Individualism Under Constraining Social Norms: Conceptualizing the Lived Experiences of LGBT persons

Jesper Ahlin Marceta 🆔
Faculty of Law
Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University
Tbilisi, Georgia
jesahlmar@gmail.com

Abstract

Value conflicts between individualism and collectivism are common. In philosophy, such conflicts have been conceptualized as conflicts between individuality and conformity, among other things. This article develops a more detailed conceptual framework by combining philosophical analysis with empirical observations. The focus is on value conflicts pertaining to LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) factors in a non-individualist society (Georgia). Conservative or traditional norms sometimes constrain LGBT individuals by influencing them to adapt to social expectations. The phenomenon is intuitively clear and has been reported on in numerous quantitative investigations. A qualitative study has been conducted on how LGBT individuals in Georgia experience the constraining influence of such norms. Deep interviews (*n*=8) have clarified how, more precisely, the effects of those influences should be conceptualized. The results indicate that important distinctions between different types of influences, as well as different objects of influence, have been overlooked in previous philosophical inquiries about value conflicts in this context. The conceptual framework developed throughout the article should be of use to philosophers and social scientists studying individualism and collectivism, and to policymakers working with LGBT issues.

Keywords: individualism; LGBT; authenticity; individuality; singularity

1. Introduction

Individualism is central to liberal democracies (Callaway, 1994; Deneen, 2018; Siedentop, 2014). In such societies, human beings are granted individual rights and freedoms, political authority is justified with attention to the interests of individuals, and it is often considered unjustified to sacrifice one individual for the common good (Blackburn, 2008, "individualism"; Nussbaum, 1999, p. 59). Non-individualist societies are less occupied with the individual's interests. Among other things, one consequence of this is that individuals in such societies are expected to adjust their way of life to the prevailing norms and traditions. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals in many non-individualist societies are prevented (i.e., discouraged, suppressed, legally prohibited, etc.) from displaying or enacting their sexual orientation. Their way of life is considered to be conflicting with the prevailing norms and traditions and they are therefore pressured to adjust to conservative or traditional social and political expectations.

It is a philosophical matter which moral values are at stake in conflicts between individualism and non-individualism. Philosophical analyses work to delineate and articulate the relevant value conflicts. For instance, it appears that the value of *individuality*, i.e., the value of fully realizing one's own person or disposition, may conflict with the value of *conformity*, i.e., the value of submitting to social expectations for the sake of the common good (Mill, 1977 [1859]).

However, philosophical analysis sometimes gains from being empirically grounded (Valentini, 2012; Woolf, 2011). Value conflicts are often better understood if philosophers pursue their conceptual analyses in light of factual considerations. Without empirical grounding, philosophers may overemphasize values that people are not practically concerned with, underemphasize values that are most relevant to those whose interests are considered, or misunderstand the real-world nature and experience of, for instance, conforming to social expectations.

The purpose of this article is to develop a more detailed conceptual framework for analyzing conflicts between individualism and collectivism, and provide empirical grounding to philosophical analyses of the values at stake. The focus is on conflicts pertaining to LGBT related issues in conservative or traditional societies. The research questions are:

- How are individualist values challenged by constraining norms?

- How do LGBT individuals in a conservative or traditional society experience that their way of life, or preferred way of life, is challenged by the prevailing social and political norms?

- Have philosophers overlooked important conceptual ambiguities, distinctions, aspects, or nuances in this context?

- Are established philosophical concepts and theories fruitful for analyzing value conflicts in this context?

To answer the questions, qualitative interviews were conducted with self-recruited Georgian LGBT individuals (*n*=8). The study resulted in a better understanding of the values at stake in the conflict between individualism and non-individualism, and of how constraining influences

on individuals should be conceptualized. This improved understanding may be valuable not only to philosophers, but also to social scientists and policymakers. The conceptual apparatus developed throughout the article enables more detailed analyses of the influence of constraining social and political norms, and is thus useful for various practical purposes.

The article is structured as follows. The first section elaborates on the notions of individualism and collectivism, and on the social and political circumstances pertaining to LGBT issues in Georgia. The subsequent section explains the methods employed and provides a brief overview of the results. Thereafter, the respondents' experiences are analyzed. Their reports of constraining influences are ordered in a comprehensive and coherent conceptual framework. It is explained in greater detail how the interviews contribute to a philosophical understanding of individualist values and of how such values are challenged by constraining social and political norms. The final section summarizes and discusses how theorists and practitioners can gain from the conceptual framework developed throughout the article.

2. Individualism, collectivism, and LGBT issues in Georgia

In the social sciences, individualism is commonly analyzed as a social pattern in cultures (Triandis 1995, 2001; here and in what follows). It is then contrasted with *collectivism*. Collectivism is a social pattern that appears among individuals who think of themselves as members of different collectives. These collectives may be, for instance, families, coworkers, clans, tribes, classes, or nations. In collectivist cultures, individuals are motivated by the norms of the collective. They are willing to prioritize the goals of the collective above their own and emphasize the social bonds among its members in their actions and in their way of life.

Individualism is instead a social pattern that appears among loosely connected individuals who think of themselves as independent from the whole. People in individualist cultures are motivated by their own preferences, needs, rights, and the agreements they make with others. They prioritize their own goals above those of the collective. Instead of thinking of themselves as natural members of different communities, as people in collectivist cultures tend to do, people in individualist cultures emphasize rational analyses of the pros and cons of being associated with other individuals and groups. For them, community is a choice—not a natural state.

