

## THE LGBTQ2+ CONUNDRUM: THE IMPERATIVES OF ETHICAL COUNSELLING PRACTICE

Blessing W. Onofiok<sup>1</sup> & Nsisong A. Udoh<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of General Studies, Akwa Ibom State Polytechnic,  
Ikot Osurua, Nigeria.

<sup>2</sup>Department of Guidance and Counselling,  
University of Uyo, Uyo, Nigeria.

### Abstract

The adoption of Western code of ethics in counselling practice in Nigeria has particularly made it difficult for professional counsellors to align what is conceived as “Global ethical practice with local prescriptions and proscriptions on sexual behaviour, orientation and preferences”. This article examines how professional counsellors can safeguard their practice amid global divide on LGBTQ2+ issues, using core ethics of counselling. Global views on LGBTQ2+ and the discordant hues of legislation, religious opinions, societal attitudes, and individual perceptions are explored. Furthermore, ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, among others are individually explicated in the context of LGBTQ2+ counselling. While the depth of challenges confronting counsellors in diverse legal, religious, and societal landscapes are highlighted, resolute means to overcome them through ethical practice are elucidated. Sexual orientation theories provided theoretical anchorage since it is a complex interplay of biological, psychological, environmental and social factors. It is argued in the article that counsellors must adopt culturally sensitive and ethically sound techniques to navigate the complexities surrounding LGBTQ2+ issues, while providing competent and compassionate care. By adhering to these ethical principles, counsellors can effectively support their clients, uphold their professional responsibilities, and avoid potential ethical dilemmas in this challenging area of practice.

**Keywords:** Sexual orientation; Sexual disorientation, LGBTQ2+,  
Counselling Practise, Counselling Ethics

## **1.0 Introduction**

The acronym LGBTQ2+ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, and Two-Spirit, with the plus sign symbolising the inclusivity of other sexual and gender identities not explicitly represented in the acronym (Twinkl, 2024). This terminology reflects a diverse spectrum of sexual orientations and gender identities, each with its unique cultural, social, and personal significance.

The concept of LGBTQ2+ identities is not a modern invention but has historical roots that trace back to ancient civilisations. For example, evidence of same-sex relationships and non-binary gender expressions can be found in ancient Greece, where same-sex love, particularly between men, was not only accepted but also idealised in certain forms of art and literature (Hubbard, 2018). Similarly, the Two-Spirit identity, recognised by many Indigenous cultures in North America, predates European colonisation and reflects a complex understanding of gender that transcends the binary view of male and female (Driskill, 2016).

However, as suggested by Duberman (2019), the terminology and framework used today in LGBTQ2+ discourse seem to have emerged from Western socio-political movements in the 20th century, given the role of the Stonewall Riots of 1969 in New York City often regarded as the catalyst for the modern LGBTQ2+ rights movement which led to the formation of advocacy groups and the eventual decriminalisation of homosexuality in many Western countries. Over time, the movement has expanded to include a broader range of identities and issues, reflecting the evolving understanding of gender and sexuality.

Despite this push, the acceptance and recognition of LGBTQ2+ identities vary widely across different cultures and historical periods. In some societies, LGBTQ2+ individuals have been revered, while in others, they have faced severe persecution. This historical context is essential to understanding the complex and often contentious global views on LGBTQ2+ issues today.

## 2.0 Societal views of LGBTQ2+ around the World

Societal views on LGBTQ2+ individuals and communities are diverse and shaped by a combination of cultural, religious, legal, and political factors. These views can range from acceptance and support to outright hostility and discrimination, reflecting the broader societal attitudes towards gender and sexual diversity.

### 2.1 Western societies: Acceptance and legal recognition

In many Western countries, particularly in North America and Europe, there has been significant progress toward the acceptance and legal recognition of LGBTQ2+ rights. Countries like Canada, the United States, and many members of the European Union have enacted laws that protect LGBTQ2+ individuals from discrimination and violence. Same-sex marriage is legally recognised in these countries, and there is a growing awareness and support for transgender rights (Kollman & Waites, 2016).

The rise of LGBTQ2+ visibility in popular media and the arts has played a crucial role in shifting public opinion in these regions. Shows like *Queer Eye* and movies like *Moonlight* have brought LGBTQ2+ issues into mainstream culture, challenging stereotypes and fostering empathy and understanding (Baunach, 2017). Despite this progress, challenges remain, particularly concerning transgender rights and the intersection of LGBTQ2+ identities with race, religion, and class.

