

Embracing gender, sexuality and relationship diversity – *in action*

Tina Williams, Jack Lynch, Sam Sharpe and Jeanine Connor share their experience of contributing to the BACP GPiA resource

BACP has commissioned a new resource on working with gender, sexuality and relationship diversity (GSRD). Embracing the spirit of diversity, six authors were invited to co-create the Good Practice in Action (GPiA) resource,¹ and I was delighted to be one of them because, as regular readers will know, embracing gender and sexual diversity is something I am passionate about. The new resource supports those working with adults and young people over 18, and it became clear during its production that additional resources on this topic are needed to support those working with children and young people. BACP is considering how these could be developed.

For this article, I invited BACP’s Good Practice Lead to tell us about the commissioning process and each of the authors to say a little about their contribution; why they thought a review of BACP’s resources was needed; and suggest one key takeaway message about working competently with GSRD. Two authors were unable to contribute due to other commitments.

Tina Williams

I feel very privileged to have been involved in the process of commissioning the new BACP GSRD resource for adults. The project has taken nearly two years and has involved consultation with experts in the field, liaison across departments at BACP, and a lot of hard work from a dedicated group of experts with lived experience.

In planning the resource, colleagues across BACP recognised the importance of reflecting the complexity and diversity inherent in this topic. With this in mind, we set out to recruit a panel of experts with lived experience, who also had experience in counselling and

psychotherapy research, awareness of debates in the field along with proven skills in writing on the topic. Their remit was to offer recommendations for new GSRD materials. They committed to attend regular meetings, review our previous BACP GSRD resource and discuss current research. This informed their recommendation that we should have a fact sheet style resource, the format for longer Good Practice resources, complemented by a shorter checklist. The next stage was to commission a lead author, who had the skill and experience required, and they then identified a group of contributors who would bring additional expertise to the different sections of the resource.

Those meetings proved to be rich with knowledge, experience, understanding, respect and care for each other. It was important to establish trust and build good

Across BACP, we are clear about our position on GSRD; we are an inclusive employer, membership body and charity for all transgender, non-binary and gender-questioning people

Tina Williams

relationships with everyone on the panel. As with any process, this took time, commitment and transparency from everyone involved. Across BACP, we are clear about our position on GSRD; we are an inclusive employer, membership body and charity for all transgender, non-binary and gender-questioning people.

Our aim was to commission a resource to help members challenge their assumptions and increase their awareness and understanding of GSRD. This will, in turn, inform their practice, supporting them to offer safe, respectful and affirming counselling and psychotherapy for people of all genders, sexualities and relationship identities.

The resource reflects learning from the panel in setting out clear principles for inclusive, ethical practice with the caveat: 'Due to the extensive variety of individual human experiences in relation to these areas, it would be impossible and impractical to create a resource that attempts to cover all of them. Therefore, this resource is not an exhaustive list of identities or experiences and, for that reason, refers to recommended resources throughout, which can be used to gain more in-depth knowledge on particular topics'.¹

The resource is split into three main sections: Sex and Gender; Sexuality; and Relationships. Each of these sections provides foundational information to help members develop their understanding of the diverse ranges of human experiences, concluding with good practice notes, written by an experienced psychotherapist and clinical supervisor. This enables the integration of the information provided in each section into professional practice.

.....

Jack Lynch

“ I am very proud to have been the lead author of the BACP's GSRD GPiA resource. However, this is not something I can take credit for alone. From the very beginning, I was adamant that a resource covering such a breadth of experiences and identities must be shaped by a diverse range of voices. We achieved this not only through the authorship itself, with an incredible team of expert contributors, but also through the many people who generously offered feedback throughout the project.

It is impossible to speak meaningfully about diversity without including and listening to diverse voices. Together, we have developed a resource that I am confident will help practitioners better understand GSRD and support more compassionate, informed, and competent practice.

As with any field, our understanding about gender, sexuality and relationships continues to evolve. For this reason, updating professional development resources is essential to ensure

practitioners have access to the most up-to-date and accurate information. GSRD is no different in this respect. With increasing recognition of the diversity in how people experience gender, sexuality and relationships, there is also a fast-growing amount of information available to help us understand these topics. At times, this can feel overwhelming. BACP's new GPiA resource aims to make that information more accessible and digestible, while also supporting counsellors and psychotherapists to apply it in practical ways. This resource is intended to help build confidence and compassion in working across all areas of GSRD.

Gender, sexuality and relationships affect every client, to varying degrees. Everyone has a unique and nuanced experience of how these aspects shape their lives. Of all the recommendations offered throughout this resource on working competently with GSRD, the most essential 'takeaways' are to lead with curiosity and compassion, set aside assumptions and expectations and listen to the expert – the client.

**the most essential
'takeaways' are to lead
with curiosity and
compassion, set aside
assumptions and
expectations and listen
to the expert – the client**

Jack Lynch

.....

.....

Sam Sharpe

“ The recent review of BACP's GSRD resource importantly reflect the ongoing expansion in our understanding of sex, gender, sexuality and relationship diversity as they impact human experiences and the needs of individuals seeking counselling support. The resource provides a timely re-write to support counselling across spectrums of human variation. Individuals whose experiences of sex, gender, sexuality and romantic or sexual relationships are not considered 'normative' often experience stigma, oppression and misunderstanding. This is additionally compounded by the lack of positive representation in mainstream media and education. If individuals are met with biases, assumptions, lack of knowledge, or expectation to provide education in counselling settings, this can add an additional burden which reduces the efficacy of care. While no individual therapist will have expertise on every aspect of sex, gender, sexuality and relationship diversity, the new BACP GSRD resource provides an informative starting point to ask respectful and appropriate questions, leading to a better understanding of each client's needs and experiences.