Individualism is increasing globally (Santos et al., 2017) but is most prominent in Western cultures. There are various ways of measuring the degree of individualism in a society. World Values Survey (WVS) analyzes *traditional values* versus *secular-rational values* and *survival values* versus *self-expression values*. Traditional values, in this analysis, "emphasize the importance of religion, parent-child ties, deference to authority and traditional family values" (World Values Survey n.d.). People embracing these values tend to "reject divorce, abortion, euthanasia and suicide". Traditional societies have "high levels of national pride and a nationalistic outlook," and are collectivist. Secular-rational values are the opposite. People in such societies "place less emphasis on religion, traditional family values and authority," view divorce, abortion, euthanasia, and suicide as "relatively acceptable," and are individualist (Santos et al., 2017).

Survival values "place emphasis on economic and physical security," and are "linked with a re-latively ethnocentric outlook and low levels of trust and tolerance," whereas self-expression values "give high priority to environmental protection, growing tolerance of foreigners, gays and lesbians and gender equality, and rising demands for participation in decision-making in economic and political life" (Santos et al., 2017). The former values are associated with collec-tivism and the latter with individualism.

From these constructs, WVS puts together a "world map" that shows how individualist diffe-rent countries are relative to each other (image 1). As the map shows, protestant European countries such as Sweden, Norway, and Denmark are relatively individualist. African-Islamic countries such as Yemen, Jordan, and Morocco are instead relatively collectivist. In general, individualism has a stronger foothold in liberal democracies than elsewhere. As the discussion below is focused on Georgia, it is also relevant to note that Georgia itself is relatively collec-tivist; it scores about -1 on the vertical axis and -0,75 on the horizontal axis.
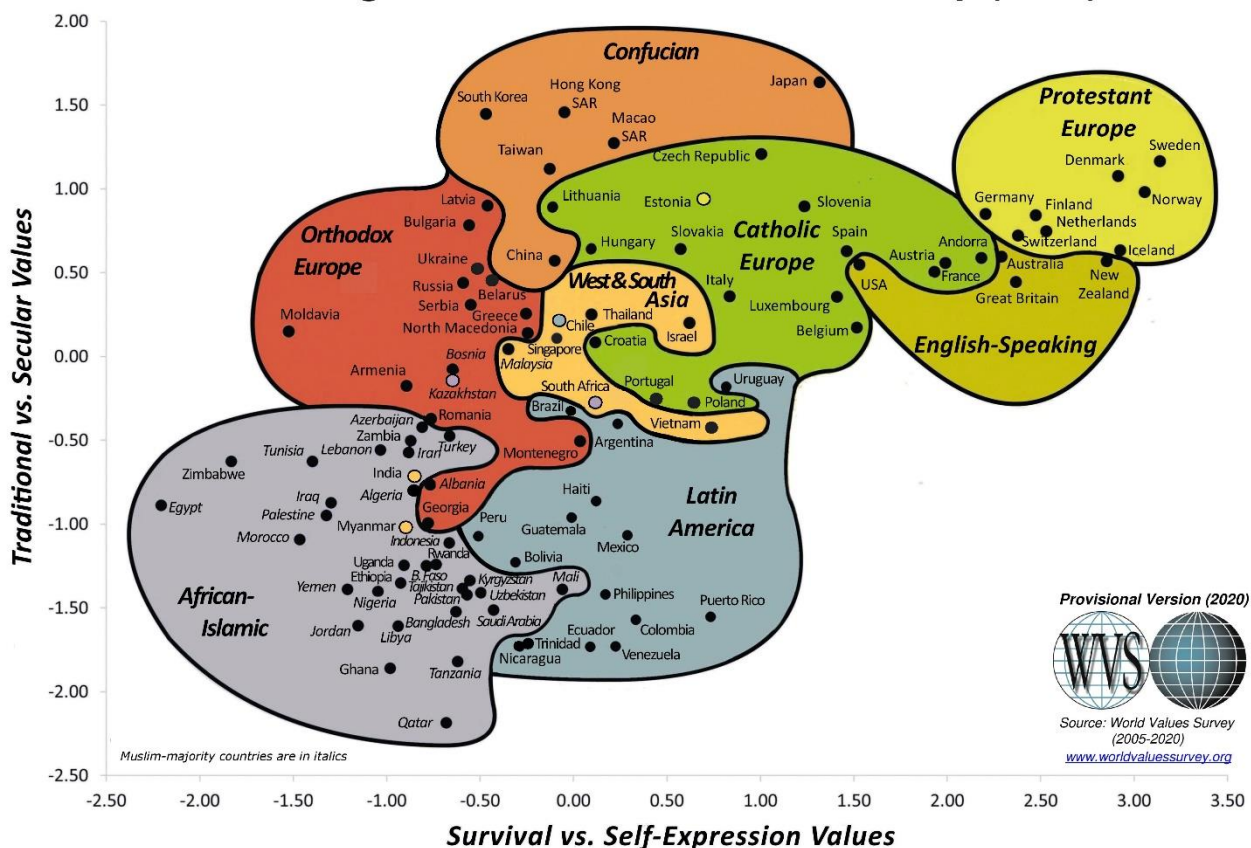

Image 1: www.worldvaluessurvey.org (2020-12-02)

In the wake of globalization, conflicts should be expected between individualist and traditional values, not least as people in liberal democracies are interested in spreading their individualist worldview to others. For instance, a liberal democracy may offer financial support to a collectivist country which is conditional on that the country introduces or strengthens their laws protecting LGBT individuals. Something similar happened in Georgia in the 2010s. As part of its European and Euro-Atlantic integration, the country adopted its first anti-discrimination law in 2014, banning discrimination by both public and private entities on all grounds, including sex, age, religion, language, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, and political affiliation (Administration of the Government of Georgia, 2015). It was a step in the direction of treating everyone as separate individuals on equal grounds.

