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## **PREPARING HUMAN SERVICE STUDENTS FOR LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER, AND QUEER (LGBTQ) AFFIRMATIVE PRACTICE IN AN ONLINE CLASSROOM SETTING**

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### **Abstract**

*The motivation for this project was to examine the extent to which social work professional aspirations to prepare students for LGBTQ affirmative practice are operationalized within a particular classroom. Beliefs about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) issues rights have been a concern of human service organizations for the past several decades. Position statements from major professional human service organizations call for preparing students for affirmative practice with the LGBTQ communities. Human service accreditation standards note that diversities shape the human experience, and multiple intersecting identities, including race and ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, and other identities inform how human service workers interact in the world. While these position statements represent definite commitments to appreciating LGBTQ diversity, whether these position statements lead to reduced stereotypes and affirmative practice with LGBTQ communities is unclear. The objective*

*of this project was to explore the extent to which students' beliefs about LGBTQ human rights changed over the course of a semester-long course. Using a mixed method design with a small class of social work students (n = 11) in the United States, this study found evidence of positive change in these students and that students were becoming more sensitive to the nuances of LGBTQ human rights. In this paper, I discuss my own experiences teaching about LGBTQ diversity in an online classroom. Challenges and opportunities for talking about sensitive issues such as LGBTQ issues are explored. Additionally, I examine lessons learned and make recommendations for future teaching about engaging people from LGBTQ identities.*

### **Keywords**

Higher Education, Diversity, Sexual Orientation

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## **1. Background and Rationale**

Social work is a human rights profession (Reichert, 2011). According to the International Federation of Social Workers ([IFSW], 2012), a human rights framework in social work aims to protect the fundamental dignity and worth of all human beings and to advance fundamental economic, social, and cultural rights. This statement is broadly based on the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ([UDHR], 1948), an international document which has been developed following the atrocities of World War II and includes negative rights (individual and personal rights), positive rights (economic rights), and collective rights (solidarity rights). Social work education aims to prepare practitioners with the knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive/affective processes to contribute to the well-being of society, fulfillment of human potential, and advocate for the rights of people who have been historically marginalized (IFSW, 2012; Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2010; Council on Social Work Education, 2015).

While social work education has a strong tradition in preparing students for human rights practice, there is some evidence of additional work needed around support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) rights. Empirical studies of social work and human service students in North America suggest varying levels of LGBTQ human rights. Though some recent studies show evidence of negative attitudes towards LGBTQ human rights among social work students (Black, Oles, & Moore, 1998; Kulkin, Williams, Boykin, & Ahn, 2009), there is a trend towards support for LGBTQ human rights in several studies involving

social work and human service students (Dentato, Craig, Messinger, Lloyd, & McInroy, 2014; Logie, Bridge, & Bridge, 2007; Swank & Raiz, 2010).

These findings also consistent with research in other healthcare occupations which has assessed the impact of continuing education on service quality (Yfanti & Sipitanou, 2017). Human service students who receive education on LGBTQ human rights and supportive practices tend to endorse LGBTQ human rights more often. In a study of human service workers' ( $N = 476$ ) support for LGBTQ affirmative practice, Alessi, Dillon, and Kim (2015) found that training interventions that help practitioners to understand the importance of LGBTQ human rights resulted in more willingness to engage in supportive practices. Together, these findings suggest that training and development in the area of LGBTQ rights might have an impact on service provision in social work and the human services.

## 2. Research Scope and Questions

To better understand the impact of LGBTQ affirmative training on social work students, an exploratory study was planned. This project sought to explore the extent to which social work students, in an online class on practice with LGBTQ people, endorsed support for LGBTQ rights. Practice with Sexual Minority Communities is a 14 week online elective course which teaches social work and human service students an LGBTQ affirmative perspective on practice. This course is offered at a midsize university in upstate New York. LGBTQ-affirmative practice refers to a range of strengths-based models of practice that creates a safe, supportive environment for LGBTQ people to express their sexual orientation and gender identity. LGBTQ-affirmative practice assumes that diversity in sexual orientation and gender identities is a regular part of the human experience (Gates & Kelly, 2017; Van Den Bergh & Crisp, 2004). Rather than treating LGBTQ as an aberration or assuming that the LGBTQ person is 'struggling' with their identity, LGBTQ affirmative practice celebrates the LGBTQ person as they are, at this moment, without trying to fix or change them.

