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Lesbian and Gay Students in Social Work Education:

“That Relationship Is Such An Important Piece”

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Abstract

This article presents the findings of a phenomenological study exploring the experience of lesbian and gay MSW students in two Schools of Social Work in the Pacific Northwest. The research was driven by two issues: 1) a discrepancy between social work education's stated curricular policies of integrating sexual minority content in discussion of oppressed populations and the implementation of those policies; and 2) the dearth of research conducted directly with lesbian and gay students. Interview analysis revealed that lesbian/gay students experience their education as a series of interactions and relationships that exist along a continuum from Marginalizing to Inclusive, encompassing Dismissive, Ambiguous, Supportive, and Validating experiences. A model of this continuum and implications for social work education are presented.

Keywords: gay and lesbian students; homophobia and heterosexism; social work education; qualitative research methods; CSWE standards

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) mandates in its Code of Ethics (NASW, 1999) that social workers “obtain education and seek to understand the nature of social diversity and oppression with respect to . . . sexual orientation” (p. 9). The same document warrants that “social workers . . . act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class on the basis of . . . sexual orientation” (p. 27). In its official policy position, the NASW (2000) states that it

supports curriculum policies in schools of social work that eliminate discrimination against lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. In conjunction with the Council on Social Work Education, the schools of social work are expected . . . to articulate this position in curriculum policy and standards; to require course content on lesbian, gay, and bisexual cultures and concerns . . . [and] to integrate this material throughout the curriculum. (p. 198)

The most recent iteration of the Council on Social Work Education’s (CSWE, 2003) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards states that one purpose of social work education is “preparing social workers to practice without discrimination, with respect, and with knowledge and skills related to . . . sexual orientation” (Educational Policy 1.2, p. 32).

As clear as these directions from social work’s principal professional organizations appear, their consistent and ongoing implementation within social work education as whole, and individual programs, remains problematic (Gerdes, Segal, & Ressler, 2003; Logan & Kershaw, 1994; Parr & Jones, 1996; Van Soest, 1996). Johnston (2002) asserts that not only does social work education have “difficulty aligning action and rhetoric” (p. 2), but is “actually regressing when most of the rest of society is making significant strides in addressing equality for and nondiscrimination of gay men and lesbians” (p. 4).

Until very recently, no studies have been accomplished that include the voices of gay and lesbian students themselves—rather, heterosexuals have been the frame of reference for understanding the manifestation of homophobia and heterosexism in social work education. Hylton's (2002) study of the experience of lesbian and female bisexual social work students in the southeastern part of the United States is an excellent starting point, however, and bears many methodological similarities to the current study. Most recently, Messinger (2004) has explored the experience of homophobia for social work students as it manifests in their field placements.

The current study documents the experiences of gay and lesbian graduate social work students in two graduate programs in the Pacific Northwest, the extent to which they perceive heterosexism to be a problem in social work education, and the meaning they attach to these experiences and perceptions. It is this different voice added to the chorus that may move social work education and educators in the direction of justice and the nurturance of all its students.

It has been two decades since DeCrescenzo (1984) found that among mental health professionals, social workers exhibited the highest rates of homophobia. Other studies of homophobia among social work students tend to reinforce this finding (Morrow, 1996; Smoot, 1992; Sun, 2002). A study of social work programs by Mackelprang, Ray, and Hernandez-Peck (1996) twelve years after DeCrescenzo's (1984) call for "an aggressive recruitment program of lesbian and gay students by graduate schools of social work" (p. 131) revealed that only weak efforts were being made by those programs to recruit either faculty or students who were gay or lesbian. No research since then has indicated any change. Taken together, these studies indicate that social work is singing the same song, just a different verse.

