

2 LGBT relationships

Introduction

First of all

Contrary to popular myth, LGBT relationships are not essentially different from other types of relationships and offer as much diversity as heterosexual ones. However, there is one difference and it is due to the fact that, in most societies, LGBT relationships are far less accepted than heterosexual ones. Indeed, in most EU Member States, LGBT couples have less or no legal rights at all (see *Handbook, Appendix 5*; see also *The Rainbow Map, May 2001*). Therefore, having to live in a society that considers their couples less worthy than others creates many obstacles in their everyday lives.

Another difference comes from the impossibility for LGBT couples to function on the basis of the traditional division of gender roles. In a LGBT couple, the partners have to find a way to interact which is not based on standard role patterns and this is why it is crucial for gays and lesbians to have the opportunity to affirm and share their way of life, just as much as heterosexuals do. It would be hoped that, since these “alternative” models are parts of reality, they could be regarded as shared and accepted cultural models.

Moreover, LGBT couples are not necessarily childless and in fact many children live in LGBT families with two mothers or two fathers. Studies and statistics shows that the sexual orientation of these children is not different from that of children from heterosexual households but, apart from their sexual orientation, they might have problems in comparing their families with those of their friends. However, they may experience bullying by their peers or, in general, discrimination from a non-supportive and/or openly intolerant environment.

Basic information

There are many factors that contribute to determine the meaning of relationships: religion, culture, national laws, education, social norms and personal values. In some cultures and societies, the choice of the type of relationship is more influenced by family or community values, while in others it may be a more individual choice. These differences can have significant implications for those who come from a traditionalist cultural background. Indeed, in these cases, gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transsexuals encounter great difficulties in conducting a LGBT life while at the same time maintaining a good relationship with their families. At this regard, it needs to be pointed out that the family plays a crucial role in the development of the child as it provides him/her with the necessary protection to grow into an individual who will be strong enough to face the challenges of life.

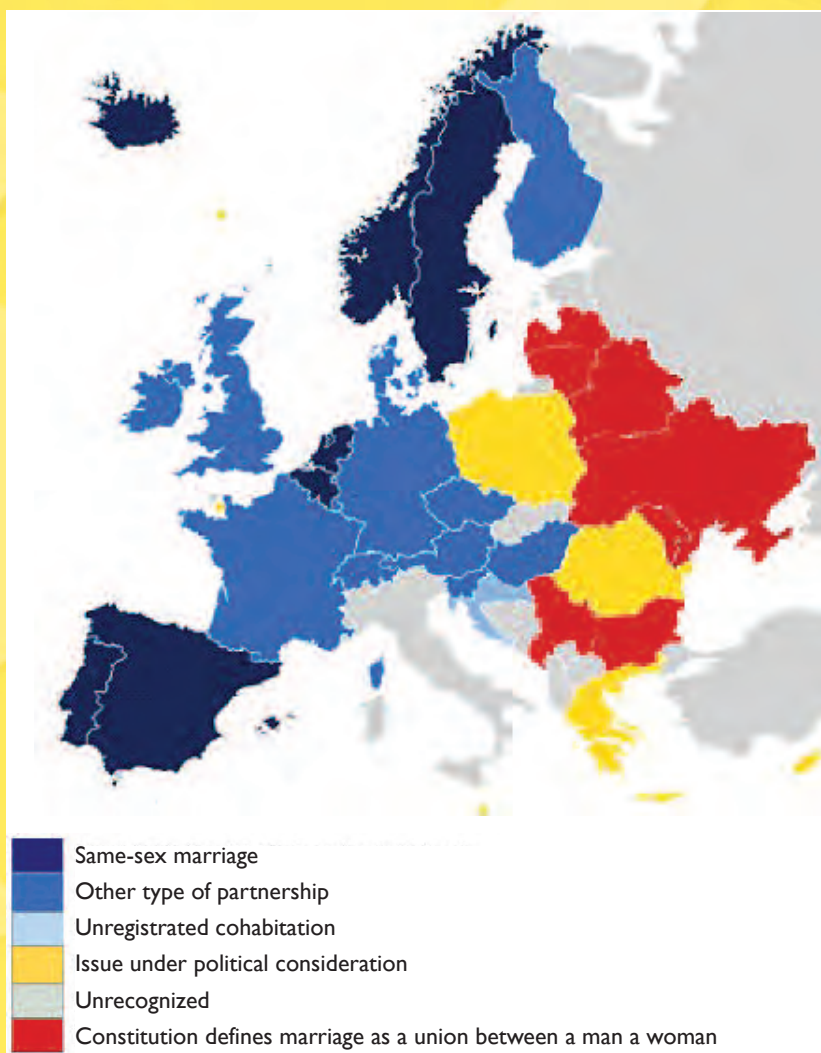
Today, relationships are being redefined and reshaped. The types of relationships that are available for gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transsexuals and heterosexuals are more varied than they were 30 years ago: getting married, staying single, living together, same-sex registered partnership. Therefore, there are different types of families that exist alongside traditional nuclear families: reconstituted families, single-parent families, intercultural families. Today, many couples fulfil their wish to become parents thanks to scientific advancements or adoption and fostering: the biological dimension of the family ties starts to make room for a conception of the family as a socio-cultural construction. However, although “sexuality” does not exclusively mean “reproduction”, the concept of parenthood still revolves around these two concepts and today it is still difficult to view filiation as something separate from these two domains.

