



Sexual Orientation in Social Work Education: Field instructor and lesbian, gay and bisexual student perspectives

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Purpose of the Research Study

The study aims to explore sexual orientation-related challenges in social work field education, and illuminate factors and processes that contribute to positive learning experiences for LGBT students in MSW field education.

Context of the Study

The field practicum provides unique and important opportunities for social work students to purposefully work towards developing and integrating their sense of personal and professional identity. In the socio-political context of institutionalized heterosexism and homophobia generic approaches to field instruction do not provide sufficient information for field educators to address possible barriers for LGBT students.

Methods: Data Collection, Analysis and Recruitment

We conducted an exploratory case study using qualitative techniques derived from grounded theory. Two sets of in-depth,

semi-structured interviews were conducted; one with LGB students who were recent MSW graduates (n = 6) and one with field instructors (n = 8). A recruitment letter for student informants was sent to all graduating MSW students. Field instructor key informants were selected using purposive sampling.

Results

Three sets of themes emerged:

1. Overarching themes across students and field instructors
2. Themes from all field instructors, and
3. Themes from lesbian- and gay-identified field instructors .

1. Students and Field Instructors

- Students' ability to disclose and explore their sexual identity in the context of field education is significant to their learning experience and professional development.

- Students noted the absence of field educator-initiated discussions about sexual orientation as a practice issue during field education.
- Field instructor and staff practices contribute to or detract from LGB students' sense of comfort and acceptance.
- Students employ strategic use of personal narratives to navigate self-disclosure with field instructors and agency staff.
- "Out" agency staff foster a more positive agency environment for LGB students.
- Agency policy, practices and characteristics contribute to LGB students' sense of comfort, acceptance, and self-disclosure of sexual orientation.

2. All Field Instructors

- LGB students' need to manage self-disclosure is associated with the potential risks of heterosexism and homophobia.
- Students' potential discomfort in self-disclosure in field education is linked to the omission of LGB issues in social work education.
- The agency context (diversity and human rights policy, staff practices, and physical environment) is an important determinant of students' comfort level and disclosure.
- Field instructors address the needs of LGBT students through individual practices such as "making myself available to students," being "open and put[ting] things on the table."

3. Lesbian and Gay Field Instructors

- Self-disclosure of field instructors' sexual orientation plays a role in educating students about self-disclosure in the social worker-client relationship.
- Role modeling of professional boundaries and providing debriefing opportunities are important for LGB students working with LGBT clients.
- Instructors' use of self is important to facilitate student self-determination about disclosure.
- LGB field instructors can help LGB students learn to negotiate their sexual identities, develop their professional selves, and facilitate their abilities to create positive systemic change.
- Important to attend to power dynamics that may exist between LGB field instructors and LGB students.

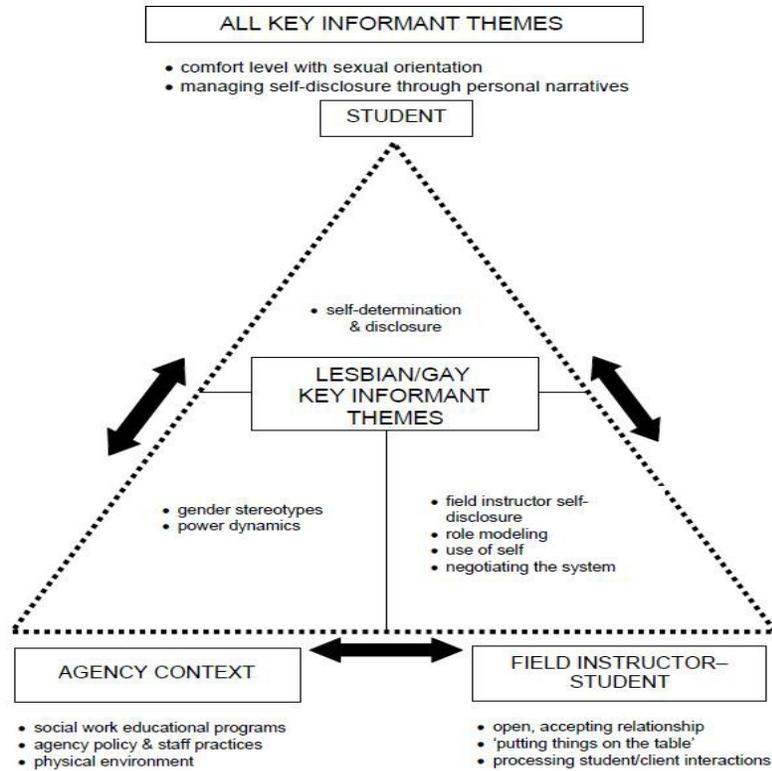


Figure 1. Conceptual model of sexual orientation-related issues in social work field education

Discussion

Figure 1 depicts a conceptual model of sexual orientation-related issues in field education. The model suggests that agency policies, practices, and the field instructor-student relationship are integral components of LGB students' experience and the learning environment in field education settings. Of particular importance, *a predominant focus on LGB students themselves as the source of issues and concerns about sexual orientation in field education may overlook power relationships, agency-level politics and practices, and societal sexual prejudice.*

Implications

Implications for Field Education

- Schools of social work should work collaboratively with field instructors to develop approaches for working with sexual identity issues and to incorporate new knowledge in the orientation and training of field instructors.
- Schools of social work should provide training for new and experienced field instructors to develop competence in providing educational experiences for LGBT students.

- Trainings should include content to:
 - Raise awareness about the degree to which presumed heterosexuality and homophobic attitudes prevail in agencies – in overt and covert ways
 - Recognize that students are at different points in their readiness and desire to self-disclose their sexual orientation; past experiences, personal circumstances, agency dynamics and power dynamics inherent in the field instructor-student relationship inform these decisions
 - Improve field instructors' ability to initiate open dialogue with students related to sexual orientation while respecting boundaries and maintaining a focus on practice
 - Establish common practices with all students in which field instructors are explicit about identifying field education as a process for considering a range of social identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, gender expression, ability) and how they impact on work with clients
- Field instructors need to introduce and later reiterate that appropriate discussion about identity issues is a legitimate focus for education for practice.
- Agency staff, including field instructors, can take proactive roles in challenging discrimination and bias in the agency and ensuring that

appropriate anti-discrimination policies and protocols exist.

Implications for Social Work Education

- Schools of social work should offer educational opportunities for students to explore issues of identity and self-disclosure of sexual orientation, and for integration of their personal and professional selves in an open and supportive environment. Systemic power issues such as heterosexism should be acknowledged and addressed.

Fact Sheet based on:

Newman, P., Bogo, M., Daley, A. (2009). Breaking the silence: Sexual orientation in social work education. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 45(1), 7-27.

Newman, P., Bogo, M., & Daley, A. (2008). Self-disclosure of sexual orientation in social work field instruction: Field instructor and lesbian and gay student perspectives. *The Clinical Supervisor*, 27(2), 215-237. Also summarized in: *Journal of the Ontario Association of Social Workers*, 34(4), 1-3.

Presented at:

University of Toronto, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. 2011, March 24. Providing competent, evidence-based field supervision to support quality education for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) students.