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Queer family intimacies: sex and love between *primos* in Mexico

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the rich and detailed sex life stories of two self-identified cisgender gay men. Both recalled in retrospect their romantic and sexual experiences with their respective close in age first cousins during their adolescence. Both men described their experiences as voluntary and a positive influence on their emotional and sexual development as self-identified gay men. The men were born and raised in contrasting contexts: the first in a small town in Jalisco, the second in Mexico City. Both men participated in a larger study that gave life to experiences of incest as documented through storytelling, and the stories men shared speak for themselves. However, they also provide insightful reflections on cultures of family intimacy in Mexico.

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While conducting research for the book entitled *Family Secrets: Stories of Incest and Sexual Violence in Mexico* (González-López 2015), I met Elías and Zacarías. Both cisgender men described having had sexual relationships with their respective cisgender male first cousins. They defined their experiences as close couple relationships that began during adolescence. Accounts of romantic, erotic and emotional closeness between cousins are rarely present in sexuality studies. But the memories of experiences recounted to me by Elías and Zacarías ultimately shaped their lives as gay men in meaningful and positive ways. Their stories also shed light on sexuality, gender and intimacy in contemporary Mexican families. I place both sex stories at the centre of the text that follows, letting them speak for themselves, so that their richness remains intact. The authorial voice then moves from the margins to the centre to offer some reflections on rarely discussed stories of queer sex and romance to identify implications for (a) sex education in Mexico, and (b) emerging understandings of family intimacy as discussed by scholars in gender and sexuality studies in Mexico.

Elías

A college-educated, articulate, engaging young man in his mid 20s, Elías was born in a small town in Jalisco and migrated to Guadalajara to attend college. He struggled to remember when and how his *primo* (male cousin) first started to flirt with him, yet he recalled in graphic detail what he identified as his ‘first sexual experience.’ Elías was 10

and his primo was 14 or 15 at the time; frequent encounters that Elías identified as 'voluntary' followed afterwards. Both primos engaged in sexualised exchange, the use of pornography they both enjoyed, hugs and other physical expressions of affection, together with participation in entertainment and outdoor sports. Elías described the relationship as *de manita sudada* – with sweaty hands – to explain that they did not kiss on the mouth, it was not 'that deep.' Although he never fell 'in love' with his primo, he developed an 'identification' and special feelings for him. 'I used to look out for him all the time. I was always waiting for him, because he used to play soccer, every Sunday. And I was always waiting for him to come round so I could go out with him. I remember that when he had a girlfriend, I was jealous when he left with her. I was angry because I wanted him to be with me.'

Both cousins kept the relationship secret from their families. When did they have sex? I asked. Elías responded, 'If he knew that nobody would be at home, he would come over and pick me up. Or when my parents were not around.'

A romantic relationship of some 3 years ended when Elías's primo left for the USA. Around the same time, Elías started to spend time with another primo who was close in age and eventually approached him sexually, but he did not accept. Elías did not insist. Elías then dated a girl in *secundaria*¹ and later another young woman in *preparatoria*² – but sex was never a part of these relationships. A year later, his primo returned to Mexico and surprised Elías. 'He came back and took me to a place, a brothel and told me, "I am going to take you there because I want you to . . . screw a woman." He paid for it and everything . . . but when I was there, I could not do it.' He said his primo had wanted a threesome, 'but the young woman did not want this. He wanted to be with me, obviously. And he just put the woman as an excuse.' Elías was 16 or 17 when this took place. He and his primo never talked about the experience and shortly afterwards his cousin went back to the USA. Four or five years later, he returned to Mexico. Elías recalled, 'He visited me as if nothing had happened. He stopped by and said hello. He talked about his life in the USA, gave me some perfume as a gift and a pair of tennis shoes.'

Elías and his primo talked regularly long distance on the phone to touch base about work and life in general. Initially, when he thought about the relationship they used to have, Elías felt *vergüencita* (a bit ashamed). His primo is now married, has children and lives in the USA. His cousin's parents have a long history of migration to the USA, and for about 30 years, Elías's father too worked seasonally there.

Of the relationship with his primo, he said, 'I believe it did not affect me because, number one, he never forced me. In other words, he did it, he let me do it, it was almost, almost like shared play. He did not blackmail me. He did not hit me. He did not hurt me. *No dejó huella* – he left no imprint –, in other words. He did not damage anything.' Talking of why he valued the relationship with his primo, Elías said, 'He was the first man I felt attracted to, I loved seeing him, I loved being with him, and the fact that he was a man. [These were things] that helped me accept myself as a gay man.' From his primo, Elías learned to become familiar with his own body, explore it, masturbate, and care for himself as a man. He felt protected by his cousin's presence. '[I knew that] being with him nobody would touch me, because he was *mi primo el grandote*. Well, not that much, but kind of, he was a well-built guy and everything, I was kind of skinny,' he said.

