Chapter 8
Homosexuality Justification and Social Distance: A Cross-Cultural Approach from Latin America Using World Values Survey Data

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8.1 Introduction

In the last decade, the defense of the civil and social rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people (LGBT) improved in South America and some countries in Central America (Barrientos, 2015, 2016). The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association's (ILGA) annual report on state homophobia (2020) shows that an increasing number of countries in the region are becoming more inclusive regarding issues related to sexual diversity rights.

However, the LGBT population continues to be a target of stigma, prejudice, and discrimination in Central and South America. For example, police violence, violence at school, and violence against transgender individuals are still important issues in Latin American countries (Barrientos & Lovera, 2020; Boglarka et al., 2020; Infante et al., 2016; Movilh, 2019; Sentido & Colombia Diversa, 2016).

In addition, data reveal a disparity between the favorable scenario for the regional LGBT population, based, on the one hand, on laws pointed to increase their social and civil rights and, on the other hand, the persistence of negative attitudes toward LGBT individuals. Added to this is the recent emergence of reactionary movements and anti-gender policies resisting advances in sexual and LGBT rights (Corrêa, 2018).

However, scarce comparative data from Central and South America have been available so far to monitor the attitudes toward LGBT people over time. The most relevant data that allow the comparison of several countries and observing the evolution of attitudes over time on a regional basis come from the World Values Survey

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(WVS). The WVS has conducted seven measurement waves worldwide (1981–1984, 1990–1994, 1995–1998, 1999–2004, 2005–2009, 2010–2014, and 2017–2020) concerning different issues of social, political, and economic interest, including several Latin American countries. These issues include attitudes toward LGBT people, among others. These measurements, conducted periodically since the 1980s, allow comparing several countries in the region with the use of two items concerning attitudes toward LGBT people. One item refers to homosexuality and the other one to social distance from homosexual neighbors: (a) "Please tell me whether you think that homosexuality can always be justified, never be justified, or something in between," and (b) "On this list are various groups of people. Could you please mention any that you would not like to have as neighbors? Homosexuals." However, WVS data have been used for both reports on a global basis (Valfort, 2017) or across regional areas or countries mainly within Europe (Andersen & Fetner, 2008). Thus, information from those items have been scarcely used for describing attitudes across Latin American countries (Navarro et al., 2019). This chapter intends to describe the attitudes toward LGBT people from Central and South American countries, using data available from the seven waves conducted by the WVS.

8.2   Attitudes Toward LGBT People from Central and South America

Studies on attitudes toward LGBT conducted in the region are scarce. As a whole, attitudes are measured in different ways in a local perspective. As a consequence, results cannot be compared with findings from other countries (Cárdenas et al., 2018; Costa et al., 2015; Lodola & Corral, 2010; Moreno et al., 2015). Additionally, these studies do not allow seeing the evolution of attitudes toward LGBT people in a certain country or region over time. Also, these measurements have an uninclusive group target, often including gay or lesbians but neglecting other populations (e.g., bisexuals or transgender people). Lastly, these studies generally do not allow determining what factors, either individual, relational, or social, are associated with these attitudes.

The WVS is used on a worldwide basis to compare attitudes toward LGBT people across several countries, with the possibility to measure changes in these attitudes and understand the social and relational correlates. For example, some studies conducted on a world basis, using data from WVS, have shown that some sociocultural aspects are related to negative attitudes toward homosexuality (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009; Inglehart & Baker, 2000). Accordingly, results from Adamczyk and Pitt (2009) reveal that the levels of self-expression in different countries moderate the relationship between the importance attributed to religion and attitudes toward homosexuality.

However, fewer studies (e.g., Dion & Díez, 2017) evaluate the general level of attitudes toward homosexuality in Central and South America, comparing different

countries and describing the evolution of these attitudes over time, observing their regional standing and future challenges.

Hence, to advance in these objectives, this study uses data from WVS seven measurement waves available to analyze the attitudes toward LGBT people in Central and South America, particularly the responses to the questions on homosexuality justification and social distance from homosexual individuals.