Hence, when dealing with homosexual parenthood, it is necessary to examine the heterosexist prejudices and stereotypes that prevail in the general population and that are shared by heterosexuals and LGBTs, and often by the scientific community as well.

We therefore invite you to reflect on the most common objections (Lingiardi 2007), such as:

1. children must have a mother and a father;
2. homosexual couples who want children are not aware and/or do not consider the implications of the limitations posed by their condition;
3. LGBT persons are unfit to raise a child; lesbians are less maternal than other women;
4. LGBT couples are less stable than heterosexual ones, therefore do not guarantee familial continuity;
5. the children of LGBTs have more psychological problems than the children of heterosexuals;
6. the children of LGBTs will more easily become homosexual.

At the moment, in Europe, laws that recognise LGBT marriage or partnerships exist in the Scandinavian countries, Belgium, France, Germany and the Netherlands (for more detailed information get in touch with local or European LGBT organisations such as ILGA-Europe). However, there are only limited possibilities for LGBT couples to be recognized as a couple in another Member State if the law of that country does not allow it.



(Source: WIKIPEDIA (Same-sex marriage))

Below, you'll find the three ways in which LGBT couples can fulfil their parenting desires and the Countries that allow them:

- joint adoption (the least frequent in the EU: allowed in Spain, UK, Belgium, Netherlands and Sweden.) – LGBT couples can jointly petition for adoption;
- second-parent adoption (allowed in the abovementioned Countries, and also in Germany, Denmark and Finland) – LGBT partners can petition to adopt their partner's child;
- fertility treatment (allowed in the abovementioned Countries, except Germany) - possibility for LGBT couples can access a range of treatment options aimed at producing one or more biological children (insemination, egg-donation, etc.).

What does this mean to me?

For young LGBTs, it is very important to meet others with whom they can socialize and share their experiences about couple relationships. In this way, they have the opportunity to realise that they can play an active role in the creation of their relationships and can develop their own way of life. Here are some suggestions:

- Show that you respect LGBT relationships through your own attitude and that you regard two people who care for each other as a value for society.
- Be sensitive towards same-sex relations between young people, regardless if they are of a romantic or sexual nature or not, and encourage them to establish a mutually respectful and friendly relationship. Be supportive - even general remarks or statements made in class can be helpful.
- Support the parents of gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transsexuals. If the parents can't accept their children's partner, this may become a major stress factor.
- Sex education should deal not only with biology but should also focus on the emotional aspects of couple relationships and gender identity. Try to remember that some of your students may experience difficulty in fitting in conventionally defined genders and identities. Moreover, sex education should not present LGBT issues separately from heterosexual ones. This would only lead to reinforce the division between the different forms of sexual orientation and would encourage young people to believe that some sexual orientations are "normal" while other are "deviant". Instead, sexuality should be presented as encompassing different types of sexual orientation and identity where hetero- and homosexuality are only two examples of many.
- When dealing with intercultural questions, you should be willing to accept other points of view, even those that seem very different from yours: being respectful towards others is the best way for people to live together.
- It is not useful to pressure young people into coming out. Focus instead on offering support and do not try to define the sexual orientation of the person you are counselling, especially if he/she does not feel the need to do so.

