

VALUE SYSTEM AND RECOMMENDATIONS WHEN PROVIDING PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELING TO LESBIANS AND BISEXUAL WOMEN

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Due to the fact that, as an associate of NGO "Labris", over the period June 2003 – June 2008, I started and conducted the first psychological counseling center within this organization, which 377 girls and women contacted either in person or over the internet, I received the proposal to compose a new exposé highlighting the points I consider to be important in psychological counseling with this purpose, i.e. for the experts who are bound by the Law to be reliable helpers for lesbians and bisexual women. At that time, it was about the first counseling service of this kind in Serbia and the most important topics the clients tackled in the course of their sessions were the following (in order of frequency): 1) Am I a lesbian? 2) Relationship with parents 3) Partner relationships. Bearing in mind the need for awareness raising of the general and expert public, and primarily of the members of the lesbian community, I laid particular importance on recording my experiences in the work I was doing, which resulted in 8 articles that were published twice a year (www.incesttraumacentar.org.rs / Rubric: Publications - authorship articles)*.

Therefore, in addition to the fact I provided parallel extensive training activities in the sphere of (sexual) diversities, it is from this part of my experience that I would like to draw some recommendations for work, regardless of whether you provide psychological assistance as part of your job in a school, police, medical institution, welfare center, non-government organization, or private practice. You may as well be responsible for prevention work in a daycare facility, school or some other institution – it is your responsibility to influence the development of children's and adolescents' views and help them develop into open-minded, non-homophobic persons. The following is requisite in your work:

- Do people in your immediate social surroundings regularly hear your views that lesbianism is a sound and normal thing for everyone? (And that some people are heterosexual, and some are simply not. PERIOD.)
- Have you been through a critical phase of reflecting over your own attitude toward lesbianism? Have you clarified all your beliefs that socially, it makes a difference whether you are a lesbian or a homosexual? Have you steered clear of the tendency to "treat" sexual orientation, so that you would not encourage your client to develop ideas like "when I grow up, I will be heterosexual" (or "it is like this now, but I will marry later /a male person/ and have children") – or have you been introducing this moment into your work yourself? The lesbian sexual identity

is not a disease that you are supposed to treat. Get informed through human rights conventions as well as through specialized literature. The standpoint is the same.

- Do you understand that each instance in which you avoid speaking out or do speak out about the topic of lesbianism and sexual diversity you publicly demonstrate your opinion? Both in the private and business environment. This also happens when you support some of the derogative jokes about gay persons or when you keep silent while they are being told. More than ten years ago, I introduced the term “a different than heterosexual orientation”, which is still being used. It is important to understand that the language you use defines reality – either discriminative or indiscriminative. Legal or illegal. Furthermore, it is extremely important to assume an attitude toward pejorative names that are used to refer to persons of different than heterosexual orientation. Adapting public discourse to the audiences is intolerable; instead, one should take into consideration the person whose dignity and human rights have to be respected. Regarding the same topic – language – old-fashioned terms „butch“ and „femme“, which are broadly used within the lesbian scene, should be avoided. These terms virtually reintroduce lesbians into patriarchal, male-female roles. If lesbian human rights are about love between two women that they express in mutually accepted ways, why should the presence of man in such a relationship be encouraged once again, as well as the classical, patriarchal division of roles typical of heterosexual relationships? Those are all too well-known, derogatively presented concepts concerning the functioning of a lesbian relationship by the homophobic majority, right? In such a division of roles we know that power is unevenly shared, to the benefit of men, and this precisely is the subject of decades of activities of the feminist movement throughout the world, and as of more recently, of UN agencies, The Council of Europe and other relevant institutions. And just when the necessity of removing this imbalance of power was acknowledged at practically all levels, do not be surprised at the fact that the lesbians themselves still insist on a language that encourages the very same imbalance – because they need to rely on a familiar model. But you can choose to differ!
- Did you make it your aim to learn about the history of the LGBT movement in the world? The fact that you are a “professional” does not mean that you are well equipped to understand the nature of lesbian existence. Just like a good therapist in circumstances of war is only she who puts her knowledge, skills and experience in the social context, which means that her intervention reflects her understanding of the social context – the situation is identical with the helper pretending to provide the right intervention to lesbians. Without a broader picture, you will not get far.
- By assuming a broader picture, through learning and obtaining a detailed insight, you can make an impact in forming your own policy in the interest of lesbians. You have already developed your personal policy. Perhaps you still do not refer to it this way. You have your own policy even if providing psychological assistance to lesbians is only your ancillary (or principal?!) source of income, if you possess an authentic interest and are self-motivated to attend education in the sphere of human rights, gender and diversity issues. Define that policy for yourself. Try to understand what benefit the clients who come to you draw from your policy. Benefit means that

