

Running Head: Jewish, Bi, Fem, in a Christian Hetero World

Jewish, Bisexual, Feminist in a Christian Heterosexual World: Oy Vey!

Sari H. Dworkin, Ph.D.

California State University, Fresno

From: Dworkin, S.H. (2005). Jewish, Bisexual, Feminist in a Christian, Heterosexual World: Oy vey!. In J. Crouteau, J.S. Lark, M.A. Lidderdale, & Y.B. Chung (Eds.) *Deconstructing heterosexism* (pp. 65-70), Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Jewish, Bisexual, Feminist in a Christian, Heterosexual World: Oy Vey!

Introduction

I had just finished my American Psychological Association (APA) approved internship in August of 1985 and was on my way to my first academic job as a counselor educator.

Excited and scared, I left a conservative, fundamentalist Christian, agricultural, setting for a liberal, progressive state. To my surprise, the university where I was to begin a long and fruitful career was also in one of the few conservative, fundamentalist, Christian, agricultural areas in my new progressive, liberal, home state. Once again fundamentalist Christian preachers used the outdoor student gathering areas to intone what God considers moral and immoral. Once again I found myself on the margins as a Jewish, feminist, lesbian (at that time in my life), new faculty member. It was difficult to make a decision about which identity was the safest one to test the waters with. While my vita had listed all of the lesbian and gay professional divisions of counseling and psychological organizations I belonged to, I hadn't begun a program of scholarly writing so my sexual identity and/or sensitivities were not completely evident. The university did have a Woman Studies Department and I soon made connections there. A feminist identity was the first "out" identity I had in my new, academic, setting. Of course, part of the feminist ideology is openness to all sexual identities so it didn't take long for me to begin to be "out" as a lesbian as well as a feminist.

This narrative explores my journey through the first and only academic position I have held since completing my doctorate. It begins in 1985 and moves to the present. My

sexual identity fluidity is explored as well as my Jewish identity fluidity. I move from lesbian to bisexual and from Conservative Judaism to Reform and Secular-Humanistic Judaism. Growing up as a Conservative Jew I found their lack of validation for a non-heterosexual identity disturbing and decided to join a Reform temple in the town where I held my academic position. That identity again shifted as I realized that while Judaism was important to me ethnically and culturally I didn't believe in God. I am now part of the small but international Secular Humanist Jewish movement, although I belong to the Reform temple as well. There aren't any other options (in my current community) for connecting on a personal level with other Jews.

The Early Years (1985 – 1990)

Lesbian and gay (LG) students sought me out to become a faculty advisor for the Gay, Lesbian Student Alliance (GLSA) they were forming. At the same time the affiliate organization to the American Counseling Association, ACA (at that time called the American Personnel and Guidance Association), the Association for Gay/Lesbian Issues in Counseling, and the affiliate organization to the American Psychological Association (APA), the National Association for Lesbian and Gay Psychology, sought my active participation. My scholarly writing, a requirement for faculty, began to focus on lesbian and gay issues in counseling and psychology.

My first crisis was with the GLSA. The group was thrust into the local news when its information booth was burnt down, the KKK circled the campus during a lesbian and gay student regional conference held on campus, and some students attempted to start an anti-gay-lesbian student group. I was now the most open lesbian in the Fresno area and as yet,

untentured at the university. Christian literature showed up on my faculty office door. A student asked to pray with me and prayed not only that I would give up “homosexuality,” but also my Judaism as she hoped I would “accept Jesus as my savior”. The Chair of my department informed me that calls were received calling for my dismissal. While the faculty all openly supported me, my file for retention, tenure, and promotion (RTP) was questioned. It was suggested that I remove all evidence of the scholarly and professional work I had been doing on gay and lesbian issues from the file. I refused. In addition to problems with my RTP file some counseling students (especially those with strong Christian religious beliefs) began to question my credibility due to my strong LG affirmative stance. The only part of my identity that remained unquestioned was my feminism and my work with both the Women Studies Department and the Women’s Resource Center. I weathered the crisis by consulting with an openly lesbian faculty member who advised me to trust the university committees to do the right thing. Her work and her international fame had been rewarded over and over again by the university. I trusted her advice and neither tenure nor promotion was denied to me. In fact I received both tenure and promotion early.

