

When the Political and the Personal Collide: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People as Political Targets

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In recent decades, American voters have gone to the polls more than 100 times to vote on the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. More often than not, the outcomes of those votes have not been favorable for LGBT people or their rights (Gamble, 1997). These elections—and the campaigns that precede them—represent paradigm cases of homophobia and heterosexism. The elections exploit the existing homophobia in U.S. society and stand as witness to the need, articulated in the Competencies for Counseling Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered (LGBT) Clients, to “understand that heterosexism pervades the social and cultural foundations of many institutions and traditions and may foster negative attitudes toward LGBT persons” (Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Counseling, 1997, “Social and Cultural Foundations,” Competency 2).

Therapeutic work with LGBT people confronting anti-LGBT campaigns and elections rests on a number of considerations that have been derived from previous research. Campaigns and elections often have a negative impact on LGBT people. They have the capacity to “undermine the healthy functioning of . . . LGBT persons” (Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in Counseling, 1997, “Social and Cultural Foundations,” Competency 1) for a variety of reasons related to the position of LGBT people as psychological, social, and political targets (e.g., Hatzenbuehler, Keyes, & Hasin, 2009; Riggle, Rostosky, & Horne, 2009; Russell, 2000). The failure to understand the potential for this negative impact is likely to leave LGBT people mystified by the psychological reactions they and others experience. At worst, this failure to understand the potential impact can lead to victim blaming (e.g., the suggestion that something is “wrong” with the person who has negative responses to being a political target rather than that something was wrong with a process that targeted a group of people).

Intervention

An intervention designed to help LGBT people overcome the negative impact of homonegative politics entails two major elements. The first involves cognitive reframing, a critical countermeasure to the negative experience of being the target of anti-LGBT rhetoric. The second includes a variety of specific measures, both cognitive and behavioral. Some of these fit within the general rubric of active coping, and some are specific to the content of anti-LGBT politics.

The cognitive reframe provides an alternative to the sense of being personally targeted in a win-or-lose contest. This reframe contextualizes the political event within an expansive perspective from which the particular campaign and election are seen not as the final outcome but as a single moment that is but one part of a much larger movement for equal rights. Other measures in therapy are associated with increasing the strength of an individual’s coping capacities. These measures involve a focus on acknowledging the heterosexism implicit in such campaigns, working to counter the internalized homophobia that may be activated by such events

(e.g., Levitt et al., 2009), articulating and working through affective responses to the event, and tending to the client's relationship to the LGBT community (e.g., Rostosky, Riggle, Horne, Denton, & Huellemeier, 2010) and to possible heterosexual allies (Russell, 2011).

Client Background

James was a 20-year-old White gay male college student who contacted his university counseling center with concerns about depression. He was assigned to my caseload, and he was aware that I was a lesbian from the beginning of our work together. James was a junior majoring in architectural engineering who reported doing well in his coursework and in his social life at school. He was unable to specify any precipitant for his depression. He suggested that he had begun experiencing intermittent bouts of feeling down—"a vague sense of doom," as he called it—during his most recent summer break with his family in southern California. This intermittent mood had seemed to diminish by the time he returned to Colorado for school in the fall. However, it had returned after a while, and it was severe enough to interfere with James's studying and his everyday enjoyment. James denied any changes in his sleep or appetite. That fact, along with his general presentation and self-description, suggested something other than a biologically based depression.

When I asked James about whether he had experienced depression in the past, he described a period of some months during his years in middle school. He had been on the receiving end of considerable taunts by his classmates. He had been teased because he was smaller than many of the other boys and because he seemed to keep to himself a good deal of the time. Some of the taunts suggested that James was gay. James initially told no one of these experiences. However, as he grew increasingly withdrawn, his parents asked him what was wrong. He told them about the teasing at school, and in the process he told them that he might be gay. His parents were social liberals who also belonged to a liberal Christian denomination. James reported that they "had some adjusting to do" when they learned of their son's sexual orientation. However, they were generally supportive of him and offered James the option of seeing a therapist. They also wanted to talk to the middle school principal about the harassment by classmates, but James insisted that it would only make matters worse.

James took his parents up on the offer of seeing a therapist, and he did so for what he estimated was about a year. James recalled that he had used the therapy to talk about the harassment and about how to deal with his classmates. He had also explored his sexual orientation, and the therapist had given him some helpful resources and concrete information about gay men and the gay community.

