Special Issue of *Lesbian & Gay Review*, *10*(1), 3-7 [2010].
Edited by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke

Editorial Introduction: Coming Out and Negotiating Heteronormativity in Higher Education

We are delighted to welcome readers of *Psychology of Sexualities Review* to a Special Issue on the theme on coming out and negotiating heteronormativity in higher education. A number of papers published in previous issues of *Review* have already addressed these themes (see Barker, 2006; Bertram and Massey, 2007; Braun, 2004; Ritter, 2006), so we are very pleased to contribute to the ongoing discussion about coming out in the classroom and negotiating heteronormativity within psychology. These topics have also received academic attention elsewhere within LGBTQ psychology (see Cramer, 2002; Minz and Rothblum, 1997), as well as within academia more broadly, yet the enthusiastic response to our call for papers attests to the fact that questions of whether to come out (or not) and how to negotiate heteronormativity within academia are not questions with easy or obvious answers. They remain significant ones in the lives of LGBTQ educators and scholars. This Special Issue runs parallel to a Special Feature on the topic recently published in *Feminism & Psychology* (see Clarke and Braun, 2009).

The Special Issue consists of twelve short (personal, empirical and theoretical) papers by authors from the UK, the US, Canada and Australia. Some of the contributors are psychologists; others teach in a variety of disciplines, from sociology to information technology. Some teach *about* sexuality and gender; others struggle to find connections between the topics they teach and (their) sexuality. Despite this diversity among contributors, there are patterns across the issues grappled with, and we have organised the papers into three sections: coming out in higher education; intersections of sexuality, gender, race and class; and negotiating heteronormativity in higher education.

The six papers in the first section address the theme of coming out in the classroom, or in higher education more broadly, and consist of personal reflections on this issue. One striking feature of the contributions is the wide variety of (local) cultural contexts in which LGBTQ educators teach. Whereas some contributors teach in relatively 'liberal' (although heteronormative) environments, others negotiate what Mary Rasmussen (2004) has dubbed the 'coming out imperative' (the notion that coming out is personally, politically and pedagogically necessary) in conservative climates. The contributors to this section weigh-up

the well-documented costs and benefits associated with coming out (see Rasmussen, 2004), and detail and evaluate their varied strategies for coming out (or not). Writing in the British context, Róisín Ryan-Flood explores the heteronormative space of the classroom and how to manage students' heterosexism/homophobia and genderism. She discusses the importance of making sexualities and genders (especially non-heterosexualities and trans genders) visible in the classroom, so that they are not 'the elephant in the room'. She outlines her varied strategies for coming out in the classroom, which depend on context: mentioning her research interests but leaving students to 'read between the lines' in compulsory courses; and coming out through declarative statements in optional gender and sexuality courses. American Professor of education Christine Cress anchors her piece around a 'difficult moment,' when a conservative christian student, Jeff, who had seen her out the night before with her girlfriend, pressured her to declare her lesbianism as she handed out end-of-course teaching evaluation forms. Like Ryan-Flood, Cress's coming out strategies are context dependent; on this occasion she chose to come out. The piece nicely synopsises the careful weighing up of pros and cons that can be involved in classroom environments when whether to come out or not is a live dilemma.

Teaching in the Australian context, Kirsten McLean explores the complexity of coming out when you cannot (authentically) lay claim to a *fixed* sexual identity. Although she does (now) speak openly about her female partner, as well as a 'heterosexual' past, and brings her research on bisexuality and sexual fluidity into the classroom, she remains uncertain about how best to describe her sexuality to students, to ensure she does not unwittingly reinforce the very binary models of sexuality she aims to challenge. Shara Sand's account is located in a rather divergent context – a conservative Jewish University in New York. Using a narrative structure that switches between the past (her first coming out in class) and the present (reflecting on that, now), Sand makes a strong case for the benefits that coming out can have, even in contexts which render coming out difficult. As her narrative illustrates, it is in these contexts that coming out can, potentially, have the most powerful and transformative impact on students' lives.

