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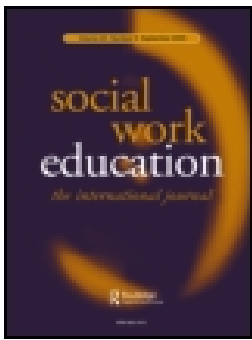
Michael P. Dentato,, PhD

Shelly L. Craig,, PhD, *University of Toronto*

Michael R. Lloyd,, PhD, *Lewis University*

Brian L. Kelly, PhD, *Loyola University Chicago*

Caitlyn Wright, MSW, *LUC*, et al.



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Michael P. Dentato, Shelley L. Craig, Michael R. Lloyd, Brian L. Kelly, Caitlyn Wright & Ashley Austin

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Homophobia within schools of social work: the critical need for affirming classroom settings and effective preparation for service with the LGBTQ community

Michael P. Dentato^a, Shelley L. Craig^b, Michael R. Lloyd^c, Brian L. Kelly^a, Caitlyn Wright^a and Ashley Austin^d

^aSchool of Social Work, Loyola University Chicago, Chicago, IL, USA; ^bFactor Inwentash Faculty of Social Work, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada; ^cSchool of Social Work, Lewis University, Romeoville, IL, USA; ^dSchool of Social Work, Barry University, Miami Shores, FL, USA

ABSTRACT

Social work programs must effectively meet the needs of their diverse lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) student populations as well as effectively train all students to work with minority groups including the LGBTQ community. While many undergraduate and graduate social work programs provide open, supportive, and affirming experiences for LGBTQ students, there remain ongoing challenges related to hostility, stigma, heterosexism, and homophobia within classroom settings across programs in the US and Canada. This study examines classroom experiences of homophobia among 1,018 social work students. Qualitative data associated with three optional open-ended questions were analyzed utilizing grounded theory. Main qualitative findings identified several major themes associated with social work student experiences of homophobia in the classroom including: (1) *Coming out*; (2) *Faculty inaction*; (3) *Implicit and explicit content*; (4) *Direct language and actions*; and (5) *Religious rationalizations and non-affirming positions*. Conclusions and recommendations for social work education are discussed that center around creating safe and affirming classroom settings; the vital role of out faculty, students, and allies; impactful integration of diversity content within curricula, policies, and accreditation standards; ongoing training and mentorship; understanding the role of power and oppression; and a call to action among social work educators and the profession.

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LGBTQ; homophobia; social work; classroom; oppression

Background

There has been substantial progress and momentum related to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) equality and civil rights in the United States over the past four decades. In June 2015, the US Supreme Court ruled that the right to marriage is a fundamental right for all, and that bans on marriage for LGBTQ individuals are unconstitutional

(Human Rights Campaign, 2015). In the same regard, 59% of Americans support marriage equality overall (Craighill & Clement, 2014). As a result of changing policies and attitudes related to the promotion of LGBTQ rights, support for the LGBTQ community has increased substantially (Altemeyer, 2002; Andersen & Fetner, 2008a; Baunach, 2012). However, such progress for LGBTQ equality is often accompanied by the persistent elevation of homophobia and/or heterosexism (Adam, 2003; Andersen & Fetner, 2008b). It is important to first examine the meaning, definition, and terms of homophobia and heteronormativity to more fully understand their impact upon certain populations (e.g. LGBTQ students) and within particular settings (e.g. classrooms). After reviewing the meanings of homophobia and heteronormativity, we will consider literature and research associated with experiences of homophobia among student populations including those within high school, college, and social work classroom settings. This study will then examine classroom experiences of homophobia among 1,018 social work students across the US and Canada.

Homophobia

The definition of homophobia has evolved over time. Sears and Williams (1997) define homophobia as ranging from, 'overt violence, such as physical assault and verbal harassment, to psychological battering resulting in fear of self-disclosure or the absence of same-gender intimacy, to social and political offensives ... that have fostered and reinforced anti-gay sentiments and behaviors' (p. 15). Homophobia can be implicit or explicit, affecting LGBTQ individuals' attitudes about themselves and others. Through institutionalized homophobia, businesses, and other organizations discriminate against LGBTQ individuals through written and unwritten policies (Giuffre, Dellinger, & Williams, 2008). Internalized homophobia is explained by Sears and Williams (1997) as the 'conscious or subconscious adoption and acceptance of negative feelings and attitudes about homosexuals or homosexuality by gay men and lesbians' (p. 15). It is important to understand various forms of oppression through homophobia that LGBTQ individuals continue to face, despite recent advancements.

Heterosexism

Heteronormative ideology in which heterosexuality is understood and embraced as normal, universal, and superior to all other sexual orientations (Morrow & Messinger, 2006) continues to permeate societal values and beliefs. This view has created a hierarchy related to sexual orientation; heterosexuality is the category to which non-heterosexual orientations are compared. This creates a hegemonic system in which more power is given to heterosexual orientations whereby discrimination can and often persists among those with non-heterosexual orientations. Similar to sexism, Balsam (2002) explains that heterosexism affects institutional, personal, and interpersonal levels of society. Heterosexism is not simply explained as a system of power structures; it must be understood as the deeply embedded belief that non-heterosexual orientation is abnormal and deviant. Hoagland (2007) stresses that the organization of society supports heteronormativity often undermining LGBTQ community building and organizational work.

