# Nurturing the Relationships of All Couples: Integrating Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Concerns Into Premarital Education and Counseling Programs

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*Research shows that premarital counseling programs help engaged couples develop interpersonal and problem-solving skills that enhance their marital relationships. Yet, there are limited services for same-sex couples. This article assumes an integrated humanistic and social justice advocacy stance to explore the needs of lesbian, gay, and bisexual partners and develop recommendations for providing affirmative premarital counseling, with implications for counseling practice, training, and research.*

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In response to disconcerting divorce rates, premarital educational and counseling services have been developed to help engaged couples learn critical skills for creating strong and stable unions. Some states have passed legislation that requires premarital education or provides incentives for couples who complete such programs (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; McGeorge & Carlson, 2006). Although premarital education is readily available to opposite-sex couples, similar services are limited for same-sex couples.

All couples can benefit from such services by developing their communication and problem-solving skills. Premarital programs can assist lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) persons to nurture their relationships in the midst of societal discrimination, legal prohibitions, and other forms of social injustice that are enacted against same-sex marriages. In the current article, we explore the needs of LGB partners in committed relationships and offer recommendations for providing affirmative premarital counseling that addresses oppression at individual, couple, and institutional levels.

## ADOPTING A HUMANISTIC AND SOCIAL ADVOCACY LENS

Debate continues in American society about the nature and place of LGB persons and their relationship status. Although national mental health or-

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ganizations dispute the notion that same-sex attraction is abnormal and in need of treatment (APA Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation, 2009; Whitman, Glosoff, Kocet, & Tarvydas, 2006), members of political, religious, and social institutions continue to hold views that same-sex relationships are unnatural, pathological, immoral, and socially divisive. Given this context, we use a humanistic lens in framing LGB persons as normal, healthy, productive, fully functioning individuals who are responsible for their own choices, worthy of dignity and respect, and capable of developing optimal relationships and living up to their highest potential (Kottler & Montgomery, 2011). These foundational values are consistent with the humanistic philosophy espoused by the Association for Humanistic Counseling (Cain, 2001).

Although at the time this article was written, five states and the District of Columbia issue marriage licenses to same-sex couples, 39 states have statutes defining marriage as between one man and one woman (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2010). Whereas initiatives within various religious institutions recognize and support LGB individuals who seek to formally consummate their relationship in marriage, some major denominations continue to oppose same-sex unions (Human Rights Campaign, 2010). Given these systemic barriers to recognizing same-sex relationships, we assume a social justice advocacy lens when describing inclusive premarital counseling as a systems response at the individual, couple, and institutional levels (Lyons, 2001). We support counselors adopting social change agent roles to collaborate with community, civic, and institutional leaders to introduce efforts to enhance optimal personal and relationship development for LGB couples (Ratts, 2009).

## DEFINING TERMS

The literature uses the term *pre-union* education programs when referring to services for same-sex couples and *premarital* education programs for opposite-sex couples. The distinction is based on the reality that in a majority of states, marriages between same-sex couples are prohibited. Laws in some states affirm the legal rights of persons involved in same-sex marriages. In other states, however, same-sex couples insist on enacting marriage ceremonies in their places of worship, even when legal civil marriages among same-sex couples are prohibited. We operate from the view that distinctions between premarital education programs frequently are based on heterosexist biases that operate from the perspective that same-sex persons should not be entitled to the same legal rights and culturally sanctioned rituals as heterosexual couples (e.g., the marriage ritual). Despite the refusal of many persons in contemporary society to recognize the constitutional right of same-sex couples to be protected by equal treatment under the law, many same-sex couples perceive their union as a marriage. The current article uses the term *premarital education programs* for both same-sex and opposite-sex couples.

The terms *same-sex couple* and *opposite-sex couple* are used to describe the recipients of premarital education programs, instead of terms such as *heterosexual, gay,* or *lesbian* couples. The latter terminology, although descriptive of many members of the targeted populations discussed, may inadvertently serve to silence bisexual partners within each type of relationship. Also, it is suggested that bisexual partners in same-sex and/or opposite-sex couples may have specific needs that require attention within affirmative premarital education programs.

