CHALLENGING TIMES: NAVIGATING RELATIONSHIP DISSOLUTION AND STEPFAVILY REFORMATION IN LESBIAN AND GAY FAMILIES

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Gay and Lesbian Families

- What makes the experience of relationship dissolution different?
- What challenges might lesbian and gay couples and families face as they form stepfamilies?
- How do these differences inform our work as counselors?
Themes

- Invisibility
- Social isolation
- Intersectionality
- Identity
- Grief/Loss
- Disenfranchisement
- Social Pressure
Family of choice is often constructed by members; therefore, traditional models/structures for navigating dissolutions do not fit.

- **Ambiguous loss**
  - **Definition**
    - Relational perspective conceptualizes stress as externally caused and ongoing.
    - Much more stressful than ordinary loss because “the assault never lets up” (Boss as cited in Allen, 2007).
  - Relationship may or may not have been legally recognized or involved a formal ceremony.
  - If legally recognized, may not be able to divorce where they live.
Relationship Dissolution for Lesbian and Gay Couples

- Activating trigger for unresolved internalized negative stereotypes
  - Instability/impermanence of lesbian/gay relationships
  - Guilt and self-blame
  - Shame
  - Self-doubt
    - Relationships
    - Parenting
Relationship Dissolution for Lesbian and Gay Couples

- Social stressors
  - Reactions of others
  - Continual need to explain change in family structure in child’s world
    - School
    - Birthday parties
    - Pediatrician
  - Name changes
    - Legitimizes connections
    - Renders connections invisible
Relationship Dissolution for Lesbian and Gay Couples

- Additional stressors related to children’s experience
  - Intersectionality of disenfranchised statuses
    - Sexual minority family
    - Family dissolution
  - Isolation
    - Externally imposed
    - Self-imposed
  - Loyalty/Betrayal
    - How many different words are there for mom or dad?
Stepfamily Reformation

- **Coming out**
  - Lesbian and gay families have “none of the social, legal, or ritualistic grounding that accompanies heterosexual unions” (Lynch, 2004, p. 50)

- **Identity shifts**
  - Changing family type (nuclear to stepfamily)
  - Change in status from single to partnered
  - For stepparents, being confronted with “the juxtaposition of a new parenthood role (a status which typically meets with social approval) onto a socially disapproved role, homosexual identity” (Lynch, 2004, p. 51)

- **Identity shifts are compounded by:**
  - Social and legal barriers
  - Unrecognized status of gay/lesbian families
  - Poorly defined and stigmatized stepparent role
Stepparent Role in Lesbian and Gay Families

- Stepparent role is “incompletely institutionalized,” as there are few or no guidelines (Lynch, 2004)

- For lesbian/gay families, stepparent role is not only “incompletely institutionalized,” it is invisible

- Not accompanied by social or legal approval

- Role as nonbiological parent for gay persons “directly confronts the proscription regarding homosexuality and parenthood” (Lynch, 2004, p. 52)

- An absence of recognition and support from family of origin may exist and initially does exist from newly formed family

- Lack of support from heterosexual community and little from the gay/lesbian community

- “The status acquisition of the stepparent role, unlike that of heterosexual stepparents increases feelings of marginality reminiscent of the earliest stage of homosexual identity transformation” (Lynch, 2004, p. 52)

- Coming out as gay/lesbian parent
Counseling Interventions

- Theoretical frameworks
  - Multicultural and relational theories
  - Traditional models of grief/loss
  - Ambiguous loss
  - Coming out
  - Stepparent identity transformation
    - Anticipatory socialization
    - Identity adjustment
    - Identity resolution and commitment
Counseling Interventions

- Specific techniques/interventions
  - Assess
    - Stage of identity transformation for family members
    - Level of support within family, extended family, and community
    - Current family dynamics
  - Identifying difficulties as typical stressors
    - Help clients depersonalize the source of many external, persistent stressors
  - Validate and normalize experience
Specific techniques/Interventions, cont.

- Coping skills
  - What sources of strength do the clients have?
- Developing resilience
- Creating support systems and a sense of community
- Support groups
- Bibliotherapy
References

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