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COMING OUT – THE PREDOMINANT INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION CHALLENGE AMONG CROATIAN GAY, BISEXUAL AND QUEER MEN?

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a concise overview of the development of the rights of LGBTQ+¹ people in Croatia and attempts to clarify the specifics of counselling work with such clients. It also provides an overview of the primary motives and reasons for the need for psychotherapy among gay and bisexual men conducted in the Psychological Counselling Centre of one of the oldest associations for the rights and protection of LGBTQ+ people in Croatia, the Iskorak. Founded in 2002, Iskorak is a civil society association whose mission is to promote and protect the human rights of the citizens of the Republic of Croatia, especially the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons people, as well as to advocate for their equal participation in civil society. As part of its programme objectives, Iskorak also offers psychological counselling. This paper attempts to answer questions regarding the extent to which coming out is perceived as a communication challenge among gay, bisexual, and queer men in Croatia in comparison to other difficulties, and understand how many GBQ+ men have joined the therapeutic process in the past five years. The aim is to create space for a better understanding of GBQ+ clients and promote further empirical research on such topics in Croatia.

Keywords: GBQ+ men, Iskorak, counselling, coming out, interpersonal communication

INTRODUCTION

This paper provides a concise overview of the development of the rights of LGBTQ+ people in Croatia. The article highlights the increase in the number of users of the Psychological Counsel-

¹ This paper uses the term 'LGBTQ+' (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer+) to collectively refer to sexual minorities and gender diverse identities because of the proliferation of terms used by young people. When referencing previous research, we use the cited author's original terminology for sexuality/gender.

ling Centre, one of the oldest non-governmental organisation for the rights and protection of LGBTQ+ people in Croatia, the Iskorak². In addition, it provides an overview of the motives and reasons prompting LGBTQ+ people to seek help at the counselling centre. Following the general assumption that, in comparison to other difficulties, coming out continues to be the biggest interpersonal communication challenge among gay, bisexual, and queer men in Croatia, the paper attempts to determine the truth behind this assumption, as well as to discuss the development of the rights of LGBTQ+ people in Croatia in order to contextualise the research problem using an incomplete inductive method of synthesising (few and main) research results on this topic in Croatia. Furthermore, the aim of this paper is to determine the number of clients who come to Iskorak's psychological counselling centre and understand the reasons for their visits during the past five years. Considering the increase in the number of people who seek psychological help at Iskorak, the intention is to assess whether coming out continues to be a challenge for GBQ+ men who come to the counselling centre. Statistical analysis of the data collected in the counselling centre was used to determine the dominant reasons for visiting the centre, as well as for the increase in the number of users over the years.

Although the current challenges faced by LGBTQ+ people in Croatia certainly differ compared to a few years ago (Jurčić & Dota, 2023; Rainbow Europe, 2023; Stevanović, 2022), the fact is that these individuals participate more actively in counselling and seek psychological and medical help. At the same time, the range of services offered by non-governmental organisations and public health institutions has also expanded significantly in recent years. Iskorak is one of the largest and longest-running organisations focusing on the protection of LGBTQ+ people, offering psychotherapy and counselling services within its diverse activities. For many clients, one of the most significant challenges they face and the key reason for counselling is the process of coming out. This paper aims to focus on men as a target group, i.e., all clients who are biologically male, as well as those who identify with the male sex, and have expressed their sexual orientation as bisexual, homosexual, or other. In this paper, the term 'queer' will be used for all other sexual identifications (asexuality, pansexuality, and so on).

The intention of the paper is to determine the most common reasons that adult men (18+ yrs) of minority sexual orientation provide when they seek help at Iskorak's counselling centre. The results of this research offer clearer insights into the most common interpersonal communication challenges faced by gay, bisexual, and queer men in Croatia and they can help create a solid foundation for further research that would produce guidelines for more successful therapeutic efforts for these clients.

Non-governmental organisations, such as Iskorak, have definitely made an immeasurable contribution to the protection of the rights of LGBTQ+ people in Croatia. In fact, Iskorak was the first to actualise the issues of protection of these individuals and to actively become involved in building a better and more tolerant society. One of the first programme determinants was psychological assistance, which included free psychotherapy and counselling services for all users. Although there were not many users at the beginning due to the fear of social stigma and shame, it is clear that this changed over time, resulting in Iskorak's psychological counselling centre successively

2 Word "Iskorak" translates to 'coming out' in Croatian

recording an increase in the need for counselling and psychotherapy services, with an emphasis on helping the MSM group (**m**en who have **s**ex with other **m**en).

OVERVIEW OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE RIGHTS OF LGBTQ+ PEOPLE IN CROATIA

In Croatia, the rights of LGBTQI+ people have changed and developed gradually over the years, but the situation is not ideal even today. Although the situation has changed over time and the rights of LGBTQI+ people are increasingly recognised, this research aims to shed light on the real situation, which is far from ideal. There is a clear disparity between the realised rights and the opinion of LGBTQI+ people about their position in Croatian society. Therefore, as per the focus of this research paper, it is important to explain the context of the development of the rights of LGBTQ+ people, i.e., provide a brief overview of the development through history.

