SOCIAL WORK

LESBIANS, GAYS, AND BISEXUALS

A STRENGTHS PERSPECTIVE

KATHERINE VAN WORMER
JOEL WELLS MARY BOES

Social Work with Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals

A Strengths Perspective

Katherine van Wormer

University of Northern Iowa

Joel Wells

University of Northern Iowa

Mary Boes

University of Northern Iowa

Allyn and Bacon

Boston

London

Toronto

Sydney

Tokyo

Singapore

Series Editor, Social Work and Family Therapy: Judith Fifer Vice President, Editor-in-Chief, Social Sciences: Karen Hanson

Editorial Assistant: Julianna M. Cancio **Marketing Manager:** Jackie Aaron

Production Editor: Christopher H. Rawlings

Editorial-Production Service: Omegatype Typography, Inc.

Composition and Prepress Buyer: Linda Cox

Manufacturing Buyer: Julie McNeill Cover Administrator: Jenny Hart

Electronic Composition: Omegatype Typography, Inc.



Copyright © 2000 by Allyn & Bacon A Pearson Education Company 160 Gould Street Needham Heights, MA 02494

Internet: www.abacon.com

All rights reserved. No part of the material protected by this copyright notice may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without the written permission of the copyright owner.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

van Wormer, Katherine

Social work with lesbians, gays, and bisexuals: a strengths perspective / Katherine van Wormer, Joel Wells, Mary Boes.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-205-27931-7

1. Social work with lesbians. 2. Lesbians—Services for.

3. Social work with gays. 4. Gay men—Services for. 5. Bisexuals—

Services for. I. Wells, Joel. II. Boes, Mary. III. Title

HV1499.W67 2000

362.8—dc21

98-41567

CIP

Printed in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 04 03 02 01 00 99

Social Work with Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals

To my daughter, Flora, whose coming out letter is included in these pages and whose joy in her lesbianism is an inspiration to us all.

Katherine van Wormer

To my son, Brett. with love and admiration. Ioel W. Wells

For Virginia without whom, so much less.

Mary Boes

PREFACE

The primary job that any writer faces is to tell you a story out of human experiences—I mean by that, universal mutual experience, the anguishes and troubles and griefs of the human heart, which is universal, without regard to race or time or human condition. He wants to tell you something that has seemed to him so true, so moving, either comic or tragic, that it's worth preserving.

-William Faulkner, 1962

As team teachers involved in offering a course in gay/lesbian studies at the University of Northern Iowa, we searched together and separately for a text that would somehow tackle biological, psychological, and cultural aspects of gayness and lesbianism. What we were looking for was a textbook that would incorporate social work's person-in-the-environment approach, a conceptualization that views the individual and environment in constant and dynamic interaction. More specifically, we wanted our students to recognize how society's norms for heterosexuality are internalized by all of us, sometimes with devastating results. We also felt the need for a source that was sufficiently up-to-date to counter some of the right-wing, antigay, antilesbian rhetoric with which we have all grown familiar in recent years. Finally, as members of the helping professions, we sought a positive, strengths-based focus so that individuals (both our students and their future clients) could be empowered to take charge of their personal lives and to reach out in partnership to communities within which to achieve their highest potential.

Indeed, there are a great many books on lesbian, gay, and bisexual existence, enough to fill whole libraries. At the level of the popular press, issues relating to sexual orientation—for example, same-sex marriage, gays and lesbians in the military—have become more and more prominent in public discourse. Social scientific research on homosexuality has been prolific as well. But, apart from anthologies, no contemporary volume offering an integrated, social work approach had appeared. Why not draw up a tentative chapter outline, we thought, to see if the holism of the social work perspective could effectively address, in a dozen chapters or less, the complexity of issues across the homosexual/heterosexual spectrum? We did; the arrangements seemed to work, and the challenge was on. Once the structure was laid out and operationalized, the only remaining task was to fill in the content: the science (research, data, findings) and the art (poetry, commentaries, and the wealth of human experience). Consistent with the aims of the profession most committed to serving oppressed groups in our society, this book offers an overview of social work and related theory on lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities across the life span. Our focus is influenced by the perceived need.

The shaping and writing of *Social Work with Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals: A Strengths Perspective* was made possible through the collaboration of three feminist, progay/lesbian social activists, each with a separate counseling and/or research expertise.

Katherine van Wormer, MSSW, Ph.D., a member of Gay and Lesbian Issues Committee of Iowa NASW, PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), and NOW (National Organization for Women) is the author of *Alcoholism Treatment: A Social Work Perspective* and *Social Welfare: A World View,* both published by Nelson-Hall. Her dissertation, *Sex Role Behavior in a Woman's Prison*, was published by R & E Publishing Company.

