

Strange bedfellows?

Spirituality meets sexual identity in the counseling office



BY STACY NOTARAS MURPHY

A few years ago, Craig Cashwell found himself highly conscious of his wedding ring during certain initial sessions at an Episcopal counseling center in Greensboro, N.C. Cashwell, now a professor of counseling and educational development at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, had been brought onto a previously all-female counseling staff because the center's gay male clients wanted to work with a male therapist.

"I can't tell you how many male clients looked at my ring and said, 'So you're married. So you're straight,'" Cashwell recalls. "I could watch them begin to pull back a little bit. In most cases, I don't think that I had said or done anything at that point, because it usually happened in the first session. But it certainly created sort of a barrier."

As a secular counselor at an Episcopal agency, Cashwell had anticipated some projections around his religious affiliation,

but he had not expected to navigate the added layer of his heterosexuality. "It was eye-opening that there could be something in someone's history that made them, quite logically, wary of both people of faith and of someone who's straight," Cashwell says. "That's why I never took it personally. I usually felt a great deal of compassion, wondering what must have been the story to this point to make it so immediate that just wearing a wedding ring or just being affiliated with a religious counseling center could carry that kind of weight."

Most counselors agree that sexual identity is a major aspect of personality development. While more in the field are recognizing that spiritual identity informs personality development as well, the intersection of the two hasn't received much attention. But the connections may seem more natural when both are considered under the umbrella of multicultural competency.

"One way of looking at it is that we can't segment various aspects of our identities," notes Michael Kocet, an assistant professor of counselor education at Bridgewater State College in Massachusetts and a board member of the Association for Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Issues in Counseling, a division of the American Counseling Association. "A person isn't African American on Mondays and Wednesdays, gay on Fridays and Sundays, and spiritual on Tuesdays. We integrate all of those aspects of our identity."

Kocet, who chaired the ACA Ethics Code Revision Task Force, believes more attention ought to be paid to integrating gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) issues and spiritual identity into the range of multicultural competencies. "We can't separate out the various pieces of our identity," he explains. "It's not a simple pie that you can just cut into pieces and split evenly. Different aspects become salient depending on the context or situation in which the person finds himself."

Looking at AGLBIC and another ACA division, the Association for Spiritual, Ethical and Religious Values in Counseling, Kocet sees room for connection. "I would like to see AGLBIC and ASERVIC partnering more on how to integrate their two competency models into effective practice with GLBT clients," he says. "Right now, I think they're very much treated separately, most likely unintentionally. I think more research should be done on that; it's an untapped area within the GLBT community."

Delving into the discomfort

There's a reason for the adage that politics and religion are subjects best left out of polite

conversation — they are complicated issues with nuances and implications that many would rather avoid when trying to build a therapeutic alliance. As such, counselors may be uncomfortable bringing spiritual discussion into the therapeutic process, particularly with GLBT clients, for fear of offending the client or sending the wrong message about their stance.

"It's another facet of multiculturalism that's been ignored for a long time," says Rebecca Powell Stanard, a professor of counseling and educational psychology at the University of West Georgia in Carrollton. "Counselors either shy away or, even worse than that, take on the attitudes of mainstream society or the mainstream church. Then it becomes an either/or for their clients. They don't offer them options."

Counselors looking to work with the GLBT population, particularly on a spiritual plane, must consider their own values surrounding religion and GLBT issues, both separately and in relationship to one another. Says Stanard, "Our counselors have to be aware of their own values around this issue and how do I, either overtly or covertly, impose those values on my clients? And how can I keep from doing that? Our counselors are parts of these religious organizations as well. That's certainly part of their personal and private belief system, but how do they operate within that system and be non-judgmental and helpful to their clients?"

"Saying to a client, if I were a Baptist, 'They're right, you've got to give up your church,' well, we've got to educate our students so they can see that's a value judgment just like all the other value judgments we can't

impose on people. When our clients come to us, they don't always see the middle ground, especially when they're part of a church that tells them you either have to reject your homosexuality or convert or repent or get married or be celibate or we're going to reject you or you reject us. There are alternatives to that. To help people see those alternatives and to find comfort and strength is what we're trying to do. Most of straight society doesn't know about these choices because they don't have to know about them. I think to educate our counselors is vitally important."

