Enriching Future Therapeutic Conversations with Lesbian Clients

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Abstract

This article is based on research I completed in 2009 as part of the requirements for a Master of Counselling degree at the University of Waikato. The dissertation, entitled "Lesbian Reflections on Past Counselling Experiences," reported the results of in-depth interviews with three lesbian women who live in New Zealand, exploring their experiences as clients in therapeutic relationships. Our conversations broadly covered five themes: homophobic practices; lesbian culture; politics; the importance of boundaries, and difference. By reflecting on the participants' stories, counsellors are invited into practices that will provide sensitive support for lesbian clients with whom they may work in the future.

Keywords: counselling, lesbian clients, therapeutic relationships, homophobic practices

Despite the number of lesbian women who enter into therapeutic relationships with counsellors in New Zealand, little research has been done in the area of working with this client group. This study grew out of a curiosity about what those women who have participated in a counselling relationship as clients might say to counsellors about their experiences of counselling. Because the majority of the literature that concerns counselling gay and lesbian clients comes from the perspective of the counsellor (Bernstein, 2000; Davies, 1996; Davies & Neal, 1996; Kanellakis, 2000; Malley & Tasker, 1999; Moon, 1996; Pearlman, 1996; Simon, 1996), I became interested in tapping into the "valuable and underutilized resource…[of] clients' perceptions of [counselling]" (Singer, 2005, p. 11).

As with any investigation, a number of different theories underpinned all aspects of this research process. The thinking of French philosopher Michel Foucault informed this research at many levels. Foucault (1976) defined power as not necessarily negative, and claimed that it is present in all relationships and conversations. Due to the way in which

power "is produced one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another" (Foucault, 1976, p. 93), power is exercised in the therapeutic relationship. One can wonder about how much power is reproduced in therapy and the effect of this on clients, particularly when the sexual orientation of a counsellor is different from that of a lesbian client. Foucault also discussed avenues of resistance within a power relationship, especially in the form of deconstructing discourse.

Heavily influenced by Foucault, social constructionist ideas also helped to shape this research in a number of ways. Social constructionism asks theorists to question knowledges that are presented as taken-for-granted truths. It asks us to identify assumptions that we hold, both consciously and unconsciously, and to examine and interrogate the ways in which these are often seen as "natural." There are a number of different aspects of social constructionism that I carried with me into this study: the power of language (Burr, 2003), the existence of multiple truths (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1995; Sampson, 1989), the presence of agency within relationships (Burr, 2003; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999), and the ways in which we are shaped by and shape discourse (Burr, 2003; Weedon, 1997). This also led to the use of positioning theory (Burr, 2003; Harré & van Langenhove, 1999).

Poststructuralist feminist deconstruction of language also featured in my research. Contrary to essentialist definitions of language, within the framework of poststructuralist feminist theory, language is not transparent, it is not expressive in that it can often be inadequate for communicating or expressing the message a person wants to convey, and it does not label the "real world" (Weedon, 1997). Instead, meanings attributed to words or language in general are dependent on who is speaking, to whom the speaker is talking, the context in which these words are spoken, and the discourses into which they are voiced. This theory proposes that the meanings that language holds or communicates are open to exploration and/or challenge. Poststructuralist feminism also views language as a site for political resistance. This refers to how language, and the way it is used, can and often does reproduce the dominant discourses within which it is situated.

Another of feminism's key threads woven through this research is the influence of the personal on the political. The revolutionary catch-phrase of the 1970s, "the personal is political," values the richness of knowledge that can be gained through the sharing of one's personal experiences. Laird (1989) refers to this as a longstanding feminist commitment to enable women to tell the stories of their lives to supportive audiences. In terms of research, this allows for acknowledgement of the women who have been

interviewed for this study. Rather than presenting their stories as objective fact, and in my words, I attempted to weave their voices into the presentation of this research as much as possible (Denzin, 2005; Reinharz, 1992).

I also drew in some threads from Participatory Action Research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000) when weaving this research project together. These include the wish to reflect on counselling situations that Susan, Lana, and Anika experienced in order to move away from thinking of the world in an either-or dichotomy, and to continue to consider how "people…are historically, socially and discursively constituted" (p. 557).

