11 In my Latinx gay shoes

Work, discrimination, immigration, and polyamory

Oscar Pantoja Guzmán

My personal story and context

My name is Oscar Pantoja Guzmán. I'm originally from Mexico City, where I lived for most of my life. A few years ago, I graduated from university with a Bachelor of Science in psychology. I studied this discipline because, for me, psychology is a way in which society explains itself and its social and cultural phenomena. It is a way in which human beings study themselves as individuals and as the cornerstone of society. I identify as part of the LGBTQ communities and have done so since I was 18 years old. Today I have a strong sense of belonging to this group, and sometimes I am an advocate for its causes.

As I write this chapter, I'm living in California. The adaptation and acculturation processes have been a challenge. As part of my life here I give pastoral and counselling support to members of the Latinx community.¹ Something I would like to achieve in this country, the USA, is to build the foundation for a career in the arts and humanities. Considering that before coming to the USA I worked in Human Resources for three years, my career seemed to be going towards organisational psychology, but I think there's more to life than having only one career choice. Perhaps, in the same way that I see my community, life is a full spectrum of colours.

At work

In the professional arena, I've had the chance to provide psychological support to people in need. This was as part of my training as a psychologist in the last stages of my degree. After that, I went into recruitment and selection. The highest post I got was senior recruiter for a company in Mexico City, in which the organisational chart indicated that the only people more senior than me were the manager and the vice president of the company. I

1 According to Patricia Arredondo (2018), the Latinx communities refer to the ethnic minorities who are originally from the +20 Spanish-speaking countries in the Americas who live in the USA.

used to cover all stages of the hiring process, from recruitment to selecting staff at executive and managerial levels. This was one of the most fulfilling, thrilling, and demanding experiences I've had as a professional – there were occasions when I would work seven days per week – as I even developed induction and basic training programmes for new members of staff.

Being a gay man

For me, being gay is a great responsibility, as I know I have to double my efforts so that my actions speak louder than my sexual orientation. I feel that it's a luxury to belong to this LGBTQ group in this cultural context, as even nowadays there are places in the world where displays of affection between people of the same sex can put your life at risk. For me, being gay, being Latinx, and being Mexican means doing things in the best way possible – it means everything I do needs to be high quality and I can't give up. Ever. Being gay is a challenge. Just like being a woman – cis and trans, gay, or bisexual. I feel that being gay is a luxury that combines the sensitivity of my emotions, the strength traditionally associated with my gender – 'el sexo fuerte' as they say in Mexico – and the social expectations of what being a man represents. I have to be the best of the best, without transgressing other people's rights. For me, being gay is being a common man but with the privilege of loving freely. For me, being gay is being able to love who I want to love (respectfully), love them like I want to love them (respectfully), and wherever I want to love them (respectfully).

Migration and culture

My trajectory and development as a social being has been marked by the culture of the country I grew up in. However, now that I'm living in California, I can say that culture is a fascinating phenomenon, as it changes from person to person; it is inherited, it is taught, it is learnt and it can be unlearned at every opportunity and in relation with the social circles to which we are exposed. Culture can be a very small circle that doesn't offer opportunities for development and growth. Culture can be a big circle in which development is promoted and fostered in every sense. My first job in California was at a Mexican restaurant which employed fellow Mexicans. I want to mention that I never felt the activities of a restaurant were alien to me, even if I had never worked in one before. Without being arrogant, I thought to myself: 'if I was able to complete a degree and work in other settings, I'll be able to do this, it's all about the attitude'. It was an important and exciting challenge as all my skills and previous learning were at play. It was in California that I've learnt the most (not even the seven-day work week as an HR executive could compare). I was so mentally busy, I had just arrived in a different country, I was getting used to a job with which I wasn't familiar, and I felt I needed to play with the new environment before the environment

played with me. A year went by like this until I was able to regularise my immigration status from tourist to resident.

Not everything was ‘miel sobre hojuelas’ – ‘honey over cornflakes’ – as I would say in Mexico. It was working at that restaurant that I experienced one of the first acts of discrimination by the Latinx community. It was then that I understood the reasons why people who come here looking for new opportunities struggle to move forward, as discrimination towards Latinx people sometimes is exercised from within, the rejection comes from within (Moraga, 2015), from other Latinx like ourselves. I’ll soon tell you what happened at the restaurant.

