

Jowita Wycisk

SUPPORTING IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN LESBIANS, GAYS, AND BISEXUALS BY
THE EXAMPLE OF THE WORKSHOP „COMING OUT AND THE LIFELINE”

Institute of Psychology
Adam Mickiewicz University, Poznań, Poland

LGB identity

narrative identity

prevention of mental disorders

Summary

The article presents a project of the workshop dedicated to lesbian, gay and bisexual adults. It is an affirmative workshop aimed at strengthening the integration of non-heterosexuality with the whole individual's identity. The identity formation of LGB people is a significant developmental process, its optimal course can be a protective factor against detrimental effects of the minority stress. The workshop is grounded on the theory of narrative identity, however, it also refers to stage models of sexual identity development.

The paper describes the theoretical assumptions and the plan of workshop. Its main part is an exercise based on drawing by participants their life lines, which is a widely used method in the art therapy. These drawings are to illustrate significant events associated with discovering and disclosing their sexual orientations. Then, participants tell their life-stories. The method is aimed at: 1) stimulation of narrative processing and autobiographical reasoning, processes enabling the inclusion of minority experiences in the personal life-stories; 2) identification of individual and social resources which can be used to cope with minority stress. Predicted and observed benefits and limitations, obtained during two editions of the workshop, have been discussed. The method can be used as a start-up of further meeting of a support group or a personal development group as well as a single strengthening experience which can complement the individual therapy

Introduction

As indicated by current studies, homosexual and bisexual individuals are more often diagnosed with symptoms of depression, anxiety disorders, and psychoactive substance abuse in comparison to the general population [1]. When explaining these results, researchers emphasize the role of minority stress. This concept highlights the significance of the sociocultural stigma attached to non-heterosexuality, which may potentially entail experiences of violence and exclusion motivated by heterosexism and lead to persistent states of anxiety, attempts to withhold one's identity, and intrapersonal conflicts associated with internalized homophobia. These chronic strains may result in depressed mood, anxiety, and social isolation, thus potentiating the risk of mental disorders among sexual minorities [2, 3].

For LGB¹ individuals, this sociocultural context forms the backdrop for the shaping of their minority sexual identity, which requires them to confront heterosexism that is both present in the external environment and internalized in the process of socialization. The formation of a positive self-image as a non-heterosexual and its integration with other important aspects of the self have a protective function against the negative impact of minority stress [4, 5]. A significant role in this process is also played by the disclosure of sexual orientation to others, which is usually a source of apprehension for the subject despite being associated with positive consequences [6, 7]. Support for the development of sexual identity in LGB individuals and for the process of self-disclosure can, therefore, be considered as contribution to the prevention of the consequences of minority stress, including depression, anxiety, and substance abuse.

Sexual orientation and sexual identity

Although sexual orientation and sexual identity are concepts that are sometimes used interchangeably, this paper treats them as two separate phenomena. Narrowly defined, sexual orientation is the direction of sexual drive toward women, men, or both [8] — it is the individual disposition to react with sexual arousal to representatives of a given gender and it is relatively stable. Independent of behaviours and self-definitions, this disposition is not subject to conscious control, and its origin has not been ultimately established [9], even though most results indicate that its causes are biological rather than social [8]. In turn, sexual identity is a type of self-definition, a verbalized category, and its meaning is determined by the cultural and historical context. This category refers to personal feelings and sexual fantasies or behaviours. It is one of the many possible labels selected by the individual and included in the self-identification. As such, it may be changeable and is not always compatible with the direction of the subject's sexual desires or behaviours [10].

With the depathologization of homosexuality, progressing since the 1970s, the concept of sexual identity has been gradually displacing the concept of sexual orientation. The latter is associated mostly with studies on the origin of homosexuality and criticized (especially by constructionists and queer theorists) for its essentialism and biological determinism [11]. Despite this criticism, both concepts may be useful for understanding individual identity development and explaining the sources of adaptation difficulties experienced by non-heterosexuals. Sexual identity can be understood as a subjective response, made by an individual living in a specific cultural and historical context, to the question posed by sexual impulses originating from the body, namely sexual orientation.

