Queer meaning

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Introduction

It is may be both surprising and challenging to encounter a chapter on queer people in a volume on religion, spirituality and social work. For many people, both queer and non-queer, the very notion that we might talk about religion and spirituality at the same time we consider sexual and gender minorities is epistemologically dissonant. These seem to be exclusive categories that simply do not fit together in either historical or contemporary discourse. Yet a major task of a minoritised identity or experience of difference is to make sense of that identity or difference (Park and Folkman 1997; Plattner and Meiring 2006; Solomon 2012). If we understand spirituality as a kind of meaning making activity (Lips-Wiersma 2002), then there is something quite spiritual about a minoritised or marginalised individual’s search for meaning. On the other hand, religions, which are formalised institutions with specific codes of beliefs, practices and boundaries that usually reflect dominant social norms, often have difficulties managing differences of the sexual kind (Boellstorff 2005; Buchanan et al. 2001; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith 1986; Fone 2000; Siraj 2012). The challenge to social work, with its core principles of social justice and human rights, and its mandate to respect diversities (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW] and the International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW] 2014), is to support clients, and the families, institutions and policymakers with which they engage, to manage these differences and challenges. Providing a perspective from which to do that is the goal of this chapter.

This chapter will not address the profound spiritual crisis caused by HIV disease particularly in gay male communities since the 1980s. This is not to ignore the importance of this pandemic in any way; rather, this spiritual crisis merits specific attention, and has already been addressed by a rich literature (see for instance, Cotton et al. 2006; Fortunato 1987; Jacobson et al. 2006; Miller 2005; Simoni et al. 2002).

A note on language

The taxonomy of sexual identity is complex, and there is little agreement even (or perhaps especially) among people who write and talk frequently about sexual and gender identities. Western
notions of identity are reflected in English language labels such as ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, ‘bisexual’, ‘trans*’, and so forth, but in many cultures such essentialised and individuated categories have no meaning, and there are cultures and languages with more than two gender signifiers. Binary identities such as ‘gay’ and ‘straight’, and even ‘male’ and ‘female’, have been replaced by contemporary understandings of sexualities and genders as multidimensional continua (Teich 2012). Current academic writing often uses the inclusive language ‘sexual and gender minorities’ as an attempt to reflect the broad scope of these concepts, and that is the language that will be used here. In this chapter the word ‘queer’ is also used deliberately, to underscore and reclaim a term of bullying and hate, to align with the contemporary scholarships of queer theory and queer theology (e.g. Cheng 2011; Cornwall 2010), and to highlight the multifarious meanings of queer – which synonyms can include surprising, astonishing, funny, perplexing, odd, curious and unexpected. Sexual and gender minorities are all of those things. Words (such as ‘heterosexual’, which did not appear in print until the 1930s) are used anachronistically for the sake of brevity and clarity.

**Heteronormativity**

Much of social work theory and education has used the heuristic of the cultural ‘other’ about sexual and gender minorities in order to learn about them as separate phenomena or cultural variants (Mallon 2008). Enlightened introductory social work textbooks now include sections on how important it is to learn to work with sexual and gender minorities because of high rates of depression and other mental health disorders, substance misuse, suicidality and other social problems in these communities. Such approaches can label sexual and gender minorities as broken – as sad, mad and bad. *Coming out* is constructed as a kind of ontological crisis, which the young (or mature) person must undergo as though it were an unavoidable rite of passage to an essential sexual or gender minority identity. Coming out is understood as a coming to terms with the ‘real’ (essentialised) self, and rejecting the norms, conventions and ways of validating knowledge with which the individual has been brought up. Thus constructed, coming out is not an isolated event, but is a process that the gender or sexual minority person undertakes throughout their entire lifespan, often beginning with a family of origin, and continuing through teachers, coaches, health care providers, national censuses, workplaces, social gatherings, banks, insurance documents, religious institutions, hotel clerks, lawyers and funeral directors.

