

8 History and Culture

Introduction

First of all

Homosexual romantic and sexual relationships have always existed. Only their form and the conditions under which they have and still are experienced have changed over time, depending on the meaning each culture attributes to sexual orientation.

Today, for instance, multiple identities exist side by side and they can't always be classified using a specific term (e.g. lesbian, gay, bisexual, heterosexual, transexual, queer, transgender, etc.) In European history, homosexuals have been persecuted for a long time because of social prejudice. This persecution was first justified with theological arguments ("sin") and later with pseudo-scientific evidence that led to label homosexuality as a disease or as a mental disorder. In fact, the term "homosexuality" was coined in the 19th century and transformed the "sin" and/or the "crime" of homosexuality (which, in some cases carried the death penalty) into a disease.

Today, scientific research has proved that gays and lesbians are as healthy as heterosexuals and that their problems do not derive from their sexual orientation but from the discrimination by and the culture of the environment they live in.

Criminal prosecution of homosexual acts has been abolished in all European countries – initially in France in the late 18th century and then in the remaining countries during the 20th century. At the end of the 19th century, several political and social organisations for homosexual men and women were created. In the 20th century, the women's liberation movement and the gay and lesbian movement promoted more openness in general about constraint-free sexuality and contributed to the creation of a positive gay and lesbian identity.

It is worth pointing out that history, as it is told in books, is a man-dominated history and that is why we know just a few historical female figures and, especially, lesbians. In fact, the low visibility of lesbians is one of the specific types of discrimination homosexual women have to deal with in everyday life.

Basic information

In specific historical periods and in the different societies, same-sex relationships took on many different forms and meanings. Some societies don't talk, and neither did in the past, about homosexuality but only make a distinction between active and passive sex, where the latter is devalued. This value judgement is based on the traditional sexist division of male and female gender roles, highlighting the higher valuing of whatever is traditionally associated to men over women. In this cultural construct, so-called "passive" men are seen as if they were a sort of women and therefore this "feminisation" makes them "inferior" to "active" men.

All these forms differ quite a lot from 'modern homosexuality', i.e. same-sex relationships between adults who identify as gay or lesbian. In these 'modern' relationships, the sexual behaviour and the division of tasks is subject to negotiation and is not traditional.

Culturally accepted forms of same-sex relationships

In ancient Greece, same-sex relationships were accepted and encouraged on the condition that they

were carried out between adult men and boys. Relationships between men were a means of reinforcing the rules and customs of male power, of transmitting philosophical knowledge but also of reinforcing the personal bonds between warriors.

Native Americans had a special respect for the so-called 'two-spirits' or 'Berdaches'. These people were considered neither men nor women. They were often revered experts in medicine and the arts.

"Berdachism" had a mystical and spiritual dimension, whilst in the Western and modern notion of homosexuality a person identity's core is sexual orientation.

Some Native American cultures consider sexual orientation and gender identity as being unrelated. Another conception of same-sex relationships may be seen in the original Indian religion where, before the onset of the current patriarchal philosophy, aversion against same-sex relationships was unknown. There even were homosexual divinities, as can still be seen in temple sculptures and in epic books, poetry and literature.

The influence of the monotheist religions

In countries where the three biggest monotheist religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam) were predominant, homosexuality has been strongly stigmatised for millennia. Although same-sex relationships have always existed in Europe and the Middle East throughout history, Christianity considered homosexual behaviour as illegitimate.

In the Middle Ages, for instance, women were sometimes denounced as witches when they were too independent, particularly when they lived with other women.

In 16th-century Italy, sexual relations between young men were very common, while sex with a woman before marriage was strictly forbidden. In those times, it was quite common for masters, servants and friends to sleep in the same bed.

In the 19th century, the new scientific approach to sexuality partially shifted same-sex relationships from the theological into the medical realm.

