

Dear Membership,

Mindful of “Gestalt Therapy being essentially a discipline that offers support for the process of contacting and promotes awareness, presence and growth”, as it is stated on the first page of EAGT website, I wanted to draw your attention to an extremely worrying situation of the growing prejudice and violence against LGBTQ+ community that has been happening over past year or so in my country of Poland, where I live and practice as a Gestalt psychotherapist. Amongst people who are targeted by the state sponsored homophobia and discrimination are my colleagues, fellow Gestalt therapists, clients and friends.

I spoke briefly about this issue at the last EAGT AGM during the conference in Budapest, helped by my British/Polish colleague and EAGT member, Piotr Mierkowski. Since then, during my correspondence with the members of EAGT Board and the HR&SR Committee, it was pointed out to me that first and vital step would be to share my concern with the wider membership using the means of *Newsletter*, as it could open the dialogue, grow awareness and develop together possible actions. After all, as Paul Goodman, one of the founders of Gestalt Therapy, suggested it is in the creativity of our community where the best hope resides for the survival of democratic principles and practices both in and out of therapy.

Despite Poland joining the EU in 2004, the Polish parliament never succeeded in passing any anti-discriminatory legislation and over past few years the LGBTQ+ individuals have been facing increasingly challenging circumstances. Prejudice and oppression are on the rise fuelled by the hate campaign during the recent parliamentary elections, when LGBTQ+ people were dehumanised by portraying them as sexual deviants and predators by the Church and the ruling party. Additionally to the everyday discriminatory practices regarding health care, privacy, and access to justice amongst many other issues, in the atmosphere of the increased prejudice when even one of the large daily newspapers *Gazeta Polska* was distributing “LGBT-free zone” stickers and frequently intimidating words by senior members of the clergy about “a rainbow plague” there has been a marked surge of violent crime where LGBTQ+ individuals are targeted.

To depict the situation of gay and transgender men and women in my country more clearly, I must say more about the very particular character of the Polish psychotherapy field. In spite of the growing popularity of relational approaches, the traditional individualistic paradigms dominate, including the medical model that is heavily influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis, and thus thinking in dichotomies prevails, i.e. real and what is apparent, health and illness, conscious and unconscious. Additionally, due to historical factors, Poland’s transformation after it emerged from the Soviet influence in 1989, have mostly followed introjected solutions of the market-oriented Western democracies. As a result, Polish makeover can be aptly characterised by simultaneously occurring clash and co-occurrence of elements that belong to several different systems of social order in terms of the rules that connected particular institutional solutions to cognitive, axionormative and emotional orientations.

In such a context, Gestalt therapy in Poland may act in some way as a form of ideology of individual autonomy and agency (humanistic - existential perspective) whereas what is constitutive is classical psychoanalytic approach with its assumption of an underlying unconscious truth (which available to the therapist only). On the surface therefore what I see is a postmodern turn towards relationality, diversity, yet the main outdated assumptions remain: fixed identities, long-established associations, hierarchies and binaries. This, as you may rightly expect, has a considerable significance in the context of perception of LGBTQ+ individuals and attitudes towards them, including the psychotherapy they receive.

In view of the above mentioned reasons, I present below a list of concerns that in the opinion of myself and my fellow psychotherapists working with LGBTQ+ population or/and identifying themselves as gay and bisexual men and women, are serious shortcomings needing immediate attention and remedy with support of the expertise of the wider Gestalt community and member organisations, national and international. The concerns are as follows:

- absence of LGBTQ+ educational modules or training on topics such as homophobia, heterosexism, minority stress internalised homophobia, and its psychological consequences during the psychotherapy training programmes that leads to ignorance of this important subject and often causes harm to the clients and trainees who are most often misunderstood, totally missed or misled;
- absence of supervisors trained and experienced in working with issues affecting LGBTQ+ population;
- absence of focus on diversity related issues in the programmes run by the leading Polish Gestalt training and accrediting institutions (I am calling here not only for training on gender and sexual diversity, but also for training that is focused on other differences, like race, religion, ethnicity, class, culture, etc.);
- lack or low interest shown by trainee psychotherapists in gender and sexuality related subjects during the course of their personal and professional development;
- the most ominous is the total nonexistence of the unambiguous statement by any Polish professional psychological or psychotherapeutic organisation that denounces any form of conversion therapy and any past or more recent manifestation of homo-, bi and trans-phobia in Poland, as well as showing any steps to de-pathologise of gender and sexual diversity, and eradicate any form of stereotyping and prejudice.

The direct consequence of the above is a nearly total absence of openly gay, bisexual or gender and sexual orientation questioning psychotherapy practitioners for fear of homo-, bi- or trans-phobic prejudice and discrimination from their colleagues and teachers and therefore lack of positive models for the LGBTQ+ community.

I am calling for a meaningful action because I know that the situation in Poland is not at all unique; prejudice and discrimination against LGBTQ+ people exists all-over the world and is on the rise, especially in Central and Eastern Europe. I also know that, in most cases, the individuals whose human rights are trampled upon do not have voice and are too vulnerable to speak up. Gestalt therapists care deeply about human integrity and dignity, and have been calling for equality and diversity, including the LGBTQ+ rights, since the very beginning. Fritz and Laura Perls were immersed in the social activism even before leaving Germany in early 30s, whilst political activity of Paul Goodman, and the twin brother of Isadore From, Sam, were pivotal in creating conditions that led to removing homosexuality from the APA list of mental disorders, and recognition of a healthy spectrum of gender and sexual identities.

I hope my drawing attention to this area will initiate the dialogue about these complex socio-political issues amongst all Gestalt practitioners throughout EAGT member countries. I have a strong desire that senior practitioners involved in the workings of our organisation together with those who live in countries with a well-established and better record on human rights will no longer remain indifferent and silent, but instead offer concrete support to the efforts in changing the situation of LGBTQ+ community.

Thank you in advance for taking time and reflecting upon what I have written.

Yours faithfully,

Kamila Biały, Ph.D., kamila.bialy@gmail.com
Gestalt Psychotherapist, kamilabialypsychoterapia.org
Sociologist, University of Lodz, Poland

LIST OF WORLD NEWS COVERAGE:

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- Easton, A., 2019. LGBT Virgin Mary triggers Polish activist's detention. BBC News, available at: <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-48257706>> [published 14/05/2019].
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