Although progress has been made, the social and legal position of sexual minorities in Croatia remains far from equal. As Vučković Juroš (2015) emphasised LGBT individuals continue to be systematically marginalised and excluded from unrestricted participation in democratic and legal systems. Despite the existence of anti-discrimination laws, sexual minorities continue to face discrimination in multiple spheres of life, including access to legal rights, employment, healthcare, and education. In the labour market, many LGBT individuals experience hiring discrimination, workplace harassment, and the need to conceal their identity to avoid prejudice (ILGA-Europe, 2020; Vučković Juroš, 2015). The 2020 European Union Fundamental Rights Agency report confirmed that over 50% of LGBT respondents in Croatia avoid being open about their identity out of fear of rejection or violence (FRA, 2020). Heteronormativity in education and healthcare further perpetuates social exclusion. While sexual minorities have formal access to these services, the lack of inclusive policies and representation can result in indirect harm, stigmatisation, and unequal treatment (Dugine obitelji, 2023). Additionally, many LGBT individuals are isolated from traditional sources of social support, such as family and local communities. Rejection by family members, which is reinforced by negative societal attitudes, often leads to increased mental health risks and the search for alternative support networks such as LGBT organisations or chosen families (Niedlich et al., 2022; Rosati et al., 2020). Although Croatia has made strides in the protection of sexual minorities through legal reforms, substantial gaps remain in the lived experiences of LGBT individuals. Persistent discrimination, lack of social acceptance, and structural inequality demonstrate that complete inclusion and equal opportunities are still far from reality (FRA, 2020; Vučković Juroš, 2015).

Čemažar and Mikulin (2017) described the 1980s and the 1990s as formative decades for the emergence of gay and lesbian activism in Croatia. In 1989, Lila Inicijativa (Lila Initiative), the first lesbian group in Croatia, was founded out of the Ženska grupa (Women's Group) in the Trešnjevka neighbourhood. A few years later, in 1992, an organisation called LIGMA was established, bringing together lesbians, gay men, and bisexual individuals. However, its operations ceased in 1997. During the 1990s, many of the initiatives of gay and lesbian groups revolved around running SOS phone lines, AIDS outreach programmes, and promoting queer culture. Operating within the Yugoslav

context, a gay radio segment was launched through Omladinski (Youth) Radio, while magazines such as *Start*, *Danas*, and *Svijet* offered media support to sexual minorities (Čemažar & Mikulin, 2017).

According to Đurin (2018), more organised and visible LGBTQI activism emerged in Croatia in the early 2000s, particularly with the political shift brought by the Social Democratic Party's rise to power. Despite initial resistance from authorities, she notes that the late 1990s saw the beginnings of queer activism as part of the broader human rights movement. One of the pivotal moments came in 1997 with the creation of ATTACK! (Autonomous Cultural Factory), which quickly gained public attention through provocative public performances and interventions. Among their early actions was the protest titled "We're all anarcho-lesbians," sparked by the termination of a venue lease due to the presence of the lesbian group Kontra, a collective that was founded informally in 1997 and later formally registered in 2002 (Marušić, 2014).

That same era witnessed the emergence of several key LGBTQI initiatives and organisations. The CroL lesbian forum, which later evolved into an influential online portal, was launched in 1999. In 2000, the LORI association was founded in Rijeka, focusing on raising awareness and promoting acceptance of sexual and gender minorities. Around the same time, Iskorak was established as a civil society organisation dedicated to the protection of LGBT human rights (Đurin, 2018).

In 2002, LGBTQI activists organised the first Gay Pride event in Zagreb - this landmark event acted as a catalyst for further activism. From that point onward, the number and diversity of associations, initiatives, festivals, and online platforms began to grow rapidly. This expansion contributed significantly to the development of a continuous LGBTQI cultural presence in cities such as Zagreb and Rijeka, and later in Split. In addition, these events and organisations helped shape public policy on a national level.

Through numerous public interventions, often met with shock, curiosity, or resistance from the heterosexual majority, queer artists and activists challenged heteronormative social norms. These actions played a crucial role in disrupting dominant narratives, pushing society out of its comfort zone, and increasing public visibility of LGBTQI individuals. As these organisations gained legitimacy and stability, they became key actors in raising awareness, fostering community togetherness, and encouraging broader societal acceptance of LGBTQI issues (Đurin, 2018).

In the 1990s, the right-leaning political party in power, in close cooperation with the Catholic Church, whose social and political influence was growing significantly, imposed traditional gender and sexual discourse and politics (Đurin, 2012). Within this framework, all variations from traditional gender and sexual roles (singles, people who do not want children, homosexuals, trans individuals) were considered a threat to society, which was in the process of being rebuilt after the already existing trend of demographic decline and war losses (Đurin, 2012; Vuletić, 2004). In this context, the pressure towards the invisibility of the LGBT population was intertwined with institutionalised homophobia. In the 1990s, there was no public discussion about homosexuality and sexual minorities, and homosexuals/homosexuality were often mentioned publicly only in the context of attempts to discredit political rivals (Vuletić, 2004). Furthermore, although there was progress in gay and lesbian activism and activities in the nineties, their work did not receive any official support, and even members of various gay and lesbian groups tried to hide their identities for fear of discrimination or violence (Vuletić, 2004). Both discrimination and violence were an everyday

reality for many LGBT people in Croatia in the 1990s: if the sexual orientation of these individuals was revealed, they would be fired from their jobs, or dismissed from the army, and they were often victims of attacks by skinheads and other thugs (Vuletić, 2004). In many cases, the authorities did not react adequately to these situations and often contributed to it. For example, police raids were frequently conducted in gay and lesbian clubs and informal meeting places (Vuletić, 2004). However, changes were on the horizon. After the death of the Croatian President Franjo Tuđman in December 1999, a left-wing coalition led by the Social Democratic Party came to power in 2000, which provided greater political support for legal and political recognition of the rights of sexual minorities (Jurčić, 2011). In this context, the first pride parade was held in Zagreb in 2002, which was organised by the lesbian organisation Kontra and the newly founded LGBTQ organisation Iskorak. The first "Queer Zagreb" festival was also organised in 2003 (Jurčić, 2011).

