
Reconsidering Sexual Identities: Intersectionality Theory and the Implications for Educating Counsellors Reconsidérer les identités sexuelles : la théorie de l'intersectionnalité et son incidence sur la formation des conseillers

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ABSTRACT

Counselling programs in Canada provide minimal training relating to lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) issues and cultures. This article presents a theoretical argument proposing that counselling programs move away from educating counsellors about LGB issues through specialized courses based on multicultural approaches of difference and diversity and move toward an approach based on intersectionality theory. Intersectionality theory presents social identities such as gender, race, class, and sexuality as mutually constituted, interconnected, fluid, and contextually specific. It is argued that feminist pedagogy can play a major role in integrating intersectionality theory throughout entire counselling programs and that this implementation would better equip counsellors to work with LGB clients.

RÉSUMÉ

Au Canada, les programmes de counseling assurent un minimum de formation sur les enjeux et les aspects culturels ayant trait aux lesbiennes, gais, et bisexuels (LGB). Cet article présente une argumentation théorique selon laquelle les programmes de counseling devraient délaissé la formation des conseillers sur les enjeux de LGB au moyen de cours spécialisés fondés sur des approches multiculturelles de différence et de diversité et qu'ils devraient plutôt tendre vers une approche fondée sur la théorie de l'intersectionnalité, qui présente les identités sociales, telles que le genre, la race, la classe sociale, et la sexualité, comme mutuellement constituées, interdépendantes, fluides, et liées au contexte. On y soutient que la pédagogie féministe peut jouer un rôle important dans l'intégration de la théorie de l'intersectionnalité à l'ensemble des programmes de counseling et que sa mise en œuvre permettrait aux conseillers d'être mieux préparés à travailler auprès des clients LGB.

Counsellors continue to receive inadequate graduate training relating to sexual identity (Alderson, 2004; Evans & Barker, 2010; Grove, 2009), even though individuals who are questioning their sexuality are more likely to access counselling (Jones & Gabriel, 1999). Also, lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals have higher rates of mental health disorders compared to heterosexual individuals (Meyer, 2003). Same-sex couples report feeling uncomfortable in counselling due to the manner in which counsellors relate to their sexuality (Grove & Blasby,

2009). Satcher and Schumacker (2009) found that counsellors are more prejudiced against lesbian and gay individuals when they lack training in LGB issues. These findings suggest that counsellors need to be better prepared to work effectively with LGB clients and families and that we must seriously consider the manner in which professional counsellors are trained.

The most recent study that focused on Canadian masters' and doctoral counselling programs established that Canadian counsellors received minimal graduate training in the area of LGB awareness and matters specific to counselling techniques (Alderson, 2004). This study reports that the amount of LGB-specific counsellor training varies across counselling programs ranging from no training to approximately 24 hours of training over the duration of an entire graduate program. This lack of training is alarming and in need of urgent attention.

More traditionally, counselling programs have framed sexual identity as a specific form of individual diversity (Alderson, 2004; Chantler, 2005). This approach tends to consider sexual identity as separate and distinct from other aspects of identity categories. As a feminist informed by intersectionality theory, I propose that providing counsellors with quality training related to LGB issues means we must move beyond framing sexual identity as a category of individual difference to an approach that considers the complex interconnections of identities. The call for counsellors and psychotherapists to work from models that focus on complex social identities is certainly not new (Chantler, 2005; Collins & Arthur, 2010a, 2010b; Ecklund, 2012; Moodley, 2007); however, there is little discussion related to integrating intersectionality theory into graduate counselling programs as a strategy to create a shift in the field of counselling. Teaching intersectionality theory to counsellors would provide them with a more complex model of identities that defines sexuality as mutually constituted and interconnected with gender, race, class, and all other categories of personal identity¹ (Chantler, 2005; Watts-Jones, 2010).