There are moral problems associated with such international involvements. On the one hand, there are reasons to facilitate the global increase in individualism. Focusing on Georgia, a 2011 study found that 88% of the population thought that homosexuality "can never be justified" (Caucasus Barometer, 2011). 95% of Georgians oppose same-sex marriage (Pew Research Center 2018, p. 12). Human Rights Watch reports that LGBT individuals in Georgia "often experience abuse, intolerance, and discrimination in every sphere of life" (Human Rights Watch 2019). Women's Initiatives Supporting Group (WISG), an NGO offering support to LGBT individuals, writes that the majority of those who address WISG "have problems in relation with employment or accommodation," that the majority of "lesbian, bisexual and transgender women, who receive the services of WISG, experience alienation from family members," that the majority of "people receiving the service have hard socio-economic conditions and do not have higher education," and that the "absolute majority of trans-gender women [have financial and social problems and] have to do commercial sex-work" (Bakhtadze, 2018, p. 80).

One event which is often referred to (not least by several of the respondents in the present study) took place on May 17, 2013, i.e., the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia. About 50 LGBT activists gathered to demonstrate in the country's capital Tbilisi but were violently attacked by thousands of counter-protesters fronted by Georgian Orthodox church leaders (Mestvirishvili et al., 2017, p. 1254). Among other things, the attack included "the throwing of stones by clergy" (Pearce & Cooper, 2016, p. 2). In this context, it must be noted that 72% of the Georgian population in 2013 stated that they "completely trust" the Georgian Orthodox church (Caucasus Barometer, 2013), which makes it a highly trusted institution and an influential factor in matters relating to LGBT issues.

On the other hand, some interpret individualist influences on non-individualist countries as violations of their national sovereignty and threats to their cultures. Georgian opponents of individualism in LGBT matters argue that homosexuality is of Western origin and that it is therefore alien to Georgian culture, that it "threatens the existence of the Georgian nation," and "contradicts Georgian traditions and Orthodox Christianity" (Aghdgomelashvili, 2016, p. 182). "Georgian gays do not exist," clerics have claimed (p. 186). This opposition needs to be understood in the context of global political power struggles. The view that individualism in LGBT matters is a threat is emphasized by those who want Georgia to approach Russia instead of the European Union; "those who declared the West and liberal values, rather than

Russia, to be the main vector of development for Georgia were considered 'ideological ene-mies' of the country" (p. 184). Russia—who invaded Georgia in 2008 and still occupies parts of the country's territory—is among those who do not want Georgia to strengthen its ties to the European Union.

Thus, on the one hand, the global expansion of individualist values is in the interest of many and should be facilitated, but on the other hand that expansion is interpreted by many as alien cultural threats and violations of national sovereignty. That interpretation grounds the view that non-individualist countries should reverse their developments toward liberal democracy and instead move in the direction of authoritative politics resting on traditional values and social hierarchy. It is a moral problem how to mitigate such conflicts; how can individualism in LGBT matters be facilitated while avoiding social and political backlashes?

The question is general and should be understood as topic setting. Problems in this topic in-clude how to accomplish harmonization of domestic and international legal frameworks, how to raise local awareness of LGBT issues, and how to promote the visibility and acceptance of LGBT persons and ways of life. From the perspective of fact-sensitive political philosophy, the first step in treating such problems is practical understanding; how are conflicts between individualist and traditional values actualized in local contexts? The present study aims to contribute to an understanding of how such conflicts are actualized in the lives of Georgian LGBT individuals.

Georgia and the lives of Georgian LGBT individuals were selected as a target for the study since, Baltic states aside, the country is together with Ukraine a front-runner among former Soviet republics in democratization and approximation to the European Union. Not only is a legal framework offering LGBT individuals protection in place, but Georgia outscores neighboring countries Armenia, Azerbaijan, Russia, and Turkey in both the Transparency In-ternational corruption perception index and the Freedom in the World index (Transparency International, 2018; Freedom House, 2020). Its citizens enjoy the legal right to freedom of speech, association, academic inquiry, and so on. Yet strong traditional values prevail, making conflicts between individualism and non-individualism remarkably visible. Georgia is there-fore a suitable country to study the lived experiences of LGBT individuals under constraining social influences.

Problems relating to the situations of Georgian LGBT individuals are already well-investi-gated (in addition to the above, see also, e.g., Adamczyk and Pitt 2009; Dragić 2019; Shahna-zaryan et al. 2016; Tolkachev and Tolordava 2019). Some of the studies include anecdotes of the lived experiences of LGBT individuals, such as detailed descriptions of physical and verbal abuse and accounts of various failures to prosecute the perpetrators (see, e.g., Bakhtadze, 2018; Ratiani et al., 2015). However, the available studies are mainly quantitative and with fo-cus on issues on an aggregated scale. The purpose of the present study therefore requires fur-ther inquiry into the lived experiences of Georgian LGBT individuals through qualita-tive investigations.

