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To cite this article: Myrto Dagkouli-Kyriakoglou (2022) ‘When housing is provided, but you have only the closet’. Sexual orientation and family housing support in Athens, Greece, Social & Cultural Geography, 23:9, 1257-1274, DOI: 10.1080/14649365.2021.1910989

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2021.1910989

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Published online: 07 Apr 2021.

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‘When housing is provided, but you have only the closet’. Sexual orientation and family housing support in Athens, Greece

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ABSTRACT
This article explores the impact of sexual orientation on the housing practices of individuals self-identified as LGB+ in Athens, Greece. In Greece, welfare state was always inadequate to cover people’s social needs. On the contrary, the family proved to be resilient as a welfare agent covering also the housing needs of its members by employing related strategies. The support comes ‘with strings attached’, and this includes parents’ demands and wishes upon the lifestyle of the dependent children. These demands have strong gender and sexual connotations imposing a heteronormative life trajectory, which may clash with the desires of LGB+ family members. In order for them to continue receiving support they are ‘pushed’ to employ strategies regarding their ‘coming out’ or sexual identity’s concealment process. In this paper, 16 semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with a double focus: a. the housing pathway of the respondents, and b. the strategic decision of coming out or staying in the closet to benefit from the family welfare.

‘Cuando te dan alojamiento, pero solo tienes el closet’. Orientación sexual y apoyo a la vivienda familiar en Atenas, Grecia

RESUMEN
Este artículo explora el impacto de la orientación sexual en las prácticas de vivienda de personas autoidentificadas como LGB+ en Atenas, Grecia. En Grecia, el estado de bienestar siempre fue inadecuado para cubrir las necesidades sociales de las personas. Por el contrario, la familia demostró ser resiliente como agente de bienestar cubriendo también las necesidades de vivienda de sus miembros mediante el empleo de estrategias relacionadas. El apoyo viene ‘con condiciones’, y esto incluye las demandas y deseos de los padres sobre el estilo de vida de los hijos dependentes. Estas demandas tienen fuertes connotaciones sexuales y de género que imponen una trayectoria de vida heteronormativa, que puede chocar con los deseos de los miembros de la familia LGB.
Introduction

In Greece people usually rely on family and relatives for housing support. ‘Familistic welfare capitalism’, the welfare type that is attributed to Greece, is characterized by the eminent role played by the family in most activities that, elsewhere, are managed by the market, such as the real estate sector (Papadopoulos & Roumpakis, 2013). The social services provided by the state are merely complementary to family welfare. The only assumed viable solution to survive is a familial strategy to collectively ‘gather odds and ends of income wherever they can find them’ (Trifiletti, 1999, 53). Therefore, Greek welfare system is safeguarded by a strong commitment to maintaining the traditional family unit, preserving the structure of private patriarchal relationships and sustaining the strong division between public and private spheres. Accordingly, family housing support does not come without obligations, and each generation has to negotiate between traditional and modern duties within the family arena (Paxson, 2004).

The inter-generational social contracts that are bound with the support strengthen and extend the family control and in that way the beneficiaries are accountable for their actions. People who do not comply with the family’s imaginary for a prescribed life
trajectory may face implications on their housing provision. These imaginaries follow gender norms and heterosexuality producing homophobia as well as sexism. However, this does not mean that Greek families are uniform and static; they can be in different degrees neglecting, open-minded or supportive to LGB+ family members or grow into that progressively. The choice to come out or not seems to be strategic for LGB+ in this cultural context in order to secure the housing opportunities that are provided to them by their families. However, even when they are choosing to come out to their families they may experience restrictions in personal life as long as they are receiving housing support.

The preponderance of research on inter-generational housing support tends not to address or even acknowledge, sexual orientation as a factor that shapes a person’s housing experience (e.g., Micheli & Rosina, 2010; Balabanidis et al., 2013; Minguez, 2015; Serracant, 2015; Druta & Ronald, 2017). Simultaneously, the coverage of the housing difficulties and domesticity of LGB+ people, especially in the Southern Europe, at least that in the English language, remains limited (Di Feliciantonio, 2015; 2016; Gusmano, 2018). The main countries that have conducted considerable research about the housing conditions of the LGB+ community are remarkably limited. More precisely, for Australia (e.g., Gorman-Murray, 2006a, 2006b, 2008a, 2008b; 2015) where the focus is on the domesticities of LGBTQ+ as well as the positive responses from the family towards the coming out of their LGBTQ+ member whereas USA and UK scholarships focus on housing conditions especially for elderly (Addis et al., 2009; Adelman et al., 2006; Gratwick et al., 2014) and minors with a specific focus on homelessness (Castellanos, 2016; Hunter, 2008; Shelton & Bond, 2017). The above-mentioned scholarship regards mainly anglophone contexts distant from the Southern European where family support is the self-evident alternative of welfare state.