To explore the extent to which students' beliefs about LGBTQ human rights changed over the course of a semester-long course, an exploratory, mixed-methods survey was planned. The following research questions guided the study: (1) What is the nature of social work and human service students' beliefs about LGBTQ human rights in my classroom and (2) How do those beliefs change over a 14-week course?

### 3. Methods

Before beginning the study, ethics approval was obtained from the State University of New York at Brockport. Participants were recruited as a sample of convenience from an online course on practice with sexual minority communities. Potential participants were advised that the intent of the survey was to measure how beliefs about LGBTQ issues changed throughout the course. Potential participants were also told that there are no right and wrong answers about LGBTQ issues when participating in this survey. In other words, they should be honest about how they feel about LGBTQ issues. Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. As the instructor of the course, I agreed to not analyze the data until the course was complete and grades were submitted. This strategy was put in place to minimize coercion of the students.

Data for this study were collected via SurveyMonkey using a pre-posttest design. Eligible students were invited to participate anonymously via a link sent to their registered email account. Fifteen students were enrolled in the course and eligible to participate. Eleven (73%) of the enrolled students elected to participate in the survey. Of the 11 participants, 10 (91%) reported that they were social work students. Most of the participants identified as White ( $n = 7$ , 64%), female ( $n = 6$ , 55%), and heterosexual ( $n = 6$ , 55%). Three (27%) of the students identified as transgender.

The primary measure for the study was Ellis, Kitzinger, and Wilkinson's (1999) 25-item Support for Lesbian and Gay Rights Scale (SLGRS). The SLGRS uses a 5-point Likert scale and asks participants to rate the extent to which they agree with certain statements about LGBTQ human rights. For example, SLGRS includes a statement such as "books promoting lesbianism and gay male homosexuality as a positive lifestyle should be freely available in school libraries" and "there is never a situation in which someone's homosexuality should be a cause for job discrimination." There are also reverse coded items such as "society has a right to prevent lesbians and gay men who want to speak in schools from actively promoting homosexuality as equivalent to heterosexuality." Two open-ended questions were also used in the survey. Open-ended questions include: (1) Please describe your current understanding of social work practice with LGBTQ people, and (2) In what ways can social workers show respect for LGBTQ people?

Completed pre- and post-test surveys were analyzed upon completion of the course, to identify the extent to which participants endorsed certain statements about LGBTQ human rights and how their frequency of endorsement changed over time. Thematic analysis of the open-

ended data also provided insight into whether students' beliefs about LGBTQ human rights have shifted during the 14-week course period.

#### 4. Results

After accounting for reverse coding, 11 (100%) of participants either strongly agreed or agreed on 20 out of 25 items. There was no observed difference in many of the items at pre- and post-test. For example, all the participants agreed that children should be taught to respect the rights of LGBTQ people and that all employers should develop just and favorable conditions for LGBTQ people within the workplace.

Reported changes in beliefs occurred on 5 of the 25 items at pre- and post-test. On the item, "There is never a situation in which someone's homosexuality should be a cause for job discrimination", 9 (82%) participants strongly agreed/agreed, 1 (9%) was unsure, and 1 (9%) disagreed/strongly disagreed. At post-test, 11 participants (100%) strongly agreed/agreed with this statement. On the item, "books promoting lesbianism and gay male homosexuality as a positive lifestyle should be freely available in school libraries," 10 participants at pre-test strongly agreed/agreed, and 1 (9%) was unsure. Eleven participants (100%) strongly agreed/agreed.

Participants also endorsed other questions about being more inclusive about the rights of LGBTQ people. For example, on the question "Lesbian and gay male couples should be legally permitted to marry, just as heterosexual couples are," 10 participants (91%) strongly agreed/agreed and 1 participant (9%) is unsure at pre-test. All participants ( $n = 11$ , 100%) strongly agreed/agreed at post-test. On the question, "all university modules in fields such as social psychology, education, history, English literature, and health studies should explicitly include lesbian and gay male perspectives," at pre-test, 7 participants (64%) strongly agreed/agreed, 1 participant (9%) were unsure, and 3 participants (27%) disagreed/strongly disagreed. At post-test, 11 (100%) strongly agreed/agreed. On a reverse coded item, "society has a right to prevent lesbians and gay men who want to speak in schools from actively promoting homosexuality as equivalent to heterosexuality," at pre-test, 9 participants (82%) participants disagreed/strongly disagreed, 1 participant (9%) was unsure, and 3 participants (9%) strongly agreed/agreed. All participants ( $n = 11$ , 100%) disagreed with this statement at the end of the course.