Even now, people have very different views on homosexuality. Next to openly gay and lesbian lifestyles, there are many others. For instance, in the Mediterranean region, homosexual practices are very common, however they cannot be publicly mentioned. In some Islamic cultures, same-sex attraction is seen as natural and is considered very seductive. As long as Muslims do not display such behaviour in public, many homosexual practices are allowed, especially because heterosexual sex before marriage is forbidden. Despite the claims of many fundamentalist activists, homosexuality can in no way be thought of as an entirely novel or as a "Western" or "colonialist" phenomenon.



What does this mean for me?

The historical development of sexual and affective customs (including same-sex relationships) may be an important topic to discuss both in schools and during counselling. Understanding how cultural definitions and identities changed over time is important. However, this is not just a philosophical exercise: historical and cultural definitions help to shape the present. Reflecting on the changes in historical and social development can make young people more aware of the origins of current lifestyles. It can help them understand how some social definitions have developed over time and allows them to contextualise behaviours, norms and definitions within a given historical period and see that they are not absolute truths but a function of the historical context.

Education

(Teachers)

Bear in mind

Historiography is not an objective science. The interpretation of history has often been used as a means of promoting or opposing change. By becoming aware of historical developments and influences, we could learn to recognise how the present has been shaped by the past and, in this way, it could be easier to find the resources to change it. What do you think about that?

Many specialists believe that values, ideals and customs concerning sexuality and the differences between men and women change over time and play an important role in social control. Do you agree?

Do you believe that some historical developments influenced your own way of having sexual and relational experiences? And the ways of your parents and grandparents? Which factors have limited or fostered your self-consciousness about their and your gender identity and role, sexual orientation?

Sexuality and homosexuality are interesting and controversial aspects of our social and cultural history.

In what way could the historical and social aspects of homosexuality and sexuality in general be covered?

In your view, what is important for your students to learn from these classroom lectures?

Education - FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions)

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

Where can I get information about gays, lesbians and bisexuals in history?

You can find a lot of interesting information on the Internet at the Wikipedia sites. Please also see the pages dedicated to your Country in Appendices 3 and 4 of the *Crossing Diversity Handbook*. They will provide you with a starting point for a very interesting and surprising exploration.

Which historical figures were homosexual or bisexual?

There were many. To name a few: Sappho, Socrates, Plato, Alexander the Great, Aristotle, King David and Jonathan of Israel, the Roman Emperors Hadrian and Trajan, Richard I (the Lionheart) of England, Erasmus, Montezuma II of the Aztecs, Edward II of England, Henry III (King of France and Poland), James I of England, Louis XIII of France, Karl XII of Sweden, Christina of Sweden, Peter I of Russia, Frederic II of Prussia, Christian II of Denmark, Statholder William of Orange (later King of England), Alexander I of Russia, Ludwig II of Bavaria, Christina of Sweden and the last Chinese emperor Pu Yi.

However, the homosexuality/bisexuality of the majority of these figures was not historically relevant, in the sense that their feelings or orientation did not in themselves make a difference for history as such, and the same goes for famous heterosexuals in history. Still, many gays, lesbians and bisexuals perceive these historical figures are as important positive role models that strengthen their own identity and self-esteem.

How much do I have to know about the historical and cultural aspects of sexuality in order to be able to teach them to my students?

You don't need a lot of information. The most important thing is to know and to be able to convey the variety of emotions, values, attitudes and practices which have existed in different times and places. Of course, it helps to have some examples of that at hand. Also the students can help you find them. Involving students in a research project on contemporary homosexual figures is a very good way of showing that today homosexuality is a visible and ordinary feature of the life of many persons who play a prominent role in their own communities.

What happened at the Stonewall Inn?

An important historical turning point in gay rights was the outbreak of riots at the Stonewall Inn, a very popular bar for gays, lesbians, and transvestites on Christopher Street in New York City. This was the first case of organised resistance against ongoing harassment and raids by the police. The bar was regularly raided and the managers and patrons were insulted and arrested by the police. The police often gave the names of the arrested to family and employers, which often exposed these people to social isolation and made lose their job. During a raid in June 1969, the Inn's manager and patrons rebelled against the police. The next day, the gay movement in New York organised a demonstration which ended in a fight with the police and resulted in riots going on for several days. This event is celebrated in many countries with an annual gay and lesbian parade called Gay Pride parade or, sometimes, "Christopher Street Day".