#### Researcher Role in the Study

As a gay man who experienced master's level social work education over a decade ago, I

was interested to know how things had changed since my own tenure as a student. Grounded in a worldview informed by critical constructivism and symbolic interactionism, I found it important to understand how individual social work students experienced their educational world, and how they saw homophobia manifesting in what, as described above, should be a nurturing environment. While tacit knowledge of the social norms and mores of gay men and (to a lesser extent) lesbians unavoidably came into play, conscious efforts were made during interviews and through member checking activities to minimize the extent to which such knowledge and accompanying cultural assumptions might distort the analysis and discussion of findings.

### Methodology

The paucity of literature on the subject at hand calls for an initial exploration of the phenomenon under study before more detailed studies can be pursued. Because qualitative research methods are so well suited to exploration of previously unmined material and to gaining an understanding of the lived experiences of individuals in their cultures (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), they represent the most useful method for seeking out the meaning that gay and lesbian social work students attach to their educational experience.

### *Sample*

For this purposive sample, participants were recruited among students enrolled in the MSW programs of two public schools of social work in the Pacific Northwest. The decision to exclude bisexual and transgender individuals from the study was a conscious one, based on the researcher's belief that the dynamics of both these characteristics are different from those of gay men and lesbians. Additional research that gives voice to these populations is certainly in order.

The study was advertised via e-mail listserves of MSW students in the targeted programs, as well as printed flyers distributed to their student mailboxes. Because of the stigma often

associated with revealing one's sexual orientation, individuals interested in the study were instructed to contact the researcher, avoiding any appearance of an invasion of privacy. As it was incumbent on participants to contact the researcher, individualized recruitment or traditional "snowball" recruiting methods were not possible.

#### *Data Collection, Analysis and Trustworthiness*

Participants engaged in semi-structured, face-to-face interviews at a site of their choice, ranging from 30 to 75 minutes in length. Audiotapes from the interviews were transcribed by the researcher, allowing for an initial immersion in the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1998).

Data analysis followed the system suggested by Rodwell (1998) for unitizing, "lumping," and categorizing interview content, which relies on grounded theory approaches (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). As with all aspects of qualitative research, the data transformation process was fluid and constantly revised and revisited to insure that the data were being presented fully and authentically. Critical assessments of various interpretive possibilities were screened through two peer debriefers and their feedback incorporated into the process.

Member checking also was accomplished to enhance credibility. All participants were given the opportunity to review the transcript of their interview prior to analysis to verify the extent to which their beliefs, experiences, and attitudes were captured and correctly stated. Member checking also was used to verify interpretive inductions and use of specific quotations from the interviews as the interpretive process was taking place. For this final process, three participants were chosen at random from each site (for a total of six reviewers) and asked to provide their feedback.

As an exploratory study in a limited geographic and educational arena, the transferability of the current findings to other settings is quite limited. The study does, however, enhance the

knowledge about regional differences in MSW education experiences for sexual minority students when compared with Hylton's (2002) study.

### Findings

Both campuses used for this study are located in urban settings and are large, public institutions. University A offers the traditional, two-year, full-time MSW program, as well as a part-time evening program, an Advanced Standing program, and an on-campus, weekend outreach program. University B offers the traditional, two-year, full-time MSW program, which can also be completed on a part-time basis, and offers a distance education option in another part of the State.

Both of the cities in which the universities are located were perceived by participants to be friendly to sexual minorities and for some, were part of their reason for applying to that university.

“City A” is progressive and GLBT-affirming and in the forefront of a lot of progressive things. So, it just kind of made sense to me that it would be a very friendly, very out, very good place to be queer. (Student #9)

I knew that “City B” was really liberal, or relatively, and I knew that there was a lot of sexuality-type stuff here. So that was encouraging. And I guess I figured that would somehow be represented in the faculty and the student body. (Student #15)

In all, 26 individuals responded to the recruitment efforts, 12 from University A, and 14 from University B. Of the 26 respondents, three (all from University B) did not meet the inclusion criteria, either identifying as bisexual, or having already graduated from the program.

An equipment failure resulted in the loss of one University B participant's interview. Table 1 presents some demographic characteristics of the final 22 participants.

