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**PSYCHO-SOCIAL-CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF
HOMOSEXUALITY – THE CONTEMPORARY ROMANIAN
PERSPECTIVE**

SPECIALTY: 511.03 – SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

ABSTRACT
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I. CONCEPTUAL FUNDAMENTALS OF THE RESEARCH

Topicality of the theme and research relevance. Homosexuality represents a sensitive dimension of contemporary human society, which raises numerous social, legal, moral, religious, cultural, and political controversies. Being a social phenomenon with political and cultural implications, namely a lifestyle assumed by some of the people who publicly declare their orientation and fight for their identity and rights, homosexuality bears upon both the individual human side and societal dimension. In recent decades, the investigation of homosexuality has begun to expand in various socio-cultural contexts, first and foremost as a result of the changing consensus of researchers and practitioners in the field of psychological counseling and psychotherapy regarding the nature of this phenomenon. Thus, towards the end of the 19th century and the first part of the 20th century, homosexuality caused agitation in the scientific, political, and public discourse, because it was viewed as a mental illness and persecuted not only in societies dominated by political regimes - authoritarian ideologies, but also in those characterized by democratic regimes, such as the USA. Communist ideologues claimed that homosexuality among young people was contributing to the decadence of American society.

As of the second part of the 20th century, homosexuality began to be viewed in a much broader view, being understood as the manifestation of sexual behavior and attraction towards a person of the same sex, accompanied or not by an emotional attachment and certain ways of (self)identification¹. Gradually, many countries have legalized relationships between two people of the same sex, although few states have legislation allowing marriages between two people of homosexual orientation. In 1974, the American Psychological Association recognized homosexuality as a “sexual behavior pattern”, excluding it from the category of sexual perversions. Likewise, the 10th edition of the International Classification of Mental Disorders (published in 1992 by the World Health Organization) excluded homosexuality from the mental illness category². With the proliferation of the humanist current in science and the functioning of society, many studies in the fields of sociology, behavioral sciences, and public policies have focused their attention on identifying mechanisms and ways to counteract the stigmatization, marginalization, and social exclusion of people from the LGBT community (in general), as well as dismantling negative myths about homosexuality and people with orientations other than heterosexual.

Description of the situation in the field of research and identification of research problems.

All over the world, non-heterosexual people face prejudiced labeling, discrimination in various forms, and hostility that can amount to physical violence. Sex between two people of the same sex is illegal in more than 70 countries, and in some of them, it is punishable by death. For this reason, measuring the attitudes that different social groups or the general community population have towards the topic of homosexuality in general/persons with homosexual orientation/members of the LGBT community is an essential step toward a better understanding of public prejudice against people of other sexual orientations than the majority, as well as to combat discrimination and marginalization of this vulnerable group. European and national public opinion polls, as well as numerous studies, have measured the attitudes of the general population towards people from the LGBT community. European-wide investigations have included the Eurobarometer, the European Values Survey, and the European Social Survey³. These investigations have focused on questions about the freedom of lesbian and *gay* people to live their lives as they wish, the acceptance of a person of homosexual orientation as a neighbor, or the possibility of a lesbian/*gay* person holding the highest political office in their country of affiliation.

In the international literature published mainly in English, notable contributions to the investigation of the phenomenon of homosexuality from an anthropological-cultural point of view, the origins and explanatory mechanisms of the formation of gender identity and sexual orientation, the causes of homosexuality, individual challenges and health problems among people with homosexual orientation, as well as public perception and attitudes towards the issue of homosexuality in general and, more specifically, towards people who adopt this lifestyle have been authored by: M. L. Bettinsoli, A. Suppes and J. L. Napier, J. M. Chonody, E. Coleman, A. R. D’Augelli and S. L. Hershberger, L. M. Diamond, K. A. Gainer, M. B. Harris, G. Herdt and A. Boxer, G. M. Herek, R. E. Howard-Hassmann, S. Jain and S.

¹ Knight D. A. *The homosexual male*. În: Heidelbaugh J. J. (Ed.), *Clinical Men’s Health. Evidence in Practice*. Philadelphia, PA: Elsevier (Saunders), 2008, 624 p. ISBN 978-141-60-3000-3.

² Organizația Mondială a Sănătății. *ICD-10: Clasificarea tulburărilor mentale și de comportament. Simptomatologie și diagnostic clinic* (translated). București: All, 1998. ISBN 978-606-71-9838-6.

³ cf. Council of Europe, *Discrimination on Grounds of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Europe* (2nd ed.). Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing, 2011, 215 p. Available online at <https://rm.coe.int>.

Silva, J. Kelley, C. Kirkup, M. E. Kite and K. Deaux, D. A. Knight, R. D. Martinson, V. Prince, L. Reiter, R. C. Savin-Williams and K. M. Cohen, R. Seltzer, A. Štulhofer and I. Rimac, R. R. Troiden, G. Weinberg, and others. In Romania and the Republic of Moldova, the scientific research interest in this topic has been raised by papers published by V. Gheorghe and A. Dîrlău, O. Lungu, A. Moraru, C. A. Popescu, V. Prelici, S. M. Rădulescu, S. Spineanu-Drobotă, M. Șelaru, L. Turcescu and L. Stan, I. Vlăduț, O. Voicu, J. Cash and V. Cojocariu, and others. It can be noted, however, the relative poverty of concerns from the autochthonous and Moldovan space regarding the scientific research of the complex psycho-socio-cultural, and legal universe that homosexuality implies as an assumed personal choice and lifestyle.

In Romania, the issue of homosexuality is part of the public agenda through its presence in the mass media, the political discourse, or in the debates occasioned by the civil partnership introduction project (launched in 2016) and, more recently, in the debates that took place in the years 2017-2018 on the issue of amending the Constitution to redefine the family, debates that strongly polarized public opinion. Despite some progress made so far regarding the access of members of the LGBT community to equal rights and opportunities for development, people with sexual orientations other than heterosexual are still excluded, marginalized, considered abnormal, or inferior. The mass media has played a crucial role in creating such a reductionist image that only fuels, especially through sensational news, stereotypes, and prejudices well-rooted in the minds of Romanians.

The scientific research on homosexuality in the Romanian social, cultural, and political context still registers a timid advance. We note, for example, the appearance of two monographs that focused on this issue, namely *Homosexualitatea. Normal sau patologic* [Homosexuality. Normal or pathological]⁴, respectively *Fața nevăzută a homosexualității* [The invisible face of homosexuality]⁵. The two references approach homosexuality from two opposing perspectives, highlighting the diversity of ideological orientations and points of view regarding the issue under discussion, which characterizes the scientific community, lobby organizations, the political environment, and public opinion in Romania.

Given the situation described in the previous paragraphs, the **research problem** consists of the need to use the scientific methodology to explore the social representation that the educated population of Romania and the Republic of Moldova (students and master's students) have regarding the issue of homosexuality, as well as the elaboration and validation of a model of predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality in general and towards people with homosexual orientation in particular.

Given the problem stated above, the **purpose of the research** presented in the thesis focused on determining the universe of social representation of homosexuality among Romanian and Moldovan students, as well as on the theoretical substantiation and empirical testing of the model of predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality and towards people with homosexual orientation.

Research objectives. The objectives that guided our conceptual documentation based on the literature and empirical approaches were aimed at:

- identifying the degree to which the research topic has been investigated in international and domestic literature, to highlight the psycho-socio-cultural dimensions of homosexuality and, above all, the aspects that have received less attention in Romanian research and the Republic of Moldova;
- applying scientific methodology to empirically investigate the social representation of homosexuality among students and master's students in the two countries, the social distance towards members of the LGBT community, prejudices and stereotypes about people with *gay*/lesbian orientation, and the predictors of attitudes towards this social group and homosexuality in general;
- elaborating practical recommendations to promote, and foster respect for issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity, tolerance towards members of the LGBT community, as well as ways to reduce discrimination and social exclusion among people who consciously and openly assume a different sexual orientation and/or a different gender orientation than the prevailing ones;
- identifying directions for future theoretical and empirical research that specialists from Romania and the Republic of Moldova should undertake to offer professionals from various assistance sectors, human communities, and societies in the two countries an unbiased, scientifically accurate, and practically feasible perspective regarding the challenges and problems encountered by the group of people with a homosexual orientation, and the other categories of members of the LGBT community.

⁴ Spineanu-Dobrotă S. *Homosexualitatea. Normal sau patologic*. București: Tritonic, 2005, 224 p. ISBN 973-733-028-5.

⁵ Gheorghe V., Dîrlău A. *Fața nevăzută a homosexualității*. București: Christiana, 2014, 280 p. ISBN 978-973-19-1372-8.

The **general hypothesis** that has guided our theoretical and empirical approaches relied on the assumption that the educated population in Romania and the Republic of Moldova was heterogeneous in terms of factual knowledge, representations, and attitudes towards the issue of homosexuality.

Scientific research methodology. The exploratory and descriptive investigations we carried out in two samples of students and master's students from Romania, respectively a sample of students and master's students from the Republic of Moldova aimed to specify the content and structure of the social representation of homosexuality in social and cultural contexts from the two countries. The premise that was the basis of the steps taken was that investigating the perceptions, representations, and attitudes that the general population in each of the two countries or various population segments have about people with homosexual orientation can contribute to the informational support that researchers and specialists in public policies (for example, in the field of social and legal protection) need to form a "map" as complete and clear as possible about the members of this minority group, as well as the other categories of people from the LGBT community, to develop and implement coherent support measures. We also presumed that how the educated population in Romania and the Republic of Moldova represents the issue of homosexuality impacts the attitudes and the behavioral responses of the academia towards people who openly declare their homosexual orientation and, in general, members of the LGBT community. In addition, we have selected a population segment that has been the focus of studies from the Romanian and Moldovan socio-cultural space to a lesser degree.

To define the content and structure of the social representation of homosexuality in the academic population of Romania and the Republic of Moldova, the method of free associations was used, which can be efficiently applied to large groups of respondents and requires quantitative processing that can be easily managed. The evocations that the students and master's students from the two countries made while solving the free association task were processed quantitatively following the suggestions of P. Vergès regarding the analysis of the prototypical categories. This approach involves lexically and semantically evaluating the various associations that the respondents in a sample evoked starting from the stimulus term, then narrowing down the universe of associations according to the frequency of occurrence and the importance that the respondents have granted to it. The simultaneous analysis of the two quantitative indicators allows a better highlighting of the content and structure of the representation of the "social object" that a researcher has in mind.

The investigation of the universe of the social representation of homosexuality among Romanian students and master's students ($n = 375$), respectively of the predictors of the attitude towards homosexuality, in general, and people with homosexual orientation, in particular ($n = 535$) was carried out by administering a protocol that included seven standardized instruments ($k = 104$ items). Of these, one was constructed by the author of this doctoral thesis, and the others (having psychometric properties recognized in the international academic community) were identified in the literature that focused on issues related to the research topic, translated into Romanian and adapted for the linguistic specificity and the native socio-cultural context by respecting the standards on translation, adaptation, and standardization from a psychometric point of view of the psychological assessment tests. The raw data obtained by processing the answers to the instruments were exploited using a variety of descriptive (univariate) and multivariate statistical methods (calculation of indicators of central tendency, dispersion and shape for the distribution of values of a variable, the nonparametric $Z_{Kolmogorov-Smirnov}$ test for estimating the deviation of the distribution of the values of a variable from the condition of symmetry, the $t_{Student}$ test for comparing the means obtained in two independent samples, the calculation of the effect size, the non-parametric test χ^2 for the association of two categorical variables, the z test for comparing the proportions from two independent samples, correlation analysis, multiple linear regression analysis, etc.).

The delimitation of the area of silent representation of homosexuality in the considered population was carried out using the method of record by substitution. This method facilitates obtaining results that are less dependent on the pressures of the social group to which the respondents belong, especially when perceptions/representations of socially and culturally sensitive realities are investigated. Respondents from Romania ($n = 120$) and those from the Republic of Moldova ($n = 80$) completed five items that capitalized on the evocation of free associations starting from the stimulus term "homosexuality" both under the conditions of the standard record and that of the record by substitution. The associations that the students and master's students from the two countries reported were again processed qualitatively (lexico-semantically) and quantitatively (to determine the prototypical categories). Comparisons were made

regarding the content and structure of representations of homosexuality in the two samples of respondents.

To measure in the samples of students and master's students from Romania ($n = 120$) and the Republic of Moldova ($n = 80$) the social distance towards people from the LGBT community (by comparison with other minority groups, such as alcoholics, drug users, people of other ethnicity/nationality, people diagnosed with a mental illness, etc.), respectively of prejudices and stereotypes regarding people with a homosexual orientation, the respondents filled in two instruments that included 11 and 14 items, respectively. The investigations started from the observation that in Romania and the Republic of Moldova, the social distance towards people from the LGBT community and other indicators of the attitude that educated people show towards this social group has been less in the attention of researchers. For the assessment of social distance towards members of the LGBT community, an instrument was created that capitalizes on the notable contributions (Social Distance Scale and hierarchical/cumulative scale) that E. Bogardus and L. Guttman had in the field of measuring social attitudes. Prejudices and stereotypes that students and master's students in the two countries have about people with homosexual orientation were measured by another original instrument.

The **novelty and scientific originality of the investigations** carried out reside in the fact that the theoretical-conceptual approaches, the inventory of the empirical studies carried out so far in the international and domestic space, and our research have led to clarifications regarding the complex universe of homosexuality, as well as to the shaping of a representative map regarding the perception, representation, and attitudes that students in Romania and the Republic of Moldova have about homosexuality, in general, and the people who adopt this lifestyle, in particular. The investigations presented in the thesis cover the deficit that was found in the local literature focused on the phenomenon of homosexuality. Likewise, the young population represented by people with higher education has received less attention from researchers in Romania and the Republic of Moldova. Investigating the universe of representation that Romanian and Moldovan students have about the issue of homosexuality represents the necessary step for a clearer configuration of the socio-cultural map that the population of the two sister countries has about the issue under investigation. This PhD thesis approaches homosexuality from an equidistant perspective. Both the collective representations about the phenomenon under consideration, as well as the factual knowledge, prejudices, and stereotypes that the population segment represented by educated people have about homosexuality, are investigated.

The **results obtained that contributed to solving the scientific problem** consist in delimiting the universe of the social representation of homosexuality, as well as the factors that can explain the individual differences in terms of the attitude that students from Romania and those from the Republic of Moldova have towards homosexuality in general, and people with a homosexual orientation, in particular.

The **theoretical relevance of the conducted research** is ensured by the presentation from a multidimensional perspective of the conceptual and empirical investigations that were concerned with the psycho-socio-cultural dimensions of homosexuality, as they are reflected in the collective mentality of students from Romania and the Republic of Moldova.

The **applied value of the investigations** derives from the efforts aimed at delimiting the content and structure of the social representation of homosexuality among students in the two countries, the social distance towards people from the LGBT community (by comparison with other vulnerable social groups), prejudices and stereotypes towards people with a homosexual orientation, as well as the variables that explain the attitude that Romanians who access higher education show towards homosexuality in general and people who have this sexual orientation.

Summary of the thesis. The thesis consists of annotations (in Romanian, English, and Russian), a list of abbreviations, lists of tables and figures, an introduction, three main chapters (160 pages), general conclusions and practical recommendations, a bibliography (196 sources), and 12 Annexes. In the main body of the thesis, 40 tables and 4 figures are inserted.

In the *Introduction* section, the actuality and importance of the research theme are highlighted, with a focus on the psycho-socio-cultural dimensions of homosexuality from the contemporary Romanian perspective. Contributions from the international and domestic literature that focused on the discussed problem are presented and, based on the findings, the research problem is identified. Also, the introduction of the thesis summarizes the objectives of the research carried out, the general hypothesis, the methodology, the scientific novelty and originality, the theoretical significance and the applied value of the investigations, the results obtained that contributed to the solution of the scientific problem, the summary of the sections of the thesis, as well as ways to implement the scientific results obtained.

The contemporary issue of homosexuality: psycho-socio-cultural dimensions establishes terminological and conceptual delimitations necessary for a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of the complex universe of homosexuality are drawn. Terms such as biological sex, gender, sexual identity, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, sexual preference, and sexual behavior are reviewed, which are interrelated and provide the necessary picture for understanding a person's sexuality profile. Homosexual practices and attitudes towards homosexuality are x-rayed, as they have been analyzed and commented on by specialists who have dealt with the question of homosexuality in the history of Ancient Greece and Rome, as well as in the ideological representation of the Christian Church. Brief reviews of conceptions of homosexuality are made for the Renaissance and Enlightenment eras. Also, in the first chapter, the focus is on investigating the perceptions and attitudes that Romanians and Moldovans have regarding homosexuality. The psycho-behavioral dimensions of homosexuality are approached from the perspective of the forms of manifestation of human sexuality, as well as individual differences in terms of sexual orientation. The most well-known typologies of people with homosexual orientation are operated. Also reviewed are the findings of several investigations that have focused on predictors of attitudes toward homosexuality and persons with homosexual orientation.

Methodology for the empirical investigation of the social representation of homosexuality and the predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality among students in Romania and the Republic of Moldova presents the aims, hypotheses, and methodological frameworks for several quantitative studies that were carried out in the student population and master's students from Romania and the Republic of Moldova, through which the delimitation of the universe of the social representation of homosexuality, prejudices and stereotypes about people with homosexual orientation, predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality, in general, and people with homosexual orientation, in particular, as well as the determination of social distance towards people from the LGBT community. A considerable space in the chapter is allocated to the presentation of the instruments that composed the protocols administered in the selected population, as well as the steps taken to adapt and validate the instruments by which the variables used in the predictive models for the attitude that Romanian students have towards homosexuality in general and persons with homosexual orientation, in particular.

Chapter 3 (“The results of the investigations carried out among students from Romania and the Republic of Moldova”) reviews the findings of the approaches we have applied to identify the level of knowledge about homosexuality in the population of Romanian students and master's students, the universe of the representation of homosexuality among them and of students from the Republic of Moldova, social distance towards people from the LGBT community, prejudices and stereotypes towards people with homosexual orientation among students from the two countries, respectively predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality and people with homosexual orientation among Romanian students.

The **results of the theoretical-conceptual research and empirical investigations** were disseminated through 15 papers presented at national scientific events, with international participation or internationally organized in Romania and the Republic of Moldova, respectively 8 published papers, of which 5 in specialized journals (category B or B+), reviewed and indexed in international databases and 3 in volumes with papers delivered at international conferences organized in the Republic of Moldova.

II. CONTENT OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

The contemporary issue of homosexuality: psycho-socio-cultural dimensions approaches terminological and conceptual delimitations necessary for a clearer and more comprehensive understanding of the complex universe of homosexuality.

In international social, cultural, and scientific jargon, the well-known acronym LGBT is used to abbreviate the English expression “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender people”. It is about people who have a different sexual orientation than the predominant one (heterosexual), and/or a different gender identity than the biological sex established at birth. The umbrella term LGBT is also used to name the community of lesbian, gay, bisexual, or trans people. This doctoral thesis has focused only on one of the categories of people in the LGBT community, namely people with a homosexual orientation.

The term *homosexuality* (introduced into the researchers' vocabulary of social and human sciences at the end of the 19th century by the German psychologist K. M. Benkert) was used as of the middle of the 19th century to define a special type of relationship between two people of the same sex⁶. Such relationships based on physical and/or emotional attraction were considered unjustified and abnormal. In

⁶ Spineanu-Dobrotă S. *Homosexualitatea. Normal sau patologic*. București: „Tritonic”, 2005, 224 p. ISBN 973-733-028-5.

a general sense, homosexuality is a term that applies both to the relationship between two people of the same sex marked by physical touches and by any form of extra- and intragenital intercourse, as well as to the relationship marked only by passionate or tender feelings⁷. When we refer not to the relationship itself, but to the latent tendency or disposition of a person to feel attracted to another person of the same sex, the meaning of the term homosexuality becomes more extensive. A person can be classified as having a true homosexual orientation only when the sexual and/or emotional attraction for another person of the same sex causes spontaneous erotic responses that are just as intense as in the case of heterosexual people who establish relationships with people of the opposite sex⁸.

In the definition of the conceptual universe of homosexuality, the problem arose of the nuance of the dichotomy between heterosexuality and homosexuality - poles that, for a while, were seen as an antithesis of a person's sexuality. A significant percentage of the general population is represented by people who are not completely or exclusively heterosexual or homosexual, that is, people who can have both heterosexual and homosexual experiences and behaviors. In the field of classifying human sexuality and evaluating sexual behaviors, an important contribution was made by the American biologist Alfred C. Kinsey who, together with Wardell R. Pomeroy and Clyde E. Martin, developed for both female and male sexuality the famous scale designed to assess sexual behavior on a continuum from heterosexuality to homosexuality. The instruments were published in two reference works, namely *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948), respectively *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953)⁹. The scales were developed to combat the idea that human individuals are either heterosexual or homosexual. The tools proposed by Kinsey and his collaborators allow a classification of sexual orientation based on the relative level of heterosexual or homosexual experiences or the psychic responses that a person presents in his own life experience. Each position on the scale is based on the relationship between heterosexual and homosexual experiences that a person has had rather than on the actual level of experience or overt cognitive, emotional, and behavioral responses. Thus, the scales of Kinsey and collaborators differentiate between the following categories of individuals according to their sexual orientation¹⁰: a) *exclusively heterosexual individuals* – people who do not establish any physical contact that produces erotic stimulation or orgasm, and who do not mentally respond in any way to other individuals of the same sex; b) *predominantly heterosexual/only incidentally homosexual individuals* – persons who have only occasional homosexual contacts involving physical or mental responses to persons of the same sex or mental responses without physical contacts; c) *predominantly heterosexual, but more than incidentally homosexual individuals* - people who have more than incidental homosexual experiences or who clearly respond to the stimuli generated by other persons of the same sex; d) *individuals who have both a heterosexual and a homosexual orientation* - they are almost equal in terms of heterosexual or homosexual mental experiences and reactions; e) *predominantly homosexual, but more than incidentally heterosexual individuals* - persons who have more open activity or manifest mental reactions in the homosexual spectrum, but who, however, maintain a fair level of heterosexual activity or who clearly respond to heterosexual contacts; f) *predominantly homosexual/only incidentally heterosexual individuals* - persons who are almost exclusively homosexually oriented through their sexual activities or responses; g) *exclusively homosexual individuals* - persons who are exclusively homosexually oriented both in terms of the manifested experiences they live and in terms of psychological reactions.

Although they have been criticized for several conceptual and methodological deficiencies, the scales proposed by Kinsey and his collaborators have the merit of overcoming the reductionist dichotomous classification of sexual orientation and stimulating a new conceptual perspective on human sexuality that has been speculated since the end of the 19th century by the German sexologist M. Hirschfeld.

For a better understanding of homosexual orientation and specific behaviors, a distinction must be made between homosexuality and various other terms with which it is confused. These terms evoke certain sexual preferences that some authors consider to be abnormal and include *transvestism* (a person's habit of dressing, styling their hair, and applying make-up in imitation of the other sex, which is not

⁷ Widlöcher D. *Homosexualitate*. în: DORON R., PAROT Fr. (Coord.), Dicționar de psihologie (translation). București: Humanitas, 1999, p. 374-375. ISBN: 973-50-1164-6.

⁸ SPINEANU-DOBROTĂ S. *Homosexualitatea. Normal sau patologic*. București: "Tritonic", 2005, 224 p. ISBN 973-733-028-5.