The first pride parade was attended by around 200-300 people and was generally considered a success, although there were violent incidents after the parade officially ended. Despite occasional setbacks, in the first ten years of the 21st century, the pride parade established itself as much needed annual event with a growing number of participants. The first pride parade in Split in June 2011 should be mentioned as a potentially critical event. As a consequence of the intense violence that accompanied the event in Split, the Zagreb Pride Parade, held on 18 June 2011, was supported by the largest number of participants attending a pride event up to that time - between 2,000 (as estimated by the police) and 4,000 people (as estimated by the organisers) (Obrenović, 2011). The second Split Pride event was discussed in the media for more than a month before the actual event took place on June 9th, 2012. The second Split Pride event, characterised as a high-risk event, was secured by 900 police officers who, among other things, had water cannons and a helicopter at their disposal. Eight days later, in Split's Bačvice, a group of men beat up a group of six girls because they assumed that they were lesbians: these men remain unpunished till date. In the following years, the pride parades in Zagreb and Split were held without incident, and there were no such incidents reported at the first pride parade in Osijek in 2014. In the 2000s, there were changes in the Croatian legislation and in public discourse that indicated that sexual minorities can no longer be ignored and that the issue of discrimination and the rights of LGBT people was something that the Croatian society must and should address (Đurin, 2012).

On the other hand, many interventions by the government, non-governmental organisations, media, and international organisations in the last ten years in Croatia indicate that there is a desire to successfully resolve the issue of sexual and reproductive rights and the health of young people. This is indicated by the growing number of associations that represent the rights of sexual minorities, a more informed attitude towards members of sexual minorities in the media, changes in laws related to sexual minorities, and numerous documents by which the Croatian Government committed itself to the health education of young people and to education in the field of sexual and reproductive health. And yet, the society remained sharply divided, despite the knowledge that both the governmental and non-governmental sectors support the idea of education about the sexual and reproductive rights of young people and their protection, as well as the desire of the majority to positively resolve the issue of education about the sexual and reproductive rights and health of young people (Đurin, 2012).

After Croatia's entry into the European Union (EU), the situation changed. Considering the conditions that the EU places before its potential member states, which concern stable institutions that guarantee democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and the protection of minorities, there is greater visibility for the LGBTQ community. According to Čemažar and Mikulin (2017), the legal protection for individuals in this community has broadened. By organising pride parades and lobbying, the LGBTQ movement acts on the domestic political system from the inside, while at the same time, the EU acts from the outside. After a period of silence in the 1990s, the Europeanization phase of Croatia began starting in 2000, which was the period when many LGBT associations and pride parades were founded. The first wave of establishment of LGBT associations (2000-2002) followed the establishment of conservative associations (2006-2009). In a period of 13 years, there was an upward trajectory of development for the LGBT movement. Unfortunately, in 2013, LGBT rights experienced a major setback due to the outcome of the referendum on marriage. However, it should be emphasised that, after the referendum, the Law on Life Partnership (NN 92/14, 98/19) was passed, which gave Croatia many positive points on international rankings for the protection of LGBTQI rights. Discursive analysis, according to Čežmar and Mikulin (2017), showed that after liberalisation and the beginning of the development of the LGBT movement in the eighties, silence followed in the nineties because of the re-traditionalisation of society. Getting closer to the EU also initiated discussions about issues related to the LGBT movement, and the ideas around the most important events were grouped within the framework of social acceptance, Europeanisation, and second-order issues. In the Europeanisation phase, the ideas were mostly based on the issues associated with the pride parades, while in the final phase, they revolved around the issues of marriage and family (Čežmar & Mikulin, 2017).

At the end of 2013 and in 2014, Croatia was marked by two very different changes in the status of sexual minorities. First, the constitutional referendum prevented access to the institution of marriage for same-sex partners. Second, with the new Law on Life Partnership (NN 92/14, 98/19), they were granted most of their marital rights, except for the joint adoption of children. This clearly illustrated the conflicting trends of Croatian society. On the one hand, improvements in the position of sexual minorities could be observed as early as the 1970s and 1980s, and after the interruption of these positive trends in the 1990s, improvements occurred, especially in the 2000s (Vučković Juroš, 2015).

In an attempt to dislodge the hegemony of heterosexuality in Croatia, policy-related events on sexuality were conducted from 2012 onwards. At the beginning of 2012, the new, relatively left-oriented government, according to its pre-election programme, intended to introduce several significant changes in public policies related to the biopolitical management of citizens through sexuality policies: the first was the Law on Medically Assisted Fertilisation (NN 86/12), followed by the introduction of health and civic education in schools, as well as discussion on the adoption of the Law on Life Partnerships. Such interventions at the level of laws and policies can help shift the discourse on heterosexuality, which, among others, faced resistance from conservative currents with the support of the Catholic clergy in Croatia. Namely, numerous associations of faithful citizens, in cooperation with the clergy and the heads of the Catholic Church in Croatia, tried to stop the Law on Medically Assisted Fertilisation (NN 86/12) from being passed in July 2012 by collecting signatures for a referendum on the aforementioned law. After insufficient signatures were collected for the referendum on the Law on Medically Assisted Fertilisation, the next objection was the new

health education curriculum that was supposed to be included in the programmes of primary and secondary schools in the same year. There were several other instances in the discursive struggle that created an even greater divide in the society between those who support the traditional understanding of marriage, family, and sexuality and those who wanted an inclusive definition of marriage (Đurin, 2012).