In addition to considering identity categories as interconnected and overlapping, intersectionality theory defines identity categories as fluid and contextually constructed (Collins & Arthur, 2010a; Ecklund, 2012; Narvaez, Meyer, Kertzner, Ouellette, & Gordon, 2009). People understand their intersecting identities differently over time and also in relation to social interactions and contexts (Narvaez et al., 2009). For example, an African Canadian, able-bodied, middle-class gay man living in a small urban town may find that the intersections of race and sexuality are at the forefront of how he thinks about himself and how he interacts in predominantly white, heterosexual spaces. However, if this same man becomes paralyzed from a car accident and requires a wheelchair for mobility, this would likely shift his intersectional identity and he may place more importance on feeling excluded in society because he is in a wheelchair compared to feeling excluded as an African Canadian. Because all of his identities are interconnected, having a physical disability would also change his perceptions of, for example, his gender, race, and class. A change in one identity signals a shift and change in the other identities based on his lived experiences.

Thinking about sexuality in terms of an intersectional theory suggests that one's sexual identity is constantly shifting and changing (Collins & Arthur, 2010a; Ecklund, 2012; Narvaez et al., 2009).

Learning about sexuality, and all other identities, from an intersectional approach would benefit counsellors because they would better understand the benefits and risks their clients take as they negotiate their sexual identities across various social contexts such as home, work, and other social situations (Ecklund, 2012). Clients may experience their sexuality completely differently in various places and could, for example, experience oppression in the work place and support and acceptance at home. The important point is that intersections of social identities translate to differing social experiences of oppression and privilege for both clients and counsellors (Chantler, 2005; Ecklund, 2012; Watts-Jones, 2010). Counsellors must not only focus on the intersectional identities of their clients but must also develop a good understanding of their own intersectional identities and how these identities connect them to oppression and privilege (Chantler, 2005; Ecklund, 2012; Watts-Jones, 2010); their own intersectional identities have a direct impact on the therapeutic process (Ecklund, 2012).

As a White, able-bodied, middle-class mother, educator, and lesbian woman who is informed by psychological, feminist, and poststructural theories of sexuality, I argue that teaching intersectionality theory of identities to counsellors is critical for work with LGB clients. I further argue that applying a feminist pedagogy across all courses in counselling programs is one way to model the application of intersectionality theory for counsellors and increase the likelihood that counsellors would leave their programs with a personal understanding of intersectional identities, oppression, and privilege.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF INTERSECTIONALITY THEORY

The concepts that form the foundation of intersectionality theory grew out of women's experiences of marginalization and struggle within Western feminism (Combahee River Collective, 1977/1981; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1984/2000; Lorde, 1984/2007; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981). During this time (1970s and 1980s), feminists of colour worked to challenge the universalized messages coming from White privileged voices of feminism. The concerns and experiences of White, middle- to upper-class women were central to feminism, and the struggles and oppressions of women from other races and classes were left unacknowledged (hooks, 1984/2000). For example, Friedan's (1963/1997) book, *The Feminine Mystique*, played a major role in defining the problem of women's oppression: women were unfulfilled as housewives and a career would give meaning to women's lives and liberate them from patriarchy. hooks (1984/2000) argued that Friedan (1963/1997) generalized this experience to all women when it only affected a small group of privileged women. Women of colour and poor White women had been working outside of the home their entire lives, and their work was anything but liberating. hooks (1984/2000) further contended that as White

privileged women entered the workforce, they worsened the fate for women and men of colour. White privileged women often displaced men of colour in the workforce and hired women of colour to take care of their domestic work while they were out pursuing careers. hooks (1984/2000) argued that feminists must integrate race and class into their analyses so that they would include all women in feminist theorizing.

The Combahee River Collective was a Black feminist lesbian group that was formed in the mid 1970s in Boston. They are well known for their published manifesto, *A Black Feminist Statement* (Combahee River Collective, 1977/1981). This statement marks an important moment in feminism because it shifts our attention away from gender as a singular category of feminist analysis to interconnected oppressions of gender, race, class, and sexuality.