8.3   Method

Data Source

This study analyzed national data from the seven measurement waves conducted by the WVS Association (Inglehart, et al., 2020; World Values Survey, N/d), collected in 1981–1984, 1990–1994, 1995–1998, 1999–2004, 2005–2009, 2010–2014, and 2017–2020. WVS is a high-quality survey conducted on a representative national sample in almost 100 countries worldwide. WVS measures issues such as cultural values, attitudes, beliefs, and experiences about gender, family, religion, poverty, education, health, and cultural differences and similarities between regions and societies. In this chapter, we used data available from 11 and 6 (depending on the analysis) major Central and South American countries (Table 8.1).

Concerning sampling, a research team in each country aims to obtain as many primary sampling units as possible, regardless of whether the sampling method is that of full probability or a combination of probability and stratified. Each country has a representative national sample, informants being then interviewed face-to-face by using uniformly structured questionnaires designed by professional organizations or phone interviews in remote areas (Inglehart, et al. 2020). Data are anonymous, and interview files show no data to trace informants.

Sample

We selected two main samples including (a) waves 1–7, considered data from 60,389 adult respondents from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru (i.e., countries with ≥4 waves of data available) (Inglehart et al., 2020), and (b) specific 7 waves with data from 15,221 participants included in wave 7 (Haerpfer et al., 2020) were used for subsequent comparisons between countries: Argentina (6.59%), Bolivia (13.58%), Brazil (11.58%), Chile (6.57%), Colombia (9.99%), Ecuador (7.88%), Guatemala (7.90%), Mexico (11.43%), Nicaragua (7.88%), Peru (9.20%), and Puerto Rico (7.40%). Ages range between 16 and 97 years ($M = 40.62$, $SD = 16.74$), with 52.24% respondents being women and 47.75% men. Table 8.1 shows data for each wave by country.

Table 8.1 Sample size for each wave by country

	World Values Survey Wave						
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
	1981–1984	1989–1993	1994–1998	1999–2004	2005–2009	2010–2014	2017–2019
Argentina[b]	1005	1002	1079	1280	1002	1030	1003
Bolivia[a]							2067
Brazil[b]		1782	1143		1500	1486	1762
Chile[b]		1500	1000	1200	1000	1000	1000
Colombia[b]			6025		3025	1512	1520
Dominican Republic			417				
Ecuador[a]						1202	1200
El Salvador			1254				
Guatemala[a]					1000		1203
Haiti						1996	
Mexico[b]	1837	1531	1510	1535	1560	2000	1739
Nicaragua[a]							1200
Peru[b]			1211	1501	1500	1210	1400
Puerto Rico[a]			1164	720			1127
Trinidad and Tobago					1002	999	
Uruguay			1000		1000	1000	
Venezuela			1200	1200			

Note: blank boxes indicate that country was not sampled in that particular wave
[a]Country included in ANOVA and mean geolocation analyses
[b]Countries included in wave comparisons, ANOVA, and mean geolocation analyses

Variables

Homosexuality justification. This variable was measured with the following question: "Please tell me for each of the following actions whether you think it can always be justified [10], never be justified [1], or somewhere in between, using this card." This item was assessed in a scale from 1 ("never justifiable") to 10 ("always justifiable"), 10 showing the highest tolerance to homosexuality. In general, any score ≤ 9 would indicate some degree of questioning a homosexual orientation.

Social distance. This variable was measured with the following question, "On this list, there are various groups of people. Could you please mention those you would not like to have as neighbors?" This item was assessed using "mentioned," "not mentioned," "don't know," and "no answer." In this chapter, we focus on the proportion of those who do mention homosexuals as a group of people they would not want as neighbors.

Data Analysis

Descriptive analyses emphasized the visual inspection of available data. Specifically, the means for all available waves by country were estimated, displaying changes in line plots over time, as well as geolocated scores for visual comparisons across countries—such differences were statistically tested with ANOVA. Their corresponding distributions were subsequently examined by density ridges to observe distinctive response patterns.