It is remarkable that most of the people have forgot that the first to react was a group of transvestites, which included a number of African Americans.

Education - Tools

Stories

Aim: to make teenagers aware of the way they were raised to perceive sexuality.

Method: ask students how they were educated on gender identity and roles, as well as sexuality. Ask them as well what information – which they deem important – they did not receive and how they compensated. An alternative approach could be to ask the students to ask their parents and grandparents (or whoever raised them) information on how they (the family members or caretakers) learned all this. Have them ask them as well what information and values they wanted to convey to their own children, what difficulties they were confronted with, and whether they think they succeeded.

In the second stage, the students can discuss which differences they see between their stories.

Make them discuss conflicts that may arise between educators and pupils. How were they resolved?

Another follow-up can be to ask the teens how they intend to deal with these topics with their own children. What will they do if their children have opinions that differ from their own? What if their child was homosexual?

Please note: bear in mind that the student may feel embarrassed about disclosing certain elements about their private, personal, and family lives, and, possibly, their sexual orientation. Moreover, parents and grandparents who are interviewed on subjects such as sexuality might feel uneasy and they might perceive the questions as a provocation from the young family member, or unwanted school interference. Prepare the students for this beforehand and take care they don't violate the personal boundaries of the adults.

Heroines and Heroes

Aim: to explore the importance of historical figures as role models for young LGBTs.

Method: ask the students to list famous historical figures they consider as role models in some way. Explore why these people are important as examples of creativity, independence, strength, honesty ... Pay attention to which role models are chosen by minority students and explore whether this has something to do with their condition.

Then tell the students that having role models is especially important for minorities. Ask them why (because minorities are marginally appreciated, positive role models and examples help correct negative images) and help them express their opinions.

Extend the discussion to homosexuality by asking which role models are important for gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transexuals. You may also choose to discuss historical figures that are important to LGBTs (see FAQs), or discuss more recent examples like Virginia Woolf, Oscar Wilde, Marcel Proust, Freddy Mercury, Pedro Almodovar, etc. Alternatively, you could show a picture of a non-European role model for gays, lesbians and bisexuals, such as Oum Khalsoum, the Egyptian female singer.

Please note: depending on the intellectual level and interest of your students, you could go into a more personal discussion about current gay, lesbian and bisexual role models (e.g. pop stars) or into a more academic discussion about why gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transexuals feel the need to know about historical figures that bear witness to the homosexual presence throughout history.

Another option is to analyse the representation of gays and lesbians in movies by showing a movie or documentary (see *Appendix 6 of the Crossing Diversity Handbook*) and then discussing their content with the teens.

A STORY...

My friend from the gay/lesbian Jewish group “Sjalhomo” is probably the only person I can talk to about this,” thinks Aaron to himself as he makes his way to the meeting centre. The thoughts in his head are so mixed up that he can’t make sense of them anymore. He really likes his teacher, Mr. Lanssen, who teaches his favourite subjects: History, Philosophy, and Dutch. He has often wondered whether his teacher’s ability to understand so many things has

anything to do with him being in a wheelchair and therefore constantly having to fight the stereotypes against disabled people. Since Aaron realised he was gay, he started being more and more interested in finding out which famous male and female figures in history, philosophy and literature were homosexual. How could Mr. Lanssen skip over such a crucial thing? Maybe he was crazy to give homosexuality such an important place in his life, but everything had changed since he realised that he was gay. In many ways, gays see the world through different eyes. That’s why he had to know if any of the free thinkers, freedom fighters or great writers had been gay, too. At any rate, in school nobody had ever talked about this. He had always excelled in History and Philosophy, however, over the last six months, he had distanced himself more and more from classroom study and his classmates. When he’s sitting alone in his room, he has no problems studying, but his class attendance is now close to zero.

...

“Aaron, I’ve noticed for some time now that you haven’t been participating in class. Are you having problems at home, or maybe love problems? I have always been honest with you. What’s going on?”