Joel Wells, MA, Ph.D., teaches courses on human sexuality each semester and conducts workshops on homophobia for teachers and gay/lesbian organizations. Additionally, he has conducted extensive empirical research on homophobia and published numerous articles on his findings. The proud father of a gay son, Joel Wells is a member of the AIDS Coalition of Northeast Iowa, Planned Parenthood, and the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy.

Mary Boes, MSW, MPH, DSW, is a member of Gay and Lesbian Issues Committee of Iowa NASW, who brings to her writing eight years of emergency room social work at an inner-city Philadelphia hospital. The hospital specialized in treating end-stage AIDS patients.

We share responsibility for this book as a whole and each chapter is a collaborative effort of all three authors. However, initial responsibility for the Preface, Chapters 1, 2, 9, 11, Glossary, and Resources was taken by Katherine van Wormer, Chapters 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 by Joel Wells, and Chapters 3 and 10 by Mary Boes.

Our manageably sized volume is designed for either a specialized course or as a supplementary resource for the standard practice course curriculum.

The writing of a social work practice text on counseling gays, lesbians, and bisexuals brings up problems, questions, and controversies. What is homosexuality? Is it sexuality and/or a social identity? Even more problematic, what is heterosexuality? Are people born with a predisposition for attraction to the opposite sex? Or are many of them forced into heterosexuality in much the same way that left-handed people were once forced into right-handedness? To the extent that gays and lesbians can be singled out, what percentage of the population are they? And how common is bisexuality? For all the voluminous writing on these matters, the questions remain unanswered. Although as freelance historian Neil Miller (1995) points out, "There is clearly more coherence in the modern period than in the homosexual worlds of the more remote past. But there are difficulties that any writer has to take into account" (p. xix).

Social work with lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients incorporates complexities that transcend meeting the immediate personal needs of individual clients. Such social work practice is delivered in a climate characterized by increasing hostility and antigay/lesbian hysteria. In 1994, for instance, there were 2,064 reported incidents of harassment of sexual minorities, according to a recent federal government report on hate crimes. This physical violence is matched by political attacks on openly gay and lesbian teachers, Boy Scout leaders, and members of the clergy, among others.

This current criminal and political activity offers a significant challenge to affirmative perspectives on lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity. In such a climate of oppression and self-righteousness, it is imperative that those of us who are truly committed to improving social work practice with lesbians and gay men work together to develop strategies to motivate social work students to confront covert and institutionalized heterosexism. It is toward this end that this book is written.

Foundations

One of the primary rationales for gay/lesbian studies, as for ethnic and women's studies, is in the advancement of knowledge, especially in areas in which knowledge has been willfully hidden or distorted. To know about the lives of one's fellow citizens and to understand their history and culture are essential if we are to have a humane and just society; it is especially affirming to those populations whose very existence and contributions have been so consistently overlooked.

A major goal of this book, then, is to bring together in one work essential knowledge for effective and affirmative social work practice with gays, lesbians, and bisexuals who are coping with all the usual crises of everyday life in addition to concerns related to their individual uniqueness. During the coming-out stage and committed relationship stage, social work intervention can be especially helpful. The secondary goal, on the macro level, is to incorporate this knowledge under an ecosystem-interactionist framework for a multidimensional understanding of the many complexities and nuances of lesbian, gay, and bisexual orientations. The ecological approach, in its person-in-the-situation conceptualization, successfully integrates the components of sexual/affectual relations. These components are biological, psychological, and environmental. Especially helpful to the study of homosexuality is ecosystems' holistic framework for viewing reality. There is no either/or with this formulation—either you are a homosexual or you're not—but rather, the individual is perceived in terms of all his or her biopsychosocial complexity. Relevant to our purposes, instead of polarizing sexuality into mutually exclusive opposites—straight and gay, "us" and "them"—we can be aware of shades of gray and of sexual orientation as a complexity of constellations of feelings and identities that may fluctuate in intensity over time. Imagining homosexuality on one side of this constellation and heterosexuality on the other, we can say that most of us probably would find ourselves somewhere in the middle. Such is one of the assumptions of this book.

A second major assumption, related to the first, is the notion that our society is predicated on *heterosexual privilege*. Heterosexual privilege entails access to the taken-forgranted institutional arrangements including having respected love role models, validation from the culture in your relationships, marriage with all the legal rights bestowed thereof, and acceptance in respected social roles such as adoptive parent, teacher, or member of the clergy. Gaining heterosexual privilege: This is what "being in the closet" and adopting a facade are all about.