It is interesting to point out that, in 2014, a study was conducted in Croatia with 992 heterosexual participants of both sexes (70% women) who were between the ages of 18 and 79 years (Kamenov et al., 2019). Participants expressed less support for gay than lesbian parenting, with female participants expressing more positive attitudes towards both gay and lesbian parenting. As expected, same-sex parenting was more likely to be supported by participants who were not very religious and were more left-oriented politically, as well as by those who cohabited with their partners, rather than those who were married. Age, education, and gender identity did not have any predictive value. Nevertheless, expectations about the role of traditional gender norms were confirmed. Participants with more traditional attitudes about gender roles, as well as those who were parents themselves, expressed more negative attitudes towards same-sex parenting.

Additionally, research conducted on a total of 1,551 students of heterosexual orientation in various study programmes at the Universities of Zagreb, Rijeka, Split, and Osijek (Huić et al., 2015) showed that the participants support the right of lesbian and gay individuals to compete for jobs, as well as their right to visit their partner in the hospital. However, the participants reported a lower extent of support for the rights of these individuals to adopt children, to get married, and to have access to medically assisted fertilisation. Female students supported the rights of gay and lesbian individuals to a greater extent than male students. After controlling for interest in the topic of equality of homosexuals, the authors found that the rights of lesbian and gay individuals received more support from women, people who had less pronounced modern prejudices against homosexuals, lower levels of religiosity, and a higher degree of contact with homosexuals.

In closing, it is important to highlight the results of Zagreb Pride's research (Jurčić & Dota, 2023). If we consider the findings of the Zagreb Pride analysis of the investigated types of violence in Croatia (2023), they show that almost two-thirds of the participants (approx. 64%) experienced violence at least once, and many of them went on to require further psychological help. Verbal abuse was the most frequently experienced type of violence, followed by unwanted sexual proposals, unwanted touching, and threats of physical violence, as well as following, stalking and/or intimidation. Of the 491 respondents who experienced violence, the majority answered that the violence was motivated by their sexual orientation. For more than two-thirds of those who experienced some kind of violence, the perpetrators were unknown people who approached them in open public places, while for more than half of those who experienced violence, the perpetrators were unknown people on the Internet/social networks. Less than ten percent of respondents who experienced violence reported the case to the police or other competent authorities (Jurčić & Dota, 2023).

PSYCHOTHERAPY AND LGBTQ+ CLIENTS

According to various authors and research studies (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020; European Pride Organisers Association, 2020; Kamenov et al., 2015.; Rainbow Families Association, 2023) lesbians, homosexuals, bisexuals, queers, and members of other sexual minorities from Croatia and the surrounding regions experience higher levels of psychological difficulties than heterosexual individuals, mainly because of exposure to greater levels of misunderstanding and minority stress.

It is interesting that research in western countries have highlighted several specific challenges in the psychotherapy process with LGBTQ+ clients, referring mainly to minority stress as a frequent source of additional difficulties (Meyer, 2003). For instance, the results of a study conducted by the Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology, and Neuroscience in London (Moagi et al., 2021) suggested that treatment outcomes for LGBTQ+ individuals in England are less successful than outcomes for heterosexual individuals, especially for bisexual individuals and women belonging to sexual minorities. Barriers to LGBTQ+ counselling mainly included: fear of stigma in the therapeutic process, reluctance to disclose sexuality, inconsistent discussion regarding sexuality in treatment, lack of awareness and understanding of LGBTQ+ identities and community-specific challenges, as well as consequent distrust, disappointment, and exclusion (Foy et al., 2019). Similarly, scientists from the University of Pretoria found that lesbians, homosexuals, bisexuals, and transgender individuals are expected to experience worse mental health outcomes compared to heterosexual and cis-gender individuals, a phenomenon that healthcare providers must consider and act on (Moagi et al., 2021). Researchers at the University of Rochester Medical Centre (McDermott et al., 2021) stated that the system is disproportionately reliant on heterosexual and cis-gender reference groups as the norm in terms of psychological health, which primarily frames the LGBT individual's experiences through the lens of psychopathology. Therefore, the authors explained that efforts that could be attributed to the LGBT experience are neglected in education and practice. Consequently, the authors advocate for the more intensive inclusion of the concepts of positive psychology in working with LGBTQ+ individuals (Lytle et al., 2014). Furthermore, a group of authors (McDermott et al., 2021) from the UK and Australia researched the necessity of quality therapeutic support for LGBTQ+ individuals. The interdisciplinary theoretical framework that was produced shows that effective early intervention in preserving the mental health of LGBTQ+ youth implies the necessity of addressing normative environments that marginalise young people, their LGBTQ+ identities, and mental health difficulties (McDermott et al., 2021). Analysing the broader social context of the lifestyle of LGBTQ+ individuals, Bitterman and Hess (2021) examined the differences between the generational identity of LGBTQ+ individuals and the heteronormative generational identity. The researchers conclude that LGBTQ+ individuals can identify with two generational groups – one defined by year of birth and the other associated with growing up as a sexual minority. The authors concluded that generational stratification affects various aspects of LGBTQ+ life, including a connection to where they live, which in some cities contributes to the establishment of a gay district (Bitterman & Hess, 2021). In addition, research results from the University of Girona in Spain (Cámara-Liebana et al., 2023) showed that gay men needed support in the identity formation process, because they stated that they felt different and lonely in the process: they needed further support when coming out, because it had a significant effect on their mental health. Fear of rejection, negative

reactions, and disappointment of people were the dominant reasons associated with why men did not reveal their sexual orientation to their family. In contrast, those who came out stated that they felt a sense of liberation (Cámara-Liebana et al., 2023). Drecher and Fadus (2020) explained that LGBTQ+ clients, similar to others, were more likely participate in psychotherapy because they needed to talk, to gain a better understanding of interpersonal relationships, as well as to cope with stressors related to work, family, and social circumstances. Although the client's identity as a sexual minority will no doubt emerge during psychotherapy, according to the author's interpretation, it is unlikely that this will be the only issue discussed. They emphasised that one aspect of a person's identity should never be equated with the whole individual (Drescher & Fadus, 2020).

