



Development of a Collaborative Network: Latin-American Network for Research in Psychotherapy and Mental Health in Sexual and Gender Diversity

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Abstract

The main goal of this article is to describe the formation and development of a Latin-American network for research in psychotherapy and mental health in sexual and gender diversity. Research has shown that psychological well-being and mental health problems of sexual minority individuals are strongly influenced by the particular social and cultural contexts in which people develop and live. Therefore, the development of effective psychological and mental health interventions that meet the specific needs of people of sexual and gender diversity is necessary to deepen the knowledge of the psychosocial and specific contextual-related aspects of mental health of these populations. The Latin-American network for research in psychotherapy and mental health in sexual and gender diversity seeks to reinforce the contextualized study of these topics. This is an ongoing project that has generated collaborative work among researchers from centers in Chile, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, and Argentina. The diverse modalities of collaboration that have been developed so far between the centers are described, as well as the specific products that have emerged from these efforts. Finally, there is a discussion of the value of regional collaborative work in the global south that, while emphasizing differences, allows the comparison of different contexts, their histories, and influences on the object of study, as well as the shared cultural similarities derived from a common geographic space and history.

Keywords Latin-American network · Psychotherapy · Mental health · Sexual diversity · Gender diversity

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From the 1990s onward, openness on social and cultural topics has increased concerning the acceptance and recognition of the rights of people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT+) (Cáceres, et al., 2008; Valfort, 2017). Both globally and locally, social movements and political activism have been driving laws and major changes in the field of civil rights recognition, non-discrimination, and the protection of the human rights of LGBT+ people (e.g., Yogyakarta Principles, 2007/2017; Barrientos & Caetano, 2016; Barrientos, 2016). However, rejection, discrimination, and prejudice indexes are still high, while at the same time more subtle or implicit forms of prejudice have emerged (Cárdenas and Barrientos, 2008; Linguardi et al., 2015). For the LGBT+ community, there appears to be strong tension between this greater political and social openness and the cultural barriers that still make them feel threatened and stressed in everyday life (Barrientos et al., 2014). In this context, researchers have observed that LGBT+ people are more likely to seek psychological help (e.g., Platt et al., 2017), which means that professionals must be more aware of the social and cultural determinants of the mental health of these populations to provide culturally competent psychological and psychotherapeutic aid (APA, 2021a; Bidell, 2016).

In the mental health field, research has systematically shown that differences in psychological well-being between sexual minorities and their heterosexual and cisgender counterparts are due to the stress caused by the stigmatization associated with gender identity and sexual orientation (American Psychological Association, 2015, 2021a; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2013). The Minority Stress Model (Meyer, 2003) and its following adaptation to gender identity (Hendricks & Testa, 2012) note that these mental health disparities are underlain by social processes of stigmatization and internalization of the sexual stigma (APA, 2021b; Martínez et al., 2018, 2021; Nakamura & Logie, 2020; Tomicic et al., 2016). Researchers have shown that it appears to be insufficient for the specific needs of LGBT+ populations (Budge et al., 2017; Nadal et al., 2016). Experts have stressed the importance of conducting psychological interventions that consider and cater to these needs while promoting practitioners' acquisition of clinical competencies that enable them to supply affirmative and non-discriminatory care.

The above suggests developing a therapeutic approach that is not only affirmative, but also effective and socio-cultural competent. This involves addressing mental health and its treatment with a strong emphasis on the political, social, economic, and training characteristics that are unique to or shared by a geographic region. Although the acronym LGBT+ applies to lesbians, gay men, bisexual men and women, and transgender people, these groups are distinct and comprise subgroups based on race, ethnicity, geographic location, socioeconomic status, and other factors. These variations have implications for mental health research, including the methodological challenges involved.

The creation two years ago of a Latin-American network of centers that conduct research and/or provide psychotherapy services with a special focus on LGBT+ people has shown promise as a way to help fill this need and strengthen the scarce development of this field in our region. The main goal of this article is to describe the formation and development of this network, including its main characteristics, the milestones that have marked its brief history, and the

advantages and disadvantages that the COVID-19 pandemic has meant in its development.