My everyday

This was in 2017, when I was working in Human Resources in Mexico City. I remember a specific occasion when I had to recruit to fill a vacancy for an accountant post. It wasn’t a particularly complex profile, but for some reason I was having problems finding the right person. Then one day I was reading the CV of a candidate and I was in awe. I conducted a telephone interview to confirm that his skills and experience were what I was looking for, which I did. He seemed to be right for the job and I could even forecast his growth within the company. I immediately arranged an interview with the candidate and, knowing his potential, I arranged an interview with my line manager as well, so he could evaluate him too.

The day of the interview arrived and everything seemed to go as planned – honey on cornflakes. I didn’t have a doubt that the candidate was right for the post. I went to my line manager’s office and from the door threshold I announced I had the candidate’s CV and documents so he could interview him. I even said, ‘the candidate is so good, I think you’ll be impressed’. At that moment, my boss checked the documents and very briefly, without much attention, he raised his gaze and asked: ‘is “that” him?’ ‘Yes, it’s him’, I replied. Through the glass walls of his office, my boss looked at the candidate for one second and – like in ‘The Devil Wears Prada’ – he said: ‘Do you know what type of company are we? We’re not “that” type of people, Oscar, we’re different, so don’t make me waste my time with that fat, Brown candidate’. I was shocked, and I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Especially because my boss and I, myself, are Brown – morenos. He was overtly discriminating against someone in front of me based on their appearance. From the shock, I didn’t know what to think or how to act. I went to speak to the candidate and said there had been an unexpected situation and we couldn’t continue with the process, but that I was hoping for a positive response. I don’t know why I told him that, and I felt awful for doing so. Those comments made my enthusiasm and passion for that company crumble. I quit days after I had a conversation with my boss about the discrimination I had witnessed. Notwithstanding what I said and with no sign of remorse, his last words before I left were: ‘You can call it

discrimination or whatever you want, but I don't want a fat, Brown candidate for this position; we're more than that, we're a different company, Oscar'. What I felt that evening was pure and blatant racism, which was even more hurtful because my boss was also gay, and I would've expected more understanding from him, considering he is part of a population that has experienced such discrimination first-hand.

After that experience, I decided to travel and try my luck in a different context, where I could live with my particular traits, like being gay. Although to some people it might sound strange, being gay is something that is present in every part of my everyday self. Being gay sometimes manifests itself in simple ways like when I'm driving or when I go to buy groceries. Maybe others don't notice, but when my personhood interacts or performs a specific role in this social machinery, it is when all the components of the self shine in all their splendour.

Let me cite an example. When I arrived in California and had just recently started working for the Mexican restaurant, my boss hadn't noticed I was gay, but after a few days, I could perceive how his approach towards me had changed. When this type of change happens, I start questioning, 'What should I do? Should I express my gayness overtly? Should I let people assume what they want to assume? How far can I go in expressing my gayness? To what extent is it "right" to do so?' If you are reading this text and are heterosexual, and you're wondering whether even in the 21st century gay people still experience discrimination for our identity, the answer is yes. A month after I started working at the restaurant, my boss was making fun of me with two of my co-workers. They were seated at a table; my boss was doing the cashing-up for the day and my colleagues by his side were counting money. I approached my boss and asked whether I could have a 10-minute break, as I had been working for about 12 hours. Since one of my colleagues had told me that having a work break is a right of all workers in California, I felt empowered to do it. So, I asked. His puzzled expression seemed to show incomprehension about my request, as if I asked in a foreign tongue. He asked me: 'Why are you tired?' I responded that I was also working for the 'Restaurante Flores' – Flowers Restaurant, which he knew. He burst into laughter and said: 'Ya todos sabemos que haces flores!', which translates as 'We all know you do flowers'. Trying to overlook his prosaic remark, I emphasised that I was talking about the restaurant. At that point, one of the waiters – my colleague – seconded him and said: 'Aquí vienes a chingarle ¿o a qué creías que venías?' – 'You came here to work your ass off, or what do you think you came for?' and he kept counting money while sharing a complicit look with a waitress who was in front of him. She nodded while continuing to count money. I was angry as all I was doing was asking for something that was my right as a worker. I went back to my activities without my break. When I finished my shift, I left without saying a word to anyone. A week later, it was brought to my attention that I had been fired and nobody had told me.

