

LGBTQ Psychology

Elizabeth Peel, University of Worcester, UK

Introduction

LGBTQ Psychology is the acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Queer Psychology. LGBTQ Psychology is the more recent name for the affirmative field of Lesbian and Gay Psychology research that developed in the late 1960s onwards. The ‘Q’ in LGBTQ Psychology denotes that it encompasses identities and practices, in addition to LGBT ones, which challenge binaries of sex and gender (for example, asexual, intersex, gender neutral), and it also includes the explicit study of heterosexual experience and the operations of heteronormativity. It is closely aligned to the Psychology of Sexualities. The naming of the field varies between countries with the acronym LGBTQ being favoured in the UK and LGBT being widely used in the USA, for example. The epistemological frameworks and the methods predominantly used by LGBTQ psychologies differ in different countries. In North America, particularly the USA, positivist-empiricism informed by liberal humanism are the dominant frameworks in this field (as with psychological research more generally). In Europe and in Australasia, however, LGBTQ psychological research is commonly more aligned with post-positivist and critical psychological traditions such as social constructionism (Kitzinger, 1987).

Definition

When this field was known as lesbian and gay psychology it was defined as ‘psychology which is explicit about its relevance to lesbians and gay men, which does not assume homosexual pathology and which aims to counter prejudice and discrimination against people who are not conventionally heterosexual and to create a better world for lesbians and gay men’ (Kitzinger & Coyle, 2002: 2). Since the explicit expansion of the field to label a range of broader perspectives LGBTQ psychology has been defined as:

‘a branch of psychology that is affirmative of LGBTQ people. It seeks to challenge prejudice and discrimination against LGBTQ people and the privileging of heterosexuality in psychology and in the broader society. It seeks to promote LGBTQ concerns as legitimate foci for psychological research and promote non-heterosexist, non-genderist and inclusive approaches to psychological research and practice. It provides a range of psychological perspectives on the lives and experiences of LGBTQ people and on LGBTQ sexualities and genders.’ (Clarke, Ellis, Peel & Riggs, 2010: 6)

Core components of LGBTQ psychology include: contributing to positive social change, understanding the lives and experiences of non-heterosexual and non-cisgender individuals, and challenging heteronormativity, heterosexism (including ‘mundane heterosexism’, Peel, 2001) and homophobia within the discipline of psychology and within wider society.

Criticality and dissenting voices are central to the business of LGBTQ psychological research and practices, even regarding the labelling of the field itself. For example, the very constitution of the acronym in its current form arguably generates a hierarchy of identities (Barker et al., 2009). However, lively internal debates within the LGBTQ Psychology field enhance its continued criticality, reflexivity and radical potential.

Keywords

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, transgender, transsexual, queer, intersex, sexuality, sexualities, sexual identity, sexual orientation, gender identity, biphobia, homophobia, transphobia, heterosexism, mundane heterosexism, heteronormativity, heteropatriarchy, lesbian feminist, mononormativity, non-heterosexual, cisgender, same-sex attraction, sexual fluidity, asexuality, intersectionality

History

A desire for positive social change on behalf of, historically, gay men and lesbian women and now various LGBTQ and related communities has been the key driver in the history of the establishment of LGBTQ Psychology. Early pioneers in the field, such as Evelyn Hooker (1957) and June Hopkins (1969), challenged the assumption of homosexual pathology within psychology using scientific methods. Academic activists from the 1970/80s fought to establish LGBTQ psychology, and the psychological study of non-heterosexuals and gender non-conformists, as a legitimate part of the discipline. Psychology, and allied sexological and psychiatric disciplines, have a long legacy of pathologising, dehumanising and subjecting LGBTQ individuals to degrading and inappropriate treatment, such as aversion therapy. Before the 1970s most psychological research focused on the question of whether or not homosexuals were sick, and how they could be cured. The discourse of ‘homosexuality as pathology’ was prevalent until comparatively recently in the history of the discipline, and countering this discourse, through affirmative positivist-empiricist research, was the central focus of early ‘gay affirmative’ psychology. Despite significant contributions made in LGBTQ psychology and the psychology of sexualities fields, heteronormativity remains entrenched in much of the discipline.

Critical Debates

There has been explicit debate about whether LGBTQ psychological research constitutes a form of critical psychology and what form that criticality takes within this field. In Fox and Prilleltensky’s (1997) groundbreaking introductory critical psychology edited collection, British lesbian psychologist Celia Kitzinger (1997) explored whether liberal humanist and positivist-empiricist lesbian and gay psychology – the majority of the research that characterised the field at that time - *could* be regarded as critical psychology. Kitzinger argued that because scientific and quantitative methods were effective in producing positive social change on behalf of lesbians and gay men (and latterly bisexual, trans, queer and

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intersex people) these traditional, mainstream approaches should, in this context, be regarded as a form of critical psychology. She also noted that there was very little evidence of concrete positive social change as a result of discourse analytic research or other critical methods. One example of much broader tangible positive social change effected by LGBTQ psychologists working within mainstream psychology is the recognition and documentation of anti-lesbian and –gay violence. In the USA, following their research documenting the scale of homophobic violence, Gregory Herek and Kevin Berrill (Herek and Berrill, 1992) testified about the high levels of anti-gay hate crime at the US congressional hearings on anti-gay violence and harassment, which led in 1990, to the inclusion of ‘sexual orientation’ in the Hate Crime Statistics Act, thus directly impacting on the national documentation and annual publication of crime statistics. Therefore, regardless of the epistemological or methodology framework used, LGBTQ psychology resides within the umbrella term critical psychology because of its uniform emphasis on positive social change for non-heterosexual and non-gender normative individuals and groups.

