

From Invert to Intersectionality: Understanding the Past and Future of Sexuality

Esther D. Rothblum

I cannot tell you what a source of both inspiration and pleasure *The Ladder* contained for me within its pages. I, as an invert, can only know of what momentous importance such a movement as yours can mean, for the ultimate good of all of us.

Like so many others . . . I am living a completely repressed existence, sublimating my nature, whenever possible, in my profession.

One of the insertions in *The Ladder* caught my attention and I could not help but muse over it with some irony. The part about "Come out of hiding." What a delicious invitation, but oh, so impractical. I should lose my job, a marvelous heterosexual roommate, and all chances of finding work . . . I would be blackballed all over the city.

I am interested-very much interested in becoming a member of the Daughters of Bilitis. Although at present discretion prevents me from making any moves to help the cause . . . there is one very effective weapon we, who must fight from a hiding place, still have – the fountain pen and the typewriter (J.M. Cleveland, Ohio *The Ladder*, October 1956, p.14.).

Progress

As non-heterosexual activists, we tend to focus on oppression, on remaining sources of internalised heterosexism, and on the limitations of clinical practice. Yet we also need to celebrate how far we have come, as the quote above illustrates. Non-heterosexual issues and communities are portrayed in the news and popular media, and increasing numbers of people know someone who is non-heterosexual. Gay Pride parades in many countries

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reflect the increasing gender, ethnic, religious, ability/disability, cultural, and age diversity of our communities. The United Nations has promoted LGBTI (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex) rights as human rights, and we read about non-heterosexual milestones in politics, the law, education, health, mental health, popular culture, athletics, and the arts, among others. Nevertheless, limitations of early research and writing meant that we knew the most about non-heterosexuals who were white, middle class, able-bodied, highly educated, and willing to be out.

It is important to identify risk factors of being non-heterosexual in a heterosexist society, as reviewed in this volume by Jowett and Peel about physical health (Chapter 7) and by das Nair and Fairbank about mental health (Chapter 8). However, it is also important to focus on the benefits. For example, women who exclusively have sex with women do not need to practice birth control, and thus don't have to consider the risks of the various contraceptive methods. Women who have sex with women are also at lower risk for HIV than are women or men who have sex with men. Because men still earn significantly higher incomes, in general, than do women, two men in a couple will have more economic resources. My research has found that non-heterosexual women report finding more support from their communities during times of stress or hardship than do heterosexual sisters (Rothblum, 2008; 2010); also non-heterosexual men and women are more highly educated than their same-gender siblings (Rothblum & Factor, 2001). As Gibson and Hansen state in this volume (Chapter 10), '... the crisis of "coming out" could prepare one for the crisis of midlife and growing old because it somehow generates skills, competencies or mastery for facing such developmental challenges'.

Conversely, it is important that non-heterosexuals not be unduly influenced by what 'mainstream' society considers beneficial. Not everyone necessarily wants to join the military, get legally married, rear children, or join the middle class, to name just a few examples. Reducing heterosexism should not mean assimilating to the point of diluting our vibrant and diverse non-heterosexual rituals and communities.

Intersectionality as a Continuum

Psychological research, grounded in a positivist methodology, likes to form categories. A great deal of research compares a treatment to a placebo, people who are high or low on measures of mental health, or women to men. Just as we regard age as falling on a continuum (39 is not that different from 40, even though they represent different decades), so it is important

to view all dimensions of intersectionality as continuums. Sexuality itself is complex and multi-dimensional, including sexual identity, sexual fantasies, sexual attraction, sexual relationships, degree of outness to others, and participation in political and social activities, among others. A man who identifies as gay may be currently in a sexual relationship with a woman. The research of Lisa Diamond (2008) with a cohort of young women found that love and desire are more fluid than constant, so that the woman whose sexual identity remains lesbian, or heterosexual, over time are the exception rather than the norm. Butler (this volume) states that, due to internalised oppression, some people may not feel disabled 'enough'. Our research found over 30 terms used by individuals who do not identify fully with the concept of binary gender (Factor & Rothblum, 2008). As Riggs and das Nair state (Chapter 1), 'Chicana lesbian might be an identity in itself . . .' rather than a combination of 'Chicana' and 'lesbian'.

Riggs and das Nair state in Chapter 1 to this anthology that there has been an assumption that 'cultural categories' remain stable over time. Yet we need to understand that all dimensions are flexible. A Native American woman visiting South Africa may be startled to be identified as white. There are many degrees of mobility, or vision, or hearing. In Robinson's (2010) recent book *Disintegration*, he describes how the concept of 'the Black community' in the US has evolved into disparate communities, such as immigrants from Africa, biracial and multiracial families, and African Americans from wealthy, middle class and poor backgrounds, so that being black in the US is increasingly less cohesive.

Gibson and Hansen emphasise in this volume that we must be aware of the 'generational cohort' of non-heterosexual people, given that older people grew up in a more heterosexist society than those who are younger. Both Diamond (2005) and Savin-Williams (2005) have conducted longitudinal research with non-heterosexual youth, and found that sexual identity is more fluid and flexible, more resistant to easy categorisation, and can be independent of sexual behaviour. As members of this age cohort enter adulthood, they may appear markedly different from older generations. Much of the research conducted on non-heterosexuals, including the life experience of therapists, may be inapplicable to this younger generation.