3. Methods and a brief overview of the results

Qualitative research interviews are appropriate when the aim is to develop hypotheses, theories, and concepts for articulating and analyzing the perceptions of the interview subjects (Esaiasson et al., 2012, pp. 253–255). They are "particularly useful for getting the story" behind the subjects' experiences (McNamara n.d.). Qualitative interviews allow researchers to seek answers to open-ended questions and thus pursue in-depth understanding that is difficult to obtain through quantitative studies.

The study builds from so-called *grounded theory*, which refers to "a systematic method for constructing a theoretical analysis" (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012, p. 347) when the aim is to "produce or construct an explanatory theory that uncovers a process inherent to the substantive area of inquiry" (Chun Tie et al., 2019). In grounded theory, in-depth interviews are conducted in parallel with analyses of the collected data, which means that the interview protocols are continuously developed throughout the interview phase to successively narrow down the focus on the object of interest. The data collection is concluded when "saturation" is reached, which in general terms means that "on the basis of the data that have been collected or analyzed […], further data collection and/or analysis are unnecessary" (Saunders et al., 2017). Thereafter, the data undergoes a coding process. Recurring themes and categories in the data are identified and labeled, so that relationships between different elements are hypothesized inductively. The process results in hypotheses, theories, and concepts which among other things can be further tested through hypothetico-deductive methods.

The social circumstances in Georgia posed difficulties for recruiting respondents. Many Georgian LGBT individuals would find it intimidating if they were approached with a request to participate. They would not appreciate that others (i.e., researchers or their acquaintances) are talking about their sexual orientation; perhaps they do not expect others to know about it at all. What is more, such requests from international researchers may unduly influence them to participate, thus negatively affecting their personal autonomy; a violation of standard Western research ethics (see, e.g., Shamoo & Resnik, 2015). Therefore, a website was set up with information about the project (*reference omitted for peer review*). It was distributed among NGOs and researchers working with LGBT related issues in Georgia. These actors then approached LGBT individuals who trusted them and felt comfortable talking about their sexual orientation with them, encouraging these individuals to study the information on the website and volunteer to participate. Thus, respondents in the study were self-recruited.

These ethical considerations seriously limited the recruitment base. Only people with direct or indirect links to Georgian NGOs and researchers working with LGBT issues were reached, and from that group only people with an active interest in contributing to the research field could be considered as potential recruits. What is more, given that English is most often only understood and spoken by younger generations in the big cities in Georgia, it was practically impossible to recruit older people in the villages, i.e., social strata and geographical places where the influence on individualist values can be expected to be more severe. In summary, the participants in the study belong to a small group of people who (i) are relatively well-educated, (ii) are directly or indirectly connected to people and organizations with active interests in LGBT issues, and (iii) feel sufficiently motivated to contribute to research as a volunteer.

One concern is that the skewed recruitment base negatively affects the external validity of the study; the participants are not representative of the complete LGBT population, which means that the results cannot be generalized to other groups in society. I believe the concern is theoretically valid but that the effect is practically negligible. The real worry is that the participants in the study belong to the *least* exposed group of LGBT individuals in Georgia. It is probable that there are other groups of LGBT individuals who are more negatively affected by traditional norms, and in more ways, than the group of participants included here. This means that while the present study is likely not *inaccurate*, there is a real chance that it is *incomplete*. At present, this is taken to indicate that further research is needed to cover the complete nature and scope of issues relating to the effects of constraining norms on Georgian LGBT individuals.

Eight respondents (five women, two men, and one non-binary person) participated in the study. All were in the ages 20–35. The interviews, which took place in July through October 2020, were either conducted in the homes of the respondents or at an LGBT oriented NGO in Tbilisi. They were recorded and transcribed for analysis. For ethical reasons, the recordings were deleted after being transcribed. For reasons of accuracy and realism, the respondents' accounts of their experiences are presented below without grammatical or other corrections.

After six interviews it became clear that saturation would soon be reached for the group of people that the respondents belong to, i.e., young and well-educated people in an urban social environment. The first three interviews brought new insights into philosophically overlooked aspects of the influences of constraining norms. The interview protocol was adjusted to incorporate these insights, and the three following interviews confirmed that all respondents shared these experiences. However, at that point, the interviews had not produced much further understanding of the influences under scrutiny. The respondents repeated similar experiences. Variations in the responses were due to personal circumstances, such as differences in family situations and work conditions. After eight interviews, it was concluded that saturation had been reached. The epistemic value of conducting further interviews would likely have been negligible, considering the purposes of the study.

Throughout the process, the interviews were coded in accordance with the methods of grounded theory. After the three first interviews, recurring patterns had begun to appear. The patterns were compared to the philosophical literature on individualism (e.g., Ahlin Marceta, 2021; Durkheim, 1969 [1898]; Kateb, 1989a, 1989b, 2002, 2003; Lukes, 2006 [1973]; MacIntyre, 1984; Mill, 1977 [1859]; Puolimatka, 2004; Pyyhtinen, 2008; Sandel, 1998 [1982]; Taylor, 1990, 1991; Tocqueville, 2010 [1840]), which ultimately resulted in two sets of distinctions: (1) active versus passive influences, and positive versus negative influences, and (2) the value of *authenticity*, *individuality*, and *singularity*. These distinctions have thus been achieved partly through conceptual analysis with support in philosophical literature, and partly through a coding process building from grounded theory.

In short, authenticity, individuality, and singularity are separate objects of influence. They represent the value of being *real*, *complete*, and *someone*. For instance, an active negative influence such as physical abuse may cause an LGBT person to live and act in a way that is not truly theirs. This influence can be analyzed using the concept of authenticity. It may also cause them to refrain from fully expressing or enacting their true self. This influence can be analyzed using the concept

of individuality. And, finally, it may affect their social or political status relative to others. This influence can be analyzed using the concept of singularity.