But in attempting to keep personal values outside of the counseling room, counselors run the risk of overcorrecting and ignoring the spiritual implications of a client's journey. "Certainly we have to be careful not to proselytize or put that on the client's experience," Kocet warns. "Alternately, when counselors may not be comfortable talking about religion, they may not speak about these issues in the counseling session even though the client specifically wants it as part of their goals for therapy."

"I think a counselor is acting unethically if they are not practicing counseling in this area; counselors need to be more comfortable and have more knowledge, particularly if they identify as being GLBT-affirmative. To say, 'Well, (spirituality or religion) is just not my thing,' I think, is doing a disservice to our clients. My sense is that there's still some discomfort in talking about these issues together. Part of it comes from the fact that GLBT-affirming counselors may not feel they have the training or background to talk about these topics. But regardless of one's religious or spiritual tradition, I think they're still impacted by issues of spirituality and religion, whether one chooses to practice or not."

Cashwell emphasizes that imposing one's personal values can go both ways. "I've supervised students who take the line of, 'Be true to who you are, come out and to hell with anybody else who doesn't love you!' Well, that's fine, but if the client is scared to death, that line is not fine, it's not helpful. When the counselor's agenda, one way or the other, gets in the way, that's probably the most common mistake we make. Those counselors may see their perspective as an advocacy role, and at a macro level it really is, but with an individual client who is sitting in a place of fear, that's not really helpful."

It doesn't accept them where they are and that they have a long history and perhaps a reason to be scared. Supporting them there is the key rather than ignoring their own personal history and the wider sociological, political history."

Cashwell admits he experienced a learning curve when he began counseling GLBT clients. "When I first started working with the GLBT community, I initially tried way too hard to

convince people with words that I was gay friendly, that I was an ally," he says. "At one point you have to ask, 'Am I trying to convince him, or am I trying to convince myself?' What I say now is that I've worked with the GLBT population in the past, but ultimately it's your decision as to whether I'm the right counselor for you. I sort of leave it at that. The hard sell isn't particularly the way to go."

Avoiding assumptions

Even if counselors overcome discomfort at incorporating spiritual discussion into their work with GLBT clients who request it, they must take care not to make assumptions about the content of such requests. Education is a tool for avoiding such stereotyping.

Stanard and co-researcher Cheri Smith have investigated the range of spiritually based

resources available to GLBT clients. "We researched a number of denominations, including Catholic, Baptist, United Church of Christ, Episcopal, United Methodist, Evangelical Lutheran, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints — as many as we could think of," explains Smith, an ASERVIC past president and counselor educator at Southern Connecti-

Continued on page 24

Take a **FREE** Online CE Course Today!

Instant Online Courses * Homestudy Audio & Video Courses

10 Different Ethics Courses * 8 Specialty Certifications

Low Cost Textbook Courses * NBCC/NAADAC/CNE/State Approvals

FastCEUs.com (800)390-9536



LEARN CLINICAL HYPNOSIS

Hypnosis is Safe, Effective and Fast!

Therapists who use clinical hypnosis report:

- Satisfied clients and increased referrals
- Explosive private-practice revenue
- Becoming "unstuck" from limited therapeutic approaches

You already possess the skills for effective helping and problem-solving in therapy ~
~ clinical hypnosis gives you an opportunity to use them and achieve dramatic results!

- ✓ **Live Clinical Hypnosis Certification Trainings Offered Nationwide**
- ✓ **Also Available as a Multi-Media Homestudy Certification Program**
- ✓ **Earn 20 NBCC, NAADAC, CNE & State Board Approved CE Credits**
- ✓ **Learn Advanced Parallel Programming - The Ultimate Brief Therapy Tool**

Whether live or homestudy, this course will teach you the technical skills and ethical guidelines necessary for integrating clinical hypnosis and Advanced Parallel Programming methods into your counseling practice.

REGISTER EARLY Space is Limited

- ♦ Reno April 28-29
- ♦ Las Vegas May 7-8
- ♦ Tulsa May 14-15
- ♦ Austin May 18-19
- ♦ San Antonio June 5-6

► Have the Most Fun Ever Earning CEUs! ► Expand Your Offerings or Build a Cash Practice!

