



Reducing the Suicide Risk of LGBTQ Library Users

Noemi Somorjai

Institute of Behavioural Sciences, Semmelweis University, Budapest, Hungary.
somorjai.noemi@med.semmelweis-univ.hu

Abstract:

Adolescence is a difficult period in the life of many young people even if the gender orientation of the growing individual is solid and straight. Non-heterosexual youth not fitting the gender mainstream are often threatened by their peers, the school, eventually their family and the whole society until they find their gender identity. According to the surveys, risk behaviour, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts and suicides occur more often among LGBTQ youth than heterosexual peers. About 30% of all suicide attempts are committed by LGBTQ youth respectively in their age groups and about one third of all LGBTQ youth have or have had suicidal thoughts or attempts. Registered users on internet community sites are overrepresented considering LGBTQ persons, it is about 30%, compared to their presence in society which is about 10%. Virtual communities have increasing chance for empowerment and skills for self-determination. Public and children's libraries have a duty in helping these youth to survive and to become healthy adults with a positive self-image and a prosperous life.

Keywords: Responding to Book Challenges; Promoting Inclusion.

Introduction, Antecedents

Last year I gave a lecture in Hungarian about the suicide risks of LGBT persons at the Library 2.013 online conference organized by Steve Hargadon with Tibor Koltay from Hungary.

As a librarian working at a medical university I had the chance to participate in several national representative surveys organized by professor Maria Kopp, former director of the Institute of Behavioural Sciences at Semmelweis University in Budapest. Professor Kopp was a well-known researcher in the field of behavioural sciences, she was a stakeholder in many European and WHO projects on depression, suicide prevention, work stress, mental and physical health of the Hungarian population. She established the Hungarian Network for Suicide Prevention and the library of the institute had the opportunity to provide a venue for the founding session of this national network.

Though many participants represented research fields in the social, psychological and medical sciences, I had to face the fact that very little attention was paid to those persons who were lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersexual or uncertain about their gender identity. This fact urged me to begin a more extensive and profound research in suicidology of LGBTIQ people. I was eager to know more about the suicidal disposition of adolescents and young adults. They are the most vulnerable group in suicidology, however, the least literature can be found about this issue in libraries and databases.

Let me cite here the article of Barbara L. Frankowski from Pediatrics (USA) in 2004.

“Although only representing a portion of youth who someday will self-identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, school-based studies have found that these adolescents, compared with heterosexual peers, **are 2 to 7 times more likely to attempt suicide**, (...) **It is important to note that these psychosocial problems and suicide attempts in non-heterosexual youth are neither universal nor attributable to homosexuality per se, but they are significantly associated with stigmatization of gender nonconformity, stress, violence, lack of support, dropping out of school, family problems, acquaintances’ suicide attempts, homelessness, and substance abuse.**”

The above mentioned rate of suicide attempts of non-heterosexual persons should not let researches omit LGBTQ persons from responsible research.

As there are very few published articles in Hungarian about LGBTQ library users and the number of documents about LGBTIQ topics in general accessible in Hungarian libraries is about 350-400, I would rather write an essay-like literature review, a kind of state-of-art based on my experiences, some literature published in English, and the achievements and future goals in my research.

Why just librarians?

Reading the book published in 2010, *Serving LGBTQ Library and Archives Users, Essays on Outreach, Service, Collection and Access*, a chapter informs us that those young adults who are seeking secure and correct information on LGBTQ health issues, psychological, social and legal conditions, etc. **turn to librarians first, or at least the second** requesting information about questions emerging in their uncertain „passage”. They turn to parents,

friends, peers, teachers, the church, medical and paramedical professionals for advice in the self-identification process only when they are aware of the most common knowledge acquired through the internet and in libraries. So librarians and information professionals have a key role in informing LGBTIQ people. Providing person-centred, correct information in a positive, promoting manner can give self-confidence to patrons, and build trust in librarians as helping professionals. As a result any kind of library service referring to LGBTIQ persons, such as impartial acquisition, elaborating correct subject-heading system, providing correct information and safe spaces in libraries give better chance to survive, belief in self-empowerment and ways to find communities of LGBTIQ persons via internet or in personal. Providing correct information to those individuals who are more disadvantageous in society will reduce self harm, defencelessness, substance abuse and suicidal thoughts in general. Using the internet and community sites will serve as tools in finding friends and companions, but librarians will be the first helpers of lgbtq people, who would be able to provide assistance in their need. It is essential for lgbt people to experience help on behalf of strangers, such as librarians, who would not judge them and would handle confidentially any information concerning them.

