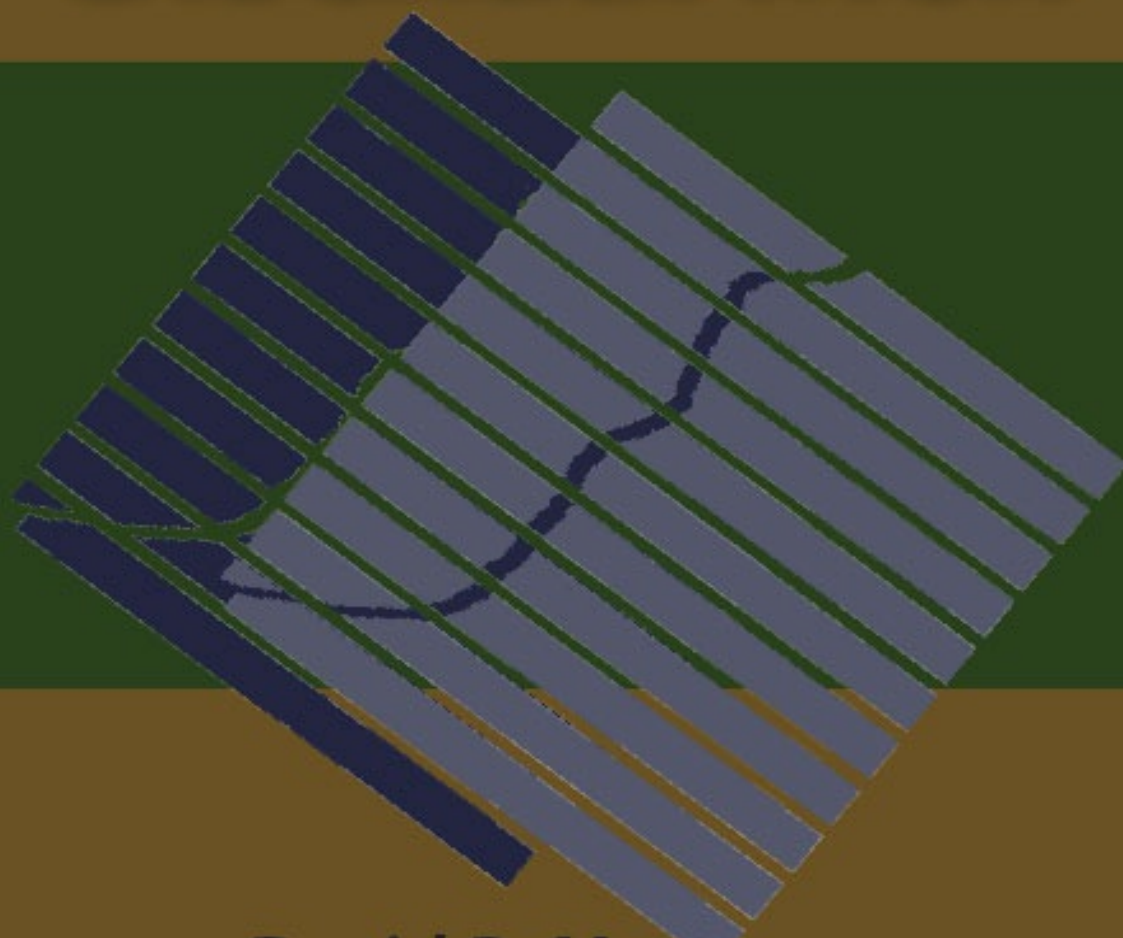


# Counseling Bisexual Men



David R. Matteson

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## Counseling Bisexual Men<sup>1</sup>

**David R. Matteson**

Both gays and heterosexuals are likely to categorize sexual orientations as falling into two discrete categories. Heterosexuals—out of homophobia—and gays—because of the oppression they have experienced—are likely to perceive these two orientations as “them” and “us.” But for self-affirming bisexuals, this division of human experience makes no personal sense.

Like gays, the bisexual man belongs to an invisible minority. But because of his heterosexual interests, it may be easy for him to “pass”; he can maintain a “public identity” that is heterosexual. Of course, if he does so he feels some incongruity, and it is harder for him to affirm the gay part of his experience if it is kept “in the closet.” Thus the bisexual man’s sexual identity and his lifestyle are likely to be a bit more complex than the gay man’s.