## RATIONALE AND LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of research studies describe marriage preparation programs for opposite-sex couples (Larson, Newell, Topham, & Nichols, 2002; McGeorge & Carlson, 2006) and evaluate their effectiveness (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; McGeorge & Carlson, 2006). Numerous investigations have shown that marriage preparation courses are successful in influencing short-term stability and enhancing the relationships of opposite-sex couples (Carroll & Doherty, 2003; McGeorge & Carlson, 2006). Lacking in the research literature are studies that assess the degree to which same-sex couples may benefit from similar services (Shurts, 2008). To date, Shurts's (2008) literature review and proposal for pre-union counseling is the only article published on premarital counseling for same-sex couples.

Shurts (2008) asserted that same-sex couples can benefit from such services, provided that current marriage preparation programs are adjusted to meet the needs of gay and lesbian clients. Among the specific concerns many same-sex couples face are (a) legal issues, such as current marriage laws that prohibit same-sex couples from marrying (Shurts, 2008), and the need to create legal documents to protect the rights of partners (Riggle & Rostosky, 2005; Rostosky, Riggle, Gray, & Hatton, 2007); (b) relationship stressors that are due to societal discrimination, including sexual orientation disclosure issues (Riggle & Rostosky, 2005; Rostosky et al., 2007; Shurts, 2008; Spitalnick & McNair, 2005); (c) nurturing a couple orientation in an atmosphere of discrimination (Shurts, 2008; Spitalnick & McNair, 2005); and (d) maintaining social networks that support the couple's stability and success (Shurts, 2008).

Although there is a dearth of literature on premarital education programs for same-sex couples, counseling literature regarding bisexual partners in same-sex or opposite-sex couples is essentially nonexistent. When in a same-sex relationship, bisexual individuals grapple with concerns that are consistent with those of gay and lesbian partners; however, they may also have the disadvantage of less social and community support than their counterparts (Bradford, 2004a; Brown, 2002; Worthington & Reynolds, 2009).

The lack of community support is often fueled by *biphobia*, which has been defined as an aversion to people who do not identify as either heterosexual or gay or lesbian (Dworkin, 2001). Some believe that claiming a

bisexual identity is an attempt to retain the privileges of heterosexuality (Bradford, 2004a; Brown, 2002). Others believe that bisexuality constitutes a transitional stage from heterosexuality to gay or lesbian identity (Bradford, 2004a, 2004b; Brown, 2002; Collins, 2004). The continued existence of these myths perpetuates confusion in the identity development process of many bisexuals and creates additional relational pressures and associated conflicts. Furthermore, other persons may make incorrect assumptions about the sexual orientation of each partner in a bisexual relationship (Bradford, 2004a; Brown, 2002). In other words, heterosexuality is assumed for partners in opposite-sex relationships and gay or lesbian identity is assumed for those in same-sex partnerships. Consequently, others' assumptions may render invisible the sexual identity of bisexual partners.

Given these concerns, couples with a bisexual partner may benefit from premarital education programs that address the following issues: (a) societal discrimination and associated myths based on bisexual identity (Bradford, 2004a, 2004b; Brown 2002, Worthington & Reynolds, 2009), (b) the personal meaning each partner attributes to bisexuality within the relationship (Bradford, 2004a, 2004b), (c) the implications of these meanings for the well-being of the couple (Bradford, 2004b; Brown, 2002), and (d) the need to maintain or create societal networks that are supportive of bisexuality (Bradford, 2004a; Brown, 2002).

## DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES

Two developmental models are central to the experiences of couples and directly influence the formation of premarital education programs: sexual identity development (Bradford, 2004b; Connolly, 2004) and couple development (Mullen, 1997) theories.

### *Sexual Identity Development*

Various models of gay and lesbian sexual identity development have been proposed in the literature (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1985; Fassinger & Miller, 1996). Although specific stages may vary, most of these theoretical models depict a path from denial or questioning of one's sexual orientation to acceptance and pride and eventually to synthesis of sexual identity into a more comprehensive sense of self (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004; Rosario, Schrimshaw, Hunter, & Braun, 2006). The sexual identity development process is not a linear one for all persons.

Moreover, cultural, societal, and situational concerns influence movement through the various stages (Collins, 2004; Connolly, 2004; Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007; Fukuyama & Ferguson, 1999; Rosario et al., 2004). For example, salient aspects of sexual identity may variously intersect with race, ethnicity, class, gender, religion and/or other work–life roles. Some of these allegiances may be deemed of equal importance to or more important

than sexual orientation. Consequently, movement through the stages of the identity development process involves an integration of various elements of individuals' personal identity (Fassinger & Arseneau, 2007; Fukuyama & Ferguson, 1999) and investigation of multiple forms of oppression (Fukuyama & Ferguson, 1999).

Partners in same-sex couples commonly locate themselves in different developmental stages. Premarital counseling programs can help couples assess their developmental location and generate solutions for potential conflicts that may arise. For instance, one partner may have disclosed his or her sexual orientation in all domains of life, whereas the other partner may have come out to family members but not to coworkers. Furthermore, each partner may ascribe identity salience to distinct social and cultural domains. Premarital programs can help couples address such differences as well as other developmental issues in positive and growth-producing ways. A humanistic approach—emphasizing mutual respect, open and authentic communication, and unconditional positive regard—can be effective in facilitating this process (Ivey, D'Andrea, & Ivey, 2011).

Models of bisexual identity development have also been proposed in the literature (Bradford, 2004a; Brown, 2002; Collins, 2004; Worthington & Reynolds, 2009). These models differ from those of gay and lesbian identity development in that, to a certain extent, confusion may be an inherent and continual part of an individual's self-identity as a bisexual person. According to these theoretical models, bisexual identity development involves moving from an initial state of confusion to finding, applying, and then settling into a bisexual lifestyle that is consistent with one's values and personal perspectives. However, researchers have found that sexual confusion continues to plague many persons who self-identify as bisexual (Bradford, 2004a; Brown, 2002). As some bisexual persons enter into monogamous relationships, they may begin identifying as gay, lesbian, or heterosexual. Others may continue to self-identify as bisexual irrespective of their current relationship.

Bradford (2004a) interviewed self-identified bisexual persons who reported satisfaction and enrichment in their sexual identity development. These persons expressed the ability to find or create a community that was supportive of their bisexual identity, and community membership was viewed as being critical to their psychological and developmental well-being.

Alternatively, it can be difficult for some persons to embrace and maintain a bisexual self-concept in the absence of social support and public role models. Given this potential difficulty, premarital counseling programs can help bisexual partners attend to each individual's developmental perspective as it relates to each person's views and concerns about being in a committed relationship with a bisexual person.

Some premarital education programs match participant-couples with volunteer couples who have been married for a number of years. Often, the married couples function as role models or mentors to premarital

education participants. Mentors may share some of their previous conflicts (e.g., communication difficulties, differences in expectations, intimacy issues, and/or spiritual or religious experiences) and the ways in which they were negotiated. This exchange aims to help the participant-couples develop skills to address current or eventual tensions that may surface in their own relationships.

Given the specific needs of LGB partners discussed previously, inclusive premarital education programs should recruit same-sex mentor couples as well as couples in which one or both partners self-identify as bisexual. Doing so provides the opportunity for the paired couples to discuss issues specific to sexual orientation, for example, ways in which the couple have addressed or managed (a) differing understandings of sexual orientation; (b) variations in identity development; (c) societal oppression and corresponding stress; (d) a couple orientation; and (e) relationships with family, friends, and LGB community members.

*Couple Development*

It may be important for counselors to develop an understanding of the process of couple development prior to providing premarital education services to same-sex and opposite-sex couples. Mullen (1997) identified a three-stage model of couple development that is relevant to premarital education programs. In Mullen's model, the first stage, *confluence*, is characterized by an emphasis on the ways in which each partner is similar to the other. It is at this point that the couple develops an identity as a single unit. Focus is on the existent similarities of priorities, preferences, and behaviors. In short, partners begin to reference themselves as *we* instead of *I* in private and public dialogue, thereby cultivating a couple orientation.

Conversely, attention to ways in which coupling partners are different from each other marks the second stage, *differentiation*. Although partners' perceived differences can be seen as valuable and complementary aspects of the couple's relationship, differences often underlie interpersonal conflicts that manifest over time. According to Mullen (1997), this stage is marked both by (a) a desire to privilege self-interests instead of or in addition to the best interests of the couple and (b) feelings of guilt for wanting to do so. Mullen noted that persons desiring differentiation might feel as if they are falling out of love with their partner. Therefore, couples in the differentiation stage may be most vulnerable to premature separations and/or divorce. However, couples at this developmental stage can strengthen their relationships by learning to value and respect each other's differences.