⁹ cf. Bulboacă G. *Homosexualitatea ca fenomen al societății contemporane: semnificații și dimensiuni psihosociale*. In: Anuarul Universității „Petre Andrei” din Iași (Fascicula: Asistență Socială, Sociologie, Psihologie), 2023, vol. 29, p. 55-72. ISSN (print) 2248-1060, ISSN (online) 2601-8209. doi: [10.18662/upasw/29/67](https://doi.org/10.18662/upasw/29/67).

¹⁰ *idem*.

necessarily the expression of homosexuality but, rather, the expression of a form of fetishism), *transsexualism* (the belief of belonging to the opposite sex, accompanied by the claim of the person in question to be considered as such, in particular through surgical modifications of the breast formations, the genital apparatus, body hair and other secondary sexual characteristics) and *pedophilia* (any person of adult age or any person nearing the end of adolescence, who feels a strong attraction to children or adolescents and, much less often, to adolescents of one sex or another)¹¹.

A key term for understanding all facets of the dimension of homosexuality concerns *homophobia*. The term was introduced into the social science vocabulary by the American psychologist G. Weinberg in the late 1960s. Homophobia includes disgust, aversion, hatred, or antipathy towards *gay/lesbian* people and can be seen in hostile behaviors, discrimination, or violence that are activated by non-heterosexual orientations¹². A distinction is made between *institutionalized homophobia* (e.g., Church-promoted homophobia or state-sponsored homophobia) and *internalized homophobia* experienced by people who exhibit same-sex attraction, regardless of how they identify in terms of sexual orientation. The term *homophobia* implicitly suggests that the attitude against homosexuality is configured in an irrational fear of this lifestyle and people with a homosexual orientation, to which is added the fact that such an attitude represents a form of individual psychopathology rather than a socially reinforced prejudice. For this reason, G. M. Herek¹³ proposes to replace the term with *prejudices based on sexual orientation*. The author justifies the option by the fact that: a) the limitations imposed by the term referring to homophobia became more and more problematic as, starting from the 1980s, attitudes against people with a homosexual orientation came to represent a central issue capitalized on by conservative political parties, and religious ideologies; b) heterosexism refers to an ideology that manifests itself at the social level and patterns of institutionalized oppression of people who have other orientations than the (predominantly) heterosexual one, while homophobia describes individual attitudes and behaviors. For G. M. Herek, prejudice about sexual orientation refers to a set of derogatory opinions, negative (often stereotyped) beliefs, prejudices, and negative attitudes (for example, hostility) that heterosexual people have about homosexual behavior, people who have a homosexual or bisexual orientation, respectively the communities of *gay* men, lesbians, and bisexual people¹⁴.

According to E. S. Bogardus¹⁵, the attitude is presented in the form of a tendency *for* or *against* an element in the social environment which, thus, becomes a positive or negative value. A multidimensional model was proposed to explain and describe the structure of the attitude towards a certain element of social reality. It includes three components: a) cognitive – consciously expressed opinions and/or beliefs; b) affective – the emotional tone that accompanies the opinions and/or beliefs that a person has concerning the object of the attitude¹⁶; c) evaluative - the attitude can be positive or negative; d) conative (behavioral) – a person's predisposition to act according to the opinions and/or beliefs he has and the emotions he feels about the object of the attitude. Generalizing, we can say that attitudes describe¹⁷: a) internal states that present themselves in the form of cognitive-perceptive and evaluative, affective and volitional structures and that are formed through the interaction between the reasons underlying the behaviors of some people and the stimuli from the environment/ environment factors; b) predispositions towards certain behaviors (oriented towards the object of the attitude) which are based on certain experiences and individual motivation and which, as a rule, manifest themselves under the demands of the social environment.

The predictors of attitudes (positive or negative) towards people with homosexual orientation include sex, age, level of education of the respondents, level of knowledge about the problems and

¹¹ Bulboacă G. *Homosexualitatea ca fenomen al societății contemporane: semnificații și dimensiuni psihosociale*. In: Anuarul Universității „Petre Andrei” din Iași (Fascicula: Asistență Socială, Sociologie, Psihologie), 2023, Vol. 29, p. 55-72, ISSN (print) 2248-1060, ISSN (online) 2601-8209. doi: [10.18662/upasw/29/67](https://doi.org/10.18662/upasw/29/67).

¹² Bulboacă G. *Percepția și atitudinea românilor față de homosexualitate: dovezi empirice*. In: Rusnac S., Robu E. (Eds.), *Preocupări contemporane ale științelor socio-umane. Materialele Conferinței Științifice Internaționale*. Ediția a XI-a. Chișinău, 3-4 December 2020. Chișinău: „Print-Caro” Printing House, 2021, p. 76-96. ISBN 978-997-53-4713-6.

¹³ Herek G. M. *The psychology of sexual prejudice*. In: *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 2000, vol. 9, no. 1, p. 19-22, ISSN (print) 0963-7214. ISSN (online) 1467-8721. doi: [10.1111/1467-8721.00051](https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8721.00051).

¹⁴ Bulboacă G. *Percepția și atitudinea românilor față de homosexualitate: dovezi empirice*. In: Rusnac S., Robu E. (Eds.), *Preocupări contemporane ale științelor socio-umane. Materialele Conferinței Științifice Internaționale*. Ediția a XI-a. Chișinău, 3-4 December 2020. Chișinău: „Print-Caro” Printing House, 2021, p. 76-96. ISBN 978-997-53-4713-6.

¹⁵ As cited in Boza M. *Atitudinile sociale și schimbarea lor*. Iași: Polirom, 2010. ISBN 978-973-46-1014-3

¹⁶ Boza M. *Atitudinile sociale și schimbarea lor*. Iași: Polirom, 2010. ISBN 978-973-46-1014-3.

¹⁷ Rusnac S. *Preocupări contemporane ale psihologiei sociale*. Chișinău: RVR Consulting Grup, 2007, 264 p. ISBN 978-997-57-8566-2.

lifestyle of gay/lesbian people, religious affiliation, level of religiosity, contact/friendship with a gay/lesbian person, representations (stereotypes) about gender roles, political and religious conservatism/liberalism or about expressing sexuality, beliefs about the institution of marriage and the value of the family, certain personality traits (for example, mental openness and interpersonal experiences, conformity or orientation towards traditional values, compliance with rules and conventions, etc.), resistance to new ideas and change, intellectual poverty, the level of modernization of societies, etc. 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23

In a study that sought to highlight the perception and attitude about homosexuality among different generations of the Russian population, A. M. Rikel²⁴ used structural analysis (P. Vergès) to identify the content and organization of the social representation that 170 adolescents (with ages between 16 and 22 years), 181 young people (ages between 25 and 34 years), respectively 93 adults (ages between 37 and 63 years) had about homosexuality. Participants were given the task of indicating three words that came to mind when they heard the word *homosexuality*. It is about the method of free associations. The lexical and structural analysis of the evoked associations highlighted the fact that, compared to adults, adolescents, and young people had associated homosexuality with mental deviance or promiscuity to a lesser extent²⁵. They had more frequently linked homosexuality to the concept of LGBT and to some positive characteristics (for example, homosexuality was seen as the result of an independent choice that a person can make). For adolescents and young adults, the terms *gay*, *male*, *love*, *norms*, and *orientation* were part of the central core of representation of homosexuality, while for the adult generation, the terms that entered the content of the core were *gay*, *male*, and *perversion*.

Before 1989, homosexuality was quite effectively masked by the propaganda apparatus of the Romanian Communist Party and by the severe censorship imposed on the press. Sexual behavior and practices represented a territory contested by the Church and the state throughout the 20th century²⁶. In traditional Romanian society, mentalities and morals remained tributary to rural conservatism, which vehemently rejected homosexuality and prostitution and denounced abortion. In contrast, women who were mainly rural residents had acquired an impressive knowledge of medicinal plants that could be used for the empirical induction of abortion and tacitly accepted adultery among men²⁷. Because homosexuality represented a factor that undermined the effort to create the “new socialist man” and contributed to the decrease in the birth rate, the communist authorities tightened the punishments for homosexual behavior and increased the sentences by deprivation of liberty for people who were accused of having this sexual orientation. Often, accusations and punishments were not based on consistent evidence from a judicial point of view, but rather on informational notes that were provided to the regime by security workers. Also, in many cases, homosexuality was used as an accusation against dissidents.

After the revolutionary movement of 1989, the issue of sexuality (including the question of sexual orientation and the rights that can be granted to people who are part of the LGBT community), but also other controversial social issues (for example: contraception, abortion, family planning or prostitution)

¹⁸ Brown M. J., Henriquez E. *Socio-demographic predictors of attitudes towards gays and lesbians*. In: Individual Differences Research, 2008, Vol. 6, no. 3, p. 193-202. ISSN (print) 1541-745X.

¹⁹ Herek G. M., Capitanio J. P. „*Some of my best friends*” *Intergroup contact, concealable stigma, and heterosexuals’ attitudes toward gay men and lesbians*. In: Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 1996, 22(4), p. 412-424. ISSN 0146-1672. doi: [10.1177/0146167296224007](https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167296224007).

²⁰ Kelley J. *Attitudes towards homosexuality in 29 nations*. In: Australian Social Monitor, 2001, 4(1), p. 15-22. ISSN (print) 1440-4842.

²¹ Lingiardi V., Falanga S., d’Augelli A. R. *The evaluation of homophobia in an Italian sample: An exploratory study*. In: Archives of Sexual Behavior, 2005, 34(1), p. 81-94. ISSN (print) 0004-0002. ISSN (online) 1573-2800. doi: [10.1007/s10508-005-1002-z](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-005-1002-z).

²² Nguyen T. Q., Blum R. W. *Homosexuality tolerance among male and female Vietnamese youth: An examination of traditional sexual values, self-esteem, and demographic/contextual characteristics*. In: Journal of Adolescent Health, 2014, 55(6), p. 823-829. ISSN (print) 1054-139X. ISSN (online). doi: [10.1016/j.jadohealth.2014.07.011](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2014.07.011).

²³ Štulhofer A., Rimac I. *Determinants of homonegativity in Europe*. In: Journal of Sex Research, 2009, 46(1), p. 24-32. ISSN (print) 0022-4499, ISSN (online) 1559-8519.

²⁴ Rikel A. M. *The influence of the environment on a person’s sexual orientation: Intergenerational analysis in Russia*. In: E3S Web of Conferences, 2021, Vol. 273, Article ID 10043. [10.1051/e3sconf/202127310043](https://doi.org/10.1051/e3sconf/202127310043) (accessed online 22.09.2021).

²⁵ cf. *idem*.

²⁶ Bulboacă G. *Percepția și atitudinea românilor față de homosexualitate: dovezi empirice*. In: RUSNAC S., ROBU E. (Eds.), Preocupări contemporane ale științelor socio-umane. Materialele Conferinței Științifice Internaționale. Ediția a XI-a. Chișinău, 3-4 December 2020. Chișinău: „Print-Caro” Printing House, 2021, p. 76-96. ISBN 978-997-53-4713-6.

²⁷ Turcescu L., Stan L. *Religion, politics and sexuality in Romania*. In: Europe-Asia Studies, 2005, 57(2), p. 291-310. ISSN (print) 0966-8136, ISSN (online) 1465-3427. doi: [10.1080/09668130500051924](https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130500051924).

began to generate so many public and political disputes that were fueled and intensified by the mass media. Likewise, the interest of researchers from various fields and non-governmental organizations that defend the rights of members of the LGBT community and aim to create a support network for them has intensified. The acceptance of homosexual orientation, at least from a normative point of view, was facilitated by the insistence of the Council of Europe, which threatened to resume monitoring how Romania respects human rights, regardless of conditions and lifestyle.

Currently, in Romania, the issue of homosexuality is part of the public agenda through its presence in the mass media, the political discourse, or in the debates occasioned by the civil partnership introduction project (launched in 2016) and, more recently, in the debates that took place in 2017-2018 on the topic of amending the Constitution to redefine the family. These debates have strongly polarized public opinion. Despite some progress made so far regarding the access of members of the LGBT community to equal rights and opportunities for development, people with sexual orientations other than heterosexual are still excluded, marginalized, and considered abnormal, or inferior²⁸. The mass media has played a crucial role in creating such a reductionist image that only fuels, especially through sensational news, stereotypes, and prejudices well-rooted in the minds of Romanians.

The Public Opinion Barometer highlighted the fact that 86% of the surveyed Romanians did not want a lesbian woman or *gay* man as a neighbor²⁹. This indicator of social distance from people with sexual orientations other than the predominant one has occupied a leading position alongside the values for alcoholics, people who had served prison terms, people suffering from HIV/AIDS, and Roma residents. For the period 2005-2007, the values of the indicator we referred to were 66%, 61%, and 60%, respectively³⁰. The findings of several public opinion polls conducted between 2000 and 2018 on representative samples of the youth and adult population have highlighted the fact that Romanians are still above the average of EU countries in terms of intolerance towards people with a homosexual orientation. The studies carried out in our country have revealed that age, residence, level of education, religiosity, the representations that the respondents have about the traditional roles of men and women, beliefs about the institution of marriage and the value of the family, etc. are among the factors that differentiate perceptions, representations, and attitudes about homosexuality³¹.

The Pew Research Center³² has surveyed 18 countries in Eastern, Southeastern, and Central Europe. The survey included ten predominantly Orthodox countries (Armenia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Georgia, Greece, Republic of Moldova, Romania, Serbia, and Ukraine), four predominantly Catholic countries (Croatia, Lithuania, Poland, and Hungary), and three countries characterized by mixed religious cults (Bosnia, Estonia, Latvia), respectively the Czech Republic where the majority of citizens are not religiously affiliated. The samples of respondents varied between 1361 (Romania) and 2409 (Ukraine) of young people and adults. The Romanians interviewed showed themselves to be intolerant towards homosexuality (82% considered homosexual behavior to be immoral). This percentage was above the percentage recorded for all analyzed countries (71%). Above Romania were Ukraine (83%), Belarus and Russia (85%), Georgia (90%), respectively the Republic of Moldova (91%). Armenia (a predominantly Orthodox country) was among the top conservative countries regarding homosexuality (98%). Bosnia registered a percentage similar to Romania (81%). Among the predominantly Catholic countries, Lithuania stood out as the most conservative in terms of acceptance of homosexuality (72%). Regarding the legalization of same-sex marriages, 74% of Romanian respondents rejected this idea. Romanians aged between 18-34 accepted marriage between two people of the same sex in a slightly higher percentage (33%) compared to Romanians over 35 (23%). For ten of the 18 countries analyzed (Bulgaria, Estonia, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czech Republic, Romania, Serbia, and Hungary) young people between the ages of 18 and 34 were more tolerant towards marriage between two people of the same sex (compared to adults over 35). On the other hand, Armenia, Bosnia, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova,

²⁸ Spineanu-Dobrotă S. *Homosexualitatea. Normal sau patologic*. București: "Tritonic", 2005, 224 p. ISBN 973-733-028-5.

²⁹ cf. Bulboacă G., BRICEAG S., ROBU V. *Reprezentarea socială a homosexualității în rândul studenților români: o abordare structurală*. In: BRICEAG S. (Coord.), *Asistența psihologică la etapa contemporană: realități și perspective*. Materialele Conferinței Științifice Internaționale. Ediția a II-a. Bălți, 22 October 2021. Bălți: Centrul Editorial Universitar, 2021, p. 65-77. ISBN 978-997-55-0269-6.

³⁰ *idem*.

³¹ cf. Bulboacă G., *Percepția și atitudinea românilor față de homosexualitate: dovezi empirice*. In: RUSNAC S., ROBU E. (Eds.), *Preocupări contemporane ale științelor socio-umane*. Materialele Conferinței Științifice Internaționale. Ediția a XI-a. Chișinău, 3-4 decembrie 2020. Chișinău: „Print-Caro” Printing House, 2021, p. 76-96. ISBN 978-997-53-4713-6.

³² Pew Research Center. *Religious Belief and National Belonging in Central and Eastern Europe*, 2017, 175 p. ISBN 978-92-846-6328-6. Available online la www.pewresearch.org (accessed 09.08.2021).

Russia, and Ukraine stood out for their high intolerance both among young people and among adults over 35 years old.

Also in the Republic of Moldova, the public attitude towards the social group of people with homosexual orientation has been the focus of researchers. O. Voicu, J. Cash, and V. Cojocariu³³ published an extensive research report that presents the data analysis of a study conducted on a stratified and multistage sample that included 2090 citizens of the Republic of Moldova aged over 15 years. Within it, the perceptions of the general population were investigated through opinion polls and group discussions, as well as those of opinion leaders from several communities through in-depth individual interviews. One of the indicators tracked was the level of intolerance towards various social groups. Along with alcoholics, drug users, and people suffering from HIV/AIDS, people with a homosexual orientation stood out among the least tolerated social groups. Thus, 84% of all respondents would not have accepted that a person with a homosexual orientation should live in the Republic of Moldova, 89% would not have accepted that they should live in the same locality, 94% would have rejected the possibility of having such a person as a neighbor, 95% would not accept having a friend and 97% would reject the possibility of having a relative with a homosexual orientation. Social conservatism refers to a set of values that emphasize family and tradition, traditional gender roles, and moral and religious teachings. Respondents were asked to indicate on a scale from 1 to 10 to what extent a series of social situations that contravene traditional morality could be “justified”, such as adultery, abortion, divorce, homosexuality, lying, the death penalty, sexual relations before marriage, suicide, homosexuality. Along with suicide and prostitution, homosexuality was highlighted again among the most rejected social situations (79% of Moldovan respondents believed that homosexuality is never justified). Also, 94% of the surveyed Moldovans rejected the legal recognition of marriages between two people of the same sex and 92% rejected the civil partnership between two people with a homosexual orientation.

According to the authors O. Voicu, J. Cash, and V. Cojocariu³⁴, the conservatism that dominates public opinion in the Republic of Moldova regarding social issues such as homosexuality, prostitution or suicide can be explained by two value systems that dominated (and still do) Moldovan society, namely Orthodox Christianity and Soviet-style communism. Their overlap for a fairly consistent time may partially justify the systematic failure of attempts to promote a progressive ethic in Moldovan society through legal and educational tools. In conclusion, in the Republic of Moldova, homosexuality is strongly condemned by the majority of the general population, but also by opinion leaders (for example, representatives of the Orthodox Church or those of religious minorities). The problem of equalizing the rights of sexual minorities is one of the most troublesome issues related to homosexuality.

The conceptual-theoretical and empirical analysis presented in Chapter 1 of this doctoral thesis, as well as the practical arguments we have mentioned have led us to define **the research problem**, namely *the need to use scientific methodology to explore the social representation that the educated population from Romania and the Republic of Moldova (students and master's students) have regarding the issue of homosexuality, as well as the development and validation of a model of predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality, in general, and towards people with homosexual orientation, in particular.*

In accordance with the problem stated above, **the purpose of the investigations** we have carried out focused on *highlighting the universe of social representation of homosexuality among Romanian and Moldovan students, as well as the theoretical foundation and empirical testing of the model of predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality and people with homosexual orientation.*

Methodology of the empirical investigation of the social representation of homosexuality and the predictors of the attitude towards homosexuality among students from Romania and the Republic of Moldova summarizes the general methodological framework that was used in six empirical investigations whose premises were:

- how students from Romania and the Republic of Moldova perceive and represent the issue of homosexuality in general, and the psycho-social issues of the LGBT community, influences their attitudes and behaviors about people who declare their homosexual orientation and, in general, with members of the LGBT community;
- investigating the content and structure of the RS that students and master's students have about homosexuality is a necessary step through the basis it can provide for a) a better understanding of the factors that explain the attitudes and behaviors that contemporary young people display in

³³ Voicu O., Cash J., Cojocariu V., *Biserică și Stat în Republica Moldova*. Chișinău: Fundația Soros-Moldova, Centrul pentru Inovare Publică și CBS-AXA, 2016, 56 p. ISBN 978-997-58-7220-1. Report available online at <https://www.soros.md>.

³⁴ *idem*.

relation with the dimension of homosexuality as an individual choice and lifestyle; b) rethinking the policies, strategies, and measures that can be implemented in Romanian and Moldovan society to reduce prejudices, stereotypes, negative collective representations, as well as attitudes of rejection, discrimination, and marginalization of vulnerable people based on identity and /or sexual orientation;

- the high level of social distance towards LGBT people (the degree to which heterosexual people accept or reject the possibility of social interactions with lesbian, gay, bisexual, or trans people) is an indicator of the negative attitudes that heterosexual people can show towards the minority group represented by LGBT people;
- throughout modern history, people with non-heterosexual orientations have been stigmatized, demonized, or portrayed by appealing to unrealistic stereotypes that have included labels such as abnormal, mentally ill, intellectually and socially disabled, or individuals who contribute to the degradation of society³⁵; for this reason, reducing the social distance between heterosexual people and those who are part of the LGBT community could lead to the reduction of stereotypes and prejudices based on sexual orientation, as well as to a greater openness to understand the lifestyle and social value of people who have sexual orientations other than heterosexual and/or a different gender identity than the sex assigned at birth³⁶;

The studies we carried out in the population consisting of students and master's students from Romania and the Republic of Moldova aimed at the following **goals**:

- delimitation of the content and structure of the social representation of homosexuality in the contemporary social, cultural, and political context of the two countries;
- measuring the social distance towards people from the LGBT community by comparison with other minority groups (for example: alcoholics, drug users, people of another ethnicity/nationality, or people diagnosed with a mental illness);
- measuring prejudices and stereotypes about people with homosexual orientation;
- investigating the predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality (as a phenomenon and lifestyle in general), respectively towards people with homosexual orientation among students and master's students in Romania.

The following **working hypotheses** guided our investigative steps:

1. There are differences between students and master's students from Romania and those from the Republic of Moldova regarding the content and structure of the social representation they have regarding the issue of homosexuality.
2. The orientation of students and master's students towards conservatism (in terms of ideology and lifestyle) contributes positively to the prediction of a negative attitude towards people with a homosexual orientation, and negatively to the prediction of a positive attitude towards the issue of homosexuality, in general.
3. Occasional social contact and, especially, friendship with a person with a homosexual orientation contribute negatively to the prediction of a negative attitude towards gay men and lesbian women, respectively positively to the prediction of a positive attitude towards the issue of homosexuality in general.
4. The high level of (correct) knowledge regarding the field of homosexuality has a negative contribution to the prediction of a negative attitude towards people with homosexual orientation, respectively a positive contribution to the prediction of a positive attitude towards the issue of homosexuality in general.
5. Among students and master's students, the high level of religiosity contributes positively to the prediction of a negative attitude towards people with homosexual orientation, respectively negatively to the prediction of a positive attitude towards the issue of homosexuality in general.
6. The high level of mental openness and personal experiences (as a personality factor) has a negative contribution to the prediction of the negative attitude that students and master's students have towards people with homosexual orientation, respectively a positive contribution to the prediction of the positive attitude towards the issue of homosexuality, in general.

³⁵ Renzetti C. M., Edleson J. L. (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of Interpersonal Violence* (Vol. 1). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2008, 486 p. ISBN 978-141-29-1800-8.

³⁶ Bulboacă G., Robu V. *Distanța socială față de persoanele LGBT: studiu exploratoriu în rândul studenților din România și Republica Moldova*. In: *Revista de Psihologie*, 2022, 68(3), p. 205-229. ISSN (print) 0034-8759, ISSN (online) 2344-4665. https://revistadepsiologie.ipsihologie.ro/images/revista_de_psihologie/Revista-de-psihologie-nr-3_2022.pdf.