On the other hand, when analysing the situation in Croatia and the surrounding areas (states of the former Yugoslavia, whose countries have recorded independence since the 90s), it is clear that the research was predominantly associated with fundamental and essential issues of the life of LGBTQ people and their acceptance in post-socialist societies in general. The first such research was conducted in Slovenia by Švab and Kuhar (2006) who examined the main problems faced by gay and lesbian individuals during the coming out process. This predominantly implied a high level of exposure to violence and the challenges of gay and lesbian partnerships, which was also confirmed by their subsequent research (Švab & Kuhar, 2008).

Current research in Bosnia and Herzegovina indicates that there are two groups of citizens (representing 35-40% of the total sample) - one group that does not support (somewhat or strongly) LGBT people and their struggle for a free and dignified status in society and another group that supports (somewhat or strongly) the activities of the LGBT population. Apart from these two groups, a small proportion of citizens (15-20%) do not have any opinion on this issue, they are simply not interested or ignore the presence and activities of LGBT people in their environment (Šijaković et al., 2024). On the other hand, some studies (Bošnjak, 2023) have indicated that the situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina is changing slowly, but gradually, indicating a significant change in the attitudes of the general population about sexual orientations and gender identities. Only 35.3% of respondents considered that LGBTI people are, unwell while 41.8% considered that LGBTQ+ people are not sick and do not need treatment.

In Serbia, there is a significant level of homophobia and attitudes change very slowly, according to Radoman and Petrović (2024). The results of their research indicate that the level of homophobia has not changed in the last two decades. Approximately a quarter of respondents who were extremely homophobic believe that homosexuals are no better than criminals and that they should be severely punished (Radoman & Petrović, 2024). In countries that were part of former Yugoslavia, the issue of LGBTI identity is associated with a complex constellation of cultural and historical forces, for example, in North Macedonia (Dimitrov, 2017). Thus, Dimitrov (2017) emphasised that most neighbouring countries have adopted laws against discrimination based on sexual orientation, while North Macedonia is yet to adopt an inclusive law. In addition, Dimitrov and Blazheva (2023) stated that there is a wealth of data that offers a comprehensive insight into the extent to which the lives of LGBTIQ+ people are marked by discrimination, stigmatisation, exclusion, and injustice. In the context of North Macedonia, this has occurred as a result of a traditionally patriarchal social attitudes and values, inadequate legislation, lack of information on legal methods of protection, lack of political will to guarantee and protect the rights of LGBTIQ+ people, fear of risks related to

possible identity disclosure, as well as lack of relevant, positive, and affirmative representations of LGBTIQ+ in the cultural sphere including art, education, media, and various public cultural practices. Dimitrov and Balzheva (2023) stated that LGBTIQ+ people face a higher level of daily discrimination compared to their non-LGBTIQ+ peers in the Macedonian society and that a significant part of the LGBTIQ+ community in North Macedonia considers themselves victims of violence because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

In Montenegro, the issue of the LGBTIQ+ community often becomes a political issue, which is connected to the acceptance of this community after Europeanisation and the rejection of traditional values. The specificities of the post-socialist environment of the countries belonging to former Yugoslavia, including Montenegro, are also linked to pronounced homophobia (Kalezić, Brković, 2016), which represents a challenge in same-sex relationships (Brković, 2021).

In the youngest country in this area, Kosovo, according to research by Veli et al. (2016), LGBT people are often denied the right to freedom of expression through threats, family shaming, and social exclusion. Serious threats have forced LGBT organisations in Kosovo to hide their locations, and the entire LGBT community lacks a public place to gather. After the hate-fuelled violence against the LGBTQ community in December 2012, the need to protect the LGBTQ community in Kosovo has become even more pronounced (Veli et al., 2016).

COMING OUT AS THE MOST COMMON INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION CHALLENGE AMONG GBT+ MEN

Continuing from the topics discussed in the previous chapter, coming out brings greater exposure as a member of a sexual minority and it is associated with an even greater fear of violence. The coming out process is the public expression of one's sexual and/or gender identity (Jagose, 1996) and it is linked to two levels of communication disclosure - personal or intrapersonal, and public or interpersonal level (Ali, 2017). To understand this phenomenon, it is important to consider the sociocultural context - *"National Coming Out Day, which was first celebrated in America on October 11, 1988, through the initiative of an LGBTQ+ political activist and psychologist, is now celebrated in a few other Western countries. The celebration is rooted in the premise that coming out can be a liberating and empowering experience. However, this Western-centric view has been criticised, arguing that it ignores the complexities of self-disclosure for queer communities in different sociopolitical and cultural contexts. Coming out is a challenging process for many in traditional or collectivistic cultures due to enforced heteronormativity"* (Roy, 2024).

Research conducted on the process of coming out for those with a queer identity in collectivist countries such as Japan, India, China, and Taiwan highlighted the diversity of coming out experiences within individualistic and collectivist countries (Huang & Brouwer, 2018). The same authors explored two models of coming out in China - "coming out" (leaving the family to gain sexual freedom) and "coming home" (staying with the family while concealing one's identity). Chinese LGBTIQ+ people prioritise social harmony over individual identity, making the "return home" model more culturally important. The study also described a third model, "coming with", which integrates

aspects of both approaches and is more appropriate within Chinese culture, allowing individuals to preserve family relationships, as well as their sexual or gender identity (Huang & Brouwer, 2018).