Some of the other basic assumptions that underlie this presentation are as follows:

- The causes of homosexuality cannot be understood apart from knowing the causes of heterosexuality.
- Homophobia, or the irrational fear of homosexuality, is pervasive in Anglo American culture and it affects not only some of us but all of us.
- Homophobia is closely related to fear of sexuality or erotophobia.
- The growth of homophobia paralleled the heightened awareness of sexuality generated by Freudian psychology; gay and lesbian identity and culture are a modern Western phenomenon as well.
- The bond among gay men and lesbians, the brother/sister bond, is a little noted but striking phenomenon and source of considerable social support and political unity.
- To encourage a people to remain invisible and keep their private lives to themselves is to effectively disempower them. Oppression and silence are integrally interconnected.

- The strengths of the gay/lesbian community to organize for social change and social helping can be seen in its response to AIDS, violence, and discriminatory legislation.
- Because variation in sexual orientation is universal, the economic and cultural diversity of this group is pronounced. Learning about the lesbian and gay population must include differential experiences on the basis of age, class, ethnicity, gender, and disability.
- Open and nonjudgmental attitudes by social workers are essential to the development
 of supportive practice environments for lesbian and gay clients; same-sex relationships are potentially as healthy (or unhealthy) as opposite-sex relationships.

A Proud History

Consistent with the strengths approach, our perspective is influenced by the need to look at possibilities as well as problems and at the special strengths that emerge out of lesbian and gay identity and experience. In this volume, homosexuality-gayness/lesbianism-is viewed as an Anglo American historical construction developed out of the late nineteenth century's heightened awareness of sexuality. The notion of normal human development, which presupposes the development of opposite-sex attachments, is viewed as of little or no use in addressing diversity across the life span. Of more use is the notion steeped in Native American tradition of homosexuality as a special gift allotted to only a few, a gift that entailed social roles and spiritual attributes. Central to our conceptualization is the use of a positive vocabulary. In the body of this text, we will use words such as gays but usually gay males to refer to men with same-sex orientation and lesbian to women with same-sex orientation. Homosexual as a noun we do not use; however, homosexuality and gayness/lesbianism are sometimes used to refer to lesbians, gays, and bisexuals collectively. Despite the appeal of brevity in using gay as a generic adjective for homosexuality in both genders, we have chosen not to do so, and have added the term lesbian when referring to both genders. We realize the word queer, as in queer art or queer culture, is being reclaimed by the gay and lesbian community, but as use of this term appears to lack sensitivity, at least on the surface, we will avoid it apart from reference to the work of others. An undeniable advantage of this usage is aesthetic: Queer art simply sounds better than gay, lesbian, and bisexual (and transgender) art and meets the same need for a generic term that gay did in the 1980s.

Equally problematic are the words *orientation* and *lifestyle*. *Sexual orientation* will be used to denote one's sexual attraction—whether this is to the same or opposite gender or both. *Lifestyle* we will use only reluctantly for want of a better word to denote a positive identity, and, in fact, a whole way of life.

Judy Grahn (1990) detects a vibrant gay culture common to both sexes:

Gay people have a history because Gay culture has histories that give us a continuity with the past and that give us connections with Gay people in other cultures and countries, places, and times. We're the inheritors of a distinct cultural background with very long roots, long buried to be sure. (p. 18)

And Mark Thompson (1987:78) articulates "the gay spirit" accordingly:

"Being gay is about being in the world in a different and essential way. Androgyny permits all things," said a lesbian psychic. "There's something about gay people that goes beyond sexual orientation. All throughout history we've been very different from heterosexual people. I believe there is something about gay people that is profoundly religious," said a shaman. "A gay person cannot live an unexamined life," concluded a poet. (p. 78)

Thompson's words, a tribute to gay/lesbian legacy and uniqueness, are meaningful to social workers preparing to work with this clientele and who wish to adopt a strengths perspective. The strengths model—actually more of an approach than a theoretical model—empowers and validates lesbian and gay clients in a social climate characterized by homophobia and hostility, on the one hand, and by the triumph of gay identity and community, on the other. In encouraging social workers to reframe their perspective from the negative (problem centered) to the positive, the strengths perspective is grounded in the premise that "each person already carries the seeds for his or her own transformation" (Weick, 1992, p. 25). Not only does the client learn from the social worker, but for social workers there is so much to learn from the rich vein of autobiographical and semiautobiographical material devoted to lesbian and gay experience. There is so much to learn also about the developmental stages across the life span for individuals who identify themselves along various points of the heterosexual–homosexual continuum.

