A Feminist Approach to Working With Internalized Heterosexism in Lesbians

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This article addresses counselors' calls for more training on internalized heterosexism. Through a synthesis of the research on lesbian internalized heterosexism, the author discusses how the integration of a feminist approach can enhance college counselors' work with lesbian clients. Describes 3 core feminist therapy principles, uses these principles as a framework within which to discuss relevant research on internalized heterosexism, and provides practical suggestions and clinical examples to illustrate the application of both research and feminist theory to counseling with lesbians.

Research indicates that lesbians and gay men use counseling at higher rates than do heterosexuals; a large percentage of lesbians have obtained some form of mental health support; and lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) clients are present in most counselors' caseloads (Bradford, Ryan, & Rothblum, 1994; Hughes, Haas, Razzano, Cassidy, & Matthews, 2000; Liddle, 1997; Murphy, Rawlings, & Howe, 2002). Mental health services to LGB clients should be free of bias, prejudice, and discrimination and should be provided by college counselors who are trained in LGB issues (American Psychological Association [APA], 2000). However, research suggests that heterosexist bias influences some counselors' work with LGB clients (Garnets, Hancock, Cochran, Goodchilds, & Peplau, 1991; Liddle, 1996) and that graduate training in counseling concerning LGB issues is inadequate (Phillips & Fisher, 1998; Pilkington & Cantor, 1996).

In a recent study (Murphy et al., 2002), therapists indicated that training in several areas, including the topics of internalized heterosexism, "coming out," and estrangement from family, would improve their work with LGB clients. In addition, clinicians indicated that their most frequent type of training on LGB issues was reading relevant articles. This finding is somewhat surprising given the dearth of articles on LGB issues in counseling journals (Phillips, Ingram, Smith, & Mindes, 2003).

This article addresses counselors' calls for more training on internalized heterosexism (Murphy et al., 2002). Through a synthesis of the research on lesbian internalized heterosexism, I illustrate how the integration of a feminist approach can enhance college counselors' work with lesbian clients. More spe-
cifically, I describe three core feminist therapy principles, use these principles as a framework within which to discuss relevant research on internalized heterosexism, and provide practical suggestions and clinical examples to illustrate the application of both research and feminist theory to counseling lesbian college students.

Internalized heterosexism, or what some clinicians call internalized homophobia, represents lesbians' and gay men's acceptance of negative societal, cultural, religious, and familial attitudes and assumptions concerning same-sex attraction and nonheterosexual persons (Sophie, 1987). Although internalized heterosexism is believed to be a developmental occurrence that all lesbians and gay men experience as a result of living in a heterosexist environment (Shidlo, 1994), this article focuses on lesbians only because of the unique factors that influence lesbian identity development (e.g., female gender role socialization, sexism, and feminism; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Differences have also been found in internalized heterosexism and its psychosocial correlates between lesbians and gay men (cf. Amadio & Chung, in press; Herek, Cogan, Gillis, & Glunt, 1997; Mohr & Fassinger, 2000). In addition, many articles on sexual orientation fail to mention gender differences, thus making it unclear what information holds true for lesbians, gay men, or both.

Feminist Approaches in Counseling

There are several reasons why a feminist approach may be particularly useful for college counselors who are working with lesbian clients to reduce their internalized heterosexism. First, feminism is based on the belief that sexist, heterosexist, classist, and racist societal structures oppress women (Worell & Remer, 2003). Feminists have critically examined how “compulsory” heterosexuality and the promotion of negative views of lesbians are significant aspects of women’s oppression under patriarchy (Brown, 1994; Rich, 1980). Second, attitudes about and social responses to LGB individuals are inextricably linked to negative assumptions about gender and gender roles (e.g., to negative positions that suggest “lesbians want to be men” or that “masculine looking women must be lesbians” [Brown, 1988; Fassinger, 2000]). Third, research suggests that most lesbians prefer a therapist who is feminist (Hughes et al., 2000). Fourth, feminism has been theorized to play an important role in mitigating internalized heterosexism and facilitating the achievement of a positive lesbian identity (Szymanski & Chung, 2003b). Empirically, less internalized heterosexism in lesbians is related to self-identification as a feminist, favorable attitudes toward feminism, more adherence to various feminist ideologies, greater feminist identity development, and more involvement in feminist activities (Szymanski, 2004; Szymanski & Chung, 2003a). Fifth, feminist therapy is the only therapy approach that includes large numbers of open, self-identified lesbian therapists. This suggests that feminist therapy differs from other counseling approaches in its specific inclusion of an affirmative LGB phenomenological perspective (Brown, 1988).
Several principles of feminist therapy have been identified that cut across the different philosophical traditions (e.g., radical, liberal, socialist) within feminism. Three of these core principles—(a) the personal is political, (b) an integrated analysis of oppression, and (c) egalitarian relationships (Brown, 1994; Enns, 1997; Worell & Remer, 2003)—will be used as a framework for discussing research and practice implications for working with lesbian internalized heterosexism. Because lesbian college students are dealing with both external and internalized oppression, it is important for college counselors to address these three areas in counseling.

