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• REACTIONS

## A Call to Action in Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Theory Building and Research

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*Phillips, Ingram, Smith, and Mindes's significant contribution exposes some of the gaps in our current writing regarding gay men, lesbian women, and bisexual men and women. Counseling psychology should incorporate gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) samples into some of our current mainstream areas of study, including a focus on lesbian women, gay men, and bisexual men and women as separate groups, and more sophisticated theorizing and research. Although counseling psychology is aware that individuals may identify by race/ethnicity, disability, or sexual identity (among other core identities), this contribution reminds us that more than one identity may be salient for any given person.*

As noted by Phillips, Ingram, Smith, and Mindes (2003 [this issue]), the amount of literature on gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity (GLB) issues has increased appreciably yet barely dents the volumes of counseling psychology literature. If the earlier reviews of the GLB literature represent the infancy of research on sexual identity, this current review moves us into adolescence. The authors reference several of the primary thinkers in this area, including (but certainly not limited to) Buhrke, Croteau, Dworkin, Fassinger, and Reynolds (Buhrke, Ben-Ezra, Hurley, & Ruprecht, 1992; Croteau et al., 1998; Dworkin, 2000; Fassinger, 1996; Reynolds & Pope, 1991). These writers push counseling psychologists not only to reflect on the consequences of benign neglect or outright rejection of GLB issues on our clinical practices, research, and training methods, but to do something to reverse the current trend.

Phillips et al. (2003) expose several glaring deficiencies in the current literature. The comments in this reaction article elaborate on four of these deficiencies: the consistently low percentage of GLB empirical and theoretical publications in mainstream journals, the imbalance in the amount of research on gay men versus lesbian women, the relatively imperceptible amount of research on bisexuality, and the examination of sexual identity for people of color and persons with disabilities. A fifth comment is made regarding the proportion of empirical to theoretical articles.

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### PROPORTION OF RESEARCH ON GLB ISSUES

Previous reviews (e.g., Buhrke et al., 1992; Clark & Serovich, 1997) reported that less than 1% of the total number of articles published in their target journals during the years under review were in any way relevant to GLB issues. Phillips et al.'s (2003) review indicates that perhaps three times as many articles were published during the 10-year period (2.11%) under review compared to Buhrke et al.'s (1992) 12-year period (0.7%). Yet 2.11% is barely a blip on the research radar and does not reflect the vast possibilities for inclusion in mainstream counseling psychology research. For example, counseling psychology has its roots in career and educational counseling, yet we might be hard-pressed to identify more than a handful of articles on vocational issues for gay men and lesbian women. Certainly, articles related to general counseling theory do not reflect an inclusion of GLB issues.

In addition, 28% of the articles reviewed by Phillips et al. (2003) were part of special issues or sections of the targeted journals (compared to 40% of the articles included in Buhrke et al.'s [1992] review). I predict that the percentage of articles from special issues will continue to drop as GLB development achieves its place in the mainstream counseling psychology literature. Well-written, well-designed, empirically based, theoretically sound articles published on their own and not as part of a special issue will signify that GLB issues are part of the counseling psychology mainstream. These articles will intersect other specialty areas in counseling psychology (e.g., health psychology, gerontology, race/ethnicity, vocational psychology). In other words, gay men and lesbian women sometimes fall ill, usually grow old, are not all Caucasian, and usually hold some place in the workforce. Our changing literature will begin to tell us what differences, if any, exist when GLB issues are factored into the equation.

Phillips et al. (2003) reported that 29% of the empirical studies reviewed did not report even a cursory assessment of the sexual orientation or identity of the participants. Why is this happening? Three possible reasons come to mind. First, researchers often do not ask about sexual identity as a matter of course when collecting demographic data, so the lack of reporting in these studies may simply be an oversight. Second, it is possible that researchers do not want to appear insensitive or signal the underlying focus of the study to participants. Third, it is possible that the authors assume that their potential participants are heterosexual or that the participants' sexual identity does not matter. In my opinion, not reporting on the sexual identity of participants in a study of GLB issues would be akin to not reporting on the relationship status of participants in a study of marital issues. Phillips et al. provide some excellent suggestions to assist in assessing the sexual identity of research participants.

## GAY MEN VERSUS LESBIAN WOMEN

The relatively high percentage of articles focusing on gay men, either through content of the study or through selection of participants, was striking. Phillips et al. (2003) suggest that this disparity may be the result of the vast number of articles focused on the effect of HIV/AIDS on gay and bisexual men, or it may be reflective of a lack of attention to women's issues. I do not intend to suggest that we should decrease the amount of research related to gay and bisexual men. To the contrary, we should cut the research pie more broadly and increase the amount of research done with lesbian and bisexual women.

Historically, women's issues have been secondary in other areas of counseling psychology, including theories of career development and research on multicultural issues. This oversight was remedied as women researchers and women practitioners shifted their focus and demanded attention. According to current literature, attitudes toward the sexuality of women differs from that of men, and attitudes toward lesbian women differ from attitudes toward gay men (Simoni, 1996). Heterosexual men have reported more negative attitudes toward gay men than do heterosexual women (Simoni, 1996), whereas no significant gender difference is reported about attitudes toward lesbians. It also tends to be harder to change attitudes toward gay men than those toward lesbians (Stevenson & Gajarsky, 1990). As such, it seems that lesbian women's relationships can more easily be ignored or mislabeled as platonic friendships, whereas gay men's relationships and sexuality are more universally condemned. Yet we also find that a large percentage of lesbian women seek counseling services at some point in their lives (Bradford, Ryan, & Rothblum, 1994); we need more literature focusing on lesbian women's experiences in counseling. Are the concerns and experiences of lesbian and bisexual women similar to or different from those of heterosexual women? Do lesbian and bisexual women have certain preferences for or expectations of counseling that we should be more aware of in our practices?

