Summaries of SIGI panels on Sexual Object Choice

Spring 2004: Sexual Object Choices of Transgender People
The third in a series of ongoing discussions regarding sexual object took place at the spring 2004 meeting of Division 39 in Miami, FL. Sponsored by the Committee on Sexualities and Gender, this year's discussion, “Transgender Explorations,” was facilitated by chair Dennis Debiak, Psy.D. Panelists included Randi Kaufman, Psy.D., Deborah Anna Luepnitz, Ph.D., Bethany Riddle, M.Ed., and Debra Roth, CSW.

Debiak introduced the discussion by raising several questions related to the complex intersection between gender identity and sexual object choice. He mused, “Is there way in which the choice to change one’s body to match one’s inner gender affects one’s object choices?” And then raised a contrasting question, “Or does sexual attraction follow a distinct developmental line through childhood, adolescence, and adulthood?” The result being that postoperative transsexuals, for example, remain attracted to the same gender or genders. The four discussants responded with diverse perspectives and positions raised by Debiak’s opening remarks.

Debra Roth spoke of the “worlds of people transmuting the limitations of gender and literally dismantling the scaffolding of a binary gender system.” She asserted that psychoanalytic conceptions of sexual object choice relied far too heavily on the nomenclature of sexual orientation, and quoted Trans theoretician James Cromwell, who argues that the links between gender, anatomical sex, and sexual orientation are produced by cultures attempting to organize “the deeply unruly realm where gender and sexual behavior conjoin.”

Roth illustrated these ideas with the vignette of Eli and Sam, a lesbian couple that decided to undergo double mastectomies in order to reconcile their interior sense of gender nonconformity. Identifying as Transmen—men who are male but who were once female—Eli and Sam finally experienced a sense of well being in the
world while incorporating their histories as females into the masculine identities.

Roth criticized psychoanalysis for its failure to understand the subjective experience of transgender individuals, and for imposing obstacles to developing more flexible categories of sexual orientation. She challenged psychoanalysts to overcome the “tendency to conflate notions of gender with those of sexual orientation,” given that Trans phenomena simultaneously highlight essentialist and constructivist notions of gender and sexual object choice.

Randi Kaufman, Psy.D., a clinician specializing in psychotherapy with transgendered people, provided a variety of clinical data suggesting that “sexual object choice became much more fluid postoperatively for many individuals completing surgery.” Kaufman conducted an informal study of 54 clients who had altered their gender identity. She found that roughly 1/3 of her clients changed their sexual object choice while roughly 2/3 retained their original object choice. According to Kaufman, individuals who experienced a change in sexual preference also experienced greater fluidity in their gender identity.

Drawing on historical as well as contemporary sources, Kaufman also discussed the development of categories related to sexual orientation while concomitantly bringing the audience’s attention to the linguistic and epistemological limitations of describing the experience of being transgendered. If someone is female bodied and likes women, is she lesbian? “Only if she identifies her gender as female,” Kaufman contends. Kaufman’s clinical experience suggests that “it is not all that unusual in the sub-group female-to-male for the person’s attraction toward women to ‘switch’ toward men.” Put another way, “the lesbian becomes gay.”

Kaufman also acknowledged the conundrum faced by many of the partners of transgendered people. They often experience profound discomfort while their Trans partner has a greater sense of internal and external congruence.
Bethany Riddle, M.Ed., commented that at times “it seems as though my theoretical interests contradict my clinical and political interests.” In particular, she related how her clinical experience working with transgender people did not necessarily correspond with her theoretical leanings about gender identity and sexual orientation. She remarked, “The trans people I’ve worked with have felt decidedly confident about their gender identity and more fluid about their sexual orientation. They tend to embody [gender] in a hypernormative way.” According to Riddle, her transwomen clients felt most like women where they are hyper-feminized, i.e., wearing clothing and accessories associated with conformist views of femininity.

