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Best of British? Contributions to Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Psychologies and Psychotherapies

British Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Psychologies: Theory, Research and Practice

Edited by Elizabeth Peel, Victoria Clarke and Jack Drescher, Binghampton, NY: Haworth Medical Press, 2007. 183 pp. \$14.95 (paperback). ISBN-13: 978-0-7890-3252-2.

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With *British Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Psychologies*, editors Elizabeth Peel, Victoria Clarke and Jack Drescher aim to 'showcase current developments in lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) psychological and psychotherapeutic theory, research and practice in the United Kingdom' (p.2).

The book opens with Clarke and Peel's thorough overview of the history of British LGB psychologies and psychotherapies (section 1). This leaves the reader with a good sense of what is unique about British contributions in this area and what they have to offer internationally. Following this, the two main sections of the book present current work in British LGB psychotherapy (section 2) and psychological research (section 3). Whilst these sections both include interesting and useful material, I felt that they did not quite capture the defining features of British approaches which are signalled in the introduction. I imagine that this is due to the practical problems involved in producing a short collection with the broad aim of covering both psychotherapy and psychology in a limited period of time.

In many ways, this book is best read alongside two additional recent texts: Clarke and Peel's other collection *Out in Psychology* (2007), which focuses on psychological theory and research, and Moon's (2007) collection *Feeling Queer or Queer Feelings* (2007), which focuses on psychotherapy. Whilst neither of these texts are exclusively British, they have British editors and include work by several of the main contributors to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) psychology in the UK over the past decade.¹

In the rest of this review I will pull out three of Clarke and Peel's defining features of British LGB psychology and psychotherapy. For each I will evaluate the extent to which these are represented in the current book and point to possible ways forward for future collections.

Embracing Critical Perspectives

Clarke and Peel point out that, from its early beginnings in the 1980s, British LG psychology has had a critical, post-positivist flavour which distinguished it from much

¹ Readers should also be aware of the British Psychology Society (BPS) journal *Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review*, which is the only existing LGBTQ psychology journal that Clarke and Peel are aware of, and Butler, Moon and Barker's (2006) special issue of the BPS publication *The Psychologist* which overviews current work on sexuality.

other work in the area. Richardson and Hart's (1981) collection *The Theory and Practice of Homosexuality* emphasised the fluidity of sexual identity, its meaning for the individual and its location within the political arena. Celia Kitzinger's classic text *The Social Construction of Lesbianism* (1987) built on this in its focus on how lesbian identities are constructed and negotiated, and its rejection of the concepts of homophobia and internalised homophobia which depoliticise oppression with their personalised explanations of discrimination and shame.

To exemplify the distinction between essentialist and constructionist research, Clarke and Peel draw a nice comparison between the work of two British psychologists on lesbian and gay parenting: Fiona Tasker and Victoria Clarke herself (both published in Coyle and Kitzinger's (2002) collection on lesbian and gay psychology). Tasker (2002) compares children of heterosexual and lesbian parents on various measures of well-being to provide 'scientific evidence' that such children are healthy, whilst Clarke (2002) explores the representations of lesbian and gay parenting that are prevalent in mainstream media. This latter approach demonstrates the impact of societally dominant discourses on the stories that can be told by such parents, and displays how psychological research itself is not a neutral activity but feeds into such discourses in ways which enable some stories (e.g. of sameness between lesbian and heterosexual child-rearing) but restrict others (e.g. of difference).