7. The conservative attitude that students and master's students have regarding the issue of human sexuality, in general, contributes positively to the prediction of the negative attitude towards people with homosexual orientation, respectively negatively to the prediction of the positive attitude towards the issue of homosexuality in general.

In total, **1110** students and master's students from Romania ($n = 1030$) and the Republic of Moldova ($n = 80$) participated in the investigations we carried out, of which 861 were female and 249 were male. They were recruited from five higher education institutions in Romania, respectively a sixth university from the Republic of Moldova. The sampling strategy was nonprobabilistic (convenience sampling). Data collection was conducted between February 2018 and October 2019. Responses to the administered instruments were anonymized to control for the effect of social desirability. Responses to standardized protocols administered to four samples of undergraduate and graduate students were evaluated as follows:

- 375 subjects → the social representation of homosexuality through standard record (Romania);
- 120 subjects → identification of the silent area of the social representation of homosexuality through the substitution record (Romania);
- 80 subjects → the delimitation of the social representation of homosexuality through the standard record and the identification of the silent area through the substitution record (Republic of Moldova);
- 575 subjects → investigation of social distance towards people from the LGBT community, prejudices and stereotypes towards this social group, as well as predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality in general and people with homosexual orientation (Romania).

To collect field data on the social representation that students and master's students from Romania and the Republic of Moldova have about homosexuality and in-depth processing, the free association method, the lexical-semantic analysis, respectively the analysis of prototypical (structural) categories were used. The tasks required of each of the students and master's students surveyed included:

- evoking five words that came to mind when hearing the term *homosexuality*; the students were asked to take care that none of the words they were going to evoke represented a semantic, morphological, or grammatical form of another word, such as sex (intimate relationship between two people) – *sexual relationship*;
- the ranking of the associations that the student/master's student had evoked starting from the stimulus term *homosexuality* (1 – the most important; 5 – the least important); this requirement oriented each of the subjects towards a cognitive effort on his social discourse by explicitly expressing the preference for certain evocations associated with the central core of the social representation of homosexuality³⁷;
- establishing a connotation (positive, neutral, or negative) for each of the evoked associations.

The quantitative processing of the evocations that the students and master's students made through the method of free associations followed the suggestions of P. Vergès³⁸ regarding the analysis of prototypical categories. To evaluate the global polarity (on the positive-negative axis) of the representation of homosexuality among students and master's students in Romania and the Republic of Moldova, the polarity indicator proposed by A. S. de Rosa was used³⁹.

The investigation of the silent zone of the social representation of homosexuality is based on the researchers' observation that some realities are “sensitive” to the normative orientations, beliefs/convictions, and values that prevail in a certain social reference group⁴⁰. The silent zone is a part of the central core of the representation of a “social object” that includes counter-normative elements that a subject masks because, if he were to express them explicitly, he might risk conflicting with norms and values (moral, religious or social) of the belonging group⁴¹. Illustrating the intimate beliefs that a person may have towards the “object” of a social representation, the silent zone can be identified either by the

³⁷ Șleahțișchi M. *Analiza structurală a spațiului reprezentational: evocarea liberă, harta asociativă și rețeaua de asociații*. In: Psihologie. Pedagogie Socială. Asistență Socială, 2013, 2(31), p. 14-25. ISSN (print) 1857-2502. ISSN (online) 2537-6276.

³⁸ Vergès P. *L'évocation de l'argent: une méthode pour la définition du noyau central de la représentation*. In: Bulletin de Psychologie, 1992, 45(405), p. 203-209. ISSN (print) 0007-4403. ISSN (online) 1968-3766.

³⁹ De Rosa A. S. „The associative network”: A technique for detecting structure, contents, polarity and stereotyping indexes of the semantic fields. In: European Review of Applied Psychology, 2002, 52(3-4), p. 181-200. ISSN (print) 1162-9088, ISSN (online) 1878-3457.

⁴⁰ Șleahțișchi M. *Tratat de analiză structurală a reprezentărilor sociale*. Chișinău: „Știința”, 2016, 224 p. ISBN 978-9975-85-185-5.

⁴¹ Guimelli C. *Normativitate, reprezentări sociale și strategii de mascare*. In: Rouquette M.-L. (Coord.), *Gândirea socială. Perspective fundamentale și cercetări aplicate*. Iași: Polirom, 2010, p. 173-192. ISBN 978-973-46-1645-9.

method of substitution or by the method of normative decontextualization. The substitution method facilitates obtaining results that are less dependent on social pressures, especially when investigating representations of socially and culturally sensitive domains. To highlight the silent area of the social representation of homosexuality, students and master's students from Romania (sample 2) and the Republic of Moldova (sample 3), respectively, completed a standardized task that asked them to think about the opinion that students from Romania/Republic of Moldova in general (regardless of their college and/or degree program) and indicate the first five words or phrases that might come to mind when they think of the stimulus word "homosexuality". Respondents were then asked to rank from 1 (most important) to 5 (least important) the words they had associated with the stimulus term "homosexuality" according to the importance they thought students in the two countries would have attributed to these words. The respondents also had to determine the connotations (negative, neutral, or positive) for each association.

To assess social distance towards members of the LGBT community, an instrument was created that capitalizes on two of the most notable contributions in the field of measuring social attitudes. One of them is the *Social Distance Scale* (SDS)⁴², respectively the hierarchical or cumulative scale⁴³. The standardized protocol that was administered to students and master's students from Romania (sample 2) and the Republic of Moldova (sample 3) included 11 items that operationalized social distance from people from various minority groups, as follows: people with a different racial origin, people of another ethnicity/nationality, sectarians, people with a criminal record, people with a homosexual orientation, drug users, people suffering from a mental illness, people with a bisexual orientation, people suffering from HIV/AIDS or another contagious disease, alcoholics, respectively transsexual persons. Another 14 items (e.g.: "Homosexuals have unusually strong sexual urges and desires", "Homosexuals tend to sexually corrupt co-workers", or "A person with a homosexual orientation would be most suitable for occupations such as *hair-stylist*, *make-up artist*, fashion designer, florist, artist, etc.") targeted the prejudices and stereotypes about people with a homosexual orientation.

In the investigation that focused on determining the predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality in general (as a lifestyle) and people with homosexual orientation, Romanian students and master's students (sample 4) answered 101 items that operationalized: a) the socio-demographic characteristics; b) sexual orientation; c) self-assessment of religiosity – the Romanian language version for the instrument *Centrality of Religiosity Scale-5* (CRS-5)⁴⁴; d) self-evaluation of personal openness on the conservatism-liberalism axis taking into account one's ideologies and lifestyle (scale with six verbal anchors gradually distributed from *very conservative person* to *very liberal person*); e) occasional interpersonal contact and friendship with a gay/lesbian person; f) the importance that the topic of homosexuality has for Romanian society (scale with six verbal anchors gradually distributed from *not at all important* to *very important*); g) factual (correct) knowledge about homosexuality – the Romanian language version for a modified form of the *Knowledge About Homosexuality Questionnaire* (KHQ)⁴⁵ instrument; h) the attitude towards people with homosexual orientation and the issue of homosexuality in general – the versions translated into Romanian and adapted to the local cultural context for *Attitudes towards Lesbians and Gay Men Scale-Revised-Short Version-10* (ATLG-R-S-10)^{46, 47}, and *Homosexuality Attitude Scale* (HAS)⁴⁸; i) the

⁴² Bogardus E. S. *Measuring social distance*. In: *Journal of Applied Sociology*, 1925, 9(1), p. 299-308. ISSN (print) 0749-0232.

⁴³ Guttman L. *The basis for scalogram analysis*. In: Stouffer S. A., Guttman L., Suchman E. A., Lazarsfeld P. F., Star S. A., Clausen J. A. (Eds.), *Measurement and Prediction* (Studies in Social Psychology in World War II, Vol. 4). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950, p. 60-90.

⁴⁴ Huber S., Huber O. W. *The Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS)*. In: *Religions*, 2012, 3(3), p. 710-724. ISSN (online) 2077-1444. doi: [10.3390/rel3030710](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel3030710).

⁴⁵ Harris M. B., Nightengale J., Owen N. *Health care professionals' experience, knowledge, and attitudes concerning homosexuality*. In: *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 1995, 2(2), p. 91-108. ISSN (print) 1053-8720, ISSN (online) 1540-4056. doi: [10.1300/J041v02n02_06](https://doi.org/10.1300/J041v02n02_06).

⁴⁶ Herek G. M. *Attitudes toward lesbians and gay men: A factor-analytic study*. In: *Journal of Homosexuality*, 1984, vol. 10, no. 1-2, p. 39-51. ISSN (print) 0091-8369, ISSN (online) 1540-3602. doi: [10.1300/J082v10n01_03](https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v10n01_03).

⁴⁷ Bulboacă G., Robu V. *A psychometric evaluation of the Revised Attitudes toward Lesbians and Gay Men Scale-Short Version: The ATLG-R-S-9*. In: *Journal of Innovation in Psychology, Education and Didactics*, 2021, vol. 25, no. 2, p. 225-238. ISSN (print) 2247-4579, ISSN (online) 2392-7127 doi: [10.29081/JIPED.2021.25.2.10](https://doi.org/10.29081/JIPED.2021.25.2.10).

⁴⁸ Kite M. E., Deaux K. *Attitudes toward homosexuality: Assessment and behavioral consequences*. In: *Basic and Applied Social Psychology*, 1986, 7(2), p. 137-162. ISSN (print) 1052-9284, ISSN (online) 1099-1298. doi: [10.1207/s15324834basp0702_4](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15324834basp0702_4).

attitude towards sexuality in general - the Romanian language version (ATSS-10)⁴⁹ for the instrument *Attitudes Toward Sexuality Scale* (ATSS)⁵⁰; k) the personality factor regarding openness from a mental point of view and regarding personal experiences – the Romanian version for the *Openness scale from the Big Five Inventory* (BFI-O)⁵¹; l) the tendency to lie on purpose (self-presentation in a favorable light) – the Romanian version of the *Paulhus Deception Scale-Impression Management* (PDS-IM)⁵² instrument. The internal construct validity for the Romanian versions of the instruments administered to the respondents to determine the predictors of the attitude towards homosexuality in general and towards people with homosexual orientation was investigated using confirmatory factor analysis with the AMOS 24.0 application⁵³.

Results of the investigations carried out among students from Romania and the Republic of Moldova reviews the findings of the approaches we have applied to identify the level of knowledge about homosexuality in the population of Romanian students and master's students, the universe of the representation of homosexuality among them and of students from the Republic of Moldova, the social distance towards people from the LGBT community, prejudices and stereotypes towards people with homosexual orientation among students from the two countries, respectively predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality and people with homosexual orientation among Romanian students.

A. The level of knowledge about homosexuality among Romanian students. The study program that the respondents were following had a statistically significant effect on the total score on the questionnaire that operationalized knowledge about the field of homosexuality (Table 1). Compared to respondents who were enrolled in programs in the social sciences and humanities, those in other programs had a significantly lower mean, although the effect size was modest ($d_{\text{Cohen}} = 0.26$). The result we obtained could be explained by a higher level among students and master's students following basic/master's university training programs in various social and humanistic fields (such as anthropology, philosophy, psychology, sociology, etc.) in terms of open-mindedness and concerns for knowing and understanding human variety, the nature and meanings of various social and cultural practices, and individual lifestyle choices.

⁴⁹ Robu V., Bulboacă G. *Psychometric Properties of the Attitudes Toward Sexuality Scale in a Sample of Romanian University Students*. Lucrare prezentată la Conferința Internațională Științifico-Practică cu tema „Orientări și practici metodologice contemporane în științele sociale”, Chișinău, Republica Moldova, 17-18 octombrie 2019.