Sexual identity development in LGB individuals according to stage models

The term “coming out” is colloquially understood as a synonym for disclosing one's sexual identity to others. In psychology, this concept “describes a certain particular fragment of an LGB

¹ When writing about lesbians, gays and bisexuals, I use the abbreviation „LGB individuals”. In turn, in contexts related to NGOs or the minority culture created by these individuals, I use the acronym „LGBT” (T indicates transgender individuals), which is in accordance with the way in which these communities refer to themselves.

individual's experience which concerns the initial recognition of their non-heterosexual feelings and the beginning of the process of inscribing these feelings into their own individual identity" [12, p. 816]. Therefore, psychological literature treats coming out as an LGB-specific process of defining one's sexual identity and including it in the whole self in cases when this identity deviates from the heteronormative standard.

Clinicians working with homosexual individuals using affirmative therapy described this process with the use of over a dozen different stage models, distinguishing from 3 to 14 stages of its development [13-16]. After reviewing various stage models, Horowitz and Newcomb [16] settled on four main phases of homosexual identity development: 1) awareness or sensitization; 2) internalization or acceptance; 3) disclosure; and 4) identity synthesis or integration. As pointed out by Eliason and Schope [17], regardless of the differences between various models, most of them have a number of similarities. They underscore the developmental and adaptive role of achieving a homosexual (or, possibly, bisexual [18]) identity. They also acknowledge that the coming out process begins with a feeling of differentness and ends with the integration or synthesis of identity which means an acceptance of one's non-heterosexuality and its inclusion into the whole self. Another common feature of stage models is that they emphasize the essential role of disclosure to others and underscore the significance of "identity pride", i.e., the stage of identifying with and immersion in a gay culture, which is accompanied by a rapid increase in positive valuation of the LGBT community and culture [17].

Although stage models are being improved² and are successfully employed in therapeutic practice, they continue to meet with criticism. Their postulated weaknesses include linear vision of development (without consideration of regressions, omissions, and changes in the order of stages), ethnocentrism, and essentialist assumptions regarding gender binarity and sexuality in general. As underscored by some authors, the subjective definition of one's sexual identity stems from various factors, which include not only physiological arousals, but also romantic and sexual experiences, as well as the social context delineating the boundary between norm and pathology [16]. Confronted with these factors and endowed with particular personality traits, the individual goes through the challenge of including non-heterosexuality into their identity at their own pace and in a highly individualized manner. The process of self-acceptance regarding homo- or bisexuality may sometimes span decades. The individuals can shift from rejecting their desires and attempting to adhere to the heteronormative pattern of life to affirming these desires and creating a positive self-identity as a homosexual. Therefore, sexual self-definition appears to be a long-term, dynamic process rather than a one-time developmental achievement.

² For example, the McCarn & Fassinger model introduced some significant changes in comparison with many earlier proposals. Basically, the authors distinguished two parallel lines of identity development: the formation of individual sexual identity and the formation of identity within a minority group. They also suggested that disclosure to others is relatively independent from the stage of development.

Narrative identity and sexual identity

A useful theoretical framework for analysing this process is the narrative approach to identity [19, 20]. Its proponents study the human ability to tell stories and ascribe it with the function of integrating and shaping identity. Humans are presented as subjects assigning meanings to important personal life-events, which are included in their life-stories as self-defining memories. This life-story bonds together, explains, and gives meaning to various roles and relations (synchronic integration). It also unites memories, present events, and future predictions into one coherent timeline (diachronic integration) [20]. An important feature of self-narration is its reflective and dynamic nature, which enables the subject to reinterpret past experiences and reconstruct previous meanings [21]. Thus, rather than lead to a final, stable self-definition, identity development enhances the ability to continuously create and make sense of one's life-story and to increase its coherence.

The initial appearance of a narrative perspective of one's own life usually takes place during late adolescence/early adulthood [20], the period characterized by the intensification of romantic and sexual desires (including the confrontation with homosexual ones). Personal memories (which may be shared with significant others) are the basis of this story; however, its remote foundation is also constituted by the themes and values widespread in the cultural environment, prevalent in myths, fairy tales, and popular stories. The process of constructing one's life-story is, therefore, rooted in conversations with close friends and relatives on the one hand, while, on the other, being determined by the sociocultural context; it is this context that specifies the level of acceptance with which different stories are met, making some of them dominant and others - taboo [20].