This paper contributes to housing studies by being situated in the intersection of the aforementioned debates of LGB+ housing experiences and the impact of inter-generational housing support on the dynamic process of coming out. The main hypothesis is that as family support in Greece is considered the main alternative for housing provision for young people and is safeguarded by heteronormative structures regarding both gender roles and sexual orientation, the beneficiaries self-identified as LGB+ may have to conceal parts of their lives that do not fit into them.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The first section constitutes a brief introduction to Greek family welfare, housing culture and crisis. Afterwards, the housing and urban visibility as well as the coming out process in relation to the geographical context is discussed. In the next section, the methodology behind the study resulted in this paper is described. Further, through research partners, housing biographies, the empirical section initially focuses on the impact of non-conventional identities on LGB+ people’s housing practices and on the different kinds of account of living ‘in the closet’. Finally, in the discussion/conclusion section the outcomes are analysed as well as the need for more intersectional and inclusive housing research.

Greek family welfare and housing

‘[…] the only truly poor person is one who has no family.’ (Moreno & Mari-Klose, 2013, 495)

Esping-Andersen’s in 1990 failed to include Greece as well as other two Southern European (hereafter SE) countries, namely Spain and Portugal in his typology. However,
following his typology since the beginning of 1990s other scholars debated the existence of a distinctive type of welfare for the four southern European countries (Leibfried, 1992; Petmesidou, 1996; Castles & Ferrera, 1996; Ferrera, 1996, Andreotti et al. 2001). The discussion also moved to family models and care regimes (Naldini & Jurado, 1997, Trifiletti, 1999) that could result to stronger similarities between these countries. Also, while Esping-Andersen (1999) and, Katrougalos and Lazaridis (2003) presume the SE countries as a subcategory of the conservative welfare regime typical of a greater degree of familialism and inefficiency of the social protection system, other scholars propose a distinctive model. Ferrera (1996), in particular, posits that Greece, Spain, Italy and Portugal belong to a Southern European model or ‘South European welfare world’ according to Andreotti et al. (2001), that is determined by similar politico-institutional, socioeconomic factors and a particular path to modernization. Moreover, Trifiletti (1999) groups the same countries in the Mediterranean welfare regime. The main structure of this microeconomy is the family and there has always been the need for some form of indirect support from the state or the extended family in order to ensure survival. The social security schemes, even though insufficient alone, in combination with other family incomes and allowances can achieve a ‘synthesis of breadcrumbs’ (Trifiletti, 1999). Through this synthesis, the immediate and extended family members are supported.

Another way to describe the welfare regime in Greece is ‘familialism by default’ where ‘there are neither publicly provided alternatives to, nor support for family care’ (Saraceno & Keck, 2010, 676). This is evident in the extremely low coverage of residential provision and care services by the state. One could argue that the Greek welfare state was never active enough to cover the needs of its citizens (Petmesidou, 2013). To this day there is no developed, cohesive social housing policy, as the state limits its provision for shelter only to extreme cases of homelessness (Balabanidis et al., 2013; Siatitsa, 2014). Housing policies in Greece were mainly indirect economic indicators that aimed to the self-regulation of housing needs through the support of the family and kin, with a focus on homeownership (Allen et al., 2004; Leontidou, 1990; Mantouvalou, 1985).

Greeks tend to employ some familialistic2 practices in relation to housing, such as late emancipation from the parental home, intergenerational co-residence and residential spatial proximity to the members of the same extended family (Ferrera, 2010). In fact, providing and maintaining a safe and decent environment in order to accommodate the family members is one of the top concerns in the Southern European region (Knight & Ch., 2016) that are relieved by intergenerational micro-solidarities (Di Feliciantonio & Gadelha, 2016; Moreno & Mari-Klose, 2013). Family housing support is usually self-evident for younger – and not only – family members in connection to the absent welfare state and the precarious local labour market. However, there are also variations of the housing strategies that are linked with the ability of family to support its members or the capability/will of the members to be autonomous.

The above mechanism is also safeguarded by homeownership, which was promoted or assisted by the state throughout the history of post-war Greece (after 1949) while urban home property constituted a good, stable and secure investment in light of the precarious financial climate (Leontidou, 1990). The house could be used as accommodation or a source of income, in combination with an absent welfare state (Allen et al., 2004; Gentile, 2016; Minguez, 2016). This practice depended greatly on family savings and wealth, in connection with an underdeveloped local mortgage market and a dismantled
rental sector (Poggio, 2008). However, access to homeownership has been stratified unevenly across the generations, penalizing those who originate from families in the lower social strata (Forrest & Yip, 2012; Micheli & Rosina, 2010; Moreno & Mari-Klose, 2013; Ronald & Ch., 2018).

