

A spirited identity

ADRIAN Coyle is prolific. A senior lecturer at the University of Surrey with a PhD in social psychology, and joint director there of the practitioner doctorate in psychotherapy and counselling psychology, he is also Honorary Secretary of the Lesbian and Gay Psychology Section of the BPS, and has played a pivotal role in its development. As he says: 'I am quite happy to have a fragmented and flexible professional profile! I still see myself primarily as a social psychologist, but one who takes ideas and theories from social psychology and applies them in lesbian psychology, counselling psychology and whatever other domain my interests might take me into.' With a wide range of areas up for discussion, we forged ahead.

Sexual and cultural identity
'Sexual identity, and identity generally, has been an abiding interest for me,' Adrian explained. 'The story of the intersection between sexual identity and ethnic and cultural identity is only beginning to be told in this country, and that sparked Deborah Rafalin and myself to undertake some work into looking at sexual, cultural and religious identity among Jewish gay men (Coyle & Rafalin, 2000). We did a qualitative study using interpretative

JIM McCOURT meets Adrian Coyle.

phenomenological analysis, and interviewed 21 Jewish gay men who varied in terms of the branches of Judaism to which they belonged – from orthodox to liberal – and in their levels of religious observance. However, being Jewish was something that was important to almost all the men who took part.

'We were interested in how these men managed to hold a Jewish identity and a gay identity simultaneously. To many outside observers, these identity components would appear to be in ideological conflict; there is an apparent prohibition of same-sex sexual activity in Jewish scriptures, and traditional family relations play a central role within Jewish culture. Many had arrived at creative, innovative and very principled solutions to this task, albeit with some compartmentalisation – for many of them, their world seemed to be divided up into the Jewish and gay aspects.

'We were expecting to hear conflict about how men who defined themselves as gay found it difficult to integrate the Jewish aspect, and were surprised at the extent to which Jewish identity wasn't simply

abandoned, but remained salient. Instead, some of these men talked about how difficult it was to be Jewish in gay contexts. We had assumed that gay identity would take priority but for some of our participants, that wasn't the case – they were primarily Jewish men who were also gay.'

Adrian hopes the results of this study can help inform the practice of people working with clients facing such conflicts of identity. He says: 'We would like to see a continuing attentiveness among practitioners to issues of diversity and difference, whether this be to do with ethnic and cultural diversity or sexual diversity.'

That's affirmative
We moved on to discuss another significant body of work – research into psychotherapy with lesbian and gay clients, an area where Martin Milton, Phyllis Annesley and Adrian have been working for some years (Annesley & Coyle, 1998; Milton & Coyle, 1998). One current project is looking at countertransference issues with lesbian and gay clients – the therapist's cognitive, affective and behavioural responses to the client. Another, more major undertaking, is considering the extent to which various therapy models might be adaptable to work with lesbian and gay clients. Adrian explains the study as a grounded theory piece of work: 'The aim is to work from data to develop a theory of the research topic, rather than starting with theory and collecting data to test it. We are trying to theorise lesbian and gay affirmative practice and identify the main qualities of affirmative lesbian and gay therapy. An affirmative approach does not pathologise lesbian and gay sexualities but seeks to affirm these sexualities as being of equal value to heterosexuality, whilst acknowledging the ways in which they differ from heterosexuality.

'Martin Milton conducted interviews with therapists who claimed to be working in an affirmative manner, and with clients who claimed to have experienced therapy



that they regarded as lesbian and gay affirmative. What struck me was the overlap between accounts of lesbian and gay affirmative therapy and principles of good practice with any client group, which was reassuring, because we weren't talking about something radically different. We were simply reminding people about the principles of good practice and the ways those principles look when you apply them to therapeutic practice with lesbian and gay clients – so there was talk about acceptance, validation and respect. There was also talk of things like respect for diversity and difference.

'We were seeking to discover if lesbian and gay affirmative therapy is a radically different way of operating, or if it can be regarded as something akin to CBT, or psychodynamic approaches or whatever. We concluded that it is not a theory in that sense – it is a stance, akin to feminist therapy for example. It can be potentially grafted on to other theoretical approaches to therapy, so you could potentially have psychodynamic lesbian and gay affirmative therapy, or lesbian and gay affirmative CBT.

'Our participants talked about the need for therapists to be aware of the gaps in their knowledge, and to take responsibility for filling those gaps in their reading and supervision or whatever, but also to be prepared to draw upon the client to help fill in those gaps.'

Spirituality

The third major area we discussed was spirituality, which has long been an interest for Adrian and which may be about to undergo a resurgence in psychology research and practice. He and Richard Golsworthy have recently completed research examining the uses of spirituality and religion within therapeutic contexts (Golsworthy & Coyle, 1999, 2001). As Adrian explains: 'Therapists are overlooking a potentially very rich resource which they can make use of within the therapeutic context if only they know how. We interviewed older adults about the ways in which their religious views helped them to deal with the loss of their partner. Spirituality had been a hugely important coping resource for these individuals.

'We then asked therapists who specialised in bereavement issues how they made use of religious ideas, and spiritual beliefs with their clients. They talked very readily and easily about how they were able to use such ideas. We are hoping that the research will provide practitioners with a sense of how religious and spiritual

beliefs can potentially be used not only in bereavement work but also in other domains as well.'

Change the world or don't bother

Over and above specific topics, research methodologies are a major focus for Adrian. He discussed his experiences of using interpretative phenomenological analysis, grounded theory, discourse analysis, factor analysis, multiple regression, and his involvement with social constructionist and postmodernist perspectives, explaining: 'I tend to conceptualise my research work in terms of methods and epistemologies. They are tools and languages that I use in different ways to achieve different ends in relation to different topics, and the likelihood of those methods giving me data which will be heard and will be acted upon. People tend to use methods without an appreciation of the epistemology that goes with them, and that really worries me. You cannot just choose a method off the shelf. You have to be aware of the history that you bring with you, and the epistemology underpinning research methods.'

The need for research projects to have practical applicability and be linked to real-life concerns is an important issue for Adrian. He says 'It is a constant mantra that I give to our trainees here in the counselling psychology and clinical psychology doctorates, that if you don't want to change the world with your research, then, frankly, don't bother. I want to see people undertaking research that they feel passionate and committed about, doing work on real-life issues, and making a difference. Being involved in projects that interest me intellectually and where I perceive a need for change – these are the things that fire or motivate me. Psychology needs a real-life edge.'

This sense of Adrian's commitment and enthusiasm is shown most clearly in relation to lesbian and gay psychology. 'The establishment of the Lesbian and Gay Psychology Section within the BPS is the aspect of my work that I am proudest of. It was a long, protracted struggle, but we were very determined and got there. Our aim is to make lesbian and gay psychology as much of a taken-for-granted part of psychology as developmental psychology, or social psychology, or whatever. With Celia Kitzinger, I have just published a new textbook on the issues: *Lesbian and Gay Psychology: New Perspectives* (BPS Blackwell).

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'One idea as to how we might foster lesbian and gay psychology was to establish a prize for postgraduate research. This was inaugurated in 2000, and three prize-winning entries were published in *Lesbian and Gay Psychology Review* [the Section's publication] in July last year. It was exciting to see the quality and calibre of research that is going on, and very reassuring to think that lesbian and gay psychology is in such safe hands.'

The combination of optimism, creativity and hard work was evident through all of our discussion. This must surely bode well for even greater achievements to come for Dr Adrian Coyle.

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