Marginalizing anybody – young or old, members of a minority, the disabled or the ill – placing them on the periphery of a family, group or the society, will trigger the feelings of loneliness and exclusion. Those who are excluded will feel in a „vacuum”, people do not answer their questions, do not reflect their feelings. This state of existence may cause a similar effect to „voodoo” death in archaic societies. The phenomenon of voodoo death is noted in native societies, and it may manifest itself through process to suicide in modern times. Thus it would be advisable to address LGBTQ persons, attract them to the safe and welcoming environment of a library, offer specialised services and public programs, confirm their positive self-image and capacity to become responsible members of their established/future families. At the same, it would be instrumental to sensitize librarians towards LGBTQ individuals and their problems as well as to increase librarians’ knowledge and reduce misinformation and rejection. In the long run, these measures would reduce minority stress and LGBT users’ feeling of „exile” from society, consequently suicidal thoughts as well.

It is difficult to offer general suggestions as empowerment or refusal of LGBTIQ persons vary from one country to the other, so acceptance of LGBT people in societies and legal systems promoting their human rights are in flux. We may recline upon Pope Francis’s attitude to homosexuality. His words may slowly change the mind of many.

The situation in Hungary is also slowly changing towards the acceptance of the rights of LGBT persons to live in registered partnerships, but there is no open discussion in the society about helping children and adolescents who would later become LGBT adults. There are few resources focusing on minority issues, such as lgbtq people, in the Hungarian library system. However, Roma people receive more and more attention from the government in an attempt of integrating them into society. Thus libraries and librarians pay more attention to them as well.

Nonetheless, let me share some initiatives in raising awareness - slowly and carefully - about LGBT persons, staff in the health system, at a medical university or in the Hungarian library system.

1. Compilation and publication of a bibliography on sexology, sexual mental health, sexual psychotherapy of hetero-, homo- and transsexual persons, in 2008.

http://www.magtud.hu/files/szexologia_bibliog_080107.pdf (Several books from publishers abroad were inspection copies or donation to the library.)

2. In 2011 there was a presentation in our library about the *comparative results* of the mental and physical health status of the Hungarian population based on the *Hungarostudy 2008*, a representative health survey conducted by the Institute of Behavioural Sciences, and the *LGBT Research 2010*, the mental and physical health survey of a non-representative sample of LGB persons in Hungary, organized by Háttér Civil Society.
3. Proposal of replacing the incorrect and outdated subject heading „ill library users” with lesbian/ gay/ bisexual/ transgender library users in Library Institute, branch of National Széchényi Library in 2013.
Partial fulfilment, discussion and correction are in process.
4. Purchasing and lending the most important literature in English about LGBTQ library users.
5. Keeping the copyright laws, copies of the most substantial chapters in the above mentioned book was granted to Library Institute Special Library.
6. LGBTQ Community of the Semmelweis University, a group of lgbtq students in the university was founded in 2013. <http://selmbtq.hu/index-en.php> Since the education at the university is organised for Hungarian, English as well as German language speakers, it is most essential that this LGBTQ society *exist at all* both to Hungarian students and to students from foreign countries. Its existence amends the work of psychologists at the Student Counselling Service of the university, providing counselling in Hungarian, English and German as well.
7. After setting up the LGBTQ Community at the Semmelweis University an activist gave a presentation about their activity and future plans. It was organized for the researchers and lecturers of the Institute of Behavioural Sciences.
8. Building connections with LGBTQ librarians and libraries, who welcome LGBTQ patrons, i.e. children, adolescents and adults.
9. Meeting and presentation in School Library Month 2013 in the library of the Institute of Behavioural Sciences, special guest was the director of the institute. Retired school librarians, many LGB students from several universities, secondary schools, Háttér Civil Society activist, psychiatrists from the institute joined the meeting.
10. A proposal was sent to the Hungarian Library Association, Section of Social Sciences to form an LGBT Round Table. We are waiting for their reply.
11. Queer Reading Group was formed at Háttér Civil Society to raise the awareness and increase knowledge on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender mental and physical health through reading the most up-to-date literature in English. Participants were medical students, psychologists, sociologists, anthropologist, librarians, lay persons. The focus of the reading group turned to analysing internalized homophobia.
12. I proposed to the Acquisition Department of the Metropolitan Ervin Szabó Library, the centre of the public library network in Budapest, to change the practice of non-cataloguing lgbtq content in literature, i.e. novels, short stories, papers in literary magazines. Discussion is in process. At the moment librarians are forced to rely on their memories to recall these contents in order to help users.
13. *LGBTQ physicians in Hungary*. This topic was accepted as the first lgbtq research topic in the medical university in Budapest as optional scientific research field at the conference of the Scientific Students' Association. It is organized to provide opportunity for students to do voluntary scientific work and join the university research system.