However, this taken-for-granted step fails to recognise that the need to come out is necessitated by a socio-political context that constructs minoritised sexual and gender identities as unusual or variant. This socio-political context is called *heteronormativity*, the assumption that heterosexuality, and its accompanying rights, institutions and privileges (including reproduction) is natural, inevitable or desirable (Kitzinger 2005; Montgomery and Stewart 2012). Heteronormativity assumes heterosexuality implicitly, and explicitly writes it into the laws of many nations and states: the assumptions, for instance, that opposite-sex marriage was somehow divinely instituted, and remained intact and consistent for all classes throughout human history; normal families require both a mother and father; and/or certain kinds of sexual behaviour are criminal. The management of sexual and gender minorities with arrest, incarceration, shock treatment, physical and chemical castration and (in some nations) torture, stoning and death, are examples of how the state has managed and continues to manage sexual and gender minorities (Fone 2000). Although she was speaking of women, Adrienne Rich, the late American poet, could have been speaking of all sexual and gender minorities when she wrote ‘Heterosexuality has had to be imposed, managed, organized propagandized and maintained by force’ (1980/1986: 50). It is these realities that make coming out as a sexual minoritised person
hardly a taken-for-granted step, but an act of great courage and integrity. Acknowledgement of one’s sexual or gender minority status also requires resituating oneself in the context of one’s cultural norms; this, in turn, creates the need to rediscover or redefine the meaning of one’s identity.

Religious institutions are inheritors, and even guardians, of cisgendered heteronormativity. Religious scriptures are (often selectively) interpreted as condemning anything other than heterosexuality as aberrant, sinful or disgraceful. Heterosexual milestones such as marriage and birth are celebrated with public ceremony. Since about 1000 CE (Fone 2000), church leaders have often been at the forefront of ensuring that heterosexual values are retained and promoted; and these messages of exclusion and stigma have been widely circulated in popular and social media. It is these messages that sexual and gender minority persons read, mark, learn and inwardly digest; they know that they are not welcome.

While the gaze of social work on sexual and gender minorities as cultural variants is perhaps an inevitable and positive first step in breaking away from the power of the state and religion, contemporary queer discourse challenges this heuristic because such an approach constructs sexual and gender minorities as objects of knowledge (Hicks 2008). Such approaches problematise sexual and gender minorities, and fail to critique the dominant paradigm of cisgendered heteronormativity, which creates the experience of alienation in the first instance. It is not the minoritised sexual or gender identity, then, that creates the crisis of meaning: it is the larger social-political and religious context of heteronormativity that creates the spiritual crisis.

To complicate matters further, there is a growing challenge within sexual and gender minority communities in developed Western nations to an emerging phenomenon called homonormativity. Homonormativity is a late-twentieth and twenty-first century notion that equality with middle class, cisgendered heterosexuals – the rights to marry, to birth or adopt children, etc. – is a desirable goal (Cocker and Hafford-Letchfield 2010). A complex challenge has emerged for sexual and gender minorities: on the one hand, legal and social inequalities remain battles (like marriage equality) that once engaged cannot be lost; on the other, sexual and gender minorities increasingly insist that only they have the right to establish ontological and epistemic meaning for themselves (why reproduce the meaning of heterosexual marriage in same-sex relationships?). This challenge could easily be misconstrued as mere political discourse, and to non-queer people something akin to perseverating at trivia. Yet striving for autonomy – the right to define oneself, to establish where one belongs and to create a meaningful way of living – is a meaning-making activity, and thus a spiritual one.

Meaning-making is not simply an activity that asks relatively simple questions about whether a queer person is acceptable to their god. The awareness that one is not as one thought, that one is ontologically different from one’s family, one’s peers, one’s culture and society, is a shattering one. The self is fractured. The known reality is forever and completely changed; all the ‘truths’ that the queer person has learned about themselves either implicitly or explicitly must be reassessed, and reinterpreted into the new identity, or rejected. The meaning-making process for a sexual or gender minority person is a multidimensional one, which seeks to locate the person horizontally in family, society and culture, vertically in one’s beliefs about the universe, and historically both in the life course of a person and in their sociopolitical context.

Heteronormativity, then, creates a crisis of identity in queer people, which perplexes non-queer people – Why do they always have to talk about it? – and which queer people must resolve in some way. As we shall see, for people who understand themselves as religious, both queer and non-queer, it is not surprising that a primary resource to addressing this crisis is a faith community.
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Spirituality and religion as meaning-making