### 2.2 Africa: Legal prohibition and cultural guardrails

In contrast, many African countries maintain strict legal prohibitions against LGBTQ2+ individuals, often influenced by colonial-era laws and deeply entrenched cultural and religious norms. In countries like Nigeria, Uganda, and Kenya, same-sex relationships are criminalised, with penalties ranging from imprisonment to the death penalty (Epprecht, 2020). These laws are often justified by appeals to tradition and religious morality, with many viewing LGBTQ2+ identities as foreign impositions on African culture (Kahn-Fogel, 2013).

Cultural stigma against LGBTQ2+ individuals in these regions is pervasive, leading to widespread discrimination, violence, and social exclusion. The lack of legal protection and social acceptance creates a hostile environment for LGBTQ2+ individuals, who often face harassment, assault, and even murder with little recourse to justice (Amnesty International, 2019).

### **2.3 Middle East and South Asia: Religious conservatism and limited rights**

In the Middle East and South Asia, societal views on LGBTQ2+ issues are heavily influenced by religious conservatism, particularly Islam and Hinduism. In many countries in these regions, homosexuality is illegal, and transgender individuals often face significant legal and social challenges. For example, in Saudi Arabia and Iran, same-sex relationships are punishable by death, while transgender individuals may undergo gender reassignment surgery under strict legal and medical supervision (Mahdavi, 2016).

In India, the 2018 Supreme Court decision to decriminalise homosexuality was a landmark moment, signalling a shift in societal attitudes and opening the door for further advocacy (Narain, 2018). Similarly, Pakistan has recognised the rights of transgender individuals, allowing them to self-identify their gender on legal documents and providing them with some legal protections (Khan, 2016). However, societal acceptance remains limited, with LGBTQ2+ individuals often facing discrimination and violence.

### **2.4 Latin America: A mix of acceptance and resistance**

Latin America presents a complex picture of LGBTQ2+ rights, with seeming acceptance in some areas and persistent challenges in others. Countries like Argentina, Brazil, and Mexico have enacted laws that protect LGBTQ2+ individuals and recognise same-sex marriage (Encarnación, 2016). However, these legal advances often coexist with deep-seated cultural and religious resistance, leading to high levels of violence against LGBTQ2+ individuals.

Brazil, for instance, has one of the highest rates of violence against transgender people in the world, despite having relaxed laws on the books (Carrara, 2020). This contradiction highlights the ongoing struggle for LGBTQ2+ rights in the region, where legal recognition does not always translate into social acceptance and safety.

### **3.0 Factors sustaining or inhibiting prevailing views on LGBTQ2+**

The societal views on LGBTQ2+ are sustained or inhibited by a variety of factors, including cultural traditions, religious beliefs, political ideologies, and media representation. Understanding these factors is crucial for analysing the global landscape of LGBTQ2+ rights and the challenges that persist.

**Cultural Traditions**

Cultural traditions play a significant role in shaping societal views on LGBTQ2+ issues. In many societies, traditional gender roles and family structures are deeply ingrained, and any deviation from these norms is often met with resistance. For example, in many African and Middle Eastern cultures, heterosexual marriage and procreation are viewed as fundamental to social stability, and LGBTQ2+ identities are seen as a threat to these values (Nyeck & Epprecht, 2013).

However, cultural traditions are not static, and there are instances where traditional practices have accommodated diverse gender and sexual identities (Morris, 2023). The Two-Spirit identity in many indigenous cultures in North America, for example, reflects a tradition of recognising and honouring non-binary gender roles (Driskill, 2016). These examples show that cultural traditions can both sustain and inhibit LGBTQ2+ acceptance, depending on how they are interpreted and practised.

**Religious Beliefs**

Religious beliefs are perhaps the most influential factor in sustaining or inhibiting views on LGBTQ2+. Major world religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism have historically promoted heterosexual marriage as the ideal, and deviations from this norm have often been condemned (Yip & Page, 2013). For instance, many conservative Christian denominations in the United States oppose same-sex marriage and transgender rights, citing biblical teachings on gender and sexuality (Vines, 2014).