Another common practice is extended intergenerational cohabitation stay or returns to the parental home that can be justified by the poor performance of the local labour market, the absence of welfare support for housing, the limited availability of high-quality and affordable rented housing and the cultural norm of relying on the family (Micheli & Rosina, 2010; Serracant, 2015). This practice is a cross-class phenomenon in Southern Europe, widely socially accepted. Young Greek population in particular ‘fly away from the nest’ in an older age than in most of the European countries, over 30 years for men and over 27 years for women (EUROSTAT, 2015). Considering the above, many southern Europeans are supported by a ‘cushion’ of intergenerational solidarity and family welfare (Serracant, 2015) resembling a ‘substitute for the limitations of state intervention’ (Martin, 1996, 31). Extended intergenerational cohabitation has intensified also during the crisis as a copying practice (Marques et al., 2014).

Crisis and austerity measures reorganized housing and everyday life in Greece. The European Central Bank, the European Commission and the International Monetary Fund (also known as the Troika) dictated austerity measures that constituted the preconditions of the three bailout packages received by Greece during the global financial crisis (Papadopoulos & Roumpakis, 2013). The austerity measures imposed deep cuts in the total public expenditure, which impacted the formation of households and the related housing strategies that families adopt to face the challenges (Costa Pinto & Guerra, 2013; Naldini & Jurado, 2013; Serracant, 2015). Also, since 2012, Greece has had some of the highest unemployment rates among OECD countries at all educational levels, and today it has the second highest percentage of unemployment of the total labour force among them (19.5%) while the percentage of youth unemployment is up to 43.6% (OECD, 2019). At the same time, the government reduced unemployment benefits and the criteria to receive them became stricter (Zambarloukou, 2015).

According to this research, the crisis does not appear directly in the housing pathways of the research partners, as families draft strategic plans to support their members in their housing pathway with any available means prioritizing the need to provide direct means for access to homeownership (Matos et al., 2015). These housing strategies are usually followed also by the younger members as they presume them as the only alternatives to secure a house, trapped in a situation between a non-existent state support and labour market problems.

**Housing and urban visibility of LGB+ in Greece**

The family home, in Greece, is considered as the base of the asymmetrical heteropatriarchal family, which has certain heterosexual and gender relations and imposes expectations and behaviours (Valentine, 1993). The family home is where individuals’ identities and collective family identities are expressed as well as where a continuous renegotiation across generations about them is hosted (Valentine et al., 2003). Therefore, LGB+ people may feel they should choose strategically to suppress, in some cases, their non-normative sexuality and life plans while they are still dependent on their families. In other words, the
contemporary family home formed in Greece may ‘exclude’ LGB+ members because of the socio-sexual power relations that are reproduced.

Domestic factors, especially political, economic and religious ones, delay the policy reforms that Greece should have undertaken to comply with EU regulations against sexual discrimination (Ayoub, 2015). The Orthodox Church, in particular, has retained its considerable influence on society and promoted, like the dominant political ideology, the heterosexual family as the core structure of society (Allen et al., 2004; Trihas, 2018). Within this view, other forms of family outside of the heteronormative model are assumed to threaten this sensitive equilibrium.

At the same time, as the crisis in Greece continues to evolve, the ‘fascisation’ of society and the power of Golden Dawn, the Greek neo-Nazi party, are strengthening. This political formation has been part of the parliament between 2012 and 2019, promoting homophobia and sexism, and praising heteronormativity while calling non-heteronormative people the ‘shame of the nation’ (Eleftheriadis, 2015). As Eleftheriadis (ibid, p. 1037) explained, ‘Austerity reinforces gender binaries and heteronormative domination in all aspects of social life’, and this has multiple implications in the daily life of LGB+ individuals in Greece.

Athens, Thessaloniki (the two biggest urban centres in Greece) and the Greek islands are included in the geographies of ‘open’ homosexuality for both the Greek and international LGBTQ+ community (Trihas, 2018). However, Athens is considered the Greek city with most visible presence of a LGBTQ+ population, being the first to have held a Pride parade in 2005. However, even though the Greek state has evolved towards recognizing homosexual rights (especially during the Syriza-Anel government), the Greek society demonstrates a prevailing conservative structure and the backlash of accepting queer sexualities (ibid.). There are also frequent incidents of homophobia (e.g., Mark, 2019).