Insert Table 1 approximately here

Participants ranged in age from 22 to 50, with a mean age of 32.6. Women tended to be younger, with a mean age of 30.2 versus 39.2 for men. Of the four participants who did not identify ethnically as White/Caucasian, one identified as Native American; one as Asian-American; one as biracial; and one as having some Native American heritage of which she didn't know the details. Two students enrolled in the Advanced Standing program at one campus were included as advanced students, even though it was only their first temporal year in a program. Three students were enrolled in nontraditional programs (evening, weekend, or distance programs), which are all part-time. Of the 19 students enrolled in traditional program offerings, 14 attended school full time. Nearly all students described themselves as being "out" (open about their sexual orientation) in their programs; only one student indicated that his sexual orientation was known only to a small number of peers.

### *Conceptual Model*

Taken together, the reconstructed data fall under the core category of "The Primacy of Interactions and Relationships" (see Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 approximately here

This should not be surprising for social workers or social work educators, since one of the guiding principles in the profession's ethical code states that, "social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships" (NASW, 1999, p. 6). A student on the verge of graduation put it perhaps most clearly: "I think that relationship is such an important piece to learning about each other" (Student #12).

The interactions and relationships discussed by each and all respondents fell along a continuum of experience from Marginalizing to Inclusive. The continuum can be conceptualized into four general categories of experience: Dismissive, Ambiguous, Supportive, and Validating, with each category manifesting similar experiential patterns. In no case did a student describe his/her experience as categorically good or bad. Even those individuals with mostly negative experiences established some positive relationships (and vice versa). For example, one student from University A, who had multiple “Dismissive” and “Ambiguous” interactions and relationships with faculty in the classroom, felt quite “Supported” by some heterosexual students in his cohort who addressed the perceived slights. The same student described a “Validating” experience in his practicum site, where his lesbian supervisor served as a strong mentor and model for him.

While these categories are discussed as discrete conditions, it should be kept in mind that they are part of a fluid continuum based on the individual’s experience: the same situation described by two respondents might have seemed “Supportive” to one, but “Ambiguous” to the other. Also, given the nature of the sampling process, it is likely that some sexual minority students who experienced their education in a more marginalizing or more inclusive way did not come forward as participants.

#### *Relationships Experienced as Dismissive*

Respondents described many interactions and relationships that would generally be perceived as negative and which can together be described as “Dismissive.” For the individual respondent, this perception meant that they and their experience were being discounted, leading to safety concerns and anxiety about being out in the program. This sense of being dismissed was made evident to students by the absence environmental cues that they were welcome, absence of

lesbian/gay curricular content, or the failure to follow up on issues that arose in the classroom.

I mean, I'm looking for messages, watching them, kind of going: OK, am I safe to be out? I listen to the professors and the examples they give and the pronouns they use and all of that stuff in class. I look in the hallways and see: what do they have on the walls? . . . All of these things that I'm looking for all the time to see where somebody's at. (Student #11)

I did [come out], actually, just this year for the first time. We got into small groups in the practice class. And at that point I felt it was important to have the perspective of a sexual minority, and so I brought that up. I got shot down. The response did not feel good. (Student #16)

By the end of the year, I was really pissed. Basically, I'd go into class expecting to have this discussion that I wanted and it wouldn't happen. Then, I'd say to myself: OK, next week, I'm sure it'll happen, then next week, then next week. Sometimes she'd say, "OK, next week we're gonna talk about homosexual issues," and then we wouldn't. She'd just talk about a homosexual client that she had, and that's it. So I just kept thinking "next week," then finally, in the final week of school, I realized it wasn't gonna happen. And I was really mad. (Student #16)

If you can't discuss it in an academic environment, where can you discuss it? So that really irks me—it should have been drawn out. I mean, here this gal made

that comment about her beliefs—“I believe homosexuality is wrong”—in a classroom full of gays and lesbians, and we didn’t talk about it. What’s up with that? (Student #7)

Faculty and students being ignorant of the issues faced by sexual minority students, as well as making heterosexist assumptions and statements also were an issue.