Homophobia and student populations

Homophobia and heterosexism within classroom settings and school environments can negatively impact LGBTQ student experiences. The college or university classroom is a particularly important setting in which to examine oppression, stigma, and hostility for members of the LGBTQ community. While past studies are limited because of their focus on high school students (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008; Jordan, Vaughan, & Woodworth, 1998; Thurlow, 2001), the prevalence of homophobia within high school classroom settings may provide a context for understanding the impact upon the continuation of such experiences for college-age students. Ultimately, LGBTQ students that experience homophobia or heterosexism may have lower self-esteem; increased likelihood for bullying, violence, and harassment; and greater fear for safety than other students (D'Augelli & Rose, 1990; Fineran, 2002; Gruber & Fineran, 2008; Jordan et al., 1998). Additionally, experiences of homophobia and heterosexism directly violate implicit assumptions about what most LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ students expect – and do not expect – to be part of their typical positive, affirming and nurturing educational experiences across grade school, high school or college/university settings (Fisher et al., 2008; Wickens & Sandlin, 2010).

Jordan and colleagues (1998) found that many LGB high school students in Chicago had negative feelings associated with the school setting. The study measured student disclosure related to outness, anxiety, and self-esteem and found that students shared the common desire for school-provided safe spaces, free from violence or harassment. While this urban study had a small sample size ($n = 34$), the need to expand on the limited scope of research (e.g. focus on gay male youth) provided an important foundation for future research.

Results from the 2013 Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) National School Climate Survey of 7,898 students between the ages of 13 and 21, found that over half of the sample identified as either gay or lesbian, along with underscoring the need for advocacy and education. The GLSEN survey findings included: 74.1% of students heard 'gay' used in a negative way (e.g. 'that's so gay') frequently or often at school, and 90.8% reported that they felt distressed because of this language; 64.5% heard other homophobic remarks (e.g. 'dyke' or 'faggot') frequently or often; 56.4% heard negative remarks about gender expression (not acting 'masculine enough' or 'feminine enough') frequently or often; 51.4% of students reported hearing homophobic remarks from their teachers or other school staff, and 55.5% of students reported hearing negative remarks about gender expression from teachers or other school staff (Kosciw, Palmer, Kull, & Greytak, 2013). These findings illustrate that both homophobia and transphobia are pervasive within high school settings. Participants over the age of 21 are excluded from this survey; therefore, it remains relevant to examine college-age student experiences of homophobia.

D'Augelli and Rose (1990) examined experiences of a freshmen cohort ($N = 218$) with differing views of lesbians and gay men, along with exploring the relationship between homophobia and student's personal knowledge of gay men and lesbians. The researchers found strongly negative and biased views related to lesbians and gay men concluding that approximately one-third of respondents preferred a college environment without LGBTQ individuals. Other findings related to disgust for gay men and homosexual activity being perceived as 'wrong.' Gender-specific findings noted that students were more hostile to gay men than lesbians with male students significantly more homophobic than female students (D'Augelli & Rose, 1990). DeSurra & Church, 1994 qualitative study ($N = 33$) found that

homophobic views may increase likelihood for direct and indirect forms of hostility within classroom environments. However, whenever such homophobic views or comments were directly challenged by faculty or other students, and LGB issues were included in course content, students felt more support (DeSurra & Church, 1994).

Ellis (2009) studied 291 students from 42 universities in the United Kingdom, and found approximately 23.4% of those surveyed indicated that they had on at least one occasion been a victim of homophobic harassment/discrimination while attending university. These numbers may indicate that a majority of college students might demonstrate some level of support for the LGBTQ community, however, students noted negative incidents including: derogatory remarks (77.9%), direct or indirect verbal harassment or threats (47.1%), and threats of physical violence (26.5%). Engberg, Hurtado, and Smith (2007) conducted first- and second-year surveys of a diverse sample of 4,741 college students to determine attitudes of acceptance of LGB peers. The study found that direct interaction with LGB peers as well as enrollment in diversity courses that explored race, gender, and/or sexual orientation created an environment for student acceptance. The study also indicated that one of the most effective ways to create change and encourage affirmative relationships is through interactions across different student groups and populations (e.g. LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ).

Rankin (2003) found campus climate among undergraduate and graduate students to be homophobic as reported by 74% of those surveyed ($N = 1,669$) as well as 60% of LGB students concealing their sexual minority status to avoid discrimination, and 36% reporting experiences associated with harassment due to their LGB status. However, as evidenced by the limited literature in this area, there remains a dire need for college-level data that examine the role of homophobia in the classroom (Longerbeam, Inkelas, Johnson, & Lee, 2007) as well as understanding the experiences of LGBTQ students overall.

As students across all disciplines are likely negatively affected by homophobia in the classroom, social work students have a unique responsibility to end such discrimination. Tenets of the social work profession include a call to serve marginalized and underserved communities, while promoting social justice and eliminating oppression (Breton, 1994; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). Social work classrooms throughout the US and Canada provide a unique lens through which to examine LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ student experiences associated with homophobia.