Objectives of the Latin-American Network for Research in Psychotherapy and Mental Health in Sexual and Gender Diversity

The “Latin-American network for research in psychotherapy and mental health in sexual and gender diversity” (hereafter referred to as the network) arises to strengthen specific research on clinical psychology and psychotherapy with LGBT+ people; it also promotes the competencies of its researchers through an exchange of knowledge and methodologies developed in each of these countries to study the psychosocial determinants of mental health in LGBT+ populations, their specific needs of psychological intervention, and the therapeutic tools and competences for the development of affirmative and effective psychotherapy.

The expectation of a formal establishment of the network is to be sustainable over time, and that its research projects contribute to strengthen its development. Also, that the network produces a corpus of knowledge, linked to our local realities, to establish guidelines, techniques, and methods to improve professional practice in clinical psychology and psychotherapy with LGBT+ people.

Since its beginning in 2019, the network has been looking to create and exchange methodologies for the evaluation of the socio-cultural determinants of mental health in LGBT+ populations; this includes the identification of specific mental health and psychological intervention needs in LGBT+ people of various ages, family contexts, and cultures, as well as the identification and characterization of prejudices, negative attitudes, and microaggressions against LGBT+ patients from mental health professionals. It also includes the evaluation of the psychotherapeutic process and its relationship with psychological change in LGBT+ patients.

The network also has the purpose of disseminating the scientific findings and knowledge obtained among academic communities, mental health institutions, and civil organizations at a national and international level, as well as to train undergraduate and graduate students—master’s and doctoral students—and post-doctoral researchers from the countries involved in the network. All the aforementioned will provide innovative methodologies and knowledge for current and future research and practice in the field of clinical psychology and psychotherapy with LGBT+ communities and patients. This collaboration looks to design joint research projects funded bilaterally and apply to South American, North American, European grants, or other available international research scholarships.

The Expected Results of the Network: More than Publications

The international literature recognizes that research collaboration has become an indispensable way to progress in the scientific field, as it enhances and increases the exchange of ability and the production of new knowledge (Bukvova, 2010). Traditionally, the most obvious form of collaboration is co-authorship, which

is usually a frequent goal of any scientific collaboration (Su, 2010). Most studies that address the field of scientific networks, and their results, focus on co-authorship of academic articles, the network's characteristics, and the diversity of the authors within the network and the relationships between them (Paraskopoulou, et al., 2021; Wu & Duan, 2015). An uncomplicated way to understand a scientific network is as a network of relationships in which researchers in a field collaborate to research and author papers (Glanzel & Schubert, 2004).

However, network research can also promote inclusion and diversity within a research community, especially when it takes place in a regionally distributed network (Chartier et al., 2018). Our regional network for researching psychotherapy and mental health in sexual and gender diversity has the vision to become a pole of development and visibility of the specific needs of mental health and psychotherapeutic care in the context of the participating Latin-American countries. In this sense, it conceives the publication as an outcome—certainly necessary in the concert of scientific and academic production—but not exclusive. It privileges the notion of practice-oriented research, which brings together the traditions of psychotherapy research that have dealt with natural contexts and establish collaborative efforts among clinicians and psychotherapy researchers interested in the research implementation as a constitutive element of their program of action from the outset and not as a final link in the research process (Castonguay et al., 2013). Therefore, our network seeks the establishment of spaces of encounter and collaboration between different centers from Chile, Brazil, Colombia, and Argentina. These collaborations set up common aims, building synergies and merging the richness of complementary approaches to psychotherapy and mental health in a coordinated direction, expressed through the implementation and execution of joint research projects and publications. We expect the network to help strengthen the representation of LGBT+ topics in diverse scientific societies through its local or regional chapters as well as through the number of participating scientific presentations in the annual meetings of these societies.

Progressively, the network has produced a corpus of knowledge, bound to our local realities, which has been and will be disseminated through joint publications in indexed scientific journals. In this enterprise, the participants—researchers, graduate students (Master's, Ph.D.), and post-doctoral researchers involved in the network—have been familiarized with the latest findings regarding the theories that guide our research, as well as the analytic and methodological strategies applied for the study of psychotherapy and mental health with LGBT+ people. In this way, in addition to traditional publications, we have already generated two guides for therapists and mental health professionals for culturally competent practice with LGBT+ patients in Chile and Brazil (Martínez et al. 2018; Costa, 2021). We expect to continue in the future producing guides, techniques, and methods to enhance the professional practices of clinical psychologists and psychotherapists who treat LGBT+ people in the context of the Latin-American countries.

