Intersecting sexual, gender and professional identities among social work students: The importance of identity integration

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**ABSTRACT**

Discrimination toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) social work students can negatively affect academic performance and personal and professional identity development. Intersectionality is a conceptual approach that states that social identities interact to form different meanings and experiences from those that could be explained by a single identity. This study explored how the educational experiences of LGBTQ social work students in the United States and Canada influenced their professional and personal identities. Using an intersectional analysis, three major themes emerged: the need for social work programs to better promote LGBTQ identity and emerging social work professional identity integration, a lack of LGBTQ content in the curriculum, and unsupportive LGBTQ school climates. Implications for social work education are considered.

**ARTICLE HISTORY**

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Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals experience pervasive discrimination because of their sexual and gender identities (United Nations General Assembly, 2011). Compared to non-LGBTQ individuals, LGBTQ populations report higher rates of poor mental health including anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem (DeAngelis, 2002; Institute of Medicine, 2011) because of marginalization in social and educational environments (Almeida et al., 2009; Meyer, 2003). LGBTQ discrimination has a negative impact on the academic performance and social lives of students (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010; Sanlo, 2005; Zamani-Gallaher & Choudhuri, 2011). Further, stigma experienced in nonaffirming (e.g., heterosexist, homophobic, and transphobic) educational environments has been found to have a negative impact on students’ personal and professional identity development (Evans & Broido, 1999; Vaccaro, 2012).

**The development of a professional social work identity**

Social work education cultivates professional identities and socializes students into the profession (Wiles, 2013). Social work professional identity can be conceptualized as a set of beliefs, attitudes, and understanding about the profession’s role and scope (Adams, Hean, Sturgis, & Macleod Clark, 2006). The socialization process into a profession provides a pathway for students to develop their sense of professional identity as well as the process they implement and cultivate to establish professional values, norms, knowledge, skills, expected roles, and culture (Hershey, 2007; Khalili, Orchard, Laschinger, & Farah, 2013; Newman, 2013). Asquith, Clark, and Waterhouse (2005) suggested that to avoid conflict in their practice, social workers must clearly understand their own professional identity. Forming a strong professional identity early in a student’s academic career has been shown to enable the successful transition to professional practice, motivating and instilling confidence in the beginning practitioner (Benner, Surphen, Leonard, & Day, 2010). The development of a healthy professional identity is considered a critical foundation for effective client care and professionalism (Lapinski & Sexton, 2014). Consequently, interest has heightened in the ways professional identities are constructed and understood through social work.
education (Clarke, Brown, & Hailey, 2009) and interprofessional practice (Scholar, McLaughlin, McCaughan, & Coleman, 2014).

**Intersectionality**

Intersectionality is the conceptual approach that states that social identities (e.g., sexual orientation, race, and student status) “interact to form qualitatively different meanings and experiences” from those that could be explained by a single identity (Warner, 2008, p. 454). Intersectionality suggests that identities must be understood within “a social structural context” (Warner, 2008, p. 455) and are shaped by environments that support, discourage, or maintain them (Stewart & McDermott, 2004). Although it is recognized that multiple contexts inform the experience of LGBTQ social work students, the primary context of interest for this study is the educational environment. Much has been written about the effects of the educational environment on LGBTQ students generally (Dentato et al., 2014; Lapinski & Sexton, 2014; Risdon, Cook, & Williams, 2000), but there is a paucity of research on the influence of the environment on the development and intersection of professional and personal identities of LGBTQ social work students. Mattis et al. (2008) suggested that the salience of one’s identity in a specific location may influence the salience of one’s other identities. As identity shifts through negotiation with environments, intersectionality can include the ways individuals negotiate these shifts throughout their educational experiences (Diamond & Butterworth, 2008). Thus, educators should identify the ways in which students negotiate these identities during their social work education and explore the barriers and facilitators to healthy identity integration. Taken together, these experiences ultimately contribute to the creation of students’ professional identities. Weber (2004) notes that research should attend to the process of conceptualizing and clarifying identities. Thus, the analysis of relationships between educational environments and individual experiences may assist with articulating a comprehensive understanding of the important role of intersectionality for social work students.