Social work classroom settings

LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ social work student experiences

While some literature has indicated across various disciplines that non-LGBTQ students struggle with LGBTQ topics and LGBTQ students in the classroom (Long & Serovich, 2003; Wolfe, 2006), the same may be true within the social work classroom setting. Previous studies have shown that social work students struggle to fully accept other LGBTQ students (Austin, Craig & McInroy, *In Press*; Craig, Dentato, Messinger & McInroy, 2016; Martin et al., 2009). In their sample of 575 heterosexual social work undergraduate students, Swank and Raiz (2010) found that 35.4% of BSW students considered homosexuality an unnatural expression and 53% of BSW students disagreed that homosexuality is merely a different kind of lifestyle, while '38% of BSW students ... thought that homosexuality is a sin' (p. 21). In a study of 173 MSW students at a large North American University, Logie, Bridge, and Bridge

(2007) found that ‘while the outcomes indicate that the majority of MSW students surveyed have positive attitudes and low-levels of phobia, significant differences between subsets of the LGBTQ populations were evident. Specifically, students had a higher phobia toward the bisexual and transgender populations as compared with gay men and lesbians (p. 214).

(Dentato, Craig, Messinger, Lloyd & McInroy, 2014) found significant relationships between an LGBTQ social work student’s level of outness related to their sexual orientation or gender identity and certain university, school, and classroom environmental factors. Some of these factors included the LGBTQ student perceptions of non-LGBTQ students’ levels of comfort and discomfort with LGBTQ issues; faculty and other student knowledge and support for LGBTQ student identities; faculty support for sexual orientation issues; and LGBTQ student awareness of openly LGBTQ administrators and staff members. From a sample of 409 school social workers in Illinois, Krieglstein (2003) found significant correlations between non-affirming social work education and heterosexism in BSW and MSW programs. The respondents reported that their social work education provided little information about the lives of gay and lesbian individuals. There was also a direct correlation between strongly held religious beliefs and heterosexism among participants.

Faculty

The support or absence of faculty connections, support, and monitoring of homophobia within the classroom can contribute significantly to the level of LGBTQ social work student comfort and may also directly impact homophobic and transphobic experiences within college settings and across campuses. Fredriksen-Goldsen, Woodford, Luke, and Gutiérrez (2011) found that faculty in the United States and Canada reported generally supportive attitudes related to LGBTQ people and issues with Canadian faculty significantly more likely to be supportive of gay marriage (69% US/92% Canada). There were also significant differences between the US and Canadian faculty on their attitudes toward LGBTQ relationships being acceptable (67% US/93% Canadian). Faculty also reported that they demonstrated support for a lesbian, gay, or bisexual friend (89% US/99% Canadian) (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2011). Hylton (2005) found that faculty members and peers often appeared to be uncomfortable in discussing LGBTQ issues or interacting with sexual minorities. Such discomfort was reported to be particularly problematic in the classroom, where curricular content occasionally brought LGBTQ issues to the forefront. When discussing college-level homophobia in the classroom, Bennett (2002) stresses the importance of instructor responsibility in creating a safe space for students. According to Cain (1996), LGB faculty disclosure positively correlates with the coming out of LG students; faculty disclosure can stimulate discussions about oppression and challenge inequality (Cain, 1996). In this way, sexual minority students may feel more comfortable coming out in the classroom because their faculty member is not only affirming but is also out. The critical role of faculty and other student support and direct action (e.g. through the use of affirming language and directly addressing homophobia and heterosexism) will likely have a positive impact upon LGBTQ student classroom experiences overall.

Effective training

In order to effectively train and prepare social work students to work with the LGBTQ community, faculty must work actively to insure infusion of content across the curricula as well as monitor for stigma, oppression, and heterosexism in the classroom. Student assessment of readiness to practice is also vital to understanding effective training and competency associated with practice among the LGBTQ community. While progress has been made with student preparedness with subsets of the LGBTQ community, (e.g. gay men), there is still significant room for ongoing preparedness related to work with the transgender community (Craig et al., 2016). Implicit program support, positive management of LGBTQ issues within classroom settings and explicit inclusion of LGBTQ content across courses is necessary and will likely have a positive impact upon social work student competencies (Craig et al., 2016).

Previous research indicates the importance of positive and affirming faculty, staff, administrative, and student support for LGBTQ students related to outness and comfort with self-expression in social work school settings as well as across campus environments. While the social work classroom environment plays a vital role in preparing students for work with minority communities including LGBTQ individuals, so does the role of membership and accrediting bodies such as the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) among others across the US and internationally. Taken together, research and organizational guidelines suggest that homophobia and heterosexism are a continuing concern in social work education, yet few large-scale studies of social work student experiences exist. Such efforts can be aimed at helping all students understand and integrate professional values around diversity and dispel LGBTQ stereotypes in order to become more culturally sensitive and competent practitioners (Craig, Iacono, Pacey, Dentato, & Boyle, *in press*; Krieglstein, 2003). The purpose of this study was to examine perceptions and experiences of homophobia among LGBTQ social work students within classroom settings in CSWE accredited programs across the US and Canada.

Methods

A mixed method study was conducted examining LGBTQ social work student experiences within programs related to various implicit and explicit factors in the classroom, program and field internship experiences pertaining to policies, curriculum, faculty, non-LGBTQ students, and other related areas. Participants completed an internet-based questionnaire and data were gathered from 136 programs across 52 states and provinces throughout the US and Canada from social work programs during a three-month period in 2012. Participant inclusion criteria included the following: (1) age 18 or older; (2) enrollment in BSW or MSW degree program; (3) identification as LGBTQ; and (4) English fluency. The survey was comprised of a series of multiple choice questions with Likert scale responses as well as open-ended questions. The study and all ethics protocols were IRB approved by the primary and secondary author's institutions. To insure the privacy and confidentiality of study participants, no names were collected. Institutional names were not required, however, students were able to provide them. Identifying information such as sociodemographics and locations were obscured to protect privacy. A full description of the methods utilized

for the parent study, as well as quantitative analyses used in related research is described elsewhere (Craig et al., 2016).

