

Deconstructing Heterosexism in the Counseling Professions

A Narrative Approach



James M. Croteau
Julianne S. Lark
Melissa A. Lidderdale
Y. Barry Chung
Editors

Multicultural Aspects of Counseling Series 20



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Deconstructing
Heterosexism in the
Counseling Professions

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Foreword

These 36 authors are asking us, the readers, a question regarding the principle of inclusiveness in the practice of counseling. The book is intensely personal, and each author took a considerable risk in the degree of self-disclosure in his or her narrative story. This is a book not only about lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) issues but, more important, also about the deeper issues of being inclusive with regard to the thousands of differences, including demographic, status, and affiliation as well as ethnographic characteristics, which combine to define our individual identities. This book is a test of the legitimacy of counseling, and if the field of counseling fails this test, then it has lost a great deal of its professional legitimacy. There is a great deal at stake here, not just for the authors but for the readers as well.

The *Multicultural Aspect of Counseling (MAC)* series is honored to include this book among the several dozen books that address culture-centered issues of the counseling profession. It is interesting to note in the introduction to Section II that the decision to publish this book in the *MAC* series was carefully made, both to address LGB as a culture and to address at the same time how LGB is addressed differently in each cultural context. The editors decided to follow the principle of cultural inclusiveness and publish this book in the context of other multicultural books of the *MAC* series to emphasize the interactivity of LGB issues with other aspects of our cultural identities.

This is a book of stories told by professionals that will transform the reader as well as educate, connect, and empower the generic competencies of counselors. It is not only a book about a special LGB population. It is a book about liberation over oppression and the "core alignment" of counseling on achieving human potential. Many of the stories led LGB readers to exclaim, "It was just like that for me!" We hope many of our other

readers will be able to see how these stories are “just like them” as well. In the editors’ own words, “We contend that the telling, listening, and reflecting on stories about navigating sexual orientation within the counseling professions comprise the missing ‘map’ or ‘key’ in the journey to bring LGB affirmation more fully into the heart of what it is to be a counseling professional” (Croteau, Lark, & Lance, Ch. 1, this volume).

This is a book about change in how counseling is provided and received so that the change can be positive with regard to inclusiveness. This comprehensive text seeks to move LGB-affirmative practice, training, and research from the edge to the center of counseling professional discourse. The first section of 18 chapters provides the “narrative voices” of the authors speaking out about their own personal and private journeys as they take risks about how you, the reader, will interpret their choices. The second section of two longer chapters focuses on the special issues and contexts for the narrative perspectives. The concluding chapters of the book link the narratives and special issues in “deconstructing, envisioning, and making practice suggestions” to the reader. The book does not limit itself to identifying what is wrong but also makes concrete and practical suggestions for making things right.

Many of the authors talk about the risks they were taking in writing these chapters and how vulnerable they felt having disclosed such personal information to the relative strangers who will read this book. Many of the stories demonstrate the extent and power of inappropriate exclusivity that remains strong in the profession of counseling. The profession of counseling has a long way to go, but progress is being made.

—Paul B. Pedersen
Senior Editor

Multicultural Aspects of Counseling Series

Preface

At its heart, this is a book of stories about the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual counseling professionals as they confront sexual orientation issues in their personal and professional lives. All four of us who are editors of this book have dedicated significant energy in our careers to lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) issues. All of us have lived our professional lives openly lesbian or gay. The book is “about us” in a profound way that has been unique in our professional writing experiences.

LGB lives have historically been rendered invisible in the wider society and popular culture. Even with today’s increasing public visibility, LGB lives too often remain invisible, with any representation remaining an exception or exotic event. Amidst significant developments in LGB-affirmative practice and scholarship in the counseling professions, our lives as LGB counseling professionals continue to feel marginal. We continue to be “the only one” in most of our professional contexts, and our daily work occurs most often in institutional and social structures steeped in heterosexism. Our own stories of struggles and successes as LGB professionals seem genuinely honored only in LGB-focused professional groups (e.g., the Association for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Issues in Counseling, the Society of Counseling Psychology’s Section on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Awareness).