**The Personal Is Political**

The first principle, personal is political, refers to the belief that women’s personal difficulties are connected to the social, economic, and political context in which they live (Enns, 1997). This principle encourages college counselors to attend to the external/sociocultural factors, such as heterosexism, that contribute to lesbians’ distress, as well as to the ways that lesbian clients may have internalized negative and limiting heterosexist attitudes.

**Heterosexism.** Heterosexism refers to attitudes and behaviors that deny, devalue, or stigmatize any nonheterosexual form of identity, behavior, or relationship (Herek, 1995). Examples of heterosexism include antilesbian harassment and discrimination, a lack of legal sanction of same-sex couples, rejection by the church due to sexual orientation, a belief in the superiority of heterosexuality over homosexuality, and assumptions of heterosexuality.

Numerous studies indicate that college campuses provide a hostile environment for lesbian students and that many college lesbians have experienced discrimination, harassment, and violence based on their sexual orientation (D’Augelli, 1992, 1993; Herek, 1993). These studies reveal that many lesbians have been the victims of verbal abuse based on sexual orientation, threats of violence, personal property damage, sexual assault, physical assault, and unfair treatment and that these incidents are rarely reported to university authorities because of fears about the consequences of help seeking. In a more recent national study (Rankin, 2003) of sexual minority students, staff, and faculty at 14 “gay friendly” universities (defined as having a LGB campus center or sexual orientation nondiscrimination policy), the author found that 29% of respondents had experienced harassment based on sexual orientation within the past year, 20% feared for their physical safety because of their sexual orientation, 51% concealed their sexual orientation to avoid intimidation and harassment, 43% described their campus climate as homophobic, and 41% stated that their college was not addressing LGB issues. Furthermore, the experience of heterosexist events is related to adverse psychological outcomes (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999; Mays & Cochran, 2001; Otis & Skinner, 1996; Szymanski, in press). Consistent with sexual minority students’ reports, studies of heterosexual college students’ attitudes also indicate an intolerant climate for lesbian students. For example, most heterosexual students report hearing derogatory
remarks on their campuses about LGB persons (Malaney, Williams, & Geller, 1997); heterosexual students hold more negative attitudes toward gay and lesbian students than toward students whose sexual orientation was not specified (Engstrom & Sedlacek, 1997); 40% believe that lesbians are sick (D’Augelli & Rose, 1990); and 19% report no interest in having a lesbian or gay friend (Mohr & Sedlacek, 2000). Evans and Broido (2002) found that factors leading to lesbians’ negative perceptions of the college environment included experiences of heterosexist comments and harassment; antigay graffiti; a lack of visible support for LGB individuals and social activities; characteristics of the residence hall, such as a lack of community and large numbers of athletes, sorority members, and/or 1st-year students; and nonsupportive interactions with resident assistants, roommates, and other students living in the residence hall.

Internalized heterosexism. A recognition of the pervasive heterosexism in U.S. culture and on college campuses makes it easy to understand how all lesbians have, to some degree, internalized negative attitudes concerning lesbianism. Internalized heterosexism is often greatest during the early phases of the coming-out process. Mildner (2001) found it to be a significant predictor of the phase of individual sexual identity development (i.e., process involving the recognition and acceptance of same-sex attraction and lifestyle preferences) and the phase of group membership identity development (i.e., process involving the acceptance of one’s status as a member of an oppressed group and confrontation of oppression), as proposed by McCarn and Fassinger (1996). In addition, lesbians’ internalized heterosexism is related to more conflict concerning sexual orientation (Szymanski, Chung, & Balsam, 2001). These findings demonstrate the important influence that internalized heterosexism can have on developing and integrating a positive lesbian identity into an individual’s overall sense of self (Mildner, 2001). Because traditional-age college students are often in the coming-out stage on college campuses, this is a critical time for them to be encouraged by others (e.g., counselors) to feel good about themselves.