Writing in a different, dialogical, style, Deborah Foster and Karen Perry recount their experiences of working in a conservative college in a small town in northern Canada. They discuss their very different approaches to coming out (or not) in the classroom: Foster does; Perry does not. In part, Perry attributes this choice to the fact that she teaches maths and sciences, and struggles to find connections between her sexuality and the content of her teaching. This experience of no obvious or immediate close connection between topic and

sexuality is shared by Linda Stepulevage, the final contributor to this section, who teaches information technology. However, Stepulevage feels strongly that coming out in her courses is necessary to disrupt the heteronormativity within computing. Like other contributors to the coming out debate (see, for example, Barker and Reavey, 2009; Cain, 1996; Cramer, 1997; Smith and Yost, 2009; Waldo and Kemp, 1997), Stepulevage canvassed the opinions of her students on her decision to come out. In contrast to others (e.g., Cain, 1996; Smith and Yost, 2009), students reported little impact from this on their classroom experience.

Together, these papers demonstrate debates and perspectives on coming out that vary by context of teaching (classroom environment, topic), but similar pedagogical and personal/political identity issues are considered by all, regardless of their ultimate decisions about, and positions on, coming out.

The two papers in the second section seek to locate the debate more broadly, and address the complexities of coming out and teaching LGBTQ psychology and sexuality studies at the intersections of sexuality, gender, race and class. Yvette Taylor writes about her experiences of being a British, working class, lesbian academic in an environment deeply marked by inequalities, despite the mainstreaming of equal opportunities rhetoric. She suggests the importance of displacing the 'coming out imperative' by focusing on the doing and undoing of privileged identities. Damien Riggs, an Australian, draws our attention to the ways in which sexual and racialised identities intersect to create intelligible subject positions. He advocates the importance of teaching sexuality through a racial lens, by which he means foregrounding the cultural context in which teaching about sexuality occurs, and emphasising that conceptualisations of sexuality are raced. It also means, for white educators, examining their racialised identities and making the white norm that pervades society, and much psychology research, visible in the classroom environment.

Finally, the four papers in the third section discuss the challenges presented by the heteronormativity deeply embedded in the discipline of psychology and in higher education more generally (Barker, 2007; Epstein et al., 2003). The teaching and research practices of North Americans Mickey Eliason and John Elia, like many of the contributors to this Special Issue, are informed by queer, critical and feminist pedagogies (e.g., Britzman, 1995; Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). Eliason and Elia, based in different universities in California, outline their development of a 'queer research collaboration' that aims to encompass and transcend (their) differences. Mary Valentich and Teri Jane Ursacki-Bryant's deeply personal analysis uses Teri's experiences of transitioning as a male-to-female transsexual in Canada, to discuss how universities (and other workplaces) can facilitate the transitioning process of transsexual

people. Teri's experiences highlight the manifold issues that surround transitioning at work, and offer a refreshingly positive account of this time.

Moving away from the personal, Dwayne Schanz and Valory Mitchell contribute to the growing literature analysing the representation of non-heterosexualities within textbooks (e.g., Barker, 2007; Peel, 2001; Simoni, 2000), by examining the representation of LGB people within three clinical psychology textbooks widely used in the US. Schanz and Mitchell demonstrate that the clinical psychology textbooks in their sample (continue to) promote heterosexist assumptions about, and distorted images of, the lives of LGB people, which starkly highlights the ongoing need to challenge heterosexism at all levels of clinical psychology training. They call on LGB academics to draw on their own experiences of heterosexism, in educating their students, as a way of counteracting the lack of, or problematic, content in textbooks. Finally British Psychologist Ian Hodges reports on research he and colleagues at the University of Westminster have conducted examining the experiences of LGB students studying psychology at university. Although the students' accounts clearly signalled the detrimental impact of institutional heterosexism on their university life, positive experiences also run through their stories (see also Taulke-Johnson, 2008). For example, many of the students expressed loyalty to psychology as a discipline, despite its heterosexism, and felt there was great value in psychological research and practice.

