

Gay relationships as threat to 'normative' family life

How flexible is a society about
incorporating different models of
sexual relationships and new
structures for family life?

Living 'family life': healthy development for children

- Models of intimacy which attend to the attachment needs of adults for mature peer based relationship
- Models which attend to the attachment needs of children
- Child needs secure loving bonds and responsive relationship
- Child needs a parental mind that holds a developing infant mind in their adult mind

Family structure and child development

- Family structure is assumed to play important role in well being of children
- Ideal structure believed to be two heterosexual parents, genetically related to the children
- Deviations from this pattern thought to be detrimental to child
- Ignores existing wide range of variation in the structures of family life

Research shows:

- Children with Lesbian parents:
 - No difference in psychological well-being of children
 - No difference in gender development of children
 - Co-mothers are more involved with children than fathers
 - Two parents better than one for child's psychological development

Gay male parenthood:....

- No long term studies as yet
- Further discussion in workshop
- Many gay fathers, living as heterosexual, now coming out
- Are the effects greater than for heterosexual divorce and re-partnering?

`Coming out`

The pathway to `gay family life` is more problematized than it is for heterosexual family life

- The downgrading of gay relationships in the minds of `society` contributes to the internal downgrading of the self, and to lower self esteem in the minds of people deciding whether they can `come out; about their homosexuality
- When as clinicians we are asked to reflect on the potential effects of `coming out`, we have to consider the effects both on the individual and on the family in the larger context of a particular society of which they are all a part (coming out in Athens versus coming out in London)

Ongoing tension for individuals

- The tension between what is 'received wisdom' about sexual relationships; the 'higher organising rules' within a society will also affect the inner space of all concerned.
- These 'received rules' are in conflict with human curiosity and exploration and the capacity for choice (Adam, Eve and the apple)

Coming out as a perturbation to society' cohesiveness

- The image of `normal' itself becomes elaborated, challenging assumptions about the fabric of society.
- Current US and UK debate reflects these polarised assumptions
- Obama v. Rick Santorum
- Boris Johnson, Maria Miller v. Archbishop of Scotland (google Out4 You campaign or YouTube)

Boris Johnson: gay marriage as a building block

‘Why on earth should we deny marriage to anyone...marriage is an ancient human institution that is far older than any of the religions practised today... It may well be beloved by God but no religion has ever had a monopoly on marriage

Maria Miller: (our Minister for Culture) ‘marriage is one of the building blocks of society’, therefore ‘we want to encourage gay marriage’

A change in the `building blocks of society `: the other point of view

`Western European countries are declining because of a secular revolution, a godless revolution which threatens to spread to America and destroy the institutions of America's foundation... destroy the American Family (...)

--Rick Santorum, 12th October 2012

Living as 'gay' as one social change among a number of others

- Which aspects of disturbance in family life belong to 'gay' itself and which to the change in pattern and expectations in which 'gay' may be embedded, for example:
- A father who **divorces** to take up a gay relationship
- A son who '**removes**' the idea of 'family and grandchildren' from his parents by declaring his lifestyle choice
- A daughter who **becomes pregnant** but informs her parents that the babies other parent will **be a woman.**

Widening the context to consider fear of social change

- Is the relational distress in the three possibilities to do with a **gay relationship** or:
 - Divorce and the associated disruption and grief
 - Change in expected family pattern
 - Loss of tradition
 - Fear of effects of
 - a) 'lone' parenting
 - b) the unknown qualities of a female partnership for children

Looking at the fears (1)

- Father: choice of gay lifestyle: child's fears
... divorce and upset of mother, change in family `norms'; fear of peer's views and comments; fear of bullying at school;
...fear of father's new partner `what will he be like' ... `I don't want to be rushed into `liking him'

Stages children go through

- Avoidance of telling anyone
- Selection of key `safe' others to tell also with hope of `protection' when the word gets round at school
- Attempts to control parents behaviour in different contexts (no `gay' behaviour)
- Loss of trust in the parent's love (he is not what he seemed to be)'
- Rewriting of the family past

Parental `misbehaviour' and the creation of `new fears' in the child

- Fathers 'very keen' for child to meet new partner or reconcile to new life style
- Early exposure to erotic material in their own excitement at coming out
- Hinting at meanings the child cannot comprehend for example exposure to gay websites or letting child know about desires 'I have always wanted a man's arms around me'
- Overexposure to new anxieties without proper explanation, i.e. anxieties about AIDS

Fears (1) continued:

- As you can see some of these are similar to any child hearing of their parent's divorce, but the added 'uncertainty' is around the quality of relationship with his/her father, and their new partner.
- Subsequently many questions about the meaning for their own sexuality

What questions do young children ask?