Although Elías and his primo were always careful and he was confident that nobody knew about their relationship, Elías did not know if his brother suspected. One day his brother had come into the room and saw Elías and his primo cuddling. Elías and his primo were startled, but Elías's brother never asked him about it. Elías talked for the first time about the relationship in conversations with his gay friends. Not long before our interview, he shared his experience with them as others talked about their experiences of sexual abuse as children.

'I was 19 years old when I accepted that I was gay. While I had my first sex with my primo I had not accepted myself as homosexual yet.' It was not until Elías' first kiss and a romantic relationship with a man at the age of 19, that he 'accepted himself as gay.' He came out to his mother about that time, who eventually accepted him; his father did not know about it. 'As a boy, I was incredibly happy,' he said while explaining that from childhood to this day, he had never been exposed to homophobic remarks at home. 'In fact, my mother became upset when a neighbour once told her that I walked like a woman [...] she even went to confront the neighbour.'

At the time Elías shared his story with me in 2006, he had a promising professional career in Guadalajara. He travelled back frequently at weekends to his pueblo of 35,000 or 40,000 people and loved spending time with his parents and siblings. As we finished our interview, he shared: 'My dream is to be like, when I am close to 30 to have a partner, to be in love. I would like to fall in love, I do not know with whom. I have never felt it, I know that it is natural, and it will happen when you less expect it, I am not that desperate, but yes [...] I would love to be 30 and live with [a man], together.' Of all the people I have interviewed in my professional career, Elías was with no doubt one of those who came across as genuinely happy, with a stable family life.

Zacarías

Zacarías was a self-identified gay man in his early 20s who was raised in an upper middle-class family in Mexico City. He was educated at a Catholic primary school. However, he did not like the corporal punishment used by teachers, he talked to his parents about it and they transferred him to a public school. Zacarías ultimately left the Catholic Church. He explained, 'I started to experience conflict. It is a stage in my life when I used to spend a lot of time with my primo and a wonderful friendship was established. When that friendship became a romantic relationship, that's when I said, "I am not worthy of putting a foot in the church." That was it.'

Zacarías and his primo were the same age. The romantic relationship both shared involved sex, endless conversations while having coffee or dinner in remote parts of the city, holding hands at the movies, and enjoying fun together. Prior to their first kiss, Zacarías looked on him as just '*el primo*,' seeing him at family reunions, watching soccer together, or spending the night at his home. Eventually, however, his primo evoked special feelings in him. He said, 'I was about 11 and a half and I was already having a crush on my primo.' With a sigh, he explained their first kiss was like a 'dream coming true.' When I asked him if anyone knew or if he believed that anyone ever suspected their relationship, he said, 'No. In fact, it lasted for a period of time, 4 years, from age 12 to 16 years old. It was like the brotherhood that happens among all *chavos*. As in, "*Eres mi super cuate*" – You are my super buddy. I love you

very much.’ We were inseparable as boys. We went everywhere together. And when we were 16 – which was when the relationship ended – it was also normal because each one of us was doing different things. So, from that angle, nobody ever suspected about it.’

‘One day I got home, and my mother told me, “You know what?! Your primo already has a girlfriend!” And I was like, “¡Ay! Really? That’s great, no?” So, I waited for a long time to see whether he was going to finally tell me about it, or not. Then we had a family reunion and he showed up with this girlfriend, who unfortunately, I happened to know, but she did not know about the relationship that I had had with him’. After Zacarías learned that his primo had been dating the young woman, he took his primo for a coffee, confronted him and broke up with him. Zacarías was in pain but not surprised. ‘We have had conversations in the past and he used to say that he felt uncomfortable [with our relationship]. I said, “Well, if you want to break up it is not a problem.” But he [primo] said, “But I don’t want to break up. I want to do it but at the same time I don’t want to. At times, I feel like I am homosexual.” And I was like, “This is not a heterosexual practice, duhhh!” So, he got to the point where he had to define himself.’ Zacarías became depressed and was suicidal after the break up, while his primo established a long-term relationship with the young woman. An unexpected pregnancy took the primo and his girlfriend by surprise a few years later and his parents forced him to marry her when they learned about it. In the years after their break-up, Zacarías and his primo bumped into each other at family events and in other situations, something that is still emotionally challenging for him.