Qualitative research also characterised this study. I was guided by the approach that qualitative researchers take towards their participants in order to explore things in their "natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 3).

As a counsellor, my practice is guided by narrative therapy constructs. Some of these include placing the client at the centre in counselling conversations, taking up a position of curiosity rather than one of expertise, unpacking the meanings of words used by the client, holding gently the stories that are shared with me during sessions, exposing and examining discourses that arise as we speak, and witnessing compassionately (Weingarten, 2003) the stories that are shared with me in a way that honours the people who share them. It is with these "hoped for directions" (Johnson, 1999, p. 211) that I entered into research. I soon discovered that I needed to adjust these ideas slightly so that I could step out of the position of therapist and into that of a researcher. Instead, I took with me the ethics sustaining the narrative ideas above. For example, I would guide the interview process for research purposes while keeping curiosity close by, I would unpack ideas and language used in the interviews, I would allow participants to review the transcripts of our conversation together, and I would witness the stories that came through in the research interviews in which we both took part.

Introducing the Participants

One of the three participants came to the study through responding to a flyer I had placed in a location frequented by women who might identify as lesbian and who would be willing to share their experiences of counselling. The other two came through mutual acquaintances. Lana (60), Anika (25), and Susan (54) (pseudonyms used to protect the anonymity of research participants) identified publicly as lesbian and were of New Zealand European descent. Each participant had entered counselling at various times between 1990 and 2002. The age at which each participant came out as lesbian varied

also, from nine years to 19 years old. At the time of the interviews, one of the participants had entered into a civil union with her partner the previous year, one had been in a relationship for two years, and the third participant was single. Together, these women offered insight into a wealth of "insider knowledges" (Kitzinger, 1987; Reinharz, 1992) pertaining to counselling lesbian clients.

Lana, Susan, and Anika experienced counselling in different contexts and settings, and from these counselling experiences offered useful suggestions for counsellors to bear in mind when counselling lesbian clients. These fell loosely under the headings of homophobic practices, lesbian culture, politics, the importance of boundaries, and difference.

Homophobic Practices

Homophobic counselling practices were an area that all three women touched on in their interviews. When reflecting on the influence that homophobia (defined in this research as a significant prejudice toward those people who identify as lesbian) can have on the counselling relationship, Lana connected homophobic practices with the oppression that lesbian women have faced in history: "I mean that's part of being an oppressed group," acknowledging that there were still many places in the world, even in some rural parts of New Zealand, where "even though it is not so oppressed…you could still get beaten up because you are a lesbian."

In 1993, Stacey published a study on the experiences of lesbian clients in counselling in the United States. Her research addressed the influence of homophobic thinking and actions in the counselling relationship and the reaction of counsellors when they learned of a client's lesbian orientation. She explored ways in which a counsellor's assumption that a client is heterosexual in itself reinforces the homophobic discourses that already exist within the fabric of society.

Unfortunately, in a homophobic culture, counsellors are not immune to being shaped by and shaping heterosexist attitudes that contribute to the oppression of gay and lesbian clients (Bernstein, 2000; O'Dell, 2000). In practice, this heterosexism can take many forms. As mentioned above, the most common heteronormative attitude that seems to be prevalent in counselling is revealed when a counsellor assumes that a female client is in a relationship with a male partner. Comments or questions about a lesbian client's husband or boyfriend, or the use of the male pronoun "he" when asking about the client's partner, can have the effect of silencing the client immediately. The lesbian client then needs to decide whether she will challenge this heteronormative

discourse when responding to questions about her partner, or whether she will let slide the use of the male pronoun. One implication of not challenging this usage is that discussion around home and significant relationships can now be coloured by this assumption. The client can also be placed in the awkward position of having to decide whether she will challenge her counsellor during their first session together.

The ideas discussed above could be attributed to the living out of heteronormativity or heterocentricity in counselling relationships. These terms communicate a dominant societal discourse that exists today: everyone is heterosexual until proven otherwise. As a result of being subjected to this discourse of heteronormativity, a lesbian client may perceive the therapeutic relationship as an unsafe place within which to talk about her lesbian identity.