International Relevance

Although often seen by mainstream psychology as a marginal field, since 1984 major professional bodies for LGBTQ psychology have been founded (sometimes in the face of opposition from colleagues in the discipline) in a number of western psychology organisations. These international bodies include: Division 44, The Society for the Psychological Study of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Issues of the American Psychological Association (established 1984); the Gay and Lesbian Issues and Psychology Interest Group within the Australian Psychological Society (established 1994); the Psychology of Sexualities Section (formerly the Lesbian and Gay Psychology Section) within the British Psychological Society (established 1998); and the Section on Sexual Orientation and Gender Issues within the Canadian Psychological Association (established 2002). A number of key books and edited collections have attempted to expand the international scope and reach of LGBTQ Psychology (Clarke & Peel, 2007; Peel, Clarke and Drescher, 2007; Clarke, Ellis, Peel & Riggs, 2010).

LGBTQ psychology research has traditionally been generated in western countries and has relied upon samples of white, middle class, gay men and lesbians often living in urban centres in countries such as the USA and Britain. In recent years there has been a growing recognition of the need to consider diversity within LGBTQ communities, critically engage with intersectionality and axes of privilege as well as marginalisation, and move beyond knowledge generated by researching samples of ‘the usual suspects’. Due to multiple factors, not least LGBT identities being illegal and severely punished in many countries and western non-heterosexual and non-gender normative identities categories not being universally intelligible, the global knowledge-based of LGBTQ psychology is partial, fragmented and dominated by western perspectives.

Practice Relevance

Much of LGBTQ Psychology is applied, designed to maximise social impact and, as such, generates knowledge and understanding of practical relevance. The findings of LGBTQ psychological research are applicable across the discipline of psychology and the social sciences. LGBTQ Psychology does not just offer critiques of heteronormativity in psychology, neither does it just analyse the lives of LGBTQ people – although both of these things are part of LGBTQ Psychology. LGBTQ Psychology often generates knowledge that provides ways of creating social change by offering a true psychology of people and reflecting on the ways that psychological and social norms can be detrimental to the lives of diverse groups.

LGBTQ Psychology contributes to many areas of psychology including, but not limited to, social and developmental psychology, applied areas like clinical and counselling, health, and educational psychology, and areas of psychology that intersect a number of different concerns such as the psychology of the family and relationships, workplace and leisure, and the media (see also Clarke et al., 2010).

Future Directions

LGBTQ Psychology is vibrant and expanding. There are many avenues for future research in this field across a range of issues (too many to list), and stronger theoretical links could be made with related areas of research within and outside psychology such as feminist psychology, sexology and queer theory. There are a number of core issues LGBTQ psychological research could engage more with now and in the future (see also Clarke et al., 2010).

First, the consideration and potential creation of an LGBTQ-positive mainstream psychology. A critical psychological move could be to radically re-envision ‘mainstream’ psychology by placing the theories, concepts, and empirical insights generated by LGBTQ psychology at the heart of the discipline. What would the psychological landscape look like if it genuinely encompassed a diverse range of experiences, rather than simply ‘adding-in’ LGBTQ people and leaving the heteronormative framework of mainstream psychology intact?

Second, LGBTQ-specific research and comparative research should continue to be generated and valued. In other words, there should be the continued promotion of LGBTQ-specific research that explores the lives of LGBTQ people on their own terms. However, the benefit of comparative research which avoids treating heterosexual people as the benchmark, and seeks to identify and explain differences between groups needs to be acknowledged (e.g., the disparities between LGBTQ and heterosexual and cisgender people on key health indicators) (Peel & Thomson, 2009).

Third, LGBTQ psychologists could more actively and comprehensively utilise participatory and community-informed modes of research method and practice. Building stronger collaborations with grass roots LGBTQ organisations and working to develop research capacity could greatly strengthen the criticality, scope and impact of LGBTQ psychological research. While there is prejudice and discrimination on the grounds of sexuality and gender there is pressing need for LGBTQ psychologists to maximise positive social change outcomes from their research.

Finally, representing the diversity across all LGBTQ communities and using lens other than sexuality to interrogate axes of marginalisation and privilege should be a critical component of future research in this field.

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Online Resources

American Psychological Society (APA) Division 44 - Society for the Psychological Study of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues <http://www.apadivision44.org/>

American Institute of Bisexuality: <http://www.bisexual.org/home.html>

Australian Psychological Society (APS) Gay and Lesbian Issues and Psychology (GLIP) Interest Group: <http://www.groups.psychology.org.au/glip/>

British Psychological Society (BPS) Psychology of Sexualities Section -
http://pss.bps.org.uk/pss/pss_home.cfm

Canadian Psychological Association *Section* on Sexual Orientation and Gender Issues (SOGII): <http://www.sogii.ca/>

International LGBT Psychology Summer Institute <http://sitemaker.umich.edu/lgbt-summer-institute/home>

The Kinsey Institute for Research in Sex, Gender, and Reproduction:
<http://www.kinseyinstitute.org/>

Sexual Orientation, Science, Education and Policy (a web site featuring the work of the renowned US LGBTQ psychologist Gregory Herek):
<http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/rainbow/index.html>