**Integration of professional social work identity and LGBTQ identity**

Social work education aims to foster the development of “competent social work practitioners” (Bogo, 2010, p. 55) with a social work identity. Competence is typically defined as a readiness to practice that includes mastery of the “knowledge, skills, attitudes or values” for social work practice (p. 59). The Council on Social Work Education’s (CSWE, 2015) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards states that social work competence is “the ability to integrate and apply social work knowledge, values, and skills to practice situations in a purposeful, intentional, and professional manner to promote human and community well-being” (p. 6). Those in social work education are called to instill these indicators of competent practice (Gambrill, 1997).

Integrating personal capacity and self with professional knowledge, values, and identity (Collins, 1993) is critical to the development of competence in social work. Although some research has examined the integration of personal and professional identity in social work when one’s values are not consistent with the professions’ values (Osteen, 2011), little research has examined the development and integration of stigmatized core identities, such as LGBTQ identities, and professional social work identities. Given that social work students are often motivated to become social workers based on their personal identity, values, and experiences (Osteen, 2011), understanding the ways this integration is or is not fostered in social work education programs is essential. Studies focused on processes that help social work students with personal and professional identity integration have shown that students in their final year of study were better able to describe their personal and professional identities and their ability to be more self-critical (Deal, 2000; Fortune, McCarthy, & Abramson, 2001; Knight, 2001). However, these studies did not explore social work students’ specific social identity characteristics (Newman, Daley, & Bogo, 2009). Messinger and Topal (1997) discussed their experiences as sexual minority students in social work field placements and described feeling unprepared for how to disclose (or not disclose) their sexual minority identities in social work professional settings.
McSweeney (2012) indicated that the integration of personal and professional identities needs to occur for appropriate knowledge and behavior to transfer to the work setting. She found that identity integration required students to locate their personal experiences in a theoretical context and use those experiences to explicitly explore their perceptions of the relationship between theory and practice. This may be facilitated in the classroom through students’ critical reflection on their practice. In exploring the relationship and construction of social work students’ personal and professional identities, Wiles (2013) found that social work students constructed their professional identity in relation to desired traits by a developed sense of shared identity among their social worker peers and as a personalized process of individual development. Wiles emphasized the importance of making explicit the dynamic nature of professional identity development and integration in social work education. This identity work can be even more challenging when considering one’s marginalized intersecting identities (Slay & Smith, 2011). Having the opportunity to articulate the importance and presence of intersecting identities can be highly beneficial for LGBTQ social work students, who often feel unsupported because of their sexual and gender identity (Dentato, Craig, Lloyd, Kelly, Wright, & Austin, 2016; Newman et al., 2009). Such self-awareness is a core ingredient of the developmental process and integration of personal and professional identity (Hensley, 2002). A North American online study found that LGBTQ social work students (BSW and MSW) reported fairly low levels of self-assessed practice readiness with the LGBTQ population. Higher readiness to practice was positively associated with implicit program support for LGBTQ students, appropriate handling of LGBTQ-related classroom issues, and explicit inclusion of LGBTQ content in courses (Craig, Dentato, Messinger, & McInroy, 2016).

Heterosexism, homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in social work programs can seriously inhibit learning (Messinger, 2002), which consequently may inhibit integration of personal and professional identity, overall professional competency, and efficacy to work with LGBTQ populations. Social work program directors report that their programs do not adequately prepare students to work with LGBTQ adults or youths (Martin et al., 2009). Increasing professional efficacy to work with LGBTQ clients is crucial as it can help ensure that discriminatory policies, practices, and structures will be addressed once students are practicing in the field (Foreman & Quinlan, 2008). Professional efficacy with LGBTQ clients requires social work students to be knowledgeable and aware of heterosexist or discriminatory language that may be present on assessment measures or policy statements (Fish, 2006; Foreman & Quinlan, 2008; Hafford-Letchfield, 2010) as well as on intake forms, agency signage, and other materials.

Messinger (2013) noted that LGBTQ students will continue to face challenges in fostering a healthy integration of personal and professional identity until the environmental context is addressed. For instance, the campus climate for LGBTQ osteopathic students was found to influence their levels of disclosure and overall mental health (Lapinski & