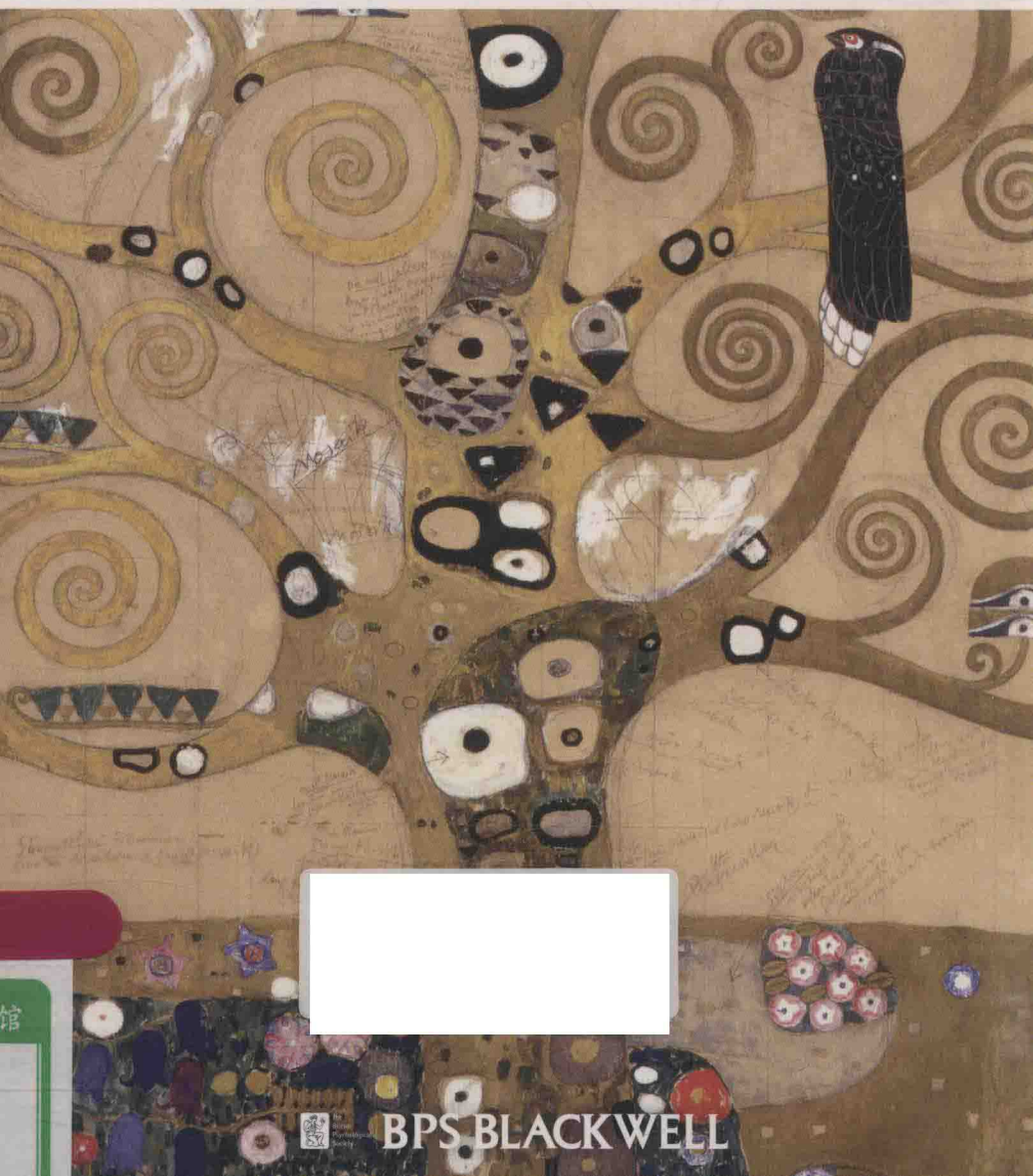


# Intersectionality, Sexuality and Psychological Therapies

## Working with Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Diversity

Edited by **Roshan das Nair** and **Catherine Butler**



BPS BLACKWELL

# Intersectionality, Sexuality and Psychological Therapies

Working with Lesbian, Gay and  
Bisexual Diversity

Edited by

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# **Intersectionality, Sexuality and Psychological Therapies**