McLean (2002) makes an important point during his reflection on counselling gay and lesbian clients as a male heterosexual counsellor. He talks of how homophobia-fuelled injustice is maintained by many who "close their eyes and ears to the injustices all around them, because these injustices do not impact directly on them" (p. 71). McLean offers several suggestions for standing against heterocentricity at an agency level, including speaking up when homophobic discourses and/or practices are noticed, ensuring that magazines and images on agency walls include lesbian women and gay men, and if needed, changing the wording on forms and documents that communicate assumed heterosexuality.

Suggestions about how to avoid communicating heteronormativity within counselling relationships include listening for and picking up on gender-neutral terms that clients use, openly enquiring about the names and genders of significant individuals that come up in counselling conversation and, if it arises, keeping dialogue open following a female client's reference to her attraction to another woman or to women.

Making visible the practices that shape heterocentric discourses, as well as reflecting on the ways in which counsellors continue to shape homophobic practices, would help to advocate for a more inclusive attitude toward sexual orientation and relationships. However, it is important to mention how the more overt or blatant discourses are also present at times. For example, if a counsellor views homosexual attraction as a temporary or experimental phase of identity development, he or she may encourage clients to move away from what the counsellor perceives as "experimenting." Alongside this, some counsellors believe that lesbian and/or gay relationships are not acceptable and communicate this through the way they conduct counselling. This can take the form of attempted conversion from a homosexual lifestyle to one more closely allied with the heterosexual norm.

In her own counselling, Susan, one of the participants interviewed for this study, experienced pressure to shut off her attraction to women and go back to her marriage and children, right from the beginning of her sessions with Robert, her male counsellor. By refusing to discuss Susan's attraction to women and her wish to explore coming out as a lesbian, Robert foregrounded heteronormativity and, in doing so, marginalised or deemed inappropriate Susan's feelings for women. Steering the therapeutic conversation away from her attraction to women brought forward Susan's feelings of sadness, fear, and a wondering whether "I definitely was doing the right decision." These doubts were compounded even further when Susan realised that Robert was attempting to change her sexuality to that of the norm: "I almost felt like he thought that he could change me…from being gay to being a straight person, to getting on with my marriage and children and family." Susan experienced Robert's attitude toward her lesbian identity as unsupportive and this led her to question her attraction to women overall. By assuming that counselling is an environment within which a counsellor can alter a client's sexual orientation, Robert had positioned Susan as submissive and malleable. Questions arise around what the implications might be for the client's self-narrative and the beliefs she holds about herself in taking up this space. In this situation, Susan was inevitably silenced. This example calls counsellors to take care that they do not close down opportunities to discuss sexual orientation if this is what the client wishes to talk about.

The presence of homophobic beliefs and practices in the counselling relationship that Susan had entered made the coming out process much more difficult. Susan spoke of spending a significant period in each session in tears, and then leaving this to continue crying in the car park. She questioned whether having had a different, more positive, normalising (Stacey, 1993) or affirming (Davies, 1996; Young, 1996; Zur, 2006) experience of counselling might have made the journey less challenging: "I think it would've made the road a lot easier to travel, having had someone I could talk to, even someone to affirm some of the things I was thinking, some of my doubts."

As counsellors, we try to practise ethically and to be of assistance to our clients. Susan's experiences, although they took place over 15 years ago, can teach us ways in which we can provide a more supportive counselling environment for clients who do identify as lesbian. In the NZAC Code of Ethics, two sections are relevant to this discussion of counselling and homophobic practices:

> *4.1. Act with care and respect for individual and cultural differences and the diversity of human experience.*

> *4.2. Avoid doing harm in all their professional work.* (New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2002)

The first of these ethical principles refers to how a counsellor must act with care and respect for individual cultural differences and human diversity. If a counsellor responds to a lesbian client by implying or suggesting, either covertly or obviously, that she should choose a life outside of lesbian experience, the counsellor is definitely not honouring cultural differences and/or human diversity.

