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Invisibility, Alienation, and Misperceptions

The Experience of Being Bisexual

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I realized that I was attracted to women during my master's program. I was at a gay bar, which I had been to numerous times before, and had an intense attraction to a female bartender. I was in my mid-20s, had a long history of dating men, and had never questioned my sexual orientation. Until that time, my understanding of sexual orientation was the two-box explanation: a person was either straight or gay, and, since I was attracted to men, I had to be straight. Once I realized that I was definitely attracted to this woman, and I was also still attracted to men, it changed my whole world dramatically. Ten years later, I am a 35-year-old, Italian American, bisexual, counseling psychologist working full-time in a university counseling center. I have a much different level of understanding about sexual orientation, and much of that has to do with my own personal journey as it relates to being in the counseling profession.

I entered the world of counseling psychology as a doctoral student. When I applied to doctoral programs in counseling, I wasn't "out," and I never considered the implications of attending a program that wasn't affirming of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) persons. I hadn't reached any conclusions about my sexual orientation, and I still had no concept of how or whether being attracted to both men and women would fit into my professional life.

I was still just starting to become comfortable acknowledging to myself, and several close friends, that I was attracted to women as well as men. Luckily, I was admitted to an LGB-affirmative program with a relatively large number of gay and lesbian students, and I think eventually one other bisexual. Although my doctoral program didn't overtly recruit gay and lesbian applicants, they were supportive once they realized that we were there.

The dominant discourse in the counseling profession still favors Caucasian, male, heterosexual, socially advantaged, able-bodied persons. Within that overriding force, when I think about what made my program a supportive place to be, a number of factors come to mind. The most important factor is the social environment and the presence of a critical mass of diverse people, and not just with regard to sexual orientation. "Isms" are "isms," and someone accepting of racial/ethnic diversity has a much greater chance of being accepting of diverse sexual orientations. When I hear someone say anything prejudicial of any group, it makes me think twice about being open about my sexual orientation with them. Just the presence of a diverse group of people brings different awareness to the conversation, and that's how we really learn about the nuances of difference. A close friend of mine was out and partnered when he was admitted to the program, and just the constant presence of him and his partner made a huge impact. When I think about training programs that support LGB persons, I consider the following questions. When you chat with the secretaries or professors about your life, can you mention your same-sex partner? Can you bring your same-sex partner to departmental social events? When people ask about whom you are dating, do they assume the person will be of the opposite sex? When you are going through your "gay pride" period, can you wear your freedom rings around the department? Do people look uncomfortable about the details of your life, or do they just take it in stride? If you come out during your training, are there people there to direct you to LGB-affirmative therapists? Does your advisor notice that you are struggling and help you figure out how to handle coming out while you continue to progress in school? I am always looking to see whether people flinch or look uncomfortable when I talk about LGB-related topics. When I do see it, it greatly decreases the chance that I'll bring it up again, especially if it's someone who has power over me, like faculty.

Outside of my doctoral program, I became active in the lesbian community on campus, and this aided me in changing my perceptions of gay men and lesbians overall. I found that lesbians are a lot like straight women, and they sometimes share many of the same phobias and prejudices. In addition, I confronted my idealization of lesbian and gay cultures and began to understand the complex relationship between gay men and lesbians. Finally, I began to seek specific information about being bisexual and to learn about the difficulty that bisexuals face in belonging to the lesbian or gay community. Being in a critical mass of gay men and lesbians allowed

me to have personal conversations about my struggles; this was exactly what I needed. Another way that training programs can really help LGB persons is to know how to connect LGB persons with the LGB community outside the department.

Within the academic curriculum, professors addressed diversity issues to some degree in the majority of my classes. Students and graduate programs seem to co-create each other, and having a critical mass of LGB students ensured that sexual orientation would be addressed in our coursework and discussions to some degree. But LGB students are always wondering where the line is. Can LGB students expect that every class will address LGB issues? Can we ask about applicability to LGB persons as often as we want? My program was tolerant of a fair amount of questions, and, in addition, one professor was receptive to a request for a specific seminar course on LGB issues in psychology. That was amazing for me to have an entire course just on LGB issues.

In addition, it was common during this time for LGB graduate students to present panel discussions to undergraduate and graduate classes, giving them a chance to interact with gay, bisexual, and lesbian persons. This type of learning experience seems particularly effective with students in challenging personal stereotypes. I believe it is also beneficial for panel participants in helping them to better understand their identities and develop strength and pride in being LGB. It was sometimes difficult for me because I was constantly confronted with the stereotypes about bisexuals. For instance, common questions I received were as follows: Aren't you attracted to everyone you see, so how do you focus on your life? If you can choose a straight relationship, why wouldn't you? Don't your partners worry that you're unfaithful? Do you think you'll eventually decide that you're lesbian (or straight)?

On another level of discourse within the field of psychology, the mid-1990s were a time when the research literature began to address bisexuality in its own right and not just as an add-on to gay and lesbian studies. This is another very important level of academia because what's being published greatly affects what we are taught as trainees. A number of important books about bisexuality came out at this time, and the Internet became an amazing tool in disseminating information to LGB persons.