This chapter will begin with a discussion of some ways in which the development of bisexual identity is different from that of either heterosexual or homosexual identities. Particular emphasis will be placed on the role of kinesthetic or visual feedback in sexual arousal (for a fuller discussion see Matteson, in press, b). It is important to recognize that very little research has been done on bisexuality. Essentially no longitudinal research on sexual orientation has been done; this sketch of bisexual development is necessarily based on retrospective data from adults and is very tentative. Most of the research on bisexuality has focused on bisexual men in marriages; therefore, most of the examples in this chapter focus on this lifestyle. However, issues regarding identity formation, grieving lost models, and seeking new ones apply to bisexual men regardless of their marital status and lifestyle.

Sufficient data and experience exist to dismiss some of the myths and confusions about bisexuality, and these will be reviewed. With this background, attention to the special needs of bisexual men when they seek counseling will be addressed. Finally, some suggestions to counselors will be presented, based on the limited clinical literature to date and my experience and research.

Before he can affirm his identity, the bisexual man must struggle with two social taboos: the taboo

against homosexuality and the taboo against extramarital sex or multiple relationships. The pressure to conform to the heterosexual expectations of parents and peers leads many bisexuals into heterosexual marriages before they have explored their sexuality sufficiently to recognize and affirm the gay component of their sexual orientation. As noted in the chapter on gay men, the formation of a gay identity is a difficult process, because it is a stigmatized identity and because the gay person is usually raised by heterosexual parents. Most members of minority groups at least have the experience of learning from their parents (also minorities) how to cope with their minority status. In contrast, the invisible minorities grow up among the majority, and only recognize their own minority status when their inner experience begins to conflict with external expectations. This process is clearer, if not easier, for the gay man who experiences no sexual response to women; eventually he realizes that what comes “naturally” for other men simply doesn’t interest him. The adolescent who is bisexual is likely to “go along with the gang” longer, since the heterosexual feelings *are* “natural” to him. In the midst of early identity formation, the bisexual male may genuinely believe that his homosexual feelings are simply a result of being sexually frustrated, and that his homosexual explorations are merely adolescent and will disappear once he has a steady heterosexual partner. Since affirming one’s bisexuality requires a tolerance for ambiguity,

confusion should be seen as a sign of mental health, not an indication of neurosis, a fact which needs to be pointed out to bisexuals, who often blame themselves for being confused. (Lourea, 1985, p. 53)

To understand the development of this more complex sexual orientation, it is useful to clarify the roles of visual and kinesthetic lead systems in sexual arousal. (The concept of lead systems comes from the therapeutic theory of neurolinguistic processing; Cameron-Bandler, 1978.)

Visual fantasies and dreams play an important role in discovering one’s sexual orientation for a large portion of the bisexual married men studied (Matteson, 1985). Dan, who was in his late twenties when interviewed, provides a prototype of this visual style. Dan and his wife had good communication; both were sensitive and well-educated persons. But Dan was worried that the majority of his sexual dreams and fantasies were of homosexual relationships. He joined a support group for married bisexual men. Two years later, at the time of the second interviews, Dan had left his wife and was living in the gay community. Though most of his sexual activity was now with men, he reported that many of his fantasies and sexual dreams were now of women. Some strongly visual types, like Dan, do not experience their lives as complete unless their visual expectations are met; that is, unless they have both male and female

sexual partners concurrently.

There is some evidence (though far from conclusive) that the privatized nature of masturbation in boys leads to the development of elaborate sexual fantasies (Offer & Simon, 1975); this may contribute to a more visual approach to sexual arousal in boys. Generally, adolescent boys are far more likely than girls to engage in masturbation and to have explicitly sexual fantasies before they actually begin interpersonal sexual activities.

It can be hypothesized that men generally discover their sexual orientation first through visual experience, and women first find themselves sexually (and discover their sexual orientation) through their emotional interaction and physical contact with others. To oversimplify, women generally have a kinesthetic “awakening” and a kinesthetic “arousal pattern.” Those whose arousal is primarily kinesthetic have very few sexual fantasies or dreams; sexual feelings emerge from a deep emotional relationship. They find it difficult to understand why someone would feel a need to have sex with anyone except their primary partner. Bisexuals of this type are satisfied if they have one good personal/sexual relationship; it makes very little difference if their lover is male or female. They are often sequentially bisexual, some even tending to alternate between male and female lovers. These persons may experience bisexuality as a “choice”: For many bisexual women, the awareness of having a “choice” emerged out of a deep friendship with another woman which became sexual (or some other situation in which physical closeness led to sexuality; see Dixon, 1985). This stands in contrast to most of the bisexual men studied, who were obsessed with fantasies long before they met the persons with whom they first acted on their desires.

For bisexuals in committed heterosexual relationships, AIDS presents a special dilemma. Monogamy as a method of reducing the risk of contracting AIDS is not usually a viable option. For bisexuals who view homosexual sex as purely recreational, and do not desire personal intimacy, there is great risk of contracting AIDS unless they are disciplined to have only “safe sex.”