The promise of professional visibility and validation that this book brings to our own lives as LGB professionals has made our editing and writing work a deeply emotional experience. We feel honored and empowered by the opportunity to make this book a reality. We acknowledge that we would not have had this opportunity if not for the LGB and heterosexual ally counseling professionals who pioneered the LGB-affirmative counseling movement. We also acknowledge that we would not have been able to take advantage of the opportunity to do this book without the many people

in our lives right now who provide us with personal and professional support and nurture.

We placed a strong value on inclusiveness in putting this book together. We wanted this book to be more inclusive than is the norm in sexual orientation literature in our field. While it is rewarding to take account of our progress toward greater inclusion, it is also painful to take account of how such progress has been only modest or marginal. We do think this book is stronger than prior literature in being a deeper and more honest inclusion of issues around both race and bisexuality. We have done some justice to inclusion in other ways, too. The voices of professionals who manage their minority sexual orientations in less public and "out" ways are present in the book. Gender weaves through the writing and is there to be considered by readers. There are stories and commentary related to issues around professional and economic status. Included is the often-ignored disability voice. On the other hand, despite our efforts, we had little success in finding a way to give voice to the transgender experience among counseling professionals; transgender issues are only briefly mentioned in a few places in the book. The absence of transgender in the book title, thus, is meant to represent the lack of genuine inclusion and to avoid the false impressions that can be created by nominal inclusion. We do acknowledge and support the historical and cultural movement toward the inclusion of transgender people and issues in the LGB-affirmative counseling movement. We encourage work toward a transformation in the counseling professional that will be inclusive of both sexual and gender diversities.

Sharing coming-out stories is an LGB cultural phenomenon that holds great transformative power. We share our coming-out stories to educate and challenge others in formal situations such as LGB speakers' panels. We share our coming-out stories to increase connectedness in intensely personal contexts, such as disclosing our sexual orientations to our families of origin. We share our coming-out stories with other LGB people to gain the mutual empowerment that comes from discovering commonality in the struggle to overcome heterosexism. Though the stories in this book are not coming-out stories per se, the stories do render professional experiences with sexual orientation issues more visible or more "out." We hope that this book of professional storytelling can be transformative: serving to educate, increase connectedness, and empower lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual counseling professionals in their work on sexual orientation issues.

Years after coming out, having lost two lovers to AIDS and living and dying with the disease himself, Paul Monette wrote a memoir about his own coming-out experience. In that powerful book, he described the emotional significance that such stories still held in his life:

I still shiver with a kind of astonished delight when a gay brother or sister tells of that narrow escape from the coffin world of the closet. "Yes, yes, yes," goes a voice in my head, "it was just like that for me" . . . we laugh together then and dance in the giddy circle of freedom. (Monette, 1992, p. 2)

The transformative power of coming-out stories may lie in how such stories "align at the core" but not necessarily in the details (Monette, 1992, p. 2). Perhaps that core alignment is really about the human potential for liberation over oppression. We hope that this book can touch some part of that core of human experience and be a transformative force for liberation within the counseling-related professions. We hope that at times the readers of this book will react to the stories and commentary herein with a sense of "astonished delight" and hear an internal voice that says, "It was just like that for me." Our greatest hope for this book is that it be one more step toward a day when sexual orientation equity is a genuine reality in our disciplines, and all counseling professionals can truly "laugh together then and dance in the giddy circle of freedom. . . ."

Reference

Monette, P. (1992). *Becoming a man: Half a life story*. San Francisco: Harper.

Acknowledgments

In the preface, we acknowledged the pioneers of the LGB-affirmative counseling movement and the people in our lives who support us personally and professionally, and here we want to make special acknowledgement of the book's contributing authors, who have told their stories with extraordinary clarity, courage, and passion.

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1

Our Stories Will Be Told

Deconstructing the Heterosexist Discourse in the Counseling Professions

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It has now been 25 years since homosexuality has been removed from a diagnostic category of mental illness. How much longer will it take to explore LGB issues as natural forms of human diversity worthy of study and professional support?

—Douce, 1998, p. 777

But every memoir now is a kind of manifesto, as we piece together the tale of the tribe. Our stories have died with us long enough. We mean to leave behind some map, some key, for the

gay and lesbian people who follow—that they may not drown in the lies, in the hate that pools and foams like pus on the carcass of America.

