Toward a Conceptualization of Career Counseling with Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual Persons

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With the exception of a handful of references (Hetherington, 1991; Hetherington, Hillerbrand, & Etringer, 1989; Hetherington & Orzek, 1989; Schmitz, 1988), the career literature is void of information regarding career counseling with gay/lesbian/bisexual (g/l/b) persons. G/l/b persons possess characteristics that distinguish them from other oppressed persons, including the fact that they "must decide whether, when, and to what degree to disclose their minority status" (Hetherington, 1991, p. 141). Issues surrounding g/l/b persons in the workforce have recently been highlighted by the controversy surrounding g/l/b persons in the military (Herek, 1993).

At the heart of career counseling theory, whether called "trait-factor," "matching," congruence," or more recently "person-environment," is the importance of the match between people and careers. As Osipow (1987) wrote, "Person-environment is what vocational psychology is all about. Starting from the day of Frank Parsons (1909) . . . . the idea of a good match between people and their work remains at the core of career psychology" (p. 333). Dimensions relevant to this matching process include interests, values, and abilities (Rounds & Tracey, 1990; Walsh & Betz, 1990).

It is the premise of this article that the most basic paradigm of career counseling, person-environment, does not have to be abandoned when working with g/l/b persons; but instead, must be

amended to include a dimension beyond interests, values, and abilities. This dimension is the degree to which both the person and the work environment are affirming of the g/l/b orientation.

On the person side of the equation, it is necessary to know how the person thinks/feels/behaves in relation to sexual orientation. In other words, what is a g/l/b person's level of identity development in regard to sexual orientation?

On the environmental side, it is necessary to know the environmental response to an individual's sexual orientation. In other words, what is the environmental level of heterosexism? Assessment of identity development (person) and environmental heterosexism (environment) is essential to the career counseling of g/l/b persons.

The balance of this paper more fully develops the concepts of identity development and environmental heterosexism. Practical suggestions are made for assessing each of these dimensions. Brief case examples are also presented.

The Person: Identity Development

The APA Monitor (Riddle & Morin, 1977) reported that the time betweeen the first awareness of feelings of same gender attraction and the development of a positive sexual identity averages 18 years. Numerous models have been proposed to describe g/l/b identity development. In a review of those models, Levine and Evans (1991) wrote that the Sexual Identity Formation (SIF) model, proposed by Cass (1979, 1984), "provides an exceptionally comprehensive description of gay identity development" (p. 8) with Cass having "conducted extensive research on her theory, something which is lacking in several of the other models" (p. 9).

Because of its comprehensive nature and empirical investigation, the SIF model is used here as a reference for discussing g/l/b identity development and its impact on career concerns. The model proposes six stages of development and is briefly summarized in Table 1.

The level of a g/l/b person's sexual identity development is important for career counseling. For example, a person at Stage 1 would likely not raise the issue of sexual orientation. A person at Stage 3 or 4 might raise the issue, particularly if the career counselor is gay affirmative, but show ambivalence as to the need to avoid heterosexist work environments. A person in Stage 5 is likely to strongly object to being in a heterosexist work environment.

Table 1
A Summary of the Sexual Identity Formation (SIF)
Model by Cass (1979, 1984)

Stage 1 - Identity Confusion:
Growing awareness of g/l/b thoughts, feelings, or behaviors. Self perceptions are incongruent with personal assumption of heterosexuality. Conflict resolved through repression or movement to second stage.

Stage 2 - Identity Comparison:
Gathering of more information and the seeking out of contact with g/l/b persons.

Stage 3 - Identity Tolerance:
Increased contact with g/l/b community. Increasingly strong g/l/b self-image, but continues to usually self present as heterosexual.

Stage 4 - Identity Acceptance:
Increased conflict between self and non-g/l/b others. Management by passing as "straight," limiting contact with heterosexuals, and/or selective disclosure to heterosexuals.

Stage 5 - Identity Pride:
Dichotomized g/l/b world view (valued) and heterosexual world view (devalued). Strong pride in g/l/b community, intense anger toward and isolation from heterosexual society.

Stage 6 - Identity Synthesis:
Perceptions of similarities and dissimilarities with both heterosexuals and g/l/b persons. Sexual identity is seen as one part of total identity.

This model is useful to career counselors in that it increases awareness that not all g/l/b persons are alike, that they can differ in the extent that they possess positive g/l/b identities, and that these differences in identity impact career concerns. Because only research instruments currently exist to assess g/l/b identity development (Cass, 1984), the career counselor can use the SIF model as a framework for asking questions and gathering information which will allow for the accurate assessment of identity development and its interaction with career concerns.

The Environment: Environmental Heterosexism

Homophobic prejudice, the manifestation of irrational fear, hatred, and intolerance of people who are g/l/b, results in heterosexism, a belief in the superiority of heterosexuality (Obear, 1991). Unlike the extensive theoretical literature on identity development (Levine & Evans, 1991), there is little theoretical literature describing hetero-sexism occurring in work environments. Certainly work environ-ments do differ in respect to acceptance or affirmation of g/l/b individ-uals (e.g., higher education versus the military). A proposed typology is outlined in Table 2. Work environments can be overtly discrimina-tory, covertly discriminatory, tolerant, or affirmative of the g/l/b life-style. Critical work environment issues can include explicit non-discrimination policies on sexual orientation, insurance coverage for partners, broader community support for g/l/b concerns, g/l/b role models, legal protections for g/l/b persons, and informal work place attitudes toward g/l/b persons.