When James moved from middle school to high school he quickly became a member of the school's gay/straight alliance. That, in combination with moving to a bigger school, helped James to feel more socially integrated. He developed some strong relationships with other gay and lesbian students as well as with heterosexual students. It was also in high school that James began to pinpoint his interests in both architecture and engineering. By his last 2 years in high school, he felt very comfortable with himself and comfortable with his position at school. He was successful academically and was able to gain admission to his first choice of university. When he left California to begin college, he left a number of solid friendships as well as happy memories of his high school years.

Upon arriving at his new university, James had a relatively uneventful transition. He loved his classes, had a few friends in his residence hall, and joined a student club that attracted engineering majors in particular. James's first 2 years went very well, and he had secured a

prized internship for his junior year. He also had a small but comfortable cadre of friends. Although he was enjoying his classes and the internship in this junior year, he kept encountering his vague sense of doom.

Therapy with James

I worked with James in brief therapy, the duration established by the counseling center where he sought help. My work in this time-limited frame was different than it would have been in a more open-ended therapy relationship; in particular, there was virtually no focus on our relationship in this brief format. After reviewing mandatory disclosure information, James and I spent much of the first session exploring both his current situation and his history. He was frankly baffled by his bouts of depressive-like symptoms, and so was I. I asked him questions about his classes, his social life at home and at school, his career plans, his family, and his sexual orientation. None of the questions yielded an answer to our now-shared curiosity about his bouts with “doom,” as we began to call it. At the end of our first meeting I asked James to monitor his thinking over the next week, suggesting he pay particular attention to what he was thinking or feeling when he became aware of the doom experience.

When he came to our next session, James brought a brief list of situations in which he felt aware of the doom. As he went through the list, I asked whether any of the issues had been relevant during the previous summer when the depressive feeling had first emerged. Nothing rang a bell—nothing, that is, until James spoke of one item on the list. He had been walking between classes and had heard two male students laughing and talking about “faggots.” James was unsure what the context of their conversation was, but he knew he was bothered by the mix of anti-gay language and laughter.

James denied any current difficulties associated with his sexual orientation. I asked him to elaborate on his experiences in middle school. It clearly had been a stressful time for him. As he talked, James moved ahead in time to mention Proposition 8 in his home state of California; the passage of Proposition 8 had stripped same-sex couples of the recently granted right to marry. As he spoke about the election, James spontaneously mentioned that such elections meant that the majority could overrule the rights of the minority, which made him feel “doomed.” I visibly reacted to his use of the word *doomed*, and he immediately knew why.

I asked James to tell me how much he knew about the campaign that had led up to that election, which had occurred several weeks before our first meeting. He spoke with anger about certain campaign materials he had seen before he had left California. He talked about his frustration that people could not understand that “gay people are just people.” He said that he had always wanted to get married and maybe raise children with a partner. For a while, it had looked like that would be possible in his home state. Now it was not. Moreover, he had been thinking lately that he did not want to return to California, that he instead might try graduate school in Massachusetts, where marriage is available to same-sex couples.

James spent the remainder of the session describing a host of reactions to the campaign about and passage of Proposition 8. He described pain and alienation and anger. I said little, recognizing that he seemed to have stumbled on (at least) one source of his feelings of doom. It was clear that he needed to talk through some of the affective charge he had been experiencing. As that session wound down, I asked James what he thought about his doom now. He had already decided that Proposition 8 was very relevant to his depressive symptoms. Certainly the timing was more than suggestive. James had been depressed watching the campaign heat up while he was in California during the summer. His depression had improved when he left

California for school, which greatly reduced his exposure to the campaign. His symptoms were exacerbated soon after Proposition 8 passed. James went back and forth between wondering why people had to be so “mean” and expressing his anger about the unexpected outcome of the Proposition 8 election. I intentionally took a mirroring stance during James’s litany of feelings. He knew what his feelings were, he knew what gave rise to them, and he knew how to articulate them. My job was to help him articulate those feelings and then to reflect them back to him.

At our next session James reported that he had called a friend from his high school gay/straight alliance to talk about the passage of Proposition 8. His friend, Martin, was going to college in California and had been involved in the campaign to defeat Proposition 8. Martin described his campaign experiences to James; he also told him about the very visible activism that had taken place after the election. James was fascinated by his friend’s reports. He had never thought of himself as particularly political, but he expressed regret at not having been in California to take part in the public outrage about Proposition 8.