Hypnosis is one of the most effective ways to help clients change their lives. Smoking cessation, weight loss, stress reduction, medical referrals, pain management, learning disorders, test-taking anxiety, depression, sexual dysfunction, communication, sports concentration, public speaking and more.

Become ICBCH Certified as a Clinical Hypnotherapist
Visit www.LearnClinicalHypnosis.com for details!



LearnClinicalHypnosis.com

ADVANCED PARALLEL PROGRAMMING AND HYPNOTHERAPY

Register Online or Call 1-800-68HYPNO



cut State University in New Haven. Their aim was to provide counselors with a knowledge base to help navigate the complicated process of finding accurate, up-to-date information for their clients (see sidebar, p. 25). "We wanted them to know what resources are out there, not just (say) this could be an important part of their development," Smith says.

Stanard and Smith presented their findings at last month's ACA Convention in Detroit. "Some of the findings are what you might expect," Smith says. "There are some churches that do have support systems in place and others that do not. Some churches have groups that advocate for gays within that church, and other churches have groups that are against same-sex marriages and do not have specific resources that would offer advocacy for gay/lesbian individuals. The resources vary, and we wanted to offer specifics ... as well as the fact that what we found often points to a lack of resources.

"We really don't want counselors to make assumptions. They may think that they know that this church's stance is this, but they may not know about the support groups within that church — resources that may not be publicly recognized. We want counselors to have that information so as the client faces that challenge, the counselors have some supports they can offer."

Stanard stresses the importance of not discounting a GLBT individual's faith connection as a potential resource. "I think it's important for us to offer clients options other than leaving the church," she says. "That's an important part of many people's lives. Just because their mainstream denomination does not support who they are, they shouldn't have to leave their church. If counselors are aware of other options, we can educate our clients as to what those options are. Sometimes people are so hurt, they feel rejected and, in turn, reject something

that is a very important part of who they are. You shouldn't have to choose between those things, but that's my personal opinion.

"As counselors, we could potentially overlook a source of strength for these individuals. If they're actively involved in their religion and that's strength for them, to then say, 'I can't be a part of that anymore,' could really take away something that's valuable for them as they go through their identity development. They can see positive, affirming role models in these groups that maintain their ties to religion while being gay."

Complicated context

Not all GLBT clients want to consider the spiritual implications of their identity development. Still, viewing the coming out process within a client's spiritual context may yield valuable insights. In their qualitative study on the spiritual identities of GLBT persons (presented at the ACA Convention), Cashwell and John Marszalek found that the coming out experience was a turning point in many respondents' spiritual lives, in addition to being a defining moment in their social development. Cashwell is careful to point out that the study's results do not generalize to the entire GLBT population but may offer some guideposts for counselors working with these clients.

"We had the full spectrum of stories," he says. "There were people who grew up in churches that were openly gay-affirming, and the coming-out process was just a celebration where they were supported, nurtured and loved. There were people who grew up in churches where they heard very negative messages about homosexuality, but then when they came out, they were, in fact, supported. Then there were the horror stories — stories of being sent off to conversion camps and one respondent being taken outside and physically beaten up by a group during the teenage years. As you can imagine, those experiences had a lot of implications for their future religious and spiritual lives, and that's what stands out to me the most."

Beyond the outward struggle of coming to terms with their sexuality in a religious setting, participants' responses also highlighted the internal conflicts that may last for years after the coming-out process. "What really struck me was how much organized religion had contributed to (the respondents') own internalized homophobia," Cashwell says. "We had people who responded that in a very powerful way, having grown up in a community (and) hearing that homosexuality is a horrible, sinful, terrible, bad thing and then realizing that they were gay automatically created emotional dissonance."

He recalls the response of a woman who said she still feels the internal conflict — 25 years after coming out. "She said this is who she is but that it is 'bad.' She talked very openly about not being

able to come to terms with that, not being able to resolve that in any way. She'd had a quarter of a century of living with that dissonance about her identity as a person of faith and as someone who is a lesbian."

At the same time, many respondents stated that spirituality was central to their decision to make a public declaration of their sexual identities in the first place. "There were a lot of people who said the most important aspect of their coming out process was their spirituality," Cashwell says. "They said that this is who they are at the core and, whatever language they used — higher power, the absolute God — if there is a Creator, this is how I was created, so it is OK."

Cashwell's research revealed that regardless of the respondent's religious experience — positive or negative — a "working through" process had occurred or was still occurring within the person. He suggested counselors could be useful in assisting clients with that progression. Furthermore, he noted each respondent had his/her own distinction between religion and spirituality, which could be a helpful area to deconstruct in counseling.

Kocet advises GLBT-affirming counselors to be prepared to deal with the complicated issues facing clients who have had prior experiences with reparative or conversion therapy aimed at eradicating homosexual desires. "Counselors need to be sensitive, for example, that if an adolescent client is brought to one of those types of programs by their parents, they may have a feeling of being unsafe that's associated with spirituality," he says. "That young adult may still have a desire to have a healthy spiritual identity, but maybe he's also been very hurt by the experience. I think that's where GLBT-affirmative counseling needs to be interjected."

The case for more education

Counselor educators and mentors can do much to get the new generation of counselors thinking about spirituality, religion and sexual identity as extensions of the multicultural counseling concept. "We have to make sure that they're being used at the education level," Smith says. "If we, as counselor educators, aren't helping our students develop proficiency in those areas, then when they go out to meet with the clients, they might think, 'I don't really have to tap into that.' Then we're doing a disservice to our clients, because that could be a key ingredient to help them in their development."

Kocet advises counselors to become familiar with spiritual assessment techniques to avoid making assumptions about a client's religious perspective. "Even if a client may self-identify within a certain religion, I think it's important that we don't label that," he says. "We can't assume that we know what the person's beliefs are. I think a very thorough, holistic, spiritual assessment is necessary where you get an understanding of how the client defines spirituality or religion

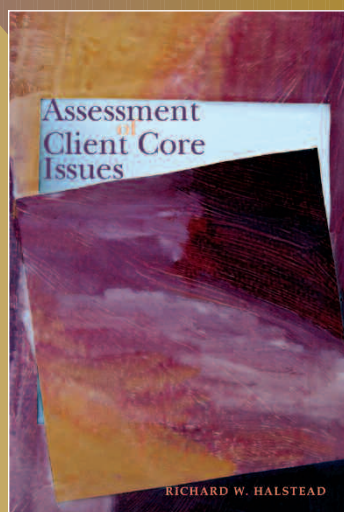
Assessment of Client Core Issues

RICHARD W. HALSTEAD

"This book offers a welcome alternative to the medical diagnostic and treatment model and provides a map for intervention and strategies for truly understanding clients and their needs."

—Dale-Elizabeth Pehrsson, EdD
Oregon State University
2006–2007 WACES President

Halstead instructs counselors on how to better recognize, understand, and treat clients' underlying problems, or deeper issues, in order to provide the most effective counseling services possible. The model presented in this book helps uncover the origin of these core concerns, provides a means to address them by deconstructing the client's living story, and challenges counselors to move beyond the diagnostic limitations of the *DSM-IV-TR*. This framework will assist counselors in developing more targeted treatment plans to help clients establish lasting, meaningful change.



2007 128 pages Order #72844
ISBN-13: 978-1-55620-235-3 ISBN-10: 1-55620-235-0
List Price: \$29.95 **ACA Member Price: \$22.95**

Please include \$6.75 for shipping of the first book and \$1.00 for each additional book.

American Counseling Association 800-422-2648 x222

Spirituality-based resources

Counselor educators Rebecca Powell Stanard and Cheri Smith have compiled the following list of spirituality-based resources for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender clients. Those who would like additional information can contact Stanard at rstanard@westga.edu or Smith at smithc26@southernct.edu.

Baptist

- The Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists (www.wabaptists.org/)
- Rebirth (www.operationrebirth.com/index.html)
- The Balm in Gilead (www.balmingilead.org/home.asp)

Episcopal

- Integrity (www.integrityusa.org/)
- Beyond Inclusion (www.beyondinclusion.org/)
- Claiming the Blessing (www.claimingtheblessing.org/)
- The Witness (<http://thewitness.org/>)

Hindu

- The Gay and Lesbian Vaishnava Association (www.galva108.org/)

Islamic

- Al-Fatiha (www.al-fatiha.org/)
- Huriyah (<http://huriyahmag.com/>)

Jewish

- Mosaic (www.jewishmosaic.org/)
- The World Congress of GLBT Jews (<http://glbtjews.org/>)
- Twice Blessed (www.onearchives.org/)