As a contributor to this resource's coverage of sex diversity and intersex experiences, I encourage BACP members to cultivate an ongoing responsiveness to how their client's experiences of sex, gender, sexuality and relationships interact with the broader context of their lives. These aspects of identity and experience intersect with geographic location, racial and ethnic background, economic status, religion, ability/disabilities and more. These intersections in turn can shape individual choices, challenges and counselling needs in complex ways. Navigating the capabilities and limitations of counselling to provide support for a client's experiences of structural oppression and bearing witness to such difficulties with care and validation, can be both humbling and essential. Individuals may also seek counselling for unrelated issues and feel most supported by a therapist who fluently understands

**I encourage BACP
members to cultivate an
ongoing responsiveness
to how their client's
experiences of sex,
gender, sexuality and
relationships interact
with the broader
context of their lives**

Sam Sharpe

.....

their experiences of sex, gender, and/or sexuality without assuming them to be the central focus of therapy. Ultimately, the new BACP GSRD resource stands to facilitate counselling approaches across the spectrum of sex, gender, sexuality and relationship diversity that uphold BACP's overarching commitment to social justice.

.....

Jeanine Connor

“ I think it was vital for BACP to review the guidance for working competently with GSRD in the context of an evolving social and political landscape, and the resultant misunderstanding this has created. It feels to me as if we are bombarded with media headlines and government 'draft' policies – emphasis on 'draft' – predominantly about the rights of transgender adults and young people. This leaves many well-meaning professionals unsure how to support this client group and/or disinclined to try. Transgender folk are not political footballs. Their experiences are not 'issues' to be resolved. They deserve to be treated with the same respect, acceptance and positive regard as anyone.

I also observe stigma around sexual and relationship orientations that differ from the cis, het, monogamous majority, which is seen as the 'norm'. I see this as a problem because perceiving 'norms' positions diverse sexual and relationship orientations as 'abnormal', which can lead to judgment, shame and pathologisation. I think

professional organisations play a pivotal role in guiding their members to work competently within GSRD and I commend BACP for their ongoing work in this field.



I was responsible for writing the Good Practice sections at the end of the sexuality and gender diversity and relationship diversity sections, as well as a standalone Good Practice section at the end of the resource. I drew on BACP's *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions*,² their commitment to serve transgender, nonbinary and gender questioning (TNBGQ) communities, and their signatory of the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) which makes it clear that conversion therapy in relation to gender identity and sexual orientation is unethical and potentially harmful.³ My recommendations were also considered within the wider context of current UK statute, including equality and gender recognition legislation, domestic abuse and sexual offences legislation and Fraser Guidelines.

What I hope members take away from the resource is a recognition that gender, sex and relationships are universal and this fundamental recognition should be at the core of competent practice. GSRD is not synonymous with LGBTQ+. Everyone has a gender, a sexuality and a relationship status which develop and evolve throughout their lifespan, and we all live within the context of diversity. Knowledge of GSRD is positioned within BACP members' commitment to equality, diversity and inclusivity. If we could stop thinking in terms of 'norms' and 'differences', I think we'd be well on our way to greater acceptance.

Tina Williams (she/her) is BACP's Good Practice Lead, has been a practising psychotherapist and supervisor for over 25 years and has worked for most of that time in the third sector.

Jack Lynch (they/them) is co-director and workshops and training lead for Pop'n'O'ly, the UK's leading LGBTQ+ education resource provider for primary schools. They are a writer, educator and consultant specialising in diversity and inclusion.

Sam Sharpe PhD (they/them) is a biologist, educator and intersex and transgender peer support advocate committed to advancing understanding and support of sex and gender diversity. They have a PhD in biology and are currently an adjunct professor of biology and social transformation studies.

Jeanine Connor MBACP (she/her) is a psychotherapist and clinical supervisor in private practice. She is the author of over 270 publications, most notably, *You're Not My F*cking Mother and other things Gen Z say in therapy* and *Stop F*cking Nodding and other things 16 year olds say in therapy*. Jeanine is an active LGBTQ+ ally and advocate and Editor of this journal. www.jeanineconnor.com

Tina Williams

“ This resource reflects the position of BACP which is that gender, including the social experiences of it, are diverse; and that all experiences of gender are valid and deserve respect.

We consulted extensively with experts with lived experience throughout the process and hope that the resource will support and inform members in their work in this complex area. The resource is for counsellors and psychotherapists working with adults, and we recognise the need for a resource that focuses on children and young people and will be developing this in due course. The resource has been published just before the launch of the new *Ethical Framework* and will be re-branded and aligned with the new framework later in the year.

The authors of the resource remind us that: 'Gender, sexuality and relationships are distinct yet deeply interconnected, and cannot be separated from the social, cultural and historical contexts in which they exist. They shape all of our lives, but the ways in which we experience and express them are diverse, nuanced and deeply personal. Although this resource aims to reflect as many experiences as possible, it is by no means exhaustive. Of all the recommendations offered in this resource to support competent practice, the most essential is to lead with curiosity and compassion, respecting every individual as an expert in their own gender, sexuality and relationships. ■

References

- 1 British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. GPIA 001: Gender sexuality and relationship diversity. Lutterworth: BACP; 2026. <https://tinyurl.com/2uu3vuyx>
- 2 British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. Ethical framework for the counselling professions. Lutterworth: BACP; 2018.
- 3 Memorandum of understanding on conversion therapy in the UK. Version 2 Collaborative publication; July 2024. <https://tinyurl.com/4mvcvdkn>