### **Confusions and Myths**

Some common myths regarding bisexuality include the belief that bisexuals “choose” their

orientation, that bisexuals are really “gay” but are using heterosexual relations as a cover, and that bisexuals are generally “promiscuous.” These myths are addressed in the next section.

## **BISEXUALS HAVE A CHOICE**

With increased knowledge and understanding of the gay experience, many professionals are aware that gay men rarely think of their sexual orientation as something they “chose.” However, since bisexuals define themselves as being aroused by members of either gender, it is easy to assume that they “have a choice.” And for those for whom arousal is triggered primarily by emotional responses or direct physical contact (kinesthetic), there is some truth to that assumption. For the bisexual man whose sexual arousal is largely visually initiated, however, sexual orientation is unlikely to be experienced as a choice. Instead, he is likely to feel that he needs both heterosexual and homosexual activity to live a full and satisfying life.

## **HETEROSEXUAL MARRIAGE IS A “COVER”**

Studies of bisexual husbands in heterosexual marriages have consistently shown that the men did not “deceive” their wives into marrying them; only a minority of the men believed themselves to be gay or bisexual at the time of the marriages (for a review, see Matteson, in press, b). Certainly homophobia played a role in the difficulty these men had in developing a clear sexual identity. But some of those men who overcame their homophobia and became openly and self-affirmatively gay or bisexual nevertheless chose to remain in their marriages. Because their sexual and emotional relationships with their wives were rich and satisfying, they negotiated open marriage contracts. Many of these couples were able to develop stable, satisfying marriages (Matteson, 1985).

The myth that bisexuality is a “way station” to avoid facing one’s homosexuality is so strong in gay culture that men who have affirmed their gay identity and then are surprised to find that a particular woman turns them on have great difficulty accepting that they may in fact be bisexual. Reentry into the world of heterosexual relations can create some difficult social problems. The Bi Center in San Francisco has offered support groups specifically for persons who have been exclusively homosexual for an extended period and are now aware of heterosexual attractions (Lourea, 1985).



## **BISEXUALS CANNOT MAINTAIN A FAITHFUL RELATIONSHIP**

Faithfulness has been taken to be synonymous with monogamy in much of our heterosexist culture. This definition of faithfulness is shallow and has been challenged even by religious writers (United Church of Canada, 1977). It may be the case that most visually oriented bisexuals cannot make a lasting commitment to monogamy (although some bisexuals who have fully accepted their bisexuality seem able to do so). In terms of maintaining intimacy, the real issue is faithfulness in the relationship, that is, being honest about and following through on the covenants and commitments the couple have made. For most couples, it is crucial to affirm the primacy of the couple relationship if a committed relationship is to remain viable. That is, each partner must feel that he or she is the most important relationship in the partner's life. Primacy, rather than sexual exclusivity, seems central.

### **Special Needs of Bisexual Men**

## **OVERCOMING HOMOPHOBIA**

Part of becoming a healthy and congruent person is overcoming the judgments and evaluations of others, which we have internalized but which are inconsistent with our own experience. It is nearly impossible to have grown up in Western society and not to have internalized some hatred of homosexuality. It is clear from the research that the most significant event in overcoming homophobia is developing a personal relationship with someone and then learning that person is gay or lesbian. Positive models of being gay are very important to developing a positive gay or bisexual identity. This is one of the advantages for a gay or bisexual client being seen by an openly gay counselor. Whatever the orientation of the counselor, it is important that the counselor does not relate in a way that implies that the bisexual or gay lifestyle is inferior or to be pitied. If the counselor is not gay or bisexual, or is not willing to be open about this, it is probably advisable that the client be encouraged to seek experiences (for example, gay-affirmative coming-out groups) where he can get to know persons who are comfortable with being gay.

Men who are just beginning to face their bisexuality often enter counseling because of their confusion. They may not need intensive counseling; they may only need confirmation that it is O.K. to

accept the self that they are discovering. Permission giving is often the first step in work with the bisexual client—and often it is the only “therapy” needed (Gochros, 1978; Lourea, 1985). To quote a client:

I knew what I wanted, but was afraid to get what I wanted. What I got from you [the counselor] was the guts to do what I wanted to do. You got me thinking again about myself and my own needs.” (Gochros, 1978, p. 8)

## **RESPECT FOR THE UNIQUENESS OF EACH INDIVIDUAL’S SEXUAL ORIENTATION<sup>2</sup>**

It is important to respect each person’s sexual orientation without judging it against either heterosexual or gay standards. There is no harm in professionals admitting areas of ignorance if they are open to learn. Counselors need to be honest about their own lack of knowledge when working with persons of minority groups, without abdicating the leadership role in providing help.

