

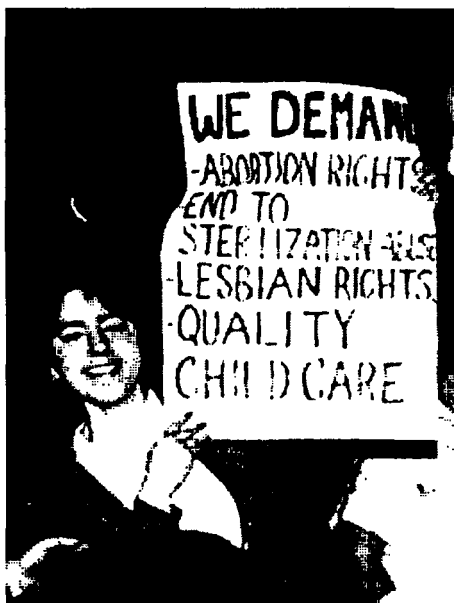
# ***Anti-Lesbianism in the British Psychological Society***

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At the end of 1991 the British Psychological Society rejected a proposal for a Psychology of Lesbianism Section of the Society. This marked the end of an unprecedented period of activity, excitement and optimism by and for lesbians in British psychology, and precluded the potential of a forum for lesbian voices within what is a deeply heterosexist discipline. The psychology of lesbianism is a rapidly growing and internationally respected field.

The aims of the rejected section were to ensure that all psychologists were aware of the important advances in this field. Psychology no longer treats lesbians as sad products of genetic mishaps or disturbed family backgrounds. Instead, psychologists speak as expert witnesses in court to enable lesbian mothers to keep custody of their children, support the rights of young lesbians in schools, and try to develop an understanding of lesbian problems within the context of our oppression. A BPS Psychology of Lesbianism Section would have provided a forum for scholarly discussion and



debate about such work, and would have enabled fruitful collaboration between the existing Psychology of Women Section and the proposed Psychology of Lesbianism Section, these two sections together offering strength in our challenge to a psychology that takes male-as-norm.

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Those of us proposing the new section knew from the outset that it would be a struggle to achieve any kind of formal recognition for lesbian issues within this deeply conservative professional organisation. As lesbians we had already encountered and written about anti-lesbianism within our discipline.<sup>1</sup> Some of us had also been involved in setting up the BPS Psychology of Women Section a few years before, and had encountered the full weight of BPS resistance.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, we hoped that the BPS would follow the lead of its American counterpart, the American Psychological Association (APA), which has a division for psychologists working on gay and lesbian issues, and a Committee on Lesbian and Gay Concerns. More than 15 years ago the APA passed a resolution urging psychologists "to take the lead in removing the stigma of mental illness that has long been associated with homosexual orientations", and we received a great deal of support from our colleagues in the USA — in particular, Professor Bernice Lott, President of the APA Psychology of Women Division, Professor Esther Rothblun, Chair of the APA Committee on Lesbian and Gay Concerns, and the writer and activist Barbara Sang, who has worked within the APA as an openly lesbian psychologist for the past 25 years. Barbara Sang believes that "it is important that we continue to research this area in different communities and countries", and regards the provision of built-in structures within an organisation as essential in countering myths and stereotypes about lesbians. We also received support from Michael Siever of the American Association of Lesbian and Gay

Psychologists, Sandra Cole of the American Association of Sex Educators, Counsellors and Therapists, Donna Daniel of the American Mental Health Counsellors Association's Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Network, and Jan Schippers of the Association of Lesbian and Gay Psychologists in Europe.

Sadly, we did not find the same level of support in this country.<sup>3</sup> In addition to outright prejudice and clearly voiced religious objections, British psychologists argued that our proposal was 'political' rather than 'scientific', and that it focused on a small topic marginal to the overall study of psychology as a whole. Lesbian issues were trivialised and sexualised. It is a matter of particular regret that the BPS Psychology of Women Section refused to support our proposal, complaining that we were dividing and diverting women's energies within psychology.<sup>4</sup> It was almost a year later, in October 1992, that the Psychology of Women Section finally offered some support. Not only has the BPS rejected our proposal for a section, but we have also subsequently been refused sufficient financial support to set up a working party to explore the teaching of the psychology of lesbianism. We are deeply saddened and also very angry about these rejections. We have learned — the hard way — just how anti-lesbian psychologists can be.

Since turning down our proposal for a Psychology of Lesbianism Section, the BPS Council has approved, in principle, the formation of two other subsystems within the society: a Special Group of Psychologists in Social Services, and a Sport and Exercise Psychology Section.

The latter proposal was far less well documented than our own, and was presented to Council without supporting letters from external organisations. It has nevertheless been approved, while our own proposal was rejected. We believe that the psychology of lesbianism is every bit as important an area of psychology as is the psychology of sport, and that the BPS cannot legitimately plead financial constraints as a reason for turning down our proposal if it then approves the proposals advanced by others.

Some BPS subsystems have now recognised this: the Scottish Division of Educational and Child Psychology accepts that its "stance over the proliferation of Society Subsystems has led to inconsistent treatment of the application for the formation of the [Psychology of Lesbianism] section", and that "consequently if the proposal for the formation

of a Psychology of Lesbianism Section is again put to Council the Division will feel obliged to give its support".<sup>5</sup>

We plan to resubmit our proposal to Council next year. In addition to the international support cited above, three BPS subsystems have now formally supported our proposal (the Psychology of Women Section, the Special Group of Counselling Psychologists, and the Scottish Division of Educational and Child Psychology), and we await promised support from several others. If you would like to support us, in either an individual or an organisational capacity, please write to us.

Copies of the full proposal for the Psychology of Lesbianism Section can be obtained from Sue Wilkinson, Health Studies Research, Institute of Nursing Studies, The University of Hull, Hull, HU6 7RX.

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1. Louise Comely, 'Educational Psychology and Heterosexism', letter, *The Psychologist* 3, 12, 1990, p.547; Celia Kitzinger, *The Social Construction of Lesbianism*, London, Sage, 1987; Celia Kitzinger, 'Heterosexism in Psychology', *The Psychologist* 3, 9, 1990, pp.391-392

2. Sue Wilkinson, 'Women's Organisations in Psychology: Institutional Constraints on Disciplinary Change', *Australian Psychologist* 25, 3, 1990, pp.256-269

3. We had the support of over a hundred individual British psychologists (some of them

not members of the BPS); our thanks to them. We are also grateful to the BPS Special Group on Counselling Psychology, the *only* BPS group to give us official backing

4. For further details, and for a response from the Psychology of Women Section, see *Feminism and Psychology: An International Journal* 1992, 2, 2

5. Letter from Graham Williams, Hon Sec., Scottish Division of Educational and Child Psychology, to Colin Newman, Executive Secretary of the BPS, 23rd September 1992