One of the essential challenges of a sexual or gender minority identity is the experience of alienation, or not belonging. The early and ontological experience of (usually) being different from one’s birth family and one’s peer group is at the core of the experience of self (Solomon 2012) as the sexual or gender minority person attempts to find meaning in the experience of difference. A queer identity is an individuated identity – it is not something that is shared with a family, tribe or kin collective, and so the process of finding meaning in the identity is, inevitably, an individual one. Much of the contemporary literature in the field of sexuality and spirituality comes from the counselling discipline. The literature is almost universal in demonstrating the importance for individual mental health of reconciling one’s identity with one’s religious and spiritual values. While it is admirable that counsellors are researching and publishing in this area, the predominant paradigm in counselling is a reflexive-therapeutic one, which locates problems in individuals, and helps individuals to adjust to an unchanging or unchangeable environment. A core challenge to the helping professionals who work with sexual and gender minorities is not to replicate the oppression of problematising those individuals by *a priori* locating the problem in them rather than the social context. In other words, simply because the meaning-making process is individuated does not mean that the problem is in the individual. Social work, on the other hand, accesses a variety of paradigms when working with clients, and recognises that sometimes problems are in environments. We shall return to this later in the chapter.

Searching for meaning by sexual and gender minority persons not infrequently begins in the context of a formal religious organisation (Buchanan et al. 2001; Figueroa and Tasker 2014; Gold and Stewart 2011; Hattie and Beagan 2013; Yip 2002). However, as we have seen, many, if not most, formal religious organisations have had at best an antipathetic relationship with sexual and gender minorities; many of these religions, while outwardly expressing love and charity, struggle to navigate from outright condemnation to tolerance (Hamblin and Gross 2014; Melendez and LaSala 2006). A major developmental task of sexual and gender minority individuals is to reconcile their personal experiences of identity with the discourse of exclusion by their faith communities (Guttiérrez 2012; Kocet et al. 2011; Levy and Reeves 2011; Murr 2013; Siraj 2012; Walker and Longmire-Avital 2013). Screeds of text, some of it useful, have been written about what religions and religious texts, particularly the monotheistic Abrahamic religions, have claimed about sexual and gender minorities (Hunt 2003; Irby 2014; Rosik et al. 2007), and Hunt’s (2015) extensive anthology contains an array of articles on managing the queer self in Christianity, Judaism and Islam. The experience for most sexual and gender minority persons is that what religions have to say about them is often unhelpful, and at worst hateful. Reviewing and responding to that literature and those theologies is beyond the scope of this chapter. Contemporary scholarship and queer theologies propose alternative hermeneutics and ways of approaching problematic texts.

The negotiation of sexuality in the context of formal religions can be a major life task in the lives of emerging sexual and gender minorities, and for some remains contended throughout the life course (Boellstorff 2005; Cheng 2011) as they struggle to maintain a relationship with formal religions (Dollahite and Lambert 2007; Eliason et al. 2011; Henrickson and Staniforth 2012). The resolution for many is to leave their faith communities. A New Zealand study, for instance, found that lesbian, gay and bisexual respondents to a national survey were leaving Christianity at 2.37 times the rate of the general population (which was also increasingly unchurched). Sexual minority respondents who claimed ‘no religion’ experienced significantly more support from their families of origin, and reported that their families were significantly more likely to include a same-sex partner in family occasions, than those who reported that they were currently
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Tan (2005) found that lesbian and gay respondents who had high existential wellbeing, or spiritual lives, had higher self-esteem, lower internalised homophobia and a lower sense of alienation than those who expressed a sense of religious wellbeing. He suggests that this may be because his respondents had to look beyond organised religion to seek more comprehensive answers to the meaning of existence and faith. Indeed, there is evidence to support that the longer a gay or lesbian person has lived that identity, the more satisfied they are with their lives, even when compared with life satisfaction in heterosexual persons (Henrickson and Neville 2012). Apparently it really does get better, but as queer youth now ask, why should they have to wait?

There are some mainstream religious organisations that welcome sexual and gender minorities (e.g. see chapter on ‘LGBTQ affirming environments’ in Hunt 2015), and recent polls, such as the May 2015 vote on marriage equality in traditionally Roman Catholic Ireland, and the evolving position of mainstream churches on marriage equality (e.g. the Anglican Church of Canada), suggest that some established religions may be becoming more flexible in respect of full and open inclusion of sexual and gender minorities. There are queer-affirming groups in many mainstream religions today, including the Latter Day Saints and Islam. The dissolution of the ‘ex–gay’ Christian organisation Exodus International in 2013, and their public apology for the pain and hurt their so-called ‘reparative therapies’ (which seek to ‘repair’ homosexuals by claiming to convert them to heterosexuality) had caused (Sundby 2013) seems a step towards recognising how fraught relationships have been between some faith communities and sexual and gender minorities. It is also a public recognition of the futility of attempting to change something as fundamental as sexuality. Additionally, there are established parallel religious organisations catering specifically for sexual and gender minorities. However, Maher (2006) has suggested that such parallel organisations are on the fringes of both religious life and gay and lesbian life.