The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. (Combahee River Collective, 1977/1981, p. 210)

The very realities that emerged from Black women's experiences of interlocking oppressions challenged feminism to its core because it required White privileged feminists to recognize the racism, classism, and heterosexism of their feminism. To accept the concept that oppressions are interlocking required feminists to abandon a singular analysis of gender and attend to its connections to race, class, and sexuality (Combahee River Collective, 1977/1981).

hooks (1984/2000) argued that Black women in America had a unique perspective of life and feminism because their experiences were informed by sexism as well as racism and classism. If feminism was to include all women, it meant that White privileged feminists had to acknowledge how they were implicated in the oppression of other women through race and class. Along with several other feminists of colour (Combahee River Collective, 1977/1981; Crenshaw, 1991; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981), hooks maintained that feminists must move to an analysis acknowledging the interconnections among gender, race and, class. During this same time period, feminists began to critically challenge the institution of heterosexuality (Rich, 1980) and argued that we must also consider sexuality in relation to gender, race, and class (Combahee River Collective, 1977/1981; Lorde, 1984/2007).

More recently, we are seeing the application of intersectionality theory across other disciplines (Chantler, 2005; Cole, 2009; Davis, 2010; McCall, 2005; Shields, 2008; Watts-Jones, 2010). Educators are drawing on intersectionality theory in their pedagogical approaches. Davis (2010) uses intersectional and transnational feminist methods as tools to challenge colonial assumptions of education, while Schacht (2000) applies an intersectional analysis to expose the workings of power within the classroom context. Psychology, which has traditionally taken a singular approach to identities, is beginning to incorporate intersectionality theory into

psychological research (Cole, 2009), psychological perspectives of gender (Shields, 2008), quantitative (McCall, 2005) and qualitative (Narvaez et al., 2009) research of identities in general, and counselling theory and practice (Chantler, 2005; Ecklund, 2012; Moodley, 2007; Watts-Jones, 2010).

INTERSECTIONALITY THEORY AND COUNSELLING TODAY

There appears to be a shift taking place in the field of counselling and psychotherapy that is calling for counsellors to adopt more complex models of social identities in their work (Collins & Arthur, 2010a; Ecklund, 2012; Meyer, 2003; Moodley, 2007; Watts-Jones, 2010). While some authors recommend reformulating multiculturalism (Collins & Arthur, 2010a; Moodley, 2007), others have turned to intersectionality theory (Ecklund, 2012; Watts-Jones, 2010).

Watts-Jones (2010) applies intersectionality theory to family therapy. Her technique called *location of self* encourages counsellors to have an open dialogue addressing intersectional relations of power and privilege as part of the family counselling process. She contends that relations of power and privilege play out in several ways during the therapeutic process; there are power relations within the family dynamic and between the family and the therapist. By openly discussing her own location as an African American middle-class woman, Watts-Jones helps families understand the implications of their own individual locations.

Ecklund (2012) presents a case study analysis that demonstrates the application of intersectionality theory to the clinical practice of psychotherapy with a child and his family. Ecklund highlights several ways that intersectionality theory can be integrated into therapeutic interventions with children and families. She proposes that the intersectional identities of the psychologist, the child, and other family members all have a direct impact on the therapeutic process.

Both Ecklund (2012) and Watts-Jones (2010) argue that intersectionality theory has great potential for psychotherapy. They each argue that, because intersectional identities are connected to various experiences of privilege and oppression in society, it is necessary for counsellors to understand their own and their clients' intersectional identities. However, before counsellors can integrate intersectionality theory into counselling practice, they must first learn the theory and practice of intersectionality theory.

TEACHING INTERSECTIONALITY THEORY IN COUNSELLING PROGRAMS

After reviewing all Canadian counselling programs, Alderson (2004) proposed the curriculum for a course about sexual minorities, and suggested that it be integrated into educational curriculum for counsellors. This course would focus on important aspects of LGB culture and provide information about sexual orientation and identity.