However, there are also religious movements that advocate for LGBTQ2+ inclusion, arguing that religious teachings should emphasise love, compassion, and justice for all individuals. So-called progressive Christian groups, for example, have reinterpreted biblical passages to support LGBTQ2+ rights and have been instrumental in advancing these causes in many Western countries (Robinson, 2016).

**Political Ideologies**

Political ideologies also play a crucial role in shaping societal views on LGBTQ2+. In many countries, the rights of LGBTQ2+ individuals are a highly politicised issue, with conservative and liberal parties often taking opposing stances. Conservative parties may oppose LGBTQ2+ rights, viewing them as

a threat to traditional family values, while liberal parties typically support these rights as part of a broader commitment to human rights and equality (Paternotte & Kuhar, 2018).

In some cases, authoritarian regimes use anti-LGBTQ2+ rhetoric as a way to consolidate power and distract from other issues. For example, in Russia, the government has enacted laws banning "gay propaganda," which critics argue is a way to scapegoat LGBTQ2+ individuals and stoke nationalist sentiment (Stella, 2015).

### **Media Representation**

Media representation is a powerful factor in shaping public perceptions of LGBTQ2+ issues. Positive representation in films, television, and social media can challenge stereotypes, humanise LGBTQ2+ individuals, and foster empathy and understanding. Conversely, negative or stereotypical portrayals can reinforce prejudice and discrimination (Bond, 2019).

The rise of LGBTQ2+ visibility in mainstream media has been a double-edged sword. While it has helped to normalise LGBTQ2+ identities in many parts of the world, it has also provoked a backlash in more conservative societies, where such representation is seen as a threat to traditional values (Clarkson, 2020).

### **Legal Frameworks**

The legal framework of a country significantly influences societal views on LGBTQ2+. Laws that protect LGBTQ2+ individuals from discrimination and violence send a strong message that these identities are legitimate and deserving of respect. Conversely, laws that criminalise LGBTQ2+ identities reinforce stigma and justify discrimination (Choudhury, 2017).

In countries where LGBTQ2+ rights are legally recognised, there is often a correlation with higher levels of social acceptance. However, legal recognition alone is not enough to change deeply ingrained societal attitudes, as seen in countries like Brazil and South Africa, where progressive laws coexist with high levels of violence against LGBTQ2+ individuals (Theron, 2020).



#### **4.0 Assessing LGBTQ2+ from a Psychological Perspective**

As a psychologist, it is pertinent that a counsellor recognises the multifaceted issues revolving around global perspectives on LGBTQ2+. It is necessary to reflect theories of sexual orientation, gender identity, mental health, and knowledge of the impact of societal stigma when addressing this issue. Understanding these perspectives is crucial for addressing the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ2+ individuals and for promoting their well-being as a counsellor to whom they may come for counselling. It is pertinent at this juncture to review these factors.

##### **4.1 Theories of Sexual Orientation**

Theories of sexual orientation have evolved, reflecting changing scientific and cultural understandings of human sexuality. Early theories, such as the theory of psychosexual development proposed by Sigmund Freud, pathologised same-sex attraction as a form of arrested development or psychological disturbance (Drescher, 2015). However, contemporary psychological research has largely rejected these views, arguing that sexual orientation is a complex interplay of biological, psychological, and social factors.

LeVay (2016) suggested, regarding the genetic and hormonal influences on sexual orientation, that both biological and environmental factors contribute to the development of sexual orientation. Furthermore, Bailey et al. (2016) indicated that identical twins are more likely to share the same sexual orientation than fraternal twins, suggesting a genetic component. However, no single "gay gene" has been identified, and sexual orientation is likely influenced by multiple genes and environmental factors.

#### **5.0 Gender Identity and Transgender Issues**

Gender identity refers to an individual's internal sense of their gender, which may or may not align with their biological sex. For transgender individuals, their gender identity does not correspond to the sex they were assigned at birth, leading to a desire to transition to the gender with which they identify (Bockting & Coleman, 2016).

The psychological understanding of transgender issues has shifted from pathologising transgender identities to recognising them as a natural variation of human gender diversity. The American Psychiatric Association, for example, removed “Gender Identity Disorder” from the DSM-5 and replaced it with “Gender Dysphoria,” which focuses on the distress experienced by some transgender individuals rather than labelling their identity as disordered (APA, 2013).