Open-ended questions provided insight into participants understanding of LGBTQ rights over the course of the semester. On the first open-ended question, participants indicated a gap in their understanding of LGBTQ-affirmative practice. One participant noted, "I believe that for the most part, social work practice is largely exclusive and uninformed toward the issues of LGBTQ communities." Another mentioned that, while they generally believed that rights should be afforded to all people, their "experience and understanding [was] minimal." At post-test, it was apparent that students' beliefs were still developing and at the theoretical level. However, there was evidence of some progression. For example, one participant noted, "I am still just starting out understand the LGBTQ community in a social work aspect but being open, and understanding of every client is what is important." Another noted "[Sexual orientation and gender identity] innate and should be treated like any other client issue. Respect, respect, respect!"

On the second question about ways in which social workers can show respect for LGBTQ people, responses at pre-test typically related to negative rights, including the right to work free from discrimination. One participant noted, "people are people. Who they are sleeping with is very little to the large picture of who they are. Get to know all of them without labels!" Another noted that, at work, LGBTQ should be treated the same as others. At post-test, remarks are indicative of an understanding of affirmative practice from a human rights perspective and that human rights are more than the absence of discrimination. For example, one participant noted that it is important to "listen and be open to all clients. Each one is different, and social workers need to keep an open mind." Another participant at post-test noted that "by using language that is affirmative and celebratory... social workers can show respect for LGBTQ people."

## 5. Discussion

This study provides several initial insights about the benefits of using an online class for educating students about LGBTQ human rights in a social work and human services educational setting. Within the 14-week online elective course, which was designed to prepare students for LGBTQ affirmative practice, there is some evidence of positive change. Positive trends of the exercise were that students seemed to become more understanding of the nuances of LGBTQ human rights and may have resolved some of their uncertainties about LGBTQ human rights in



this classroom experience. This finding provides data in support of the importance for transformational learning experiences in higher education (Celli & Young, 2017).

Initial trends in this study suggest that students began to understand the importance of embedding LGBTQ content across the curriculum, rather than treating the content as a standalone course. Several students indicated that they entered the classroom experience with very little knowledge about LGBTQ communities. They began to see the content as being more germane to their practice, even if they were not practicing within an agency setting that specifically serves LGBTQ people.

Even though the observed change in the course was small, there are important lessons to be learned. Most students entered the classroom experience with some level of agreement that LGBTQ human rights should be prioritized in social work practice, and all of them maintained this belief throughout the 14-week course. On several of the items, including the question which stated that society should begin to view homosexuality as equivalent to heterosexuality, there was some evidence of improvement. Whether this growth would be observed in a more substantial classroom with more students, however, is unknown.

### **5.1 Limitations**

There are also other significant limitations to the study which should be acknowledged. The SLGHR measure is a limited measure of possible support for LGBTQ human rights and may have not fully captured the beliefs and experiences of the students. There was also likely a social desirability to response bias present in the study. Since the study was conducted within my classroom, students may have responded as they did from a desire to please me as an instructor. Though I attempted to minimize the impact of the social desirability of response bias by postponing data collection until after the course was over, students' responses may not have reflected their true feelings. Future research should attempt to control for social desirability of response bias.

That this was an elective course, using a small sample within a small classroom is another limitation. Students may have self-selected into this course because they already felt strongly about LGBTQ human rights issues. This limitation is in addition to selection bias that may be a result of their enrollment in a social work and human services program. Regardless of their enrollment in an LGBTQ human rights course, their enrollment in a social work program may mean they placed a high importance on human rights for diverse communities generally.

## 5.2 Implications for Practice and Future Research

Though the study had several significant limitations, there are valuable lessons to be learned for social work and human service educators. Education about LGBTQ human rights has an impact. Though LGBTQ people continue to be marginalized in many different spaces, social work and human service students can make a difference in changing their own beliefs about LGBTQ communities. Educators should continue to infuse LGBTQ perspectives across their courses so that more students can be exposed to this valuable content.

Further research is needed to better understand the impact of LGBTQ affirmative education on students in social work and other allied fields. This research should include not only the perspective of the students themselves but also the perspectives of professionals in the field. A follow-up with field supervisors of students who believe that they are engaging in LGBTQ affirmative practice could help assess whether LGBTQ affirmative education is making a difference in the field. Additionally, conversations with clients and other users of social services might be helpful, to assess whether students who perceive they to be LGBTQ affirmative are in tune with the lived experiences of clients and other users of social services.

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