I asked James how much contact he had with the LGBT community on campus. He said he knew a few gay men in his major and a lesbian student couple whom he had met through a friend in his engineering club. But he had sought no contact with the broader LGBT community. I suggested to James something that was apparent from research in a variety of contexts: Contact with the gay community can be helpful to LGBT people in the best of times and especially in the worst of times, when voters deny them equal rights (Russell & Richards, 2003). James immediately saw the connection between this statement and the relief and excitement he felt when he talked with Martin about Proposition 8. We discussed several on-campus LGBT-oriented student groups. James seemed intrigued by the possibility of becoming more involved, but he also expressed concern about spending too much time away from his studies.

At one point in the conversation James referred to the Proposition 8 election as a “catastrophe.” I asked how he saw it as a catastrophe. He replied that it had made it unlikely that gay people would ever be able to marry in California or even gain other rights. I viewed James’s statement as an invitation to begin reframing his understanding of the election’s outcome. I asked him whether he knew that Massachusetts couples’ access to marriage equality had been repeatedly threatened, even after it was granted by the court. He said that he knew virtually nothing about how marriage rights had been won there. I gave a 4- to 5-minute mini-lecture on the story of marriage equality in the Bay State. I emphasized the ups and downs, the victories, the losses and squeaking by, and the amazing work that had been done by both LGBT people and their heterosexual allies.

James was intrigued by the mini-history lesson, and he asked for several specific details. I suggested a couple of resources he might consult to find out more information, but I was more interested in talking with James about the reframe. I suggested to him that the Massachusetts story was a good illustration of how social change tends to happen. It is not anything like a straight line. It is a process that entails victories and defeats, dead ends and lost efforts, the exhilaration of success, and the frequent fear that it will all end in failure.

James wondered, as much to himself as to me, why anyone would want to do it. I asked why he and his friends went out of their way to keep the gay/straight alliance going in their high school. Without hesitation he said it was because it “meant something; it made a difference.” He continued, “We felt better. We helped one another. We weren’t alone. We had support. We did the Day of Silence [an annual event in schools nationwide when LGBT and ally students do not speak for a day to call attention to how often LGBT students are silenced on a regular basis], and kids in the school got a lot more awareness about gay issues.”

I asked James to contrast how he had felt in high school with how he had felt in middle school. He spoke of loneliness and isolation in middle school and of his fears, first that he was gay and later that others would know that he was gay. High school, in contrast, was “way different, totally different.” He was out and not at all lonely or isolated. He no longer lived in fear that others would find out he was gay. He felt “more comfortable in [his] own skin.” He ended with, “In some ways, having the gay/straight alliance helped me to feel like being gay was no big deal.”

I suggested that being gay both *is* and *is not* a big deal. It is not a big deal when it is just a part of who we are. But it is a big deal when we run into homophobia and heterosexism in the world. James was on a roll, but our time was up.

At our next session James reported that he had gone online twice during the intervening week to read what he could about the election. Having been in Colorado when California voters had passed Proposition 8, he knew about the outcome, of course, and he recalled that he had been shocked by it. But otherwise he had not thought much about it. He was busy at school, and it seemed to have had no immediate effect on him. I asked him what he had discovered through his online searches. Now it was James’s turn to offer me a mini–history lesson. He was enthralled by what he had learned, and he was certainly tracking the ups and downs of marriage equality in his home state. James was also angry about what he had read. He was angry not only about the outcome of the election but also about campaign messages, about how not enough gay people took it seriously, about how most heterosexuals didn’t “get it,” about why there can be elections in which the majority votes away the rights of a minority.

I listened as James led us both through the objects of his anger. They all made sense, even as I privately thought that he overstated the case in a couple of instances. I talked with him about how anger was a reasonable response to the perception of being violated, and I asked him to consider exactly how he personally had been violated by Proposition 8. James was able to say how the election—and the events surrounding it—had made him feel: singled out, targeted, misunderstood and misrepresented, treated unfairly (“when they don’t even know who I am!”), “pissed off,” isolated, helpless.

I asked James whether he had ever felt that way before. He drew an easy thread to his middle school experiences of being harassed. But as he drew the connection he was less angry now, more in touch with the pain. I reflected on the commonalities in his response to Proposition 8 and his response to what had happened in middle school. They were as clear to James as they were to me. I asked him what the two experiences had in common, and James went through a number of the feelings he had described earlier. I waited. James added a couple of other parallels in the two experiences.

