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Guest Author:

An introduction to the field of LGBTQ Psychology and the BPS Psychology of Sexualities Section

Dr Adam Jowett & Dr Joanna Semlyen

WHILE HISTORICALLY psychologists played a significant role in stigmatising non-heterosexuals through adopting a 'pathological' model of homosexuality (Kitzinger, 1987), psychologists working in the field of psychology of sexualities today more typically seek to understand and challenge homophobia and heterosexism as well as promote positive wellbeing for non-heterosexuals (Clarke et al., 2010). Homosexuality was removed from the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1973, thanks in no small part to the pioneering work of early 'gay affirmative' psychologists (e.g. Hooker, 1957; Weinberg, 1972). These academics and practitioners successfully demonstrated that homosexuality should not be conflated with psychological dysfunction or impairment but rather that it is societal homophobia that has a negative impact on lesbians' and gay men's wellbeing. The mental health consequences of heterosexism, discrimination and homophobic prejudice on LGB people have been more recently evidenced in two recent meta-analyses (King et al., 2008; Semlyen et al., 2016) in addition to increased health risk behaviours (Hagger-Johnson et al., 2013).

This emerging field of psychology, originally termed 'lesbian and gay psychology', aimed to promote positive wellbeing and social change for lesbians and gay men, and counter the underrepresentation of non-heterosexuals in many areas of psychology (Kitzinger and Coyle, 2002). It also sought to establish research

about the lives of lesbians and gay men as a legitimate field of academic enquiry.

While many are drawn to this field out of personal interest (see Jowett's comments later in this issue), one need not be lesbian or gay to work in this area (Peel & Coyle, 2004). Indeed, early gay affirmative psychologists such as Evelyn Hooker and George Weinberg were themselves heterosexual. As Kitzinger et al. (1998, p.532) note; 'a "lesbian and gay psychologist" can be heterosexual, just as a "social psychologist" can be anti-social or a "sports psychologist" can be a couch potato'. The scope (and name) of the field has widened over the last few decades, incorporating bisexual, transgender and occasionally 'queer' perspectives (Clarke et al., 2010). Clarke et al. (2010, p.6) provide the following definition of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) psychology:

LGBTQ psychology is a branch of psychology that is affirmative of LGBTQ people. It seeks to challenge prejudice and discrimination against LGBTQ people and the privileging of heterosexuality in psychology and in the broader society. It seeks to promote LGBTQ concerns as legitimate foci for psychological research and promote non-heterosexist, non-genderist and inclusive approaches to psychological research and practice. It provides a range of psychological perspectives on the lives and experiences of LGBTQ people and on LGBTQ sexualities and genders.

While it is relatively rare today for psychologists to (openly) portray homosexuality in pathological terms (at least in the West, see Jowett, 2016), non-heterosexuals continue to be under-represented in psychological research; LGBTQ issues are rarely covered in any depth in psychology curriculums and heterosexuality continues to be the unmarked norm in much psychological theory and research (Semlyen, 2015). So there is much work still to be done! LGBTQ psychologists work as practitioners across fields such as clinical, counselling and health psychology as well as in academia. See Semlyen and Couzens (2016) also in this issue for an overview of the PoSS research interests.

History of the Section

This sub-field of psychology first gained institutional recognition with the American Psychological Association's establishment of Division 44, the Society for the Psychological Study of Lesbian and Gay issues in 1985 (now the Society for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues). There was however some considerable resistance against the establishment of a similar section within the British Psychological Society (BPS). The Lesbian and Gay Psychology Section was established in 1998, after nearly a decade of campaigning and three rejected proposals (two for a Psychology of Lesbianism Section and one for a Lesbian and Gay Psychology Section) (Wilkinson, 1999). In 2009 the Section changed its name to the Psychology of Sexualities Section in recognition that the work and interests of its members also applied to bisexuality, queer identities and heterosexuality (das Nair, 2009). While transgender issues could be more accurately described as belonging to a psychology of gender, the psychology of gender and sexuality are closely related (Richards & Barker, 2015) and the Section remains committed to representing trans and non-binary research interests and concerns under the wider umbrella of

LGBTQ psychology (Clarke et al., 2010).

The Section was instrumental in drafting the BPS guidelines and literature review for psychologists working therapeutically with sexual and gender minority clients (BPS, 2012a) and the Society's position statement on therapies attempting to change sexual orientation (BPS, 2012b). Section members also played an important role in a UK Consensus Statement on Conversion Therapy with other mental health professional bodies and a Memorandum of Understanding on Conversion Therapy in the UK.

Section members are active in all aspects of sexualities research publishing regularly in the Section's own journal and other LGBTQ and mainstream journals. Promoting sexualities research ensures the continued representation of LGBTQ issues within the wider field of psychology.

The Section has an international outlook and represents the BPS on the International Psychology Network for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex issues (www.IPsyNet.net) (see also two Special Issues of *Psychology of Sexualities Review* (2015, 6[1]; 2016, 7[1]) on international perspectives). The Section publishes *Psychology of Sexualities Review* twice a year and has a number of annual award categories including a postgraduate award.

Future of the Section

The section is keen to engage new psychologists and allied professionals, researchers and activists' interests working in, promoting and supporting LGBTQ Psychology to join the Section and indeed the Committee to take part in the future direction of its work and objectives. If you are interested in joining the Committee or the Section email the current Honorary Secretary on j.semlyen@uea.ac.uk

The Psychology of Sexualities Section is holding a one-day conference and annual general meeting on 2 December at the BPS London Office. The theme will be 'Innovations in Psychology of Sexualities' and

there will be presentations, pecha kuchas and prizes. We strongly encourage post-graduate students to submit an abstract. More information about this and about the Section can be found at www.bps.org.uk/pos. You can also follow us on Twitter (@BPSSexualities).

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