The most obvious lack of respect is the subtle inducement of guilt. It has already been noted that bisexuals have a particularly difficult struggle in finding their sexual identity due to lack of models in either the home or in the gay subculture. On top of this, if they are in a committed heterosexual relationship, they face guilt for breaking the vows of sexual exclusivity. Guilt is, perhaps, the most destructive force in the struggle to come to terms with a sexual identity that doesn’t fit the norm (Matteson, in press, a).

## **RESPECT FOR THE INDIVIDUAL’S ATTEMPT TO MEET HIS INTIMACY AND SEXUAL NEEDS IN A WAY THAT IS AUTHENTIC FOR HIM, WITHOUT MONOGAMOUS ASSUMPTIONS**

“As we grow up we are faced with the reality that we cannot simultaneously fit in and be ourselves” (Harrison, 1985, p. 42). This quote was written in regard to lesbians and gays, but it applies to both single and coupled bisexuals. The traditional marriage or couple relationship simply doesn’t fit them. When bisexual husbands decide to stay married, it is usually for reasons similar to those of heterosexuals. One’s dreams of the ideal partner seldom exactly match the real persons we discover our partners to be, yet there may be enough satisfaction and love to affirm that marriage was a good decision after all. Rarely, however, can these relationships remain traditional monogamous marriages.

Frequently, counselors who have not had the opportunity to know many couples with open sexual relationships mistake the open contract for promiscuity or wild permissiveness. They fail to recognize the deep level of trust, and the letting go of possessiveness and control, that can be involved

in a love that is based on the needs of two unique individuals. Another common error is to equate a non-monogamous contract with a lack of commitment, or even to equate bisexuality itself with indecisiveness or confusion (Erik Erikson, 1968).

### **RESPECT FOR THE BOUNDARIES AND CONTRACTS THE CLIENT HAS WORKED OUT IN HIS RELATIONSHIPS**

Perhaps one of the reasons many people respond negatively to the concept of open marriage is their intuitive awareness of the importance of boundary issues in intense and intimate relationships. Just as any successful couple with children, regardless of how much they love the children, must guard the primacy of the marriage from the children's demands, so the mixed orientation couple, though they may embrace an ideal of unbounded love, in practice must work out times and places in which their couple relationship is not intruded upon by the demands of others lovers.

For bisexuals, the issue of sexual exclusiveness, and the expectation that one partner can meet all the other partner's needs, has to be challenged and negotiated on an individual basis, whether in the context of a mixed-orientation marriage or as a single bisexual in a relationship that is moving toward deeper involvement and commitment. One manifestation of the boundary issue is the agreements about how much the non-gay partner is told, or wishes to know. Sometimes this is worked out in careful negotiations between the two parties; in other couples it emerges from a subtle series of nonverbal interactions leading to a conspiracy of silence. Either way, if there are "secrets," they are part of this unique relationship. If they appear to be malfunctioning, the counselor may choose to challenge them in an individual session. It is important not to violate the boundaries between partners. There is accommodation in all committed relationships. However, mixed-orientation partnerships frequently require much more individually tailored forms of contracting and caring. Once both partners have accepted that the norms simply don't fit their personalities and needs, the freedoms and limits, the openness, and the boundaries that are set are unique to each couple. The most important general rule for the counselor is to avoid making any assumptions about what is open and what is secret in a particular

couple's communication. It is not necessary to know all of the couple's rules if the counselor is especially careful not to be a message carrier between two partners.

Counselors have the responsibility of explaining their own rules in counseling (if they have a "no secrets" rule) from the beginning, before setting up any individual appointments in which the client may spill secrets with the expectation of confidentiality. Many couple counselors believe strongly in open communication between intimates, and see secrets in areas that affect the relationship as potentially destructive. However, counselors are also aware that effective communication involves sensitive timing, not just openness. It is important to remember that the bisexual partner has spent years trying to overcome his homophobia before finally coming out to himself. The non-gay partner may have only recently begun to deal with this issue. Appropriate timing for her is important.

Though the counselor needs to be sensitive to issues of timing and secrets, when it appears that one partner keeps information to himself as a form of power or control, even if it is done with the "good intention" of protection, the counselor should consider challenging it. This "protection" can be particularly destructive when it involves patriarchal assumptions of the woman's dependency.

The unilateral secret may be distinguished from a mutually agreed upon silence, where both partners know the situation but contract not to intrude on the other's privacy by discussing it. There is a clear danger that conspiracies of silence will feed into the downward spiral of mistrust (Bozett, 1982). But there also is the fact that the non-gay partner may, verbally or nonverbally, signal that she does not want to know too much. It is difficult to judge when a conspiracy of silence is dysfunctional and when it is in the best interests of both parties; certainly the judgment should not be made solely on the grounds of the counselor's ideology.

