

3 Different Lifestyles and Stereotypes

Introduction

First of all

There are many opinions about homosexuality and they vary according to the social and cultural context of peoples and individuals.

Those convictions are the result of the combination of a number of factors on which it's worth reflecting.

Stereotype: a rigid and conventional pattern of behaviour or discourse; preformed opinion, not based on direct experience. In general, stereotypes provide individuals with behavioural guidelines that are applicable even when the subject has no prior direct experience with a given situation. However, when stereotypes are used in an indiscriminate manner, they contribute to create and perpetuate prejudices. When the opinion is shared by a group of people, we talk about social prejudice. In this case, for instance, social stereotypes that refer to specific countries or to ethnic and religious traits may lead to racist behaviour.

Prejudice: preconception, judgement formed beforehand, not based on direct experience. It is a generalised and simplified perception of specific aspects of reality or of a person.

Discrimination: division, separation, tendency to apply different and worse conditions to people because they belong to a specific social group. Discrimination may be based on ethnicity, religion, geographic origin, cultural origin, sexual orientation, age, gender, body weight, financial status, socio-relational status, physical appearance, political beliefs, physical or mental disability, among many other things. Therefore, homophobia and racism, the main issues around which Crossing Diversity is conceived, are just two of the many types of discrimination which can be found among teens/young adults and in the environments in which they live (school, family, group of friends).

In particular, beliefs on homosexual people are usually based on rather traditional stereotypes regarding gender roles and sexuality. These, in turn, lead to a series of prejudices, which are usually negative, about homosexuals. These prejudices contribute internalising homophobia in LGBT persons and spreading it in their social environment, thus bringing about new forms of discrimination.

Many religious fundamentalisms view sexuality as sinful when it is expressed outside of specific social rules and rituals (e.g. marriage). Therefore, homosexuality is not viewed in a favourable way, indeed is seen as "scandalous" and its positive - both individual and social - aspects are denied. A young homosexual who belongs to a traditional religious or social community might find him/herself in a difficult position because he/she will have to deal with different levels of prejudice both outside his/her community, because he/she is a member of a discriminated group, and within his/her own community because he/she is a homosexual.

Basic information

In *Crossing Diversity*, on more than one occasion we suggest you personally meet and get to know LGBT people and organisations. Direct exchange and experience expose us to elements that might be dissonant with our conscious or unconscious stereotypes. Therefore, direct experience discourages the formation or preservation of existing stereotypes and the possible discriminating behaviour that might follow as a result of that.

Indeed, in the European Union, gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transsexuals have developed many different 'lifestyles'. For some LGBTs, the anti-discrimination aspect is paramount and therefore they create associations, wear symbols and promote equal rights, i.e. they live an "activist" lifestyle. For others, the priority is on social contact, romantic or sexual relationships, hence they prefer to join communities that organise meetings and events. Others are looking for a permanent and monogamous romantic relationship. Thus, the scenario is as varied as that of the majority of people; however, we can become aware of that only if we come into contact and interact with different behavioural models.

Contemporary societies, with their social and economic mobility, offer much more diversity and freedom for individuals to express their desires and peculiarities, especially regarding gender roles. With this greater diversity comes the need for mutual respect, acceptance and flexibility. Today, one of the basic principles of the EU is that all persons, couples or families, shall have equal rights and responsibilities, without regard to sexual orientation or any other personal characteristic, because they all share the same European citizenship. Most EU Member Countries provide legal recognition to homosexual couples and families and a growing number of countries allows these families to adopt children.

As acceptance towards homosexuality increases, gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transsexuals no longer feel the need to hide their homosexuality behind a heterosexual marriage and a traditional family, like they often used to. As a result, there are more and more gay men and lesbian women who have long-term relationships or have adopted or natural children. Studies show that children raised in such families do not lack affection or role models. However, these children do suffer when laws make good parenting difficult (e.g. by denying parental authority or legal recognition as a parent to the partner of the natural parent) or when others treat them in discriminatory ways.

What does this mean for me?

In your work inside and outside of the school setting, you will often encounter stereotypes, prejudices and discrimination toward homosexual people and families, due to the increasing number of coming out cases.

In Theme Map 2 (*LGBT Relationships*), you will find useful information on the possible ways to challenge the most common stereotypes in the “Basic information” section.

School is the place designed specifically to prevent distress and value the relational dimension in addition to the cultural one. Here young people, each with their own backgrounds and differences, come into contact with social values, including stereotypes and prejudices. It is precisely in the school, which is a space for dialogue, exchange and mutual listening, that we need to promote actions aimed at integrating and celebrating diversity, to be seen as an opportunity and potential for personal growth.

