“For same-sex couples the political and psychological are inseparable.”
( Robert Jay Green, 2004)

The predominant issues that distinguish GLB same-sex couples from heterosexual opposite-sex couples are;

- The impact of gender role socialisation
- The societal oppression generalised as heterosexism and homophobia

( C.M. Coânnolly, 2004)
Homosexuality and heterosexuality are not opposites, rather, they are variations on a single theme of human romantic attachments and sexual attractions and the capacity for love. Most of the problems that same-sex couples present for therapy are identical to the problems presented by heterosexual couples.
I am calling this slide – *At the interface* – since a key task of the therapist is to be able to distinguish when a same-sex couple’s presenting problems are related to GLBT issues and when they are not.
According to Connolly – the existence of homophobia has lead to a multitude of couple stressors, including internalised homophobia.

She says;
“ A pivotal issue with same-sex couples is cultural oppression with heterosexual and homophobia and the internalisation of both intruding into the individual’s functioning and permeating the same-sex couple relationship.”

Spitalnick & McNair (2005) suggest that therapists must consider sexual orientation as a culturally specific variable (social, political and legal realities) subsumed in the broader framework of couple’s therapy.
With all of this in mind, I would like you at this point, to think about how these issues might present themselves in the therapy you may be undertaking with couples.
Saunders, writing about gay male relationships says:

“\textquote{The major impediment for gay men in developing, maintaining and promoting intimacy of value can be broken into what I have come to call the ‘triad of tyranny; patriarchy, heterosexism and homophobia (Saunder’s 1993)}”. 
Saunders draws a distinction between:

- heterosexism as a cultural held belief
- homophobia as an individual's internalized heterosexism expressed with negative intent
The dilemmas of disclosure

- Factors that influence concealment?
- Factors that influence disclosure?
Dilemmas of disclosure

Same-sex couples are characterised as being in a “double bind” embodying the stresses of invisibility versus risks and consequences of disclosure. Gary Saunders refers to this phenomena as “Self affirmation versus self erasure.”

To some extent we are really talking about the dilemmas of negotiating a private and public identity.
According to Patterson et al., (1999), the decision to ‘come out’ is a matter of couples’ identity, synchronism and resource mobilization. However, the decision to ‘come out’ or not needs careful consideration in terms of the individual and couple’s appraisal of the costs/benefits to self, couple and others. For instance the decision by lesbians and gay men to come out to mothers rather than fathers fits with previous research which shows that males have more negative attitudes towards lesbians/gays than do females (Herek 1994, 1998).
Stages of development of gay and lesbian identity

- Sensitisation
- Identity confusion
- Identity comparison
- Identity tolerance
- Identity acceptance
- First relationships
- Identity commitment and pride
- Identity synthesis

(J. Scrivner, 1984)
Individual development of ethnic minority gays and lesbians

- Denial of conflicts
- Identifying as bisexual
- Conflicts in allegiances deepen
- Establishing priorities in allegiances begins
- Integration of the various communities

(E. Morales, 1980)
Stages in Family Response

- Subliminal awareness
- Impact – explicit undeniable truth is made apparent. Family experience conflict between negative substance of social stereotypes and homosexual member’s previous identity
- Adjustment – family attempts to adapt by pressuring the homosexual member to change or hide sexual identity
- Resolution – family discards fantasized heterosexual identity for the homosexual member and examines its own values about homosexuality in the light of new intimate knowledge
- Integration – family changes values in order to accept the homosexual member’s new identity within the family

(J.L Devine, 1984)
Lesbian couple formation development

- Stage 1: Pre-relationship
- Romance
- Conflict
- Acceptance
- Commitment
- Collaboration

(S. Slater, 1995)

- Formation of the couple
- Couple-hood
- The middle years
- Generativity
- Lesbian couples over 65

(S. Slater, 1995)
A developmental model of gay male relationships

- The first year – blending
- One to three years – nesting
- Three to five years – maintaining
- Five to ten years – collaborating
- Ten to twenty years – trusting
- Twenty years + - re-partnering

( M. Butler., & J. Clarke, 1991)
Systemic therapy with gay and lesbian couples

- The system created by the gay and lesbian couple
- Relationship to family of origin
- The relationship within the context of the multigenerational gay and lesbian communities
- The impact of the dominant culture on gay and lesbian couples

(Slater & Mencher, 1991)
Systemic Therapy with couples

- Defining the couple
- Life cycle considerations
- Relationship to family of origin
- Defining the relationship between the couple
- Patterns of interaction
- The meaning of the presenting problem
- The presence or absence of children
- Locating the therapist within the system
- Research implications in couple therapy
- The couple within the context of the wider society
Challenges facing same-sex couples

- Coping with homophobia & heterosexism in the larger society
- Maintaining a sense of couple-hood despite the lack of a normative/legal template for same-sex relationships (very limited role models exist)
- Creating social networks that provide emotional support and family like interaction among network members
- Maintaining flexible gender roles (androgyny) and avoiding the emotional risk of emotional fusion and over-dependency in female couples or emotional disengagement and competition in male couples which accompany traditional gender role conformity
Within this changing landscape Giddens (1999) suggests that gays rather than heterosexuals have actively been pioneers in discovering the new world of relationships and exploring its possibilities.

(Reith Lecture, 1999)
What for many are the cornerstones of western civilisation – the institution of marriage, the biological imperatives of reproduction, the social conditions of parenthood – are being radically challenged by the emergence of new patterns of intimacy and claims on relational rights. (Weeks et al., (2001))
Changes in fixed and rigid notions of the proper family has pushed individuals into a more active relationship to the construction of family. This implies that individuals are doing family rather than passively residing within some pre-given structure. (Silva & Smart, 1999; Morgan, 1999)
Couple considerations

- Problems will arise where a couple is unable to resist the negative cultural messages.
- The lack of full recognition interferes with boundary making for the couple and adds to the couple’s own experiences of “relational ambiguity” (Green & Mitchell, 2002).
- The fluidity of same-sex relationships adds to the couple’s feelings of ambiguity as the sanctity of the male couple’s relationship is frequently not respected by other gay men (Tunnell & Greenan, 2004).
- Many gay male couples do not use sexual exclusivity as a way to create boundaries (Johnson & Keren, 1996).
Couple considerations

Variables such as;

- A system’s management of difference
- The level of systemic openness and closedness
- Degree of differentiation of the member

These will all affect that system’s response to a range of issues.
Key elements of training

- Working on the self of the therapist and the therapist’s own level of homophobia and heterosexism
- The need for specialist knowledge
- Knowledge of current research
- The need for therapists to have contact and exposure to LGBT people