## **RESPECT THE SPECIAL NEED FOR CONFIDENTIALITY IN A HOMOPHOBIC SOCIETY**

Though many counselors believe that the personal and political advantages of being "out of the closet" in our professions and in our communities outweigh the risks, they also know that the risks are not simply phobic delusions; they are real. The power to make decisions as to when and where to take these risks belongs to the client and his intimates, not to the professional.

## **RESPECT THE CLIENT’S CHOICE OF THE ISSUES NEEDING PROFESSIONAL HELP, AND GET ON WITH THE GOALS SET BY THE CLIENT**

The most frequently stated criticism concerning professionals’ work with mixed-orientation couples is that they get fixated on the uniqueness of the lifestyle and lose sight of the issues for which services are being sought. It appears common for counselors to assume that the lifestyle itself is the problem, regardless of the stated reasons the clients give for coming. One woman, married to a bisexual man, described three months of counseling during which she was trying to resolve an issue with her daughter. After a resolution was achieved, the counselor expressed surprise at the mother’s profound relief. “You really *were* that upset over your daughter!” the counselor exclaimed. “That really *was* the problem, not your husband?” The counselor had not believed that the husband-wife relationship could be stable, and had assumed it was the underlying cause of the problem. Fortunately, in this case the counselor realized and admitted her own mistake.

The issues of communication, problem-solving skills, too much criticism, failure to give positive support to each other—common issues in couple counseling—may be overlooked when the counselor is distracted by the uniqueness of the alternative lifestyle that a couple has chosen.

The issue can be compounded if the client himself tends to use bisexuality, or fear of latent homosexuality, as a convenient scapegoat on which to blame the things that go wrong in his life (Lourea, 1985), when in fact personality problems exist that have no direct connection to the issue of bisexuality.

The special needs of bisexuals have been organized in this section around the concept of respect. Respect is an interpersonal phenomenon. Some bisexuals, after years of being open about their lifestyle, and with sensitive and supportive partners, families, friends, and colleagues, can work with homophobic professionals without letting the professionals’ prejudices affect them personally. Others, with less experience since coming out, and less security and self-respect concerning the bisexual issue, are more vulnerable. The following suggestions may help counselors guard against their own biases being damaging to these more vulnerable clients.

### **Suggestions to Counselors**

## GETTING ACCURATE INFORMATION

Until the mid-1970s, very little accurate and unprejudiced information was available on homosexuality, let alone bisexuality. Even now, some gay-affirmative writings continue to treat bisexuality as a “cover” against accepting one’s true (gay) identity. The most useful writing on bisexuality has appeared in a series of issues of the *Journal of Homosexuality* (see DeCecco, 1981; DeCecco & Shively, 1983; Klein & Wolfe, 1985).

## FINDING SUPPORT NETWORKS

It is an incredibly “normalizing” experience when a client meets a person who has the same “problem” as he does. Normalizing experiences, and experiences interacting with positive models for gay or bisexual identity, are important factors in the development of a positive self-image. It is extremely useful for the bisexual to be in a situation in which being gay is the norm. A gay affirmative group provides a wonderful balance to the years of heterosexist groups he has already experienced, and is usually the safest setting for sharing thoughts about the gay aspects of one’s identity. If the counselor or agency cannot provide these experiences directly, it is a valuable adjunct to the counseling to connect the client with persons or groups who can do so. Assisting bisexual clients in this networking is a legitimate function of the counselor, and helps the client to recognize that much of his “problem” is social, rather than intrapsychic (see Gochros, 1978).

Most of the large metropolitan areas have one or two groups that are specifically for bisexuals, often including a group for bisexual and gay men who are married. The easiest way to locate these groups is by calling the local gay switchboard, which is almost always listed in the phone directory under “gay.” One of the special problems about being bisexual is that one is tempted to “pass” as “straight” in the heterosexual community (with the accompanying sense of hiding), and then to “pass” as “gay” in the gay community (not daring to speak of one’s heterosexual partner). In neither place is one accepted as a whole person. Since there simply is no bisexual community, involvement in an ongoing bisexual group can be of special significance, particularly during the period of forming a clear and affirmative bisexual identity.

Because most bisexuals live much of their daily lives in the heterosexual world, it is also very

freeing if they can come out to some of their closest non-gay friends. Suggestions for assessing to whom to come out, and how, can be found elsewhere (Borhek, 1983; Hamilton, 1977; Muchmore & Hansen, 1982).