Losing jobs for being gay and asking for something within your rights is not sustainable in a capitalist system. This is the second or perhaps third time that being gay has put me in a position in which I have to choose between my dignity and paying the rent. When this happens to me, I feel powerless and I experience a sense of wrongdoing for being who I am.

On a different occasion, I was working for Apple. I had a female colleague, and we had friendly interactions in which we would talk about trivial things like the weather, traffic, and our respective countries of origin. One day she asked me about my wife and my children, as she had assumed I was married to a woman, had a house, two kids, a mortgage, etc. Since this wasn't the case, I said I wasn't married, to which she responded with incredulity – 'How is that possible?' I just laughed the comment off and changed the topic. The question came back again and again in the following days until I said, in a kindly manner, that I was gay and that I wasn't married to anyone. She laughed, perhaps thinking that it was a joke, and left. Minutes after that incident, her approach towards me changed, and then she told me: 'Being gay is the most stupid decision you've made'. But things didn't stop there. She said repeatedly, perhaps ten times, that she couldn't believe I was gay. I was fed up with the situation, so I asked my line manager to move me to a different branch, explaining what had happened. I didn't want to report her to the authorities because she would lose her job, and, since in California you get benefits when you're unemployed, I didn't want her to go home with that reward. I asked her to abstain from making those comments, or I wouldn't hesitate to protect my rights. I went as far as saying that, if she was living on the American continent, she should respect sexual diversity in any country of the Americas – from Canada to Argentina. I experienced a strange feeling and a phrase – the Americas for the Americans – came to mind, but I didn't express it. In retrospect, I think that for one moment, her ignorant comment almost pushed me to be like the people from the Mexican restaurant, like the oppressors who had offended me in the past. But this didn't happen, I rose above the situation and just left. I understood that from her position, she didn't understand what sexual diversity is, and it was sad for her – not for me.

Love in Mexico City

The definitive factor that pushed me to start my journey to a different country was love, but not love like some would think, Hollywood-style, from a romantic, poetic point of view. Instead, it was the rupture of love. After breaking up with my partner of nearly three years, I found myself struggling to find a place where I could work. I was doing badly financially and I experienced the loss of friends in the earthquake of 19th September 2017. I remember how everything was suddenly shaken when the seismic alarms warned. I recall how I hit the wall to try to protect myself when suddenly through the window I saw a three-story building disappear in a cloud of

dust and the walls of another building fell apart but the skeleton remained. I could see people on the other side of the wall without using x-ray vision.

So, without a concrete plan, I took a plane in the hope that I would distract my heart from the events I had experienced. I assumed my troubles would be left behind in Mexico.

Back to the story of my ex. One day I went to Zona Rosa – the gay district in Mexico City – to celebrate a work achievement. I invited my then-boyfriend, but he didn't want to go. He preferred to have some beers somewhere else with his best friend. I need to mention that I always knew he was in love with his best friend, which I respected because for me it wasn't an issue that he was in love with someone else while he was in love with me. From my experience, the 'nature' of man tends to be more polyamorous than monogamous. However, because of my ex-partner's conservative education, I never wanted to confront him with this question. He wasn't 'out' with his friends nor with his family. Before me, he had been in a relationship with a woman, and it seemed he found sexual fulfilment with her. It seemed like there was something about his sexuality he needed to demystify.

So, I was at the bar, celebrating with my colleagues, and I had had a few drinks. A very handsome guy approached me, we talked, and I gave him my number. The following day he sent me a few messages, which were read by my partner. He snapped and gave me the keys of the flat where we lived. With a severe and angry tone, he told me he had been clear about how much he hated unfaithfulness. I was in shock, and I couldn't speak. So, I only admitted my misdemeanour, gave him a hug, and thanked him for the time spent together. I knew him as an arrogant person, so I didn't want to go through the pain of demonstrating that nothing else had happened and gaining his trust again. I was so exhausted by my job at that point, and I knew he had someone else in his plans, so I chose the easiest path. I thanked him without arguing, and he left. That's the last time I saw him, but I knew he started a new relationship a couple of months after that. I, on the other hand, was about to start a journey full of ups and downs.

Love in California

Towards the end of 2018, I met my current partner. From the beginning I held up my hands and stated clearly that, before entering into a problematic situation, I didn't want a 'traditional' relationship. I'm a gay man who feels more polyamorous than monogamous. He accepted that proposition.