Psychological support for transgender individuals often involves helping them navigate the social, medical, and legal aspects of transitioning, as well as addressing any mental health concerns that may arise due to societal stigma and discrimination (Budge et al., 2016). Studies have shown that transgender individuals who receive gender-affirming care, such as hormone therapy and surgery, experience significant improvements in mental health and well-being (Murad et al., 2017).

### **5.1 Mental Health and LGBTQ2+ Individuals**

LGBTQ2+ individuals are at higher risk for mental health issues compared to their heterosexual peers, partly due to the stress of living in a society that often stigmatises and discriminates against them. This phenomenon, known as minority stress, can lead to increased rates of depression, anxiety, substance abuse, and suicide among LGBTQ2+ individuals (Meyer, 2015).

However, it is important to note that these mental health disparities are not inherent to being LGBTQ2+, but are the result of external factors such as discrimination, social exclusion, and lack of support. Russell and Fish (2016) suggested that LGBTQ2+ individuals who have access to supportive communities, inclusive healthcare, and affirming social environments have better mental health outcomes.

### **5.2 Societal Stigma and Discrimination**

Societal stigma and discrimination against LGBTQ2+ individuals remain pervasive in many parts of the world, leading to significant psychological distress. This stigma can take many forms, including verbal harassment, physical violence, exclusion from social and family networks, and institutional discrimination (Herek, 2016).



The impact of stigma on LGBTQ2+ individuals can be profound, leading to feelings of shame, isolation, and internalised homophobia or transphobia. These negative experiences can contribute to mental health issues and hinder an individual's ability to live authentically and participate fully in society (Meyer, 2015).

Addressing societal stigma requires a multifaceted approach, including public education, legal protections, and the promotion of inclusive environments. Psychologists and mental health professionals play a crucial role in this process by providing support to LGBTQ2+ individuals, advocating for their rights, and challenging discriminatory practices and beliefs (Herek, 2016).

### **6.0 Imperatives of Ethical Approach to LGBTQ2+ Issues in Counselling**

Given the global divide in legislation, religious support, social acceptance, and individual viewpoints on LGBTQ2+ discussed in the preceding sections, it is apparent that counsellors are duty-bound to thoroughly understand the confusion brewing in society and assume an ethical stance if they must intervene on client issues in this critical subject. Ethical principles in counselling include autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, fidelity, justice, veracity, and self-respect (American Counseling Association, 2014; British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, 2018). These principles, when strictly followed, act like a compass to ensure that counsellors do not veer off course in their interventions. It is pertinent at this point to discuss briefly how each ethical code may guide the counsellor:

- i. **Autonomy:** Autonomy is the ethical principle that underscores respect for the client's right to make their own decisions. In the context of LGBTQ2+ counselling, a counsellor must honour and respect the client's self-identification, choices, and life decisions, irrespective of the counsellor's personal beliefs or societal norms. This involves providing a non-judgmental and supportive environment where clients feel safe to explore their identities and experiences. To safeguard practice, a counsellor should avoid imposing their personal views on the client and must ensure that their counselling approach is client-centred, empowering the client to make decisions that align with their values and beliefs.

- ii. **Beneficence:** Beneficence involves acting in the best interest of the client by promoting their well-being. In dealing with LGBTQ2+ issues, a counsellor must focus on fostering the client's mental, emotional, and psychological health, which might involve helping them navigate societal stigma or internalised homophobia. The principle of beneficence requires the counsellor to stay informed about the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ2+ individuals and to offer interventions that enhance the client's quality of life. Safeguarding practice here means continuously updating one's knowledge and skills to provide competent and compassionate care that benefits the client.
- iii. **Non-maleficence:** Non-maleficence is the obligation to not harm. Given the global divide on LGBTQ2+ issues, it is crucial that counsellors carefully consider the potential harm that might arise from their interventions, especially in regions where LGBTQ2+ identities are criminalised or heavily stigmatised. A counsellor must be vigilant to avoid any actions or words that could inadvertently contribute to the client's distress or place them at risk of harm from others. Safeguarding practice requires a careful, culturally sensitive approach that protects the client from potential negative repercussions while supporting their psychological well-being.
- iv. **Fidelity:** Fidelity refers to the counsellor's duty to be trustworthy and maintain confidentiality. In contexts where LGBTQ2+ identities are socially or legally contentious, the principle of fidelity becomes critical. A counsellor must safeguard their practice by ensuring that client information is kept strictly confidential, particularly in environments where disclosure could lead to discrimination, persecution, or legal consequences. Maintaining fidelity also involves being honest with clients about the limits of confidentiality, particularly if there are legal mandates that might require the disclosure of certain information.
- v. **Justice:** Justice in counselling ethics emphasises fairness and equality. Counsellors are obligated to treat all clients with fairness, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or any other characteristic. This principle requires counsellors to advocate for the rights of LGBTQ2+ clients, ensuring they receive equitable access to care and resources. To safeguard their practice, counsellors should work to eliminate any biases in their practice, challenge discriminatory