Network Participants: Progressive Growth

Currently, the network is formed by centers belonging to six Latin-American countries: Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Argentina, Uruguay, and Ecuador. Three of these centers are part of universities and mainly conduct research. Originally, the network was initiated with members of centers in Chile, Brazil, Colombia, and Israel. Only members of Latin-American centers are actively taking part, since the researchers of the Israel center, for different reasons, were never able to take part actively. This was the first learning. Thus, it has been an opportunity to reconfigure the network towards Latin-American identity, which has been visualized as culturally more synergistic and socially more significant. In the northern hemisphere, research on the topics of mental health and psychotherapy with the LGBT+ population is highly developed, and many centers, universities, and researchers produce it (e.g., Dominic Davis at Pink Therapy Institute at London, Heidi M. Levitt researcher in the clinical psychology program of the Department of Psychology at the University of Massachusetts Boston, Walter Bockting at Division of Gender, Sexuality & Health at the NYS Psychiatric Institute, and the Columbia University). Therefore, strengthening the scarce systematic research in this area in Latin America has a great social value, since the production of situated and contextually significant knowledge can locally improve the clinical approach and public policies on mental health in this area.

One of the activities that the members have had, which have contributed to the progressive growth of the network, has been the identification of scientific teams in the countries of the region that have begun to systematically develop activities of scientific value on these topics. It was in this framework that during 2020, the Center for Studies in Competent Psychotherapy for Sexual and Gender Minorities led by researcher Julieta Olivera of the University of the Merchant Marine (UdeMM) of Buenos Aires, Argentina, officially joins the network. She has a team with experience in research in psychotherapy and who were looking for a collaboration to focus on issues of sexual and gender diversity. In addition, with this purpose in mind, the two following individuals have been invited to collaborate and be part of the network: researcher Edgar Zúñiga from the University of the Americas of Guayaquil, Ecuador, who coordinates the Ecuadorian Network of Psychology for LGBT + Diversity, and Gonzalo Gelpi, a researcher at the University of the Republic of Montevideo, Uruguay, who coordinates the Friendly Reference Center (CRAM) that psychologically serves young LGBT + population.

We have learned that the recognition between the different centers and their members is important for the growth of the network; that would include setting up the network as a radial structure rather than a circular one. The components of the network sustain the network's collaborations around a common objective. To this end, both the visits and the realization of the first annual meeting of the network have been instrumental in strengthening this configuration, but also to make its existence visible to the scientific community in general as well as to other groups that research psychotherapy and mental health in larger populations. A scientific network can grow in diverse ways, but the important thing is that

its progressive growth brings with it learning that, while merging and increasing collaborations, also allows for the development and deepening of the objectives that the network pursues. This implies conceiving the network not just as the participation of different authors in publications, but also as incorporating the challenges faced by each center or member team in the national, socio-cultural, and historical contexts in which they are situated.

Strategies Implemented for the Operation of the Network

As we already mentioned in the previous section, there have been different strategies that have been implemented to keep the network active and contribute to its development; some of them emphasize the meetings that allow sharing and generating research ideas and joint publication, others the formation of transnational teams that implement new research and training projects, or that allow transferring experiences from one country to another.

Research Visits and Meetings Between Members and Centers

In its beginnings, the network planned to conduct short visits—of six days—between members of the centers. Originally, these visits were intended for the formal inauguration of the network and to strengthen the multicenter nature of this project; these visits also included the holding of scientific meetings. More specifically, they contemplated business meetings, intensive workshop sessions for sharing relevant methodologies and knowledge obtained by each center through its lines of research on sexual and gender diversity, and open lectures about LGBT + mental health and psychotherapy conducted by the visitors from foreign centers.