Another review of adoption in international and Indian contexts determined family support and cultural/traditional barriers in the adoption process (Achar & Gopal, 2021). This study explored outings in India, highlighting the need to uphold family values derived from collectivist social norms. In collectivist societies, connection with family takes precedence over individual identity (Anjana, 2024). The author discusses how family reactions to ostracism can be rooted in racial/ethnic or societal acceptance of sexual minorities. In fact, it has been observed that traditional families often resort to faith-healing methods or conversion therapies to keep LGBTQI+ people integrated into religious and cultural values.

Another study on cultural differences in coming out in Turkish and Portuguese male sexual minorities showed that heteronormative beliefs are associated with increased internalised auto homophobia, as well as increased sexual identity stigma (Torres & Rodrigues, 2021). These results were more pronounced among men of the Turkish sexual minority. However, the mentioned effects were less visible, but still present, among men from the Portuguese sexual minority. Namely, less internalised auto homophobia and less social discomfort around sexual identity are related to 'outing'³ in different ways.

When talking about coming out, it is important to take another aspect into account. According to the International Lesbian Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Intersex Association (2020), of the 11 member states of the United Nations, five states in the Middle East (Iran, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates) have proscribed the death penalty for consensual same-sex relations, while another five places in the region (Bahrain, Israel, Jordan, the West Bank, and Turkey) do not criminalise same-sex relations and do not recognise same-sex marriages.

In 2013, the Iskorak association published the results of research (Kavić & Urukalo, 2013) aimed at identifying the characteristics of certain factors important for the coming out process and describing the coming out of individuals of homosexual and bisexual orientation in Croatia. The survey included visitors to the Gay.hr, Crol.hr and Queer.hr portals, where a questionnaire was made available to them. Here are some basic conclusions from the aforementioned research study involving a total of 1194 participants. The results showed that half of the respondents came out by or at the age of 18 years. Friends were the most common individuals to whom the respondents initially came out (63.1%, followed by school/university/work colleagues (14.6%). Participants mostly came out to friends (68.9%), school/college/work colleagues (40.8%), and mothers (32.7%). On average, the immediate reaction of the mother and father to coming out was neither positive nor negative, and the reactions of friends were more positive than those of parents. The current attitudes of mothers, fathers, and friends are significantly more positive compared to their initial reactions. The relationship with the family before and after coming out was assessed as good (on average) by the participants, and it was found that the relationship did not change significantly after coming out. Women were significantly more satisfied with their lives than men. Similarly, those who are bisexual were more satisfied with their lives than homosexual individuals. The results showed that men experienced more fear, were more unhappy, and found it harder to accept their homo-

3 "Outing" is when someone discloses the sexual orientation or gender identity of an LGBTQI+ person without their consent. Outing creates issues of privacy, choice, and harm. In addition, outing can sometimes be publicized. (Kumar, 2022).

sexuality/bisexuality than women. It was also shown that homosexual individuals felt more fear and were unhappier than bisexual individuals. However, these results should be interpreted with caution because, despite their significance, the differences observed were very small and these differences would probably no longer be significant if the study was conducted with a smaller sample. The authors of this research concluded that the greatest significant correlation with respect to life satisfaction was found with the quality of the relationship that participants currently had with their family, i.e., the higher the quality of the relationship, the greater the level of life satisfaction. Furthermore, the better the father's attitude towards the homosexuality/bisexuality of the participant, the greater the life satisfaction. Life satisfaction is negatively associated with internalised sexual stigma, i.e., the greater the experience of internalised sexual stigma, the lower the level of life satisfaction (Kavić & Urukalo, 2013).

In the Handbook of LGBT Psychotherapy, Miletić (2015) clarified the concept of coming out by explaining that coming out of the closet represents a process in which a person declares themselves to be homosexual (or bi/transsexual/queer) in front of others. Coming out is a multifaceted process that can be seen at the same time as a phase in the development of the identity of every LGBT person, but also as an instrument of political struggle for the realisation of the human rights of LGBTpeople . According to Miletić (2015), statistical data show that individuals who come out have a positive impact on their environment in terms of contributing to the development of positive attitudes towards LGBT individuals and reducing prejudices. Heterosexual individuals who know at least one publicly declared LGBT person have significantly fewer negative stereotypes about the LGBT population. This demonstrates that arguments and logic only go halfway through the struggle for human rights, while closeness and emotional components play an equally important role. Furthermore, from the perspective of health, coming out is a process that has psychological and somatic health benefits. Statistics show (Miletić, 2015) that, in Western countries, LGBT people who have come out are more functional, have a better quality of life, and are less likely to face problems with anxiety and depression. From a somatic-health perspective, it is important to mention that statistics show that LGBT individuals who have gone through the process of coming out are less likely to enter into unprotected sexual relationships, which justifies the consideration of coming out as a protective factor that reduces the risk of HIV infection. On the other hand, this data shows that social homophobia and the stigmatisation of homosexuality have very real, medical consequences (Miletić, 2015).