## **GRIEVING THE FALLEN GODS**

Besides self-discovery and relief, the coming-out process always involves grief, as the person recognizes that models and dreams that they have honored in the past will no longer work for them. The heterosexist model of the monogamous marriage—two children, picket fence, and all—is so much a part of our culture and our family upbringing that its loss must be acknowledged and grieved. For the bisexual man, the experience may be different than for the gay man, particularly if the former is already in a marriage. He may assume prematurely that the marriage must end. Almost certainly the honest acknowledgement of the gay component of his sexual orientation will mean serious changes in the marriage, but if the marriage has been one of common values and real intimacy, it is possible that once the shock of the disclosure of his homosexuality is dealt with, the couple can work out new contracts and agreements that will allow the marriage to continue (Latham & White, 1978; Matteson, 1985). If this is the case, the major grief work concerns the loss of the view of monogamy as the ideal marriage. This is often a harder loss for the wife than the husband, since women in our culture tend to be more socialized for and invested in monogamy than men. But men, too, experience this as a loss, and often feel guilt at “causing” the death of this more “perfect” form of marriage. If the couple is not willing or able to work out a new form of marriage that honors his homosexual needs as well, and it is decided that the marriage must end, then there are other more concrete losses that must be grieved. Nonetheless, the loss of the “model,” and the sense that one is now in uncharted territory, is a profound experience that should not be minimized by the counselor.

## **SYSTEMS THEORY AND INVOLVEMENT OF “SIGNIFICANT OTHERS”**

The therapeutic model presented here is one of affirming the naturalness and appropriateness of living out the sexual orientation that the client discovers as “his own.” Gay or bisexual clients are not “sick,” per se; they have internalized the cultural sickness of homophobia. The important function of groups and role models has already been indicated. A “family” systems approach is particularly useful in

working with these clients because it makes concrete the perspective that the problem is not “inside” the client; the disease is a social disease, and the best cure is a social one. Just as parents of a gay man can best communicate their acceptance by actions (such as encouraging their son to bring home his lover to meet them), so the counselor can best communicate his acceptance of the client’s homosexuality by suggesting that the client invite his gay lover into the sessions.

### **MIXED-ORIENTATION MARRIAGES: AN ILLUSTRATION OF SYSTEMS ISSUES**

With married bisexuals, there are special reasons to work with the network of people involved, rather than just the bisexual husband. Typically the first request for help comes when disclosure to the wife is imminent, or when his “secret” has been discovered. The bisexual partner is immersed in an identity struggle, often as part of a “midlife crisis”; like most identity struggles, this results in rather narcissistic behaviors during this phase. Further, frequently the bisexual husband is repeating childhood patterns of “escape.” Having felt that a portion of his identity was oppressed throughout his growing up, he unwittingly makes a connection between the sexual inhibitions imposed on him by his mother and the fears and inhibitions expressed by his wife. As children, many of us have had a secret place (real or imaginary) to which we ran to escape the oppression and inhibition we felt, a place where our “child” could run free. When the gay component of one’s sexual orientation is first acknowledged, it is very freeing, and the gay world often becomes a “free place” that evokes all the joy and hedonism and exuberance of a childhood escape. The years of suppressing this part of ourselves only intensifies the joy of its release and acceptance. The wife’s fears and the secretive quality of the escape resonate with the childhood split between sneaking pleasure and being “responsible.” There is a risk that the husband will bolt from the marriage into a gay adolescent lifestyle, without discerning which of his feelings are, at least in part, displaced from childhood, and without carefully negotiating what is possible in the relationship with his wife.

This risk seems particularly high in those husbands who, prior to their marriage commitments, have had little contact with gay-affirmative men and have repressed their gay desires well into adulthood (Matteson, 1985). Their identity crisis may be a part of a midlife crisis in which they reevaluate their life’s assumptions. Fatigued by family responsibilities and sex-role expectations, the traditional male entertains fantasies of leaving the marital relationship. The perspective of midlife crisis



can be a helpful one in counseling with many of the husbands and their wives. (Lourea, 1985).

Working with the couple rather than just with the bisexual husband brings more of these dynamics into focus, and allows the counselor to respond to some of the needs of the wife in the context of acceptance of the husband's newly acknowledged sexual orientation. When it is clear to the husband that the counselor does affirm his bisexuality, but also is responsive to his wife's emotions, it becomes easier for him to do the same—that is, to stop viewing the wife's fear, pain, and anger as statements about his homosexuality or requests that once again he suppress what he has finally begun to affirm, and hear them simply as her genuine feelings. If the husband has had considerable homosexual experience but hidden it from his wife, she is faced with three hard issues at once: the gay issue, the issue of non-monogamy, and on top of it, the issue of deceit (Matteson, 1985). The feelings of anger, hurt, betrayal, and mistrust must be dealt with before further progress can be made. While the bisexual partner is partially responsible due to his lack of disclosure, it is also important to look at the verbal and nonverbal communication patterns in the relationship that have hindered open communication in the past (Lourea, 1985). That the counselor, in the presence of the wife, can calmly acknowledge the fact of the husband's homosexual desires, without treating these as catastrophic, not only affirms the husband but reduces the panic of the wife.