14. The Institute of Behavioural Sciences is a collaborating partner of *Joint Action on Mental Health and Well-Being Project*, funded under the EU Health Programme. From 2014 minority groups like LGBTQ persons cannot be omitted from the project on suicide prevention. Special information requests in connection with LGBTQ persons are more often raised in our library, referring to inquiries either at national or international level.

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my appreciation to my supervisor Prof. György Sebestyén for his advice on my dissertation entitled *Ethical code of Hungarian librarianship and application of professional ethics for librarians*, to Prof. Ferenc Túry for his support and to Csilla Raduch for her assistance provided.

References

Frankowski, Barbara L. and Committee on Adolescence: Sexual Orientation and Adolescent, Pediatrics 2004. 113. 1827-1832. -

<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/113/6/1827.abstract>

Greenblatt, Ellen: *Serving LGBTIQ Library and Archives Users: Essays on Outreach, Service, Collections and Access*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2011.

Somorjai, N.: Reducing suicide risks of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender library users in the library, especially adolescent and young adult patrons. In: Hargadon S, Hirsch S (eds.) *Library 2.013 Worldwide Virtual Conference*. Online Conference, 2013.10.18. (Hungarian) <https://sas.illuminate.com/site/external/playback/artifact?psid=2013-10-18.1008.D.D5C6D50AAE2E2ED1FE21EB96C2A690.vcr&aid=51418> and http://www.library20.com/forum/topics/reducing-suicide-risks-of-lesbian-gay-bisexual-and-transgender?xg_source=activity

Somorjai, N. Poster presentation on the possibilities of the non-heterosexual library users on IFLA 78th World Congress (published in) *Könyvtárvilág (Library World, Hungarian)* 1:(4) Paper 658. (2013) <http://mke.info.hu/konyvtarvilag/2013/08/posztereloadas-a-nem-heteroszexualis-olvasok-konyvtarhasznalati-lehetosegeirol-az-ifla-2012-es-konferenciajan/658/#more-658>

Somorjai, N. Non-heterosexual youth in the shade of the heterosexual majority. Promoting self-image of gay youth with library methods. (Hungarian). (Lecture) *International School Library Month 2013. School Libraries: Doorways to Life*. Budapest, Semmelweis University, Institute of Behavioural Sciences Library, 2013.10.22. Paper <http://www.ktep.hu/node/1163>

Somorjai, N.: Non-heterosexual youth in the shade of majority. Promoting positive self-image of LGBT youth with library methods. (Hungarian) (Lecture) Session of the Hungarian Network for Suicide Prevention. Ministry of Human Resources, Dep. of Youth, 2013.02.21.

Somorjai, N.: Libraries for adult and adolescent lesbian, gay and bisexual library users.
(Poster presentation) In: IFLA 78th World Library Information Congress: Libraries
now! Inspiring... surprising... empowering. Helsinki, Finland, 2012.08.13-2012.08.18.

Cannon, W.B.: "Voodoo" death. *American Anthropologist* 1942. 44. 169-181.