Interestingly, Riddle also found that most of the Trans people she has worked with clinically see themselves as heterosexual and feel they are simply in the wrong body. For example, a transwoman (mtf) describes herself as a heterosexual woman. A preoperative, pre-hormone transman (ftm) describes himself as a heterosexual male. However, Riddle also treated a transwoman (mtf) who remains undecided about her sexual orientation, commenting, “I don’t know what I am. I just don’t fit the categories.”

On a personal note, Riddle wondered about the usefulness of separating the notion of gender identity from sexual orientation. She reported that she subjectively does not experience her gender as separate from her sexual orientation.

Analyst and author Deborah Anna Luepnitz discussed the distinct experiences of intersex people—individuals born with genitalia not recognizably male or female—with those of transgender people in order to highlight the “the space in between conventional antimonies.” She said, “The experiences of intersex people can set in relief those of transgendered individuals, sharpening our discussion of object choice.”

Luepnitz then described a case of a woman who had given birth to an intersexed infant. Almost immediately, the neonate was assigned a male gender although after three months of medical complications the physicians then recommended the surgical reassignment of gender. Christopher became Christine. Luepnitz pointed out that it
was a case where object choice was “being decided by others-by well meaning if naïve physicians-almost in advance of gender.” At age 8 Christine began saying she was a boy, a claim that led to consultation with a medical expert who recommended social reassignment as a boy. Surgeries followed.

By contrast, Trans people often recall having remarkable certainty about their gender identity, Luepnitz acknowledged, with reference to the experiences of the transsexual travel writer Jan Morris. From the age of 10, Morris identified as female, but he lived as a traditional male before having reassignment surgery.

In concert with the other presenters, Luepnitz also commented on the limitations of language to describe and discuss sexuality. Reflecting on the film *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*—by way of Lacan—she remarked that “there is something in our sexed being that is left over, that cannot be accounted for in language.” She continued, “In something we might call ‘health,’ the individual would be able to ask of the body, ‘What is it?’ and the body would reply with equanimity: ‘It’s what I have to work with.’”

At the conclusion of the presenters’ formal remarks, audience members joined the discussion that touched upon an array of themes, ultimately arriving at a consensus that psychoanalysis has yet to describe persuasively the relationship between gender, sexuality, and object choice.

**Spring 2003: “Why talk about choice?”**
The committee on Sexual Identity and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues in psychoanalysis (SILGBTI), hereafter referred to by its new and more succinct name, the committee on Sexualities and Gender Identities (SGI), sponsored its second in a series of ongoing discussion groups on sexual object choice at this year’s spring meeting in Minneapolis. The goal of this series of discussions, most broadly, is to open up a space to discuss the ways in which we conceptualize sexual object choice within a psychoanalytic framework. Last year’s discussion, which was slightly more formal, included a presentation by Elisabeth Young-Bruehl on bisexual object choice. In this year’s discussion the four
facilitators, Dennis Debiak, Muriel Dimen, Victor Bonfilio, and Scott Pytluk, offered brief opening comments and opened the floor to discussion much more quickly. What ensued was a lively discussion which occurred at the intersection of theoretical, clinical and political concerns. What follows is an attempt to capture the content and the mood of the discussion in its progression.

The discussion began with the question, “Why talk about choice?” The presenters acknowledged at the outset the dangers involved in interrogating the word ‘choice.’ Given a socio-historical context that pathologizes homosexuality, and given the importance of an identity politic for GLBT individuals, any discussion of ‘choice’ has the potential to be taken up in ways that are largely unhelpful. That is, putting ‘choice’ on the table is dangerous insofar as it could provide fuel for anti-gay clinicians and laypersons who believe that if sexuality is a ‘choice,’ individuals should be able to exercise agency in ‘choosing’ something different. Even GLBT clinicians who are sympathetic to psychoanalytic complexities are wary of invoking a discussion of the word ‘choice.’