8.4   Results

Figure 8.1 shows homosexuality justification evolution since the 1980s in six countries. In this chapter, homosexuality justification and attitudes toward LGBT people are used interchangeably. Figure 8.1 also shows that attitudes toward LGBT people have slowly improved in most countries analyzed over time, yet none of them show a mean over 6, according to WVS data. The country with the highest acceptance is Argentina, followed by Chile, while lower acceptance is observed in Peru and Colombia, which also report the least improvement over time. Additionally, Argentina, which shows the most favorable attitudes toward LGBT people, remains stable in the last two measurements. In Peru, there is no observable change in attitudes since the 1990s, as an improvement is followed by a decline in homosexuality justification. Overall, long-term patterns suggest that attitudes are improving (except for Peru), regardless of year-to-year changes in the data, which may be due to sampling error.
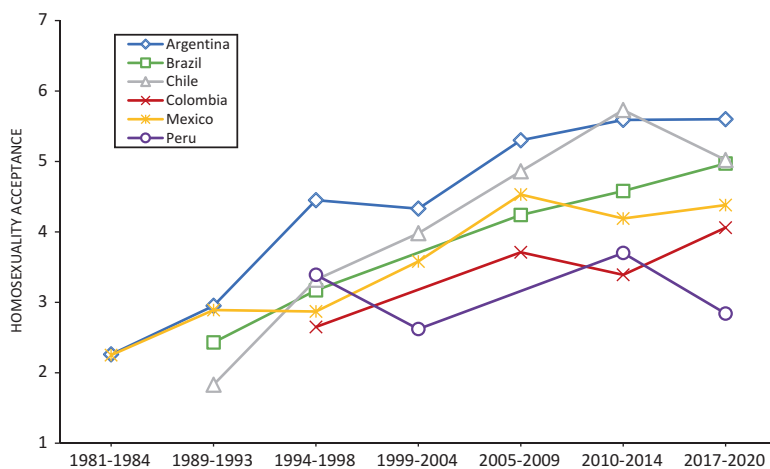

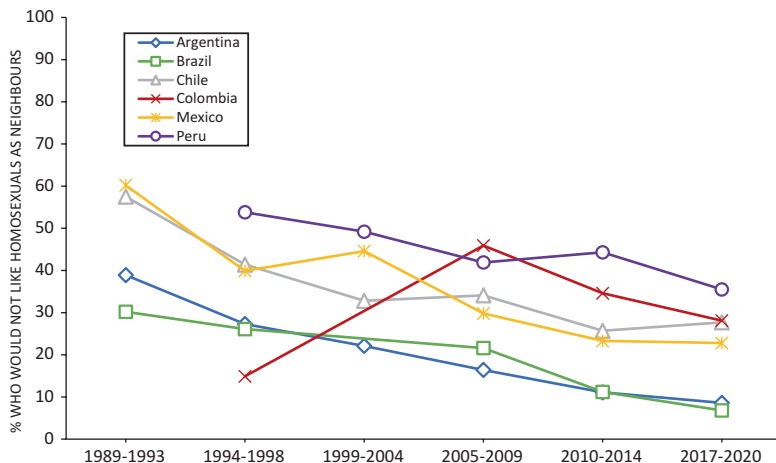**Fig. 8.1** Homosexuality acceptance, according to different WVS waves

Fig. 8.2 Social distance across different WVS waves

The WVS second measurement assessing attitudes toward LGBT people relates to the question about homosexual neighbor rejection (vs. acceptance). In line with the previous set of results, Fig. 8.2 shows that attitudes toward LGBT people are slowly improving in all six countries, and Argentina and Brazil are the countries with the highest acceptance (i.e., lowest rate of rejection). Additionally, Brazil is an interesting case, because the mean of homosexuality acceptance has been slowly increasing, while homosexual neighbor acceptance is the greatest of the six countries measured. In other countries, such as Peru, rates of acceptance are lower compared to the other countries, as well as in Chile, which shows one of the highest levels of homosexuality acceptance on a regional basis; however, the ratio of Chileans accepting homosexual neighbors does not seem to increase at the same rate as homosexuality justification.

Consequently, WVS data from wave 7 (2017–2020) was analyzed, including 11 countries. Results from a one-way ANOVA show that the levels of homosexuality justification vary significantly across countries ($F(10, 14,370) = 115.34$, $p < 0.001$). Argentina and Puerto Rico show the most favorable attitudes toward LGBT people in Central and South America, followed by Chile and Brazil with scores close to 5 (see Fig. 8.3). Additionally, in countries such as Mexico and Colombia, attitudes are not so positive, and much progress is needed. In the other countries, the situation is particularly worrisome, since the levels of justification are quite low, particularly in Peru, which makes up the lowest homogeneous subset on its own (see Fig. 8.3 for homogeneous subsets indicated by superscripts). Countries with the highest mean scores in the Central and South American region show levels that reflect, at best, mild support instead of acceptance.