⁵⁰ Fisher T. D., Hall R. G. *A scale for the comparison of the sexual attitudes of adolescents and their parents*. In: The Journal of Sex Research, 1988, vol. 24, no. 1, p. 90-100. ISSN (print) 0022-4499, ISSN (online) 1559-8519. doi: [10.1080/00224498809551400](https://doi.org/10.1080/00224498809551400).

⁵¹ John O. P., Donahue E. M., Kentle R. L. *The Big Five Inventory-Versions 4a and 54*. Berkeley, CA: University of California at Berkeley, Institute of Personality and Social Research, 1991.

⁵² Paulhus D. L. *Paulhus Deception Scales (PDS): The Balanced Inventory of Desirable Responding-7. User's Manual*. North Tonawanda, NY: Multi-Health Systems, Inc., 1998, 40 p.

⁵³ Arbuckle J. L. *IBM® SPSS® AMOS™ 24 User's Guide*. Chicago, IL. În: IBM Corporation, 2016, 693 p.

Table 1. Comparisons between total scores (number of correct answers) to the questionnaire on the level of knowledge about homosexuality

Independent variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>_{Student}	<i>p</i>
<i>Level of education</i>				
Undergraduate	5.56	2.73	0.81	0.414
(Post)graduate	5.36	2.71		
<i>Study program</i>				
Social and humanistic sciences	5.67	2.73	2.65	0.008
Other study programs	4.97	2.63		
<i>Religious affiliation</i>				
Christian-Orthodox (<i>n</i> = 413)	5.33	2.58	- 0.66	0.507
Other (<i>n</i> = 97)	5.53	2.79		
<i>Axa conservatorism-liberalism</i>				
Predisposition towards conservatism	5.00	2.67	- 3.19	0.001
Predisposition towards liberalism	5.77	2.71		
<i>Social contact with a lesbian/gay person</i>				
YES	6.22	2.74	5.70	< 0.001
NO	4.91	2.56		
<i>Friendship with a lesbian/gay person</i>				
YES	6.82	2.84	6.11	< 0.001
NO	5.12	2.57		

Compared to the respondents who were inclined towards conservatism in terms of ideological orientation and lifestyle, those inclined towards liberalism obtained a significantly higher mean for the total score on the questionnaire that tracked the level of knowledge about homosexuality. However, even for this difference, the effect size from the independent variable was modest ($d_{\text{Cohen}} = 0.29$).

Also, occasional social contact and, above all, friendship with a lesbian/gay person seems to facilitate the process of correct information about the specifics of homosexuality, as can be seen from the data we obtained (see again Table 1). Thus, compared to respondents who had no social contact with a lesbian/gay person or did not have a friendship relationship, those who had experienced casual contact or were involved in a close relationship obtained significantly higher averages for the level of correct knowledge about homosexuality. For the two differences, the effect sizes from the independent variables were the most consistent, as $d_{\text{Cohen}} = 0.50$ (moderate effect) – for social contact with a lesbian/gay person, and $d_{\text{Cohen}} = 0.65$ (moderate to high effect) – for friendship with a lesbian/gay person. It is also worth noting that the subsamples of respondents who had social contacts ($M = 6.22$) or were involved in a friendship with a lesbian/gay person ($M = 6.82$) were highlighted by the highest average score values total to the administered questionnaire.

Occasional social contact and, especially, friendship with a gay/lesbian person seem to favor a somewhat higher level of accurate knowledge that students (as well as other population segments open to varied interactions) have regarding the issue of homosexuality. This result strengthens the intergroup contact hypothesis⁵⁴, according to which prejudice against members of a minority group can be diminished by frequent interactions between them and members of the majority group. Individuals from the two groups may propose common goals and activities or may interact in various social, professional, or cultural environments. They can give individuals in the majority group numerous opportunities to properly inform themselves and form a more complete and appropriate representation of the actual characteristics of members of the minority group. It is widely accepted the conclusion that prejudices are the direct results of generalizations and oversimplifications that members of a majority group make about an entire minority group, these distortions of thinking being based on wrong/incomplete information or

⁵⁴ Allport G. W. *The Nature of Prejudice*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Books, 1954, 537 p. ISBN 978-020-10-0175-4.

negative interpersonal experiences. Open and honest interpersonal contact between people with a heterosexual orientation and *gay/lesbian* people can contribute to the correct information and reduced prejudices and, thereby, to reduced homophobic attitudes, respectively the correct approach to this social group.

B. The universe of social representation of homosexuality among Romanian students. The actual number of associations that the respondents evoked was equal to 1849. The number of associations with a positive connotation was equal to 514, and that of associations with a negative connotation was equal to 889. The value of the polarity indicator was equal to -0.20 , a result that reflects the trend of the investigated respondents to express a negative attitude towards homosexuality. The terms frequently associated with the stimulus word *homosexuality* were: *different/unusual people* (28.2%), *mental illness/madness* (26.6%), *boys/men* (23.2%), *unpleasant/disgusting/unsightly/disgusting phenomenon* (22.9%), *same-sex attraction/intimate relationship* (22.1%), *gay/lesbian men* (22.1%), *disadvantage/discrimination/exclusion/marginalization* (20%), *abnormality/deviance* (19.2%), *atypical/weird/unnatural* (18.6%), *disliked/rejected phenomenon* (18.1%), *love* (16.5%), *sin* (15.2%). When, in the quantitative analysis, in addition to the criterion related to the frequency of appearance in the evocations, the average value of the rank of importance that the respondents assigned to each of the evoked terms was taken into account, the number of candidate associations to be part of the central core of the representation of homosexuality narrowed from 12 to seven. Following this approach, it was found that the associations of *abnormality/deviance*, *attraction/intimate relationship between two people of the same sex*, *boys/men*, *mental illness/madness*, *love*, *sin*, respectively *different/unusual people* stood out both by a high frequency of occurrence in the evocations made by the students and a high importance.

The elements highlighted in the central core can be systematized in four interconnected dimensions, namely: a) the common, not necessarily negative, representation that the general public has about the community of people with homosexual orientation; this dimension is suggested by the associations of *different/unusual*, *boys/men*, and *attraction/intimate relationship between two people of the same sex*; b) a dimension related to desirable (universal) values of human existence, represented by *love/love* associations; c) a pathological dimension (both at the individual level and at the societal level) that includes the associations *abnormality/deviance*, respectively *mental illness/madness*; d) a religious dimension (*sin*). In turn, the four dimensions of the social representation of homosexuality among the investigated students can be grouped into three broader facets, namely: a) a neutral facet of the intolerance-tolerance axis towards homosexuality (the first dimension); b) a positive facet (second dimension); c) a negative facet (the last two dimensions).

C. Results of the investigation of the silent zone of the social representation of homosexuality among Romanian students. The lexical-semantic analysis of the total number of associations that the Romanian respondents evoked under the conditions of the substitution record starting from the induction term *homosexuality* led to the detection of 116 different ones, of which 22 were retained for further processing, whose frequencies of occurrence were ≥ 6 . Of these, five had a frequency of occurrence ≥ 12 and, at the same time, showed high importance (average rank = 2.43-2.83). These are about the associations: *indifference*, *different people*, *acceptance/understanding/tolerance*, *abnormality/deviance/wrongness*, and *sexual relations between two people of the same sex*. The associations that I have listed delimited the central core of the representation of homosexuality (the silent zone) among Romanian students and master's students.

Depending on the semantic connotation, the associations retained for the central core were grouped into four dimensions, as follows: a) *the common (stereotypical) representation of homosexuality*, which grouped the associations *different people* and *sexual relations between two people of the same sex*; b) *the positive dimension* rendered by the associations *acceptance/understanding/tolerance*; c) *the negative dimension* suggested by the *abnormality/deviance/mistake* associations; d) *social dimension (indifference association)*. Three of the associations included in the core (*different people*, *abnormality/deviance/mistake*, and *same-sex intercourse*) were also found in the core of representation of homosexuality obtained by administering the standard questionnaire in both samples of Romanian students and masters students.

Subjects who have a rather positive attitude about the issue of homosexuality relate it to terms such as *freedom* (an association that was positively connoted by the majority of respondents who reported it) or *choice* (an association that was either neutrally or positively connoted). The dimension related to acceptance and tolerance could be related to the description of the relationship between two people of the same sex in terms of unconditional love or passionate love (three quarters of the respondents who evoked

these associations had a positive connotation), while it is more likely that respondents who view homosexuality through the lens of abnormality and deviance associate it with aspects such as mental illness, strange behavior, lack of faith in God or sin (all these associations were predominantly negatively connoted). Likewise, homosexuality has an obvious social component, which the Romanian study participants projected in the minds of Romanian students in general by associating it with the term referring to indifference (probably towards the phenomenon of homosexuality itself and/or towards people with a homosexual orientation) and with a lower importance for other terms such as *disgust/repulsion*, *discrimination* and *marginalization* (associations that the majority of Romanian respondents who evoked had a negative connotation).

In conclusion, the investigation of the silent zone of the social representation of homosexuality among Romanian students and master's students (dimension obtained by administering the task based on the evocation of free associations in the conditions of the record by substitution) revealed a relative heterogeneity of perceptions regarding the subject addressed. The issue of homosexuality seems to divide public opinion in Romania, at least that of students, into dimensions that include both universally human values (for example interpersonal acceptance, empathy, understanding, promoting unconditional love between people, etc.), as well as negative aspects that bring homosexuality back into the discussion through the lens of deviant behavior and/or an abnormal lifestyle, with moral, religious and social reverberations.

D. Social representation of homosexuality among students in the Republic of Moldova. Under the conditions of the standard report, the respondents from the Republic of Moldova developed 355 associations. Of these, only 42 were positively connoted, 181 were negatively connoted and 132 were neutrally connoted. The tendency of Moldovan students and master's students to express a rather negative attitude towards the issue of homosexuality can be noted, a result that was confirmed by the value of the polarity indicator ($P = -0.39$). Homosexuality was more frequently associated with the terms: *disgusting/nauseating/disgust* (37.5% of all respondents), *mental illness/weakness/disorder* (35%), *gay* (27.5%), *sin* (21.2%), *sexual relations between two same-sex people* (18.7%), *lesbian* (17.5%), *rainbow colors* and *friendship/romantic relationship* (12.5% each), respectively *unacceptable/inappropriate* (10%). Four of these associations (*sin*, *unacceptable/inadequate*, *mental illness/weakness/disturbance*, and *disgusting/nausea/disgust*) also recorded high importance (mean rank values = 2.07-2.83) in respondents' evaluations. The associations that we have listed constituted the central nucleus of the representation of homosexuality in the conditions of the standard record among students and master's students in the Republic of Moldova.

The elements of the central core were organized into two dimensions, namely a *negative* one that highlighted the respondents' orientation towards the social rejection of the issue of homosexuality (highlighted by the associations of *mental illness/weakness/disturbance*, *disgust/nausea/disgusting* and *unacceptable/inadequate*), respectively another *religious dimension* centered around the idea of *sin*. It can be noted that the associative elements related to mental illness and sin were also found in the representation that the Romanian students and master's students (sample 1) produced under the conditions of the standard record starting from the stimulus term *homosexuality*. On the other hand, compared to the results obtained under the conditions of the standard record for the two samples made up of Romanian students and master's students, in the sample of respondents from the Republic of Moldova, the elements of the central core were exclusively negative. This result can be translated by the unfavorable representation of the issue of homosexuality.