My current partner comes from a family of Mexican immigrants established in Los Angeles. Alcoholism and 12-hour shifts marked his upbringing. In spite of the difficulties, he completed his studies to become a pharmaceutical doctor. He's self-made, as he didn't have much support from his family, and, although it is not my story, I feel very proud of him.

For reasons I won't address in this chapter, I have never felt comfortable entering into arguments and fights with people. I feel this is unnecessary, so I

avoid confrontations as ‘negative’ emotions overwhelm me. I think if I allow my negative emotions to run free, I might transform into a monster, which wouldn’t make me feel proud. Thus, I do everything I can to avoid fights. One day, my current partner told me we were six months into our relationship and we had never had a fight – that I either say yes to things or take time-off to collect my thoughts and reset. I hadn’t realised this. I responded that that was my usual way of being and that it was an ideal sign that we were not arguing. He debated and said that ‘ideal relationships’ don’t exist and that he didn’t feel loved by me if there wasn’t tension every now and then. That comment opened a new world for me. As I write this text, we have been living together for a year-and-a-half and I still find it hard to express what bothers me without offending him. I try to find the most gentle, balanced way to communicate how fantastic it would be if my boyfriend thought and acted like I do, but since that doesn’t exist, I’ve entered into his world and I’ve learnt to raise my voice and say ‘no’ when I don’t want to do something just because he has a whim. This doesn’t make me feel good, I feel uncomfortable. I tend to imagine an idealised world. Even from a sexual point of view, I’m like a vampire: you know, in vampire novels, vampires need to ask for permission to enter someone’s space. So, I’m like that. Even when there is sexual tension between me and someone else, I don’t proceed until the person gives me their permission, their consent. I was sexually abused when I was eight, so for me it’s crucial that the person gives me their consent before I express my wildest desires – within my conception of what ‘wild desire’ is. I would say I’m very vanilla when I’m with someone in bed, without being boring. For me it’s difficult to say whether I would still be gay if I could remove the sexual abuse from my childhood history. For me, that event, in combination with my upbringing, brought me to identify as gay.

My current partner is a mentor because he is taking my hand and helping me explore aspects of my experience that I never thought I would, had I stayed in Mexico. With him I have found, little by little, a way to be myself without a happiness mask; I now can better express my anger towards people. This change has been ‘therapeutic’, but it hasn’t been easy. I’ve even stopped using social media because I don’t want to portray a false image of ‘everything is fine’ with a well-rehearsed selfie. Animals, such as dogs and cats, have many things in common with humans but social media is not one of them. In social media, representations of our lives are often sanitised, our human mistakes omitted. When I was invited to write this chapter, the first thing that came to mind was all the times I’ve screwed up in my professional life, my family life, my relationships, my friendships, etc. Although I had many ideas, I didn’t start the writing process straight away because I think that being gay – and being a person – is not easy. After I make a mistake, I look for a guidebook, a magazine, a book, a group, an online platform where I can find an answer. A great thing in life is that while there is so much written about it, there’s still room to write my own story. My mistakes reveal part of myself and I shouldn’t feel embarrassed or ashamed

of them. I make mistakes, and I'm happy about them because otherwise I would still wear that sanitised mask and have that deep need to control the visual narrative I project in an aim to make my Instagram look pretty. I feel it's difficult to be gay in times of Instagram and Facebook because it's tempting to apply makeup to the wounds made by families who are not equipped to raise gay kids and create an illusion that everything is fine. I feel in these times of social media, we forget the fights of our gay, lesbian, trans, and queer grandparents who faced incredible challenges. What filter can I use for the deaths of my loved ones? What filter can I use for the deaths of my fellow gays who died while listening to the word 'puto' (fag)? There's no filter that can conceal the pain in those moments.

I don't ask you to see things the way I see them. In the world, there are still way too many deaths associated with gender violence and sexual orientation, and there is blatant discrimination towards people who don't fit into the established moulds. Trans identities are an example of this. Outside our LGBTQ communities, there is a constant fight we are exposed to; we are free, but we are vulnerable. We love, we want to love as equals, but there are people who want to suppress equality, just because it seems different to what they know. It is the third decade of the 21st century and there are still countries where women are subjected to genital mutilation, and men risk their lives just for exploring their sexuality with other men. It seems we must behave according to established norms.