Identifying homosexual desires in oneself, engaging in homosexual behaviours, and entering relationships requires processing and inclusion into the narrative identity. This also entails that the minority status of these experiences needs to be taken into account and considered. The integration of these experiences may be difficult due to heterosexism, especially if it has been internalized by the individual. Stories concerning the exploration of one's homo- or bisexuality, living with it, disclosing it to others, and confronting its social perception are excluded from the cultural mainstream. This refers particularly to the strongly heteronormative Polish cultural narratives, in which positive models of homosexuality are almost nonexistent. Even in view of the changes taking place over the last two decades, access to minority narratives is limited for individuals who are still in the process of discovering their sexuality; moreover, it depends on factors such as place of residence, economic status, education, and worldview (the subject's or that of their parents). For these reasons, individuals who identify their non-heterosexual desires often feel confused, embarrassed, and isolated, while the internal conflicts they experience make it harder to construct a coherent life-story in the long term. On the other hand, this struggle may be giving meaning by the subject and included in their personal life-story, which becomes internally cohesive and helps them to understand themselves and be understood by others.

The stage models of sexual identity development described above can be treated as attempts to capture regularities associated with increased understanding and acceptance (i.e., integration) of one's non-heterosexuality. The narrative approach highlights the dynamics and subjectivity of this process, while passing over the individual's self-definitions. Assuming a homosexual label does not guarantee a high level of identity integration, nor does such self-definition necessarily reflect the identity's maturity.

The method presented below serves to support identity development by creating conditions that stimulate the construction of a life-story. It focuses specifically on issues associated with non-heterosexuality and the sense of otherness. In short, it is based on the assumption that the integration of non-heterosexuality into identity: 1) is beneficial for LGB individuals; 2) occurs through assigning personal significance to non-heterosexual experiences and acts of disclosure as well as including them into the subject's life-story; 3) does not follow a clearly established scheme, though it includes qualitatively varied periods of exploring and accepting one's non-heterosexuality both as an individual and a group member; 4) is a deeply subjective and reflective process; it is also open-ended in the sense that the meanings assigned to one's own non-heterosexuality may change (in accordance with the assumptions concerning the development of narrative identity, which "becomes" rather than "is").

The workshop

The two editions of the workshop that inspired the present article, took place in September and November of 2016 in Poznań: the first as part of the Poznań Pride Week (a festival of LGBT culture) and the second — in response to the interest reported after the festival. Both workshops lasted three hours and were free of charge.

They were addressed to non-heterosexual adults who had disclosed their sexual orientation to others at least once. The expected group size was 6–12 participants. Ultimately, a total of 22 participants (7 men and 15 women aged 20-60 years old) took part in both editions; most of them (16) were young adults (aged 20-30). The participants were diverse in terms of their spontaneous readiness to declare their sexual identity: some defined themselves as "gay", "bisexual", or "asexual", while others spoke solely of their romantic relationships. The degree of their disclosure to others varied as well: some participants had come out only to closest friends, while others had disclosed their sexuality to more people, and four participants were living openly and were involved in the activities of LGBT organizations.

The whole workshop was conducted according to the following scheme:

- 1) During the introduction, the participants introduced themselves and jointly established rules for the workshop (discretion, voluntariness of participation, refraining from judgment, speaking for oneself, listening to others, and rules of order). Then, a short conversation concerning the understanding of the term "coming out" took place. To summarize, two

complementary ways of formulating this phenomenon were presented: a) as a process of discovering homosexual desires and defining one's own identity for oneself and b) as a process of disclosing one's homo- or bisexuality to others (45 minutes).

2) The main exercise was divided into three stages:

- a) Individual work based on the received instructions (see Appendix 1) using the lifeline method, popular in art therapy [22]: each participant drew a line representing their life from birth to present day on an A3 piece of paper, marking moments significant for their discovery of their non-heterosexuality as well as other important life events (20 minutes);
 - b) Working in groups of 3 or 4, the participants told their stories, while trying to identify resources that they found helpful in difficult times; the listeners were also asked to focus on the speaker's resources. The resources were written down on paper stickers and placed on the drawings by everyone; during the exercise, the workshop leader approached each group as an observer/listener (60 minutes);
 - c) Working as a whole group, the participants brainstormed as many resources as possible, writing them down on a large sheet of paper. It also allowed each participant to supplement their own drawing with resources that they had not previously considered. Next, the leader encouraged the participants to hold on to their stickers with resources written down, keep them handy, and use them in everyday life (30 minutes).
- 3) Each workshop was concluded with a conversation during which the participants shared their experiences from the meeting (25 minutes).