The urban geography of homosexualities in Athens, looks fixed since 1990s, highlighting certain central neighbourhoods as gay friendly especially for commercial and nightlife activities (Papanikolaou, 2014). However, these geographies are not resulting in a clear favoured housing location but mainly to geographical preference for social and recreational use. Therefore, LGBTQ+ should in some cases suppress their sexual identities in order to gain passability and be secure from homophobic reactions in public and private places in Athens.

**Coming Out** under construction in Greece

In the process of ‘coming out’, the geographical attribute is crucial, given that in different contexts, various cultural features affect the response to and integration of the group (e.g., Bell & Valentine, 1995; Di Feliciantonio & Gadelha, 2016; Gorman-Murray, 2007, 2009; Lewis, 2012, 2013; Nash & Gorman-Murray, 2014). This process is always under construction and needs to be framed relationally.

The coming out experience is established as critical during which an LGB+ individual is subjected to disclosure and acceptance or rejection and concealment of their sexual identities, which can lead to negative emotional and social responses (Gorman-Murray, 2008a; Suen, 2015; Valentine et al., 2003). During this procedure, people dynamically negotiate new balances in their households, family/kinship and social circles, which may impact the financial and emotional support they are receiving (Valentine et al., 2003).
Coming out is a process that occurs repeatedly and is restated through performance (Butler, 1993). The process is typically irreversible, as the member’s sexual identity is declared as differed from the perceived one contradicting all or most of the ideas that the parents and other relatives had established for them. Accordingly, the housing practices of LGB+ people can be impacted by their disclosure to their family when housing is provided. In Greece, in particular, young adults tend to cohabitate longer with their parents, as it is already mentioned, which means they are monitored and dependent on their family for longer than their Northern European counterparts.

The above cultural practices, in combination with the rising cost of living, the significant decrease in income and the general socio-economic precariousness, ‘dictate’ LGB+ individuals to remain silent at least to their family in order to continue enjoying housing support if they believe that coming out will cause them losing some material and psychological benefits. They choose in a lot of cases to conform to the role of the heteronormative son or daughter experiencing a secret and separate social and sexual reality. These roles also bear the imaginaries of gender social roles that they have to fulfil as members of the asymmetrical heteropatriarchal family and the kinship.

In this work, two main concepts are considered for the process of ‘coming out’; first the conceptualization of Mosher (2001) that LGB+ people can choose to come out to some people and not to others which refers to the fact that Greek LGB+ may select strategically to hide their sexual orientation only to their parents and some relatives involved in housing provision. Secondly, the adaptation of the semiotic square of Greimas (1970) from Gusmano (2018) about the categorization of sexual stigma management which can enable a further acknowledgement of LGB+ coping strategies. According to this, a person can take a decision upon or have to accept the stigma associated with their identities, feelings, and attractions (ibid.).

Namely, each LGB+ can choose to come out or stay closeted when they decide to and/or they have to face outing from their environment or not being accepted as queer subjectivities. In the cases explored here there are people who came out (8 participants) and people who remain still closeted (8 participants) towards their parents, independently from their age. However, even though half of them disclosed their identities, families do not accept them as queer subjectivities and continue to consider them as (dynamically) heterosexual or monogamous (this is characterized as compulsory invisibility). In the last category, the responses of the parents vary in tension and is also relative to time that the family accepts the LGB+ identity. Thus, both people ‘in the closet’ and ‘out of the closet’ may share restrictions that resembles the ‘closet’ when it comes to housing experiences as long as they are supported by the parents.

It is important to consider that LGB+ do not carry only a singular social identity that of sexual orientation but there are intersecting oppressions of imposed imaginaries according to gender, class, ethnicity, citizenship etc. (Daley et al., 2007). In particular, the perceived gender of the LGB+ subjectivity has further implications in their personal and housing life as crucial as their assumed sexual orientation.

**Methodology and ethics**

In-depth analysis of the LGB+ community and their housing and coming-out practices was conducted vis-a-vis family support or obstacles facing them. The main research
method was recorded, in-depth semi-structured, biographical interviews. The interviews were practised based on an adaptation of biographical interviewing; an initial opening description of the research subject and an open research question were employed to capture the interviewee’s housing pathways in connection with the family housing strategies related to them. The primary question regarded the housing pathway in relation to the family housing support while the second focus of the biographical narration was the ‘coming out’ process to the family or the process of concealment of their sexual orientation. According to this, a question was asked if they encountered any housing difficulty, across their housing pathway as a result of disclosing, or strategically not, their sexuality. The housing pathway approach as a core was selected in order to analyse the sequence of the housing practices of the individual as part of/as a household and its interactions (Clapham, 2002, 2005). This approach underlines the methodological importance of studying the ‘life-course’ as it aims to dynamically link the family and the household over time (Calvert, 2010).