Love in times of polyamory

When I was working for Apple in California, there were two colleagues who joined the branch. One was Latino, and the other was Asian-American. The Asian-American guy would wear a black hat and thick-framed black glasses. I could barely see his eyes behind them. I don't know how to explain it, but for some reason, there was something lurking between the Asian-American guy and myself. A few days after he joined the company, we were assigned to work together. We became friendlier and one day he asked me: 'You're Mexican, right?' and I said yes (as if I could hide my thick Mexican accent). He nodded, and I asked him: 'You speak Spanish, right?' He looked at me with puzzled eyes, smiled for a second, and responded: 'Perhaps'. I switched immediately to my native tongue and asked: '¿Me puedes entender? – Can you understand me?' I don't know how I knew it, but I sensed he would speak Spanish. As we chatted, he told me his mum is Mexican and his father Japanese. We became friends very quickly and we talked a lot about his cultural background, as I was very interested.

Shortly after, I discovered I was in love with him. In an attempt to be honest with my current partner, I told him how I felt towards this guy. We agreed that the three of us would try to get to know each other. There were various reasons why this didn't work: my maturity, the brief time I had known this new friend, the brief time my partner and I had been together. And

there were even external factors, such as living abroad and the disparities in our financial situations, that played part in this unsuccessful attempt at a polyamorous relationship. I couldn't understand what this new friend was experiencing. The line between friends and lovers was becoming thinner, so out of respect to my partner, I started to question the agreement. I wasn't able to think clearly. Everything seemed confusing. Things became tortuous for the three of us, so for the sake of everyone's wellbeing, we decided to finish the polyamorous relationship. However, it was strange to grieve the loss of a lover while being in a relationship with another lover who wanted the best for me. With hindsight, I think I was trying to help and mentor the Asian-American guy, who seemed to be disoriented by a troubled family life. Something ironic about the 'first world' is that while there might be wealth and financial resources, the basic problems, such as raising a child and nourishing self-acceptance, cannot be solved with money – at least, not that easily. As I write this text, I don't know where this guy is, and I don't know what he's doing; but I wish him the best, as he meant something positive for me. The few memories we created together are something I'll always remember.

Love after Oscar Pantoja Guzmán, reflections on this story

In a not-too-distant future, I imagine human relationships will acquire peculiar qualities, some in which the concept of faithfulness towards your partner or loved ones will change. I also envision the lines between being gay, straight, and other attractions will blur, as they're blurring already. I envision people will understand that loving someone and being in a relationship with someone doesn't mean restricting the couple's sexuality, nor the couple's freedom; and, instead, they'll share the power that Audre Lorde (1984) writes about: 'the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person' (p. 56). We will walk towards tolerance, respect, and the acceptance of our connectedness. Steph Grohmann (2020) writes that western individuals are rarely confronted with the reality of our interdependence; we might believe in autonomy and are only confronted by our interconnectedness when the structures that mediate our relationships fail (Grohmann, 2020, p. 75). Then we realise we co-exist, and we need to cooperate. I want to contribute to constructing relationships that acknowledge and celebrate our interdependence. I want to construct workspaces free of discrimination, where we recognise that multiple sexualities, identities, faiths, and peoples can co-exist, because we always have and always will. From my point of view, many of the social issues we face, namely economic, political, gender-, work-, or family-related issues, come from the limited ways in which we conceive love – love for the self and others. We should acknowledge our interrelatedness; we should respect others regardless of ethnicity, culture, identities, sexualities, or religions.

What is it like to be gay in my everyday? It is very similar to your life in many ways. There are no clear boundaries about how humans experience

the world; we might be able to separate and dissect people's experiences for analytic, academic purposes, but in practice, in our everyday we wake up, we live, we work, we feel in similar ways. Thus, what I have experienced as a gay man – the discrimination, the broken hearts, the migration – does not have to do with who I love; it is associated with the denial of our interconnectedness between individuals and between the rest of other living beings. I envision a future in which being gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other identities become historic and obsolete concepts because we no longer need to explain and defend our identities.

For now, being gay for me is a privilege that allows me to love beyond the illusory regime of heterosexuality. And on that note, I shared with you my experiences of discrimination and polyamory attempts because I want to invite you to reflect on the idea of challenging the practices that police who we love and think generatively about the question: what do we do with the love we feel?

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