Education (Teachers)

Bear in mind

Each of us is involved in many different types of relationships at the same time: with our parents, friends, teachers, etc. Each of these relationships is unique and changes over time. Moreover, the word “relationship” means something different to everyone. For some people it is something that is exciting, for others it means to be close to someone, to feel safe and secure or to regain energy. What is right for one person is not necessarily right for another and an arrangement that works well for a given person today perhaps won't be as well-suited tomorrow. There is no “right” or “wrong” way to have a relationship. The type of relationship people choose and the way they shape their lives within that relationship must be negotiated between the partners involved.

You are invited to think about your own couple relationship and the couple relationship between two men or two women. Take your time to answer the following questions. It may also be interesting to look at the

Education - FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)

Please also refer to the FAQs for the psychosocial/healthcare professionals.

Who is the “man” who is the “woman” in a LGBT relationship?

The notion that one of the partners in LGBT relationship must adopt a “masculine” role, while the other must take on a “feminine” role is a cliché based on heterosexist stereotypes. If we take a closer look to any individual involved in a LGBT relationship, we will see character traits that are traditionally defined as “masculine”, as well as characteristics that are traditionally viewed as “feminine”; this is clearly true also for heterosexual couples. The identity of an individual is the result of the combination of characteristics that are associated with both genders and today also gender roles are increasingly becoming objects of negotiations at individual level.

Do same-sex, bisexual, transexual relationships last longer than heterosexual relationships?

LGBT persons may have long- or short-term relationships, just as heterosexuals do. Some can last for only a few months while others may go on for many years or even “forever”. The only difference is that a LGBT relationship is rarely encouraged by society or by the partners' families. It is important to bear in mind that this lack of acceptance and

corresponding paragraph in the counselling section below.

- What do you think defines a happy relationship? What do you think is your partner's opinion about this? What does your partner think that your opinion is about it?
- Have you ever seen two men or two women kiss or hug each other or hold hands? What was your reaction to this? Why did you react in that way?
- How do you imagine a relationship in every day life? What role have examples and traditional role patterns played in the shaping of these images? How do you define fidelity?
- What kind of division of roles do you practise in your current (or in your last) relationship? Do you (or did you) feel comfortable with it? What do you think is your partner's opinion about this? How was the division of tasks negotiated?
- What advantages do you see in a same-sex in a relationship? What problems can arise?
- How do your personal values affect your teaching?

external support can make it more difficult for the couple to solve possible relationship problems.

Do gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transexuals cheat on their partners more often than heterosexuals?

Scientific research has shown that a large majority of young people want to live in a stable relationship and would be happy to grow old with their partner. In this sense, gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transexuals are no different from heterosexuals. Many people long for an "everlasting love", however most change stable partners once, twice, or several times during their lifetime (serial monogamy). Therefore, the notion that cheating is more frequent among LGBT couples than in heterosexual couples is just an urban legend.

In which ways are LGBT relationships discriminated against?

LGBT relationships are discriminated against in many ways. They face legal discrimination because, in most countries, same-sex or transexual couples are not legally recognized. This implies a series of limitations in inheritance laws, visiting rights in hospitals or in housing rights, just to name a few. LGBTs are discriminated against in terms of visibility, for instance they are only rarely mentioned in schoolbooks. The above-mentioned examples show that there are still many people who think that LGBT lifestyles are not as "good", appropriate and normative as the heterosexual one.

Education - Tools

Love story

Aim: to explore the representation of LGBT relationships in the media, to educate students about the media's influence on public opinion.

Method: find an example of a homosexual or transexual love story in a teen magazine (ask your students to bring it to class; if they cannot find a story, you can use a photo to get started). Take a critical look at the story content and discuss it in class. Possible questions may be: What is the general function of a love story in general? How are LGBT relationships represented in this story? What information does it provide on this type of relationship? Does it stereotype certain people or certain roles?

Please note: the exercise is suited for students aged or 14 or older. In order to be effective, it should be included in a lessons cycle about the media. Journalism should be critically analysed in its function and form: Who writes the articles for the magazines? How? Who gives them information? What is "good" journalism? If the students criticise the story as being too conventional or as portraying stereotypes, they can create their own story using their own photos.

Hetero, Homo, Bi, Trans: pros, cons and stereotypes

Aim: to identify stereotypes and compare different forms of relationships.