Interviewees were recruited through multiple initial contacts from the authors’ social circle and then invited additional participants through snowballing. The 16 interviewees ranged from 25 to 55 years in age, 11 under the age of 35 and 5 over that age, residents of Athens, Greece. All the interviewees self-identified as LGB+ at the time of the interview. The interviews were conducted in person in Greek (mother language of both parties), and the quotes displayed in this paper are products of the author’s effort for exact translation. All research partners are of Greek nationality and their social background was wide-ranging in terms of socio-economic classes, educational background and working statuses. They almost all can be regarded as ‘white, middle class’. Concerning class, all around Europe, social class is associated with homeownership but in Greece homeownership is widely distributed in all social classes without this indicating that there are no conditions of housing deprivation (Filandri & Olagnero, 2014). Therefore, even though the participants are originated from lower-middle, middle- and middle-high-class families, their own class construction could be considered lower-middle and middle class at the moment of the research.

[Table 1 below]

Concerning the ethics of this research, all the information obtained in the project will never be publicly disclosed in any way that may allow for identification of the participants. The quotes are accompanied by pseudonym, age, status of coming out (open or closeted) and sexual orientation where appropriate. The attribute ‘closeted’ here refers to situations where the person chose or was forced to hide his/her sexual orientation at least from one of the parents.

Table 1. summarizes the main characteristics of the research partners.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age of research partners (&lt;35 years old/&gt;35 years old)</th>
<th>Closeted</th>
<th>Disclosed</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of participants (&lt;35 years old/&gt;35 years old)</td>
<td>8 (6/2)</td>
<td>8 (5/3)</td>
<td>16 (11/5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently enjoying familial housing strategy</td>
<td>4 (3/1)</td>
<td>5 (3/2)</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently housing wise autonomous</td>
<td>4 (3/1)</td>
<td>3 (2/1)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supported by family to live by themselves at least once</td>
<td>8 (6/2)</td>
<td>7 (4/3)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Returning to the nest at least once</td>
<td>5 (3/2)</td>
<td>3 (3/0)</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with a partner</td>
<td>2 (2/0)</td>
<td>5 (2/3)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Family strategies in LGB+ housing pathway**

The provision of housing for all the family members is essential for Greek families and imposes the need for structuring family housing strategies. The LGB+ people in this research reported that were significantly supported by family strategies for housing. There seems to be no particular age at which intergenerational support ends. At least one incident of direct/indirect family support for housing was encountered in each collected life story.

To best highlight this process, the narrative of Anthimos (35, open) is introduced,

> We discussed [with the parents] where I was going to live, what I was going to do, and we decided to renovate it [the grandmother’s empty house]. My mother said to me, ‘We will renovate the house for you to stay’.

Anthimos as he returned from abroad was offered a housing solution. Also, as he was open about his sexual orientation, and his parents were supportive (gradually) they ended up granting the house for both him and his boyfriend to live together there.

However, also the parents who do not approve tend to provide alternative housing solutions. As Villi (lesbian, 25, open) explains, ‘This was the reason that they found a place for me [and paid the rent]’, referring to the fact that her father rented a house for her so that she can reside outside of the paternal house and not ‘impact’ her younger sister with her personal life.

In other cases, the support comes financially in the form of direct or indirect housing support. In the first case, parents offer some amount of money that is needed for a person to acquire a house or to cover the rent expenses. Meanwhile, indirect housing support can also be in the form of ‘pocket money’ from the family. Even though it is not meant for the payment of rent, it is still a certain financial income that eases one’s household difficulties.

Another way by which a family can support its members is inter-generational cohabitation. In many of the stories, the participants returned to their family homes after being away for a period of time usually by ‘staying in the closet’ or agreeing on eliminating their personal life inside the house.

Nevertheless, other relatives can also provide direct support by offering cohabitation, granting houses and/or financially. These relatives usually are older relatives and especially grandparents who are the most common group of relatives to offer housing support after the parents. Nevertheless, there are also incidents where this support is disturbed by the disapproval of the sexual identity of the LGB+ person.