I agree that Alderson (2004) proposes content that presents relevant and useful information about LGB experiences and cultures; however, I am troubled by

the focus on sexual identity as a separate and singular identity. Only one class session out of the entire curriculum is dedicated to gender, race, class, and other social variables. Further, this curriculum does not appear to engage students in an analysis of power and privilege. We must take an approach that goes beyond providing information about LGB culture and issues; otherwise we risk reconstructing sexuality as a singular discrete identity because we fail to acknowledge how it intersects with other identities. In addition to teaching about LGB issues in specialized courses, teaching counsellors about intersectionality theory and integrating an intersectional analysis across entire counselling programs would better prepare counsellors to work with LGB clients. Teaching the theory of intersectionality is course content that can be easily integrated into counselling theory courses. However, integrating intersectional analysis across an entire curriculum is a substantial goal. I suggest that the basic principles of feminist pedagogy (Webb, Allen, & Walker, 2002) are useful principles to guide educators as they apply an intersectional analysis to course content.

Webb et al. (2002) acknowledge that feminist pedagogical approaches are diverse; however, there appear to be common principles that form the foundation for all feminist pedagogies. These principles include exploring social power in the classroom, open dialogue about the teaching relationship, and respect for the diverse social positions of each person in the learning community. I do not mean to suggest that educators in counselling programs are not aware of or currently applying these principles in their classrooms. I suggest that these principles are a good fit for introducing an intersectional analysis and could be foundational to the learning outcomes of entire counselling programs, much like they have been in the field of Women's Studies.

More traditionally, feminist pedagogy has been applied in gender and women's studies classrooms (Davis, 2010; Schniedewind, 1987) and for teaching courses in multiculturalism counselling (Choate, Ropers-Huilman, & Smith-Adcock, 2004). Feminist pedagogy defines the classroom as a political arena where power and privilege are played out (Davis, 2010; Knoll, 2009; Schacht, 2000; Webb et al., 2002). Feminist pedagogy encourages teachers to have open dialogue with students assessing power in relation to both the course material and the relationships within the classroom. Together, the students and the teacher can participate in a collaborative critique of the knowledge-building process (Schacht, 2000; Shrewsbury, 1987; Webb et al., 2002).

One of the goals of feminist pedagogy is for the education process to be transformative (Keddie, 2006; Schacht, 2000; Shrewsbury, 1987; Webb et al., 2002). Shrewsbury (1987) argues that concepts of empowerment, community, and leadership are central to the goals of feminist pedagogy. It is common for techniques that encourage self-reflection, such as reflexive writing assignments, to be used to foster personal change. Schacht (2000) proposes that locating himself within the context of the classroom is important for him to do as he is a White male professor and represents social power. By having an open dialogue with his students about his own location, he demonstrates to students how important it is for each of us

to engage in this self-analysis. This type of dialogue models the application of an intersectional analysis for students and encourages them to assess their own positions of social oppression and privilege.

Understanding one's own intersectional positioning can be challenging, especially if a person stands in a position of power and privilege (Dyer, 1998; McIntosh, 1986/2009). In her canonical text, McIntosh (1986/2009) introduces the concepts of White privilege and heterosexual privilege. Her main argument is that privilege is invisible to those who have it. Even though people living with privilege benefit from it every day, they likely do not realize they have this benefit. McIntosh makes this point clear by providing a list of everyday experiences that White people and heterosexual people take for granted. A White lesbian woman, for example, will likely find the card industry heterosexist because when she goes to her local card store to purchase a romantic card for her lover she cannot find one that is appropriate. The lesbian woman knows that the card industry is heterosexist, but she further understands that it is also heteronormative because her straight friends do not even notice that in their local stores they have a privilege of accessing cards that reflect their lived experiences. The lesbian woman knows she is outside of society's assumptions about romantic relationships because she must plan ahead and order her cards over the Internet. The straight woman's sexuality is celebrated and affirmed in all spaces.