When the panic subsides, the husband's identity crisis can be given its place, but by seeing them together and directly working on their communication, the importance of the marital relationship in their lives can also be affirmed. Gochros (1978) saw the exploration of options and decision making as the second phase of (individual) work with bisexual husbands. Certainly each spouse needs to consider his or her own options, but it seems wiser, unless a decision has been made to leave the marriage, to work on this phase with both parties present, at least for the majority of the interviews. In some cases it may be helpful to set reasonable goals and time limits regarding decisions to be made (Gochros, 1978); this may reduce the insecurity of the spouse who is feeling in a "reactive" position. However, the counselor should avoid pushing for reality decisions in a way that distracts from the process of each partner examining her or his own needs and learning to express and negotiate them. Opportunities for personal growth are higher during this "unsettled" stage when some of the usual assumptions and defenses are broken down, and with the counselor's help (focusing on the process, not just the results) important personal changes and insights may occur.

The decisions regarding opening up the marriage and negotiating contracts that respect the needs of both parties precipitate discussion of the insecurities and jealousies that arise. Some wives experience more insecurity when “competing” with a male lover. One wife stated, “I know I can compete with any other woman. If I lose, well, at least it was a fair fight. With a man I don’t stand a chance. I’ve lost before I’ve even begun.” On the other hand, the bisexual husband may wish his wife would experiment with bisexual relationships—yet be threatened when she starts dating other men. The issue of jealousy usually boils down to the question of primacy. If each partner is getting enough love and attention from the other to feel sure of “my special place in your life,” the jealousy is manageable. It is when the sense of trust and caring within the relationship is in doubt that the issue of what the partner is “giving away” outside the relationship becomes a battleground. The counselor is wise to recognize the focus on “outside involvements” as a form of scapegoating, and instead to encourage “I” statements owning one’s own hurt, loneliness, and vulnerability.

Working on the communication between spouses does not mean, of course, pushing for the continuation of the marriage. It does mean refusing to discount or ignore a relationship that has been of great importance, one that must change in the light of the acknowledged bisexuality. Whether the new relationship is one of divorced co-parents, and/or close but nonsexual friends, or of partners in an open marriage (to name some of the more likely positive outcomes), the relationship issues should not simply be stepped over, as unfortunately often occurs in individual counseling. (For a summary of the stages in these couples, see Matteson, in press, b).

Support groups for the bisexual partner have already been discussed; there is no need for the wife to be a part of all the searching and exploring that he needs to do in the gay world. Similarly, the husband cannot take responsibility for his wife’s need to develop more of a life of her own, to the extent that she has accepted a “merged identity” that is dependent on him (see Matteson, in press, c), and a women’s group that works on the identity issues that modern women now face can be particularly helpful for her.

Separate work is especially indicated for the husband who has moved beyond “adolescent” exploration of the gay scene to a continued relationship with a gay lover. He may feel frightened over the degree to which he feels bonded to his homosexual lover and thus use his heterosexuality as a shield to

guard against developing intimacy with another man (Lourea, 1985). Our culture's homophobia runs much deeper than fear of the sexual interaction between two men, and might more accurately be defined as fear of intimacy between men. Individual work with the husband or work with the gay couple may be indicated at this point.

The developing of support beyond the couple relationship is vital; and support includes support of the couple, support of the husband, and support of the wife. The importance of individual friends often needs to be stressed, because many couples have abandoned separate friendships and reduced their social life to couples.

Instances arise (in these complex marriages) when it is impossible for the individual (spouses) to be supportive of one another; having other people to turn to can relieve pressure as well as add perspective that can help clarify issues. (Lourea, 1985).

If counseling continues beyond the initial crisis, the work often centers around negotiations and re-contracting in the marriage. Some couples can manage the negotiations on their own, and thus can use the counseling hour to enhance their level of emotional communication. Others need to limit negotiations to when the counselor is present. Almost all couples need to be encouraged to have "moratorium" times when they are together purely for recreation, and when a "time out" is declared on the discussion of issues that arouse conflict. A major task of the counseling is to teach both partners to take more control over their own lives and their own happiness, and to stop trying to control the other. Two milestones in the counseling are when the woman partner stops trying to control the bisexual man's activities outside their relationship, and when the man begins to initiate discussions or activities that show that he's taking responsibility in the relationship, rather than leaving it up to the woman to take care of herself *and* the relationship.