The current study will focus on social work student responses related to experiences of homophobia within their respective programs and classrooms through the analysis of specific qualitative responses and the use of descriptive findings from the quantitative data. Qualitative data were analyzed from three open-ended questions that included: (1) *If you have experienced homophobia or transphobia in your social work program, please describe your experiences*; (2) *Describe any class or field experiences regarding sexual orientation or gender identity, both positive or negative that particularly affected you*; and (3) *Please provide examples of when LGBTQ topics were handled well or poorly*.

Analysis

LGBTQ social work student responses to the three questions were analyzed using NVivo 8 qualitative analysis software along with narrative thematic analytic methods from grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Employing Charmaz's (2014) constructivist approach to grounded theory, themes were identified through line-by-line coding and constant comparison methods until authors were confident saturation of the data had been achieved. Such thematic analysis included both inductive analysis to identify new themes emerging from the data; along with deductive analysis to explore themes (Charmaz, 2014) identified by the LGBTQ student experiences of homophobia within their respective programs. This process of grounding the analyses in the data led to identification and ordering of codes, the generation of categories and eventually the emergence of themes elucidating participants' experiences of homophobia in the classroom within schools of social work. One investigator examined each response and conducted the primary data analysis through reading student responses several times while recording preliminary ideas; highlighting data to develop initial codes; collating those codes across the data-set to generate themes; followed by a review of themes to develop the overall thematic map. A second investigator reviewed the data, conducted thematic analysis, and was in full agreement with the final coding framework. Lastly, a third investigator reviewed the data, themes, and overall framework and was in agreement with the process and identified themes. The final report of themes was generated by contextualizing findings in regard to the previous literature. Responses solely focusing on transphobia related topics were eliminated for the purpose of this study, while those including both homophobia and transphobia in their responses were coded. Quantitative descriptive findings were used for triangulation with qualitative themes to provide robustness and underscore relevance of the findings.

Findings

This qualitative study of LGBTQ social work students ($n = 1,018$) examined classroom experiences of homophobia by those enrolled in Master of Social Work ($n = 744$; 76%) or Bachelor of Social Work programs ($n = 244$; 24%) across the US and Canada. A majority of the student respondents were female ($n = 737$; 72%), identified as lesbian or bisexual ($n = 562$; 55%), under the age of 39 ($n = 850$; 84%), and White-Non Hispanic ($n = 759$; 75%). Main qualitative findings identified several major themes associated with social work student experiences of homophobia in the classroom including: (1) *Coming out*; (2) *Faculty*

inaction; (3) Implicit and explicit content; (4) Direct language and actions; and (5) Religious rationalizations and non-affirming positions.

Coming out

Students reported their overall level of outness as: ‘very out’ ($n = 442$; 43%); ‘somewhat out’ ($n = 458$; 45%); and ‘not out’ ($n = 112$; 11%). While 64% of students felt overall support in terms of their LGBTQ identity, 33% reported neutral or negative feelings of support. The themes of coming out in the classroom provided a series of responses by students that felt very comfortable doing so, compared to a number of students that remained closeted due to feelings and perceptions of hostility from other students and faculty members. Several researchers have noted the potential barriers to coming out for LGBTQ students that include negative responses by other students and faculty; likelihood for increased isolationism; a lack of engagement with classroom dynamics and activities; invisibility within the curriculum, readings, activities; fractured connections with faculty and other students, along with other related factors (Garvey & Rankin, 2015; Gortmaker & Brown, 2006; Rankin, 2003; Renn, 2000). In the present study, some examples of LGBTQ student experiences and thoughts associated with coming out included the following:

I haven’t fully come out within my program so I have been privy to private conversations had by my peers. There is clearly a discomfort for some people ...

I feel like my sexual orientation is stigmatized in the classroom and I’ve only come out to one other student, whom I trust very much.

I was also warned by another student in the program to hide my sexual orientation because of the homophobia among students in the social work program.

I’ve stayed in the closet while in this program, so I have not been on the receiving end of any homophobia ...

LGBTQ student respondents also reported feeling rather tokenized and being ‘forced’ to come out as a sole representative or spokesperson for the entire LGBTQ community on related topics when they would arise during classroom discussions. Such pressures placed upon minority students and the stigmatizing role of student tokenism has been examined previously related to race (Linder, Harris, Allen, & Hubain, 2015), gender (Hart & Lester, 2011), and sexual minority status including sexual orientation (Martindale, 1992; Tillapaugh, 2015) and gender identity (Pryor, 2015; Pusch, 2004). Several examples of students feeling intense pressure to come out in a hostile manner included:

If there is a student of the LGBTQ community in a classroom and we are talking about LGBTQ issues some teachers push those students to talk about their experiences, even if the student does not offer it first.

Comments made in classrooms reflected little self-awareness in other students – i.e. looking at me to “explain” or “speak for” the entire LGBTQ community.

There’s a sense of entitlement from other students in asking invasive questions to queerfolks instead of doing LGBTQ 101 research on their own time (i.e. doing the work themselves, not pumping us for info).