But, of course, a psychoanalytic discussion of the term ‘choice’ does not necessarily (or even at all) imply a conscious agency, prompting Muriel’s questions, “What as psychoanalysts do we mean by choice given that we believe in the unconscious?” and “What part of the unconscious do we implicate with choice?” These questions set the stage for a problematization of terms and concepts that are oftentimes taken for granted. All of the presenters seemed to share a belief in the importance of an analytical discussion about concepts and categories that have been reified within both mainstream and psychoanalytic literature. As well, all of the presenters seemed to believe in the importance of raising difficult and even potentially dangerous questions without foreclosing them with answers.

In many ways, of course, it would be much easier to stick with our familiar categories and identities, to still the flux, to reduce and to simplify. But this project would not be consonant with our aims as psychoanalysts. As much as perhaps it would be simpler to be reductive (and as much as in moments we actually are), analytic thinkers do not buy into the idea that a reductive simplicity is adequate or accurate. As Muriel noted, “The idea is to complicate
things.” Ultimately, of course, we believe that it is more fruitful to complicate things, to raise questions that we might not be able to answer, to think analytically about object choices, to problematize gender identities and sexualities and to allow for a discussion of their fluidity. Rather than seeking comfort in familiar and discrete categories, the opportunity for political advancement will be, as Scott noted, “dependent on a willingness to think analytically.”

In addition to their commonalities, each of the presenters brought a different lens to the discussion. Victor raised the idea of a discussion of sexuality that acknowledged the sexually-charged nature of human relationships that are not explicitly sexual such as friendships and clinical relationships; he also highlighted the importance of keeping the discussion at a personal level and in retaining a focus on the role of excitement and anxiety. Scott discussed the history of anti-gay literature in psychoanalysis, and he as well discussed the role of self-disclosure for LGBT clinicians. Muriel raised questions about the constraining nature of categories and the importance of ‘queering,’ that is, of problematizing and breaking monolithic categories. She also raised the idea of mourning with regard to object choices. Dennis brought order to the discussion and talked about the clinical implications of our sexual object choices, raising questions about how much our sexual attraction figures into our choices of clients. He also noted the change in affect in the room as the discussion progressed.

Indeed, the quality of the affect in the room shifted in the course of the discussion. Whereas at the beginning of the discussion the mood was lively and the presenters were called upon to moderate in order to give everyone a chance to speak, the mood took a melancholic turn as the discussion neared its close. With about fifteen minutes remaining, the room fell into a silence which was so noted by the presenters and audience members. As if in parallel process with an analytic situation, the affective shifts felt palpable and the process became more interesting than the content. Such a shift perhaps highlights the personal quality of discussions about sexualities. In the end, the discussion came back to where it began, and the question, “What does choice exactly mean?” was raised again.
It appears as though this year’s SGI panel on sexual object choices was successful in that it touched upon a number of theoretical, clinical and political concerns and provided a space for an enlivening discussion about sexualities. Although the presenters provided invaluable direction, much of the energy of the discussion came from audience members’ participation. SGI members hope to imitate this format in future panels and will sponsor another discussion at next year’s meeting.

**Spring 2002: “On Bisexual Objects.”**
Psychoanalysis has a long history of pathologizing homosexual behavior and conceptualizing same-sex object choice as deviant. Though Freud himself was actually somewhat progressive, his followers and revisionists moved his work in a direction that was decidedly heterosexist. Psychologists and psychiatrists are now focusing on the complexities around sex, gender and object choice and are developing more sophisticated theoretical explorations of these issues. It is important that these discussions continue to gain credence within the division. As such, the recently developed Committee on Sexual Identity and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues (SILGBTI) is committed to sponsoring a series of ongoing discussion groups that will address the issue of sexual object choice.

At the most recent Division 39 Spring Meeting (April, 2002), SILGBTI held the first installment of its Ongoing Discussion Group on Sexual Object Choices. The presenters opened up a space for a critique of heterosexist models while simultaneously developing theories regarding the complexity of the development of object choice for the individual. Both theoretical issues, and well as clinical applications, were discussed.