your intervention encourages their personal growth and development and the already mentioned open-minded personality, with considerable self-esteem and self-confidence.

- The dynamics within the lesbian community is intensive. It is important to develop an authentic interest and get to know it. "The community" sounds like one, but in fact it harbors great diversity. Not all girls or women are part of the "community" or the "scene". Many of them would not be part of it for anything in the world. It may happen that, however open-minded you are, you recognize the accuracy of some stereotypes in practice. You can feel loyal to the values that are meant to shed stereotypes imposed by a homophobic majority, and at the same time you may notice that some stereotypes occasionally rest on solid arguments. Your engagement within the LGBT movement/organization does not mean that you are their blind follower. You have your own critical thinking, e.g. you are good at understanding causes and consequences. You understand why stereotypes are confirmed. **Use that in a constructive way.** Again, in the interest of real women of lesbian orientation. Because you owe them a sincere and qualified approach, not an ideology. **The clients are your concern. Not your boss, not homophobia, you are not at their service.** Your responsibility is to tackle the following issues within your psychological assistance: about the risks to the lesbian community as a ghetto, to promote alliance between heterosexual persons and lesbians, and also between lesbians and heterosexual persons (note: this seeming "repetition" is deliberate) which is effectuated in everyday life, in private life, at work, in volunteering for important social issues, etc., on discrimination within the lesbian community (what do you really know about that?), and many other issues.
- The existence of bisexual women differs from the existence of women with other sexual orientations. It is important to take the client seriously, to learn from her about specific points and make sure not to slip into the pattern, even unconsciously, of double discrimination that the women of bisexual orientation are exposed to within the lesbian community. This is not some kind of "fluid" identity, changeable in the sense of being unreliable. A bisexual woman often receives unfavorable treatment within the lesbian community she seeks to join and which she sees, just like lesbians, as a safe place. The analogy with the discrimination within the lesbian community can be drawn regarding women of Roma or other non-Serbian nationality (and religious beliefs), disabled women, women with feminine looks and women from smaller communities in Serbia. The diversity in terms of class and education is also reflected, in a specific way. Each of these processes must be addressed, recognized and clearly defined according to values.
- If at this point of your lives you are heterosexual: Are lesbians and bisexual women part of your everyday private life? Your lady friends, colleagues and relatives – those who come to your birthday party with their female partners and who you introduce to everyone as a couple, upon previous agreement with them? You do it gladly, just like a heterosexual couple you invited to the occasion? Are you equally active in participating and sharing the good or the sad news about this couple as you do with persons close to you, as you show empathy for life events in a familiar (or close) heterosexual couple? Or else, you do not really know much about the daily routine of

your female relative or friend? If lesbians and bisexual girls and women are “only your clients /patients”, what do you think is the reason for this? What does your intimate partner think of your engagement and providing psychological assistance to? And what about your primary family? And friends? How did you present your engagement in the sphere of sexual diversity to your close social environment and in what ways have you been adapting to their attitudes?