A few years ago, as part of the 24th Summer Psychology School of Students and Teachers of the Department of Psychology at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Zagreb, many authors presented research on the topic of issues and challenges of sexual minorities in Croatia (Kamenov et al., 2016). The resulting book from that summer school brought current insights into the various difficulties that members of sexual minorities face. In particular, the research conducted by the authors showed that concerns about not being accepted by those in one's immediate environment do not depend on gender or sexual orientation. On the other hand, the results indicated that men and bisexuals conceal their minority identity to a greater extent than women and homosexuals. When explaining insecurities about identity, in both men and women, it is more pronounced in bisexuals than in homosexuals. However, the resulting significant interaction shows that there is a more pronounced difference in identity uncertainty between gay and bisexual men than between

lesbian and bisexual women. Furthermore, the same study found that the average age of coming out is 18 years. Most of the respondents came out first to their friends, whereas, when it comes to the family circle, they first come out to female family members (Kamenov et al., 2016).

In recent years, a particularly complex dimension of the coming out process has emerged: individuals coming out while being or having been in heterosexual marriages. A study from Germany (Niedlich et al., 2022) showed that coming out after years of heterosexual family life affects not only spouses and children, but also parents and siblings. While siblings are generally perceived as supportive, often reacting calmly and positively, parents tend to be surprised, but also express interest in supporting their children. Nevertheless, the study also documents cases of negative reactions, including rejection by close family members. The children's responses varied depending on their age and the amount of time that had passed since the parent's coming out. Spouses were most commonly described as shocked and angry.

Family dynamics in coming out situations are further shaped by cultural constructions of gender and sexuality. Kranz (2021) examined how German fathers' adherence to traditional masculinity norms that emphasise independence, confidence, and strength can impact their anticipated reactions to a child coming out as lesbian or gay. The study found that fathers with higher levels of masculinity were more likely to reject their child, particularly if they held generally negative attitudes toward homosexuality and experienced emotional stress such as anger, shame, or sadness. Although this research was based on hypothetical scenarios, it highlights the influence of perceived parental attitudes on children's decisions to come out, as well as how deeply this process is intertwined with expectations around gender roles.

Similar patterns of variation in parental responses are evident in a study by Van Bergen et al. (2020), which analysed reactions to the coming out of LGBTQ+ individuals across three age cohorts. While positive parental responses were more frequent among the youngest group, older individuals tended to describe their parents as silent or dismissive when it came to topics related to sexuality. This suggests generational differences in openness and communication about sexual identity, and emphasises that a lack of overt negativity does not necessarily equal support—ambivalent or absent responses can also be emotionally harmful.

The deeply personal nature of the coming out experience is further illustrated in Leung's (2021) autoethnographic study. By tracing his own development as a gay individual from adolescence to adulthood, Leung explores the intersection of sexual and ethnic identity, internal conflict, and the search for community belonging. His analysis revealed both internal struggles, such as reconciling gay and queer identities, as well as frustrations with exclusion and lack of inclusivity within LGBTQ+ spaces themselves. This highlights that the coming out process is not only shaped by family and society, but also by intra-community dynamics and personal identity negotiations (Leung, 2021).

The emotional and psychological dimensions of coming out are further explored in a study by Rosario et al. (2006), which linked coming out, mental health, and risky sexual behaviour. The study found that positive self-perception of one's homosexuality was associated with fewer symptoms of anxiety and, indirectly, with reduced substance use. Conversely, internalised homophobia was linked to greater emotional distress and risk-taking behaviours. These findings underscore the

importance of self-acceptance and affirming environments in promoting mental health among LGBTQ+ individuals.

A similar conclusion was reached by Rosati et al. (2020) in their study of three generations of LGBTQ+ Italians. Older adults, who became aware of, accepted, and disclosed their sexual identity much later in life, were more likely to be religious and to come out within a Catholic context. This setting, however, was often marked by stress-inducing experiences such as discrimination and internalised stigma. Thematic analysis identified three types of reactions from religious communities: unconditional acceptance, calls for change, and open rejection.

Taken together, these studies reveal that coming out is not a uniform experience, but one that is deeply embedded in family structures, gender norms, cultural expectations, religious settings, and personal development. Acceptance or rejection is not only a matter of yes or no, in fact, it emerges within a matrix of generational, emotional, and interpersonal dynamics that shape the well-being of LGBTQ+ individuals across their lifespan.

CONTRIBUTION AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ISKORAK PSYCHOLOGICAL CENTER FOR GBQ+ MEN

Iskorak is a civil society organisation founded in 2002, whose mission is to promote and protect the human rights of citizens of the Republic of Croatia, particularly the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBTQ+) people, as well as to advocate for their participation in society as equal citizens of the Republic of Croatia (Iskorak.hr). It achieves its mission through its public advocacy, media, socio-cultural and health programmes. Iskorak advocates the values of civil society such as individual freedoms, non-violence, equality, justice, tolerance and acceptance of diversity, humanism, and love. Its principles of action are transparency, openness, well-being of the LGBT community, and credibility in the LGBT community. The areas of activity of the association are related to health protection, social activity, education, science and research, international cooperation, human rights, culture and art, and democratic political culture (Pogledić, 2023).