The study shows that philosophers may have neglected important distinctions in their conceptual and argumentative analyses. Those distinctions can be fitted into a comprehensive and coherent conceptual framework that theorists and practitioners should be able to make use of in future investigations. The discussion clarifies factors and phenomena that can be further studied both qualitatively and quantitatively, and grounds normative philosophical analysis in empirical observations.

4. Different types of influences

The broad range of influences in this context include social rejection by family members, suppressing public policies targeting the LGBT community, and verbal and physical abuse, among other things. The respondents report that they are subject to two types of influences, here called *active* and *passive*. Both can be understood in *positive* and *negative* terms. Positive influences are encouraging, in the sense that they inspire, support, or strengthen the individual, whereas negative influences are discouraging in the same sense. The different influences can be organized in a two-by-two table (see table 1 below).

The influences are present in three broad domains, namely *family*, *at work*, and *in public*. All of the respondents reported that they "have to hide," or similar, in their relations to their family, and most gave similar answers regarding their work. The domain of public life broadly concerns the respondents' participation in common spheres, such as how they appear to and are met by strangers on a day-to-day basis, and their relation to politics, media, and social movements.

Only one respondent reports of a positive influence, and only in one instance:

> **Respondent 3:** [My father] told me that I can always have, how can I say, I can always rely on him. And he also told me that if I had any problems, I would always be able to tell him about this problem and he would always help me. With money, or with something. Everything. But my mother does not speak to me.

Therefore, in what follows, the focus is mainly on negative influences. Accordingly, positive influences are in some cases not exemplified in the two-by-two tables below. This does not mean that such influences do not exist or cannot exist. However, in some cases, the current study has not rendered enough data to provide both practical and realistic examples. As the study aims to achieve a high degree of realism, the author has refrained from using examples building only from theoretical speculation. The range of active influences stretches from expectations of social conformity to physical violence:

> **Respondent 3:** … she [mother] only wants me to get married, to have children, to have husband, and so on.

> **Respondent 6:** And then, the next morning, I had very big fight with my father. Like, the normal situation in Georgia, they beat and stuff…

Passive influences are instead the absence of such things that could enable or encourage the individual. For instance, several respondents report that they rarely see LGBT persons in media, and when LGBT persons are included or depicted, they are mainly social activists or negative stereotypes. For instance:

> **Respondent 4:** Almost all of the LGBT people that are shown on television in Georgia are the kind of people that I would never want myself to include with. Like, in other LGBTQ groups I have met a lot of people, like, at different queer events, and it was amazing, but what I see on TV, what I see is activists. And all that, it just sounds like bullshit, most of it.

One passive influence is thus the lack of public visibility of non-stereotyped LGBT persons, i.e., ordinary people who simply happen to be LGBT and whose sexual orientation or activism is not the main reason why they are publicly visible. Other passive influences include a lack of political representation, the absence of public examples of socially well-functioning families in which one or more members are LGBT, and the failure of workplaces to ensure that LGBT persons are safe there.

One respondent reports of a passive influence that is of particular interest to the purposes of this study. The woman came out to her mother, who refused to accept her daughter's sexual orientation as real:

> **Respondent 7:** I told her [mother]. And she didn't put up a fuzz, and didn't yell, or didn't cry. She was, like, "okay, okay." I knew that she did not fully comprehend what I was saying, so I kept repeating it. And, she was like, "you know, I'm sure that one… There will be one day when you fall in love with a man, and you're going to have children, and you're going to have a husband."

The respondent kept trying to explain to her mother that her sexual orientation is sincere and lasting, but the mother failed to recognize that reality. Her failure to do so forms a passive influence. It is an absence of validation which fractures the respondent's relationship to her mother. Eventually, the respondent gave up her attempts to get her mother to recognize her sexual orientation. She uses the word "fake" when telling the story:

> **Respondent 7:** I stopped talking to her about my personal life. […] I'm faking. With my mom. Some part of my personality.

Table 1: Examples of different types of influences

	Active	**Passive**
Positive	Parents who let their children know that they support them.	Public representation in media.
Negative	Physical abuse.	Parents who fail to recognize their children's sexual orientation as real.

This particular description can also be analyzed as an influence on the respondent's authenticity, as discussed below. Thus, there are active and passive influences. Passive influences may be more difficult to identify but should not be neglected in philosophical analyses.

The different types of influences are not difficult to formulate through theoretical analysis alone. However, as shown below, philosophical analyses appear to have neglected these differences in formulations of the objects targeted by such influences. Making the different types of influences explicit advances philosophical analyses of central concepts by emphasizing important distinctions.

5. Different objects of influence

The respondents report that they are influenced in different ways. However, the study has made it more clear in what aspects they are influenced, i.e., what the targeted *object* of influence is. There appears to be three main objects of influence, namely the respondents' *authenticity*, *individuality*, and *singularity*. These concepts refer to being *real*, *complete*, and *someone*. The respondents' stories are, at least to some extent, in line with philosophical analyses of these concepts but provide deeper insight into the nature of the influences and their targeted objects.

5.1. Authenticity

There are different uses of the term "authenticity" in ordinary English. In the present context it is taken to denote the genuineness of desires, persons, and lives; an authentic individual's behavior "converges with who she actually is" (Bialystok, 2014, p. 278). An inauthentic person's behavior does not converge like that. Factors that influence authenticity negatively include medical disorders that affect the agent's decision-making processes, social or political pressure, and a lacking capability to conduct critical self-reflection (Ahlin Marceta, 2019, pp. 11–23).

