



## **CONFERENCE REPORT: INTERNATIONAL LESBIAN, GAY, BI-SEXUAL and TRANSGENDER PSYCHOLOGY SUMMER INSTITUTE**

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This report outlines my experiences attending the first International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Psychology Summer Institute, held at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, USA, 3-8 August 2008. This Institute aimed to provide for an intensive exchange of ideas among senior, junior and graduate student scholars located across LGBT psychology.

After an initial burst of enthusiasm leading to my successful application to attend the Institute, I later came to worry how I was going to cope with being immersed in 'psychology' for a week. Although I am currently completing my PhD in psychology investigating issues around gay men's health, I do not have a background in psychology – in fact I have only completed one undergraduate paper. Because of this and my 'critical' leanings I sometimes feel out of place studying in a psychology department and in the discipline of (mainstream) psychology.

Getting to Ann Arbor from Auckland is not a quick trip. It typically involves an overnight stay at the point of arrival in the US, or alternatively an overnight flight following a lengthy layover after arrival in the US. I chose the latter option, and after 48 hours of no sleep found myself at the welcoming function. If first impressions do count, then the friendliness and genuine interest in the work of others amongst all participants was immediately obvious – I felt this was going to be a very worthwhile event.

The Institute was organised around presentations by 10 senior scholars:

**Lisa Diamond** (University of Utah): Female sexual fluidity: Evidence from a 12-year longitudinal study.

**Oliva Espin** (San Diego State University): Lesbian among Latinos or Latina among Lesbians? Multiple identities as multiple sources of growth.

**Peter Hegarty** (University of Surrey): Alfred Kinsey and Lewis Terman: The co-construction of high intelligence and rational psychological science through a silence about homosexuality.

**Lih-Mei Liao** (University College London): Formulating psychological care for people with 'disorders of sex development.'

**Allen Omoto** (Claremont Graduate University): Psychological processes underlying community involvement and social action.

**Mark Padilla** (University of Michigan): Stigma, social inequality, and HIV/AIDS among LGBT populations: Theory and research on a pernicious intersection.

**Charlotte Patterson** (University of Virginia): Sexual orientation and family lives: Psychological perspectives.

**Esther Rothblum** (San Diego State University): Same-sex couples in legal relationships: I do, or do I?

**Stephanie Sanders** (Indiana University): Sexual identity and gender diversity in sexual behavior and the semantics of "having sex": Implications for research and intervention.

**Leonore Tiefer** (New York University): How analyzing the marketing of "female sexual dysfunction" (FSD) illuminates shifting constructions of sex.

Over the five days of the Institute each of these scholars presented a one hour colloquia session on an aspect of their research pro-

gramme to all participants. They also presented either a two hour workshop on some aspect of her or his research work focusing on practical methodological issues, or a seminar based around selected key readings. The same workshops / seminars were presented three times allowing participants (in smaller groups) to rotate through them over the course of the Institute. In addition to these sessions each participant had an individual tutorial with an appointed senior scholar to discuss some work in progress or future research directions. Gregory Herek (University of California, Davis) joined the Institute via video link for a colloquia session (Beyond "homophobia": Thinking about sexual prejudice and stigma). An extended lunchtime session involved lawyers from the American Civil Liberties Union.

The workshop participants were 15 'young' faculty, 3 postdoctoral researchers, and 34 graduate students in various fields of psychology. Most of these were from 19 States within the US and Puerto Rico, but also included attendees from Canada, the UK and Ireland, Germany, Israel, the Philippines, and New Zealand. Sponsorship from The John D. Evans Foundation, the University of Michigan College of Literature, Science and the Arts, Rackham School of Graduate Studies, Psychology and Women's Studies Departments, and Institute for Research on Women and Gender, meant that the accommodation at a local hotel and the bulk of travel costs were met for each participant.