One of the aims of this paper is to determine whether there has been an increase in the number of gay, bisexual, and queer men in the last five years and to understand the main reasons why these men are reaching out to the counselling centre. More precisely, we wanted to understand whether coming out is the predominant communication challenge for these clients and consequently the reason why they seek help. Statistical data collected by Iskorak's Counselling Centre (the author is one of the counsellors) are completely anonymised and protected using codes. For the purposes of this paper, we analysed data on the number of users of the counselling centre and the main reasons for seeking help. All other data were not used. Respondents were informed that the reason for their visit could be part of a broader insight into the reasons for clients' visit to the counselling centre. The reason for coming to the counselling centre, as well as basic information about each client were recorded at the introductory meeting: each client provided their informed consent in digital form. The reasons for the clients' visit to the counselling centre were entered in an excel table for each year and for each client individually, and the reason for the visit was verbally checked with the client so that there would be no misinterpretation. At the first introductory

meeting, the clients were directly asked about their reason for coming to therapy, since this is an integral part of collecting the client's history in order to determine the predominant difficulty that made them decide to undergo therapy. The questions posed at the first session are aimed at discovering the reason for coming, being informed about the therapeutic process, determining the subjective assessment of the stress they are currently feeling, and defining common goals. Each client was counted separately at the moment of their first arrival, so that the numbers across years never included the same person. The reason for choosing the population that is declared as men is because Iskorak was financed by the Elton John AIDS Foundation as part of the project "TestUP - Scaling up testing and prevention". The project aims to improve HIV/STI testing and prevention, reduce stigma, and generally improve the response to the HIV epidemic and all the needs of the MSM population in Croatia.

The intention of examining the number of users, as well as their reason for contact, is to obtain a clearer insight into the needs of gay, bisexual, and queer male clients in Croatia, since Iskorak is one of the few free psychological counselling centres in the country intended exclusively for the LGBTQ+ population. Presented in this section, we present the results of the analysis of the data collected in Iskorak's counselling centre over the past five years. All clients who visit the counselling centre are adults (over 18 years of age) and their personal data are stored in the counselling centre's database using anonymised codes.

Table 1

Total number of clients and their gender identities across five years

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Women	7	14	21	30	59
Men	11	14	30	46	52
Gender fluid	0	2	0	1	3
TOTAL	18	30	51	77	114

Data source: Iskorak counselling centre; Analysis: Author

Table 1 shows that the total number of clients has increased over the five year period between 2019 and 2023. The number of male-identified clients has also increased over the years, except in 2023, where the number of women-identified clients increased compared to male-identified clients.

Table 2

Total number of male clients and their sexual identities across five years

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Gay	10	12	27	41	48
Bisexuals	1	1	2	3	1
Queer	0	0	0	2	3
Other	0	1	1	0	0

Source: Data source: Iskorak counselling centre; Analysis: Author

The table above shows that most clients identified as gay or homosexual.

Table 3

Main reasons for male clients to seek help at the Iskorak psychological counselling centre

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Coming out	3	8	9	11	10
Sexual identity issues	0	1	3	5	6
HIV	0	0	1	2	2
Addictions	0	0	0	1	4
Difficulties or termination of partnership	3	3	5	5	8
Difficulties with relationship with parents	0	0	3	3	6
Loneliness	0	1	3	3	2
Psychiatric diagnosis	3	1	1	4	6
Misc.	2	0	5	12	9

Source: Data source: Iskorak counselling centre; Analysis: Author

Table 3 clearly indicates that coming out remains a significant challenge for male-identified clients, although in 2023, the number of clients with this issue showed a slight decrease compared to in 2022. Other difficulties that clients report include challenges in relationships (with partners and parents) and issues stemming from psychiatric diagnoses.

CONCLUSION

This paper outlines how the rights of LGBTQ+ people have progressed in Croatia and how the civil sector has supported and assisted this progress. However, there is certainly room for improvement as evidenced by the statistical overview presented in the last section of the paper: there is

an increasing number of clients reaching out to Iskorak's psychological counselling centre over the years, since it is one of the few places in Croatia where members of sexual minorities can seek assistance regarding their mental health free of charge.

When the results of the collected data are compared with other research described in this paper, it is clear that the Croatian case also confirms that LGBTQI+ clients come to the Iskorak counselling centre when they face various difficulties (interpersonal relationships, loneliness, and so on); this is similar to the aspects previously written about by Foy et al. (2019), Moagi et al. (2021), and Camara - Liebana et al. (2023). If we consider the increasing number of clients coming to the counselling centre with a psychiatric diagnosis (12 such clients in 2022), we can better understand the connection with stronger symptoms due to fear of rejection, higher levels of stress, and difficulties related to acceptance of one's sexuality, which was written about by Kavić & Urukalo (2013) and Kamenov et al. (2016).

The various studies cited in this paper also mention the extent of verbal and non-verbal violence faced by LGBTQI+ people (Dimitrov & Blazheva, 2023; Kalezić & Brković, 2016; Radoman & Petrović, 2024; Švab & Kuhar, 2008), which can certainly be connected to fear of coming out. This fear continues to be very pronounced in Croatia, considering that 20 clients in 2022 and 2023 mentioned that this was the reason why they decided to seek help at the counselling centre. Furthermore, this number indicates an increase in the number of clients facing this difficulty compared to the previous years.

In the results of the research, it can be seen that coming out is still a very common communication challenge among LGBTQ+ people who identify as men, considering that in the last three years a total of 9, 11, and 10 clients, respectively, came to the counselling centre because this was the main difficulty that they were facing. Many clients, who initially reported that they had some other problem, also talked about coming out and the fear of the process during therapy sessions, i.e., more than half of the analysed clients found the process of coming out challenging. These findings highlight the significance of available psychological help to such clients, because they themselves have a very difficult time dealing with minority stress, i.e., all the difficulties that sexual minorities face in Croatia and the surrounding regions, as previously discussed in this paper.

Statistical data clearly indicate that, in Croatia, while coming out continues to be quite a challenge for many gay, bisexual, and queer men, they also cope with difficulties in various relationships, psychiatric diagnoses, loneliness, addictions, and so on. These conclusions answer the posed research questions, however, it also provides room for further, more detailed research on the entire LGBTQ+ community in Croatia, their needs, and difficulties, with the aim of developing a clearer understanding of their issues, as well as finding possible solutions at the state level.

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