There are various ways to conceptualize authenticity. John Christman has developed a theory of authenticity as self-endorsement. He argues that "authenticity involves non-alienation upon (historically sensitive, adequate) self-reflection, given one's diachronic practical identity and one's position in the world" (Christman, 2009, p. 155). Understood as self-endorsement, authenticity is valuable because it is valuable to have the desires one wants to have, be the person one wants to be, and lead the life one wants to lead.

A second way of thinking about authenticity instead focuses on the origin of desires, personal characteristics, and ways of life. For instance, in his theory of rationality Jon Elster writes that "[a]ll desires and beliefs have a […] causal origin, but some of them have the wrong sort of causal history and hence are irrational" (Elster, 1983, p. 16). Desires and beliefs with the "wrong" sort of history "have been shaped by irrelevant causal factors, by a blind psychic causality operating 'behind the back' of the person" (p. 16). Elster then proceeds to write that "[d]esires or preferences can be objectionable because of their origin (non-autonomous desires) or because of their content (unethical desires)" (p. 22). This has later been interpreted as

a theory of authenticity, where inauthentic desires, characteristics, or ways of life have the "wrong" sort of origin (Ahlin Marceta, 2019, pp. 32–4).

Finally, authenticity can be analyzed as opposed to *alienation*. On this view, which can be traced to John Dewey (1999), Bernard Williams (1973), and others, authenticity obtains only when a person is deeply and personally connected to the moral and social activities with which she is occupied and experiences this connection as real. Alienation entails inauthenticity in the individual's social relations.

In this study, authenticity has been taken to involve (1) self-endorsement upon critical and informed self-reflection, (2) self-origin, in the sense that authenticity is at least partly contingent on the extent to which a person's desires, characteristics, and way of life originates in their own self and not in external or accidental factors, and (3) that persons who are alienated from a social context to some extent have an inauthentic relationship to that context. The respondents report of negative influences on their authenticity in different ways. For instance, one respondent explains that her family does not know the *real* her:

> **Respondent 2:** … it's still hard to fight. *sobbing* Because, first you are going to lose everything what you have. Like, I go very, you know, like, well with my parents. But as soon as I mention about LGBT, they're always, like, very aggressive. Of course, they will not do anything to me, they will never hurt me, but still so hard that you know yourself— and they don't.

It also appears that the respondents adjust themselves according to social expectations, which has as effect that their way of life does not originate in themselves but in factors external to them:

> **Respondent 4:** I'm still finding the perfect middle of it, like, the opposite of what they [the family] wanted and, just, what I want myself.

In some cases, this adaptation is partly motivated by the respondents' view that they have a responsibility for others' interests. For example:

> **Respondent 5:** I am open to my sister, but I'm not out with my parents or my grandmother. Because, she's 91 and I would probably kill her if I did that.

> **Respondent 7:** I feel very judged in Georgia. Plus, the fact that I cannot be very free here, because my mom's here. And I don't want to do anything that I know would make her upset.

Moreover, it appears that some of the respondents adapt their preferences according to the prevailing circumstances (cf. Elster, 1983). For one respondent, it was difficult to imagine a different way of life in which he was openly gay, as that imagination by necessity involved that he would be excluded from important social contexts. Thus, he prefers to be inauthentic rather than to be excluded:

> **Respondent 6:** How I want to live? Actually, I'm living how I want to live. Yeah. Because, like, yeah, I can't, because I'm used to, like, kind of be fake. And it's, like, my super-power. So, I can, like, easily go in any situation and be one of them.

This is, of course, how most people live; few individuals are completely unaffected by external influences. However, the expectations in question lead to the oppression of sexual orientation, which is one particular instance that non-LGBT individuals are not affected in.

One respondent reports of a particularly noteworthy way of being excluded from society. Consider her description of what it is like for her to attend weddings:

> **Respondent 5:** I think that weddings are a big reminder of, like, my sexuality. Like, not being, like, not helping me being included in the society. Because, whenever I go to a friend's or a relative's wedding, it's, sort of, a reminder that, you know, in this society my relationship, no matter how long it is or how, sort of, committed it is, or whatever, will never be valid.

Her description reveals that there is at least one institution—here understood as an established social regularity—in society, i.e., weddings, that she does not take part in. It is not for her. She lacks a deep and personal connection to at least one of the social activities with which she is occupied, or does not experience that connection as real, and is therefore alienated from that activity. That makes her relationship to at least one social institution inauthentic.

Overall, the respondents report of negative influences in how they live, in terms of critical and informed self-reflection and self-origin. Their way of life is partly contingent on external influences relating to their sexual orientation, and some report of inauthentic relationships to different domains in society. Influences on authenticity can be ordered accordingly:

Table 2: Examples of influences on authenticity

	Active	**Passive**
Positive	Explicit statements of acceptance.	–
Negative	Family members react aggressively to LGBT issues.	Social and political institutions are not LGBT inclusive.