The main collaboration modalities originally planned included visits by researchers between the different centers. This was possible only before the arrival in Latin America of COVID-19. The pandemic strongly affected the operation and planned activities of the network, not only in its material limits (e.g., travel) but also emotionally, since some of its members have directly suffered the consequences of the virus. Specifically, the public health conditions of Chile, Colombia, Brazil, and Argentina affected the holding of planned face-to-face meetings and the delay of research projects. However, before the pandemic began, part of the planned activities was conducted.

In 2019, a first activity was conducted that consisted of a six-day visit to Chile by two researchers: Dr. Miguel Rueda from Bogotá, Colombia, and Dr. Angelo Brandelli Costa, Puerto Alegre, Brazil. During this visit, meetings were held with the Chilean research team that allowed us to specify the modalities of work and the calendar of the internships offered by each center according to the collaborative research interests of the center represented by each visitor. In addition, research methodologies and preliminary results of studies conducted in each center were discussed together. In regard to methodology, we discussed the integration of qualitative and quantitative methods, specific ethical aspects of research with LGBT

communities, and the most appropriate ways to transfer research protocols from one center to another. Finally, at this meeting, research activities and joint publications on the subject were planned among the members of the network. An example of these first projections was the planning of the edition of a book on psychotherapy and LGBT+ mental health, which is currently in the elaboration stage and of which Dr. Claudio Martínez and Dr. Alemka Tomicic from center of Chile, Dr. Angelo Brandelli Costa from center Brazil, and Dr. Miguel Rueda from center of Colombia are editors. In addition, other members of the network take part as authors of chapters in this book along with guest authors from the Ibero-American field.

These activities, although limited by the COVID-19 health crisis, have contributed to meeting the aim concerning sharing research methodologies created locally to address the issues of mental health and LGBT+ psychotherapy. The activities have also contributed to the purpose of training new researchers and students, and to the design of collaborative studies between the centers.

Training-Oriented Activities

Until now, training-oriented activities have been one of the strongest aspects of the development of this international network. This is a rather unique aspect in the conception of a collaborative network when compared with what is reported in the scientific literature of networks developed at the North American and European levels (Bukvova, 2010; Chartier et al., 2018). This particularity is due in our opinion regarding two characteristics of the origins of the conformation of our network. The first is the commitment to a type of research that has been named Practice-Oriented Research (Castonguay et al., 2013) based in certain traditions of research in psychotherapy. The POR understands that research should set up as a reciprocal relationship between the production of scientific knowledge and the disciplinary applications, so to reduce the gap observed between research in psychotherapy and everyday clinical practice. The second characteristic is related to the theme that gives rise to this network: research in mental health and psychotherapy in sexual and gender diversity. The American Psychological Association APA (2021b), as well as first studies carried out in Chile (Martínez et al., 2018), have found that there is a deficiency in the training of mental health professionals on LGBT+ issues, training that is extremely relevant for the realization of sensitive and culturally competent care with the specificities of sexual and gender diversity as well as so that it is free of prejudices and microaggressions.

In line with this, during these two years of operation, one of the permanent lines of action includes workshops, short courses, and diploma training, in addition to scientific productions of this international collaboration. Training workshops about psychotherapy with LGBT+ patients have been held in intensive sessions open to the Chilean community of therapists and clinicians, in which they participated professors from the centers of Chile and Colombia. These workshops look to transmit relevant knowledge obtained by each center through their lines of research on sexual and gender diversity.

On the other hand, there have been open conferences on mental health and LGBT + psychotherapy, which have addressed the growing problem of mental health in sexual and gender diversity in the current context of Latin America. In addition to making these issues visible to the wider community, they have been occasions to present the international network and its members. The activities have also formed an important space for participation for undergraduate and postgraduate students, who according to their various levels of involvement have adopted the place of apprentices and, even in some cases, exhibitors.

Along with the above, one of the most outstanding results in this area of action of the network has been the creation and implementation of the international program of *Diploma in Psychotherapy and Mental Health in Sexual and Gender Diversity* in which some centers and researchers of the network participate as managers and teachers. In its first version, this program is carried out in online mode and has eight teachers who belong to the network, from at least three centers in Chile, Colombia, and Brazil. It is expected that this program will extend the activities of the network to more countries in Latin America and will be nourished by the production of knowledge of the same.