Method: split the students into small groups and distribute a sheet of paper which includes the following categories: Heterosexual Relationships, Gay Relationships, Lesbian Relationships and Transexual Relationships. In each group, students are asked to consider the advantages, disadvantages and commonly known stereotypes for each relationship category. The results should be written on the paper and are then discussed in a plenary session.

Please note: the exercise is appropriate for students aged 14 years or older. The teacher can further the discussion by asking "Where have you seen this happen?" The stereotypes should be questioned in a critical way and selective perception should be explained.

A STORY...



Her hands shaking, Almira grabs the telephone. The writing blurs again and again before her eyes. In a few seconds her life has been destroyed, as though by bombs.

“Hello, Julie Bäcker speaking?” Almira sobs uncontrollably.

“Almira, is that you? Good heavens, what happened?”

“I have to go back to Kosovo.”

A breathless silence at the other end. “My God”, whispers Julie, ages later.

“Stay where you are darling, I will be right there in a moment.”

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“They can’t just simply deport you. You’ve been living here for eleven years.

That’s almost half your life” Julie, bewildered, keeps reading over and over the notification from the Aliens’ Registration Office.

“They say the war is over”, whispers Almira. “But my family originally comes from Bosnia, and they’d make my life a living hell if I went there. And if they ever find out that I’m a lesbian they’ll kill me,” Almira looks at her girlfriend.

“In Kosovo people were killed. I saw them beat up my sister and my cousins, and threaten to kill my uncle. Death awaits me there. I will not be able to study, there will be no home, no love. Only violence, only destruction.

I can’t go back, Julie.”

“No, of course not. We’ll find a way, Almira. I love you, I won’t let you go.

Never, do you hear me?”

“What happened, Almira? You have been staring at the walls for weeks. You received low scores in three subjects. And I really thought you wanted to achieve something here in Germany. If you continue this way, you’ll never get your diploma”.

“It’s not my fault”, says Almira softly. “I have no future in Germany.”

“Nonsense”, fumes the teacher. “Of course it’s up to you. If you really want to achieve something, you can make it. But of course not with this performance. Your scores are too low Almira, I was wrong about you.”

If he only knew that I’m a lesbian, he’d probably approve of the deportation notice one hundred percent, thinks Almira and puts away her work, quietly.

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“But surely something can be done against a deportation notice” Julie looks at her classmates defiantly, as they leave the classroom together.

“Hey, the war in Kosovo is over, Julie. All these people, they’ve been here long enough. You’d better look for another girlfriend” Georg grins maliciously.

Others nod.

“What kind of people are you?” Julie looks around, shocked. “And you want to become educators?”

“Oh honestly, you only want to prevent this deportation because you fancy her, don’t you?”, Karin says.

“You have simply no idea of what war can do to a person, even after many years”, replies Julie.

“I think you’re over-reacting again, Julie. As usual.” Georg leans back nonchalantly.

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“In school nobody understands me. I feel so lonely. The teacher thinks I’m lazy.” Almira shows Julie the messed-up German essay.

“The students are just as bad”, sobs Julie with resignation. “They couldn’t care less what’s going on here.”

“Someone told me that we could find useful information on the internet. Why don’t we look for help on the Web?”

“Almira honey, that’s a wonderful idea!”

Moments later they sit in front of their computers, they are very concentrated on their task.



“Support Group for Refugees, here it is!” says Julie suddenly. “Exactly what we were looking for.”

“And see here,” laughs Almira. “I’ve found a European Chat for young LGBTs.”

“Fantastic!,” smiles Julie. “I’ll call up the Support Group, ok?”

“In the meantime I’ll join the Triangle – Chat.”

“Appointment at the Support Group in one hour”, announces Julie.

“The Chat is open.” Excited, Almira types something in.

“Show me.” Julie takes a seat next to her.

<Almira> Hi, I am a lesbian living in Germany, soon to be deported back to Kosovo. What can I do?

<Mark> Hey, I’m from the Netherlands. If you have a German girlfriend, marry her. It should be possible, according to the German Life-Partnership Law, if you are both over 18.

<Julie> Hi, I’m the girlfriend. Are you sure? That would be great. We’re both over 18. But we have to go now. Should we keep you posted?

<Mark> Absolutely. Nice chatting with you.

<Aaron> I’d also like to be updated. You can meet me here often in the Chat.