Self-disclosure of one’s lesbianism to others is an important part of developing a positive lesbian identity, developing intimate relationships, and enhancing one’s psychological well-being (Radonsky & Borders, 1995; Sophie, 1987). Yet, fears of antilesbian harassment and violence on college campuses negatively affect lesbian students’ willingness to disclose their sexual orientation to others (D’Augelli, 1992; Herek, 1993). In addition, more internalized heterosexism has been found to be associated with passing for straight and less self-disclosure of sexual orientation (Herek et al., 1997; McGregor et al., 2001; Mohr & Fassinger, 2000; Radonsky & Borders, 1995; Szymanski et al., 2001). Furthermore, Rotosky and Riggle (2002) demonstrated how both external heterosexism and internalized heterosexism act to influence self-disclosure. At the individual level, they found that having a workplace nondiscrimination policy and less internalized heterosexism were positively associated with the extent to which an individual was out at work. Examining couple effects, they also found that an individual’s disclosure status at work was positively associated with her partner having a workplace nondiscrimination policy and less internalized heterosexism. These
findings suggest that college campuses that have sexual orientation in their nondiscrimination policies may have a positive effect on lesbians’ willingness to disclose their sexual orientation to others. In addition, they highlight the importance of assessing and addressing the level of heterosexism in the individual, in the college environment, and in interpersonal relationships when working with lesbian clients.

Lesbian internalized heterosexism has been empirically linked to a variety of psychosocial difficulties, including depression (Herek et al., 1997; Szymanski et al., 2001), low self-esteem and loneliness (Szymanski & Chung, 2001), higher levels of demoralization (Herek et al., 1997), self-harm (Bennett & O’Connor, 2002), greater body dissatisfaction and weight preoccupation (Pitman, 1999), lower levels of social support and less satisfaction with social support (McGregor et al., 2001; Szymanski et al., 2001), and lower levels of relationship quality (Balsam, Szymanski, &Nilsen, 2002). Furthermore, Szymanski (in press) found that when examined concurrently, both external and internalized heterosexism accounted for unique variance in lesbians’ psychological distress.

Integrated Analysis of Oppression

A second principle, an integrated analysis of oppression, portrays the complex ways that people can both oppress and be oppressed. This analysis also demonstrates the interactive natures of dominance and oppression within one individual as well as in a particular cultural or social context (Brown, 1994). Thus, a counselor using a feminist approach will identify and explore how multiple forms of oppression may be contributing to a client’s difficulties (Worell & Remer, 2003). Because all lesbians are women, it is important for college counselors to attend not only to heterosexism but also to sexism in lesbian students’ lives. Supporting this contention, research indicates that sexism is rampant in lesbians’ lives and that experiences of sexist stressors are related to poorer mental health. For example, data from the National Lesbian Health Care Survey (Bradford et al., 1994; Descamps, Rothblum, Bradford, & Ryan, 2000) revealed that 32% of lesbians had been raped or sexually assaulted; that 19% had been involved in an incestuous relationship while growing up; and that these experiences were related to more daily stress, depression, and/or alcohol and drug abuse. In addition, lesbians who had experienced both a hate crime based on sexual orientation and sexual abuse as children reported more distress than did hate crime survivors who did not experience childhood sexual abuse. Furthermore, Szymanski (in press) found that heterosexism, sexism, internalized heterosexism, and the interaction of heterosexist and sexist events were unique predictors of psychological distress in lesbians. Although research is lacking, it seems likely that the additional oppressions of racism, ableism, classism, and anti-Semitism are compounded when intersected with lesbianism and negatively affect mental health.

Egalitarian Relationships

A third principle, egalitarian relationships, encourages counselors to treat clients as experts about themselves, use strategies to reduce the power differential
between counselor and client (e.g., mutually determined treatment goals, appropriate self-disclosure, open discussions about diagnosis), assist clients in trusting their own experience, and emphasize client strengths (Enns, 1997; Worell & Remer, 2003). Because lesbians share a common experience of marginalization and disempowerment, a counseling relationship in which the counselor holds most of the control may only serve to reinforce the feelings of powerlessness that a lesbian struggles with on a daily basis. In contrast, a counseling relationship in which a lesbian client feels powerful can have a significant positive impact on her feelings of empowerment in the society at large (Fassinger, 2000).