Today, everyone has the right to choose their own lifestyle, based on their wishes and on their own gender, cultural background, religion, age and other socially relevant aspects.

Consider for a moment the way in which your organisation or the people around you deal with lifestyles that are different from traditional ones. For instance, do employment criteria, workers’ benefits and internal regulations provide equal treatment to men and women, homosexual and heterosexual couples, citizens of your country and foreigners?

Indeed, counselling can help teens explore their feelings and needs by fostering the resolution of the internal and external conflicts that prevent them from freely choosing in their lives. At the same time, the school can provide teens with a safe and welcoming environment that promotes equitable exchange and respect for diversity, condemning and preventing any psychological, verbal or physical violence that may occur on its grounds by discussing and challenging distorted images and representations.

Education

(Teachers)

Bear in mind

It is important that you and your students acknowledge that dealing with differences is not always easy.

As educators, you can look at and analyse your own opinions about diverse lifestyles and LGBT issues.

Keep in mind that your teaching is very much influenced by your personality. For instance, if you talk to your students about diversity and different lifestyles, while at the same time you show that you don't approve of lifestyles which are too different from your own, your students will not take you seriously. Ask yourself these questions and then carefully read the questions included in the Counselling "Bear in mind" section:

- What lifestyle do you like or prefer? Why?
- Have you ever considered that there might be people who do not approve your lifestyle and choices?
- How do you feel when you are with people who don't approve your lifestyle? How would you like to be treated by them?
- Do you think that gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transexuals have specific lifestyles? What kind of lifestyles?

The next step is to prepare yourself to listen to the emotions and opinions of your students. You may also ask them the questions cited above. Try to imagine their answers before you begin the discussion.

- What will they think?
- How will they react to the topic of diversity?
- How will you feel while working with them on this topic – comfortable, insecure, threatened, etc.?

Keep in mind that you will increasingly have to deal with students who come from very different families and backgrounds, as regards culture and nationality, their own or their parents' sexual orientation, religion and lifestyles. As teachers, you have the duty to embrace this diversity – without discriminating or denying it - and to personally and professionally get in touch with it and turn this experience into a valuable learning and enriching opportunity for your students.

Education - FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)

Please also refer to the FAQs for the psycho/social/healthcare professionals.

How do I deal with opposing views on diversity in my class?

Welcome this as a good opportunity for discussion. The ground rule is: “all opinions are valid if they are expressed with respect for others and argued in a serious way”. Ask students to explain and explore their positions and promote curiosity about other points of view.

How do I make sure that LGBT issues will be dealt with in an objective manner?

You don't have to cover all the possible points of view, and it would impossible for you to do that, what is important is for you and your students to know the main points of view on sexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality and transexuality. The Crossing Diversity Handbook is a good place to start. Present it to your students, encourage them to use the included filmography, glossary, webliography and to contact listed associations. Give students the opportunity to share their thoughts and opinions, and you will be able to express yours, by being careful and not make your position act as guidelines for the teens' discussion.

How do I deal with parents who expect the school to promote their preferred lifestyle?

You need to explain to parents that the mission of the school is to teach respect and that this means also embracing diversity. Explain the goals of your educational method to the parents: to respect all differences, our differences as human beings.

Education - Tools

Defining normality

Aim: clarifying the relativity of the concepts of “normality” and “abnormality”, discussing the topic of “belonging” to and being excluded from a group.

Method: collect a series of pictures of men and women. Ask students to arrange the pictures in a line so that they constitute a continuum from “normal” to “abnormal”. Discuss where the boundary between these two extremes lies (this will certainly differ from person to person). Discuss why it differs.

Steer the discussion toward the definition of ‘normal’, ‘abnormal’, and their relation with the word ‘different’. Explain the concepts of belonging to a group (insiders) or being outside it (outsider) and analyse them. As we identify insiders, i.e. the members of a group, we automatically identify those who are excluded from that group. Then, analyse the effects of exclusion and the way to treat diversity with respect, including differences in sexual orientation.

Please note: this exercise is suitable even for young teens, however they must be aware of their own points of view and trained to critically process information. Those students who grew up in cultures that place particular emphasis on ‘collectivity’ will find this exercise rather difficult and will be more sensitive to the reactions of others. In order to obviate this block, the discussion can start tackling general topics (including smoking, going out at night, etc.) and various opinions about normality and abnormality relating to such issues, stressing the different pressure exerted by groups for conformity to any social norm.