There are four other students in my collective and it just never dawned on them that it was a big thing that I couldn’t walk down the street holding hands with another guy. It was outside of their experience, so it’s not something I could talk to them about because there’s not that common frame of reference. (Student #3)

What I remember is overhearing another group, and someone saying to the effect of, “Well, those people always want to put it in your face,” or something like that. And so, I sat there and went: Oh my God, I’m sitting here in a graduate level social work class and I’m hearing this crap. (Student #20)

Finally, lesbian and gay faculty being invisible or closeted was a concern.

I have not noticed or been introduced to any gay men—as students, yes—but not on the faculty as yet. . . . I think I had this belief, this folktale belief, that there would be a higher representation of gay and lesbian faculty in a school of social work than in other areas. (Student #8)

Personally, I think that people have a responsibility to be out. I’ve become a little less political in my views about that because I know that everyone is at different stages in their self-acceptance. I want to be able to respect that. I would hope that

a person who is a faculty member at a graduate school of social work, however, is at kind of a different level. That might not necessarily be true, but we perceive these individuals as those who know, and they have a certain responsibility to educate and share. (Student #18)

*Relationships Described as Ambiguous*

While the interactions and relationships categorized as Dismissive had a strong sense of exclusion and marginalization, those described as Ambiguous were less clearly negative. Students described situations and relationships in which they felt a subtle heterosexism rather than more overt dismissiveness. This was often experienced as tokenism, or being “the only one.”

It’s still that subtle sort of “we’re OK with everybody here, but we’re still mostly only OK with mainstream heterosexual people.” (Student #13)

What I found is that we—meaning as a lesbian—we’re kind of invisible. It’s OK to be out, but it’s not really something that’s talked about. (Student #20)

So, I’m looking at the curriculum and having this awareness and realizing that queer issues are only kind of mentioned and then they totally vanish. . . . But it’s in every syllabus. It’s like queer issues are mentioned in just about every syllabus in that little blurb about social justice, but then if something comes up in the classroom, it’s just passed over. . . . That’s not OK with me. (Student #9)

People definitely had a hard time admitting their privilege, their heterosexual

privilege. And when it was pointed out, it was just a big shock and a lot of denial.

(Student #4)

It just felt very on the spot. I think expecting any person who's in a marginalized group—if you're expected to speak for the group then it feels uncomfortable. It's like, "Well, you all read the article, too, what did you think about it?" (Student #22)

### *Relationships Experienced as Supportive*

There is a considerable shift in tone in the described experience between Ambiguous relationships and those that are perceived to be Supportive. It should be noted that, overall, there was far less data describing positive interactions and relationships than negative. Whether this is because there were demonstrably more Dismissive and Ambiguous relationships, or because negative experiences tended to stand out in students' minds more is open to conjecture.

For students who described Supportive relationships, it meant that they could be comfortable being out and that the environment was safe. They knew this through the presence of lesbian/gay course content and the use of inclusive language by faculty

Overall I feel very comfortable being out here. . . . All the instructors have been great. I feel very comfortable being out and being gay. (Student #3)

I really appreciate the fact that gerontology classes have really focused very nicely to a degree on same-sex relationships or issues, family dynamics, and family configurations related to gays, lesbians, transgenders, bisexuals, whatever. (Student #6)

One of the things that's wonderful is that all of the materials that we're reading, and most of the instructors when they're talking about various areas, will include sexual orientation in their discussions of oppression. I've never had that happen before. (Student #8)

I feel good about the way that people are inclusive in their language. So, I don't feel inferior or like I'm a forgotten sector of society, because people are very, I think, deliberate and good about being inclusive, at least in their language. (Student #1)

Supported students also experienced the valuing of lesbian/gay scholarship, and witnessed heterosexism being addressed in the classroom.