The role of social work

Social workers are often motivated by their own religious and spiritual beliefs to altruism and to help others. Social workers and gender and sexual minorities who encounter one another in these complex processes and contexts therefore face significant challenges. Social work in this practice area has, I suggest, four tasks:

1. Social workers must understand themselves, and their personal values and motivations around sexuality and gender. Social work values are clearly set out in international ethics documentation (International Federation of Social Work 2012): principles such as human rights, human dignity and social justice set a framework for self-determination, the right to participation, treating each person as a whole, and identifying and developing strengths are a part of our natural discourse; we oppose negative discrimination, recognise diversity and challenge unjust policies and practices. At the same time many social workers come to their work with their own religious and spiritual backgrounds and beliefs about an alphabet of social issues from abortion through to young girls and the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine. Some workers may be members of faith communities that are hostile or antipathetic to sexual and gender minorities. If a social worker approaches a sexual or gender minority client with an attitude of ‘I’m going to save you’, or even ‘I don’t believe in your lifestyle but I can work with you anyway’, then the work is doomed from the start. Such attitudes are unprofessional, uninformed and arrogant. The client will sense such attitudes immediately, and will react by closing down or not engaging. Claims have been
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made – and addressed – that ignoring the heteronormative values of a practitioner is a kind of oppression, but such claims ignore the tremendous position of privilege and power that heterosexuals enjoy. The social worker with such attitudes has more work to do on him/herself before they can work in this area.

2 Social workers must have a clear understanding of their personal beliefs about sexual and gender identities, and understand how those beliefs are informed by science. Social workers must be very careful not to replicate gender and sexual binaries. Social workers need to understand that we encounter individuals at moments in time, and that identities, behaviours and relationships evolve over time – and sometimes very brief amounts of time. A young woman who identified herself as lesbian last week may well describe an intimate romantic relationship she is having with a man today. A client who self-identified as male a month ago may identify as genderqueer today. We need to set aside our own expectations and simply encounter the client where they are. Healthy and respectful curiosity is useful in a social worker, because when we engage respectfully with clients we can help them to articulate the questions they have about themselves and their beliefs.

3 Social workers must understand the importance of meaning-making for queer clients, and how important it is to reconcile individual identities with spiritual and religious beliefs. This means that social workers must understand the underlying experience of alienation that gender and sexual minority communities feel from cisgendered, heteronormative institutions such as marriage, families and religions. It requires empathy for the confusion and often deep longing that accompanies this experience of alienation, particularly when these institutions are important to the client. Such empathy may mean respectfully challenging, and perhaps helping someone to exit from, faith systems or institutions that oppress or exclude them, or insist that they change or conform in order to be re-accepted. But social workers who treat sexual and gender minority persons as broken, or in need of help or guidance solely because of their sexuality, do so at their peril, for in doing so they may fail to recognise and critique their own complicity in promoting heteronormative values.

4 Social workers must have a clear understanding of the pervasiveness of cisgendered heteronormativity, and the effect heteronormativity has on themselves, on sexual and gender minorities and on religious institutions. They must work beyond a reflexive therapeutic paradigm that locates problems in individuals, and recognise that sometimes environments must also change. If a religious institution in a community is still touting ‘reparative therapy’, for instance, then social workers must use their advocacy skills to shut it down as both dangerous and unethical. Good social workers will know the supportive individuals and resources in their communities, and be able to link sexual and gender minority individuals with those resources. It is not the role of social work specifically to address matters of faith or belief, of course. But it is part of our responsibility to point out where those beliefs become self-oppressive, and how maintaining negative beliefs can affect the entire ecology of an individual. Meaning-making can occur in healthy, life- and identity-affirming ways, and the social worker can accompany the client and their families on that important journey.

This chapter promised a perspective to support social workers in helping clients, families, institutions and policymakers to manage differences associated with being a sexual or gender minority. That perspective is quite simply to be an informed, self-aware social worker, who does not replicate heteronormative oppression and stigma. The praxis is to work with clients from a vantage of respect for both person and process. This is both easy and difficult. Readers will know how to be good social work practitioners, but somehow when it comes to something
as fundamental as gender, sexuality and identity, professional values can become lost in personal values, opinions and experiences. Our task is to be aware of those personal values, opinions and experiences, to learn from them, and as always allow our clients to teach us so that we will find richer meaning in our own lives.

References


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