“Will my grades stay the same even if you’re not satisfied with my participation in class?”

Aaron stares at his shoes, embarrassed.

“Of course not. Since I know that something is troubling you and that that’s why you’ve become so quiet, I’d like to make you an offer. Prepare an oral presentation on a Philosophy or History topic of your choice. If you can make a great presentation, you’ll be back on track, OK?”

“Thanks, Mr. Lanssen.”

To go to the university, you have to have good grades on your final exams. But could he risk including the theme of famous homosexual personalities into his oral presentation?

What if Mr. Lanssen did not agree?

Aaron is certain that there have always been gays and lesbians throughout history, but that these cases have been passed over in silence. He just had to find them!!

...

“Shalom, Aaron, you seem lost in thought!.” Josef takes him in his arms with a big smile. “Is there anything wrong, my love?”

“Oh, Josef, I have to do an oral presentation in front of my class.” And then Aaron tells him the whole story.

The other members the “Sjalhomo” Jewish gay group come closer, one by one, to listen to him.

“I’ve been wondering which famous women in history were lesbians. It’s important to know, and besides, it’s exciting,” commented Yael.

“Have you already tried the Internet?” asks Dani, who always looks up everything on the Web.

“Good idea,” said Aaron. “Can you help me?”

“I’ve already written a very thorough essay on this topic, Aaron. After all, I’m a student of Philosophy.”

Aaron turns to stare at Josef.

“But you never told me!” exclaims Aaron, surprised.

“Better late than never,” joked Josef. “Now, Aaron, if you want to pass History and Philosophy, I suggest you choose Erasmus. He was born in 1469 and lived until 1536. He was a revolutionary in its time and was very modern as a theologian but also a pedagogue. Basically, he was much more of a humanist than a theologian and he was famous in his time. He even fought for women’s rights. He promoted the liberation movement at various levels. And the best part is that he was gay. Choose

him as your essay topic, Aaron. It will be great, you’ll see. I can help you.”

"All right," said Aaron with a smile.

"Mr. Lanssen, I'm preparing my presentation and I wanted to discuss the topic with you. Only if you have time, of course."

"I'm glad you took up my offer so quickly. What's the essay about?"

"It's essentially about Erasmus. The name must surely mean something to you."

"As indeed it should. Erasmus is considered the founding father of enlightened thought."

"Did you think that maybe Erasmus had a very personal motive for representing the humanistic school of thought?"

"No, to be honest. Did you think about it?"

"Yes, that's why I chose him. Did you know that he was gay?"

"Oh...! No, I didn't know that. And you think that his homosexuality played a major role in his thinking?"

"Unfortunately, it's too late for me to ask him – it's just a theory. But that's the basis of my essay."

"It's unusual and it will perhaps make you interested in my lessons again"

"Yes, I didn't want to keep my homosexuality a secret from the others any more."

"A very personal motive, then" says Mr. Lanssen with a smile. Even if I agree with your choice of topic, Aaron, I would like you to keep in mind that in Erasmus' time, homosexuality was not as accepted and talked about as it is today, and it definitely wasn't called that way. It's always very tricky to force a definition on someone who can't say anything about it any more. I'll accept your topic with this one limitation, is that okay?"

"I'll have to think about it a little longer, then" answers Aaron.

"May I take a look at what you've already written?"

"The introduction is already finished. The part about Erasmus still needs to be refined. And the last part will talk about homosexuality today. This is why I'll need another week."

"That's fine," said Mr. Lanssen, as he began to read.

History is like a field of flowers in the spring, filled with memories of past journeys and lives that, from the past, want to tell a story. One can always find what he is looking for. Throughout the centuries, millions of personal stories have been told and in many of these stories people have asked themselves the same questions about love and being loved, about pride, about being accepted or persecuted. These events have already occurred many times, sometime, somewhere... For a long time, ancient Greece – home of the ancient poet Sappho – was seen by gays, lesbians and bisexuals as a sort of paradise. But precisely at that time in history, Athens' laws introduced restrictions on homosexuality. Public opinion felt that a man should have a wife and children. A relationship between a man and a boy was accepted provided that was part of the boy's education. Sometime this relationship was passionate, sometimes it was more for educational purposes. But for the lovers, growing up was hard.