Locating Ourselves and Our Intersecting Identities

Psychology as a discipline has been influenced by feminist, disability and critical race theorists. In the early part of the last century, academic articles about psychological research did not regularly mention the gender or race

of 'subjects' (presumed to be white and male unless stated otherwise). Now psychology journals typically require that research articles describe the demographics of participants, including gender and race/ethnicity. Grant applications such as those of the US National Institutes of Health include a section on 'inclusion of women and minorities' where research applicants must explain how they will ensure that women and people of colour will be included in the study (though there is no requirement to explain how researchers will ensure diversity of sexuality, social class, or ability/disability, for example).

Whereas in the past psychology journals used the passive voice ('it was found', 'it is believed') and discouraged use of the first person or in fact any identifying information about authors, this has changed thanks to feminist methodologies (e.g. Hesse-Biber & Yaiser, 2004). Understanding that 'the personal is political', it is more common (though certainly not yet the norm) for authors to locate themselves in their research.

When the academic journal *Feminism & Psychology* published a call for papers for a thematic issue on 'representing the other', they received 150 inquires and 80 submissions (Wilkinson, 1996). Authors described dilemmas such as teaching disability studies as an able-bodied woman, studying incest in South Africa as a white woman, women rearing sons, and women conducting research on male murderers, among many others.

If we view intersectionality as multiple, continuous dimensions, then this blurs the boundaries of self and other. If I interview non-heterosexual women about what the 'women's community' means to them, then there will be a plethora of ways that respondents define 'woman', 'non-heterosexual', and 'community'. Furthermore, they may see me as same or other, not necessarily due to demographic information, but because of politics, attitudes, interests, and so on.

Traditionally, therapists were trained to self-disclose as little as possible (although certain information, such as their gender expression, race, age cohort, and accent may have been easy to discern). As Riggs and das Nair state in Chapter 1, therapists too should assess their own social location. Whether to share this with clients is a decision that must be taken in full consideration of the impact upon the client and any potential for misunderstanding the motivation for disclosure.

Because the discipline of psychology is primarily focused on the individual, and therapy on empowering the individual, this is problematic from a feminist and activist perspective. In their book *Changing Our Minds: Lesbian Feminism and Psychology*, Kitzinger and Perkins (1993) argue that this de-politicised approach to women's concerns has moved the focus from our societies and communities to the individual 'client'. Furthermore, they describe how psychology has appropriated feminist concerns such as

violence against women, but reversed them, so the discourse has changed from 'what are the causes of violence against women?' (e.g. patriarchy, unemployment) to 'what are the consequences of violence against women?' (e.g. post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety). In fact, the Code of Ethics of the (former) Feminist Therapy Institute (1995, p.40) focused on 'cultural diversities and oppression', power differentials, and social change.

Furthermore, therapists from all social class backgrounds are trained in knowledge arising from middle class values, and therapy is accessible more to economically advantaged individuals (see das Nair & Hansen, this volume). Alternatives to therapy, such as family of origin and religious organisations (see das Nair and Thomas, this volume, Chapter 6) may not be accepting of people who are not heterosexual. Consequently, non-heterosexuals may want to create alternatives to therapy that take advantage of the social networks in diverse non-heterosexual communities, including the formation of religious or spiritual resources as well as resources for what das Nair and Thomas term 'non-believers'.

It is not just psychology, but western societies in general, that individualise problems and solutions. For example, the concept of 'falling in love' and choosing one's spouse or partner for romantic or sexual reasons are not only historically recent phenomena, but are not the case in non-western societies that are more communal and collectivistic, such as China, Pakistan, or Japan (c.f. Dion & Dion, 1993). As Higgins and Butler argue in this volume, non-heterosexuals who seek asylum in the UK need to prove their 'gay identity' which is complicated when they come from countries without language or belief in individual sexual identities. Consequently, therapists and researchers should use as an example das Nair's model for 'Metaminorities and mental health' (in das Nair & Fairbank, this volume, Chapter 8) that focuses on external and social contributors to mental health in addition to internal and psychological factors.

Looking to the Future

I know it's going to be a long, hard pull before we are accepted as we really are. You and I, and our contemporaries, will probably never see the free world we are seeking. There have been pioneers in all causes and I sincerely hope that you, who are pioneering in this particular cause, will eventually win so that those who come after us will have a happier world to live in.

(The Ladder, February 1960, p.23).

Riggs and das Nair emphasise that the goal of intersectionality is to *add* to complexity. The goal of intersectionality is not to create a new grid say, of five genders \times eight social classes \times ten religions \times 18 ethnic groups \times 12 categories of disabilities, to use an exaggerated example. Instead, we must view our clients, research participants, friends, neighbours, co-workers – as well as ourselves – as forming multiple, interlocking dimensions, each one adding colours, shades and hues to a rainbow tapestry.

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