**Impact of sexuality on housing**

A few stories were collected about the sexual orientation impact on housing practices which concerned the violent disruption of their housing situation that is linked with the disclosure of their sexuality while they were accepting housing support from their parents. Villi (lesbian, 25, open), to start with, experienced a ‘double impact’ on her housing pathway because of her sexual orientation. In her own words,

> It [her sexual orientation] impacted me. I think that one reason that my mother left and found a job away from Athens [where they were living together] was my sexual orientation, because
we did not get along after she found out about me, […] and essentially, she did it to punish me, to have me live with my father [they were divorced].

After the change of household, she faced another challenge from her father who was living with his new family and to whom she was not directly disclosed,

My father […] has a new family, and because I presume that they could listen to conversations on the phone, and they may not like all of this, and because I have a younger sibling. […] They may have worried that … Yes … I do not know … I have never expressed all of this, so I cannot be certain, but I believe that basically, this was the reason that they found me a house.

So, as her father was afraid that she is going to ‘impact’ her younger sister, she experienced a second (supported) displacement in a short period because of her sexual orientation.

Another consequence can be the termination of financial support and accordingly, housing coverage. Alex’s (gay, 27, closeted) narrates the difficulties he encountered after his sibling, who he and their father was supporting him financially to rent a house in Athens, found out by accident about his personal life,

When my brother found out, he threw that back at me, sadly, saying, ‘Me and dad are struggling to support you financially and’, He didn’t express it clearly, but maybe, like, he implied that ‘You make us feel ashamed’. […] If this [sudden disclosure] hadn’t occurred, he may have supported me financially a bit more in a way.

Some respondents had to abandon their family homes to claim their identities, or were indirectly pushed to leave. When Liza (lesbian, 45, open) was asked to elaborate about her situation, she reported this episode,

[…] Because of my sexual orientation, I encountered some … one really peculiar act from my mother—blackmailing, let’s say; it’s like saying ‘me or your girlfriend’. But because I was really bonded with my mother, I was a ‘mama’s girl’, she thought I would back down and stay with her, but I did not back down, and then, I went away [moved out of the family house], in order to prove to my mother that this is me, I am like this and I do not do it to disturb anyone.

All in all, although there were no incidents resulting in homelessness among the research partners, but there were violent changes in the living arrangements of LGB+ people. This was a result of their coming out or indirect disclosure to the family when the relatives who supported them did not approve their personal life.

‘In the closet’

In order to continue receiving housing support, LGB+ people young and older, conceal their personal life or accept the imposed concealment from their family that ‘keeps them in the closet’. Staying in the closet brings about some general personal limitations that LGB+ are facing when they are enjoying housing solutions provided by the family. So, even though housing support is not interrupted because of their sexuality, is indeed depriving them.

‘You Need the House Certainly to Have a Social and Erotic Life’, Olga (42, closeted) who has enjoyed, in several periods of her life, family housing support but she always returned
to autonomous housing solution, highlights with the above quote the importance of appropriating one’s house especially when it concerns a social group who cannot express themselves freely everywhere outdoors. Housing support as it was mentioned already can be accompanied by a code of (heteronormative) behaviour, such as in the story of Liza (45, open) who after she was blackmailed to leave her maternal house, she was taken in for a short period by her partner’s mother. Her partner’s mother required her and her daughter to stay in the closet as long as they were staying there: ‘Her mother was really supportive. I stayed in her house […] I stayed until I found a house […] her mother knew but I shouldn’t know that she knows’. The disapproving mother supported both her daughter and her girlfriend (Liza) as long as they did not openly express their intimate relationship at home.

Many young people in Greece still live with their parents or in semi-dependent housing solutions provided by the family as they cannot afford a house by themselves or they prefer to save money for other activities. Given that same-sex partners are generally not widely accepted, LGB+ couples cannot enjoy quality time at their partners’ places when this is not independent. Aris (30, closeted), who is enjoying since his high school years a semi-dependent house granted to him upstairs of his parents’, commented on his housing situation as follows,

Let’s say, one day, I will find a guy that I will like and he will like me back and he will tell me ‘let’s go to your place’ and I am going to tell him ‘you know… I cannot…’ [. ] [Because a guy] to stay overnight there … […] it cannot be done. No way! […] if I find a guy, it will be a big obstacle that I cannot bring him there.

Also, LGB+ cannot always share family moments at home with their families in full disclosure. To make this limitation more understandable, Alex (gay, 27, closeted), who has not revealed his sexuality to his parents because his siblings and his mother – to whom she tried to come out – do not let him, is expressing his worry and sorrow as follows,

Sexuality does not necessarily define you as a person, but it is sad that people you love so much do not know you the way you would really want. That ‘this is my partner and not just a friend’. [. ] This is something that I have always had in mind—the issue of my parents [that they do not know], and it will always worry me. […] My parents will never know who I really am.