Faculty inaction

Most students (48%) reported that they ‘did not know’ if faculty intervened when homophobia was present in the classroom. However, students did note that faculty typically led conversations surrounding lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer-related topics (79%) more so than those associated with transgender topics and themes (51%). Regardless, faculty inaction and silence in managing homophobia in the classroom remained a persistent and often reported challenge raising student discomfort or causing students to intervene and assist with correcting other student discussions to be more affirming and inclusive. These findings align with existing literature and research surrounding ongoing challenges with faculty inaction when homophobia is present within schools and classroom settings across various disciplines – as well as a need to increase faculty capacity to address such issues when they arise (Castro & Sujak, 2014; Crocco, 2002; Woodford, Kolb, Durocher-Radeka, & Javier, 2014). Several student examples follow associated with the theme of faculty inaction:

A student made remarks in class stating that homosexuality was a choice; the professor neither challenged the student’s views nor invited other students to share different perspectives. I spoke up anyway.

[A] classmate was allowed to question why students had to be out and was allowed to say that with disgust in his voice, professor did nothing to stand up for lgbtq students in the class room ... it was extremely disappointing and made me feel unsafe.

Many students in my program make homophobic, transphobic or simply uninformed statements during class wherein professors will not speak out to correct them.

... in [an] online assignment, 3 people started the discussion that they should have been “warned” about the [LGBTQ] content that day, and should have been allowed not to attend b/c of the content. No one else in the online discussion addressed this, nor did the professor.

Implicit and explicit content

While the literature and profession of social work education speaks to concerns about managing content and dialog associated with heteronormativity and heterosexism within classroom settings (Galarza & Anthony, 2015; Messinger, 2002) many barriers still prevail. Such challenges pertain to pervasive heteronormative ideology conveyed by faculty (Chinell, 2011) and/or students (Craig et al., 2016); heteronormative pedagogical classroom approaches (Ferfolja, 2007); and the use of curricula that focuses predominantly through the lens of heterosexism or cisgender bias (Garvey & Rankin, 2015; Rankin, 2003). Students in this study spoke explicitly about the use of language, articles, case examples, and oppressive themes that promoted heterosexism and lacked LGBTQ content as described in some of the following responses:

... [persistent] homophobic language used by instructors and other students (e.g. “homosexual” vs. queer/gay); [a] lack of queer perspectives integrated in pedagogy ...

Professors do not include relevant issues or frameworks, promote heterosexist frameworks, use texts that are heterosexist.

The majority of articles read in the majority of classes were focused on the heterosexual subject/assumed that clients and workers would be heterosexual. Typically there would only be a token reading or two that addressed sexual orientation ...

LGBTQ diversity training/teaching/coaching is usually handled in a tone of: “we” (the normals) have to be open, accepting, aware (etc. through the good attitudes) in relation to and in interaction with “them” ...

It's daily. Most of it is along the lines of heteronormative thinking and cisgender bias (e.g. “family” means straight, marriage, kids; all discussion is around only 2 genders of male and female, etc.).

Direct language and actions

In addition to challenges with themes of heterosexism and heteronormative ideology within social work classroom settings, is the persistent use of direct homophobic language and actions based on LGBTQ social work students reporting behaviors of their non-LGBTQ peers. Findings from this study are consistent with ongoing research in this area related to the direct expressions of homophobia and homophobic comments made by students (Fairtlough, Bernard, Fletcher, & Ahmet, 2013; Orlov & Allen, 2014; Vaccaro, 2012) and faculty (Chonody, Woodford, Brennan, Newman, & Wang, 2014; Dhaliwal, Crane, Valley, & Lowenstein, 2013; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2011; Woodford, Brennan, Gutiérrez, & Luke, 2013; Wright & Smith, 2013) along with ongoing classroom challenges within social work education and other disciplines. Coupling these experiences with a lack of faculty intervention raises hostility, stigma, and oppression in learning environments that should be experienced as supportive, affirming, and welcoming to all students. Examples of student responses associated with homophobic language and actions included the following remarks:

There are negative, disapproving looks, attitudes or giggles and whispers.

Professors have made statements such as “if you CHOOSE to be gay, it is not my concern” ...

Throughout the BSW and MSW programs at my university, there were a number of students who consistently made derogatory comments about other gay students (i.e. calling them faggots and dykes).

In my [name of class], sexual orientation and gender identity were only discussed through the form of joking about it or complaining about “HAVING to be tolerant.”

As far as homophobia goes, people have stated that homophobia isn't as serious or as real as racism, sexism, etc., and I was told, in a class discussion, that if I was experiencing homophobia, I should just “keep my mouth shut” as a solution.

Religious rationalizations and non-affirming positions

The final theme centered on students reporting experiences within the classroom associated with non-affirming positions that had strong correlations with religious beliefs and convictions, as well as statements surrounding a refusal to work with LGBTQ populations or simply refer them to other practitioners whenever possible. Homophobic experiences stemming from religious convictions and rationalizations as well as positions that are non-LGBTQ affirming can impact a student's experience in the classroom as well as their overall experience within their social work program. Relevant research in this area includes literature examining challenges with faculty that object to teaching on LGBT topics due to religious convictions (Lim, Johnson, & Eliason, 2015; Meyer, Taylor, & Peter, 2015); legal and ethical

challenges of students and practitioners refusing to work with minority populations such as the LGBTQ community (Fallon et al., 2013; Herlihy, Hermann, & Greden, 2014); and the likelihood for bias and stigma due to religious beliefs or non-affirming positions (Chonody, Woodford, Smith, & Silverschanz, 2013; Woodford, Levy, & Walls, 2013). This theme was clearly illustrated in some of their responses noted below:

... classmates quoting scripture as a reason or basis for rejecting LGBTQ potential future clients, etc.