This book is designed to help practitioners acquire an affirmative, relevant framework for working with diverse sexual and family arrangements. Greater understanding must be supported by sound research to rebut some of the public rhetoric and discriminatory public policy reported in the media. Knowledge of what it means to live (as gay or straight or in between) in a fiercely heterosexist society is essential for human service workers if we are to succeed in intervening in both the personal and political realms to help lesbians and gay males live a psychologically healthy life.

Organization

Social Work with Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals is divided into three parts. The three chapters comprising Part One concern the social and cultural context of lesbian, gay, and bisexual experience. These chapters, roughly speaking, follow the 1994 Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) mandate to include in the social work curriculum information about populations at risk such as sexual minorities and to emphasize the impact of discrimination, economic deprivation, and oppression on these groups. In order to elucidate the more specific material that follows, Chapter 1 sets forth the theoretical framework of the book and of social work as well—the ecosystems approach—and a rationale for the strengths as opposed to pathology perspective. Definition of important terms pertaining to lesbian, gay, and bisexual phenomena lays the groundwork for the treatment issues that follow.

Chapter 2 explores the dynamics of homophobia, gay/lesbian baiting, and denial of one's selfhood in a heterosexist society. Homophobia is viewed individually and institutionally, historically, and globally. On a far more upbeat note, Chapter 3 reveals the light in the darkness—the gay/lesbian cultural contribution and also the largely hidden subculture that has sustained gay life and sensitivity over the generations.

Part Two takes us across the life span—from growing up to growing old—and reviews social scientific research pertinent to variations in sexual behavior, family forms and civil rights issues affecting living arrangements, and handling of predictable crises. Throughout this section, keen attention is paid to racial and ethnic diversity. Chapter 4 is concerned with gay/lesbian youth, with emphasis on the coming-out experience—coming out to oneself and others. The range of intense social and personal pressures facing gay and lesbian adolescents is discussed. This chapter highlights the all-American junior and senior high school experience.

Chapter 5 delves into sexuality in considerable depth. Data from extensive surveys concerning attitudes toward various male-specific and female-specific sexual practices are presented. Looming over this whole issue is the universal question: Is sexual orientation a choice? Reference to recent empirical research provides some interesting considerations if not definitive answers. That we are an erotophobic society is a major theme of this chapter. The detailed and graphic information provided should be especially helpful for mental health counselors.

Chapter 6 explores issues, both economic and legal, pertaining to the workplace and the family respectively. Workers' rights, health insurance, child custody battles, and adoption are among the matters discussed. Chapter 7 concludes this section by providing information on the meaning of old age, first for gay men and then for lesbians. Advantages and pitfalls of gay and lesbian aging are highlighted.

Part Three is practice focused. In this section, we provide firsthand case material to demonstrate effective strategies for intervention. The strengths model shapes interventions so that negative self-perceptions are challenged. Attention is paid to both individual and family therapy.

Chapter 8 views the general counseling needs of sexual minorities, what brings them into treatment, and what makes their efforts to resolve issues worthwhile. Key practice questions are addressed such as, should gay/lesbian clients have gay/lesbian therapists? Should gay/lesbian therapists practice self-disclosure?

Because of the scope and intensity of health care issues, which range from the ordinary acute and chronic diseases to sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS, two chapters provide special attention to this topic. Chapter 9 gives an overview of critical health care concerns for lesbians, whereas Chapter 10 surveys the needs of gay male clients. Both chapters address the unique health care needs and issues from a biopsychosocial perspective.

Chapter 11 applies gay and lesbian affirmative perspective to family (including couples) counseling. Children growing up with one gay or lesbian, or even two bisexual, parents and parents who have discovered they have gay or lesbian children are the subjects of this final chapter. It is important that therapists be aware of the ways in which routine life stressors may be intensified for individuals who are outside the mainstream of society.

From a general education standpoint, the study of gay/lesbian populations offers an opportunity for critical thinking on a topic often infused with emotionalism and politically charged mythology. To understand the reasons for homophobia in individuals or in the wider society is to understand the nature of oppression against minority groups and backlash against group members who fight for their rights. The personal and social attitudes of prejudice inevitably must be viewed as intertwined. We believe that, taken together, these chapters will enable social work practitioners to take an active, transformative role for the

twenty-first century. The social work profession, in fact, can learn a great deal about new family forms and incredible resilience in the face of adversity from work with this often invisible population whose only wish is to have the kind of acceptance that others take entirely for granted.

