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A reflection

from

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An invitation into complexities

I very much enjoyed reading Bill's paper and hearing about the work that he and his community are doing to address the effects of homophobia in the lives of the men who ring Gay Switchboard. As a heterosexual man who works with men and young men whose lives have been affected by sexual abuse, I find the influence of homophobia in men's lives is becoming increasingly apparent and important to me.

In my conversations with young men, I regularly hear of the ways in which homophobia is used to intimidate them, and how it influences their considerations of choice in their sexual lives. This seems true for young men regardless of how they might be identifying in relation to their sexual orientation. Of course for young men who identify as gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or are identified by others as such, there are the effects of discrimination and often violence to contend with as well.

For men who have had experiences of child sexual abuse from other men – and it is important to clarify that this abuse is mostly perpetrated by men who

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are living heterosexual lives – homophobia can have particularly complex and destructive effects. Sometimes homophobia, when linked with an abusive same-sex experience, can invite men into thinking that any same-sex feeling, desire or action that they have must in some way be linked to the abuse. For men who have experienced abuse and who also experience same-sex desire, this can really encourage destructive self-blame. Homophobia can also invite people into thinking that the abusive experiences they suffered were terrible because the acts involved same-sex sex and this can make invisible the power dynamics that made the abuse what it was.

In my experience, these complexities mean that it is really important in a counselling situation to be allowing room for men and young men to define their sexuality and sexual identity in whatever way is appropriate for them. I have found it helpful to invite those who consult with me to be open to the idea that sexuality and sexual identity is not fixed, and how for many men and women it can and does change throughout life and in different contexts.

In having conversations with men who have experienced same-sex abuse, I have found it very important to invite conversations that allow men to articulate and name their experiences as abuses of power. Considering the effects of power in situations of abuse makes it clear that entering into these sexual acts was not a choice that they were making. What can also be significant is to be able to share some of the sorts of conversations that I've had with other men about the confusion that sexual abuse can bring, so that no man has to feel alone with confusion around these issues.

One of the other things I find relevant in these conversations is to contextualise them in relation to dominant constructions of masculinity. I try to make clear that talking openly with another man about intimate experiences requires some skills and qualities as it is an act that challenges dominant constructions of masculinity. To enter into these conversations often indicates hopes and dreams about different ways that life could be for a man, and we can explore these in therapy. I am also careful to contextualise the fact that there are few places where it is 'safe' or wise to be talking with other men about same-sex desire, and that sometimes not talking about these things has been a sign of good judgement. I try to find ways to make it clear that I am comfortable and willing to talk about same-sex attraction and sexuality – not only in relation to acts of abuse, but also as choices in the realm of delight, love and hope.

One of the real hopes I had while reading Bill's article was thinking how it may inspire others, particularly those like myself within the heterosexual community, to think about our responsibilities in addressing homophobia. I was reminded of the article 'Questioning sexuality' by Mark Trudinger, Cameron Boyd and Peter Melrose (1998), and I am very interested in considering this questioning further.

If homophobia was not something that young men had to contend with in relation to dealing with the effects of sexual abuse, I believe it would be much less intimidating for young men to speak out about abuse. And if it was less intimidating for young men to speak out about abuse, it would make a difference for how long men would have to carry around the effects of the abuse in their lives. These ideas are really understandings that have come from my conversations with men who have spoken about the ways in which homophobia was used to intimidate them into silence. I remember one man saying to me, 'If homophobia wasn't around, it would make it a lot harder for men that abuse to get away with it'. This was a really important thought for this man. The men who had abused him were heterosexual men and he believed that if they had not had homophobia as an ally in secrecy, his life would have been far less affected by sexual abuse.

If homophobia was less present in our culture, I think we might also be able to get clearer about what it is that constitutes sexual abuse. Perhaps if the broader community addressed homophobia, it would also make it easier to delineate between abusive same-sex experiences, coercive same-sex experiences, confusing but kind of mutually muddily same-sex experiences, consenting and delightful same-sex experiences, transformative same-sex experiences etc. etc. With homophobia reduced, we'd be able to develop richer descriptions of sex, both heterosexual and homosexual. I think this would make it easier for all of us to have a language to better describe our experiences.

In working with men and young men who are trying to come to terms with the effects of sexual abuse, and who are trying to construct a sexual identity that fits for them, my concern is how to ensure that they have the space, the language, the tools and the time to do this in their own way. Some may identify strongly as gay, bisexual, transgender or heterosexual. Others may be finding their way between or through all these different understandings.

Somehow tied up with homophobia is the idea that if you as a man have a forced same-sex experience, this will necessarily change your sexual identity –

that somehow experiencing coerced same-sex means that you are gay. This can become further complicated if men have experienced any physiological arousal from the experience. Because of these societal beliefs, it seems all the more important that in a counselling situation men can find their own way – be that to embrace a homosexual, heterosexual or other sexual identity.

Finally, there are also complexities present in relation to exploring sparkling sexual moments. I believe that when asking men about their first same-sex sexual experiences, it is important to recognise that these may not necessarily have been sparkling at all. They may have occurred in a context of shame, or a context of tentativeness, or even coercion. Or, their first sexual experiences may not have been sparkling at the time, but have come to be seen as sparkling in hindsight – that they were first steps towards a preferred identity. Alternatively the reverse could be true, there have been incidences in my life which at the time I saw as sparkling but later came to understand differently.

So in conversations about these matters, I am interested in hearing people's own judgements about what have been sparkling moments in their lives in relation to their sexual identity. These may or may not be their early sexual experiences, whether the person identifies as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, transgender or queer.

Sparkling moments in relation to sexual identity might not even relate to specific sexual acts; instead they may involve ways of relating that are associated with a certain sexual orientation. I think these explorations can lead to rich conversations.

I am interested in checking out whether an event really is a sparkling moment, by asking questions like: 'Would you see this as a sparkling moment in your stands against homophobia?', or 'Would you see this as a beginning point in your stand against homophobia?'. Or perhaps a predictive question such as, 'In five years' time, how do you think you'd see this moment?' In relation to people's early sexual experiences, be they same-sex or different-sex experiences, I'd be interested in leaving some space for movement in interpretation of the events. The influences of homophobia, of puritan attitudes towards sexuality in our culture, and the incidence of sexual abuse mean that issues of sexuality and sexual identity have a complexity that we as counsellors need to acknowledge and work with. I think Bill's paper is a great invitation into considering these complexities and finding ways for us all to address the many differing effects of homophobia.