The final stage, *integration*, involves each partner's development and ownership of characteristics and associated tasks ascribed previously to the other. For example, one partner may be perceived as gregarious and outgoing, and the other shy and quiet. If such understanding of self and other were to occur in a relationship, the integration stage would invite each

partner to take on the qualities and behaviors that were seen previously as the domain of the other. In other words, the shy and quiet partner may begin to engage in more outgoing and social endeavors, whereas the gregarious and outgoing partner may take on more reflective and internally focused activities. Therefore, each partner engages in endeavors that can be challenging and/or fearful but may also lead to personal growth and balance.

*Applying Couple Development Stages to Premarital Education Programs*

Premarital education and counseling programs target the first two stages of couple development in Mullen's (1997) model. Although couples may present for premarital counseling during the confluence stage, topics addressed in premarital programs attend proactively to issues commonly experienced by couples in the second and third stages of couple development. For example, couples in the differentiation and integration stages may handle the following topics differently: conflict, commitment, family, communication, intimacy, spirituality, and child rearing. Therefore, it is useful for premarital education interventions to help couples develop the foundation of mutually supportive problem-solving skills to enhance their relationship on a long-term basis.

Societal bias and discrimination can create additional pressures for same-sex couples and have an impact on movement through the stages of couple development. First, same-sex couples are often told directly and indirectly that their relationships are not as valued as opposite-sex couples. For instance, although laws recognizing only heterosexual unions are an overt devaluing message, the absence of representations of same-sex couples in the majority of Valentine's Day and anniversary cards carries a more subtle yet painful message of invisibility. Second, during the confluence stage, opposite-sex couples often choose to display intimacy in public, whereas some partners in same-sex couples refrain from displaying affection for fear of public retribution ranging from verbal harassment to physical violence (Herek, Cogan, & Gillis, 2002). When working with couples operating from the confluence stage, counselors are encouraged to validate the strength and unity of their relationships. From the perspective of a social justice lens, counselors can assess each partner's individual story, identifying the degree to which the partners have experienced and developed healthy responses to oppression and discrimination.

From a humanistic perspective, counselors would do well to identify intrapersonal and interpersonal supports that nurture wholeness, optimal health, and a unified couple identity. This sort of strength-based counseling approach is useful particularly when assisting same-sex couples to deal constructively with stressors that are related to various forms of oppression and discrimination they encounter in their lives.

As LGB partners transition to the differentiation stage, they may have less access than opposite-sex couples to supports and resources that help them work through their difficulties. Often, the latter receive emotional, social,

and/or financial support from their families of origin, local communities, or religious institutions. However, heterosexist and homophobic beliefs among family and community members often limit the support that same-sex couples receive. As noted earlier, bisexual partners' sexual identities may be incorrectly assumed on the basis of their partners' biological sex. Moreover, they are vulnerable to experiencing biphobia in heterosexual, lesbian, and gay communities (Bradford, 2004a, 2004b; Brown, 2002).

Mullen (1997) cautioned that couples in general might be prone to premature separation because of the emotional difficulties faced during the differentiation stage. Therefore, communal support and problem-solving skills can be particularly important for couples to develop in general and particularly for couples operating from the differentiation stage.

For LGB couples who are in or preparing for the differentiation stage, mentor couples of the same sexual orientation may be helpful in exploring different ways to negotiate predictable challenges couples encounter at this developmental stage. LGB couples may also benefit from assessing their sexual identity development as well as other distinguishing characteristics or patterns that characterize each partner's personhood.

Same-sex and bisexual partners can learn new ways to accept and honor each other's differences, not necessarily seeing these differences as threats to their commitment to each other as a couple but as signs of diversity within unity. A counselor working from a humanistic perspective—honoring the unique individual experience of being a part of a same-sex couple, valuing self-awareness and self-acceptance, attending to personal meaning, and embracing genuine human connection—can help partners learn to balance their individual differences with a developing interdependent relationship (Kottler & Montgomery, 2011).

All of the stages of couple development previously described reflect different forms of interdependence among partners. By successfully addressing the unique challenges of each stage in premarital counseling, new forms of interdependence can be developed that mark each person's connection with the other.

It is noteworthy that some same-sex couples come to premarital education after having been together for 10 to 15 years (D. Donato, personal communication, October 5, 2009). In these cases, partners may have moved through the confluence stage and worked through a significant portion of the difficulties associated with the differentiation stage. Thus, the concerns that these couples may have are likely to be related to the challenges that characterize the integration stage of Mullen's (1997) couple development model.