Section 5.2 of the NZAC Code of Ethics also addresses the importance of respecting the individuality and diversity of clients, especially in regard to their sexual orientation. This aspect of the Code of Ethics refers to how:

> *(c) Counsellors shall learn about and take account of the diverse cultural contexts and practices of the clients with whom they work.*
>
> *(d) Counsellors shall avoid discriminating against clients on the basis of their race, colour, disability, ethnic group, culture, gender, sexual orientation, social class, age, religious or political beliefs or on any other basis.* (New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2002)

Section 5.2(d) is vital when discussing counselling with lesbian clients, as it states that counsellors should strive to avoid discriminating against clients on the basis of their sexual orientation. Again, Susan's experiences included clear discrimination around her sexual orientation, with Robert choosing not to enter into discussion around her lesbian experiences and feelings. This speaks to Card's (1997) claim: "Ignorance is not, strictly speaking, absence of knowledge; it is absence of attention" (p. 52).

Malley and Tasker (1999) refer to the importance of lesbian clients feeling able to discuss the complexities that surround the coming out process. They see counselling as an environment that can "provide a much needed space in which to explore the many implications of 'coming out': who to come out to, when to tell them [and] how to tell them" (p. 18). Hewson (2002) acknowledges how a lesbian woman (or a gay man) "who wants to be out has to make constant decisions about how to do this" (p. 58). Deciding whether to "come out" is also an inevitable part of a counselling relationship for the client.

A number of unique areas need to be addressed when working with a lesbian woman who is wishing to come out to those around her. These include how a person might approach "coming out" with her family and friends, possible reactions of others,

how to manage if family members and/or friends respond negatively, whether the client wishes to come out at work or not, and what it means to the client to be able to live openly, acknowledging her partner as being of the same gender.

Lesbian Culture

Card (1997) refers to lesbian culture as the "variety of social practices and relations, local customs, vocabularies, symbols and so on" (p. 13) that are shared by those who identify openly as lesbian. Malley and Tasker (1999) call this the "lesbian cultural context" (p. 9). This culture includes lesbian art, music, writing, and history. Bernstein (2000) refers to the importance of counsellors spending time and energy within lesbian culture, and places the responsibility for making oneself familiar with lesbian culture firmly in the hands of the counsellor.

Kort (2004) emphasises the necessity for counsellors to remain aware of their own assumptions about gay and lesbian people and clients. He also discusses the importance of counsellors remaining aware of what he refers to as their own lack of knowledge about gay and lesbian issues. These may include legal inequalities that lesbian women and gay men face; the current social context in terms of homophobic discourses; current news events—for example, recent hate crimes; a general overview of gay and lesbian history in New Zealand; employment differences for gay and lesbian employees; the lack of gay and lesbian public role models or images in the media; the emotional and physical strain of living in a heterocentric society, and what it might be like to have to negotiate revealing your sexual orientation or having to hide the gender of your partner on a daily basis.

Section 5.2(d) of the NZAC Code of Ethics also draws attention to the importance of counsellors familiarising themselves with the different cultures and experiences that clients may bring to counselling:

> *Counsellors shall learn about and take account of the diverse cultural contexts and practices of the clients with whom they work.* (New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2002)

The importance of counsellors familiarising themselves with lesbian culture was something that Susan, Lana, and Anika drew attention to in their conversations. Suggestions were offered, including reading lesbian books, frequenting local gay and lesbian bookshops, going to gay and lesbian film festivals, and talking to people they know who identify as lesbian.

Anika spoke of it being essential that, while experiencing some of what the general lesbian culture is about, counsellors should also value the individual stories and experiences that lesbian clients share with them in counselling. She referred to the importance of stepping outside the common stereotypes that exist about lesbian women, such as short spiked hair, men-hating, long underarm hair, separatist, and childless. While holding some knowledge about lesbian culture, it is vital that counsellors do not allow this to colour or filter clients' stories. Although lesbian women may share similar experiences, how they make sense of them is individual to their own life journeys.

All three women talked of the importance of counsellors remaining aware of generalisations they may be holding around lesbian women. These include the butch/femme discourse that seems to follow lesbian women around and can, at times, fuel homophobic practices. This discourse refers to the assumption that a lesbian relationship must mirror that of a heterosexual relationship (Bepko & Johnson, 2000): one woman is cast in the role of the male, and the other in the role of the female. The butch/femme binary gained a following in the 1950s and 1960s as women in lesbian couples stepped into these gender roles in order to "pass" as heterosexual couples when in public. These gender roles also remained in place out of the public eye, with the butch partner taking up patriarchal privileges while the femme in the relationship fulfilled the role of the wife.

