Heterosexuals are not the only couples

How friendly is relationship therapy training towards LGBT therapists and clients?

by Cloud Taylor

'This course was detrimental for therapists who have no experience of working with this [LGBT] client group.'

Is this the kind of comment you would expect from a participant on a relationship therapy training run in London in the 21st century?

A year ago I sent written questionnaires to three lesbian and three gay male therapists asking them questions about their experiences of relationship therapy training they had undertaken. They had trained with various organisations with different orientations - gestalt, humanistic, integrative, psychodynamic and systemic/integrative.

Anonymity of participants and the organisations with which they had trained was promised.

The participants responded to a request for participants from the Pink Therapy newsletter and an advertisement in therapy today. They were then sent questionnaires, which they returned by post or as email attachments.

The questionnaire asked 12 questions about the courses they had followed and of their experiences on these courses.

Research responses

The responses were mixed but, in general, positive. Four felt their course was inclusive of working with LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) clients. Four felt their course was, to some extent, helpful in working with LGBT clients, and five were unaware of any heterosexism or homophobia from the trainers or group.

However, none felt the course had been marketed in a way that was inclusive of LGBT therapists or of working with LGBT clients, and only half felt their course demonstrated good practice in working with this client group. Only one half felt accepted and comfortable as a lesbian or gay person on the course, and one person felt there was substantial heterosexism and homophobia from the trainers and in the training.

Worst case scenario

In addition, when the participant challenged this, the offending behaviour was neither owned nor addressed.

In three of the courses, none of the trainers identified as LGBT. On two courses, the questionnaire participant was the only LGBT person present, while on one course, there were five lesbians or gay male participants in a group of 17.

'I presented a lesbian couple who had a child through IVF treatment, using anonymous donor sperm. The (male) tutor began to rage at me and started shouting about the penis and vagina and that is how children should be conceived, making strong, almost evangelical-type preaching judgements.'

'I kept having to remind the trainers that heterosexuals were not the only couples.'

'The course was detrimental for therapists who have no experience of this [LGBT] client group.'

'I would have concerns at the other members of the group leaving with some of the taught attitudes.'
‘Are relationship trainings particularly unaware, or would similar complaints be made about trainings to work with individuals?’

I felt isolated. I decided not to present my couples, as I felt unsafe. I became so wounded and debilitated at one point that I was unable to attend both days at the weekend. The indoctrination left me feeling like a freak.’

‘One of the tutors said that the problem with lesbians was that they were so politically correct you couldn’t challenge them.’

This participant said she would have valued the presence of an LGBT tutor on the course to offer a specific focus on working with LGBT clients to balance the exclusive focus on heterosexual relationships.

Comments from participants on the other courses were less critical:

‘I would recommend this course.’

‘This organisation is more LGBT friendly now than it was when I did the course.’

‘Differences in working with LGBT clients were not fully explored.’

Nevertheless, surely we have a right to expect that all relationship therapy trainings be inclusive of working with LGBT clients? Also, would it not be reasonable to expect tutors on such courses to be sufficiently committed to an ethical approach in working with difference and equality that they have spent time addressing their own heterosexism and homophobia? The behaviour and attitudes of the tutors described above seems unacceptable ethically. Are relationship therapy trainings particularly unaware, or would similar complaints be made about counselling and psychotherapy courses training students to work with individuals?

I’d like to have had issues about working with LGBT clients addressed more fully.

On the whole, experiences ranged from complete satisfaction to complete dissatisfaction, with more ambivalent comments in the middle. Clearly, one cannot feel confident about drawing accurate conclusions from such a limited sample of responses yet there are insights to be gained from the participants’ answers to the questions.

Insights

Interestingly, the most satisfied participant had four other LGBT therapists in their group, while the least satisfied was the only one on their course. It could be argued that a strong presence of LGBT participants is more likely to inhibit explicit homophobic and heterosexual prejudice, as well as offering solidarity and support, both at a personal level, and in working with LGBT clients. There are also likely to be more case examples of LGBT relationships.

Cloud Taylor is a clinical associate of Pink Therapy, She is a BACP accredited counsellor and psychotherapist and runs a private practice in London. Cloud also works as a clinical supervisor on the training at the Psychosynthesis and Education Trust in London as well as in private practice.

If people have further relevant experiences, maybe they would write a response to this article.