After the permission-giving stage, and the ensuing exploration of options and the decision-making stage, the individual or couple move to the problems of settling into a new lifestyle (Gochros, 1978). Issues of relating to the children may come up in this phase (these are dealt with in detail in Matteson, in press, b). In some instances, family counseling is helpful at this point. Counselors can be helpful in dealing with decisions about coming out to children and to extended family, and with "training clients to be effectively gay" (Moses & Hawkins, 1982; p. 216); these are issues that have been well addressed in

the literature on counseling gays and lesbians.

Often by this time enough networking has been done so the clients have sufficient support in their lives and no longer need to see the counselor on a regular basis. However, the counselor may remain an important resource, and scattered interviews over several years are not uncommon.

## Special Issues

### THE COUNSELOR'S SEXUAL ORIENTATION

There are some special issues that concern the sexual orientation of the counselor where couple counseling with mixed-orientation relationships is concerned. Only the couples in which the husband is the bisexual will be addressed here (see Coleman, 1985, and Matteson, in press b, for information on bisexual wives). While in most couple counseling it is the woman who seeks counseling whereas the man is likely to be the reluctant partner, the reverse is often the case in mixed-orientation couples. The bisexual man is in personal crisis, and may initiate counseling for himself, involving the woman only at the advice of the systems-oriented counselor. Since he defines his problem as sexually related, he is likely to seek a male counselor. In this situation, the (male) counselor has several strikes against him when trying to engage the woman in counseling: first, that the bisexual man is not convinced she should be there; second, that the partner is not wanting to face this issue and wishes it would just disappear; and third, that the female partner is likely to see the male counselor as naturally aligned with the man. The attempt to balance the rapport between husband and wife (Broderick, 1983) is further complicated if the counselor is known to be gay or bisexual; the woman is likely to be suspicious that the counselor has a hidden agenda of seducing the bisexual man into the gay world.

One has a far better chance of keeping both partners engaged if one starts out with a cocounseling team. A bisexual male counselor may work with a non-gay woman co-counselor; at times the women meet together to discuss the woman's issues, while the men meet to discuss the bisexual issues.

### THE SIGNIFICANT OTHER

When one is working with a couple in which one partner is bisexual (whether it is a heterosexual

couple or a male couple), there may be a “significant other” who is left out—a gay lover, in the case of the heterosexual couple, or the heterosexual lover in the case of the male couple. When that person is significant, it is frequently helpful to meet with the third person, whether or not that relationship is a committed or long-term one. This allows that person access to the counselor, which not only may be of value to that person, but may decrease the chances that that person will sabotage the counseling.

The usual rule in seeing the third “corner” of a triangle is that the counselor will request that the bisexual man inform his primary partner that the counselor will be seeing the other partner. Of course, what goes on in the session is kept confidential unless explicitly agreed otherwise. This keeps the counselor out of a deceitful triangle and yet doesn’t put the counselor in the position of communicating *for* members of the triangle. Often a joint session with the bisexual man and the lover is the most helpful format, both to improve communication between this part of the triangle, and to give the opportunity to the lover to ask the counselor questions about this type of arrangement. It is rare that a session with all three present is appropriate. Usually, this is ill-advised with married couples, even where the wife is agreeable, because it tends to undermine the primacy of the marital relationship. The exception, of course, is the rare case where all three believe the married and the homosexual relationships are “equally primary.”

In summary, overcoming the guilt and alienation that result from years in “the closet” is often best accomplished in a counseling setting with more than one client. Support networks need to be developed for the bisexual man, and for significant others in his life who are coping with the news of his bisexuality.

## Conclusions

Some have claimed that bisexuals have the best of both worlds. Actually, bisexuals often experience a lack of acceptance in either world. Yet they may feel they need relationships in both worlds. The satisfactions of marriage and family may be very appealing and important to them, yet the limitations of monogamous marriage may be unworkable. Developing intimate relationships with persons who can accept their unique needs and working out mutually satisfying agreements and boundaries are complex challenges in this complex lifestyle. Counselors who can affirm their client’s sexual orientation and can appreciate the complexity of the bisexual’s search for a satisfying lifestyle may find working with

bisexual clients especially enriching and challenging.

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### Notes

- 1 Author's Note: Portions of this chapter have been previously published in Bozett, F. W., *Gay Parents* (Praeger Publishers, 1987).
- 2 This section and the following four sections are to be published in 1988 by Alyson Publications, Inc. in a book tentatively titled *A Helping Hand: Assisting Gay and Lesbian Clients*. Reprinted by permission.