

Exploring the Identity of LGBTQ+ Individuals and its Links to Self-Esteem through Art Therapy

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Lithuania is one of the European countries with the worst situation for LGTBIQ+ people, who are subjected to a range of hardships, discrimination and deprivation of fundamental rights on a daily basis that affects their mental health. Despite petitions from psychologists and therapists to Parliament demanding legal measures capable of combating this situation, the Lithuanian government has categorically rejected the proposals. In recent years, several initiatives have emerged in the country that treat the problems of depression, lack of self-esteem, etc., of the youngest LGTBIQ+ people, using art therapies. In group sessions, young people can share their thoughts, find out about themselves and feel supported when confronting exclusion and social discrimination. Art is therefore a tool that improves their perception of themselves and creates safe spaces where they can share experiences, feel accepted and find their own place in the community.

A survey conducted by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights showed that the psychological well-being of LGBTQ+ people in Lithuania is one of the worst in Europe, with as many as 34% of respondents reporting that they feel depressed all or most of the time (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2020). Given these trends and the difficulties that LGBTQ+ people face on a daily basis, a question arises: what can be done to improve the psychological well-being of this community? In this article, we will discuss how art therapy could be an effective tool to contribute to the emotional well-being

of LGBTQ+ people. Art therapy sessions are widely used in a variety of settings, including medical institutions and clinics, and group sessions are also conducted by art therapists who work in private practice. It is a way to get to know oneself better, to work through stressful or traumatic experiences, to relax, to be in the moment.

A growing body of research shows that personal creative expression, sexual identity and emotional health are linked, and art therapy can be particularly helpful for LGBTQ+ people during the period of coming out (Pelton-Sweet, 2008). The Tolerant Youth Association, a

non-governmental organization based in Lithuania, has made it possible for LGBTQ+ group art therapy sessions to be organised weekly on its premises. During these sessions, data was collected to answer the question: could art therapy sessions for closed LGBTQ+ groups have an impact on the self-esteem of LGBTQ+ people and their perception of their identity?

LGBTQ+ people experience minority stress: the tension caused by society's widespread negative attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people and the discrimination and harassment that results from this

Research shows that LGBTQ+ people experience minority stress: the tension caused by society's widespread negative attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people and the discrimination and harassment that results from this. Minority stress is associated with a higher prevalence of mental health problems among LGBTQ+ people (King et al., 2022). This stress, related to the sexual or gender identity of LGBTQ+ individuals, can negatively affect their self-esteem (Teasdale and Bradley-Engen, 2010) and manifest as identity concealment, internalised homophobia, transphobia, and dysphoria in LGBTQ+ individuals (Moagi et al., 2021). Minority stress problems are particularly pronounced in societies with high rates of homophobia and intolerance.

The American Psychological Association's Dictionary of Psychology defines self-esteem as a reflection of an individual's self-image, their assessment of themselves, their abilities, their qualities and their place among others (American Psychological Association, n.d.). This assessment determines the person's relationship with others, their self-criticism and self-demanding attitude, and their attitude towards their successes and failures. Self-esteem is closely linked to the development and growth of an individual's personality and to the complexity of the goals they set for themselves. In Maslow's pyramid of needs

(Maslow, 1943), self-esteem and self-worth are the fourth most important need, without which it is difficult to find the motivation to express oneself and to develop one's own capabilities. The needs for security and socialisation outlined in Maslow's pyramid form the basis for the need for self-esteem. In the 2021 LGBT Rights Index published by the international LGBT rights organisation ILGA-Europe (Rainbow Europe Map and Index 2021 - ILGA-Europe, 2021), Lithuania ranked 34th out of 49 European countries included in the index. According to the Index, only 23% of LGBTQIA+ people's rights are guaranteed in the areas of equality and non-discrimination, family, hate crime and incitement to hatred, gender recognition, civil society, and asylum, and Lithuania ranks last in terms of family rights (0% of rights). Thus, LGBTQ+ persons in Lithuania are not legally guaranteed one of the most basic needs – security –, which promotes homophobia in society and, for an LGBTQ+ person, internalised homophobia and self-depreciation. Emotional distress for LGBTQ+ people is often caused by internal conflicts around self-perception and identity acceptance (Moagi et al., 2021). In the spring of 2021, more than 100 psychologists and psychotherapists practising in Lithuania addressed an open letter to the heads of state and Members of Parliament, arguing that legalising gender-neutral partnerships would improve the mental health of LGBTQIA+ people in Lithuania and the safety of society at large. However, the bill was rejected by Parliament at the submission stage and returned to the initiators for further development. Thus, although mental health professionals are publicly calling for attention to be paid to the well-being of LGBTQ+ people, no decisions are being taken at the state level. This situation, coming from environmental discrimination, poses many internal challenges to the self-acceptance of LGBTQ+ persons.