Activities Aimed at the Production of Knowledge

The network has managed to design and implement thematic studies, in different degrees of progress; these have involved cooperation, and look to generate comparative and intercultural knowledge among the associated Latin-American countries. One of these studies, in which a common method is shared, seeks to describe the level of prejudice of mental health professionals. Researchers from Brazil and Chile already took part in this project, and currently, researchers from the center in Argentina have been integrated. The purpose of this research, which within two years has acquired a multicenter character, is based on findings before the formation of the network (e.g., Coppari et al., 2014; Shelton & Delgado-Romero, 2011) of the persistence of prejudice and microaggressions in professional practice with LGBT + patients by health professionals.

A second study addresses training in LGBT + issues at undergraduate levels of psychology careers in Latin America. This study has begun to be implemented in Chile and, once its method and first results have been consolidated, its implementation is projected in Colombia. In addition to being a novel research, without many precedents at the international level, the expected results are projected to have an impact on training through the insertion of LGBT + themes in the curricular plans of psychology careers.

Another production of the network was the translation to Portuguese and adaptation to the Brazilian context of a guideline for competent psychotherapy with LGBT + clients. The original guideline was produced by the Chilean members of the network in the year 2018, putting together relevant published data and previous guidelines from the global north adapted to their reality. The Brazilian version contains information about the regulations of clinical practice in that country, along

with relevant studies from Brazil describing negative bias in clinical practices and ways to overcome it.

In March and April 2020, the pandemic broke out and had direct consequences on the activities of the network. We suspended the visit of Chilean researchers to the center in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil. In addition, members of the Chilean and Colombian teams were directly affected by the virus, with complex consequences for months. Therefore, during 2020, we had to suspend trips and there was a significant delay in the development of the scheduled studies. Despite rescheduling face-to-face activities for the first months of 2021, the second wave that affected the four-member countries made us decide to change the closing seminar of the Networks Project to the virtual mode by August 2021. Despite all the drawbacks, we believe that the network has worked and has had achievements that can be highlighted:

-Research teams from Argentina, Ecuador, and Uruguay have been officially incorporated.

-The multicenter research on prejudices in professionals is completed in Brazil and Chile, and in Argentina, it is in development with plans to end the second half of this year.

-In collaboration with the researcher from Brazil, Dr. Angelo Brandelli Costa, two publications are being prepared on the studies of prejudice of professionals in Chile and on the development of the network in Latin America.

-In May 2021, a diploma program on Psychotherapy and LGBT+ mental health has begun, taught online by the Diego Portales University with professors from Chile, Colombia, and Brazil, all members of the network.

-The edition of a book on research in psychotherapy and mental health in sexual and gender diversity is being prepared with productions from Chile, Argentina, Colombia, Brazil, and Uruguay. Its launch is planned for early 2022.

The Future: the Challenge of Network Growth and Sustainability

The creation and establishment of a “Latin-American Research Network on Psychotherapy and Mental Health in Sexual and Gender Diversity” currently composed of research centers from Chile, Brazil, Colombia, Argentina, Ecuador, and Uruguay set up the common goal of building synergies and consolidating the wealth of complementary approaches to research in psychotherapy and mental health in this field. This implies coordinated actions of implementation and execution of research projects and joint publications. We intend this network to be sustainable and expandable so that it projects continuous lines of research that can grow progressively and contribute to strengthening its development. We hope that this network will contribute to strengthening the representation of LGBT+ issues in various scientific societies through its local or regional chapters, as well as the number of scientific presentations taking part in the annual meetings of these societies. Likewise, the quality of sustaining diverse cultural perspectives, but with the similarities of sharing the same continent, gives us the strength to be able to generate common knowledge that

allows us to influence public policies on LGBT+ mental health in our respective countries.