‘On the one hand it is sad [things ended], and on the other hand it is a relief, because of all the problems that might have come,’ said Zacarías thinking back to the break-up. ‘I did not want them to learn about my primo, regardless of the sexual preference.’ He explained that one of his *primas* (female cousins) and another primo had developed a romantic relationship. This has caused scandal and rupture within the extended family, but the prima and primo married and had children. Years have passed now and the entire extended family accepts the couple and their children.

‘My mother would have a heart attack and died,’ Zacarías said as he predicted how his mother – who still struggles to accept him as gay – would have reacted had she known about his relationship with this cousin. To this day, nobody in the immediate or extended family knows about Zacarías and his primo.

‘He was the first in many ways,’ and ‘he awakened me to many things’ said Zacarías as he shared his memories.

He taught me how to kiss. I did not know how to kiss; I was so stupid. He taught me how to have sex [. . .] in such a way I could fall in love for the first time, *cañón* —head over heels— giving up everything for a person. The relationship also made me think about future plans and life in the future. That was one of the greatest experiences, that one feels during that time. [. . .] These kinds of emotions were the ones that sprang to life because of that relationship.

When Zacarías got his first job, both primos thought seriously about the relationship and made plans as they thought about the implications of living together as a couple. He recalled, ‘At some point we said, we started to think, “Of course, we will rent an apartment,

two bedrooms.” Obviously, we will sleep in one of them, and when we have a guest, each one would sleep in a separate bed. How sad! [...] but we would have a normal and everyday life.’

As a partner, Zacarías said his primo became the ‘frame of reference’ he later used with potential partners. He used the word *igualitaria* to refer to the egalitarian nature of their relationship, the way they communicated and made decisions together, and the quality of the relationship overall. After finishing with his primo, Zacarías dated five different men close to his age, but the relationships did not last more than a month or two. The relationship with his primo had too many ‘ideal’ qualities, making it impossible for the other men to reach the bar. The only girlfriend Zacarías had had was in elementary school. Laughing he recalled, ‘She was different to other girls, that is why I liked her. But life has its twists and turns, and when we bumped into each other at a gay night club, she with her partner and me with mine, we told ourselves, “Of course, that is why we felt attracted to one another.”’

Zacarías used the expression ‘Al primo me le arrimo’ (You can get physically/sexually close to your male cousin) to give a gay twist to a gay twist to an expression traditionally used to validate a man’s sexual attraction to his *prima*. ‘I believed that more than anything was *la confianza* (trust) between us both,’ he stated as he elaborated extensively on how *confianza* played a key role in young men’s experiments with sex with their male cousins.

‘What if your primo gets divorced some day?’ I asked Zacarías playfully as we finished the interview. He exclaimed with a laugh, ‘Don’t tempt me, Satan!’ then paused to assert that he would offer his moral support to him, express his love in other ways, but would not go back. He valued the relationship beyond the romantic or sexual memories,

Many times, it is not only the loving relationship but what you are trying to learn about your life as well. And I think it was better, let’s say, to have my primo say, “You know what? I want to try this out with you.” And I said “Yes”, rather my *primo* than asking a neighbour across the street. For me, it was the trust between us that mattered, a kind of *liberación masculina* (masculine liberation) in a way, that does not happen often.

‘Do you think that the experience with your primo freed you as a man?’ I asked. He replied, ‘Yes, because it brought out that part of that could say, I am gay! To accept myself as a homosexual person and not to be acting all the time and pretending that I was heterosexual.’ A helpless romantic, Zacarías was grateful for the life experience and remembered his primo with a deep sigh as ‘*el amor de mi vida*’, the love of my life.

~ * ~

When I listened to Elías and Zacarías in 2006, I was moved by the secrets they had kept close to their hearts and by the warmth and the affection with which they told their stories, as well as the graphic, vivid recollections of their sexual encounters. As I revisited these accounts in 2021, their stories have much to say about (1) the quality of sex and sexuality education in Mexico; and (2) sexuality and intimacy in the context of family life.

First, same sex relationships have only been openly addressed in the sex education materials provided in progressive urban settings in Mexico. The book *Tu Futuro en Libertad* (Your Future in Freedom), published by the Mexico City government in 2008 is illustrative in this respect. Recent research, such as *Sex Education at School ... Does it Work?* By

Heredia Espinosa and Rodríguez Barraza (2021), however, highlights what continues to be the dominant paradigm of sex education for Mexican youth. Here, an exclusively hetero-normative paradigm focuses on the *dangers* of sex (both in terms of reproduction and sexually transmitted infection) and ignores the *joy* of intimacy and the erotic (personal relationships and pleasure). In such an approach, the stories of men such as Elías and Zacarías not only become invisible, but taboo and lost in silence.