Predicted and observed benefits from the main exercise

The prediction of beneficial effects was based on the following assumptions:

- 1) Referring to personal memories and being invited to treat the linear progression of events ("lifeline") as the main theme of one's own story enables the activation of narrative processing (construction of accounts concerning the past) and autobiographical reasoning (assigning meaning to events through their reflective interpretation and assessment) [21, 23];
- 2) Telling and listening to stories about non-heteronormativity creates a context that is conducive to creating narratives and understanding contents considered taboo or difficult to express, as well as including them among other significant life events;
- 3) Drawing is a creative, spontaneous technique that contributes to verbalization and enables free expression even to reluctant individuals; moreover, it facilitates access to affective or subconscious contents as well as their integration [24];
- 4) Inviting a subject to identify their resources — a technique useful in many schools of therapy — redirects their attention from their deficits and problems toward skills, personal traits, and environmental sources of support that are helpful in overcoming the difficulties they encounter.

Additional benefits are associated with the nature of group meetings.. The social support they provide is particularly helpful for individuals belonging to minorities that are exposed to acts of resentment and rejection in everyday life [25]. Reports on support groups for non-heterosexuals indicate their strengthening role in the process of non-heterosexual identity formation [26]. Participants appreciate the ability to meet other non-heterosexual people, share stories of disclosing their identities, or acquire new information [27, 28]. On the one hand, diversity among group members in terms of their openness and expression of non-heterosexuality enables acknowledgement and acceptance of one's own coping strategies; on the other — it facilitates understanding and respect for various styles of adaptation.

The attitude of the workshop leader is also very important. Their kindness and basic knowledge of the realities faced by LGB individuals is a necessary condition for the workshop to succeed. The leader should also be aware of their own heteronormative assumptions and understand the significance of the sociocultural context for the psychological well-being of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals [29].

The observation of the workshop's participants showed that telling and listening to stories in small groups proved to be the most interesting part of the exercise. Most participants were emotionally engaged and expressive while telling their stories; most were also attentive listeners, reflecting the emotions of their interlocutors. The time initially allotted to each speaker (15 minutes) was extended to 20 minutes at the expense of the break and conclusion. At the end of the workshop, several participants were disappointed with not being able to listen to the remaining stories. Some individuals also noted the diversity and richness of the presented stories, as well as the determination and "life wisdom" of the participants. In turn, the individuals whose sexual identity was known only to few friends, underscored the comfort they experienced from being accepted by the group.

The process of cataloguing personal resources (approximately 30 different factors were listed) was an important component of the workshop. The jointly created list included: internalized values (especially coherence between desires and their expression, e.g., honesty with oneself, faithfulness to oneself, authenticity, belief in God, conscience), certain personality traits (e.g., independence, courage, confidence, perseverance, empathy), feelings and bonds (care for others, self-care, righteous anger, love, friendship), as well as interests and passions (sports, arts, writing poetry, keeping diaries). In turn, the environmental resources included significant others (friends, family, partners), cultural and scientific websites concerning LGB individuals (e.g., films, books, reports, articles), and local LGBT NGOs.

The drawings were diverse and abundant in metaphors and symbols signaling significant life events (an example of a "lifeline" with a short commentary is presented on Figure 1).

Their analysis also yielded some observations. Firstly, the drawings of older individuals (40-60 years) contained significantly fewer details in comparison to those drawn by younger participants

It should also be stressed that all participants of the described workshops had either graduated from universities or were students at the time. Their cognitive abilities were a good basis for the exploration of their life-stories and reflection on identity. It would be worthwhile to investigate whether, and to what degree, this kind of method would be effective in a group with other levels of education.

Another limitation of the method is its relatively narrow target — the workshop was addressed to adults who had disclosed their sexual orientation at least once, which can indicate an at least basic level of self-definition in non-heterosexual terms. Therefore, the presented method serves mostly to support the processes facilitating the integration of sexual identity after a clear instance of questioning one's heterosexuality.

Finally, it is worth noting that the groups' composition and diversity was a significant (though random) factor for the course of workshops. The meetings were hosted as part of an LGBT culture festival and shortly after. This probably contributed to the fact that, along participants hiding their sexual identity, there were individuals living openly as non-heterosexuals and belonging to non-governmental LGBT organizations. Their stories and personal experiences carried a strong reinforcing message for the remaining participants. Such a factor is difficult to plan for, though a certain level of experience diversity should be expected in any group meeting.