I was talking about doing a Master's thesis on rural issues, rural queer issues and communities in that demographic. And I talked with one of the queer women faculty about that. She was very supportive. (Student #9)

In the social justice classes during the first quarter they really tried to bring in sexual orientation as an issue we needed to look at, putting heterosexism into our vocabulary. (#6)

### *Relationships Experienced as Validating*

In most ways, the Validating relationship is an extension of the Supportive one. Beyond feeling comfortable in the program, lesbian/gay students feel welcomed and valued. The principal difference appears to be the extent to which sexual minority faculty members are seen

as critical to the existence of positive, nurturing relationships and interactions. This includes gay and lesbian faculty being out and serving as advisors, mentors, and models for students

What's definitely the most important thing to me is that there are going to be faculty who are gay or lesbian. There's no doubt about that. . . . It's telling me that the School of Social Work is valuing those individuals and the work areas that they may represent, and that they would want those people represented on the faculty. (Student #8)

This woman comes across as such a strong role model. She came and she sat down in the first opening thing and had this beautiful direct way of communicating. And I don't know her at all, so I don't know any A to Z stuff, but was just like, "Yeah!" just this feeling. But it was important to me. It was the very first day that I was there. This person was dressing exactly the way that she wanted to for who she was, and that was really important for me to see. (Student #8)

There were people on faculty, on staff . . . who were giving voice for me and for my people, my type. (Student #6)

Validation means that heterosexual students are making a true outreach to their lesbian/gay peers and attempting to understand their lives in a genuine manner, even if the attempt is sometimes awkwardly accomplished.

I think that all of the faculty comments have been validating, all of them. You know, when they use gay examples, when they just commonly include lesbian and

gay issues in conversations. That is really validating. (Student #8)

There's a female student here in a class—we were sitting around talking about ideas for a paper, and I told her a little bit of my history. I didn't say *how* my partner had died, but *that* my partner had died, and she said, “You know, I've never really had intimate conversations with gay men before, and you're just such an interesting person. I'm really glad I met you and I hope that we can be friends.” (Student #3)

Every now and then classmates tell me things kind of in the vein of: Well, we saw this “Will & Grace” the other night and somebody said something to Grace about, “Oh I have a friend and she's Jewish, too.” “Oh yes, I've seen her at the meetings.” People say that stuff to me in the vein of: Oh, this or that about being gay. You know, trying to make a connection with me in this very awkward sort of way. So people do that, but I find that more endearing than really annoying, because I know they're trying. (Student #11)

#### Discussion

It is evident from the analysis of these data that the principal means by which the students in this study experienced their social work education was through the relationships that developed via interaction with faculty and peers, both individually and in groups. What also is evident is that the experience of gay and lesbian MSW students related to their sexual orientation and educational program is quite varied, both between individuals and within any one individual's tenure.

This range of experience is bound to create some degree of dissonance for the individual student as he/she negotiates the educational process. For example, if the Code of Ethics is clear about the oppressed status of sexual minorities, how is their exclusion from classroom discussion and examples explained? When educators stress the importance of social justice, but fail to address heterosexist comments or assumptions when they occur in the classroom, what is the message that gay and lesbian students hear?

Students clearly perceive faculty as the prime movers of the educational process. It is, after all, faculty members who set forth course goals, determine readings (even if they do not have authorship of them), guide the interactions of the classroom, recruit practicum sites, and serve as role models of social work values and ethics. While higher education administration and accrediting bodies also influence what happens in the classroom, the individual faculty member has significant leeway to address (or fail to address) issues that are important to sexual minority students.

It also is clear that change is occurring only at the slowest of paces. Students recounted experiences and interactions in this study that might have been pulled from any study of the past twenty years regarding heterosexism in social work education. It should set off major alarms for educators that students who are out in all other aspects of their lives are hesitant to be so in the social work classroom.