The discussion group began with Elizabeth Young-Bruehl’s presentation of her paper, “On Bisexual Objects.” In it, she briefly recounted Freudian conceptualization of bisexuality (in his early work, as an arrest or regression in normal development; in his later work, as neither simple nor linear). She also noted that Alfred Kinsey’s research in which he developed a scale for measuring sexual feelings on a continuum (in contrast to the widely-accepted
heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy) (1948) was shockingly radical for its time. Young-Bruehl remarked that the best studies in gender and sexuality have problematized the domains of sex, gender and object choice, considering them not only with regard to the individual but also with regard to the socio-cultural and historical context. Following this, she remarked that “type of object choice” has received least attention, and it is this topic on which she focuses for the remainder of her paper.

In her reading of Freud’s work, Young-Bruehl noted that she sees four processes of transference of object choices. Young-Bruehl remarked that it is through these types of transferences that we see the ways in which the process of object-choosing is played out. Individuals are attracted to an object’s sexuality both as they experience the object and as they experience parts of themselves; or, people look to particular object choices to meet their needs. Young-Bruehl provided several clinical examples in order to illustrate the ways in which these processes appear in varied combinations within the individual, and she noted that these are supported by the social framework in complex ways.

Following Young-Bruehl’s presentation, two discussants, Dianne Elise and discussion group leader Dennis Debiak, responded to the paper with comments of their own. Their comments were intended to generate discussion among audience members. Elise began by briefly recapping Young-Bruehl’s historical overview, first reiterating that psychoanalysis has made great strides in theorizing sexuality in a more sophisticated manner. With regard to object choice, Elise noted that it is important to move beyond the question of “Which sex?” (or even “Which object?”) in order to examine more fully the complexities of individual object-choice and transference. By expanding our understanding in this direction, we can begin to see the limitations of the homosexual/heterosexual binary. With this type of theorizing, we do complicate the developmental picture somewhat, and this might feel uncomfortable to some, particularly given the confines of the traditional heterosexist framework. When we open up a space to complicate the object chosen (for both the object and the object chooser), we begin to see bisexuality all over the place. From this point, we will be then in a position to consider
homoeroticism to be a (normal) element of every individual’s psychology.

In order to illustrate her thinking, Elise problematized the Oedipal myth, arguing firstly the ways in which this psychoanalytic fiction depicts a predominantly heterosexual unconscious. She continued by discussing the four dyadic pairings, questioning specifically the paucity of attention given to the father-son pairing, noting that, “Father and sons are all along busy working on a project of establishing the son’s heterosexuality.” Elise concludes by reiterating that the binarizing of heterosexuality and homosexuality has precluded a rich discussion of the complexity of object choice. Stepping out of our familiar ways of dichotomizing object choice, she argued, has the potential to alter constraints both theoretically and clinically.

Debiak also briefly recounted the major arguments made by Young-Bruehl. He too problematized earlier models and asserted that it is important to consider the fluidity and complexity of individual object choice (and noted that psychologists, psychiatrists and sexologists have begun to do so). Debiak, in his role as facilitator of the group discussion, posed several questions to the audience in an effort to generate discussion. His questions were concerned with a range of topics, including theory, clinical vignettes and popular film. The questions generated a brief discussion where members of the audience gave feedback and posed questions of their own.

SILGBT is hopeful that the discussion groups will foster fruitful debate on the issue of sexual object choice, with attention to the work of contemporary theorists in the field. SILGBTI also expects to generate enthusiasm for discussion of the complexities of issues of sexual identity. As well, SILGBT will be a place were LGBT members of Division 39, and others interested in LGBT issues, can bring comments and questions of their own. In addition to sponsoring the discussion groups, the committee is up to a number of other things: The committee is currently compiling a survey that will appear in the Fall Newsletter 2002 that will be aimed at generating information about concerns of members of the division. Further, SILGBT has arranged for a social hour for LBGT members and those interested in LGBT issues at the APA meeting in August in Division 39’s Hospitality Suite on Saturday, August 24, from 7:30 - 8:30pm. Members of the committee are currently discussing plans for the Ongoing Discussion Group on Sexual Object Choices at the 2003 Spring meeting in Minneapolis as well.