After the workshop - what next?

The workshop can be treated as a one-time developmental experience or as an introduction to regular group meetings. In the case of the former, the workshop could be longer and feature more activities related to coming out. Other topics that could be worth adding include: beliefs concerning coming out and its consequences, sources of concern, psychological benefits and costs, possible reactions of friends and relatives and their causes, short- and long-term personal and interpersonal consequences of disclosure (or staying „in the closet”), social and personal pressures as well as the associated coping mechanisms. The selection of specific topics should take into account the needs reported by the group members.

In the case described above, meetings of a self-development group were organized in response to the need reported by the participants, and the mentioned topics were discussed. The monthly meetings were held for a year (except for the two holiday months) in accordance to jointly established rules. The group was closed, and participation was voluntary; the meetings were partially moderated by a psychologist, but the sharing of current experiences by the participants was the basic activity. One of the most common issues discussed by them was the social perception of coming out and the ways of coping with it.

The meetings were attended by 6–12 participants. Over the course of the year, two individuals came out to their parents and four others — to other close family members. For 9 participants, the disclosure of their non-heterosexuality became an element of everyday life at the workplace. At the subsequent

meetings, two significant issues developed: 1) subjective choice of the degree of sexual identity disclosure (in the spirit of visibility management [31]); 2) treating acts of disclosure as an element of an education strategy leading to social change.

Conclusion

While failing to provide conclusive answers, the increasing number of studies on the origins of sexual orientation conducted in the Western culture has yielded numerous arguments for accepting homo-, bi-, and heterosexuality as equivalent variants of human sexuality [8]. In spite of this, heterosexism is still prevalent in many countries (including Poland), which creates an unfavorable sociocultural context for LGB identity development and increases the risk of social exclusion, minority stress, and mental health problems in LGB individuals.

To prevent the possible consequences of minority stress, psychologists and counselors should take advantage of every opportunity to stimulate and reinforce the spontaneous process of identity development and integration as well as to create a favorable, safe context to facilitate this process. Such a safe space may be provided by self-development workshops organized for LGB individuals. The workshop presented in this article, based on a single elaborate exercise, can be used as a form of such prevention. It stimulates autobiographic narration and supports the process of self-disclosure. The workshop may supplement individual therapy when the latter is necessary; it may also serve as an introduction to a cycle of meetings of a developmental or self-help group. Finally, the exercise described can be used in individual therapy for LGB patients. Considering the fact that its effectiveness requires empirical verification, this presentation should be treated as a suggestion and an inspiration for conducting similar preventive interventions on a wide scale.

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Appendix 1

Instructions

On a piece of paper draw a line which illustrates your life from birth up to the present day. Imagine it to be a road or a river that sometimes goes straight, smoothly and calmly, and at other times there are turns, bends, whirlpools or other obstacles in the way.

While drawing, mark these moments which, in your opinion, may have been important for your coming out process. Take into consideration the personal (internal) plot related to your recognition of your non-heterosexuality and the social (external) one which relates to disclosing your sexual identity to others.

These questions can be helpful whilst thinking about your personal plot:

1. Have you ever felt that you are not a typical boy / typical girl or that you are different from others in terms of your love relationships or sexual / romantic interests? When was it? How do you recall it?
2. When did it come to your mind that you were not straight? What did this mean to you? Were there several such moments? How do you recall them?
3. Do you define yourself as gay, lesbian, bisexual, inquiring or a transgender person? Or perhaps in another way? If so, when did you start to think about yourself in this way? Were there some important moments?

When thinking about your personal plot, you can try to answer the following questions:

1. When did someone find out your sexual orientation for the first time? Was it you who told somebody about it? Or perhaps someone made a coming out for you? How was it? How did you feel then?

2. Do you remember other important situations considering your disclosure? Which ones? When was it? When was the last time that you told someone you were not straight? How did you feel then?

In addition, mark on your life line other important events such as graduation, a trip abroad, making an important acquaintance, moving out of your family house, changing jobs - everything you consider significant. You can sketch, use lines, arrows, symbols, and write down names or dates. This is your own drawing and you can reveal what you want and the way you want it: literally or metaphorically. It is up to you what you want to show in this drawing and what to tell others about it.

Address: jowita@amu.edu.pl