5.2. Individuality

There are various theories of individuality, which involve philosophical problems such as how individuality should be understood and protected, and what its limits are in consideration of what is due or owed to others (see, e.g., Brennan, 2005; Forbes, 2015 [1990]; Kateb, 1989a). In this study, I have mainly followed John Stuart Mill's construction of the notion. Mill wrote (Mill, 1977 [1859], p. 266):

> It is not by wearing down into uniformity all that is individual in themselves, but by cultivating it and calling it forth, within the limits imposed by the rights and interests of others, that human beings become a noble and beautiful object of contemplation […] There is a greater fulness of life about his own existence, and when there is more life in the units there is more in the mass

which is composed of them. […] Even despotism does not produce its worst effects, so long as individuality exists under it; and whatever crushes individuality is despotism, by whatever name it may be called.

On John Rawls's interpretation of Mill's account, individuality is comprised of two components. The first is "the Greek ideal of self-development of our various natural powers, including the development and exercise of our higher faculties" (Rawls, 2008, p. 308). The second is "the Christian ideal of self-government," which includes "the recognition of the limits on our conduct imposed by the basic rights of justice" (p. 309). In addition to this, a fully developed individuality may involve certain phenomenological experiences. As George Kateb writes, individuality is associated with "a sense of life" (Kateb, 1989a, p. 188).

Authenticity and individuality are distinct notions; one can lead a real but incomplete life, which means that one has authenticity but not individuality. There are various examples of this in the respondents' reports. For instance, some of the respondents live together with their same-sex partners with whom they have authentic romantic relationships. However, due to social influences, they are prevented from displaying or enacting their relationships in public. They cannot show affection towards each other in front of strangers or need to keep their romantic relationships secret to their families and co-workers, and so on. This means that they have (some) authenticity but cannot (fully) express their individuality.

Taken together, individuality (1) involves being complete or leading a complete life, (2) is opposed to conformity and submission, and (3) entails the phenomenological experience of being complete and alive. The respondents report that negative influences restrain them from expressing and enacting their individuality in their aesthetic appearance:

> **Respondent 1:** I wanted all the different piercings etcetera, but I did not do it because I prefer to stay safe.

In what they talk about, how, and with whom:

> **Respondent 2:** … my family does not know. I have not came out to them. But I'm sure if I do, I will never be able to talk to them about this. And I lose, I don't know, one of the things that makes me happy, to be with them, probably. So, I rather just be quiet.

In showing intimate affection to their partners:

> **Respondent 3:** I don't want my pupils to know about my orientation, or I don't want my pupils' parents to know about it, because Georgia is a very traditional country and if they found out that I am a different orientation, I think that they would take their children from me. […] I think that if I lived in another country, which won't be as traditional as my country, I think that I would be free. Because I could kiss my girl in the street, and I won't be afraid that someone is looking at me…

And in their social relationships:

> **Respondent 5:** … my, back then, best friend's mother found out that I was dating a woman. And there was an incident of blackmail in that situation, that she would tell

> my parents if my best friend and I continued to be friends […] *Interviewer: What happened to that relationship with your friend?* We're… We stopped being friends. We're no longer friends.

Overall, the respondents report that they, or their lives, are incomplete in their social relationships and in how they act and behave, that they are subject to conformity and submission, and lack the phenomenological experience of being fully complete and alive in matters relating to their sexual orientation.

Table 3: Examples of influences on individuality

	Active	**Passive**
Positive	–	–
Negative	Friend's mother breaks up a friendship.	Expectations of certain behavior and appearances.

5.3. Singularity

Authenticity and individuality concern desires, actions, and ways of life. Singularity is here taken to denote the tendency to treat others, or be treated, as *someone* and not as a member of some social group a bearer of some social role or function (cf. Kateb, 2003, p. 276). For instance, singularity is negatively affected if someone is socially acknowledged first as a homosexual and only secondly, if at all, as a unique person. Singularity builds from the recognition that each individual has their own "inner reality" which is worthy of respect. Amihud Gilead writes (pp. 338–9):

> Each of us is a person consisting of an inner, private, psychical reality, accessible only to that person and inaccessible from without. […] No person can see the world through the eyes of another. Watching the image of myself in the mirror, I cannot see myself as other people see me. No person can think another's thoughts, nor can he or she have his or her feelings, and so on. These are only some indications of the singularity of each person.

Immanuel Kant argued that duty obliges us to treat the *humanity* in persons as an end in itself (Kant, 1785, p. 80; 4:429). This appears to be a call to respect the singularity of human beings (cf. Hill, 1980). Contrary to authenticity and individuality, singularity is a social and political *status*. It is respected only if each individual is considered as a unique being worthy of a certain moral recognition.

Thus, singularity is categorically distinct from authenticity and individuality. For instance, suppose that a very courageous person has a real same-sex relationship which they fully enact in public. The person has both authenticity and individuality. When the person's colleagues learn about the person's sexual orientation, they stop treating them based on their characteristics and actions and instead begin assigning properties to them that they believe all homosexuals share. For instance, they may begin to make assumptions about the person's political

preferences or stop treating them with deserved respect (based on the homophobic belief that homosexuals are of lesser value, or similar). The person, in this case, has authenticity and individuality, but does not enjoy the moral status granted by singularity.

Taken together, singularity involves (1) being treated as a person and not as a member of some social group or as a bearer of some social role or function, and (2) that one's unique perspective of the world, or one's humanity, is acknowledged. The respondents report that their singularity is not being respected. For instance, some describe that their sexual orientation risks overshadowing their personal qualities:

> **Respondent 4:** Even with my friends, I had to tell them that I don't mind that people know, but I don't want people to say, "oh, I have a lesbian friend, and then she does this." No, "I am a friend, and I'm doing this, and by the way I am lesbian."