<Almira> Great. Thanks. We’ll keep in touch. Cheers. “I’m afraid it doesn’t look very good for the refugees from Kosovo. Our authorities don’t want to understand that minority groups like Bosnian Muslims still have a hard time there.” The counsellor of the Support Group for Refugees looks at Almira for a long time.

“If we got married – according to the new Life-Partnership Law – we could avoid deportation?” Julie’s voice sounds imploring.

“Yes, that would certainly be possible. According to Article 23 of the German Immigration Law, after the marriage Almira would be entitled at first to a limited Residence Permit for three years, then she’d get a renewal, and in eight years’ time she could apply for German citizenship.”

“But what would happen to my parents?”, asks Almira.

“It would not prevent your parents from being deported”, says the advisor softly.

“I can’t stay here without them”, sobs Almira. “I can’t live here without my parents.”

“You should come here with your parents. We’ll do everything we can to protect them.”

The advisor hesitates. “Is it because you’re in love that you want to get married, or is it just an attempt to save Almira?”

“I love Almira”, replies Julie. “Perhaps I wouldn’t have thought about marriage if there wouldn’t have been this emergency, but now I see it as a great opportunity.”

“I don’t want to lose my parents”, whispers Almira. “I don’t know if they’ll ever understand, me marrying a woman.”

“Almira, for you going back to Kosovo would be the end. You told me that you grew up here, you have spent more than half your life in this country, you want to study here and, on top of that, you love a woman. To have such a life in Kosovo is unthinkable. And then there is the trauma that you and your parents have gone through. There is no chance to get therapy there. Returning to Kosovo means a whole new trauma for all your family. You told us that some members of your family were brutally beaten up and received death threats before your very eyes.”

Almira weeps silently. “Both my parents have gone through this. My mother tried to protect me. She is very strong. But my father was crushed. I cannot leave my mother alone with him. Dad needs us both.”

“Do your parents know that you and Julie want to get married?”

“Perhaps they’d put up with that, but they couldn’t stand to be separated from me. For my dad it would be the end.”

“There must be a solution for you and for your parents, Almira. I can’t promise you anything. Marrying Julie would certainly save you and that’s for sure”.

The counsellor smiles encouragingly at Almira. “Come back next week with your parents. Together, we we’ll see what needs to be done”



Counselling

(Psycho/social/healthcare professionals)

Bear in mind

Along with positive feelings, all relationships, even heterosexual ones, include anger, stress, and different expectations between the partners. For instance, some people become oppressive because they are afraid of losing their partner and they want to possess and control their partner. Generally, fidelity is particularly important in couple relationships, yet everyone defines fidelity in a different way. Can someone be called faithful if they spend a lot of time on their own without their partner? And what if someone has a one-night stand? The fact that there are many different definitions of fidelity may create some problems.

You are invited to consider your own relationship and LGBT relationships. Take your time to answer the following questions. It may also be useful for you to first have a look at the corresponding paragraph in the education section above.

- When did you first realise that there were different forms of living together than those you learned about in your family? Are you looking for a partner who shares your point of view or for someone who has different views than your own?
- Do you think that LGBT relationships are as fulfilling as heterosexual relationships? If no, why not? What is fidelity for you?
- Are there problems in couple relationships which you would describe as typically male or typically female? Are there any typical differences between heterosexuals and gays/lesbians/bisexuals/transsexuals in dealing with problems in their relationships? How could these problems be solved?
- What impact can an uncertain legal status have on a relationship? How must it be like for the partners involved to know that a large part of society would rather their relationship didn't exist?
- How do your personal values affect your counselling?

Counselling - Tools

A question of scales

Aim: to help the partners of a LGBT couple to formulate their expectations at the beginning of the counselling process.

Method: independently from each other, the two partners give their responses to a series of statements according to a scale ranging from 1 to 10 (1 = lowest value, 10 = highest value). First they give their own answer and then they also indicate what they think their partner would reply. The statements can be prepared on a flip chart by the counsellor before the session.

Some examples for possible statements are:

- The chances that we will be still a couple in one year's time are very low/very high.
- The resources we have to cope with a crisis together are many/few.
- After our sessions with the counsellor, dealing with our smaller problem will be easier/more difficult.
- Personally, I think our joint counselling sessions can contribute few/many things to solve the problem;
- My partner can contribute few/many things to solve the problem.

Please note: the use of circular questions helps to clarify each partner's point of view (e.g. What do I think? What do I think the other thinks? What does the other think I think?) For

Counselling FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)

Please also refer to the FAQs for the education sector.