- Invite audience to contribute
- `questions'How do you know you are gay? When did you decide? Can't you try harder? Does that mean you don't love mummy any more? Do you love somebody else? Does that mean you won't love me any more? Will you love Christos more because he is a boy? Does that mean I will be gay?

Fears: wife's point of view

- The complexity for a woman of her husband choosing to `come out' is multilayered and cannot be lightly `dealt with' It affects her own view of her own sexuality and re-writes the narrative of their relationship.
- Clinically there are issues of `telling and timing'. How soon does the husband , now he is `out' expect everyone, wife and new partner, to be friends.
- How quickly does he want his children to meet him in the context of a new partnership or lifestyle? (mother will have strong views on this)

Fears (2) wife leaves husband for lesbian partnership

- Fear of husband's anger and 'revenge' (threatening 'custody' of children)
- Fear of how children will 'see it' and what they will think
- Loss of social life as known, including church
- Undervaluing of own 'motherhood' capacity: 'will I be less than I am now'
- Will they love father more than they love me

What shall we tell the children?

- Joint planning re management of future
- Minimising children's disruption and pain
- Co-parenting: his house; her house `we can still be a family
- `friends will be shocked': `will I have to meet your new `friends':'
- Imagining scenarios; `what hazards might trigger you away from good will and co-operative parenting

Imagining emotional and social scenarios

- What hazards might trigger you away from good will and co-operative parenting?
- If husband finds someone (new partner) who won't 'put up with it'
- If husband's family who will disapprove, stop him being accommodating to wife
- If church turns husband against wife

Fears (3) `When a teenage son comes out' (son's point of view)

- parental anger high on list of fears but so is:
 - ...the fear of alienation among peers; bullying, violence, harassment at school
-the worst fear among adolescents `social ostracisation...'
- ...but he may already be aware of his own anxiety/depression and fear of leading a `double life' (avoidance behaviours)

Avoidance behaviours

- Attempting to `act straight/hetero`
`passing`
- Avoiding lesbian/gay people/ assuming
`anti gay` postures
- Masking behaviours ..dope and other
drugs
- Avoiding intimate relations with girls where
lack of heterosexual response may be
noted/reported back to his family

Core psychological dilemma facing adolescents

- non disclosure is associated with feelings of dishonesty, frustration, shame
- but disclosure can result in peer victimisation, parental anger and increased risk of social alienation
- The question of whether a first `gay contact' was forced by an older man (1/3 of an international sample) or chosen, is significant in relation to adolescent self esteem.

Parental reactions and effects on mental health of adolescent

- 50% of 1000 young gay men interviewed (USA) . Recommends professionals not to counsel youth to disclose unless at least one parent is accepting

Parental fears for sons include:

- risk to physical health and sexual health..Aids risk has not gone away and is on the increase in certain cultures (Poland, Sept 2012) see also....
- Risk to mental health (higher incidence of depression, hopelessness, substance use, suicidal behaviour than in heterosexual peer group
- Financial concerns re employability of son;
- Sexual risk: earning money through sexual favours: the multiple contact philosophy of gay culture

Additional anxieties for parents

- Mourning and nagging: the loss of the heterosexual lifestyle they had been hoping, planning... 'can't you change' ... 'it's only a phase'
- the 'strength of a man and the grace of a woman' ... ignorance and anxiety about what may present in the future; quality, type and number of partners 'Will I have to entertain them in my home'
- possibility of early death of a child
- Where young gay men experience such lack of affirmation about their gay lifestyle, they may choose a riskier path **outside the knowledge of their family**, and discover selves through random and brief encounters in gay pubs and clubs

Necessary distinctions

- Between 'gay cruising' lifestyle and 'settling down' ie 'having affairs' and making commitments
- QUOTE CARLOS on love
- QUOTE STEPEHEN FRY ON LOVE

Gay people say psychotherapists need to understand:

- Sexual orientation is complex and multidimensional
- Moral and religious issues facing LGB people
- Gender issues including that LGB people may be gender non conforming
- Multiple oppressions, internalised homophobia
- Coming out processes
- Relationship, family and parenting issues
- Identity development and young people's issues

Therapists own attitudes, behaviour and concerns

- American Psychological Association: LGB affirmative training
- Provision of LGB affirmative environments
- Conveying accurate information about sexual orientation and LGB people
- Raising awareness of the effects of heterosexism on self and others
- Learn and practise LGB affirmative skills with LGB affirmative supervision
- Provision of research training that is LGB affirmative (Philips et al 2003: review of therapy and counselling journals)