#### *Implications for Social Work Education*

These students made very clear what “works” for them in terms of feeling welcome and validated in their educational process. First and foremost, it is critical that gay and lesbian faculty and staff be out and visible in the programs in which they work. To a person, students discussed this as a necessary condition for feeling validated as sexual minority students. This may require

extra thought and action that a faculty member might not ordinarily engage in. Faculty should make a point of having gay-friendly artifacts in their offices and in the public areas of the social work school/program, since students clearly scan their physical environment for signs that being out is all right.

It also will be helpful if the research of lesbian/gay faculty is highlighted or made evident to students. Seeing scholarly work by lesbian/gay faculty they respect (and whom they see respected by other scholars) appeared to have an indirect validating impact on these sexual minority students. Tied to this is the necessity of having mentors and role models with whom lesbian/gay students can easily connect and establish one-to-one relationships.

Heterosexual administrators, faculty, and staff need to recognize their role in promoting a welcoming environment as well. This should include recognizing whatever shortcomings they might be subject to in their own teaching and relationships with students and making appropriate changes. It was quite evident in these students' stories that the glossing over of lesbian/gay content as some sort of "lip service" to diversity and social justice is unacceptable. Students are looking for depth in their educational experience—it is important that faculty examine their classroom content and techniques to see that they are providing it.

Those faculty who fail to include (or deliberately exclude) content and material related to sexual minorities will need to solemnly examine their own beliefs and value systems to determine whether they are, in fact, in line with social work values and principles. If these teachers are not able to create welcoming environments for sexual minority students, then their continued role as social work educators should be evaluated.

### *Study Limitations*

As with any phenomenological study, the current findings should not be generalized

outside of the context in which they were gathered. The students who discussed their experiences do not fully represent all gay and lesbian MSW students in their respective programs. Those students who are not out in their programs (or perhaps in the rest of their lives), or those who chose not to volunteer for the study may have a different experience of social work education in relation to their sexual orientation.

The study is also limited by geography. The two urban areas that house these MSW programs were perceived by students to be largely progressive cities in which to live, especially for sexual minority people. Social work programs do not exist in a vacuum, and so the larger environment also may play a role in how students perceive their educational experience. Students in similar programs, but in a different region of the country, might have much different experiences.

### Conclusions

It is worthy of note that over half the participants for this study responded to the study recruitment pieces within 24 hours of their being distributed. Evidently, lesbian and gay MSW students want to be heard and believe that what they have to say is important, both to their own education and that of non-sexual minority students and faculty. In fact, two advanced level students wondered aloud why they had never before been asked about their experience by faculty of their own programs. It seems that the concerns expressed by Johnston (2002) related to the backsliding of social work education on the issue of sexual orientation are being played out in our classrooms.

It is not possible to cover the full range of topics students discussed as important to their educational process, or to discuss any of them here in the depth they deserve. Such areas as lesbian/gay-focused practicum opportunities, practicum instructors, and relationships with other

students warrant further study and will be the focus of companion articles and further research. The specific role played by out lesbian/gay faculty and the strategies they use as out faculty to validate students also warrants additional study.

Many of the conclusions and recommendations discussed here may seem obvious and familiar. It is evident, however, that issues identified over twenty years ago as problematic in social work education's confrontation of the oppression of lesbian and gay students and clients remain salient: same song, different verse. Listening to the participants of this study, and then making intentional change based on their experiences rather than just assuming that the obvious is taking place, may allow us to sing to a different song—one which harmonizes with lesbian and gay voices.

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Table 1

Participant Demographics (N = 22)

Institution	<u>Gender</u>		<u>Ethnicity</u>		<u>Yr in Program</u>	
	Male	Female	White	POC	Foun	Adv
University A (n = 12)	7	5	9	3	7	5
University B (n = 10)	2	8	9	1	3	7
Totals	9	13	18	4	10	12

*Note.* POC = Person of Color or Biracial; Foun = Foundation Year; Adv = Advanced Year.