Therefore, the “Latin-American Research Network on Psychotherapy and Mental Health in Sexual and Gender Diversity” is expected to undertake the following initiatives to ensure its sustainability and future development:

1. Hold periodic meetings (annual or bi-annual) that allow the sharing of new knowledge that has appeared in each center, as well as advances in collaboration projects and planning of future collaboration initiatives. It is expected that these meetings will be organized by the different centers and that new members and new collaborations will be included.
2. Define lines of research to be developed by researchers belonging to each center (not all necessarily in the same line), sharing methodologies, samples, and/or results, as well as the publications derived from them.
3. Submit joint research projects to apply for international funding including some or all the network’s centers.
4. Organize annual workshops on both research and clinical applications of local studies.
5. Plan joint presentations on the results and methods of the network, to be delivered at the annual international meetings of various scientific societies.
6. Generate an exchange system for doctoral students, who will be able to conduct research practices in any of the centers that make up the network.
7. Continuous dissemination of network activity through web pages, media appearances. This would seek to emphasize a more political character of the network, seeking to influence public opinion and local government policies.

Conclusions

It is recognized that scientific collaboration networks are a tool which accelerates the construction of knowledge in various scientific fields; they also allow carrying out more open collaborative science, including the context in which the work is developed (Moshontz et al., 2018). Particularly, networks that include researchers who belong to different countries, but who share cultural, historical ties and a similar human geography, can become valuable development instruments that contribute to the research of high quality and impact. Similarly, researchers and participants from across the region can take part, but with different languages, cultures, and traditions, including people from countries that are currently underrepresented in the scientific literature.

In the last decades, Latin-American has shown accelerated growth in psychological scientific production, particularly in understanding and impacting our societies (Ardila, 2018; López-López et al., 2015). However, this growth has not been linear and varies widely in the region, with disparity in developments which are usually associated with the income level of the different countries (Gutiérrez & Landeira-Fernández, 2018). This interferes with the possibilities of promoting shared knowledge in the region, which has meant that one of the strategies has

been to seek associativity and the creation of professional and scientific networks that balance and which are enriched by the diversity.

This network has specific governmental funds which are aimed at promoting scientific collaboration at the regional and international level. However, in many cases, these funds are not permanent, so collaborative networks must search for alternative forms of financing through activities that keep them in functioning. In the case of this network, for example, the search for specific local funds in each country where the research centers are located can help to maintain collaborative studies. This is a challenge in the region, insofar as the budgets of each local government are unequal and tend to be reduced for the scientific development of their countries.

Studies in sexual and gender diversity, by nature, go beyond institutional, theoretical, disciplinary, and geographical boundaries. Therefore, we seek to collaborate and learn from and through network members from diverse communities and movements within and outside each country, to establish a vibrant Latino south-south community in this field. At a historical moment when the power of geographical borders is less and less clear around the world, our goal is to question the social processes that build those borders and explore the disruptive possibilities of diversity in Latin America.

One of the objectives of the Network is to expand academic activity in the field of mental health, widening the visibility of the LGBT+ communities, its problems, resources, and resilience within Latin America, and thus achieve greater inclusion in the public policies of the different countries. In this sense, it fosters solidarity within the LGBT+ community with seminars, debates, workshops, and other activities, where people linked to the communities are welcome.

Being a young network, and in the context of the funding difficulties faced by research in Latin America, its growth has been impacted—for better and for worse—by the changes at all levels imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This has had direct consequences on the activities of the network. Some of the visits between centers had to be suspended, which prevented closer ties between researchers. In addition, members of the Chilean and Colombian teams were directly affected by the virus, with complex consequences for months. This meant that during 2020, there was a significant delay in the development of the programmed studies. Despite rescheduling some face-to-face activities for the first months of 2021, the second wave that affected the four-member countries made us decide to change activities and seminars to online mode. Notwithstanding the above, the installation of remote work in online mode, although it does not replace the advantages of face-to-face meetings, has gradually shown the advantages of decoupling the joint developments and activities of the network from these meetings. Thus, despite these drawbacks, the network has been able to maintain its functioning and has had so far some achievements that can be highlighted: the incorporation of new centers and research teams, the development of research, and the creation of an international training program on LGBT+ psychotherapy and mental health.

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Data Availability No datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

Declarations

Ethics Approval This work does not present empirical data neither implies the direct participation of human or animals, therefore was not reviewed by an ethical committee.

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