The Middle Years (1991 – 1998)

The climate at the campus calmed down somewhat. The GLSA rebuilt their booth, did educational and outreach programming, much of it focused on the AIDS crisis. Anti - gay/lesbian incidents frequently happened, but none as serious as during the early years. I became the token representative of all gays and lesbians. Continuously called upon to join university and local community committees, give presentations and workshops, and help students with papers on lesbian/gay issues, added to an already busy faculty job. I

came out in my classes to mixed reactions often affecting my student evaluations at the end of semesters. Program faculty encouraged me to develop a course on gay/lesbian affirmative therapy. Consistently, when I taught this class, I was challenged by one or two students who accused me of biased views and of forcing these views on them.

Luckily faculty supported my affirmative stance. The class has been discontinued due to budget cuts that only allow for core courses to be taught. My scholarly writing on gay and lesbian issues included journal articles, book chapters, an edited book, and many presentations at professional conferences. All of this appeared in my RTP file without problem as I moved up the academic ranks. In addition, I began a private practice that was one of very few therapy practices in the area that reached out to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and later transgendered individuals as well as to those affected by the AIDS crisis.

The local news media still, after five years, and even when others were available, often relied on me to respond to anything about gay and lesbian issues that came up either locally and/or nationally. One major news event during this period was the first local Gay and Lesbian Pride march. I was asked to be one of the Grand Marshals of this march, much to my partner's fear and dismay. My partner was afraid that the KKK would attend and might shoot me. Luckily I was not shot, although the KKK was there in full drag as well as some Christian groups that are against "homosexuality". Gays and lesbians both on campus and in the community were coming out of the closet.

My feminist identity never proved to be a problem. It was my Jewish identity that created some problems. The Jewish part of my identity solicited occasional books and pamphlets on Christian religion left anonymously at my office door. Within the local Jewish community issues often arose concerning separation of church and state and the local public school system and I was supportive of these issues. For example, members of the Jewish community rallied to protest fundamentalist Christian activists who in the guise of running benign after school activities were actually trying to convert public school children to fundamentalist Christianity. The problems I had around Judaism within the local Jewish community stemmed from my leftist beliefs about the necessity for a Palestinian state and for Israel to leave the occupied territories. I spoke out against the Sharon government's policy of demolishing Palestinian homes when there were suspected terrorists. The labeling of me, as an anti-Semitic Jew was painful, but not that unusual for the politics around Israel.

Current Climate (1999 – Present)

A non-heterosexual identity does not seem to be a problem anymore. I became aware of this profound change in about 2000 when school and university committees openly recognized my identity and the issues of interest to me. I am still called upon to represent the LG, Bisexual (B) perspective on committees, speak in classes around campus, work with students from programs around the campus who are doing papers on LGB issues, and generally be available for work in this area. Other gay, lesbian, and bisexual faculty and students have come out of the closet making me less of a token and representative of the entire community and giving me room to spread the responsibilities around.

Even the local school districts are more open to LG concerns, although this is not due to my activism. A gay student with the help of the ACLU sued a school district for not protecting him against harassment. The decision in that case has forced the local school systems to provide sensitivity training on LGB issues. One of the high schools has started a student LGB group. LG faculty and students from the university and public school systems are helping with this necessary training. Again, I am no longer the only one called when this training is desired.

The current climate in our Counselor Education Program also shows recognition of who I am and what I believe. Students with strong conservative Christian fundamentalist backgrounds ordinarily stay away from my classes thinking that this is the way to avoid discussing LGB counseling issues. However, other faculties in the counselor education program are also teaching about LGB affirmative therapy so I don't worry that the students who stay away from my classes won't get the appropriate training.