Acknowledgments

The authors' appreciation goes to the following reviewers for their comments on the manuscript: Linda E. Jones, University of Minnesota; and Marion Wagner, Indiana University. Special thanks is extended to Darlys Hansen for her invaluable support in the preparation of this manuscript. Thanks is also extended to Tami Huff who, as a student assistant, diligently and thoughtfully typed numerous handwritten rough drafts of the original effort. The authors would like to recognize Judy Fifer, the series editor, for cheerfully and bravely overseeing the project from start to finish, and the staff at Omegatype Typography for their help and patience in securing difficult-to-get copyright permissions. Additionally, Katherine van Wormer thanks the University of Northern Iowa for providing financial support in the form of a summer research grant.

References

Grahn, J. (1990). Another mother tongue: Gay words, gay worlds. Boston: Beacon Press.

Miller, N. (1995). Out of the past: Gay and lesbian history from 1869 to the present. New York: Vintage Books.

Thompson, M. (1987). *Gay spirit: Myth and meaning*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Weick, A. (1992). Building a strengths perspective for social work. In D. Saleebey (Ed.), The strengths perspective in social work practice (pp. 18–26). New York: Longman.

Social Work with Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals

CONTENTS

Preface xiii

PART ONE The Cultural Context

1	Social Work Mission and Policies	1
	Mass Media Images 2	
	Demographic Facts 3	
	The Political Context 5	
	Models of Homosexuality 6	
	Nature versus Nurture 12	
	Interaction Theory 14	
	Other Psychosocial Theories 16	
	Definition of Terms 17	
	The Strengths Perspective 20	
	Social Work's Mission 22	
	Conclusion 24	

Definition of Terms 30 Cultural Context 31 Homophobia and Heterosexism 33 Roots of Homophobia and Heterosexism 33 All in the Family 36 Biphobia 37 Hate Crimes Worldwide 38

41

Sexism and Homophobia

Racism and Anti	-Semitism	42
Religious Funda	43	
Internalized Hor	nophobia	44
Prison World	47	
Implications for	47	
Conclusion 5	50	

3 Strengths of Gay/Lesbian Culture 54

Gay/Lesbian Culture 56
Television Portrayals 57
Poetry as Healing 60
Music 61

Recommendations from Film and Literature 61

Conclusion 62

PART TWO Across the Life Span

4 Growing Up Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual 64

Identity Formation 64

Living in a Heterosexist and Homophobic Culture 66

Sexuality Education 68

Feeling Different 69

To Come Out or to Try to Be Invisible 70

Minority Adolescents 71

The Role of the Social Worker 72

Conclusion 73

5	Sexuality and Homosexuality 75
	The Language of Sexuality 75
	The Effects of Erotophobia 76
	Discrimination under the Sodomy Laws and the Defense of Marriage Act 77
	Etiology of Sexual Orientation 78
	Sex Role Incongruity 78
	Research Findings 79
	Establishing Sexual Orientation 79
	Gay and Lesbian Children and Adolescents 80
	Establishing Intimacy 81
	Lesbians, Gay Men, and Bisexuals in Heterosexual Marriages 82
	Affectional and Sexual Expression 84
	Characteristics of Erotophobes 85
	Similarities in Lesbian, Gay, and Heterosexual Sexuality 85
	Differences in Lesbian, Gay, and Heterosexual Sexuality 86
	Safer-Sex Decision Making 88
	Conclusion 89
6	Gays, Lesbians, and Bisexuals in the Workplace 91
	Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals in the Workplace 92
	Employment Issues 92
	Employer Response 94
	Roles for Social Workers and School Guidance Counselors 97

Conclusion 100

7 Aging Gays and Lesbians 102

Lesbians and Aging 104

Gay Men and Aging 105

Living Arrangements 106

Social and Psychological Adjustment 106

Variations between Gays and Lesbians 106

Long-Term Care for Older Gay Men and Lesbians 107

Conclusion 107

PART THREE Social Work Practice with Lesbians, Gays, and Bisexuals

8 Counseling with Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Clients 109

Self-Identification 109

Conversion or Ex-Gay Therapy 110

Stages of Coming Out 112

Social Worker's Role in the Coming-Out Process 113

Sex Therapy 114

The Pursuit of Happiness 115

Counselor Self-Awareness 115

Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Therapists 116

Conclusion 117

9 Social Work with Lesbians in Health Care Settings 119

General Health Concerns 120

AIDS 121

Youths and Suicide 122

Lesbians and Depression 123

Physical Victimization 125