E. The silent area of the social representation of homosexuality among students in the Republic of Moldova. The polarity index ($P = -0.53$) highlighted the tendency of Moldovan respondents to have a predominantly negative connotation of the associations reported under the conditions of the record by substitution. Twelve associations were drawn through frequencies of appearance that exceeded the threshold equal to 10% of the total number of respondents from the Republic of Moldova. Of these, six also exceeded the 15% threshold, but only three associations (namely *mental illness/disorder*, *disgusting/nausea/disgust*, and *sin*) simultaneously met the condition of high importance, which is necessary for the delineation of prototypical categories. For these associations, the values of the average rank of importance that the Moldovan respondents attributed to them were between 2.07 and 2.33. The three associations can be divided into two dimensions, namely a dimension related to the *social rejection of the issue of homosexuality* (to which the associations of *mental illness/disorder* and *disgusting/nausea/disgust* were connected), respectively a *religious dimension* (the term *sin*).

In conclusion, it can be stated that the associations related to mental illness and sin were found among students and master's students from the Republic of Moldova both in the conditions of the standard record and in those of the record by substitution. In addition, these associations were also evoked by the Romanian students and master's students (sample 1) under the conditions of the standard record. However, compared to the Romanian respondents, the Moldovans stood out with a more negative representation regarding the issue of homosexuality.

F. Social distance towards people from the LGBT community among students from Romania and the Republic of Moldova. Both for the sample of students and master's students from Romania, as well as for the one from the Republic of Moldova, the average values of the index of social distance from the minority groups taken into account were ranked in descending order (Table 2) for comparative analysis. For Romania, the situation was as follows: a) moderate to high social distance (IDS = 3.00-3.99) – drug users and alcoholics; b) moderate social distance (IDS = 2.00-2.99) – people with a criminal record, people suffering from a mental illness, people suffering from HIV/AIDS or another contagious disease, respectively transsexuals; c) moderate to low social distance (IDS = 1.00-1.99) – sectarians, bisexuals and people with homosexual orientation; d) low social distance (IDS = 0.00-0.99) – people of other racial origin and people of other ethnicity/nationality.

Table 2. Mean values for social distance towards people belonging to various minority groups

ROMANIA	<i>m</i> _{SDI}	REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA	<i>m</i> _{SDI}
1. Drug users	3.53	1. Drug users	4.80
2. Alcoholics	3.24	2. Alcoholics	4.38
3. People with criminal records	2.77	3. People suffering from a mental disease	3.98
4. People suffering from a mental disease	2.47	4. People suffering from HIV/AIDS or other contagious disease	3.97
5. People suffering from HIV/AIDS or other contagious disease	2.27	5. Transsexuals	3.93
6. Transsexuals	2.17	6. Sectarians, people with a homosexual orientation	3.81
7. Sectarians	1.85	7. People with criminal records	3.51
8. Bisexuals	1.82	8. Bisexuals	3.50
9. People with a homosexual orientation	1.75	9. People of different racial origin	1.11
10. People of different racial origin	0.58	10. People of different ethnicity/nationality	0.82
11. People of different ethnicity/nationality	0.35	-	-

Note: SDI – social distance index

For the Republic of Moldova, the ranking of social distance index means revealed the following situation: a) high social distance (SDI = 4.00-5.00) – drug users and alcoholics; b) moderate to high social distance (SDI = 3.00-3.99) – people diagnosed with a mental illness, people suffering from HIV/AIDS or another contagious disease, transsexuals, sectarians, people with a homosexual orientation, people with a criminal record, respectively bisexual; c) moderate to low social distance (SDI = 1.00-1.99) – people with a different racial origin; d) low social distance (SDI = 0.00-0.99) – people of another ethnicity/nationality.

Compared to the Republic of Moldova, Romania was placed lower in terms of the social distances that students and master's students highlighted towards people with homosexual orientation, bisexuals, and transsexuals. Also, in Romania, the social distances towards homosexual and bisexual people were lower compared to the social distance towards transsexual people, while, in the Republic of Moldova, students and master's students showed somewhat greater proximity to bisexuals compared to transsexuals and people with homosexual orientation. On the other hand, in both countries, people who are part of sexual minorities seem to be more tolerated compared to alcoholics and drug users, with a more pronounced difference for students and master's students in Romania. However, in the Republic of Moldova, people with a homosexual orientation were rejected almost as much as people suffering from a mental illness, HIV/AIDS, or another contagious disease, respectively transsexuals.

G. *Stereotypes and prejudices about people with homosexual orientation: comparative data Romania-Republic of Moldova.* Compared to the sample of students and master's students from Romania, the one from the Republic of Moldova revealed a higher extent of prejudices and stereotypes towards people with homosexual orientation (Table 3). This result is in agreement with the data obtained on social distance.

Table 3. Comparative data (Romanian – Republic of Moldova): stereotypes and prejudices about people with homosexual orientation

Items	Frequency (%) answers YES		$z_{\text{proportions}}$	p
	Romania	Republic of Moldova		
Homosexuals behave like people of the opposite sex	53.3	37.5	2.19	0.028
Homosexuals have unusually strong impulses and desires	43.3	57.5	- 1.96	0.048
Homosexuals are afraid of relationships with people of the opposite sex	43.3	60.0	- 2.31	0.020
People with homosexual orientation are easily recognizable due to their appearance and behavior	50.8	71.3	- 2.88	0.003
Homosexuals are dangerous as teachers or leaders because they seek to sexually corrupt children and young people	28.3	68.8	- 5.64	p < 0.001
Homosexuals tend to sexually corrupt their workmates	18.3	45.0	- 4.07	p < 0.001
Homosexuality is a social corruption that may cause the fall of human civilization	36.7	67.5	- 4.26	p < 0.001
A person with a homosexual orientation should NOT be allowed to work as:				
a) Government official (e.g., minister)	38.3	42.5	- 0.59	0.555
b) doctor	26.7	48.8	- 3.19	0.001
c) educator, teacher, instructor	36.7	48.8	- 1.70	0.089
d) judge	34.2	42.5	- 1.18	0.254
e) social worker, school counselor	44.2	45.0	- 0.11	0.912
f) physical therapist, masseur	32.5	48.8	- 2.31	0.020
A person with a homosexual orientation would be best suited to occupations such as <i>hair stylist, make-up artist, fashion designer, florist, artist, etc.</i>	56.7	75.0	- 2.64	0.008

The most consistent differences were registered for the prejudices and stereotypes according to which people with a homosexual orientation are dangerous as teachers or leaders, because they are prone to sexually corrupt children and young people ($h_{\text{Cohen}} = 0.47$), and homosexuality is a social corruption that can cause the collapse of human civilization ($h_{\text{Cohen}} = 0.36$). For the first of these two differences, the effect size was moderate, and for the second somewhat lower.

Other differences (in disfavor of the participants from the Republic of Moldova) were highlighted for the prejudices and stereotypes according to which: a) people with homosexual orientation tend to sexually corrupt their work colleagues ($h_{\text{Cohen}} = 0.28$); b) people with a homosexual orientation are easily recognizable due to their appearance and behavior ($h_{\text{Cohen}} = 0.27$); c) a person with a homosexual orientation should not be allowed to work as a doctor ($h_{\text{Cohen}} = 0.24$); d) a person with a homosexual orientation would be best suited to occupations such as *hair-stylist, make-up artist, fashion designer or florist* ($h_{\text{Cohen}} = 0.24$); e) people with a homosexual orientation are afraid of relationships with partners of the opposite sex ($h_{\text{Cohen}} = 0.19$); f) a person with a homosexual orientation should not be allowed to work as a physiotherapist or masseur ($h_{\text{Cohen}} = 0.18$); g) people with homosexual orientation have unusually strong sexual impulses and desires ($h_{\text{Cohen}} = 0.16$). However, for all these differences, effect sizes were modest or low. For the prejudice according to which lesbian women and gay men behave like people of

the opposite sex, a higher magnitude was revealed among Romanian students and master's students, but, again, the effect size was low ($h_{\text{Cohen}} = 0.17$).

H. Predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality and persons with homosexual orientation among Romanian students. The most consistent predictors of scores for attitude toward gay/lesbian persons (ATLG-R-S-9) and attitude toward the issue of homosexuality in general (HAS) were: a) liberal attitude toward the domain of human sexuality (individual explanatory contributions ranging from 7.84% and 14.59% of the variance of the criteria); b) the conservative attitude towards sexuality in general (explanatory contributions between 9.18% and 10.11% of the variance of the criteria); c) the level of correct knowledge that the Romanian respondents had about the field of homosexuality (explanatory contributions between 5.01% and 8.64% of the variance of the criteria considered).

Friendship with a lesbian/gay person (individual explanatory contributions between 1.9% and 3.88% of the variance of the criteria) and position on the conservatism vs. liberalism axis from the point of view of individual ideology and lifestyle (explanatory contributions between 1.12% and 2.46%) also had a predictive role that can be taken into account. Conversely, religiosity (individual explanatory contributions between 0.38% and 1.27%) and occasional social contact with a lesbian/gay person (explanatory contributions between 0.42% and 0.65%) were the weakest predictors of the attitude that students and master's students Romanians reported it towards people with a homosexual orientation, respectively the attitude towards the issue of homosexuality in general.

III. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The theoretical-conceptual analysis, the synthesis of the findings of the studies that were concerned with the dimension of homosexuality, and the results obtained in the empirical investigations that we carried out allowed the formulation of the following conclusions:

1. Through the implications it has for the individual existence of people with homosexual orientation, the system of their family and social relationships, their integration and adaptation in the communities they belong to, as well as through the social, cultural, moral-religious, legal and political, homosexuality has begun to occupy an important place on the agenda of scientific researchers, counselors and psychotherapists, public policy specialists in the health and social assistance and legal sectors, representatives of the Church, as well as politicians. Even if there are numerous controversies regarding the nature of homosexuality and heated debates on the rights that should be granted to people who declare themselves to be members of the LGBT community, this side of human existence cannot be denied or transformed into a media tool, a means of propaganda or for ideological manipulation or leverage for regulating power relations in the political world.

2. The correct, equidistant, and complete approach to homosexuality (and, in general, people from the LGBT community), with beneficial effects on all the social actors involved, requires that we refer to all the dimensions that human sexuality involves, namely: individual/humanistic, medical, social, legal, moral, ethical and deontological, religious, etc. Based on this demand, we argue for the need for cooperation between scientific researchers, non-governmental organizations, workers from various sectors who provide specialized assistance, legal professionals, community institutions, respectively legal representatives of all vulnerable groups concerning the phenomenon of discrimination, exclusion, and marginalization, to create a framework in which adequate legislation, good practices and functional services allow access to all people (regardless of socio-economic, religious, cultural, ethnic, racial background, identity and/or sexual orientation, etc.) to equal opportunities for development and integration in the life of the communities and societies of which they are a part. In this network of cooperation, the role of researchers is to provide the least objectionable answer to the questions that, in the last two centuries, have raised fierce disputes on homosexuality in all areas of human society.

3. This doctoral thesis has been focused on the methodological scaffolding and the most relevant results of a series of investigative approaches that sought to explore the content and structure of the social representation of homosexuality among students and master's students in Romania and the Republic of Moldova. Knowing the lifestyle that members of the LGBT community have, as well as their human potential, is an essential step for a better understanding of public prejudice against people with other gender identities and/or sexual orientations than the majority, as well as combat discrimination and marginalization of this vulnerable group. The theory of social representations establishes the conceptual and methodological framework that helps us better understand how human individuals perceive the reality

around them and, through this, develop behavioral responses appropriate to the goals they propose, but also to the values, norms, and obligations that communities/the societies in which they are born, develop and live impose on them. Since it represents a sensitive issue with numerous implications at the micro-individual level, but also at the societal level, we believe that investigating the image that the general population or various segments of it have about homosexuality can provide valuable informational support for researchers and public policy specialists. They work for the resizing of the normative and procedural framework intended to control the discrimination and marginalization of people from the LGBT community who may be denied access to various sectors of society.

