Globalization, Structural Violence, and LGBT Health: A Cross-Cultural Perspective

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1 Introduction

It is a daunting task to provide even a partial analysis of the health of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transsexuals (LGBTs) from a global perspective owing to the cross-cultural and regional variation in the social construction and expression of sexuality as well as the still incomplete scholarly literature on the topic. This chapter, however, argues that it is precisely such a global vantage point that is required to apprehend the contemporary context of health and illness among LGBT populations. Although LGBT health is shaped by local cultural meanings and practices, it is also inherently embedded in large-scale processes and the position of local LGBT populations within the global system. In the era of a highly mobile, hybrid, and fundamentally interconnected world in which material and symbolic cultures are linked across vast distances, the meanings of LGBT sexuality and their consequences for health in specific locales cannot be understood if nations are viewed in isolation (Altman, 1989). Indeed, the nature of global interconnectedness requires us to engage LGBT health as a fundamentally transnational phenomenon involving the interplay of meanings, practices, and vulnerabilities that extend beyond the purely local. For example, the acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) epidemic among gay-identified men in the United States and Europe may be intimately related to the meanings and practices that drive risky practices in Papua New Guinea, Uganda, or Bolivia. Furthermore, the flow of the discourses, meanings, persons, and practices that shape LGBT health are always multidirectional, necessitating a more complicated theoretical approach that truly engages the issue of LGBT health from the global perspective.

This chapter draws on a growing ethnographic and social scientific literature on LGBT persons to analyze LGBT health at both local and global levels. Approaching LGBT health from an anthropologic perspective, we take the position that the meanings and social consequences of socially deviant or nonnormative sexualities are subject to
cross-cultural variations because LGBT persons are always situated within specific cultural systems and are also connected to larger political and economic inequalities that are expressed at a global scale. Thus, although this review is necessarily partial and is constrained by the limits of the literature currently available, particularly the relative paucity of cross-cultural studies of both lesbian and transgender health, the discussion seeks to organize the literature available within a dual conceptual framework that emphasizes two fundamental features of LGBT health: (1) the large-scale structural inequalities at work both locally and globally that influence LGBT health; and (2) the cultural variations in the meaning, expression, and practice of LGBT persons in various contexts. As other chapters in this volume examine the literature on LGBT health in developed settings, we draw primarily on ethnographic evidence in the developing world to illustrate the ways that the social and structural context (including both cultural meanings and political-economic forces) manifests in the health of LGBT persons.

We want to emphasize from the outset that although we use the designation LGBT throughout this text, readers must be mindful that this category, like others we discuss in this chapter, is not unproblematic when viewed cross-culturally. Whereas the notion of an LGBT population seeks, at one level, to emphasize diversity (clearly calling attention to the L, the G, the B, and the T as distinct subsets of this heterogeneous population), when applied cross-culturally it can itself become an ethnocentric imposition. Some activists in non-Western and developing societies have adopted it, whereas others have questioned its application. Even some who have adopted it have wished to further diversify it: In many parts of Latin America, for example, reference is made to the LGBTT population, with the second T having been added to distinguish between transgender and transvestite subgroups. In short, from a cross-cultural perspective, whenever LGBT is used in this analysis, we ask that readers remember that this is a somewhat problematic construct that must be subjected to constant critique to avoid imposing a category that fails to have a fully agreed upon (or universally shared) meaning across social and cultural boundaries.

2 Structural Violence and LGBT Health

The concept of structural violence provides an important point of departure for discussions of LGBT health in cross-cultural settings. Structural violence refers to the ways by which social inequalities and political-economic systems place particular persons or groups in situations of extreme vulnerability, and this vulnerability is expressed in patterns of morbidity and mortality (Farmer et al., 1996). Precisely because social inequalities such as class, race, and ethnicity intersect with sexual inequalities, the shape of LGBT health in any social or cultural setting is inextricably linked to the relations that exist between these various forms of social inequality. This highlights the importance of placing any discussion of LGBT health in a broader historical and political-