However, having said this, the butch/femme dichotomy is becoming far less common in lesbian relationships, at least in the visible sense. It is not uncommon these days to see a lesbian couple walking hand-in-hand, both looking and behaving as if they have a relationship that sits significantly outside of those butch/femme relationship roles. This is an illustration of Davies' (1991) resistance to discourse: the lesbian couple are aware of discourses around there being gender roles in a lesbian relationship, yet they resist these and, by doing so, challenge the taken-for-granted status of this discourse as a whole.

The prevalence of such social discourses as the replication of gender roles in lesbian relationships makes it imperative that counsellors remain aware of stereotyping, consciously and deliberately examining their own assumptions regarding lesbian women and their relationships, and the ways in which these may position their clients. Stacey (1993) also refers to the importance of counsellors "adopting a political position [around the social oppression of lesbian women and] developing personal exposure to gay and lesbian lifestyles" (p. 7) in order to nourish or grow their awareness when counselling lesbian clients.

Reflecting on counselling in general, Lana, Anika, and Susan also noted the danger and inappropriateness of counsellors depending on their lesbian clients to educate them about points of difference that exist within lesbian culture (Bernstein, 2000). It should not fall to clients to educate their counsellors about what life as a lesbian woman might involve.

Politics

One can not discuss lesbian culture without reference to politics. In New Zealand, from the emergence of the Homosexual Law Reform Society (then called the Wolfenden Association) in 1967 to the passing of the Homosexual Law Reform Act some 19 years later in June 1986, lesbian women have been on the front line, alongside their gay, transgender, and heterosexual comrades, fighting for equal rights and relationship recognition. The year 2006 saw the 20th anniversary of the passing of the Homosexual Law Reform Act by the New Zealand Parliament.

During her interview, Lana spoke of her extensive involvement in lesbian politics, beginning with the women's movement in the 1970s. As a result of the way in which this involvement had shaped her life experiences and the way she understood these, Lana identified the need for counsellors to have some sense of lesbian politics or "political consciousness" in order for them to be able to grasp some understanding of living as a lesbian woman in this country. Political consciousness can also provide space for exploration of how significant events in New Zealand's gay/lesbian history may shape what is discussed in counselling.

The limitations and restrictions placed on lesbian women throughout this history have inevitably influenced the positions available to those women who identify as lesbian, both in the past and in the present. It can also be helpful to understand this historical context, as history itself will, at certain points, shape what is discussed in counselling. As counsellors, it is critical to hold on to an awareness of this influence, while not assuming that these issues are of most importance to the client.

Despite her significant involvement in lesbian politics, Lana pointed out that it is very important that counsellors do not assume that because a client is lesbian, she is involved in or interested in politics: "I suppose having that political consciousness… [might be helpful for counselling when talking with lesbian clients] but then there could be many lesbians that don't give a damn about that." In fact, many lesbian women choose to live outside of the lesbian community as a whole and outside of the political aspect of society that other lesbian women are involved in. This was echoed by Anika:

"I mean, I know there are some lesbians out there who are real bloody right-wing feminists, and that's cool," and others who show little interest in politics at all: "I mean you have some that just don't give a f*k about the politics."

Boundaries

Maintaining clear boundaries in a professional relationship such as counselling is an area that has significance for lesbian clients, especially when they are working with lesbian counsellors. Due to the small size of the lesbian community in New Zealand as a whole, an even smaller group of lesbian women would come under the umbrella of lesbian clients and/or counsellors. This suggests a number of unique difficulties that may arise surrounding shared lesbian social spaces and counselling. Given the closeness of the lesbian community, the likelihood of a lesbian client and a lesbian counsellor finding themselves in the same social space at the same time is fairly high. However, in rural towns there may not be a lesbian social space at all, which brings up another facet that is not as often present with heterosexual clients/counsellors: friends in common.