A more nuanced look at the distribution of attitudes toward LGBT people, using data from WVS wave 7 and the same homosexuality justification measurement, supports the pattern in Fig. 8.3, although it also reveals some peculiarities. Figure 8.4
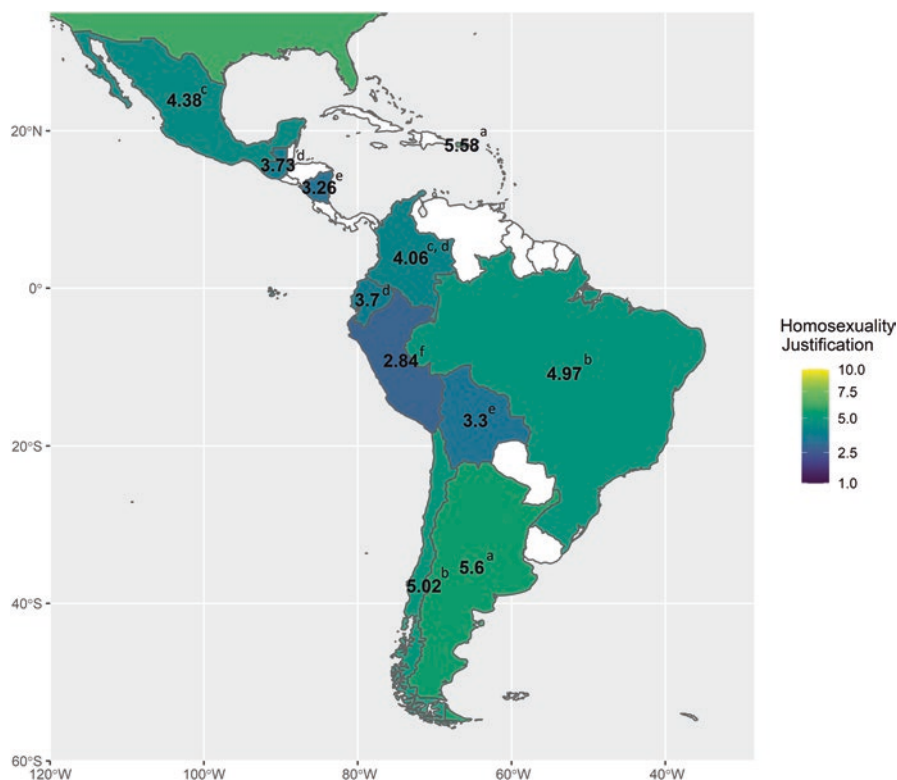
Fig. 8.3 Homosexuality justification in Central and South American countries, according to WVS wave 7 (2018–2020)

Note: Superscripts indicate homogeneous subsets.

(including countries in other world contexts, apart from those included in this analysis) shows that in Germany, Australia, and New Zealand, most answers are found on the upper end of the scale, that is, on the uppermost end of homosexuality acceptance. Closer to this acceptance pattern in Central and South America—yet far from developed countries—we found Argentina, Puerto Rico, and Chile. On the lower end, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Peru showed attitudes closer to countries such as Ethiopia, Lebanon, and China, which are characterized by great hostility toward homosexuality and LGBT people.