Second, Elías and Zacarías' experiences talk to the everyday cultures of intimacy within extended families in Mexico that I have researched and witnessed (González-López 2005). They signal the importance of affection, emotional intimacy and physical closeness between cousins and other family members. Unlike the accounts of gay identified men who recalled being the targets of sexual violence by older male relatives – stories I examine extensively in *Family Secrets* and which Joseph Carrier (1995) earlier documented in his book *De Los Otros*—, Elías and Zacarías participated voluntarily in sex with cousins close in age. What then are the social processes that facilitate and sustain these encounters of intimacy?

'I think we have to broaden our concept of intimacy' stated Guillermo Núñez Noriega, a leading scholar in sexuality and gender studies in Mexico and author of *Just Between Us* (2014). We were talking in 2021 as I was revisiting the stories of Elías and Zacarías and my own understanding of their life experiences. Núñez Noriega elaborated,

As we broaden our concept of intimacy, we do it in such a way that we understand that this closeness, emotional, affective, and corporeal, is the type of closeness that does not necessarily involve the use of categories for oneself, you know, specific identities. Some cultures offer some possibilities of affectionate and emotional bonding, closeness, bodily, erotic, that in fact, other cultures do not. And I think that Mexican culture, and in general, Latin American cultures —some would say “that has to do with the Mediterranean cultures”— offer that kind of closeness, bonding, emotional connection, strong and close, and in fact, corporeal and erotic. And right there is when sexuality is more easily explored. And these experiences do not go through those filters of categories of identity, such as being homosexual, or being heterosexual. People don't even use those terms, or not even imagine them. And in that context, many things happen that are not read by people from the perspective of those identities, or are not even verbalised by people [...] These experiences are in general lived as part of a secret.

In Mexico, gender further shapes these cultures of family intimacy as well as sexuality. 'I am sure, 100% [sure] that the most common pattern of [voluntary] sexual initiation for women is not within the family' asserted Anahi Russo Garrido, a scholar who has published extensively on lesbian relationships and intimacy in Mexico City. I engaged in a similar conversation about family intimacy with Russo Garrido in 2021, who said, 'and the most common pattern of sexual initiation for women is in the late teens, the most common pattern is with cismen first and later with a woman, but [the] ages vary.' In her research, women rarely described experiences of voluntary sexual contact with a *prima*, or other female relative. Family intimacy happens, but emotional bonding in families tends to take the form of emotional support or socialisation to participate in queer spaces at an older age. And from my own research, I have learned that although expressions of physical affection (e.g., hugging, caressing, cuddling, kissing on the cheek) between adolescent girls within the family are common in Mexico, bodily contact and closeness are less likely to be sexual. In *Family Secrets*, I wrote, 'With its roots in codes of honor and

shame established in colonial Mexico, gendered prescriptions of sexuality within patriarchal families may grant boys and young men – more so than girls and young women – some license to explore bodily desire and to follow this sexual curiosity *within* their families’ (184).

What is the future of these cultures of family intimacy? ‘Things have changed in Mexico in recent decades,’ stated Núñez Noriega, referring to sexual violence prevention campaigns in popular culture (e.g. through the mass media) and in community spaces, an increase in conversations about sexuality generally, and the growth of LGBT politics – all of which are changing practices of intimacy. ‘Over the last 20 years, Mexico has changed in a big way,’ he elaborated: ‘Cultures of emotional, affective and erotic closeness have changed with the arrival of sexual identity discourses. Gay, bisexual, heterosexual, the LGBT movement has created paradoxes. On the one hand, there are discourses of empowerment, respect, pride and non-discrimination [together with] emerging political discourses, constitutional reforms that prohibit discrimination, and campaigns.’ He continued, ‘And on the other hand, all of this has had an impact on how other sexual transgressions are lived, and the corporeal, erotic, sexual closeness that have always existed but suddenly there is a social pressure to talk about them, to state them, to define them, to verbalise them, to categorise them. And right there is where people run away and don’t want to deal with the issues.’ Núñez Noriega recalled an anecdote one young man shared with him, ‘We were engaging in *juegos eróticos* – erotic play – and we were some other friends [they were teenagers], and one of them commented, “mmm ... but that is homosexuality”. And we all exchanged glances, looking each other in the eye. And starting right there, we stopped doing it.’

It is hoped that future research on personal and collective sexual narratives lived in secret will break these sexual silences to expand our understanding of sexuality and help us develop well-informed, more sophisticated sex education programmes better attuned to the needs of a complex, pluricultural and racist, changing patriarchal nation.

Notes

1. Equivalent to middle school; grades 7–9.
2. Equivalent to high school.

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