One professor said, "Professionally, I have to support a gay client. I know what God wants but I can't say that to a client." Another professor said that her god doesn't approve but she can't bring that to the office.

[a] student said she would never work with LGBTQ, it had no place in schools, and that it should be hidden.

I also experience[d] religiously conservative students discussing their intention to refer out LGBTQ clients because they are uncomfortable with treating them.

... a student in the program stated that they would not work with an LGBTQ client as a social worker.

Such non-affirming positions and religious rationalizations from faculty and other students likely escalated an atmosphere of homophobia and may have led to feelings of insecurity and concerns for safety among LGBTQ student respondents.

Discussion

This examination of LGBTQ social work student experiences of homophobia in the classroom lends insight with regard to key areas that the field of social work education might consider in order to expand and grow into affirming environments for all sexual minority student populations. To that end, the discussion of study findings (e.g. related to the themes of coming out; faculty inaction; implicit and explicit content; direct language and actions; and religious rationalizations and non-affirming positions) will include specific recommendations to address homophobia in social work education.

Coming out: the critical role of out faculty, staff, and allies

The positive impact of out LGBTQ faculty, staff, students, and allies upon the LGBTQ community cannot be understated. In fact, half of students in this study reported knowing closeted students and a quarter reported knowing closeted faculty. One may infer that typical school and campus environments are not overly LGBTQ welcoming and affirming, thus causing faculty and students alike to remain closeted and ultimately increase likelihood for various forms of homophobia. Conversely, when school environments are open, affirming, and welcoming, the likelihood is greater that social work students, faculty, and staff members to feel more comfortable coming out (Dentato et al., 2014) and remaining visibly out. Such outness among faculty, students, and allies may positively enhance the classroom or school environment for others to feel equally comfortable with coming out related to their sexual orientation, gender identity, or allied status. While there is not a guarantee that increasing outness across student, faculty, and allied populations will decrease experiences of homophobia overall; such visibility may have a more positive impact than a classroom

or campus environment with closeted and oppressed LGBTQ students, faculty, staff, and allies. Thus, the role and importance of gay–straight alliances and visibility of allies for the LGBTQ community is essential, often overlooked, and can also positively impact school settings (Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010). It is important to note that LGBTQ allies have a similar coming out process as members of the broader community whether through verbal and affirming messages conveyed in the classroom, directly addressing homophobia and heteronormative ideology and comments, or through placing visible signs in their offices such as a rainbow flag or pink triangle, thus promoting messages of inclusiveness and welcoming atmospheres for LGBTQ students and faculty alike (Morrow, 2004; Morrow & Messinger, 2006).

Faculty inaction: The need for safe and affirming classroom spaces

Social work classrooms should be perceived as safe and affirming spaces for the ongoing discussion of work with diverse and minority groups, led by faculty members that insure such safety (Evans, 2000). Faculty should deliver content as well as monitor for classroom comportment while sharing responsibility with other students (Holley & Steiner, 2005) to acknowledge and address hostile or uncomfortable classroom experiences that convey homophobia or oppression at any level. Such safe and affirming spaces should transcend the classroom to the hallways, campus environments, field settings, and internship experiences alike for all social work students regardless of degree program. Ongoing competency training for faculty, administrators, and staff members should include specific content related to the creation of such safe and affirming classroom spaces while directly addressing how to manage homophobia and heterosexism when it arises. Additionally, to reduce homophobia within schools of social work, LGBTQ faculty might offer mentorship opportunities for both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ faculty and students alike to insure their ongoing competency, growth, and development. LGBTQ and allied faculty can also liaise with field educators to address internship environments that are homophobic, hostile, or oppressive, among many other areas for collaboration across college and university settings.

Implicit and explicit content: From curriculum to policy, accreditation and beyond

The positive impact of effectively infusing LGBTQ content across the social work curricula cannot be understated. Whether through use of videos and films, client case examples, policy review, research methods and design, lifespan developmental concerns, use of guest speakers, community based site visits, student reflections, or a combination therein, social work students – as well as other students across disciplines – can be exposed to a diverse community (Jennings, 2014; Mackelprang, Ray, & Hernandez-Peck, 1996). Students may examine issues pertaining to intersectionality, sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression while managing their personal challenges with professional obligations to work with all populations. The topics of heterosexism and homophobia should be an integral part of social work curricula and directly addressed throughout practice, policy, human behavior, and research courses. In the same regard, university, school, and program anti-discrimination policies should include sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression as well as visible diversity statements on websites and within all course syllabi. Faculty, administrators, and staff can create an open and affirming environment that will positively impact

the experiences and growth of LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ students alike when integrating LGBTQ content across the curricula and within policy statements.

Role of social work membership and accrediting institutions

In the United States, the NASW and CSWE make strong statements against heterosexism and address competency issues associated with practice among diverse populations within the field of social work. Institutions such as NASW and CSWE along with those within other professions both nationally and internationally, likely make a positive impact with regard to guidance for navigating diversity issues in the classroom and within academic settings overall. Therefore, it may be helpful to briefly examine some of these organizational guidelines and standards.

NASW Code of Ethics

Social workers are trained under the guidelines of NASW Code of Ethics, informing education and postgraduate practice alike. The code states: 'Social workers should not practice, condone, facilitate, or collaborate with any form of discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion, or mental or physical disability ... social workers should act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion, or mental or physical disability' (NASW Code of Ethics, 2008).