The Institute schedule was demanding, requiring attendance from 8:30 to 4:30, plus times outside of these for the individual tutorial sessions and the video link. Before the Institute reading material comprising 52 articles/book chapters was circulated and required to be read. Despite this energy levels remained high throughout the week, with discussions continuing during the breaks and into the evening.

With the number of sessions offered, it is of course not possible to review each one. In-

stead, to review the Institute I address the reasons contained in my letter of application outlining why I wanted to attend. In applying for the Institute, I was hopeful that three things might be achieved. The first of these was to gain access to academic leadership in the field of LGBT psychology, something that is unfortunately missing in New Zealand. While I enjoy a high quality academic environment, my supervisors do not identify as gay, and while they have experience in undertaking, and supporting students with gay-focused projects, this is not their main research area (Braun, 2004; McCreanor, 1996, 2004). The Institute provided ready access to 10 senior scholars who as well as discussing specific aspects of their research also provided valuable insights into developing and managing a LGBT psychology research programme.

A second reason was to gain an insight into the type of work being undertaken elsewhere in LGBT psychology. My observation during the week was that much of the LGBT psychology within the US (as represented by the participants) is 'mainstream' in orientation, with a lot of it concerned with addressing issues of stigma and homophobia. More critical takes on psychology appeared to be more prominent in participants from outside of the US – something which seems to be broadly consistent with previous observations (see e.g., Clarke & Peel, 2005, 2007; D'Augelli, 2002).

The third reason was to expose myself to a wider range of research on LBT research – something that my (somewhat narrow) focus on gay has not enabled me to fully consider. In this respect, through the pre-Institute reading, as well as the formal presentations and informal discussions I was encouraged to consider issues related to a range of topics concerning LBT. In summary, all three of my pre-Institute goals were amply met.

All aspects of the Institute were incredibly well managed by Abigail Stewart (University of Michigan), along with Peter Hegarty (University of Surrey) and Nicola Curtin (graduate student, University of Michigan). It

is obvious that care was taken in the structure of the programme. The rotating workshops offered the opportunity to interact with each of the senior scholars – unlike traditional conferences where you are often forced to make choices and invariably miss something you are interested in. Another strength was a good mix of those new to academic faculty positions and those undertaking postgraduate research. The willingness of these groups to mix and share ideas meant that more than one participant commented that it was never obvious who was a student and who was faculty. The one on one tutorial sessions provided an opportunity to discuss aspects of the participants' research in some depth with a senior scholar who brought fresh perspectives to the conversation.

Attending conferences and similar meetings also has a number of key 'informal' benefits, many of which appear off programme (Morse, 2008). One of the key features of the Institute was the senior tutors' presence for the entire five days. This meant lunch and other breaks were quite likely to be spent discussing with Charlotte Patterson the vibrant nature of research on LGBT families being undertaken within Australia, or chatting with Oliva Espin about takatāpui (a term she had just come across), or interrogating Leonore Teifer's provocative claim that "Psychology is part of the problem, no matter what the problem is." The Institute also provided opportunities for collaborations to develop as groups of like minded researchers met at breaks to discuss ways of maintaining on-going contacts and possibly undertaking joint research. A networking website was established by one of the participants to facilitate this. A further benefit was being able to 'put faces' to names previously only encountered in texts. Housing the majority of the participants together also ensured that these bonds were strengthened over breakfast and dinner times at the hotel.

There is very little I would offer in criticism of the Institute. I do believe that it would be strengthened if more international participants were able to be involved in all roles – senior

and junior scholars and graduate students. I would have also have found it useful to have someone make a brave attempt to survey the origins and state of international LGBT psychology. Such a review would have helped to develop a shared history and common understanding of the basis of this 'developing' area within psychology. For my interest I would have liked to have more emphasis on 'critical' approaches to psychology. These are however minor matters. It should be obvious I would recommend that anyone interested in LGBT psychology would benefit from attending a future Institute should it be held.

### Author Note

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