- If at this stage in your life you are of a sexual orientation different than heterosexual: It is important not to be part of “the lesbian scene”. It is neither ethical nor possible to preserve a trusting relationship with the clients if you go out to the same places, meet your clients in situations that pertain to their privacy or if your private life unfolds before the eyes of your clients. In spite of the fact that we have been taught during our formal education how to preserve personal borders, the concepts of transfer and counter-transfer, etc., the closeness of a “friendly” social environment (which the lesbian community seems to be at first sight) is indeed conducive to crossing this border. This challenge is understandable, because the helper feels the need to realize her identity in a safe environment which – if she intends to assume a professional approach – she should create elsewhere. Regular active participation in free activities being organized within the lesbian community is not requisite for understanding the issues these clients tackle. You will not betray anyone by refraining from participation. On the contrary, you will be more apt to respond to your clients’ requirements.
- The eternal dilemma is whether only a person who has a certain personal experience can best understand a similar experience. Or else, you will hear the phrase “only she can understand”. This is not a precondition. If you have learned about the life circumstances of your client who belongs to a marginalized social group, you have also learned about the mechanisms of oppression (note: that you did not learn during your formal education). Let us go back to the golden rule that says: **YOU ARE A HELPER IN A SOCIAL CONTEXT**. Only then does everything you have learned about or done make sense. At the same time, if you share the experience your client has (or you have a similar experience), that could be both beneficial and detrimental. It will depend on “how you are dealing” with your own experience. Depending on where you stand in that imaginary continuum of understanding your own identity and its affirmation and promotion – how far you have progressed in building your own broader picture, in which you perceive that identity as one of your manifold identities, one of your life experiences. Depending on your critical thinking about that very same, broader picture.
- Providing psychological assistance to socially marginalized groups is **PUBLIC OFFICE**. That is because lesbian existence is a social issue calling for social change. You are publicly advocating the alteration of the existing unfavorable social attitude. This means that you have come out of your practices and other spaces where you provide psychological assistance and use your own professional authority and knowledge in order to make a contribution to this process. Because you care. Because you are concerned. Your job is not complete if you stay within the confines of your work premises and nobody knows what you have been doing and what you have achieved (you have learned a lot in the course of your work with gay persons, but you do not share it with anyone in the community and you keep it to yourself as “a bad secret” and you call that the rule

of confidentiality?). It is important to understand that the expert is not here to “observe and analyze the gay person”. Instead, go out into the community you live in. You have invested your name and shown your face as part of a street action for human rights, in a press conference, etc. You keep in touch with your colleagues from the region who are already networking, so you can learn from one another how to better understand the lesbian. If you work in a school, you have opened a page on the school website for LGBT teenagers. You invest an effort there, because you know that is the most vulnerable period for the adolescents, when they are looking for a safe mirror they can look at and love their own reflection. It is our responsibility, as adults, to see to it. If a student is badly treated at the school because of assumptions regarding her sexual orientation or because of her lesbian orientation, you stand up against this discrimination before the teaching staff or in another situation where she needs an ally and explain the vulnerability of the student’s position, even at the cost of confrontations among your colleagues. You do this as you would for your own child or for a child in your personal surroundings who you love. You organize support groups for the parents of your students whose sexual orientation is different than heterosexual. These are merely some of the ways of stepping out of the old model of the comfortable position of helper who treats topics such as discrimination, diversity and violence independently of the social context. Devise your own ways.

- The broader picture refers to your understanding of the position of LGBT organizations in Serbia and the influence that they exert on the lives of real women of lesbian or bisexual orientation who are here among us, whether you are in a rural or urban environment. Furthermore, your associates are also part of your policy. You bear the responsibility of the choice of the state institution or non-government organization where you want to realize your engagement in the sphere of sexual differences. Perhaps you have opted for the psychological counseling service at the Serbian Orthodox Church or some other, whose aim is to “cure” homosexuality? It is up to you. On the other hand, if your attitude differs from that of the LGBT organizations, it is a particular challenge. You should be aware of the fact that you are working exclusively for your client’s good.
- **Every verbal or non-verbal statement you make concerning your client is also a value in your work.**

*Topics of the articles: 1. Encounter with the national lesbian scene – “Am I lesbian?” 2. Internalized homophobia in each one of us 3. “No, this is not happening to me” (or: Violence in lesbian partner relationships) 4. How much the lack of positive role models affects the coming out of lesbians? 5. Lesbian partner relationships (or: How important it is to seek psychological assistance in the building of a lesbian partner relationship (and not only in crisis). 6. Lesbian survivors of childhood sexual abuse 7. A letter to parents 8. How the policy of LGBT organizations affects the lives of lesbians and bisexual women in Serbia (A perspective from the “Labris” psychological counseling service).