

# A Response to Philip Culbertson's Presentation

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It is a privilege to be invited to respond to Philip's paper. He invites us to take the issues of sex, gender, and sexuality very seriously and I am happy to take up his challenge.

To begin at the beginning, he takes us straight from the sexual energy of Palm Springs to the sexual energy of gay men, his gay clients, desperately "acting out" sexually, and his and their attempt—therapist and client together—to make meaning of this as they juggle the competing discourses and, as Philip puts it, their competing "embodied, atomic, and social selves." In this process of therapy or counselling, he seeks to find a congruence that can lead to a healthier and safer life and to a contribution to the good of society.

To help make meaning, he appeals to Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, especially their writings about sex, gender, and sexuality. Following Foucault and Butler, he first distinguishes between sex and gender. Sex is how our genitals are named at birth, correctly or incorrectly, by society. Gender, on the other hand, is not determined by our genitals, but is understood as a performative effect that is discursively produced, even if it is experienced by the individual as a natural identity. It is, so to speak, what we do with our sex.

When Philip comes to discuss sexuality, I find him less clear. As I understand it in Foucault and Butler, difficult though they are to read, sexuality is understood as a social construction that takes place at the interface between gender (what we do with our genitals) and society's dominant discourses, structured as they are around the concept of heterosexuality as the norm for human relationships.

Sexuality, then, like gender, is not about the discovery of an innate or essential identity, existing independently of language. Rather, it is a socially constructed fiction, albeit a serious one, a product of language and specific discourses. We may believe that we have discovered and owned our sexuality as if it is uniquely ours, and that our task is to find words to express that identity, but in fact our sexuality is itself socially constructed, and not the recognition of a natural fact.

Those who perform their gender heterosexually are constructing their sexuality in a social milieu that reinforces that very heterosexuality. The interface between gender and sexuality for heterosexuals is seamless. Philip offers us the analogy of the weaving of a mat; for the heterosexual, the process of weaving is straightforward, intrinsic, and untroubled. As Tamsin Spargo puts it:

*Compulsory heterosexuality is installed in gender through the production of taboos against homosexuality, resulting in a false coherence of apparently stable genders attached to biological sexes.*

(Spargo, 1999, p. 47)

However, for those who perform their gender homosexually, the performance of their gender and the construction of their sexuality, in the face of the dominant, privileged, heterosexual discourses, will present vast internal and external difficulties, discontinuities, and conflicts.

It is not a case of unweaving and reweaving a mat; it is the recognition that for homosexuals there can be no mat at all, for mats, in Philip's analogy, belong to the culture of the heterosexual. Any attempt by homosexuals to weave inevitably creates something inauthentic, as it has been designed by others. It is alien, and offers false comfort. In the face of the heteronormativity that undergirds social construction, those who perform their gender homosexually are faced with a choice: assimilation or alienation.

Here we come to the crux of my issue with Philip's presentation. I believe that underlying his approach, and also underlying the practice of much psychotherapy and counselling with those who define themselves as homosexual, is the insidious, though understandable, privileging of assimilation over alienation. This is because the heteronormative onslaught is everywhere: in the media, education, entertainment, popular culture, and the commercial imperatives of the capitalist, materialist system (the pink dollar notwithstanding), and, as a way to survive, it is very tempting to try to fit in—so tempting that it can become second nature. This assimilation privileges relationships over sexual expression; monogamy and civil union over recreational sex and perceived marginalised practices and connections. Such a bias, conscious or unconscious, spawns pejorative terms such as “acting out” to describe the particular recreational, sexual lifestyle of the sauna and the sex-on-site venue. As I say, assimilation is a seductive way to go. Jameke Highwater argues:

*There will be less pain, less denial, less self-contempt. But there will also be fewer*

*people who exist at a distance from the unquestioned conventions of the mainstream. There will also be fewer people who are sufficiently detached from arbitrary conventions to be capable of seeing beyond the sentries of conformity, and, perhaps, to be lured into the transgressions that take us beyond the familiar world into other, unknown and unnamed worlds.*

(Highwater, 1997, p. 180)

Alienation, on the other hand, demands that we take seriously the production of “reverse discourse,” which is one of the fundamental ideas of Foucault:

*There is no question that the appearance in nineteenth century psychiatry, jurisprudence, and literature of a whole series of discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality, inversion, pederasty, and “psychic hermaphroditism” made possible a strong advance for social controls into the area of “perversity”; but it also made possible the formation of a “reverse” discourse: homosexuality began to speak in its own behalf, to demand that its legitimacy or “naturalness” be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which it was medically disqualified.*

(Foucault, 1984, p. 101)

Foucault argues that homosexuality only came into existence in social discourse at the end of the 19th century, when it was pathologised as a perverse or deviant type, a case of arrested development, a suitable case for treatment as an aberration from the heterosexual norm. As such, the homosexual was subject to the disciplining, marginalising, and subordinating effects of social control.

The irony is that the social discourse used to pathologise homosexuals became the very discourse of resistance to that pathologising. To quote Foucault again:

*There are no relations of power without resistance; the latter are all the more real and effective because they are formed right at the point where relations of power are exercised.*

(Foucault, 1980, p. 142)

Reverse discourse enables homosexuals to language their alienation and to give voice to their living over-against the dominant heterosexual social culture, rather than their attempting to live within it.

It follows, then, that counselling and therapy with homosexual people must also adopt that same reverse discourse so that a therapeutic place can be created where the

challenge of alienation can be tolerated creatively, rather than avoided. So often the opposite seems to happen: the therapy and counselling process, seduced by the dominance of heterosexuality, consciously or unconsciously, privileges the desire to assimilate.

It is my contention that counselling and psychotherapy are called to be counter-cultural and, given the history of the relationship between psychotherapy and homosexuality, this is risky. It's about inhabiting a place where not-knowing is the wisdom, where there is no weaving, no mat, no pattern. As David Halperin (1995) argues, homosexuality offers

*[a]n horizon of possibility that is always unfinished and provisional, and the queer subject occupies an eccentric position in relation to the normal, the legitimate, and the dominant.*

(p. 62)

But here's a problem! I reckon that the last thing most homosexual clients who come into therapy or counselling want to be is queer. It's enough that they can call themselves gay—define themselves, categorise themselves in this way. Philip is right, that homosexual clients often feel desperate—desperate to fit in, be accepted, be loved.

And thus we face the profound difference between “gay” and “queer”. In the popular definition of gay, we are talking about identity, something that defines, that puts a person in a category, usually, though not wholly, according to sexual activity. Queerness, on the other hand, is more than a word for the rainbow coalition of non-normative sexualities: lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and so on. Queer extends the politics of sexuality beyond sex and sexual minorities and their civil rights. “Queer” is opposed not simply to “straight”, but more broadly to “normal”.

Defining itself against the normal, queerness exceeds sexuality, sexual practices, sexual identities. It depends on a coming together through the embracing and welcoming and opening up of difference, rather than the closing down of identity. And this is a very important realisation for us in the counselling and therapy community to grapple with: that queerness is not about liberal tolerance. Rather, it is about connection, and the making of meaning, as one dimension of social alienation alongside others: women, children, people of colour, people of the third world, the disabled, the poor, all in fact who must find and language their identity over and against the dominant white, male, rich, Western world, where therapy and counselling predominantly find their natural home.

So the question I believe we need to discuss further is to what degree assimilation—this process that, to quote Philip, includes “making meaning, being congruent, being healthy and safe and contributing to the good of society”—is, in reality, a defence against the creativity and challenge that comes with tolerating alienation? How often, I wonder, in counselling and psychotherapy have clients been offered this possibility of living with difference?

As counsellors and therapists we are not in the business of making (to borrow Adam Philips' phrase) “shopkeepers into happier or better shopkeepers,” or, in our case, homosexuals into happier or better “straight acting” homosexuals. We are here to do something very different and far more creative and exciting: to challenge and confront and be radical agents of new thinking and new community.

Jean Cocteau, the early-20th-century queer, French, surrealist writer, film maker and boxing manager, was once asked in an interview which of his possessions he would save from his burning house if it were on fire. He answered without hesitation: “I would take the fire.” In this, I believe, we locate the heart of our work.

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