I waited again. And then I asked James whether he could think of any other commonalities. He did not think so, he said. I suggested that both situations were unfair and painful because of precisely the same ingredient—bias or prejudice. James ran with the idea, only he substituted “homophobia” as the attribution. We spent the remainder of the session discussing homophobia—what it looks like, where it comes from, why some people seem to be more homophobic than others. James was hungry to understand what homophobia was all about.

As we talked James seemed to become more comfortable talking about homophobia as a phenomenon in the world. I asked him whether he knew who Steven Biko was; he did not. I told him that Biko was a freedom fighter against apartheid in South Africa who really understood racism in the world. But Biko, I told James, also understood that oppression is not just an external phenomenon. It also affects people internally; it affects how we think. I told James

about an incisive observation Biko had made (a copy of which I keep in a small frame in my office): “The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.” Again I waited.

James began to work with his reaction to the Biko quote. He talked about how he felt on reading the few pieces of pro-Proposition 8 campaign materials that he had seen online and during his time in California the previous summer. He allowed as how he had read the materials quickly and pushed them out of his mind as “trash” and “ridiculous.” I asked whether he remembered what they said, and he recalled brief snippets. Without using the term, I began working with James on internalized homophobia. We began with the campaign materials but quickly branched out to discuss other homophobic messages he had heard along the way. We talked about each one: how he reacted to it, its validity, how much he had applied it to the process of constructing his understanding of himself, how easy or difficult it was to let it go.

Not surprisingly, James eventually made his way to the taunts he had heard in middle school. For the first time in our work together he talked about his small stature. It was clear that he had internalized a conflation between his small size and his sexual orientation. He seemed visibly relieved to talk about his size in those terms. When I commented on his reaction, he roamed around a bit before describing a memory: He had worried that others would know he was gay solely because he was so small. His early adolescent mind had assumed that his stature was wholly a function of his sexual orientation and that everyone would automatically know he was gay by seeing that he was small. We talked about how out of his control that must have felt for James. I asked whether he had ever discussed it with his therapist. He had not, although he was unsure whether he assumed that the therapist would already know the “obvious fact” that the two characteristics were connected and/or whether he was too ashamed to acknowledge it to anyone.

As James left my office I wondered whether he looked taller. When he returned the next week he was certainly louder. He and his friend Martin had had several phone and texting conversations about homophobia and internalized homophobia (James had apparently picked up the term somewhere in these conversations). He also talked about how homophobia “got into [his] head” and how he could resist it. James brought up the idea of the campus groups again. He had decided that he wanted to connect with a bigger group of LGBT friends. I reflected that having contact with other LGBT folks was often a good way to fight internalized homophobia. He would see a bigger cross-section of LGBT people, including people he would like and value, both of which would provide great counters to negative stereotypes. He would find some support to ease his sense of isolation. Perhaps he would find others who were working to resist internalized homophobia—something that often works especially well in groups.

In our sixth session James reported that he had gone to one of the campus LGBT groups but was not sure he liked it. It felt “too political” for him. He had already decided to try an alternative group that had been described as “more of a social group.” James quickly changed the topic. He told me that he had had a long conversation with both of his parents about his reaction to Proposition 8. James said it was difficult to bring it up. After all, his parents had been generally very supportive of him—“never any freak-outs about me being gay.” Nonetheless, as he was talking with Martin about all of the post-election activity in California, he started wondering why his parents had never participated in any of it. In fact, he realized, they had never even mentioned the election to him, even though they had talked excitedly with him about Barack Obama winning the presidency on the same day.

As James reported it, his parents were able to listen to his complaints, though he thought his dad sounded “a little defensive at first.” He explained to them that he had realized he had been

very upset by the passage of Proposition 8 and about what he might have lost for his own future. Both of his parents apologized for not having considered how Proposition 8 might have felt to their gay son. In our session James mentioned that he hoped they would take it seriously now and would “get involved,” but he had been afraid to make that request directly of his parents.

James and I discussed his relationships with other heterosexuals. He had the benefit of having had straight allies as friends in his gay/straight alliance in high school. Thus, he was aware that some straight people could be supportive. I suggested to him that some straight people really want to support equality but they don’t always know how. I added that sometimes asking is all it takes. James looked me in the eye and inquired, “You think I should ask my parents to get involved, right?” I hedged a moment and then said, “It might help, yes. It might help them, and it might help you.”