The first persecutions of homosexuals began at the time of the early Christians.

During the later Roman Empire, some Emperors subjected gay men to castration; in the Middle Ages homosexuals were even burned alive. Some examples of homosexuality reappear in the 12th century with "amour courtois" (chivalrous love), which was not limited to heterosexual affections.

Although we don't know much about the homosexual aspects of "amour courtois", We know the Pope declared that such romantic relationships were not to be of homosexual nature. This implies that there were indeed chivalrous homosexual affairs.

During the Renaissance, some artists expressed their homo-erotic feelings more visibly. The writings of Plato were translated. Although homosexuality was still officially forbidden at this time, some men were gay, including Leonardo da Vinci. At the age of 24, he was prosecuted because he had a relationship with a 17-year-old boy. Later, he had a relationship with the young Caprotti which lasted for 25 years.

Michelangelo was proud of his homosexual identity and his work was an ode to the love for men.

"I just can't wait to see how it continues," said Mr. Lanssen. "I'll finish reading it next Friday."



Counselling

(Psycho/social/healthcare professionals)

Bear in mind

We all live in cultural and historical contexts whose values determines, at least in part, our ways of thinking and feelings.

The influence exerted by history and culture should be taken into consideration and analysed, especially by those professions whose primary work tool is building relationships with people (e.g. psychologists, social workers, teachers, doctors, etc.). Always keep in mind that your own personal history has an influence on the way you relate with people.

To which particular culture do you belong? Do you believe your culture influences your professional behaviour? How?

Even scientific theories are subject to historical and cultural changes: for instance, until a few decades ago, psychiatry, psychology and psychoanalysis ignored or misunderstood homosexuality, up to the point that they considered it as an affective disorder.

Over time, this theory was discarded based on new evidence produced by scientific research, which was in turn stimulated by a new emerging cultural sensitivity. Indeed, homosexual men and women have gradually stopped hiding and started showing the world the serenity with which they lived their romantic and affective relationships. This process was all then linked to the fight for human rights and respect for diversity. These instances emphasised the need for more rigorous and unbiased scientific research and widened the range of possible results, allowing science to recognize that homosexuality is one of the natural and possible outcomes of the psycho-affective development of human beings.

It is not always easy to talk about sexuality in counselling but it is very important to encourage people to consider some important points including, for instance: what were you taught about sexuality when you were growing up? What was the history of homosexuality in your culture? Were there homosexuals in your community, and how did they express themselves? How has it changed over the years? If you will have the chance of working with persons who come from different cultures from your own, you will be surprised by how many different and interesting stories exist in the world.

During sessions, you might encounter openly homophobic attitudes: make sure you carefully select your response and remember that respect for cultural diversity should not be confused with acritical acceptance of the many cultural variations of crime and injustice. Anyway, countering homophobia in a given culture does not mean imposing one's own "modern" culture, but rather making human rights the cornerstone of your personal and professional value system and, basically, helping the person to gain greater social inclusion. Instead, when you detect signs of interiorised homophobia that do not allow that person to enjoy a harmonious affective/sexual life, remember that you have the professional duty to help him/her overcome this evolutionary obstacle and achieve greater personal integration.

Counselling - FAQs

(Frequently Asked Questions)

Please also refer to the FAQs for the education sector.

How to deal with cultural differences when counselling LGBT persons?

It is more important to be frank than to have a lot of knowledge. A bit of background information and factual knowledge (for example using the “right” words) can break the ice. Don’t be afraid to be honest about what you don’t know.

Can counselling be effective when the counsellor and the LGBT person come from different cultures?