The right to participate full disclosure in family life inside family homes, can be reassuring and healing for people who face discrimination also in other domains in life. However, the ‘full membership’ has certain rules that cannot/should not be accepted by everyone.

Countryside as a closet

The geographical location of a home can impact the freedom of expressing oneself especially when it comes to LGB+ subjectivities. In particular, the countryside can suppress the freedom of LGB+ people, thereby representing a closeted place, whereas cities are regarded as places of ‘outness’ (Di Feliciantonio & Gadelha, 2016; Guaracino, 2007).

A home in a small city can provoke an obligation to suppress himself/herself, thus it may not be considered a place that can enjoy freely. Pavlos (38, closeted) lives in Athens in a house provided by his family. However, his parents still live in a small town in the
country side where he also grew up. He is explaining about the feelings of visiting his parental home:

It is something that I do not prefer. I go mostly for family holidays—Christmas, Easter—and some days during summer, and in general, I can say that I avoid it a bit even though I have loving friends there. [...] It is something that I do not find relaxing and relieving, and I do not imagine myself living here for a long period, at least now, when I am young and want to ‘live’ a bit.

A vacation house in the countryside is not always, at least presently, a safe place where LGB+ people can experience freely personal moments when there are family connections with these places. Most participants were at pains to emphasize that they could use their parents’ houses in small cities/towns as vacation destinations, but they have to conceal the identities of their partners if they wish to bring them there or not bringing them at all:

With a partner, I haven’t used it yet. Not because I don’t want to. With a girl, I would not be able to use it, except if I introduced her as a friend. [...] There are neighbors around. [...] I wouldn’t be free to do stuff if I went with my girlfriend. (Alexandra, 29, closeted)

It wouldn’t be possible for me to go, obviously not with my partner, no way. It is impossible. (Panos, 29, open)

However, there are also indirect acts of resistance of this marginalization from the countryside. An example of ‘queering the provincial context’ (Di Felicianonio & Gadelha, 2016, 1) is an online video of one of the research partners performing his drag persona appropriating his empty parental house in a small conservative countryside town. During the show, they reveal stories for closeted LGB+ locals without disclosing their identities but by stressing the hypocrisy of the strict and narrow-minded local community.

In most of the cases presented in the empirical analysis, people found ways to conceal or to negotiate their rights to their personal lives without losing their families’ support by suffering the restrictions and imposed aspirations. A strategy for LGB+ is not to reveal their sexual identity in order to enjoy a housing solution provided by the family without engaging in conflicts, drama or emotional extortion. However, this tactic limits their freedom of expression inside their homes as they are obliged to be limited ‘in the closet’. On the other hand, if they decide to disclose their sexuality, they can be either neglected or embraced by their families. However, the initial neglect is not per se static as it can be an initial response that gradually turns into acceptance from the family.

Acceptance accordingly does not coincide always with the end of restrictions in the personal life of the supported member highlighting that both coming out and closet are not fixed processes but are, instead, negotiated and reconstructed constantly. People that are open and supported by their families, can still face restrictions in their social and personal life while they are enjoying family housing solutions. So, closeted and disclosed people can both face restrictions and rules about their personal life according to imaginaries of gender roles and the assumed sexual orientation as long as they are receiving housing support by the family. This is also true for heteronormative people that accept housing support from their families (see Dagkouli-Kyriakoglou, 2018).
Based on the experiences of the research partners the following scheme of exemplary pathways was constructed, which synthesizes the main tendencies of their coming out negotiations in connection to family housing support.

[Picture 1 here]

Picture 1: The decision of ‘coming out’ impact in connection to family housing support. (With red letters are presented the situation where the person is impacted directly).

**Discussion and concluding thoughts**

In this paper, the void around the impact of sexuality on family housing support started being filled especially for the Southern European context, showing how LGB+ negotiate their identities in order to continue enjoying housing support from their family. Indeed, in the increasing academic literature on housing intergenerational support, the LGB+ subjectivities and the specific difficulties that they may encounter are barely ever considered.

The absence of state provision for housing, the scarcity and precariousness of employment opportunities and the increase in direct and indirect taxes caused by the austerity measures in Greece render the provision of housing mainly a family commitment, as people are unable to ensure housing arrangements by themselves. The family is highlighted as the main source of relief for its members during this socio-economic turbulence (Martin, 2015; Moreno & Mari-Klose, 2013; Naldini & Jurado, 2013). Those who succeeded in their housing strategies during previous, more affluent periods are now able to support their children to a certain extent. The rest, given the uneven stratification of access to homeownership across generations (Forrest & Yip, 2012), should struggle and accept precarious, unwanted housing solutions, or adopt alternative and radical ones (e.g., non-relatives cohabitation, squatting) that culturally are not so disperse.