Integration of diversity

Aim: to introduce the concept of “diversity” through the topic of cultural diversity.

Method: place the focus on cultural stereotypes and prejudices against cultures different from one’s own.

Ask students to talk about episodes in their own life in which they met people from different cultures and had to confront views and lifestyles different from their own.

Ask them how they felt when they met these people, if there had been something that scared or disturbed them or, instead, that made them curious and also ask them about situations in which they felt “different” and how they felt.

Then you can ask students to act out the stories they told in front of the class, suggesting to switch roles (e.g. to play the part of the “different” character in the story), so as to provide the teens with the opportunity to “physically put themselves in the shoes of the other” and to experience what “feeling what the other feels” (empathy) is. At the end, ask students whether they have discovered something new and what it was.

Please note: you can start from these types of experiences and then broaden the scope of the exercise to include sexual diversity and prejudices and stereotypes connected with it.

Labels

Aim: to explore how stereotypes work and show how labelling reinforces stereotypical behaviour.

Method: glue a label with a stereotype (e.g. ‘lazy’, ‘rude’) on the forehead of every participant. Don’t let them see what is written on their label. Students may look at other people’s labels but must not reveal their content. Participants now have to carry out a simple collaboration exercise (e.g. the group has to choose a recipe and cook a meal. They have to decide who will do the shopping, who will cook, who will do the dishes, etc.). During this exercise, students have to behave in accordance to the stereotype written on their labels. Stop the exercise after a few minutes and discuss the effect it had on the students. Usually, participants feel disoriented, sometimes they are frustrated and many start to behave accordingly to their label. This is a demonstration of how stereotypes unconsciously influence our and others’ behaviours. Expand the discussion to include the labels used for gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transexuals.

Please note: this exercise works best when the students know and trust each other to some extent. With new groups, there is a chance that people will unintentionally offend others. Be careful not to give the labels that are considered as being the most negative ones to students who are already excluded from the group of their classmates.



A STORY...



“Alexander, do me a favour, give me the invitation to the Parents’ Evening, please. Hans would like to come and he wants to make a note of the date.” Flabbergasted, Alexander stares at his father. “Oh, come on, Dad. Why does Hans have to come with us?”

“We’ve been living together for five years. Hans is like a second father to you, isn’t he?” “Yes, but – honestly, can’t you go there just with Mum anyway? That would be much better, really.”

“Darling, being gay is quite normal. You see Mum only every second weekend and the everyday things, your homework – Hans and I look after everything that concerns you. Don’t we? At your school, they should have gotten the idea by now, Hans is just as responsible for you as I am. He has permission to write letters to the school for you, and to talk to the teachers about your achievements.

All in all, he’s more for you than I myself. I don’t want to hide Hans, or disavow him.”

“Yeah, sure, I understand that. But even so, it doesn’t have to become common knowledge. My life’s already stressing enough without this. You always think that accepting homosexuality is easy for every single person on Earth – just because Hans and you know thousands of lesbians and gays. Believe me, the school is a complete desert in this respect. I can already picture the teacher standing in front of me. Her face will be full of spite, she’ll smirk, but, of course, she’s completely tolerant,” groans Alexander.

“Don’t you think you’re overdoing it a little, Alexander?” His father looks at him closely. “Hans and I’ll get it right. The time will come when your miserable journey through this desert will draw to an end.”

“Okay, then I’ll go and get myself buried. By the way, Hans has pinned the invitation to the Parents’ Evening on the wall,” sighs Alexander.

“Good morning everyone”, Mrs. Steiner greets her class and glances over the pupils’ heads. Alexander squirms restlessly back and forth on his seat. As his eyes meet those of the teacher, Alex stiffens like a stone pillar.

“Now then,” begins the teacher, drumming her fingers on her desk. “Alexander, wouldn’t you like to tell us something about your two fathers, and about how you manage?”

Thirty-two pairs of eyes are fixed on Alex.

“I manage all right” cries out Alex and his voice sounds squawky, raven-like.

“Two fathers? What does she mean? ”, asks Kathrin, who just doesn’t understand when she’s putting her foot in it.

“Alex?” The teacher raises her voice and looks at him provokingly.

“What does it mean?” Suddenly Alex loses his temper. He stares at his classmates, straight in their eyes. “My father is gay. He loves another man. So I have two fathers and one mother.” He wants to make his voice sound proud, but in reality it trembles suspiciously.

“But it’s perverse”, cries out Erkan. “Revolted. In their place, I would hide in the darkest corner of the earth and pray I become normal again, instead of standing out like that. Yuck!”