The **scientific problem solved** in this doctoral thesis consists of determining the content and structure of the representation of homosexuality among Romanian and Moldovan students, as well as highlighting the predictive role that certain variables (for example: liberal/conservative attitude towards sexuality in general, correct knowledge about the field of homosexuality, friendship with a *gay*/lesbian person, etc.) have in differentiating attitudes towards homosexuality in general and those towards people with homosexual orientation.

The **applied value of the investigations** carried out derives from the efforts aimed at delimiting the content and structure of the social representation of homosexuality among students in the two countries, the social distance from people from the LGBT community (by comparison with other vulnerable social groups), the prejudices and stereotypes towards people with homosexual orientation, as well as the variables that explain the attitude that Romanians who access higher education show towards homosexuality in general and people who have this sexual orientation.

Our contributions to the research presented in this doctoral thesis include:

1. the first investigation that focuses on the x-ray of the social representation that the young and educated population in Romania has about the subject of homosexuality;
2. the comparative approach of the social representation that Romanian and Moldovan students and master's students have about homosexuality, of social distance towards members of the LGBT community, respectively of prejudices and stereotypes about people with homosexual orientation;
3. cultural-linguistic and psychometric adaptation of the ATLG-R-S-10, ATSS, and HAS instruments; they may be useful to other researchers concerned with the issue of human sexuality in general and, more specifically, with the perceptions and attitudes that Romanians have regarding the issue of homosexuality;
4. the first empirical evidence regarding the level of (correct) knowledge that the educated population in Romania has regarding the field of homosexuality.

Based on the theoretical and empirical investigations we have carried out, we propose the following **practical recommendations** addressed to managers in the higher education system, specialists in professional counseling departments (present in every university), teaching staff, and students:

1. *training students to acquire basic terms* (e.g.: gender identity, gender expression, gender norms and roles, romantic and sexual orientation, etc.) in discussing gender diversity and the LGBT community; the training, counseling, and orientation centers of the universities may be empowered to organize conferences, thematic workshops, debates or optional courses on the issue of marginalization, social exclusion and discrimination of various vulnerable groups, not only members of the LGBT community;
2. *the support given to students for monitoring their prejudices and negative attitudes* towards different gender identities, respectively romantic and sexual or family orientations; this objective can be achieved through discussion groups (in which the Student Leagues can also be involved), *peer-to-peer* support, collective *coaching* through the contribution of a mentor from the LGBT community;
3. *organizing thematic events* (for example, *International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia*) and *campaigns* focused on raising awareness among students and teachers of the causes and consequences of harassment, discrimination, and abuse to which members of the LGBT community are often subjected; in such actions, Student Leagues and other youth organizations with a national impact can make an essential contribution to changing the ideological paradigm about people with other sexual orientations and/or gender identities than the prevailing ones, as well as negative attitudes towards this social group vulnerable;
4. *ensuring a safe physical, academic, emotional, and social climate for students who openly declare their gender identity and/or sexual orientation*, as well as for their allies; the creation of inclusive

cultures in universities is a recommendation of the European Union forums that has begun, albeit timidly, to be applied in Romania as well.

The results of the investigations we carried out must be analyzed taking into account the following **limits** that also suggest future **research directions**:

1. One of the limitations of the studies that sought to assess the social distance towards people from the LGBT community, respectively the prejudices and stereotypes towards people with a homosexual orientation among students and master's students in Romania and the Republic of Moldova is the recruitment pool limited only to the east, north-east, and west regions of Romania, and the *relatively modest number of participants* from both countries, especially from the Republic of Moldova. Also, the distribution of the samples according to the gender of the participants was unbalanced, again, especially for the sample from the Republic of Moldova (where female participants predominated). In addition, for the neighboring country, the pool from which the participants were recruited (namely students and masters from the “Alecu Russo” State University in Bălți) is part of a region where political and cultural influences from the Russian Federation are felt still more significantly than in other parts of the Republic of Moldova, such as the capital. For these reasons, in future studies, we aim to use much larger and more heterogeneous samples in terms of socio-demographic characteristics, especially the residence of the participants.
2. The main variables of interest for the studies we conducted were operationalized using *standardized scales, questionnaires, and inventories to which participants responded anonymously* to encourage honesty. This method for collecting data from a certain population segment (based on self-report) involves the *risk of distorting the results through the subjectivity of the answers or the lack of sincerity of the research participants* either as a result of the intervention of defensive mechanisms activated to protect the self-image or as a result of the social desirability effect on the answers. In our investigations, participants were questioned about “sensitive” issues, such as their perceptions and attitudes towards the phenomenon of homosexuality in general, people with homosexual orientation, and members of the LGBT community. This reinforces the need to consider the accuracy and validity of responses when analyzing data and results. In a future investigative approach, we aim to supplement the responses to standardized instruments aimed at attitudes towards homosexuality and persons with homosexual orientation through individual interviews with the participants.
3. Another limitation is the *cross-sectional and correlational nature of the design that was the basis of the study that tracked the predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality* among Romanian students. The dimensions of our focus were measured simultaneously, and working hypothesis testing was performed using multiple linear regression analysis. The two methodological aspects limited our possibility of interpreting the relationships between the variables that were assumed as psycho-socio-cultural determinants and the attitude towards homosexuality in terms of cause and effect. In a future investigation, we propose to use a *longitudinal* design and appropriate statistical methods that allow highlighting the temporal dynamics of the relationships between the variables of interest.
4. In future investigations, we aim to expand the variables that can explain the differences between students in terms of attitudes towards people with homosexual orientation or, more generally, members of the LGBT community. Such variables might include interest in the political domain, political orientation (e.g., right-wing authoritarianism), orientation toward the social dominance hypothesis, strong belief in the value of masculinity, heterosexism/identification with heterosexual gender roles, role beliefs about gender, attitude towards traditional family values, ethnocentrism, attitude towards HIV/AIDS, concern for empathy and/or perspective of others, etc.

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V. LIST of PUBLISHED PAPERS

1. Papers in scientific journals:

1.1. in journals indexed in databases approved by ANACEC (indicate the data basis)

1. Bulboacă G. *Homosexualitatea ca fenomen al societății contemporane: semnificații și dimensiuni psihosociale*. In: Anuarul Universității „Petre Andrei” din Iași (Fascicula: Asistență Socială, Sociologie, Psihologie), 2023, vol. 29, p. 55-72, ISSN (print) 2248-1060, ISSN (online) 2601-8209. The journal (Category B) is indexed in EconPapers, Ideas RePEc, CEEOL, ICI Master Journal List – Index Copernicus, CrossRef, CrossCheck, Google Scholar, WorldCat, KVK, Socionet. doi: [10.18662/upasw/29/67](https://doi.org/10.18662/upasw/29/67)
2. Bulboacă G., Robu V. *Homosexuality Attitude Scale (HAS): proprietăți psihometrice ale versiunii în limba română*. In: Revista de Psihologie, 2023, 69(1), p. 5-39, ISSN (print) 0034-8759, ISSN (online) 2344-4665. The journal (Category B+) is edited by the Romanian Academy and indexed in PsycINFO, Index Copernicus International, ERIH+, EBSCOhost, ROAD, OAJI, New Jour, Google Academic. https://revistadepsihologie.ipsihologie.ro/images/revista_de_psihologie/Revista-de-psihologie-nr-1_2023.pdf
3. Bulboacă G., Robu V. *Distanța socială față de persoanele LGBT: studiu exploratoriu în rândul studenților din România și Republica Moldova*. In: Revista de Psihologie, 2022, 68(3), p. 205-229, ISSN (print) 0034-8759, ISSN (online) 2344-4665. The journal (Category B+) is edited by the Romanian Academy and indexed in PsycINFO, Index Copernicus International, ERIH+, EBSCOhost, ROAD, OAJI, New Jour, Google Academic. https://revistadepsihologie.ipsihologie.ro/images/revista_de_psihologie/Revista-de-psihologie-nr-3_2022.pdf
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1.2. in journals included in the National Register of specialized journals (indicate the category)

1. Bulboacă G., *Incluziunea studenților din comunitatea LGBTQIA+ în campusul universitar: aspecte practice*. In: EcoSoEn: Științe Economice, Sociale și Inginerești, 2023, vol. 6, nr. 3-4 p. 113-118, ISSN (print) 2587-344X, ISSN (online) 2587-425X. The journal (Category B) is edited by the Free International University of Moldova and indexed in CEEOL, DOAJ, IBN, Index Copernicus International, Munich Personal RePEc Archive/MPRA, Academia.edu. doi: [10.54481/ecosoen.2023.3.11](https://doi.org/10.54481/ecosoen.2023.3.11)

2. Papers in the volumes of scientific events included in the Register of published papers of scientific events organized in the Republic of Moldova

1. Bulboacă G. *Percepția și atitudinea românilor față de homosexualitate: dovezi empirice*. In: Preocupări contemporane ale științelor socio-umane. Materialele Conferinței Științifice Internaționale. Ediția a XI-a. Chișinău, 3-4 December 2020. Chișinău: Tipografia „Print-Caro”, 2021, p. 76-96. ISBN 978-997-53-4713-6
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VI. ANNOTATION

Bulboacă Gabriel, “Psychological, social and cultural dimensions of homosexuality – a contemporary Romanian perspective”. PhD thesis in Psychology, Chișinău, 2024

Structure of the thesis: annotations, three chapters, general conclusions and recommendations, bibliography (196 sources), 12 annexes, 160 pages of basic text, 40 tables, 4 figures. The research results have been published in 9 scientific papers.

Keywords: homosexuality, LGBT people, students, social representation, free associations, prototypical category analysis, social distance, prejudice, stereotypes, attitude towards homosexuality, predictors

Research field: outlining the social representation of homosexuality among Romanian and Moldovan students, the social distance towards members of the LGBT community, the prejudices and stereotypes towards gay/lesbian people, respectively the variables that predict the attitude towards the issue of homosexuality and people with this sexual orientation.

The research objectives: identification of the degree to which the research topic is investigated to delimit the aspects that have been of less concern among specialists from Romania and the Republic of Moldova; the empirical investigation of the social representation that students in the two countries have about homosexuality; determining the social distance towards members of the LGBT community, respectively the prejudices and stereotypes towards people with a homosexual orientation; identifying predictors of attitudes towards homosexuality and persons with homosexual orientation; elaborating practical recommendations and identifying directions for future theoretical-empirical research.

The scientific novelty and theoretical significance of the thesis result from the conceptual and empirical approaches carried out that have led to new clarifications regarding the complex universe of homosexuality and how it is reflected in the mentality and collective attitudes of students from Romania and the Republic of Moldova.

The solved scientific problem consists of identifying the content and structure of the representation of homosexuality among Romanian and Moldovan students, as well as highlighting the predictive role that certain variables (for example: liberal/conservative attitude towards sexuality in general, correct knowledge about the field of homosexuality, the relationship of friendship with a gay/lesbian person, etc.) have in differentiating attitudes towards homosexuality in general and towards people with homosexual orientation, in particular.

The theoretical significance of the thesis results from the conceptual and empirical investigations on homosexuality, which were carried out from a multidimensional perspective in the student population of the two countries.

The applicative value of the thesis derives from the approaches that focused on the perception, prejudices, stereotypes, representations, and attitudes regarding homosexuality among contemporary students, as well as from the approaches focused on the cultural-linguistic adaptation and psychometric standardization of the ATLG-R-S-10, HAS, and ATSS tools that can be used in further research on the issue of human sexuality.

The implementation of the scientific results has been ensured by the elaboration and publication of 5 articles in specialized journals (indexed in international databases) and 3 works included in volumes of international scientific events, as well as by the presentation of 15 works at conferences, symposia and congresses national and international that were organized in Romania and the Republic of Moldova.

BULBOACĂ GABRIEL

**PSYCHO-SOCIAL-CULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF
HOMOSEXUALITY – THE CONTEMPORARY ROMANIAN
PERSPECTIVE**

SPECIALTY: 511.03 – SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

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