Implications for College Counselors

The Personal Is Political

The personal is political principle encourages college counselors to (a) attend to the sociocultural context of their lesbian students' lives; (b) identify, explore, and challenge internalized negative messages; and (c) facilitate social change.

Attend to the sociocultural context. College counselors need to assist lesbian clients in recognizing the existence and negative impact of heterosexism on their lives. As such, college counselors should assess the heterosexist context of their lesbian clients' lives and ask them about their experiences of invisibility, rejection, prejudice, harassment, discrimination, and violence (APA, 2000). In addition, college counselors should help their lesbian clients see how living in a heterosexist culture influences their current problems and their own personal feelings about being a lesbian. For example, a counselor working with a lesbian couple might help them examine how a lack of acknowledgement for their relationship by their roommates and fellow students may be contributing to the difficulties in their relationship. In a related manner, a counselor working with a lesbian who is Catholic might help her examine how her religious upbringing and beliefs (e.g., being taught that lesbianism is a sin and morally wrong) may be having a negative impact on her self-acceptance. Finally, college counselors should assist lesbian clients in deciding whether they want to change themselves (e.g., their internalized messages), change their environments (social change), or both (Worell & Remer, 2003).

Identify, explore, and challenge internalized negative messages. College counselors who work with lesbian clients need to be able to detect the more blatant (e.g., hating oneself for being attracted to other women or wishing one were heterosexual) as well as subtle (e.g., acting as if one's lesbian lover is merely a friend or believing that lesbians are not different from heterosexual women) ways that internalized heterosexism manifests itself (Gartrell, 1984; Margolies, Becker, & Jackson-Brewer, 1987) and link these attitudes to the larger homophobic context in which they live to lessen victim blame. Counselors are encouraged to become familiar with scales that assess internalized heterosexism (cf. Mayfield, 2001; Shidlo, 1994; Szymanski & Chung, 2001) so that they may become adept at identifying the many ways internalized heterosexism manifests itself.
Once clients’ internalized negative messages are identified and explored, counselors can challenge these messages using a variety of methods. For example, a counselor working with a client who holds inaccurate beliefs and negative stereotypes of lesbians (e.g., “lesbians hate men,” “lesbians are aggressive,” “you can’t be feminine if you are a lesbian,” and “lesbians can’t be good parents”) might teach her cognitive methods to test the validity of these beliefs, emphasize the diversity that exists among lesbians, provide a feminist analysis of gender and power, and provide books containing accurate information about lesbians (Padesky, 1988; Sophie, 1987). In a similar way, a counselor working with a client who believes that she is destined for hell can help her change her negative self-talk to a more positive one (e.g., “My God accepts and loves me as a lesbian”) and refer her to religious readings and a clergy member who has lesbian-affirmative attitudes (Fassinger, 2000; Neisen, 1993; Sophie, 1987).

College counselors might also assist clients in seeing how their internalized heterosexism may be related to both presenting problems and psychological well-being. For example, a counselor working with a student who is struggling with the negative aspects of perfectionism might help her explore ways that her internalized heterosexism (i.e., not feeling good enough because she is a lesbian) may be contributing to her need to be an overachiever. Similarly, a counselor working with a student who has unrealistic fears that someone will find out that she is a lesbian and feels the need to be on guard and hide her lesbianism from others might help her examine how these internalized messages might be contributing to her anxiety.

Facilitate social change. Although challenging lesbians’ internalized heterosexism is often helpful to lesbian clients, it is not enough. By focusing on the individual, we, as counselors, keep the focus away from heterosexist attitudes and behaviors of individuals and the structures of inequality and oppression that created the problem in the first place. In addition, even the concept of internalized heterosexism has been critiqued as implicitly representing pathology and weakness rather than the resilience demonstrated by lesbians in the face of societal heterosexism (Kitzinger, 1996). Thus, college counselors who use a feminist approach help their clients develop a sense of personal and social power and teach them skills for confronting oppression and enacting environmental change (Brown, 1988; Worell & Remer, 2003).