CSWE EPAS, commissions, and councils

CSWE sets standards for accreditation of undergraduate and graduate social work programs known as the Educational Practice Accreditation Standards (EPAS) through the Commission on Accreditation and Commission on Educational Policy. CSWE's EPAS were developed to support '... academic excellence by establishing thresholds for professional competence ...' (CSWE EPAS, 2015a, p. 5). Examples of EPAS that address diversity issues include the following: *Competency 2. Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice*; and *(Implicit Curriculum) Educational Policy 3.0. Diversity*. Complete descriptions of these and all CSWE EPAS (2015a) may be found at: <http://www.cswe.org/Accreditation/EPASRevision.aspx>.

CSWE is also guided by diversity commissions and councils that include the Commission on Diversity and Social and Economic Justice (CDSEJ) and the Council on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression (CSOGIE). Commissioners on CDSEJ: '... shall promote in social work education inclusion, equity, social and economic justice, and the integration of knowledge of how the multiple aspects of human diversity intersect ...' (CSWE CDSEJ (2015b) charge retrieved at: <http://www.cswe.org/CentersInitiatives/Diversity/AboutDiversity/51481.aspx>). In the same fashion, councilors on CSOGIE are charged with: '... promot[ing] the development of social work curriculum materials and faculty growth opportunities relevant to sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and the experiences of individuals who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or two-spirit ...' (CSWE CSOGIE (2015c) charge retrieved at: <http://www.cswe.org/CentersInitiatives/Diversity/AboutDiversity/15550/15548/76545.aspx>).

Direct language and actions: Understanding the role of power and oppression

Broadening the critical understanding of the impact of power, oppression, and homophobia often conveyed through the use of language and direct actions by faculty and students within schools of social work is essential. Actively engaging in an ongoing commitment to eliminate homophobia and oppression, the role of power must be clearly understood pertaining to the differential present within social work classroom settings associated with heteronormative ideology. Blackburn and Smith (2010) note, 'Heteronormativity is so prevalent that it largely goes unexamined in mainstream conversations about education; it is simply in place. When concerned educators call for acknowledgment, heteronormativity draws skepticism unparalleled to any other school issue' (p. 627). Blackburn and McCready (2009) examine the expansive and quite critical need for more clearly understanding the 'social and cultural categories of identity and oppression' to ultimately shape and inform curricula, educational policies, training methods, and relevant resources (p. 229). The impact of understanding power, oppression, and privilege on multiple levels, as well as engaging in such an important dialog, can have a profound impact upon the personal and professional development of faculty and social work students alike – ultimately limiting their use of non-affirming language and raising a more conscious awareness of their homophobic thoughts and actions.

In that regard, Blackburn and Smith (2010) underscore the relevant work of Hancock (2007) examining the four 'domains of power' in which categories of difference intersect. Such domains include the following: '1) hegemonic (ideas, cultures, and ideologies); 2) structural (social institutions); 3) disciplinary (bureaucratic hierarchies and administrative practices); and 4) interpersonal (routinized interactions among individuals)' (Hancock, 2007, p. 74). As asserted by Hancock (2007), this approach ultimately 'fosters cooperation rather than competition among marginalized groups and thus offers a richer potential for a just society' (Blackburn & Smith, 2010, p. 631). Therefore, use of such dialogs and educational models for examining homophobia, oppression, and privilege in social work programs may provide a framework for addressing hostile or oppressive language and actions or ultimately to reduce and eliminate such occurrences within the classroom. Insuring such content is infused throughout the curriculum may provide an opportunity for students and faculty to connect heteronormative ideology, thoughts, beliefs, and actions with homophobia and how it all intersects within the realms of their personal and professional social work identities.

Religious rationalizations and non-affirming positions: The need for training and mentorship

Heteronormative ideology and homophobia present within social work classroom settings may also be rationalized by religious ideology or non-affirming beliefs. Therefore, the effective and competent training and mentorship of students, faculty, and staff remain essential (Finkel, Storaasli, Bandele, & Schaefer, 2003; Craig et al., 2016) to specifically address non-affirming positions and beliefs as well as religious ideology associated with oppressive and discriminatory views of the LGBTQ community. Such trainings or seminars should: (1) Include examples of understanding the use and presence of microaggressions, (e.g. verbal, non-verbal, written) associated with sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression (Nadal et al., 2011). (2) Engage participants in a dialog related to the effective

navigation of any oppressive religious or ideological beliefs that may conflict with the tenets of the social work profession and promotion of social justice (Chonody et al., 2013). (3) Address thoughts and beliefs associated with the refusal to practice with members of the LGBTQ community (Anastas, 2013). (4) Directly reject the use of reparative/conversion approaches with all LGBTQ clients (Tozer & McClanahan, 1999) while promoting affirming approaches to care (Crisp & McCave, 2007; Fredriksen-Goldsen, Hoy-Ellis, Goldsen, Emlet, & Hooyman, 2014; Austin et al., *In Press*). (5) Provide guidance in ways to effectively monitor for heteronormative ideology and homophobic language, actions, and positions within the classroom, field, and postgraduate experiences (Saltzburg, 2015).

In an effort to reduce homophobia within social work and all educational settings, trainings such as the Safezone Training (see <http://www.gayalliance.org/safezonet.html>) should be offered for students, full-time and part-time faculty, and staff members alike regardless of their specialization or area of teaching. A collective process including LGBTQ students, faculty, and staff in developing training materials and curricula may be helpful to insure competency. Such trainings and seminars should similarly be extended to field educators and staff members, alumni and interprofessionally across disciplines, departments, and campuses – ultimately to provide an LGBTQ affirming and powerful impact across the various departments, schools, programs, and broader university (Woodford et al., 2014).