“My father’s normal,” says Alexander with a quiet voice.

“Are there other opinions about this?” Mrs. Steiner looks around.

“It’s possible to undergo treatment”, remarks Kathrin.

“My father does not have to undergo any treatment,” hisses Alexander.

“He’s absolutely okay, and so is Hans. People like you, who don’t accept this, you are the ones who need a therapy.”

“What do you want?” Erkan stands up menacingly. “What the hell are you saying? Come here, twit, I’ll show you who’s normal and who isn’t, you revolting faggot.” He grabs Alex by the shoulders and shakes him.



The class is still. Mrs. Steiner runs her fingers through her shock of hair, but stays glued on the spot, and drops of sweat form on her brow.

Koray stands up deathly white. "Excuse me" he whispers. "I'm feeling sick."

"Sissy", hisses Erkan at him, and spits in despise on the floor between Koray and Alex. "One more perverse word, man, and you're dead," Erkan warns Alexander, before slamming a powerful punch at him. Alex resists the blow without dropping to the floor through sheer luck.

"That's not acceptable, Erkan", says the teacher, helplessly. "Now you apologise to Alexander and you, Koray please sit down again."

"Me? Ask a perv for forgiveness?" sneers Erkan. "He's the one who must apologise to me, Mrs Steiner, just to make matters clear."

"Nowadays homosexuality is absolutely normal", says Mrs. Steiner uncertainly. "Alexander's father can't help it if he's become that way."

"Alright, I'm leaving now, that's quite enough for me, Mrs. Steiner," whispers Alexander. Before Mrs Steiner even tries to say anything, he has already left the room.

"It's really very nice of you, to receive me on such short notice." Mrs. Steiner, embarrassed, stares at the tips of her shoes.

"Mrs. Steiner, it seems to me that Alexander is in a very difficult position within his class – didn't you ever talk about homosexuality in your class before?"

"It's not part of the teaching programme," replies Mrs Steiner with an almost defiant look on her face.

"Yes, unfortunately", admits Mr. Wyler, the advisor. "So we're agreed. Next week I'll be attending your lessons."

There's absolute silence in the class.

"I'm very pleased to be with you today. I won't bore you with figures, but it's not quite unavoidable – sorry folks. But you don't have to write anything for me", grins Mr. Wyler and some of the pupils, boys and girls, grin back at him.

"About one in every ten young people is homosexual. Hmm... in your class that would mean about three pupils. Imagine you couldn't talk about it to each other, that you always had to hide for fear of being excluded." Mr. Wyler considers the class for a few moments

"Some of you must have a very good idea of what it feels like to be excluded, don't you?"

"But you don't have to flaunt it – being different, I mean," says Erkan softly.

"Human beings all differ from one another", says Mr Wyler. "Surely, there are lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transexuals who live openly – who have fought for the right to live like that, to be allowed to marry, and to be able to get common custody for their children. Just as there are homosexuals, bisexuals and transexuals who tell no one about their feelings. Some marry a partner of the other gender and secretly pursue their sexual orientation. There are lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transexuals who live in communities, some who live together without marrying and others who want to live alone, even if they do have a relationship with someone. Not much difference, really, with respect to heterosexuals."

"But the important thing is that two human beings truly do love each other.

That's what's important", Alexander dares to say.

"A nice final word for this lesson", pipes up Mrs. Steiner.

"Just in case one of you wants to talk to me about it, I'll leave my telephone number here."

In the courtyard Mr. Wyler turns around once again. "Hey, you were sitting in that class, right?"

Koray nods. "Thank you, Mr. Wyler. Maybe I'm one of those three. I'd like to come to your counselling hour some day."

"Sure", says Mr Wyler.»



Counselling

(Psycho/social/healthcare professionals)

Bear in mind

If you counsel LGBT teenagers, belonging to your or other cultures, or to their parents, it is very important for you to be clear about your own opinions about homosexuality and sexuality in general. Everyone has their own lifestyle and probably thinks that the lifestyles of others are less appropriate. If you are not aware of your own views on these topics, you will be more inclined to unconsciously view certain lifestyles in a negative way.

To be more aware of your own view on life choices that are different from your own, try to answer the following questions and then read those for the education sector:

- What kind of life do you personally prefer?
- Did you 'choose' your lifestyle freely or were there external factors that steered you in that direction?
- Why have you chosen this specific lifestyle for yourself?
- Is there anyone who disapproves of your lifestyle? Why? How do you deal with this?
- Which life choices are easier for you to respect? Which ones aren't? Why is that?
- More in general, what is your attitude towards diversity in sexual, ethnic, religious, social and financial status?
- Do you know enough about the issues of LGBT teenagers who come from different cultures? (For instance, a person who grew up in a strictly religious context will have a completely different approach to homosexuality than a person coming from a more liberal family).

