Liberal Confessions of the Worst Kind: The role of the therapist’s sexual identity

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And then ...
He says …

‘You know, when I first heard you were, you know, … queer, I thought that wasn’t right!’

‘But now I met your … partner, he’s sound he is, he’s sound. So, I just wanted to say, you’re alright’.
Personal factors: degree of relevance

- White
- Male
- 2x marathon runner
- Multi-national
- Multi-lingual
- Boxing fan
- Kylie fan
- Radio 4 convert
- 40s
- Like some psychotherapeutic models more than others
- Environmentalist
- Heamachromatotic
- ?
- Gay male
From Kylie to … clarity?

- Characteristics of the literature
- Empirical work
- Consulting room issues
Relevant literature
‘too straight’ by a gay client to be of any help. Like other minority groups, lesbians and gay men rely on culture specific language to express their experience. It is likely to be preferable to have a therapist who can ‘grasp these emotions without further translation into Standard English’

(Atkinson et al., 1989: 20)
Research into Lesbian and Gay Affirmative Psychotherapy

- Grounded Theory study
- Clients (lesbians and gay men n = 18)
- Therapists (lesbian and gay male therapists, heterosexual female therapists n = 14)
- Limit this presentation to views on sexuality of the therapist
Fig 6: The role of the therapist’s sexual identity.
When I first started seeing [my therapist] I didn’t know if he was straight or gay, and a lot of the time I would assume he was straight’.
Fig 6: The role of the therapist's sexual identity.
found the lack of self disclosure in my psychoanalytic psychotherapy painful and very difficult at times

there’s always the dangers in psychodynamic [therapy] of a defensiveness creeping in [it’s as if, because] I don’t have to disclose [ ] to you, let’s work entirely with your projections and fantasies. [ ] Everything belongs to the client and it doesn’t. Everything doesn’t belong with the client
my age, I disclose my appearance, my accent. I disclose a host of things about me that people can project onto it would have been pretty unlikely that we would have come a long way down this line without [her therapist] self-disclosing somewhere
Fig 6: The role of the therapist's sexual identity.
different expectations in a relationship, different role models and things people aspire to [ ] perhaps different norms – [ ] actually a gay man being promiscuous in a relationship is different to a straight man being promiscuous in a relationship in terms of [ ] the frequency of it and the meaning it has in that person’s social circle and the meaning it might have to their commitment to the relationship
I am not sure that the world is quite the same for a gay couple as it is for a straight couple … polygamy in straight relationships may be more problematic than in gay relationships
Lesbians and gay men lost their adolescence, because very often, they had to make a choice in adolescence that is a particularly adult choice.

The research shows that there are sub-cultural differences.

It should be seen as alternative and valid and different but equal, not different but superior, or different but inferior.
there must be ways in which there’s a gap between the understanding of the straight [therapist] and the gay client
you don’t just want all this self-reflective crap, you actually want somebody to say ‘I do understand, I have been there and this is what I do. Maybe it won’t work for you, but I know other people that have done this
instances where [ ] the quality of the rapport was improved because of something [the therapist] disclosed. I think because of what I knew about her, I felt that much more able to go into that subject
Fig 6: The role of the therapist's sexual identity.
As a therapist you are in a powerful position, and you can be a lesbian, which is a not good thing, possibly there’s a way to make it a slightly gooder thing
Fig 6: The role of the therapist's sexual identity.
the fact of being straight can set up barriers, whatever my attitude. I may have areas that I am not aware of, even though I might try.

some heterosexual people [ ] would make judgements
I’ve always felt slightly inadequate for being a straight woman [ ] like I don’t have the credentials or the cred or the [ ] in-depth knowledge of the scene.

I think it’s quite difficult if you are a heterosexual therapist frankly, … I think you probably need to be wracked with angst, a great deal of the time in terms of being self regarding [ ] but it’s possible, but I think it’s hard.
it’s terribly hard for them not to get caught in the trap of being overly nice, you know, is it easy to take risks?

If you’re a heterosexual gay affirmative therapist … at some level you’re going to feel good about yourself, [ ], and is that a hard thing to risk? … feeling bad about yourself? You know if someone said, ‘I think that’s a grossly homophobic remark frankly’ … how certain are you going to feel that it’s not? Maybe it is
if [the therapist] was straight, I’d be assuming that he was automatically against me”.

“if it was with a straight person, [ ] I would most probably be judged”.

“I didn’t believe that a straight person would be able to understand my experience of my sexuality and accept it, and really understand what is happening for me”
clearly did not understand and it was as though I had to explain everything and check out ‘do you know what I mean’?

Are my problems so bad that my counsellor can’t understand? – I must really be screwed up
felt too vulnerable or too threatened to be able to work successfully

some gay men may feel very uncomfortable talking to a heterosexual therapist
I set the cat among the pigeons when I argued that only gay men and lesbians should be therapists for gay men and lesbians.
Fig 6: The role of the therapist's sexual identity.
to have a straight person who is on my side, it could actually help with my relationship with the world out there

it gives hope that the qualities can happen in society with other people
the therapist has spent some time exploring their sexuality and [is] non-judgemental and accepting – truly- then they should be OK whether they are gay or straight
The Headlines

- Some heterosexual therapists *may not* be able to provide therapy in an attuned manner.

- Many sexual minority therapists and heterosexual therapists *may* be able to provide appropriate therapy *if* they have done sufficient personal work to develop themselves.

- The relevance of the sexual identity of the therapist varies depending on the meaning it has for the client, therapist and setting.
Issues for the consulting room...

- **Disclosure**
  - Personal comfort with sexuality
  - Consider relevance of self disclosure – and self withdrawal
Issues for the consulting room...

- For individuals
  - Tolerance v appreciation?
  - Knowledge v assumption?
  - Flattery and burn-out
Issues for the consulting room...

- **For services**
  - NHS services reliance on ‘specialists’ – skill mix, staff development, etc
  - Employment issues – deliberately welcome applications from sexual minority therapists?
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