All of the above point to the necessity that counsellors maintain appropriate boundaries in counselling relationships. According to Section 5.11.a of the NZAC Code of Ethics:

> *Counsellors assume full responsibility for setting and monitoring the boundaries between a counselling relationship with a client and any other kind of relationship with that client and for making such boundaries as clear as possible to the client.* (New Zealand Association of Counsellors, 2002)

Ludbrook (2003) also referred to dual relationships when discussing how it is in the interests of both counsellor and client that "clear professional boundaries be set and observed" (p. 44). However, if counsellor and client both identify as lesbian and spend time in the GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender) community, there is a high probability of multiple relationships forming (Crocket, 2011; Gabriel & Davies, 2000; Kessler & Waehler, 2005; McFelin, 2011).

Of course, maintaining appropriate counselling boundaries is of importance in all counselling, but because of "the smallness and confinements of lesbian communities" (Pearlman, 1996, p. 73) this is paramount when lesbian counsellors engage with lesbian clients. The unique circumstances that exist when lesbian clients enter into counselling with lesbian counsellors indicate that some rethinking around dual and/or multiple relationships may be needed. Kessler and Waehler (2005) suggest that "the automatic

knee jerk reaction to avoid all multiple relationships will come to be replaced with a more flexible and balanced perspective" (p. 71) in the near future. Crocket (2011) refers to the need to shift from the prohibition of these multiple relationships to "navigating through these complexities in ways that strengthen, rather than undermine, counselling relationships" (p. 129).

Although care must be taken around the intentions of both client and counsellor when entering into dual or multiple relationships within the lesbian community, one of the reasons that these multiple relationships may arise is that clients often select counsellors whom they are aware of or know through the lesbian community, in an attempt to avoid other counsellors' heterosexist and homophobic ideas and practices interfering with the counselling process. To then place rigid boundaries around contact outside of the counselling room may create significant difficulties for both counsellor and client.

Zur (2006) discusses dual or multiple relationships between counsellor and client in a rural setting. Due to the small percentage of lesbians who live in a rural community, a kind of "fish bowl" (Zur, 2006, p. 7) situation is created. As client and counsellor will inevitably meet outside of the counselling context yet within the community, Zur writes of the importance of addressing this with clients when they first enter the counselling relationship. McFelin (2011) refers to this also, including the suggestion that discussions take place around the details of these possible meetings, such as initiating contact at a social occasion if both client and counsellor are present. It is important that these courses of action are discussed clearly and overtly to prevent difficulties in the future. This is the case within New Zealand's lesbian community as well. As lesbian clients and lesbian counsellors may very likely encounter each other within the lesbian community, it is vital that the counsellor be "respectful of the client's sense of privacy and autonomy and abide by the confidentiality rule" (Zur, 2006, p. 7). As long as care is taken to negotiate boundaries and possible multiple relationships outside of the counselling setting, these situations do not necessarily need to be seen as negative aspects of living and practising as a counsellor in the lesbian community.

When a counsellor becomes aware of a client's lesbian identity, Kessler and Waehler (2005) recommend that space be provided for open discussion about how to manage if or when counsellor and client come into contact outside of the counselling room. The second step they encourage is to begin dialogue around the possible implications for the counselling they are undertaking together of multiple relationships that may

arise due to contact within the community. And finally, Kessler and Waehler encourage the counsellor to gain clinical supervision from available supervisors to assist the continued monitoring of the effects of these multiple relationships if they arise. Gabriel and Davies (2000) suggest a similar process when lesbian or gay counsellors come across their lesbian or gay clients in the community.

Lana, Anika, and Susan all spoke of their preference to see a lesbian counsellor if they were to return to counselling. In addition to this stated preference, the importance of boundaries featured significantly in our conversations. Lana spoke of how a counselling relationship, due to the nature of the issues being discussed, is one of intimacy. She indicated that for her, "the client is the one who needs to be taken care of" by the counsellor, and that she would expect the counsellor to take up the role of the "watcher of the boundaries." Lana linked this with professionalism and how, if an issue did arise over boundaries, she would expect the counsellor to take this to professional supervision. Lana also emphasised the care that the counsellor must take in the counselling relationship to help the client to feel safe and heard: "the client has to feel like the counsellor is listening to them well and keeping them safe."