In his foreword to Coyle and Kitzinger's (2002) collection, D'Augelli also argues that British work can be distinguished from US research by its use of qualitative methods and constructionist approaches. The current book certainly emphasises qualitative research with all five of the research chapters presenting research which is qualitative in nature². Similarly the psychotherapy chapters are based on case studies and theory rather than any kind of statistical analysis. However, only one of the research chapters came across as explicitly social constructionist. Brendon Gough's analysis of the coming out stories of gay athletes presented a sophisticated analysis of which stories were enabled and excluded by dominant societal and sport-specific discourses. For example, he points out that 'being gay' may now be acceptable in sport but 'acting gay' is not, due to privileging of hard masculinity which is defined in opposition to femininity and homosexuality. The other research chapters employ content analysis (Malley & Tasker), thematic analysis (Ellis) and idiographic/case study methods (Crowley, Harre & Lund; Stauffer-Kruse). These latter two chapters did locate their participants (young LGB people, and gay men with learning disabilities respectively) within wider cultural discourses of youth, heteronormativity, and (dis)ability, but generally the other chapters were less explicit in political engagement and consideration of identity construction than most explicitly social constructionist research.

I was also surprised that no link was made between the psychology and psychotherapy sections of the book in terms of approach. Whilst it was stated that British LGB psychology tends to be social constructionist, little was said about the flavour of British LGB psychotherapy. However, three out of the four chapters in the psychotherapy section

² Although Malley and Tasker's chapter does provide some percentages of the numbers of their LG participants who found psychotherapy useful or unhelpful as well as qualitative data.

were existential-phenomenological in perspective (Langdridge, Milton and Clarke). Indeed, it seems that many of the authors currently writing on LGBTQ affirmative psychotherapy in the UK are existential-phenomenologically trained within the developing London School (Van-Deurzen, 2002; Spinelli, 2007). This approach shares with social constructionism an emphasis on construction of identity and negotiation of meaning, as well as a critical stance towards fixed psychiatric and psychological labels and taken-for-granted societal assumptions. Both social constructionism and existential-phenomenology aim to deconstruct dominant discourses or loosen sedimented ways of seeing the world. Whilst the current book implicitly ties these approaches together, there would seem to be much greater scope for exploration of commonalities and potentials for dialogue between LGBTQ psychology and LGBTQ affirmative psychotherapy.

Finally in terms of critical perspective I was struck by the lack of consideration of queer perspectives given the subject material, the similarities between queer theory and social constructionist approaches, and the near dominance of queer considerations in other social sciences and humanities (Piontek, 2006). Langdridge briefly considers queer as a useful hermeneutic to bring into LGB affirmative therapy because of the challenge it provides to fixed hetero-, bi-, and homo-sexual identities, but there is no other mention of queer theory or activism in the book and indeed no index reference for the term queer. Psychotherapists may find that Moon's (2007) book fills this gap, and the forthcoming work by Hegarty, Langdridge and Barker (2009) aims to present dialogues between queer perspectives and LGBT psychologies.

Recognising Difference as well as Similarity

Clarke and Peel point out that a significant theme in UK LGB psychology and psychotherapy has been an emphasis on the differences between heterosexuals and LGB people, dating back to June Hopkins' (1969) work distinguishing lesbian and heterosexual women. Whilst much research and activism on LGB people has aimed to achieve rights on the basis of their *similarity* to a heterosexual norm, British LGB psychologists such as Coyle and Kitzinger (2002) point out that such work is in danger of forcing LGB lives into heteronormative patterns, erasing or pathologising aspects of LGB experience which do not conform to heteronormativity and neglecting the specifics of LGB experiences and the social context in which they take place.

The current book certainly meets the aim of recognising the specifics of LGB experience and the dangers of imposing heteronormative assumptions. The four chapters on psychotherapy highlight the need for therapists to work with clients to counter prejudice (Langdridge), to recognise that gay identities are constructed in very different ways than heterosexual ones often within hostile sociocultural contexts (Milton), to confront the daily realities of gay men's being-in-the-world (Clarke), and to think carefully about self-disclosure because failure to disclose as an LGB therapist could limit therapeutic possibilities (Balick). Similarly, the chapters on research emphasise the unique issues faced by LG people seeking psychotherapy and community, as well as the specific problems that gay men with learning disabilities may have in a world which assumes that learning disabled people are not sexual, and which gay athletes may have within the hyper-masculine heteronormative world of sport.