What impact does an unequal legal situation have on LGBT relationships?

LGBT couples do not enjoy the same legal rights as heterosexuals do. This can affect their relationship in many concrete ways. For example, if one of the partners dies, the other can be thrown out of their common apartment if she/he is not the official owner/renter of the apartment (see the movie "Women" mentioned in the Handbook, Appendix 6). A gay or lesbian person cannot always join his or her partner in another EU country as heterosexuals do because many Member States still deny LGBT couples the right to housing and social welfare benefits. Furthermore, LGBT couples are often not encouraged or supported by others and must solve most of their problems by themselves. This lack of acceptance and support is generally a cause of stress for gays and lesbians. It has even more impact if it comes from the closest family members. Moreover, a hostile environment brings the couple closer and leads to its isolation.

Lastly, lesbians often suffer from double discrimination, because women and men are still not treated equally in many societies.

How does the everyday life of LGBT couples differ from that of heterosexual couples?

It can differ if their family, friends, neighbours, or colleagues have a problem with homosexuality, bisexuality and transsexuality. LGBT partners usually have to declare or justify their sexual orientation in public, while heterosexual couples don't, and this makes a difference in their lives. LGBTs have to come out and "label" themselves instead of "just going on with their lives" the way heterosexuals do. Com-

this to be effective, it is important that counsellors put the questions to both partners in exactly the same way.

The answers to these questions indicate the direction the counselling process will have to take.

If the partners express different opinions, it is important to work on their common aims. In the second step, change can be encouraged by asking the partners what could happen if a rating on they would change their ratings. A homework assignment for the couple in between sessions could be to ask them to pretend for one or several days that the positive changes have already happened.

Social environment as support

Aim: to work on the representation of the social environment of LGBT couples and identify sources of support in order to find solutions for problems.

Method:

1st step: Set Up

The couple is asked to set up a system with different coloured figures or symbols. These symbols represent themselves and the people of their social environment (members of both families, particular persons that are important to one or to both partners, children, former partners, counsellors, etc).

ing-out is a constant lifetime process for gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transsexuals.

How can I help LGBT persons who feel the need to meet other LGBT persons?

To help them avoid isolation, it might be a good idea to encourage them to contact and possibly join a LGBT youth group. If they are already beyond the age limit of youth groups, you could suggest they join other groups, such as a LGBT sports team. People living in small towns or villages may not always find these groups in their area and could try to and meet new people on the Internet. However, caution is required when making contacts on the Internet – anonymous users may not be who they claim to be.

If a person asks me: “Am I gay/lesbian or bisexual if I had same-sex sexual relations once or twice in my life?”

Most teenager boys have sexual experiences with other boys (for example, mutual masturbation). This is common even for those who define themselves as heterosexual. If you fall in love with someone of the same sex, you may be gay/lesbian/bisexual/transsexual, but not necessarily. Also self-defined heterosexuals may have affectionate moments and/or sexual experiences with persons of the same sex. Nowadays, the need for labelling their identity seems to be less important for some people. It would be more appropriate for counsellors to pay attention to the emotions of the person they are counselling and to the way he/she lives his/her relationships, rather than focusing on verbal labels.

It is important to bear in mind that, alongside the concept of homo-bisexuality, there is also the notion of bi-affectivity. For instance, this may mean that a person may perceive him/herself as homo-affective (i.e. he/she falls in love exclusively with persons of the same sex) and yet perceive him/herself as bisexual (i.e. he/she engages in sexual relations with both sexes).

2nd step: Perception

The partners explain who are the persons they represented during the set-up phase and explain the system from their point of view.

3rd step: Questions

- How static/ dynamic is the system?
- Where are the limits between the persons in the system?
- Which links exist?
- Who has contributed to stabilising the relationship in the past and how?
- Who was involved in finding solutions to the problems?
- Who supports the fact that the couple has sought out counselling and how?
- Which of the persons identified in the exercise best knows how the partners could cope with their current crisis?

4th step: Anticipating changes

The partners are invited to change the way the relationship is presented in terms of figures and symbols, and to move them to a different spot. What exactly would change then?

Please note: this exercise focuses attention on the social resources that could provide support to the couple. The representation of real persons with neutral symbols should not lead to interpretations of the role of those individuals. The point of the exercise is to look at the system as a whole.