Both personal self-esteem (i.e., personal worth) and collective self-esteem (i.e., the value derived from membership in a social group) are



The Cathedral Basilica of St. Stanislaus and St. Ladislaus in Vilnius.

argued to be among the strongest predictors of subjective well-being (Bond and Miller, 2021). Research shows the benefits of increased self-esteem: it can reduce stress, enhance coping skills, and improve the emotional health of LGBTQ+ individuals (Longares et al., 2016). Art therapy sessions become an opportunity to freely express and embrace one's inner world, and bringing together an LGBTQ+ group creates a safe space to share sensitive experiences and to receive an empathetic response. The organised art therapy sessions were attended by 5-7 people in a group, aged 18-29. During the sessions, the participants would draw or paint something based on a proposed topic and were then invited to share their reflections in a circle. These sessions ensure complete confidentiality, with the shared thoughts remaining in the art therapy room.

The perceived exclusion of LGBTQ+ people from a world full of stereotypes, homophobia, prejudice and devaluation affects the way they see themselves

Participants felt uncomfortable during the first sessions, but a growing sense of courage and togetherness could be observed with each new session. The need to connect with others, which had been expressed at the beginning, began to materialise, building a sense of security. One participant shared: "I'm surprised myself that I started to feel safe in this environment quite quickly and I started to do a lot of chatting and drawing and discussing and well, it's just that... I can't feel like this in every space, I'm not like this in every space."

So, creating a sense of security lays the foundation for self-expression and the opportunity to open up. "Being around people who have similar experiences, which are both very different and similar and we're all part of the same community, I don't know, that was probably the main factor that allowed me to open up."

The perceived exclusion of LGBTQ+ people from a world full of stereotypes, homophobia, prejudice and devaluation affects the way they see themselves. Most participants also expressed

the influence of other people on changes in self-esteem. Feelings of isolation and not fitting in, and comments and criticism from others have a strong impact on a person's self-image. A participant shared an experience before coming out, when he had gone through a difficult time because of being LGBTQ+: "I felt partly alone, that, ah, that's the way it should be. I was somehow humiliating myself, maybe I was trying to shut myself, because I've been bullied a lot for that too, and it's maybe knocking down my self-esteem." This was echoed by more participants, who also shared that their self-esteem was much lower before coming out. They expressed feelings of loneliness in hiding one's true identity, and fear of rejection if you come out: "I think before, uhh, coming out and as a child, uhh, my self-esteem was very low. Because, well, I felt very alone because of that... because I seemed to be carrying a very big secret that I couldn't share with anybody."

Art therapy sessions create a safe space to share experiences and be accepted, to find your place in the community. The relationship with the other takes the form of protection and strength. Belonging to a group has been valued since the dawn of time as a means of survival. Nowadays, there is no longer a physical threat from refusing to form social ties, but the psychologically arising sense of loneliness has a significant impact on a person's well-being. A participant shared her experience of joining an LGBTQ+ group for the first time: "When I first joined I was like, wow, okay, there's so many people here who are just like me and are part of the same community and just somehow... that feeling that I'm not alone... finally that kind of convincing myself that this is normal and that it's okay."

The sense of safety that comes from meeting one's community in art therapy sessions allows for the open sharing of thoughts and experiences

The relationships built during the art therapy sessions became a psychological feel-good factor: "When we talked about our inside-outside, when there is a small rainbow on the outside and a much bigger rainbow on the inside, that resonated a lot too. It's also just being around LGBT people, I keep coming back to the same thing, that it's just that these are experiences that then resonate to some extent with my own experiences." Building supportive relationships with peers also builds resilience to external, hostile relationships: "I also try to remind myself in those moments that, okay, I wasn't liked by these people, I didn't fit in with them, we didn't get along, we weren't like-minded, but okay, there are friends who are supportive of me on a lot of issues." Thus, the sense of safety that comes from meeting one's community in art therapy sessions allows for the open sharing of thoughts and experiences.

