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Coming of Age: A reflection on Psychology of Sexualities at 20

Elizabeth Peel

In some respects the establishment and development of what was originally called the Lesbian and Gay Psychology Section runs parallel to my own academic career. I had just started my PhD in 1998, and this was a hugely exciting time to be a ‘lesbian and gay psychologist’ given the lengthy ‘battle’ to found the Section within the BPS – after four unsuccessful attempts - had just been ‘won’. In 2002 Adrian Coyle and Celia Kitzinger published the first edited collection to mark the institutional recognition of the field, Lesbian and Gay Psychology: New Perspectives. It was something of a coup that the book was published by BPS Blackwell, and it included research from many of the early members of the Section committee, Adrian Coyle and Martin Milton on lesbian and gay affirmative psychotherapy, Ian Rivers on developmental issues for lesbian and gay young people, Fiona Tasker on lesbian and gay parenting, Sue Wilkinson on lesbian health, and myself on lesbian and gay awareness training. I had a number of roles in the early days of the Section, PsyPag representative, book reviews editor for the Section’s journal Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review and then co-editor with Adrian Coyle and then editor from 2004-2006.

The overriding memories from my early 2000 to 2006 involvement in the Section are of the sense of collective purpose in legitimatizing the field within the BPS as much as externally, and having lots of fun with peers and mentors as well as working across the many differences in approach and ideology which sit under the ‘sexualities’ umbrella. When Victoria Clarke and I published Out in Psychology: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer perspectives in 2007 as an more diverse and international ‘follow-up’ collection to Coyle and Kitzinger (2002) we were, partially, ‘outing’ the discipline as one that ‘already, if sometimes ambivalently or unwillingly, incorporates LGBTQ perspectives’ (Clarke & Peel, 2007, p.1). We were also keen to emphasise that ‘LGBTQ psychologies of all varieties aim to support social change’ (p.1). And around this time there was sometimes impassioned debate within the Section about the pros and cons of changing the name of the Section to reflect the widening diversity of research and activism in the field, namely to the LGB, or LGBT, LGBTQI, or LGBTQ Psychology Section. My personal preference at the time was for the latter, the argument being that the more generic alternative of ‘sexualities’ could render non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities less visible – in a comparable sense to psychology of ‘genders’ eliding a feminist emphasis. The “identities in aggregate” approach was also complicated by tensions over ordering within the acronym, and concerns about the grounds for inclusion or exclusion and a desire to “future proof” any change in name. Ultimately the Section membership voted for the change to ‘sexualities’, likely as a pragmatic solution to the challenging and shifting terrain of an acronymic alternative.

The initial naming, and subsequent re-branding of the field could all be considered rites of passage, as could the publication of the first introductory textbook in 2010 (Clarke et al., 2010). If the publication of Lesbian and Gay Psychology marked the “coming of age” of British lesbian and gay psychology’
(Kitzinger & Coyle, 2002, p. 1) then the publication of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans & Queer Psychology: An introduction was ‘a trailblazer in terms of developing the scope and content of psychology teaching’ (Wilkinson, BPS nomination statement) and ‘an event of international importance, of which all British psychologists can be proud...effecting nothing short of [a] paradigm shift in the arena of textbook publishing’ (Hegarty, BPS nomination statement). That Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans & Queer Psychology won the 2013 BPS textbook prize signalled for me, the nominees, and LGBTQ psychologists that the field had now ‘come of age’ within the Society as well as within the discipline. In a lovely moment of serendipity after Damien Riggs and myself gave an acceptance talk at the 2014 BPS annual conference, all of the recipients of awards and prizes were lined up for a group photograph. As we posed for the camera the person stood next to me, Peter Martin – recipient of the Practitioner of the Year award – said ‘I find “lesbian” works much better than “cheese”!’ And brightly indeed we smiled. Amazingly I had corresponded with Peter a decade earlier when he’d written an article for the Section’s journal (Martin, 2005). Small world (!) and a changed one given how marginal and unrecognised lesbian and gay psychology was to the canon of the British psychology ‘establishment’ some fifteen years earlier.

What this anecdote highlights is the capacity of a Section such as Sexualities to create and sustain connections across time and contexts. Although, engagement in Section activities and roles inevitably ebbs and flows, there is a bedrock of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender research, and psychological practice, that is as varied and predictable as tides. Reflecting back, probably the most significant growth in the field is the development of research and practice on trans and non-binary gender. Cisgenderism (e.g., Ansara & Berger, 2016) is now situated alongside heterosexism and heteronormativity as delegitimising, oppressive and discriminatory ideologies and practices ripe for LGBTIQ psychologists to analyse and challenge. The social change agenda of the field hasn’t, and nor should it, diminish. Now that the Section has fully ‘come of age’ let’s eagerly look forward to what the next twenty years brings; I’d urge you to be part of its future history.

References