Clients’ initiatives for social change, prompted by feminist therapy, often occur at the microlevel and are frequently a spontaneous outcome of identifying the sociocultural sources of one’s problems, of not blaming the victim (Worell & Remer, 2003). For example, a lesbian client who identifies heterosexism as a source of her problems might decide to confront a roommate’s heterosexist statement, which might result in the roommate’s attitude change. In a similar way, a lesbian student might decide to confront a college administrator about heterosexist practices on campus, which might lead to policy changes. Furthermore, a lesbian client who has decreased her internalized heterosexism might decide to join a LGB campus group to serve as a positive role model for other students and to work with others toward social change.
Finally, college counselors need to actively work to eradicate heterosexism as part of their professional responsibility. For example, a counselor might provide student outreach presentations on LGB issues; advertise LGB events; advocate for sexual orientation to be included in their institutions' nondiscrimination policy; confront heterosexist attitudes in others; organize programs with LGB themes; cosponsor events with LGB affirmative campus groups; implement a Safe Zone or Allies program to provide visible support for LGB students; recruit LGB and LGB supportive staff; and provide training to college professionals, such as residence life staff and campus police, on LGB issues (Evans & Broido, 2002; Rankin, 2003).

Integrated Analysis of Oppression

The integrated analysis of oppression principle encourages college counselors to increase a lesbian client's awareness of her other relevant social locations (e.g., gender, class, race, physical abilities), facilitate identity development within these locations, and promote an awareness of how a client's social locations influence psychosocial difficulties and both external and internalized heterosexism (Worell & Remer, 2003). For example, a lesbian survivor of sexual abuse who questions whether her feelings of same-sex attraction are valid because she has internalized the cultural myth that sexual abuse causes lesbianism might link her self-doubt and shame to the trauma she has endured. A counselor working with a client like this might encourage her to trust her own feelings and challenge her beliefs that her attractions to other women are merely a symptom of the abuse by men that she experienced (Balsam, 2003). Counselors working with lesbians of color need to understand how racism and sexism within a client's racial/ethnic community might interact to compound her experiences of both external and internalized heterosexism and how experiences of racism within the LGB community might contribute to her feelings of alienation and distress (Greene, 1994). For example, a counselor working with an African American lesbian who has heard messages from her family and racial/ethnic campus community that lesbianism is a "White problem" and that a Black lesbian is a betrayal of her own people might encourage her to explore her realistic fears of rejection from other African American students if she comes out as a lesbian; discuss the impact of racism on herself, other African American students, and beliefs about gay persons within the African American community; and provide her with readings about the issues confronting African American lesbians.

Egalitarian Relationships

Egalitarian counseling relationships can have an important impact on lesbian clients who are struggling with internalized heterosexism. For example, a lesbian counselor working with a lesbian client whose internalized heterosexism manifests itself in believing that heterosexuality is superior to homosexuality, that lesbians are unsuccessful in work, and that lesbian relationships do not last might "come out" to her client as a lesbian to provide the client with a positive
role model. In addition, she might briefly discuss her own long-term relationship or career success to counter the client's internalized negative beliefs. The counselor might also conduct a feminist analysis of heterosexual relationships, which would indicate an approximate divorce rate of 50% among heterosexually married persons, and identify other successful lesbians in the media (e.g., Melissa Etheridge, Ellen DeGeneres, Rosie O'Donnell) to provide more evidence that her beliefs are inaccurate.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research is needed to examine variables such as self-esteem and coping strategies that might moderate the relationship between heterosexism and lesbians' mental health. Research is also needed to more fully examine the impact of multiple oppressions on lesbians' psychological distress and experiences of internalized heterosexism. Although a burgeoning body of research exists supporting the efficacy of feminist therapy with women in general (Worell, Chandler, Johnson, & Blount, in press), future research is needed to examine its efficacy specifically with lesbians. Furthermore, research is needed to examine the efficacy of LGB-affirmative environmental interventions on college campuses. For example, do college campuses that have Safe Zone programs and antidiscrimination policies that include sexual orientation have a more positive impact on lesbians' college experience than those that do not have gay friendly programs and policies?

Conclusion

Research demonstrates the negative influence that external and internalized heterosexism and multiple forms of oppression can have on lesbians' mental health, findings that support the theory behind feminist therapy. College counselors can enhance their work with lesbian clients by integrating feminist theory into their approach to affirm lesbian clients and reduce their internalized heterosexism. Feminist strategies, such as attending to the sociocultural context; identifying, exploring, and challenging internalized negative messages; initiating social change; exploring how clients' diverse social locations may influence mental health; and creating egalitarian relationships, may be particularly useful when working with female clients who are struggling with these issues.

References