practices in their professional environment, and strive to provide services that are accessible and equitable for all clients.

- vi. **Veracity:** Veracity is the ethical obligation to be truthful. In the context of LGBTQ2+ counselling, this principle requires counsellors to provide accurate and honest information to clients. This includes educating clients about their rights, available resources, and any risks associated with their identity in the counsellor's socio-cultural context. Safeguarding practice under veracity involves clear, honest communication with clients, and ensuring they have all the information they need to make informed decisions about their lives and well-being.
- vii. **Self-respect:** Self-respect involves the counsellors maintaining their own integrity and professional boundaries. Given the divisive nature of LGBTQ2+ issues globally, counsellors must be clear about their values while ensuring these do not interfere with their professional responsibilities. Safeguarding practice means recognising when one's personal beliefs might conflict with the client's needs and being prepared to refer the client to another professional if necessary to ensure they receive unbiased care. Self-respect also involves continuous self-reflection and professional development to ensure that personal biases do not compromise the ethical standards of practice.

Generally, counsellors must employ sound ethical decision-making processes when faced with dilemmas related to LGBTQ2+ issues. This involves considering the ethical principles, relevant laws, and the well-being of the client. In situations where there is a conflict between ethical guidelines and local laws or societal norms (e.g., in countries where LGBTQ2+ identities are criminalised), counsellors should seek consultation and possibly legal advice to navigate the situation ethically and safely. Using a structured decision-making model helps counsellors justify their actions if they are ever questioned or face legal challenges. It also promotes consistency and integrity in their practice.

## 7.0 Conclusion

Global views on LGBTQ2+ issues are shaped by a range of cultural, religious, legal, and political factors. Ethical practice does not require that counsellors adopt the views or beliefs of the clients on presenting issues, in as much as counsellors are duty-bound not to impose their views and beliefs on the client. Rather it behoves the counsellors to demonstrate their commitment to the ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, non-maleficence, fidelity, justice, veracity, and self-respect. While this is challenging given the legal and cultural climate in Nigeria, counsellors must navigate these challenges with cultural sensitivity, professional integrity, and an unwavering focus on the long-term well-being of their clients.

## 8.0 Recommendations

Given the imperatives of ethical counselling practice in Nigeria, the following recommendations are put forward for policy and practice:

- ✱ **Develop culturally relevant ethical guidelines:** The Counselling Association of Nigeria (CASSON) and similar bodies should develop ethical guidelines that balance international best practices with local laws and cultural sensitivities. This is expedient because existing Western ethical codes do not adequately address the challenges faced by practitioners in Nigeria.
- ✱ **Promote client-centred, non-discriminatory practices:** Counsellors should be trained to focus on the client's overall well-being rather than on their sexual orientation. This would allow counsellors to provide support without endorsing behaviours considered unlawful.
- ✱ **Strengthen confidentiality protocols:** Implementation and reinforcement of strict confidentiality protocols should be prioritised. Counsellors should prioritise informing clients of the limits of confidentiality before they initiate services to forestall perceptions of betrayal and sabotage by the client.
- ✱ **Provide continuous ethics training for counsellors:** Regular ethics workshops should be organised to help counsellors navigate complex issues involving sexual orientation. These trainings should cover topics such as managing ethical dilemmas, handling cultural expectations, and ensuring client care within the bounds of local laws.
- ✱ **Create safe discussion platforms for counsellors:** Professional forums or support groups where counsellors can discuss ethical dilemmas and receive peer or supervisory guidance should be formed by relevant regulatory bodies. This will help counsellors feel supported and can foster innovative ways to resolve ethical dilemmas without violating laws or ethics.

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