For most participants, this was their first art therapy session. They came to the sessions with a desire to hear themselves, to know themselves. In a busy schedule it can be difficult to find the time to go deeper into oneself, to see the emotions that arise and to trace their cause. The weekly art therapy session was an opportunity to explore one's own identity, to learn to be present with the thoughts and emotions that arise. Art therapy can be a tool for noticing changes in one's moods and thoughts. A participant shared that she would later return to her earlier drawings because they allow her to "after some time, see what I was thinking about and observe my emotional states." The drawings show emotions that are present, and going deep into oneself is also a skill that needs to be developed. It takes time and effort to get to know yourself. The sessions can be difficult experiences, people are faced and need to deal with thoughts that have been avoided and pushed aside. There is a relief in dealing with difficult emotions when you integrate the suppressed part of yourself into your life: "I tried

not to divert my attention and stay with it and somehow I felt better afterwards.” Another participant shared similar thoughts: “It was an experience in art therapy that brought up a lot of feelings, but it was a chance to just stay with those feelings.”

When they came to the art therapy sessions, they brought with them an expectation to get to know themselves, and these sessions became like a designated “meeting” with themselves

Art therapy is a way of discovering parts of your identity that you have previously avoided, and this self-discovery can be an empowering experience. Discovering one’s authenticity is a process that starts with the question: who am I really? A participant shared her first experience of facing this question in an art therapy class: “I just kind of started thinking about how other people see me and I realised that I don’t really know how I want to represent myself, so I kind of left with these heavy emotions.” The sessions encouraged her to find answers to the question: what makes me myself? Another participant wondered: “How might I identify myself through some hobbies, through some experiences; how can I reveal myself and just what makes me who I am?” During the interviews, all participants shared the need to spend time with themselves. When they came to the art therapy sessions, they brought with them an expectation to get to know themselves, and these sessions became like a designated “meeting” with themselves: “In general I haven’t had the time or the energy to analyse myself, and I thought this kind of thing would be a reason, just to have an appointment to look at myself.” And the connection with oneself that was created during the sessions also allowed one to discover things hidden deep inside. “When we looked at our own and other people’s drawings, it was

surprising how much we can actually discover in them and sometimes even things come out of the subconscious, then it’s like wow.” In a fast-paced world, it can be difficult to stop and look inwards, and it becomes easier to look for oneself in other people, in the films one sees, or in the expectations of others. A participant came and said: “I felt I had lost myself, I had lost the side of me that I was once like this and now I am different, I want to go back to where I was, but it is not really possible. But these activities have made me remember who I am and have brought some of that artistry and that poetry back, and a lot of inspiration.” Building a relationship with yourself is also a process that takes time. Being in a healthy relationship with yourself takes effort in learning to accept and love yourself: “Now I’m trying to change my inner dialogue to be more positive and trying to somehow identify some of my strengths rather than focusing on the weaknesses and what needs to be improved.” Allowing yourself to see and accepting your authenticity creates courage and confidence. Knowing your needs makes it easier to communicate them to the environment, which creates change. A participant shared the relationship she has developed with herself: “I associate warmth with myself, with me being me and my own space, and the fact that I am trying to draw my own personal boundaries.” Thus, creative self-expression leads to a deeper knowledge of oneself, a sense of identity that allows one to feel more empowered and to assert one’s own values.

This series of art therapy sessions was an invitation to replace the cold winter evenings with something that creates a connection. The young people who came to the sessions shared their thoughts and experiences, and found like-minded people. In a society where LG-BTQ+ people may not always feel safe, making connections like this becomes a strengthening and protective factor. Art therapy sessions

created a safe environment where participants felt a sense of belonging to a community and were able to open up. Ensuring that the needs for safety and socialisation were met enabled self-expression and deeper self-exploration. Participants explored unfamiliar parts of their inner worlds through creative explorations, and the responses of other group members added new insight about their identity. The question “who am I?” is complex and challenging. Developing self-knowledge, awareness of one’s limits and needs takes time. Understanding and accepting one’s authenticity becomes a strengthening factor to move through the world with more confidence.

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