

Abstract

Gay men married to heterosexual women seek psychotherapy for numerous reasons, not only to find a way out of their marriages. Therapists must identify their countertransference reactions to avoid pushing the patient either to commit to his marriage or leave it. The patient's underlying problems should be addressed before the patient can explore the fate of his marriage. Therapists also need to be understanding of the patient's attachment to his wife. In addition, therapists must be aware of the societal implications of homophobia on gay patients. This article discusses motivations for heterosexual marriage among gay men, examines two clinical cases, and addresses practice and countertransference issues.

By conservative estimates, at least two million men and women who are or were married come out as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. Once they disclose to their heterosexual spouses, divorce results in the majority of cases. Little is known about the number of marriages that endure or how many of the disclosing spouses are bisexual, given the invisibility of such marriages, the mislabeling of bisexuals as gay or lesbian, and the reluctance of spouses to identify themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. This article reports on the experiences of 56 self-identified bisexual husbands and 51 heterosexual wives of bisexual men who maintained their marriage after disclosure. Their responses to a survey questionnaire are compared with those of 32 self-identified gay married men and 28 heterosexual wives of gay men. The convenience samples, largely from the United States, came from Internet mailing lists, support groups, and members of the Straight Spouse Network. Strategies that they found most helpful in maintaining their marriages are analyzed alongside circumstances in their lives that supported their staying married and those that worked against them. Helpful for the largest numbers of all spouse samples were honesty, communication, peer support, therapy, and taking time. The bisexual men and heterosexual wives of bisexual men also relied on the husbands' empathy and the wives' flexibility.

The findings demonstrate the importance of the couple's working together to maintain a satisfying post-disclosure marriage. The relationship of the bisexual husbands and heterosexual wives of bisexual men with their respective spouses was marked by a multileveled interaction that included mutual sexual pleasure, as well as cognitive, verbal, behavioral, and emotional engagement. Their joint effort over time enabled them to

deconstruct not only traditional concepts of marriage, but also dichotomous views of sexual orientation.

In the current study, the attitudes, behaviors and experiences of 26 gay or bisexual men who were married to a woman are examined. Data are provided on childhood family background and experiences, sexual practices with men, reasons for entering marriage, and the “coming out” process. The frequency of childhood sexual experiences was associated with unsafe sexual practices with other men in adulthood. Attitudes toward lesbians and gay men were more negative now than at the time of marriage. The two most frequent reasons for marriage were that it seemed natural, and a desire for children and family life. The results support the hypothesis that internalised homophobia is a factor that leads men into mixed-orientation marriages. Cognitive consistency theory is used to explain the eventual marriage breakdown.