In 1992 my sexual identity changed from lesbian to bisexual and I tried to be very out about this but few people seemed able or willing to accept this. For many people (both heterosexual and LG) bisexuality doesn't exist and sexual identity doesn't change. As of 2003, this is still a problem for me. Constantly I am forced to assert that I am bisexual not lesbian. My relationship with a woman makes it even more difficult for people to think of me as any identity but lesbian. Not only do I assert the continuum of sexual identity (and other non-LGB counseling faculty also assert this) but I am the only faculty member of the counseling education program to discuss transgender issues. Many of my colleagues

do not even know what this term means. This is in contrast with the Women Studies Department where transgender issues have been infused into the curriculum.

My Jewish identity continues to be a problem. I still receive brochures and notes attempting to convert me to Christianity. The local Jewish community still has problems with my outspoken opposition to the war with Iraq and my opposition to Sharon's policies in Israel. The Rabbi also has problems with my Atheist beliefs.

Deconstruction of Heterosexual and Christian Hegemony in Academia

My journey in academia has been a journey of struggling against the heterosexual and Christian norms of the academy as well as in the United States as a whole. This has been a greater struggle for me than the struggle against sexism. The first struggle involved recognition that the sexual identity continuum includes lesbians and gays. The university had to recognize my research and writing and afford these activities the same merit that they gave to research and writing in the other academic disciplines. Many LGB counseling professionals in academia face this struggle.

Once my work was recognized and valued the difficulty that still continues revolves around my being designated as the spokesperson on LGB issues (and now transgender issues). Similar to faculty of ethnic and racial minorities the workload really increases for LGB counseling professionals when they are seen as the only spokespersons for LGB issues. It is tiring to continuously have to force people to look at diversity in broader than gender and racial/ethnic issues.

When I came out as bisexual I began to struggle not only with the heterosexism of the academy and community but also with the biphobia of the LG community whom often refused to acknowledge the existence of bisexuality. The fact that I changed sexual identities and went from a lesbian identity to a bisexual identity made many people uncomfortable. The possibility that for some people sexual identity can be fluid and flexible is threatening. Counseling professionals who change their sexual identity will be seen as suspect. Many LG people expect bisexuals to betray them and to take on heterosexual privilege. Sexual identity fluidity also threatens the political theme that LG people cannot change their identity. For heterosexuals it means that they too might meet a person of the same gender, fall in love and possibly change sexual identities. Asserting a bisexual identity left me with only the support of the feminist community. Life on the margins can be lonely at times at counseling professionals must recognize this.

The Christian assumption also creates problems for counseling professionals who are not Christian. Along with heterosexism and biphobia I had to find a way to handle the perception that everyone should be Christian and that this is a Christian nation. At first having students pray over me seemed harmless. But that soon changed when I realized that this wasn't a gesture of support but another attempt to change me into what they considered normal and acceptable. Those who had problems with my identities could love the sinner (the sexual identity) but not the rejection of Jesus Christ as the savior (the Jewish identity). The brochures, books, and notes left at my office angered me. Much of this material came from counselor education students. I know this because sometimes they acknowledged this in the personal journals that are required in some classes. This

still happens and it still angers me and non-Christian professionals need to be aware that deconstructing heterosexism includes the Christian assumption of our nation.

Finally, sometimes even the community where support is expected can be rejecting. For me it was the Jewish community and their rejection of both my political and atheistic beliefs. Counseling professionals must find a base for support. I have done this by seeking out Jews individually in my community and on the web whom have similar beliefs.

Conclusion

Counseling professionals must remember that identity is complex. Few of us perceive of ourselves as one identity at all times and in all situations. Different aspects of our identities are salient at different times. Counseling professionals bring their construction of identity to the counseling students they teach. It is incumbent upon us to be honest about who we are (a professional value) and therefore to use ourselves as models, when possible, to deconstruct heterosexism. I am outside of the mainstream, on the margin, as a woman, a Jew, and a bisexual. In my classes I am out with all of my identities. For some I am a good role model and for others I am a threat. My very being forces others, including the counseling students, to deconstruct the power and privilege that comes with being male, white, heterosexual, and Christian. This has been my life in the academy and in the community where I live.