Keep in mind that there are many different ways to enjoy a fulfilling life. Some may be totally new to you, so don't be surprised if the people you are counselling have original approaches!

Here is some brief information that could be useful for your counselling work:

- LGBT teenagers lack positive role models. This may lead them to feel insecure towards homosexual lifestyles and to adopt stereotypical gay or lesbian behaviours learned from the media. Meeting with an open-minded, informed and non-biased counsellor can give them the opportunity to re-think and re-shape their lifestyle to conform to their own desires.
- Show the teen that there is no objective criteria for the evaluation of lifestyles. It is important to underline that the main criteria people should use for evaluating their lifestyle should be their own happiness and satisfaction.
- Find out about local self-help groups where can meet and exchange experiences and perceptions.
- Some LGBT teenagers may fear that they will not have a family because they are not heterosexual. This fear is often connected to their unhappiness with their current life. Many of them change their opinion when they realise that they can have their own type of family that is just as authentic and fulfilling as any other

Counselling - FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)

Please also refer to the FAQs for the education sector.

How can I avoid judging certain life choices that I disapprove of?

In most situations, we are judgemental of another lifestyle because we can't imagine what it is really like.

Remember that nobody is asking you to change your choices but just to imagine other possible choices and, hopefully, to be aware that some people may find your way of life strange, too. It is only natural for you to prefer one lifestyle over another and not to perceive lifestyles different than your own as equally suitable to you. However, keep in mind that your own opinions are adequate exclusively for your own life and that things may look completely different from someone else's point of view.

What answers I can give a homosexual person who is unhappy with his/her life?

People who are unhappy with their life often have not had the opportunity to make different life choices because of the personal or societal limits. They need to know that there is not only one way of living as a gay/lesbian/bisexual/transsexual person. Today there are many more opportunities than in the past to live a fulfilling life outside mainstream clichés. One needs to be aware of his/her most authentic needs and desires, to be able to realise that he/she is not isolated and that there is a variety of social dynamics that can meet those needs and desires, but also that one needs to do commit and make sacrifices as the construction of our lives is not "automatic".

How can I help the LGBT persons I am counselling to feel less isolated and learn about available opportunities for social inclusion?

In almost every city, there are many LGBT self-help groups that you can contact to find out more information on events and available services. Today, the Internet is a real goldmine of information on resources available in your local area or within easy reach of it. Start from the links included in the Crossing Diversity Handbook and don't hesitate to pass them on to them.



Counselling - Tools

The Two Chairs

Aim: to explore inner needs and external expectations, and the conflicts that can arise between the two.

Method: arrange two chairs face to face. One chair symbolises external expectations represented by an authoritative and emotionally significant person, while the other one represents personal needs. The person sits first on one chair, then on the other, and tries to express only the needs and emotions that position symbolises. How does he/she feel on the different chairs? Each time, how does he/she feel about what the other is expressing? What would they tell to the person sitting on the other chair?

Please note: whether we feel comfortable with our lifestyle may depend on our degree of sensitivity to social desirability pressures, i.e. to what extent we try to meet the expectations to of others.

The Mirror

Aim: to explore self-images.

Method: the person closes his/her eyes and imagine he/she is sitting in front of a mirror reflecting his/her image. What would he/she criticise about the lifestyle of the person in front of him/her? What would he/she admire?

Please note: this experience works on two levels: physical appearance (this is what most teenagers will do at first) and other characteristics, feelings and behaviours you can help him/her link to the lifestyle. You have to help the person to visualise him/herself as an individual who is actually sitting in front of him/her, and emotionally participate in this experience for the exercise to work.

The Fairy Godmother

Aim: to explore unconscious or repressed needs and fantasies about the future.

Method: ask the person to imagine that a fairy godmother comes to him/her and asks how he/she wants to live.

- 1) Write down the fantasies expressed by the person
- 2) Review together what prevents him/her from actually living as he/she wants.

Please note: it is not important to establish whether or not the fears that the person has about living according to his/her desires are justified. Even if they are not, you have to take them seriously into consideration, otherwise the person will feel you don't understand him/her. One's personal constructions of the self and the world, as well as the relating emotional experiences made over time, reflect a subjective truth that is the background to the present emotional context, where the person's choices and, to some extent, his/her whole life construction stem from.