I used the opportunity to return our focus to the cognitive reframe of the Proposition 8 election. I spoke of how much change had occurred not just in the fight for marriage equality but also with regard to LGBT rights in general. I told James that these changes happened because LGBT people worked and insisted, because we understood what homophobia is and how unfair it is, because we joined with people—straight and LGBT—from other oppressed groups, because we worked with straight allies, because we refused to give up. I added that when we look at all this change—all this progress—it is easier to be optimistic, even in the face of such painful disappointments as Proposition 8. James said little in response. I was a bit worried that in my eagerness to make sure he understood the reframe, I had taken too much of a didactic stance. I wondered whether I had pushed too fast because I was aware that our next session would be our final one.

James came in for that session with the news that he had visited a second LGBT campus group. He liked it more than the first group but still found something missing. On Sunday he went to his local church—something he had done infrequently since moving to Colorado. He returned Sunday evening for a meeting of the weekly discussion group on gay spirituality. He reported that the group included straight people as well as LGBT people and that he would continue to attend. I silently considered that his group might be really good for James; it could help him integrate his spiritual life with his sexual orientation, an issue we had not even touched on in this brief therapy and one that is often interwoven with internalized homophobia and with feelings of isolation.

James said that he would be going back to the on-campus social group as well. Through a broad grin, he told me that he had met another student whom he found attractive, and he wanted to have a chance to “get to know him better.” I acknowledged that we had not discussed dating and relationships since our first session (when I was gathering James’s history). James said he had dated a couple of guys in high school but had been too preoccupied with school work since coming to the university. He thought it was time he started dating again.

James brought up another topic. He said that he had been thinking about what I had said about how change happens. In fact, he had talked with Martin about it as well. He wondered how he could be part of that when he was “not very political.” I reminded him of his own experience with change, his comments about how his high school gay/straight alliance had “made a difference.” I suggested that change happens on many levels and that we make change in many ways—through our relationships, through what we talk about, how we vote, what kind of place we work at, what we ask of others (he smiled when I said this), how we spend our money. Any of these can be “political.”

James came back with his own measure of change: “What we think about in our heads.”

“Touché,” I responded.

I asked James what he thought he would do if he lived in a place where another election about LGBT rights were held. He said he was not sure how “political” he would be, but he knew he would give money and maybe do some “behind-the-scenes” work. And he would talk with his family and friends. He added that he would “do something, for sure.” He would not ignore it, which was how he characterized his approach to the Proposition 8 election.

“How do you think you’ll react if we lose again?”

“I’ll hate it.” After a pause, James elaborated, “I don’t think I’ll get depressed—the ‘doom’ thing again. I would hate it, but I’d know why I felt so bad. And I’d know it’s part of something bigger, part of how change happens. Besides, I’d have friends to yell about it with.”

“It wouldn’t be a catastrophe?”

“No . . . well maybe some, but not a huge catastrophe. I know that much now.”

I said, “You know something else too.” He waited for me to go on. “You know that even awful events can make for a lot of growth. Look at the organizing that went on in California after the election—the things you read about online and talked with Martin about. Look at how active Martin got, look at what your parents have learned, look at how you have changed.”

He felt more “together” as a gay person, he said. (I was thinking of how much he had integrated his sexual orientation and, with it, his experiences in middle school.) He said he was working to juggle his Sunday evening meetings and the student social group with his school work, but he thought he could pull it off—especially because he wasn’t carrying the “doom thing” around with him anymore. He left the session with an apparent sense of his own good work.

Conclusion

My work in therapy with James illustrates both the toll that anti-LGBT politics can take on LGBT individuals and how unnoticed this toll can be to them. The case also suggests how experiences with anti-LGBT politics can revive old conflicts and pain related to sexual orientation or gender identity (and often to other areas of a person’s life as well). In a more positive vein, almost two decades of research into the impact of anti-LGBT politics has suggested some of the ways in which counselors can help LGBT clients exposed to negative campaigns and elections. Prominent in this therapeutic work are reframing these events in a larger sociopolitical context and working to develop general and LGBT-specific coping skills. As James’s case illustrates, this work requires that counselors be open to seeing and intervening in areas where personal identity and political realities collide.

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