Longstanding couples can benefit from premarital education programs that include structures and topics adapted to meet their needs. Although a premarital education group might be of benefit to couples in the confluence and differentiation stages, couple counseling could be tailored specifically to address other issues that couples operating from the integration stage might experience. This may include raising partners' awareness of the

ways in which each person may continue to promote existing imbalances in the relationship that result in stress and frustration and exploring ways to ameliorate this dynamic.

## IMPLEMENTING A HUMANISTIC SOCIAL JUSTICE APPROACH

Using the perspective of social justice and humanistic lenses with couples in each relationship stage provides opportunities for counselors to be both with and for their clients (Kottler & Montgomery, 2011). Counselors can further validate same-sex and bisexual couples' unique journeys, mutually created couple identity, and sexual orientations to wellness by advocating for systemic changes that address the various forms of injustice and oppression that these persons experience.

Beginning with the self of the therapist, a counselor embodying humanistic values and assuming attitudes of compassion, respect, dignity, and unconditional positive regard may provide a welcome oasis for a couple seeking someone to support their relationship in premarital counseling and education settings (Kottler & Hazler, 2001). Specific interventions for same-sex and bisexual couples may include exploring and expressing wounds they have experienced from an oppressive culture, learning communication methods for supporting each partner's healing and wholeness, and strategizing proactively to foster changes in legal and economic systems to secure their relationship.

Beyond working directly with same-sex and bisexual couples, counselors can partner with community agencies to work toward civil relationship support and legal recognition. Counselors who are oriented toward social justice could offer workshops and retreats in collaboration with local LGB resource centers to support couples prior to and after marriage. Moreover, counselors could provide training workshops for clergy and judges to raise awareness of systemic barriers to successful LGB couple development and offer educational services that are designed to increase same-sex and bisexual couples' knowledge of their legal rights and provide information about existing affirmative premarital programs in their community.

## CONCLUSION

This article presents a rationale for implementing premarital counseling and education services that address issues of interest and concern to same-sex and opposite-sex couples. Counselors and educators are encouraged to tailor such programs to address the needs of persons who are operating at different stages of Mullen's (1997) couple development model described previously.

We also describe some of the ways that counselors and educators can use social justice advocacy services when working with same-sex couples in particular (Lyons, 2001; Ratts, 2009). Consistent with the Advocacy Competencies endorsed by the American Counseling Association (Lewis,

Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2002), these services can be designed to address both micro- and macrolevel injustices that have an adverse impact on the mental health and well-being of many same-sex and bisexual couples.

Implications for practice of microlevel advocacy services include the development of premarital counseling programs that are inclusive of the needs of LGB persons, especially those negatively affected by various forms of injustice, discrimination, and oppression because of their sexual orientation. The concerns and issues to be covered when developing such programs include the following:

- Legal concerns
- Relationship issues resulting from societal discrimination and sexual orientation disclosure
- The unique needs of couples who have been together for many years prior to seeking premarital counseling and educational services
- Ways to nurture healthy relationship development within a social context that perpetuates discrimination and bias
- Strategies to develop supportive social networks
- Specific concerns expressed by bisexual partners related to societal discrimination, invisibility, and the personal meaning of bisexuality in clients' relationships with others

The development of programs to address these and related issues could be strengthened by linking same-sex and bisexual couples with role-model couples who have experienced and successfully resolved various issues and challenges regarding their sexual identities.

Examples of macrolevel advocacy efforts that could be integrated in such programs include (a) consulting with legal agencies about ways to lobby for support for legislation that guarantees the marriage rights of same-sex couples, (b) offering workshops and retreats in collaboration with local LGB resource centers to support couples prior to and after marriage, and (c) providing training workshops for clergy and judges to raise awareness of systemic barriers to successful and healthy LGB couple development.

Counselors and educators who are humanistic and social-justice oriented have a professional responsibility to support an expansion in research endeavors that would increase the collective understanding of different issues related to premarital counseling and education services for same-sex couples and couples with a bisexual partner. Among the specific types of research we recommend for future investigation are studies that examine the unique concerns of LGB persons in relationships, supportive factors contributing to the success and resiliency of relationships involving LGB persons, and the design and efficacy of premarital programming for sexual minority couples.

In summary, most premarital counseling services are not meeting the unique needs of sexual minority couples. By designing, implementing, and evaluating

programs that attend to couple development, relationship issues, and existing discrimination, counselors positively nurture the relationships of partners as they prepare to marry. In doing so, scholar practitioners also advocate for the recognition, dignity, and equality of both same-sex and opposite-sex couples.

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