One respondent describes her moral standing in society as at least partly contingent on her not being openly queer. She would not be *someone* if she was out:

> **Respondent 5:** When it comes to my queerness, I definitely am not part of the society, and I know that if I went out there and I yelled that I was gay I probably would get a stone in my head.

One respondent describes their co-workers in a way that appears to reveal that the respondent's singularity is not fully recognized:

> **Respondent 8:** … there are ideas which they just can't understand because of their perspective on the world, which lacks the experience or the knowledge, or the desire to listen to a queer experience or to listen to someone who actually has that experience. So, I often time, I'm someone who is not understood…

Several respondents also describe the political situation in Georgia in terms related to singularity. They appear to share the impression that LGBT issues are instrumentalized in politics. Whenever such issues are mentioned (and it is not in negative terms), it is because politicians, groups, and individuals attempt to use the LGBT community to further their own causes. The respondents seem to be of the view that there is no genuine political concern for LGBT persons or their interests in the country. One respondent explains:

> **Respondent 2:** … if they do talk about [LGBT issues] it's just like, for like, voters. And they are almost, like, always against it if they say something. They just want somebody to vote for them, that's all. They use that trick always. Every year of votes, is us, get, like, used. Our name. That's all.

Table 4: Examples of influences on singularity

	Active	**Passive**
Positive	–	–
Negative	Political instrumentalization of LGBT issues.	Lack of understanding and empathy.

Taken together, most or all respondents share the experience that their singularity is not fully recognized, at least for some domains or on some occasions.

6. Lessons learned

Returning to the research questions from the introductory section, it appears that the challenge to individualist values posed by constraining norms can be conceptualized in greater detail than what has previously been acknowledged by philosophers. LGBT individuals experience that the prevailing social and political norms form negative and positive influences on their authenticity, individuality, and singularity both actively and passively. Thus, philosophers have overlooked important conceptual ambiguities, distinctions, aspects, and nuances in this context. Yet, some established philosophical concepts and theories have shown fruitful for analyses of value conflicts in this context.

The study seems to bring with it a number of lessons for the philosophy of individualism. Philosophers may have conceptualized values and value conflicts relating to individualism and non-individualism too broadly. The distinctions between active, passive, positive, and negative influences are intuitive, but have—to the best of my knowledge—been overlooked in conceptual and argumentative analyses of how individuals are subject to constraining social influences. The study shows that there is value to the distinctions. Among other things, it lends support to the hypothesis that there is a lack of real positive influences in this context. Philosophers have analyzed negative influences, such as the value of not being forced into adopting a way of life that one does not identify with. The study should show that they have reason to consider the value of positive influences and analyze those influences on their own grounds. Such studies may require novel conceptual and argumentative analyses to gain insight into which values are at stake, and which value conflicts should be expected when individualism meets non-individualism.

Moreover, the distinctions between authenticity, individuality, and singularity have—also to the best of my knowledge—been blurred in philosophical analyses. The three notions correspond to three separate objects targeted by social and political influences, and the differences between them have not been appropriately acknowledged. For clarity, philosophers should treat them separately. Moreover, the discussion should show that the three objects can be fitted into a comprehensive and coherent system of thought. Taken separately, they may explain some reason why individualism is desirable (in some domain). However, taken together, they work to strengthen each other normatively, in the sense that they form a conceptual framework with greater explanatory power than the sum of the separate objects. Philosophers have reason to further analyze the three notions and how they are affected by constraining social norms and political institutions.

Finally, the study indicates that some philosophical analyses on the topic of individualism appear to be on track. However, considering the insights gained from the analysis, it now appears that there is a real possibility for empirically grounded philosophical analyses of concepts central to individualism. The study shows that philosophers may have underemphasized some of the values at stake in this context, but also that much existing philosophy is relevant to a deep understanding of social influences on authenticity, individuality, and singularity.

Philosophers have not drifted (too far) away in their conceptual and argumentative analyses of individualist values, but in light of this study it seems that the way forward for future analyses has been cleared; philosophers should find guidance as to where they should take their next steps in their analyses of values pertaining to the relations between individualism, LGBT issues, and constraining social norms.

Social scientists should find the conceptual framework developed throughout this article useful for further studies. Qualitative investigations can be designed in accordance with the system of distinctions introduced here. However, perhaps more importantly, the various claims in the article about the relationships between authenticity, individuality, singularity, and social influences may render hypotheses suitable for hypothetico-deductive and other quantitative studies. We may have a lot to learn about how, more precisely, LGBT individuals are influenced by constraining social norms. The conceptual framework developed here may be of guidance for social scientists interested in these matters.

Finally, turning to the big picture, the study should be able to contribute to a more overarching normative agenda to further the interests of LGBT individuals in non-individualist cultures. It does not answer how to accomplish harmonization of domestic and international legal frameworks, how to raise local awareness of LGBT issues, or how to promote the visibility and acceptance of LGBT persons and lifestyles, or many other similar questions. However, it contributes to a practical understanding of how the conflicts between individualist and conservative or traditional values are actualized in one local context. This should motivate policymakers to incorporate the conceptual framework developed here in their agendas and use it to articulate the values they want to promote and defend.

Compliance with ethical standards

Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Disclosure of interest

There are no potential conflicts of interests involved with this study.

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Jesper Ahlin Marceta holds a postdoctoral research position at the Faculty of Law of Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University (Georgia). He earned his PhD in philosophy at the Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm (Sweden). His main research interests are in applied ethics and political philosophy, with particular focus on individualism and liberal theories of personal autonomy. The author's website: www.jahlinmarceta.com