*To my mother, Janet, who taught me never to be constrained by expected age or gender roles, that love and respect were the most important relationship parameters, and that life was mine to craft and live to the full*

—Catherine

*To Amma and Dad, for having the courage to let me be me*

—Roshan

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## Foreword

I feel honoured to be invited by Catherine and Roshan to write the Foreword for this book. Catherine and I have been co-training therapists together for around five years and in recent times have added information on our training programmes on working with clients who have intersecting identities and the impact of various oppressive forces on the individual. We felt it was an absolutely vital component of any training and I feel somewhat ashamed of my lack of knowledge not to have included it in earlier training programmes I have convened. This clearly demonstrates the adage: 'We teach what we know' and as much explains why counselling and therapy programmes in Britain are generally still ridiculously uninformed about the differences experienced by gender and sexual minorities. This is lamentable for two reasons: first, the research which shows poorer mental health in these populations and how Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) people are more likely to present for psychological support than heterosexual people, and second, that one in six British therapists have willingly entered into therapy contracts to reduce same-sex attractions, despite there being no evidence based research to show this is possible.

As a therapist who has worked with sexual minorities for 30 years and as the principal author and co-editor of the first British textbook on working with LGB people, it is really gratifying to see the development of a small raft of books in the past year that increasingly reflect the nuances of multiple identities and the complexities of gender and sexual minority identities and their relationships. This book, however, takes things much further in exploring the intersections in various identities (gender, age, race and ethnicity, class, disability, mental and physical health, etc.) and from a largely (though not exclusively) British perspective, which given that many of the issues covered are fairly region-specific, makes the book highly relevant to all therapists working with LGB people here in the UK.

Unlike many books which one can simply dip in and out, this book benefits from reading all the way through since there is much to be learned here; or if I am to own that statement for myself, I personally learned so much. As a white gay man who identifies as disabled and comes from a working class background, living with enduring physical health issues, I have seen my own lived experience recognised and affirmed across many of these pages. I have also learned a lot about the intersecting identities of those clients who have other identities from the research and ideas of the contributors. One example perhaps of an insight for me was thinking that therapists should be transparent about their gender and sexual identity, whereas I now realise this can be both unhelpful (and meaningless) for some therapists coming from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) communities where they may also face social exclusion from their families and communities if they were to be forced to come out so unselectively.

I think we need to recognise that a one-size-fits-all approach that assumes all LGB people experience the world in the same way is overly simplistic and culturally insensitive. The astute therapist will want to understand the nuances and differences experienced by their clients and how their intersecting identities impact on their sexuality. This book will be a valuable resource into becoming better informed so that the therapist or counsellor is not reliant on having their clients be the sole source of educating them.

Dominic Davies  
Director – Pink Therapy  
Fellow – British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy

February 2011

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# Contents

Contributors	ix
Foreword by <i>Dominic Davies</i>	xv
Acknowledgements	xvii
Introduction <i>Roshan das Nair &amp; Catherine Butler</i>	1
1 Intersecting Identities <i>Damien W. Riggs &amp; Roshan das Nair</i>	9
2 Gender <i>Sonja J. Ellis</i>	31
3 Race and Ethnicity <i>Roshan das Nair &amp; Sonya Thomas</i>	59
4 Religion <i>Roshan das Nair &amp; Sonya Thomas</i>	89
5 Refugees and Asylum Seekers <i>Stephen Higgins &amp; Catherine Butler</i>	113
6 Social Class <i>Roshan das Nair &amp; Susan Hansen</i>	137