Together, the papers in this Special Issue highlight new perspectives and issues related to sexuality and the academy. Although we add many new voices to debates about coming out and managing heteronormativity within higher education, there is still much that needs to be said, and there are still some voices that remain unspoken or unheard. We were disappointed that, despite encouraging it, no heterosexual academics reflected on their experiences of coming out (or not) about their sexuality in the classroom, and we were not able to add to the small amount of literature on this theme written by heterosexual academics (e.g., Keating, 1994; Peel and Coyle, 2004; Ritter, 2006). We encourage heterosexual educators to reflect on their coming out strategies and the ways in which they manage heterosexism, biphobia and transphobia within the classroom. Following the important points raised by contributors like Taylor and Riggs, we encourage further reflection on the intersections of non-heterosexualities (and heterosexualities) with gender, race, culture, social class, age and ability. It is vitally important that we create a more inclusive psychology curriculum, and develop more comprehensive strategies for adding LGBTQ people in to teaching in this area. Examples could include making sure homophobia, biphobia, transphobia and heterosexism are covered or used as examples in teaching on prejudice; that the experiences of children in

LGBTQ-headed families are covered in teaching on child development. Another key issue is that we develop strategies for examining, and ultimately removing, the heterosexist and genderist assumptions that underpin most mainstream psychological theories and research; likewise for challenging the heteronormativity that pervades the 'hidden curriculum' (Epstein et al., 2003) of psychology and higher education. For example, lecturers making casual assumptions that *all* students are heterosexual, or have a mother *and* a father (rather than two mothers or two fathers or some other combination of parents), or leaving heterosexist or genderist comments (on the part of either students, lecturers or their colleagues) unchallenged (see Clarke and Braun, 2006).

These issues are not, yet, adequate addressed. They are large-scale challenges, and we encourage a shift in focus on this debate to the broader level. We welcome readers' reflections on these and other relevant issues, and encourage readers to take up these issues within your departments, with colleagues, and students, of all sexualities, and more broadly, with professional bodies, and publishers, and the like – those that shape psychology as a discipline at a more meta-level. However, before the transformation of the discipline that is called for in many of the papers here, we hope that this Special Issues assists you in the on-going negotiation of your own strategies for coming out (or not), and managing and disrupting heteronormativity in the classroom (and in discipline).

Notes and acknowledgements

The contributors to this Special Issue originally responded to a call for papers in the journal *Feminism & Psychology*. We would like to thank the editors and publishers of *Feminism & Psychology* for giving us permission to publish a parallel Special Issue on the theme of coming out and negotiating heteronormativity in higher education in *Psychology of Sexualities Review*. A Special Feature entitled *Coming out in the higher education classroom* is published in *Feminism & Psychology*, 19(2). We'd also like to thank the people who reviewed the manuscripts published here: Evelyn Torton Beck, Lisa Claiborne, Adrian Coyle, Sue Crowley, Joanne DiPlacido, Sonja Ellis, Paul Flowers, Nancy Goldstein, Cath Lambert, Carole Leathwood, Elizabeth McDermott, Sara Ann McNamee, David Mellor, Heather Mendick, Mitsunori Misawa, Iain Moreland, Kate O'Riodan, Hazel Platzer, Janice Ristock, Suzanna Rose, Lorena Russell, Bonnie Spanier, Bonnie Strickland, Heather Sykes, Kristopher Wells and Andrew Yip.

Correspondence

Virginia Braun is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at The University of Auckland in New Zealand. Her research is located within feminist and critical psychology, and is mainly focused on the areas of sex, sexuality and sexual health, and female genital cosmetic surgery. She has an interest in qualitative research methodology, and is currently working on a textbook on qualitative methods in psychology (for Sage) with Victoria Clarke. She is the co-editor of *Feminism & Psychology* (with Nicola Gavey, University of Auckland).

Victoria Clarke is a Reader in Sexuality Studies at the University of the West of England. Her research focuses on lesbian and gay parenting, same-sex relationships and civil partnership, sexualities and appearance, sexualities and higher education and qualitative research methodology. She has published two books on LGBTQ psychology – *Out in Psychology: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer perspectives* (Wiley) with Elizabeth Peel and *British Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Psychologies: Theory, research, and practice* (Haworth Medical Press) with Elizabeth Peel and Jack Drescher. She is currently finishing work on a textbook *LGBTQ Psychology: An introduction* (for Cambridge University Press), co-authored with Sonja Ellis, Elizabeth Peel and Damien Riggs, and writing a textbook on qualitative methods in psychology (for Sage) with Virginia Braun.

