living with homosexuals" and "If your son/daughter had friendships with homosexuals". However, the correlation magnitude is low, according to Cohen (1988) classification.

Moreover, age showed no influence on attitudes toward *Having a homosexual friend*, *Having a homosexual coworker*, *Having a homosexual boss, with the appropriate expertise*, *See homosexual couples dating* and *Having a homosexual son/daughter*.

Figure 2 – Rating items of Rejection Proximity / Intimacy Scale (RPS) by participant's gender.



Given the religion influence, we considered the following levels: No/Without Religion, Atheist, Catholic and Other Religion (minority religions in Portugal). We calculated a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA), taking religion variable as IV, and DV's each of the dimensions of the scales (see Table 3).

Table 3 - Mean scores and standard deviations of the Rejection Proximity / Intimacy Scale (RPS) based on religion: Univariate tests and correlations with Belief in God and Religiousness level

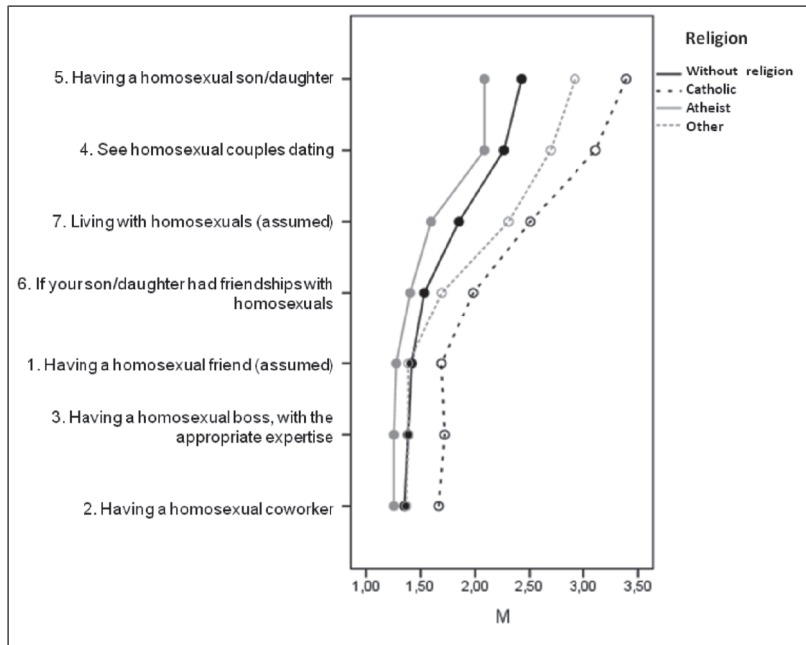
Scales in analysis	Religion								F (2, 687)	Belief in God (r)	Religiousness level (r)
	Without religion (n = 148)		Catholic (n = 443)		Atheist (n = 47)		Other (n = 49)				
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD			
RPS										,172***	,197***
1. Having a homosexual friend (assumed)	1,42	1,19	1,69	1,33	1,28	0,88	1,39	0,81	3,32*	,101**	,157***
2. Having a homosexual coworker	1,35	1,16	1,67	1,35	1,26	0,79	1,37	0,81	3,74*	,072	,136***
3. Having a homosexual boss, with the appropriate expertise	1,39	1,24	1,72	1,44	1,26	0,94	1,39	0,98	3,88**	,078*	,123**
4. See homosexual couples dating	2,26	1,69	3,11	1,92	2,09	1,59	2,69	1,73	10,80***	,169***	,173***
5. Having a homosexual son/daughter	2,43	1,87	3,39	2,04	2,09	1,78	2,92	1,96	13,10***	,223***	,224***
6. If your son/daughter had friendships with homosexuals	1,53	1,34	1,98	1,61	1,40	1,14	1,69	1,25	4,80**	,155***	,187***
7. Living with homosexuals (assumed)	1,85	1,59	2,51	1,97	1,60	1,44	2,31	1,92	6,93***	,147***	,133**

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

All items of the Rejection Proximity/Intimacy Scale indicate statistically significant differences. Catholic and other religion individuals are those who feel more embarrassment, contrary to atheists and non-religion individuals, who feel less embarrassment.