Difference

The final theme that arose in these interviews was that of difference. Lana, Anika, and Susan all referred to the danger of placing GLBT peoples in one large group. To cite an oxymoron, something that does unite us is difference.

The creation of a large homogeneous group of those who are other-than-heterosexual, referred to as GLBT peoples, also creates a binary that can nurture oppression. Gay men, lesbian women, bisexual people, and transgendered people are pushed into one group, with the opposing group being those who identify as heterosexual. Although the joining of different non-heterosexual groups worked well in gaining solidarity in the struggle for gay rights in the 1970s and 1980s, celebrating difference within the GLBT communities seems to have come more to the fore since that time. This by no means undermines the uniting of GLBT peoples to fight for equality throughout history. Lesbian women today enjoy the results of this campaign for equal rights. However, in counselling practice, subscribing only to this hetero/non-hetero polarity can be harmful and isolating for clients who identify as other-than-heterosexual (Bernstein, 2000).

Malley and Tasker (1999) emphasise the differences that exist within the GLBT community by reminding us that difference does not depend on sexual orientation:

"just as there are tremendous differences between heterosexuals, so there are between lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals" (p. 21). Bernstein (2000) also emphasises the importance of counsellors valuing each lesbian client as author of her own stories, rather than assuming that she subscribes to norms or stereotypes within the heterosexual or the GLBT cultures.

Anika highlighted this when referring to the presence of difference within the lesbian community. Although women who identify as lesbian often share some similar experiences, such as coming out and living outside heteronormativity, Anika emphasised how counselling is different for every person, regardless of their sexual orientation. Susan took another perspective in terms of difference by emphasising the similarities that all clients share, regardless of their sexual orientation: "I mean we're not that different from heterosexual people really…just treat us like normal people."

Deconstructing Discourse

"We can only ever speak ourselves or be spoken into existence within the terms of available discourses" (Davies, 1991, p. 42). At various points in this article, I have discussed briefly the shaping effects on the counselling conversations that Lana, Susan, and Anika shared with their counsellors. As Davies (1991) points out, we exist primarily in discourse, and it is within conversation that these discourses are put into practice. This can be seen with the influence of heteronormativity in Susan and Robert's exchanges. The deconstruction of discourse provides the counsellor with an opportunity to assist a client in repositioning herself within these discourses when the counsellor is aware of them. For example, instead of reproducing the dominant discourse of heterosexuality in the way he approached Susan as a client, Robert might have been able to walk alongside Susan as they explored possible places for her to stand within this discourse.

Stacey (1993) writes:

> *An appreciation of the powerful effects of our society's dominant discourses regarding sexuality is paramount if we are to approximate a respectful understanding of lesbian experience in counselling and contribute to change that neither pathologises, invalidates, nor ridicules the issues that lesbian clients bring to the [counselling] context.* (p. 5)

Earlier in this article, Lana, Susan, and Anika suggested a number of ways in which this appreciation could be gained. Stacey's emphasis on how this appreciation may help to communicate respect and understanding in counselling relationships was also echoed

in all three conversations. How this may contribute to change on an individual level for clients is a powerful reminder for counsellors about the need for social justice in terms of lesbian experiences.

In the hope of promoting societal and institutional change for our lesbian clients, Burstow (1992) emphasised that "it is critical that counsellors be able to co-investigate compulsory heterosexuality and its impact on their lesbian clients' lives" (p. 67). Although living in heteronormativity may not be a particular issue that clients bring to counselling, it is important that counsellors provide space for this to be discussed if a client so wishes. Providing the opportunity to discuss compulsory heterosexuality and other associated discourses in itself questions the dominant position these are awarded in New Zealand society. It also offers space for lesbian women to speak about the effects of heteronormativity on their daily lives.

The Journey Ahead

The reflections that these three women generously shared about their counselling experiences have illustrated a number of significant areas for us as practitioners to reflect upon. I hold the hope that from these reflections, we may all find possible ways to enrich the future counselling relationships we step into with lesbian clients.

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