The vicious circle of family housing strategies suggests that, in the absence of alternatives either by the state or the market, people usually rely on family support and accept housing solutions that come with inter-generational contracts of behaviours and prescribed gender roles. In case the personal life of the beneficiary is disapproved, he/she could either neglect it (and thus also neglect the identity that was attributed to him/her) or hide/conceal his/her identity/identities in order to continue benefiting from the support. The latter option where the people are ‘play(ing) with their identities to gain normative heterosexual privileges’ (Rodó-de-zárate, 2013, 8) is widespread among the participants in this study. In a way, with this strategy, as housing is constructed and home is achieved, they succeed in ‘queering the family home’ with the cost of hiding parts of or their entire personal lives. This may result in damages of their emotional and psychological well-being or, at least, in losing intimate personal and full disclosure family moments that every person has the right to experience. In that way, LGB+ achieve a home by ‘building’ a closet in it where they will remain, always, ‘under construction’ and negotiation.

The sexist homophobia\(^5\) that can be traced in family reactions and the preconditions of housing support is based on gendered stereotypes, attitudes, imaginaries. The sexual orientation of the young dependent members seems to be neglected or hidden under the gender aspirations imposed on them fuelled by expectations for a heteronormative life pathway that sustains the family welfare tradition which is of great importance for the socio-economic and political survival of the country. For the ones that do not fit or do not
wish to fulfil these imaginaries, welfare is limited to what the state is offering for ‘extreme cases’.

Through the support that Greek families strive to offer, they strengthen their control over the beneficiaries as family support creates or extends an intergenerational contract associated with obligations. Indicatively, people who accept support from their families are usually accountable to them when making personal life decisions. If we consider housing provision as a gift, we could stress that gift-giving serves as a generator of identity that the giver retains for the receiver (Schwartz, 1967). Correspondingly, the receiver accepts, together with the gift/housing support, a definition for himself/herself.

Therefore, with the acceptance of the housing gift, the giver retains certain expectations for the use of the house. Namely, the person who is granted a house may have to guide his/her life into the direction he/she is expected to, that is, a prescribed heteronormative, family/kinship-centric life with conventional milestones, such as marriage and childbirth, and lifelong devotion to the kinship’s obligations. Although, these can be also parts of life of an LGB+ person obviously, there is a link of normative sexual orientation and gender identity in these aspirations. The research partners and other social groups in Greece are trapped in this inter-generational contract.

This research, albeit restricted in time, place, with a sample that bears the privilege of being originated from the same country that resides and with families able to support them, demonstrates that the LGB+ community still carries a social stigma that can impact their experience in housing as it is strongly connected to family approval. Thus, for LGB+ to enjoy a housing solution, they may have to conceal parts of their identity. However, there were also families that were supportive towards their younger members, providing them with housing solution, most of which, progressed slowly over their initially negative reaction into supportive hubs of LGB+ individuals. However, even these hubs can still restrict the beneficiaries in their personal lives as they do also for heteronormative individuals.

Scholars of the field need to realize further intersectional, place-sensitive research to produce a better understanding of the complex ways by which sexuality and gender performativity, among others, define housing pathways and related difficulties in connection to socio-economic structures like the welfare state in order to inform policy. All in all, by studying the problems and struggles that bear on real people’s experiences, researchers as well as activists should progress together to generate a social and political impact on sexual and gender equality in connection to housing.

Notes

1. Respecting the significance of the interviewees in this research, they are referred to both as research partners and participants.
2. Here the term familialistic is preferred as it better explains ‘the centrality of family in the totality of the welfare capitalist regime in Southern Europe and not only its welfare and care aspects, which often in the literature are described as familialistic’ (Papadopoulos & Roumpakis, 2013, 220).
3. The Orthodox Church has aggressively opposed EU regulations concerning rights to non-normative sexual preferences (Ayoub 2015).
4. Coming out here is defined as the process of disclosure of the sexual orientation of oneself, moving away from the heteronormative expression of sexuality.
5. ‘Sexist homophobia differs from homophobic sexism in that the person who bullies employs sexist slurs rather than homophobic slurs to demean queer youth and as a weapon against (perceived) queer sexualities.’ (Daley et al., 2007, 18)

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers and Panos B. for their careful readings of this manuscript and their insightful comments. Also, I would like to dedicate this work to Zak Kostopoulos, queer activist and human rights defender, who was murdered in Greece of 2018.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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