Whilst the difference between heterosexual and LGB experience is assumed throughout the book, differences *between* L, G and B experiences are less well explored. Peel, Clarke and Drescher face the perennial problem of how to label the field in their book. The 1980s/90s term 'LG psychology' seems very limited given the current scope of work covering bisexuality, transgender, intersex, critical perspectives on heterosexuality, queer approaches to sexuality and a number of other sexual identities and practices. However, the more inclusive 'LGBTQ psychologies' is a misnomer if the text does not really represent bisexual, trans or queer people or psychologies. Peel, Clarke and Drescher decide to limit their collection to 'LGB psychologies'. However, unfortunately the problem found in many mainstream psychology textbooks is repeated here in that several chapters only consider gay men (Milton; Clarke; Balick; Stauffer-Kruse; Gough), the remainder consider gay men and lesbians (Malley & Tasker; Ellis), and there is only very sporadic reference to bisexuals (Langdrige; Crowley, Harre & Lunt), most of which seems to suggest that bi experiences will be equivalent to lesbian and gay ones, rather than considering the specific issue bi people face in terms of invisibility (being assumed to be gay or straight depending on current relationship), bi-specific stereotypes of greediness, and double discrimination from both heterosexual and LG communities (see Barker, 2007). Indeed some of Ellis' participants self-defined as bisexual but this was not reflected in the chapter title, nor were the many bisexual spaces in the UK considered as a potential safe space for participants. Gough says that his paper on gay men is 'not intended to detract from the issues facing heterosexual and lesbian women in sport' (p.154): a concerning exclusion of bisexuality in a textbook which is meant to be on LGB psychologies.

Equally, given the current tendency towards referring to LGBT psychologies that Clarke and Peel mention in their introduction, it is a great shame not to include any material on trans identities or experience of psychotherapy. This is much better incorporated in both Clarke and Peel's (2007) and Moon's (2007) collections. Finally, it would be good if future work gave more of an impression of the work expanding out of LBGTQ psychologies to include other practices and identities such as SM and non-monogamous relationships (see Langdrige & Barker, 2007; Barker & Langdrige, forthcoming 2009). This would represent the reality of a burgeoning and expanding area.

Linking Politics and Theory/Research

Early in their introductory chapter, Clarke and Peel point out that one of the first affirmative British texts (Hart & Richardson, 1981) called for an 'explicit recognition of the close relationship between the politics and science of homosexuality' (p.37). They also point to the research of Susan Golombok and colleagues in the 1980s which altered legal opinion on lesbian and gay parenting (Golombok, Spencer and Rutter, 1983). I think that the engagement of LGBTQ psychology and psychotherapy with political activism could also be seen as one of the defining features of current British work, however there is not much of this sense in the book chapters.

Possibly this is because much explicitly activist-related work is happening within bisexual and trans psychologies which, as mentioned above, are less covered in this text.

For example, such work includes Barker, Bowes-Catton, Iantaffi, Cassidy & Brewer's ongoing research emerging from the UK bisexual community (forthcoming 2008), and the BPS LG Psychology Section response to the British Mental Health Act Code of Practice regarding trans identities and transgressive sexual identities not being taken as de facto evidence of psychopathology or attendant to psychopathology (Richards, 2008). However, it would also be worth mentioning more explicitly LG campaigns which are informed by psychologists and therapists such as Kitzinger and Wilkinson's ongoing battle for same-sex marriage (Barker & Langdrige, 2006) and the BPS working party currently drawing up guidelines with a distinctly British flavour for therapists working with sexual and gender minority clients.

In conclusion I would definitely encourage readers to add *British Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Psychologies* to their bookshop (at \$14.95 it is a much more reasonable prospect than the far more expensive *Out in Psychology*) but not to assume that the chapters included represent the fullness of current UK work on LGBTQ psychologies and psychotherapies.

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