Interestingly, the distributions in Fig. 8.4 reveal a highly relevant phenomenon far from the reductionism of each isolated mean. Particularly, countries such as Argentina, Puerto Rico, and Brazil tend to heavily concentrate on the lower end (hostile rejection), in the middle (moderate rejection), and on the upper end (acceptance) of the scale. This indicates that there are within-country subdivisions regarding attitudes toward LGBT people. These differences are probably explained by sociodemographic and ideological factors such as educational level and religiousness (e.g., see Navarro et al., 2019).
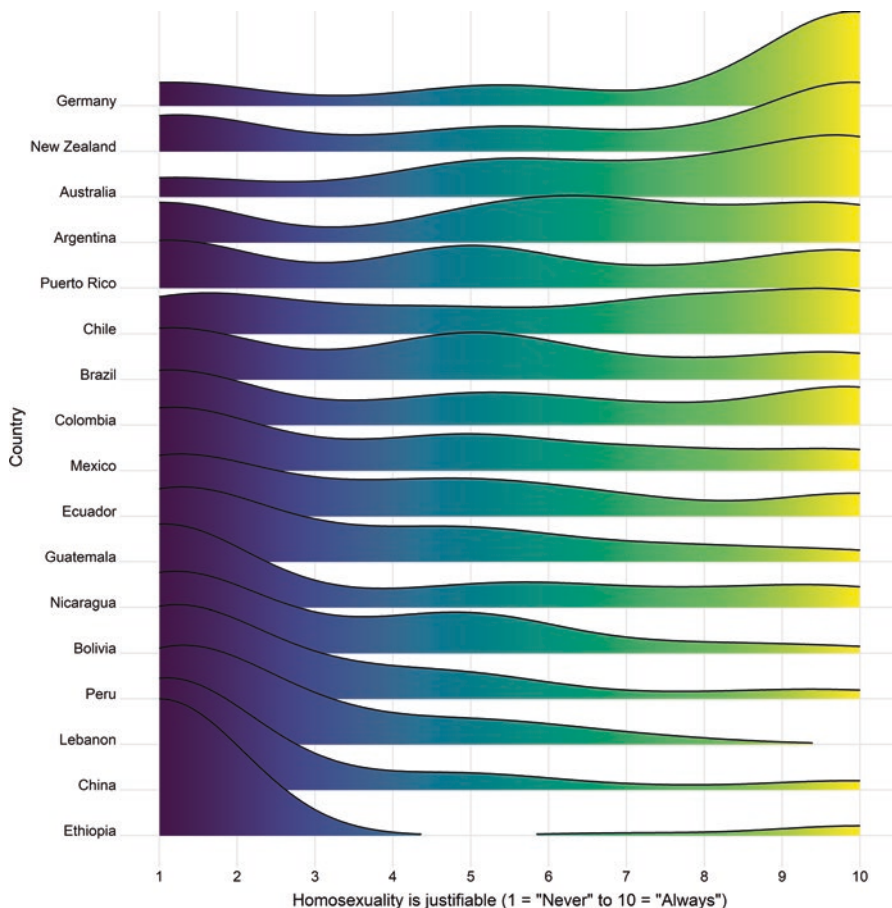
Fig. 8.4 Density ridges of responses to homosexuality justification, according to WVS wave 7

8.5 Discussion

Negative attitudes toward LGBT people are a form of violence and a specific type of stressor that negatively affects the physical and mental health of this population (Meyer, 2003) (see minority stress model). For this reason, data on attitudes toward LGBT people are so important.

However, unlike other research on a world basis delimitation, such as Europe and Africa (Dulani, Sambo, & Dionne, 2016; Eurobarometer 2015, 2019), which specifically measure to LGBT acceptance, few studies in Central and South America measure attitudes toward LGBT people. In addition, the available studies usually deal with just one country, use specific samples (e.g., college students), are limited to just one measurement (cross-sectional), and used measurement scales that do not allow for intercultural comparison. Hence, these studies are unable to provide

insights on the evolution of LGBT attitudes over time or cross-country comparisons. Thus, the situation in the region can only be described broadly, without projecting the challenges of LGBT issues explored on a regional basis over time. Along these lines, this chapter provides a retrospective inspection (through secondary analyses of WVS data) of attitudes toward LGBT people across several Central and South American countries, as well as their patterns of change over time.

The data at hand confirm that attitudes toward LGBT people have improved in Central and South America over time, although at a slow pace, and seemingly approaching relative levels of acceptance. Argentina, Puerto Rico, and Chile, the countries with the highest homosexuality justification, show a mean of 6 at the highest, quite far from the countries at the top of the measurement on a world basis, with means closer to 9. In addition, data showed that attitudes toward LGBT people vary among countries. While some of them are in a relative better situation in LGBT attitudes, others such as Peru, Nicaragua, and Bolivia report little acceptance, more similar to countries such as Ethiopia and Lebanon, countries where attitudes toward LGBT people remain hostile (Fig. 8.4). These data strengthen the idea that it is important to continue advancing toward producing data on attitudes toward LGBT in the region, to contribute to data-based decisions, with an emphasis in local- and regional-based studies from a Latin American perspective, also oriented to track and improve specific attitudes, which will help enhancing the well-being of LGBT people overtime. In addition, while these data are used as equivalent to LGBT people as a whole, in practice, WVS measurements refer exclusively to gays and lesbians (homosexuals), due to the target population within the questions. Therefore, progress should be made by the WVS, including new measurements or questions relative to other populations such as transgender individuals—a key population of interest for researchers, as well as healthcare workers and policy makers.