**PROXIMITY AND INTIMACY WITH HOMOSEXUALS: WHAT (DIS)EMBARRASSMENT?**

Figure 3 – Average dimensions of RPS Scale in function of participant's religion



We also verified that all correlations are statistically significant, with belief in God and Religiousness level, indicating progressively higher levels of embarrassment as the belief in God increases as well as Religiousness level. The item 2 - *Having a homosexual coworker*, is an exception, because it hasn't relation between embarrassment and belief in God. The relation proved to be stronger with the embarrassment in relation of *Having a homosexual son/daughter* possibility.

Table 4 - Mean scores and standard deviations of the four scales under consideration, on account of marital status: univariate tests

RPS (items)	Marital status						F <sup>a</sup> (2, 687)
	Single (n = 561)		Married / Consensual union (n = 108)		Divorced /Separated (n = 21)		
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	
1. Having a homosexual friend (assumed)	1,57	1,24	1,70	1,37	1,33	0,80	0,96
2. Having a homosexual	1,55	1,28	1,57	1,21	1,24	0,54	0,65
3. Having a homosexual boss, with the appropriate expertise	1,59	1,38	1,62	1,30	1,14	0,36	1,18
4. See homosexual couples	2,87	1,89	2,62	1,79	2,24	1,67	1,86
5. Having a homosexual	3,03	2,04	3,25	2,06	2,62	1,83	1,02
6. If your son/daughter had friendships with homosexuals	1,80	1,51	2,06	1,65	1,48	1,03	1,98
7. Living with homosexuals	2,22	1,84	2,65	2,06	2,05	1,56	2,55

<sup>a</sup> none of the differences are statistically significant



Whereas, finally, the influence of marital status, we conducted a new MANOVA, taking as IV the marital status variable (1 = single, 2 = married/Consensual union, 3 = divorced/separated). The univariate tests results are indicated in Table 3. We found that there is no statistically significant difference according to marital status.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The main question of this research lies on the analysis of the embarrassment degree regarding the proximity and intimacy with people with a homosexual orientation. Overall, levels are below the measurement scale midpoint, however, we conclude, as expected, that the greatest source of embarrassment is the possibility of having a homosexual son or daughter. Inversely, our sample shows low levels of embarrassment about having a homosexual coworker, having a homosexual friend or having a homosexual boss.

We conclude that men from our sample have a significantly higher embarrassment to the proximity/intimacy with homosexuals, than women. These results are consistent with the literature that points out the greater inflexibility from men with regard to gender norms and those who strays of them (Gato, Barbosa, Leme, & Leme 2010; Herek, 1988, 1994; Kite & Whitley, 1996, 1998). Other studies claim that women have lower levels of prejudice than men (Falcão, 2004; Gato & Fontaine, 2010; Kite & Whitley, 1996; Kurdek, 1988; Lacerda et al., 2002; Whitley, 2001).

Age was found to have little influence on the embarrassment levels with proximity/intimacy with homosexuals. As was found that older ages tended to feel slightly embarrassed if they lived with homosexuals and if their kids have friendships with homosexuals.

Also, marital status did not show influence on embarrassment levels of the subjects. It should be noted, however, that our sample is quite young, with about 24 years on average, and the majority of the subjects were college students and majority singles, which is a limitation of our study. We believe that a more heterogeneous sample in age would lead to a stronger relationship between age and embarrassment levels.

Religion was found to have a significant weight on embarrassment levels, as expected. Catholic and other religions individuals are the ones who feel more constrained, as opposed to atheists and irreligious, which showed the lowest embarrassment when in proximity/intimacy with homosexuals. These results were also reported by Lacerda et. al (2002). These authors conclude that religion has great responsibility in raising prejudice against homosexuals, as the Judeo-Christian tradition has had, and continues to have, an important role in gender patterns, family and society.

We also conclude that the embarrassment levels are positively associated with belief in God and the Religiousness level. It should be noted the influence of culture and religion have in people's attitudes. Erstwhile most of the Western religious institutions considered homosexuals sinners. The messages sent by these institutions pointed towards homosexuals are considered undesirable individuals who should not participate in religious activities (Barret & Barzan, 1996; Pereira, 2004).

As a conclusion, it's important to highlight that what we think and the attitudes that guide our behaviors result of a long process of personal construction, socially framed, with much to do about full citizenship for all, regardless of their form of being or their hetero or homosexual orientation.

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## PROXIMITY AND INTIMACY WITH HOMOSEXUALS: WHAT (DIS)EMBARRASSMENT?

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