Correspondence should be addressed to:
Virginia Braun
Department of Psychology
The University of Auckland
Private Bag 92019,
Auckland Mail Centre 1142
Auckland, New Zealand.
Email: v.braun@auckland.ac.nz

Victoria Clarke
Department of Psychology
Faculty of Health and Life Sciences
University of the West of England
Frenchay Campus
Coldharbour Lane

Bristol BS16 1QY, UK.
Email: Victoria.Clarke@uwe.ac.uk

References

Barker, M. (2007) Heteronormativity and the exclusion of bisexuality in psychology. In V. Clarke & E. Peel (Eds.), *Out in Psychology: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer perspectives* (pp. 95-117). Chichester: Wiley.

Barker, M. (2006) Critical sexology: Sexual self-disclosure and outness in academia and the clinic. *Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review*, *7*(3): 292-296.

Barker, M. and Reavey, P. (2009) Self-disclosure in teaching sexuality courses. *Feminism & Psychology*, *19*(2): 175-180.

Bertram, C. C. and Massey, S. G. (2007) Queering dialogue: Safety and discomfort in a lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender psychology course. *Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review*, *8*(2): 127-140.

Braun, V. (2004) Assumptions, assumptions, and yet more assumptions: Identity in sexuality research and teaching. *Lesbian and Gay Psychology Review, 5*: 55-58.

Britzman, D. P. (1995) Is there a queer pedagogy? Or, stop reading straight. *Educational Theory*, *45*(2): 151-165.

Cain, R. (1996) Heterosexism and self-disclosure in the social-work classroom. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *32*(1): 65-76.

Clarke , V. and Braun, V. (Eds.), (2009) Coming out in the higher education classroom. *Feminism & Psychology*, *19*(2): 194-198.

Clarke, V. and Braun, V. (2006) Avoiding heterosexism in teaching social psychology. Poster presented at the *Society of Australasian Social Psychologists 35th Annual Conference*, April 20-23, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.

Cramer, E. (Ed.), (2002) *Addressing homophobia and heterosexism on college campuses*. New York: Harrington Park Press.

Cramer, E. (1997) Effects of an educational unity about lesbian identity development and disclosure in a social work methods course. *Journal of Social Work Education*, *33*(3): 461-72.

Epstein, D., O'Flynn, S. and Telford, D. (2003) *Silenced sexualities in schools and universities*. Stoke-on-Trent: Trentham Books.

Freire, P. (1970) *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, rev. ed. Middlesex: Penguin.

hooks, b. (1994) *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.

Keating, A. L. (1994) Heterosexual teacher, lesbian/gay/bisexual text: Teaching the sexual other(s). In L. Garber (Ed.), *Tilting the tower: Lesbians teaching queer subjects* (pp. 96-107). New York: Routledge.

Minz, B. and Rothblum, E. (Eds), (1997) *Lesbians in academia: Degrees of freedom*. New York: Routledge.

Peel, E. (2001) Neglect and tokenism: Representations of violence against lesbians in textbooks. *Psychology of Women Section Review*, *3*(1): 14-19.

Peel, E. and Coyle, A. (Eds), (2004) Special Feature: Heterosexual people working in lesbian and gay psychology. *Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review*, *5*(2): 54-70.

Rasmussen, M. L. (2004) "The Problem of Coming Out". *Theory Into Practice*, *43*(2): 144-150.

Ritter, K. (2006) Insider and outside of the dilemma: Perspectives from a heterosexual ally, academician and clinician. *Lesbian & Gay Psychology Review*, *7*(3): 297-300.

Simoni, J. M. (2000) Confronting heterosexism in the teaching of psychology. In B. Greene and G. Croom (Eds), *Education, research, and practices in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered psychology: A resource manual* (pp. 74-90). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Smith, T. E. and Yost, M. R. (2009) "Like, get over it!": On 'getting' and 'getting over' sexuality in the classroom. *Feminism & Psychology*, *19*(2): 199-204.

Taulke-Johnson, R. (2008) Moving beyond homophobia, harassment and intolerance: Gay male university students' alternative narratives. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, *29*(1): 121-133.

Waldo, C. R. and Kemp, J. L. (1997) Should I come out to my students: An empirical investigation. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *34*(2): 79-94.