Data analyzed show situations that are interesting to discuss. For example, Brazil reports a rather slow increase in homosexuality acceptance levels, yet it shows a high level of LGBT neighbor acceptance. This situation, which may seem contradictory, is an interesting topic for research. Redman (2018) indicates that legislation favoring sexual minority rights does not uniformly favor attitudes toward this specific population within the general population by itself, but it does in individuals who already support homosexuality. This is due to the different factors that take part in the equation for accepting differences, which correspond to each country's specific history of development. Ironically, homosexuality rejection could be even stronger due to the effect of increased legislation protecting homosexuality, the opposite occurring among those who do support homosexuality. This is an interesting point, which seems to concur with the observed multimodal distributions, indicating the presence of a fair number of people who share openly hostile attitudes, while others show moderate rejection and others a certain degree of acceptance. Indeed, one of the main challenges faced by future research is clearly characterizing within-country subpopulations and what factors (global, regional, and local) may explain these concentrations in the population distribution of homosexuality justification in Central and South America.

Another important issue to discuss is the focus on homosexual population in WVS data. It is important to highlight two main aspects of LGBT research: (a) transgender population are still a target of repeated violations of their rights in different parts of Central and South America, which makes them a special group of analysis, and (b) although this paper does not generalize the results of the study into other populations, due to the gender differences existing between them, data can be analyzed as a proxy for attitudes toward LGBT people overall. Therefore, research with these specificities on a regional basis becomes particularly necessary on a world basis perspective (Worthen, 2013).

There are gender asymmetries in attitudes toward homosexual population. Kite and Whitley (1998) show that heterosexual men report more negative attitudes toward gays, while heterosexual women report similar attitudes toward gays and lesbians or even more negative attitudes toward lesbians (Raja & Stokes 1998). However, this study did not address these asymmetries. Accordingly, future studies must include gender-based comparisons when analyzing these patterns across different countries. Furthermore, studies acknowledging diversity in terms of gender identity within the LGBT population should be conducted (Worthen, 2013).

In addition, data analyzed highlight the comprehensive work that needs to be done in activism, professional, and academic practice within the humanities and social sciences in Central and South American countries, on a political, activist, and governmental basis. Data also suggest that, although advances in legislation to favor LGBT population rights are important, this effort will be unsuccessful if these issues are not shared at different social levels and aimed at improving attitudes toward LGBT people.

Finally, we recognize some limitations in this study. For instance, only data from some Central and South American countries were used. To overcome this limitation, it would be interesting to collect or review data from other countries such as Guyana, Suriname, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela, to have a broader view of attitudes toward LGBT people in the region.

In addition, the questions used in the survey to access data about attitudes toward homosexuality are not thoroughly appropriate because they only ask for extent to which the phenomenon is justified (tolerated) but not the degree of acceptance. Despite being broadly used in most surveys on this issue on a world basis and often used in similar studies, the measurement of the variable "homosexuality justification" can be ambiguous and even strange for some, because homosexuality by itself should not be conceived as an object of justification. Also, other approaches that could provide more comprehensive data on attitudes toward homosexuality continue to emerge (see Flores & Park, 2018). Other studies should use complementary measures such as opinions about same-sex marriage or other more specific measures regarding attitudes toward homosexuality.

Additionally, social distance, though a useful proxy measure of attitudes, evaluates disposition, not actual and effective acceptance behavior. Therefore, the answers could be biased, given their conative—instead of truly behavioral—character. For this reason, future research on attitudes toward LGBT people in Central and South America will face the following challenges: (a) use suitable measurements to detect

the levels of LG population acceptance; (b) keep these measurements to make comparisons over time; (c) extend their use to countries often scarcely represented in public opinion surveys; (d) include other populations such as bisexual or transgender individuals (this article refers to attitudes toward LGBT people using data that refer exclusively to homosexual people), (e) develop measures not only to heterosexual attitudes toward LGBT people but also those related to LGBT people's own perception of the violence exerted against them; and (f) increase efforts to characterize the rejected populations, as well as those accepting homosexuality and sexual dissidence, identifying regional factors proper of Latin America and dynamics in each country.

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