7	Physical Health <i>Adam Jowett &amp; Elizabeth Peel</i>	163
8	Mental Health <i>Roshan das Nair &amp; Sarah Fairbank</i>	185
9	Disability <i>Catherine Butler</i>	213
10	Age and Ageing <i>Stuart Gibson &amp; Susan Hansen</i>	239
11	From Invert to Intersectionality: Understanding the Past and Future of Sexuality <i>Esther D. Rothblum</i>	263
	Index	269

# Introduction

Roshan das Nair & Catherine Butler

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) literature in health and social sciences is burgeoning. However, much of the early published material focussed on differences between heterosexual and homosexual people, thereby creating a sense of homogeneity of homosexual (and bisexual) lives and experiences. While much of the later work no longer concerns itself with a heterosexual yardstick, and instead explores issues pertinent to LGB lives such as parenting, relationship styles, and so on, much of this work still does not describe the race, ethnicity, social class, or ability of its participants, largely assuming them to be white, middle class and able-bodied (Butler *et al.*, 2010). This book aims to widen the existing psychological and therapeutic literature on LGB issues within a British context. The book unpicks what it means to be LGB by exploring the social-cultural differences within these labels, identities and practices, and how these differences intersect to make being non-heterosexual a unique experience for each person who uses, or chooses not use, these labels or identities.

## Intersectionality

Although the concept of intersectionality has been around for many years, and Kimberle Crenshaw is credited with coining the term in 1989, its foray into psychology and therapeutics has been more recent. McCall (2005) hypothesised that this was possibly due to of a lack of guidelines for researchers in psychology to empirically answer complex questions or address multi-faceted issues without fractionating them into their constituent components – holding the complexity is what intersectionality requires. More

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recently, however, Cole (2009) has provided us with a framework to help apply intersectionality to psychology. She does this by posing three questions that therapists need to ask when examining any group or social category:

- (i) Who is included within this category?
- (ii) What role does inequality play?
- (iii) Where are there similarities? (Cole, 2009, p.170).

The first question challenges the perceived homogeneity of a given group on the basis of a single characteristic, and forces us to see the diversity within such a group. The second question introduces power into the equation, and forces us to recognise that the spaces that people exist in and interact with(in) are not level playing fields, but are fluid hierarchies which offer differing levels of 'privilege and power' to some people sometimes. The final question forces us to look for 'commonalities across categories commonly viewed as deeply different' (Cole, 2009, p.171).

Another potential reason for the slow uptake of intersectionality within psychology and therapeutics is perhaps because of the slippery task of attempting to define the concept. As Davis (2008) has suggested, intersectionality has been variously thought of as a theory, a concept or heuristic, or even as a reading strategy. Definitions are also deferred because intersectionality is sometimes simultaneously regarded as 'crossroads', 'axes', or 'dynamic processes' (Davis, 2008). But this lack of a consensus towards a unitary definition of intersectionality does not render it useless to interrogate troublesome questions and social phenomena. In fact, as Davis (2008) paraphrasing Murray Davis asserts, 'successful theories thrive on ambiguity and incompleteness' (p.69).

Phoenix's (2006) definition of intersectionality as a 'catchall phrase that aims to make visible the multiple positioning that constitutes everyday life and the power relations that are central to it' (p.187) is interesting because it highlights at least three key points: (i) making visible multiple identities, (ii) which are relevant in daily life, and (iii) acknowledging that this does not happen in a power-vacuum. Cole (2009) points out that much of intersectionality scholarship has examined the multiple sites of oppression and disenfranchisement of people whose lives fall along the fault-lines of social categories. However, as a theory, intersectionality can also explore issues that pertain to the privileged identities that 'some members of disadvantaged groups... (e.g., middle class blacks, white women)' (Cole, 2009, p.171). Therefore, in recognising both disadvantages and advantages of subjectivities, we challenge these frontiers further by examining the possibility for power and agency that these individuals and groups of people