## ISSUES OF BISEXUALITY

Some literature on bisexuality suggests that sexual orientation is more fluid than currently believed (Firestein, 1996; Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000). While Western society encourages sexual attraction to only one gender, preferably the opposite, a proportion of the population experiences attraction to both genders. These attractions to persons of both genders may occur simultaneously or serially (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000). Although a significant number of people experience same-gender behavior at some point

in their lives, a smaller number define themselves with a bisexual identity. Avowed bisexual individuals are caught between the heterosexual and homosexual, each demanding that sides be chosen. Finding a community that is safe and welcoming is a relatively recent phenomenon (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000).

If the general public is resistant to the idea of bisexuality, so too are researchers in counseling psychology. Phillips et al. (2003) note that most of the studies reviewed that referred to bisexuality were reaction articles or theoretical pieces, not empirical studies. Croteau et al. (1998) and Bieschke, McClanahan, Tozer, Grzegorek, and Park (2000) commented on the relative lack of articles solely on bisexual men and women. This apparent superficial treatment of bisexuality results in a dearth of work on healthy identity development and issues facing this population. Researchers cannot simply adapt heterosexual or gay and lesbian theories of development to describe the development of bisexual men and women because the interaction of heterosexual and homosexual attractions and behaviors precludes a one-size-fits-all model (Reynolds & Hanjorgiris, 2000). More appropriate assessments of sexuality would include not only questions about current partners but also about self-identity and perceived orientation. These sorts of questions would move the literature on bisexuality out of its infancy into a more mature pool of research.

### **PEOPLE OF COLOR AND PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES**

Identity research is often so compartmentalized that it might appear that individuals can handle only one salient identity at a time. In other words, one could be a lesbian, or Latina, or a woman, but not necessarily function on all three planes at once (Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000). Yet individuals connect to more than one identity on a given day, in a given hour, generally depending on the situation at hand (Gloria, 2001). To assume that persons of color would forsake their sexual identity, or that persons with disabilities are not also sexual beings, denies a major aspect of one's development (Fassinger & Richie, 1997; Olkin, 1999). As therapists, we might respond to the visible identity (e.g., ethnicity or disability), instead of allowing the client to define himself or herself. Is it possible that clients who identify most strongly with their sexual identity are discouraged when faced with counselors who focus instead on the visible identity? Might these clients, then, prematurely drop out of counseling as a result of this perceived counselor insensitivity? As the literature on GLB issues grows, perhaps these questions can be answered.

Finally, Phillips et al. (2003) indicate that 18% of the empirical studies reviewed did not report the racial/ethnic composition of their samples. The inclusion of race/ethnicity as a demographic point has become a matter of course in counseling psychology literature. Researchers who used to report race only if the study were a comparison between two racial groups now report race regardless of its importance to the project. It is surprising, therefore, that there are researchers who do not automatically report the race of their sample.

### **EMPIRICAL VERSUS THEORETICAL ARTICLES**

One final point regarding this review deserves mention and elaboration. Phillips et al. (2003) note that 54% ( $n = 64$ ) of the 119 articles in their review were empirical. Of those, the vast majority were survey/analogous studies and most used convenience samples. Indeed, 48% of the empirical articles provided no theoretical framework for their hypotheses. Do we need more empirical articles? Certainly we do, but we also need a theoretical basis for those empirical articles. Articles created from inductive reasoning alone do not tell the whole story, as they often do not provide a framework with which to explain the findings. Studies designed to test current theories, especially those using small samples and qualitative methodologies, may arguably be the best path to building the literature on GLB development, counseling issues, and other topics.

Bieschke et al. (2000) commented on the lack of programmatic, theory-based research in the GLB literature. Many studies seem to be created in a vacuum without regard to previous theory development. Bieschke et al. (2000) asserted that programmatic research designed to replicate and expand on current findings is necessary as we attempt to expand our knowledge base. Replication studies increase our confidence that the findings of the original study were not spurious or generalizable. Also, theories used in GLB research are not necessarily GLB-based theories; for example, more mainstream theories may be tested for their applicability to GLB populations. For example, a study of lesbians' career choices might be based on Super's (1990) model of life span development; the results of such a study could strengthen or contradict the generalizability of the model.

Sampling is another problem for current empirical articles on GLB issues, according to Bieschke et al. (2000). Bieschke et al. reported that researchers on GLB issues have a tendency to use White, educated gay and bisexual men as participants. Although this population may be relatively easy to find (e.g.,

on a college campus), those descriptors are not reflective of all gay men, much less the GLB population as a whole. Researchers are encouraged to expand their efforts to locate GLB participants (while reviewers are also encouraged to recognize that GLB researchers may need to use unconventional means to locate their samples).

### SUMMARY

Counseling psychologists focus on developmental issues, prevention, and strengths of clients and others with whom we interact. The broad areas in which we counsel, train, and do research are affected by GLB issues, whether or not we acknowledge them. In a primarily heterosexual world, our assumptions about GLB clients and students may reflect benign neglect at best, if not outright hostility at worst. A gay man's presentation of family issues may include being disowned by certain homophobic family members. A lesbian woman's career issues may include a fear that being open about her sexuality could result in the loss of a job. A bisexual client's aging concerns may reflect not being listed on a partner's life or health insurance policies. It is important that researchers and therapists recognize the circumstances under which GLB issues might be a factor into our work and openly check our assumptions.

I ask that readers of the Phillips et al. (2003) review consider the following question: What am I doing in my own work, be it counseling, training, or research, to widen its applicability to a new group of people? Only by self-examination, followed by action, will we see a significant change in the amount and quality of the literature summarized in the next review.

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