Yes, it is. Obviously, mutual understanding will be easier when the counsellor will show that person that he/she does not see his/her own culture as the paradigm to which that person must conform but just as one of the many possible cultures. That person will feel at ease if he/she will perceive the authentic curiosity of the counsellor towards the meanings, values and customs that are rooted in his/her own culture. This normally reduces the person’s need to defend him/herself and in turn stimulates the same level of curiosity for the differences of others or of the host society. Keep in mind that cultural exchange is an exciting game, that the nature of every human being is characterized by plasticity and by the capability of learning and adapting. Cultural exchange is the main driver of human evolution and everyone of us takes part in it, even during a counselling session. When you think that it may be preferable to refer the person you are counselling to a colleague who specialises in LGBT issues, try contacting the gay and lesbian associations in your area and they will surely provide you with a list of specialists.

Counselling - Tools

Identifying Historical and Cultural Messages about Homosexuality

Aim: to explore historical and cultural messages about homosexuality which are relevant to that person’s personal situation.

Method: give the person you are counselling something to read about views on homosexuality in different historical and cultural moments. Ask him/her what messages about sexuality and homosexuality did he/she receive as a child and as a teen. Explain that the way gays and lesbians perceive themselves and their identity is influenced by their own history and culture.

Compare this with another story that shows a different view on homosexuality (it is particularly useful if you can find a story from that person’s own culture).

Please note: whichever reading material you choose, it should somehow be linked to the current situation of that person. It could give examples of role models, it could help to relax rigid opinions or it could foster the contextualisation of the heterosexual norms that limit his/her living conditions, thinking or behaviour.

An Extended Family Tree

Obiettivo: Aim: exploring historical and cultural messages about homosexuality that are relevant to the situation of the person.

Method: let the person draw an ‘extended family’ tree (with all people who are affectively relevant for Him/her) with these questions:

1. What is the relation with the persons he/she has drawn or how are they related?

What can I do in cases of double or multiple discrimination (e.g. the person is discriminated for being gay/lesbian/bisexual/transsexual and Muslim)?

In these cases, the aim should be to help the person integrate the contradictory aspects of his/her identity. This is possible if the person will understand, with your help, that he/she is first and foremost a human being bearing the right to life, freedom and personal safety. Moreover, he/she has the right to freely live his/her personal orientation and to pursue his/her own happiness. Even if that person lives in a very repressive culture or has low self-esteem because of the homophobia and/or racism he/she experienced, he/she will surely perceive you as an ally in the pursuit of his/her own wellbeing. This work, which may take a long time, can lead to the creation of a sort of bi-culturalism, a new and personal organic integration of his/her "cultures" that allows him/her to move between them. The ability to use multiple cultural codes allows that person to use the resources of each culture according to his/her needs.

Culture is definitely not something unchangeable; actually, it is continuously changing, adjusting, crossbreeding, and synthesizing.

How do I deal with the issue of sexuality with individuals who have a strong sense of decency?

Dealing with sexuality means dealing with the most intimate sphere of people. You need to build up a good alliance with reference to the ongoing process. A good method consists in letting the person ask you the questions he/she more cares about, instead of you asking him/her. If it is really necessary to ask questions, you better ask them in a less direct manner, always giving the person the opportunity of stating that he/she does not want to answer. In particular cases, you can invite the person to write about sexuality instead of talking about it. This show of respect will surely encourage gradual building of trust and rapport.

2. Where do they come from, where were they born?
3. Which of these people had an important role in your personal and sexual evolution?
4. Which of these people gave you messages about homosexuality? What kind of messages?
5. Which of them support you?
6. How do you deal with people, if any, who don't support you or have a negative attitude?
7. How can you add more people who will support you to your extended family tree?

Please note: this exercise may take several sessions. Don't push people to answer the last questions when they are not psychologically ready for it. Many homosexual migrants will feel such a loyalty to their current social network that it may be difficult for them to imagine alternative choices. In some cases, coming out to their family might have opened a crisis or created a rift with some of their family members, hence proceed with caution.

Suggestions for intercultural communication

- You can win people's trust by showing them that you are interested in their family and are not judgemental. Many cultures place great importance on family ties.
- Be honest about your lack of knowledge of the traditions and customs of a specific culture, and ask for information without devaluing what the person tells you.
- Be aware that in some those who tend to the health and psychophysical well-being of others are prestigious and authoritative figures.