Questionnaires have been developed to assess college campus envi-ronments (Cullen & Smart, 1991) and to specifically assess college

Table 2
Proposed Levels of Work Environment Heterosexism

Level 1 - Overt Discrimination:
Both formal and informal policy discrimination based on sexual ori-entation (eg. U.S. military before lifting the ban on g/l/b persons).

Level 2 - Covert Discrimination:
No formal anti-discrimination policy. Informal discrimination at work place. Hiring and advancement favors heterosexuality (e.g., U.S. military after lifting the ban on g/l/b persons).

Level 3 - Tolerance:
Formal anti-discrimination policy on sexual orientation. No other support for g/l/b persons (e.g., no insurance coverage for partners).

Level 4 - Affirmation:
Formal anti-discrimination policy. Support of g/l/b employees through actions such as extension of insurance for partners, employee sensi-tivity training on diversity, promotion of g/l/b networking within the organization, and community support systems for g/l/b persons. G/l/b employees are valued for the diversity brought to an institution.

career centers in respect to g/l/b support (Hradsky & Comey, 1992). Broad, comprehensive assessments of heterosexism in work environments do not exist, however.

Perhaps a career counselor's greatest tool to help assess environments can come from resources from g/l/b organizations. Many of these are described by Schmitz (1988). For example the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force rates companies on a scale from 1 to 6 based upon their corporate policies concerning employee sexual orientation. A resource list by Brooks (1991) lists a number of organizations that can be useful in gathering specific career information (eg. Gay Teachers Association, High Tech Gays, Lesbian and Gay People in Medicine, Lesbian and Gay Associated Engineers and Scientists, etc.). Another resource, the *Gayyellow Pages* (Green, 1993), provides a complete listing of g/l/b networks, associations, and businesses.

Case Examples

In the following section case examples are used to illustrate the importance of assessment of both the person (identity development) and the environment (environmental heterosexism) and its importance to career counseling.

Case Example 1

A 19 year old woman has an interest in entering the military. Traditional career inventories indicate that her interests, values, and abilities are largely congruent with military service. Within the context of a developing relationship with her career counselor she discloses some hesitation about military service because of her sexual orientation, but says "it is no big deal." She has "come out" to a few people, but continues to "pass" as heterosexual to most others.

Discussion

This case illustrates a scenario in which traditional career counseling would suggest a good fit between person and work environment on the variables of interests, values, and abilities, but raises important career issues in terms of sexual orientation. The level of heterosexism in the work environment is fairly well known, Level 2 - covert discrimination. The impact of this environment on the person needs

to be explored. The person appears to be a stage 3, identity tolerance, in the SIF model. It would seem important that the counselor explore the implications of her career choice with her. What would it be like for her to have to conceal her orientation? How would she manage her attraction to others? In broad terms, do the personal and professional costs of pursuing this career choice outweigh the costs of not pursuing it?

Case Example 2

A 39 year old male is considering a midlife career change from higher education into the private sector. Traditional career inventories support such a move. He openly identifies himself as a gay male in a committed relationship with a partner for the past 10 years. Being in an environment which minimizes discrimination for him and his partner is extremely important to him.

Discussion

Case example 2 illustrates a person with a good deal of awareness about his sexual orientation, possibly at stage 5 or 6 in the SIF model. In this example, unlike in case example 1, the level of heterosexism within potential work environments is relatively unknown. Use of g/l/b associations, networks, and resources would be useful. Does a company or corporation have an anti-discrimination policy which includes sexual orientation? What support services do g/l/b persons have in the local community? Would his partner be included under health insurance coverage? At what point should this person "come out" to his employer?

Hetherington (1991) delineated salient issues in career counseling with g/l/b persons. Issues such as limited role models, negative stereotyping, and couples issues are discussed. Hetherington also highlighted the differential impact of gender on this process, suggesting some different career issues for gay men in contrast to lesbian women.

Considered together, the case examples serve to illustrate the importance of considering both the person in relationship to sexual orientation (identity development) and the environment in relationship to sexual orientation (environmental heterosexism) in career counseling. It is important to note that this conceptualization is descriptive and not prescriptive. It does not assert that persons should be

matched with congruent environments based on reactions to sexual orientation; it does, however, provide a useful schema for organizing and understanding the relevance of this information and the career concerns that arise from it. The examples are also helpful as they illustrate two persons at different points in their career and life planning, resulting in different career tasks and considerations.

Final Thoughts

Career counselors must be able to respond to the needs of g/l/b persons. This article attempts to show that services to g/l/b persons can be conceptualized within traditional career paradigms, but that awareness and sensitivity to g/l/b issues creates a new dimension of concerns to which career counselors must be responsive. Continued theory, practice and research is necessary for the career counseling field to decrease its level of heterosexism in the provision of career and life planning services to the g/l/b community.

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