In the same regard, there remains a dearth of formal mentorship opportunities, dialogs or programs for LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ social work students across degree programs. It may be helpful to formally integrate faculty-led mentorship opportunities and intergroup dialogs within each social work program to assist all faculty and students – including those identifying as LGBTQ and those holding non-affirming beliefs or rationalizations based in religious ideology (Dessel, Woodford, & Gutiérrez, 2012). In addition to trainings, seminars, and mentorship opportunities to build bridges among various groups within schools of social work to directly address homophobia – schools may provide social events, lectures, conferences, and pride month events as additional supportive resources for all students.

A commitment to change and call to action

Similar to other professions, social work typically asserts the need for continued and ongoing research related to the field of education and other areas of study. However, much is now known and documented with regard to student experiences in the classroom and field alike, specifically pertaining to the long-term impact of homophobia, oppression, discrimination, and heteronormative ideology. Thus, the profession of social work and the field of social work education must commit to change and act upon the continual promotion of social justice and elimination of homophobia through some of the ways discussed in this article. Direct action and change must take place classroom by classroom, across degree programs and campuses to work on eliminating homophobic and transphobic student environments. In addition to previous examples of ways to directly address homophobia within social work classroom settings, a specific framework for action and change includes multi-tiered prevention and intervention strategies (Merrell, Ervin, & Gimpel, 2006). Such a framework should include a primary level (e.g. policy development, curricular modifications, diversity education); secondary level (e.g. at-risk student support services, LGBT and ally student alliance groups, private group counseling spaces); and tertiary level (e.g. individual counseling services for those experiencing problems) (Fisher et al., 2008; Merrell et al., 2006).

It is vital that ongoing research and scholarship robustly document and define explicit ways in which such changes may occur in the field of social work and similar disciplines; as well as promote research associated with more clearly understanding the preparation of students to effectively work with LGBTQ populations and manage homophobia, transphobia, stigma, and oppression whenever and wherever it arises. An area for continued research specifically pertains to more fully understanding effective ways through which social work students can manage and monitor ideologies and feelings associated with LGBTQ topics and populations while balancing their professional obligations to work with such diverse communities regardless of personal feelings, religious convictions, or beliefs. As noted by Jani, Pierce, Ortiz, and Sowbel (2011), social work education remains challenged in many areas such as the consistent and effective evaluation of measuring student preparedness to practice with diverse populations across degree programs; understanding student's abilities to apply content to their practice in the field; and moving from concepts of cultural competence to the more broadly based and transformative discussion of intersectionality, while fully defining the meaning and role of social and economic justice and elimination of oppression.

Limitations

Typical of the demographics found among students within many schools of social work there are several limitations to this study related to participant composition. A majority of the sample identified as cisgender females, were under the age of 39 and predominately White Non-Hispanic. The sample may also not be fully representative of all schools of social work in the US and Canada, while clearly not representative of all non-Western social work student populations. Students are identified as undergraduate or graduate social work students and therefore, the sample is non-representative of LGBTQ doctoral students or their experiences in the academy. This was an online survey, so students without access to technology may have lacked access to completing the survey or having their experiences shared. Another limitation of this study stems from the investigator's inability to fully insure reliable responses by all study participants. While there are significant advantages to collecting data via the Internet, there are a multitude of barriers and challenges that have been widely documented throughout the literature including representativeness of the sample, response bias, and rates, 'careless' responses, lack of a controlled setting, measurement errors, and technical difficulties among many others (Granello & Wheaton, 2004; Meade & Craig, 2012). Thus, the current study may be limited by similar challenges while conducting data collection using a web-based survey and the Internet. In the same regard, IP addresses of student respondents were not verified because of a requirement of the institutional IRB to ensure participant confidentiality.

Limitations of the analysis pertain to the lack of using the lens of intersectionality as well as the homogeneity of the LGBTQ participants with limited understanding of class, gender, race, and other categories. While this provides a basis for continued examination of the important role of intersectionality and homophobia, the findings do represent the experiences of a majority of LGBTQ students in social work. As participant responses solely associated with transphobia were eliminated for the purpose of study, ongoing concerns regarding a lack of transgender content; the often negative experiences of transgender students in academia; and research associated with transphobia clearly needs ongoing and continued evaluation and broader visibility within the literature across disciplines. Even

with such limitations, this examination of LGBTQ students and homophobia within social work classrooms adds to the limited literature and research in this area.

Conclusions

Understanding the unique needs of all students, especially those from underrepresented populations is essential, as is the assurance of affirming and safe spaces whether in undergraduate, graduate, or doctoral social work programs. This study examined some of the specific challenges for LGBTQ students in schools of social work related to experiences of homophobia and provided specific recommendations for the creation of open and affirming school environments. Some concrete ways through which immediate change can occur include knowing out faculty, staff, and allies; insuring safe and affirming classroom spaces; expanding implicit and explicit integration of LGBTQ content across the curricula; offering faculty and student mentorship and intergroup dialogs; broadening the critical understanding of the impact of power and oppression; and ongoing competency training for students, faculty, and staff members. Such a commitment to change on so many levels is truly a call to action for the social work profession. Creating such change includes an unwavering commitment to the promotion of social justice and elimination of oppression to create a significant difference for all students.

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