Dyer (1998) argues that individuals who are privileged and belong to dominant groups often do not point out their position because they assume their position is normal.

Power in contemporary society habitually passes itself off as embodied in the normal as opposed to the superior ... This is common to all forms of power, but it works in a peculiarly seductive way with whiteness, because of the way it seems rooted, in common-sense thought, in things other than ethnic difference. (p. 45)

Dyer proposes that the ideas of the dominant group in society become so normalized and internalized they are considered to be the natural. I find that I am often faced with this reasoning as people conclude that, since heterosexuality is most common in our society, it must be natural and that LGB desires/relationships are, therefore, unnatural. Dyer (1998) exposes how the privileged norm becomes reified in the concept of naturalization.

Considering how privilege works with normativity, it makes sense to expect student counsellors in privileged positions to struggle through deconstructing their identities. Applying feminist pedagogical principles to counselling programs could only facilitate this process and help students better understand intersectionality theory. I suggest there are major benefits to teaching intersectionalities across many, if not all, courses in a counselling program.

The first benefit of integrating intersectionality theory across an entire program is that it allows more time for students to self-analyze their own identities. Considering the challenge that privilege presents to the process of location of

self, and acknowledging that many graduate students are in positions of class privilege, it is likely this self-analysis could be a lengthy process. Second, this approach would allow students to hear the same message about intersectionality theory in relation to different topics delivered by different professors. For example, Cole (2009) provides key arguments for applying intersectionality theory to research methodologies. Students would learn that intersectionality theory can be applied to various courses and to all aspects of identities, including sexual identity. Third, the open acknowledgement of power and privilege in the classroom models a dialogue that centres on intersectionalities. The strategies used by professors in the classroom would likely be transferable to counselling practice because both contexts are imbued with power relations related to intersectional identities. Such exposure can help trainee counsellors feel more at ease when they begin to see clients because they will be comfortable with the language and the techniques for applying intersectionality theory in the classroom and can use them in counselling.

Implementing such a change to counselling programs would present challenges as well. This approach assumes that students in counselling programs are eager to consider their own privilege and acknowledge marginalization. It further assumes that counselling professors are familiar with intersectionality theory and that, consequently, they are interested in and committed to applying the basic principles of feminist pedagogy to their teaching methods. Despite these challenges, I urge counsellors, counselling students, counselling faculty, and administrators to seriously consider the application of the principles of feminist pedagogy as a method for teaching intersectionality theory in counselling programs. It is time for counsellors to reconsider models of sexual identities and consider the transformative potential for counselling programs across Canada.

CONCLUSION

A recent review (Singh & Shelton, 2011) draws attention to the lack of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and queer (LGBTQ) research in counselling and psychology, making this special issue on *Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity in Counselling Psychology* both timely and relevant. The theoretical argument that I have presented adds to the current body of literature relating to LGB counselling issues and sexualities because it introduces a new approach to educating counsellors about sexual identities and it responds to the call for counsellors to shift toward more complex analyses of social identities (Collins & Arthur, 2010a; Ecklund, 2012; Meyer, 2003; Moodley, 2007; Watts-Jones, 2010). Integrating intersectionality theory into counselling programs can only help counsellors be more empathetic to their clients because they will have a deeper understanding of intersectionality theory, their own intersectional identities, and how intersectional identities are connected to experiences of oppression and privilege.

Note

- 1 Even though I am primarily applying the concepts of intersectionality theory to counselling LGB clients, I would like to emphasize that intersectionality theory takes all identities into consideration because they are all connected (Chantler, 2005; Ecklund, 2012). These identities could include gender, race, class, socioeconomic status, level of education, disability, religion, ethnicity, and nationality.

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