Ironically, just as I was coming to terms with the idea of possibly being partnered with a woman, I fell in love with a man. Prior to meeting him, my concern had been how lesbians would deal with me being bisexual in identity but dating women. I hadn't thought that my next long-term relationship would be with a man, and I didn't really want it to be. It felt like backsliding. But when I looked inside myself, I realized that I was in love with him, and that that is what being bisexual is; sometimes I'll fall in love with a woman and sometimes with a man. This gave me my first long-term experience of what it was like to negotiate my bisexual identity with a man, the

fears it raised both in him and in me. I wondered if I could ever be satisfied dating just one sex. Although gay and lesbian friends were primarily happy that I had found someone I loved, they couldn't completely hide their disappointment that that person was a man. Conversely, straight friends seemed a little too happy that that person was a man.

Professionally, I felt trapped. Could I be a bisexual psychologist if my partner was a man? I was developing an identity as a specialist in LGB issues, but is a bisexual woman in a long-term relationship with a man credible? In addition, during this time period, "lesbian chic" emerged in some circles, and experimenting with same-sex relationships became fashionable. Is that what I had done? I now felt pressure to inform people that although I was bisexual, my partner was a man. It not only felt like a betrayal to the LGB community, but I began to question myself. Had I really been attracted to women? One of the major struggles with being bisexual is that you are defined by the sex of your partner. Other people felt this, and I felt this too.

An important area in which LGB persons need mentoring is in the professional application process. This became relevant for me as a bisexual woman when I applied for internship. Because I knew that I was ready to be out and because diversity issues were my specialty area, I applied to programs that emphasized diversity. During this time, a group of internship sites were open to gay and lesbian applicants. Since internship spots are so highly coveted, some people "caringly" suggested that I not say that I was bisexual. This was a direct experience with biphobia. It was okay to be gay or lesbian, but being bisexual was not. Which would be worse, not getting a placement, or being accepted somewhere that was biphobic? Was I "gay" enough for sites that wanted gay candidates? Would they be disappointed when they found out my partner was a man? In addition, others said that being gay or lesbian would "help" ensure a spot, so would internships think that I said that I was bisexual to appear gay? As it turned out, my internship was also LGB affirming and offered me new opportunities to understand my bisexuality at a deeper level. At a time when I was transitioning from student to psychologist, I was able to see how other LGB psychologists managed their identities within the profession.

Bisexuality can be expressed in a number of ways. I found that I am monogamous, and what bisexuality means to me is that partner sex is like eye color—it's not a trait that I preference on. It may sound absurd to compare someone's physical sex to something so menial, but that is how it is for me. The person that I partner with has a similar personality regardless of gender. Although my relationship with that particular man ended with internship, it helped me realize that I am the same person professionally and personally regardless of whom and whether I am dating. I fit into the LGB community whether or not I appear to be gay by anyone else's standard. There are some events in the lesbian community that a male partner

couldn't be part of but I could. In addition, I can always find a segment of the gay and lesbian community that is inclusive and accepts my partner choice, just as I can in the straight community. As do most things, a lot of it for me came down to personal security. Once my identity made sense to me, I was able to help others understand it, too.

I thought that I had reached an identity plateau after internship, but applying for jobs brought new challenges. Again, was I ready to be out and proud and take a chance that I wouldn't get a job? Or should I not say anything about my sexual orientation and get hired someplace homophobic? I really struggled with myself personally, politically, and practically. I decided to let my vita speak for itself. Since my specialty was diversity issues, I hoped that places that were really homophobic wouldn't want me anyway, and I hoped that others who were more sensitive might consider that I was not necessarily heterosexual. I was really lucky and found a job in a university counseling center that I love, and I am now partnered with a woman. My colleagues are very LGB affirming, and I couldn't be happier. My colleagues are not only comfortable hearing about my professional and personal life and struggles as a bisexual woman, but I can also bring my female partner to all of our social events. When I was first hired, there was a large bulletin board in the hallway dedicated to the achievements of LGB people. It was amazing how good it made me feel to walk down the hall every day.

I had been at my job less than a year when I was asked to write this narrative. This raised new challenges for me. It was clear to me that the counseling center and the broader division were affirming, but what about the wider institution? Being a student and an intern are transitory roles, but managing a gay identity in a place you plan to stay is different. I know now that being a bisexual counseling professional raises continuous questions that will have answers over time. Perhaps that is what I have learned the most—patience and tolerance for the unknown and the importance of security in myself. People really do take my lead. When I am okay with myself and my choices, for the most part others respond in kind. What do LGB persons need? As students and professionals, LGB persons need to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance. In our own ways, each of us can feel invisible, alienated, and misperceived, and it doesn't feel good for anyone. Counseling professionals need to move beyond tolerance to understand at a core level that our differences are what make us interesting and unique—and at the same time, they do present real challenges. For the most part, the dominant discourse in the counseling professions still favors White, socially advantaged, able-bodied, male heterosexuals, but, as sheer numbers force everyone to accept greater diversity, this has begun to change. I was really fortunate to find the part of the counseling professions that embraces me at its best moments and tolerates me at its worst.