—Monette, 1992, p. 2

Taken together, these two quotations embody the purpose and method of this book. The first quotation is from Louise Douce, self-described as the first president of the Society for Counseling Psychology who has had the opportunity to be openly lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB) at the time of her presidency (Douce, 2004). In her commentary regarding a major contribution to *The Counseling Psychologist* on training related to LGB issues, she noted the clear progress that has been made on LGB-affirmative perspectives in counseling, and then explained how emotional it was for her to review material that shows the extent to which LGB issues and people continue to be ignored and/or overtly and covertly devalued within professional circles (Douce, 1998). The quotation is a plaintive reference to the frustrations that many LGB-affirmative counseling professionals feel: “How much longer” are LGB issues to be “kept at the edge” of the profession? The second quotation is from Paul Monette, one of the most passionate voices of the contemporary gay American experience. It is part of his award-winning memoir about coming out, written as he battled the HIV disease that took his life in 1995. His words speak to the power in the telling of stories that break through a history of hate-enabling silence about sexual orientation and how such storytelling can be a guide in overcoming social oppression. Inspired by the words of both these LGB community leaders, we contend that the telling, listening, and reflecting on stories about navigating sexual orientation within the counseling professions comprise the missing “map” or “key” in the journey to bring LGB affirmation more fully into the heart of what it is to be a counseling professional.

Indeed, we have designed this book to be an avenue for listening to and making meaning from the voices of lesbian, bisexual, gay, and heterosexual counseling professionals, who narrate their personal experiences with sexual orientation issues within the counseling professions. A special issue in the *Journal of Counseling and Development (JCD)* (Robinson & Ginter, 1999) addressed racism from a narrative perspective and serves in some sense as a model for this book. In that *JCD* issue, 17 diverse professionals wrote moving narratives about their own experiences with racism, and three authors presented commentary on the themes contained in those narratives. The commentators noted that “the experience of racism is difficult to define without the use of storytelling” (Watt, 1999, p. 54) and that the narratives gave “personal, intimate glimpses of the authors’ struggles

with racism . . . creat[ing] horizons from which to view racism and understand at a deeper level some of the legacies of racism" (Glauser, 1999, p. 62). In a similar vein, we think that the experience of heterosexist oppression within the counseling professions is difficult to understand without using the medium of storytelling. Only with the "personal, intimate glimpses" that the authors in this book so bravely provide is it possible for counseling professionals to get a deeper understanding of the status of the discourse on LGB issues in the counseling professions; that is, a deeper understanding of the quality and extent of both the progress toward LGB affirmation and the continuing enmeshment in heterosexism.

This book contains chapters that are the personal narratives of counseling professionals' own experiences. There are also chapters that use the personal narratives to "piece together the tale" of sexual orientation in ways that address particular purposes; that is, creating positive change in the professional discourse, shaping training programs, and guiding individual counseling professionals. Each chapter in the book, and especially the book as a whole, serves as a means for individual and collective self-examination that we hope will help transform the culture and norms of the counseling professions toward greater equity in regard to sexual orientation.

The various authors in this book are all professionals in counseling or counseling psychology who are writing primarily to graduate students, practitioners, and academicians across the many subspecialties of counseling. The authors' primary purpose is to provide perspectives to their readers concerning navigating and working for positive change on sexual orientation issues in the counseling professions. We expect, however, that the book will also have much to say to other helping and allied health professionals (e.g., social workers, clinical and school psychologists, health educators, etc.), as those individuals and their professions also journey toward more genuine and complete LGB affirmation. We find that the narrative method employed in this book is an engaging medium that is uniquely suited to both inspire and inform the kind of individual and systemic change that is needed to move these professions toward greater sexual orientation equity. Essentially, we hope that this book will help to move LGB-affirmative practice, training, and research from "the edge to the center" of the counseling and other helping professions, so that LGB issues and people can come to genuinely and fully "belong" in those professions (Douce, 1998, p. 784).

The purpose of this introductory chapter is to present a more detailed rationale for the book and its approach, as well as to introduce the structure and specific aims of the various sections within the book. In the first part of this chapter, we argue that while there has been much progress on sexual orientation issues, these issues often continue to be neglected, approached with bias, and rendered marginal within counseling. Furthermore, we argue that a key to changing this marginalization is to critically examine the discourse of