Lutheran

- Lutherans Concerned (www.lcna.org/)
- Lutheran Lesbian & Gay Ministries (www.llgm.org/)
- Extraordinary Candidacy Project (www.extraordinarycandidacyproject.org/)
- Goodsoil.org (www.goodsoil.org/)

Mormon

- Affirmation (www.affirmation.org/)
- The Family Fellowship (www.ldsfamilyfellowship.org/)

Presbyterian

- More Light Presbyterians (www.mlp.org/)
- That All May Freely Serve (www.tamfs.org/new/index.asp)
- The Covenant Network of Presbyterians (www.covenantnetwork.org/home.htm)
- The Shower of Stoles Project (<http://welcomingresources.org/sosp.htm>)

Roman Catholic

- Dignity USA (www.dignityusa.org/)
- New Ways Ministry (<http://mysite.verizon.net/~vze43yrc/>)
- National Association of Catholic Diocesan Lesbian and Gay Ministries (www.nacdlgm.org/)
- National Catholic AIDS Network (www.ncan.org/)
- Fortunate Families (www.fortunatefamilies.com/)
- Courage (www.couragerc.net/index.htm)

United Church of Christ

- United Church of Christ Coalition for LGBT Concerns (www.ucccoalition.org/)

United Methodist

- Affirmation (www.umaffirm.org/)
- Reconciling Ministries Network (www.rmnetwork.org/)
- Methodist Federation for Social Action (www.mfsaweb.org/)

and the impact that that's had either on their coming out or on their view of themselves."

Counselors wishing to serve this population should get acquainted with the GLBT-affirmative religious bodies in their areas, Kocet says. "For example, for a period of time I lived in Dallas, where there is the Cathedral of Hope, the largest GLBT Christian, nondenominational church in the world. You will find people who are Lutheran or Catholic, or who previously identified in those traditions, who are coming together to find a safe place to worship as they choose," he says. "Counselors need to be familiar with those organizations. Maybe speak with the pastoral staff or people who work in those mosques or synagogues, build a relationship with those institutions."

Taking the time to find appropriate spiritual supports for GLBT clients is a valuable service. "In my opinion, we're talking about individuals who don't have many role models," Smith notes. "They don't have a lot of role models through the historical perspective of the church or in the leaders they see, and I really think that's a component that's missing. ... The point is that we need to get the information out to the counselors. We don't want counselors not to address supports because of a lack of information. That's where we're stepping in, to offer as much

information as we can to get the dialogue going, to tap into the resources that ACA has, through either AGLBIC or ASERVIC, so that the counselor can be as effective as possible with that client."

Kocet agrees: "If GLBT-affirming counselors are struggling with their own issues of comfort with this issue, I would encourage them to do more research and have more conversations with folks who already are integrating spirituality with their counseling practice. I think counselors need to have more training on the specific tenets of various religious traditions. To me, it seems that in this profession we talk in these broad generalities about the importance of spirituality, but we don't do enough to train people on what is the difference between the Jewish faith and the Muslim faith and so on. We're on the right track, but we just need to take it further." ■

Stacy Notaras Murphy is a pastoral psychotherapist at PC&CC in Washington, D.C., and a contributing writer to *Counseling Today*. Contact her at smurphy@pastoralcounselingdc.com.

Letters to the editor:
ct@counseling.org

Tobacco Cessation Treatment Specialists are in HIGH DEMAND

- ☎ Earn 20 NBCC * NAADAC * CNE Approved Credits
- ☎ Earn ABHWP Board Certification as a C.T.C.T.S.
Certified Tobacco Cessation Treatment Specialist
- ☎ Live Training Class in Las Vegas, June 16-17
- ☎ Or an Intensive Self-Paced Homestudy Program
- ☎ Based on the US Surgeon General's Treatment Protocol and fully integrable with a variety of treatment strategies and settings for maximum results - healthcare, fitness industry, corporate, group and individual counseling applications.
- ☎ Work with motivated, self-paying clients.
- ☎ Help people end despair and start feeling good.
- ☎ Register Today at www.QuitSuccess.com

GET CERTIFIED in LAS VEGAS!
Tropicana Hotel June 16-17, 2007
(800) 390-9536 **QuitSuccess.com**
(Also Available as a Multi-Media Homestudy Program)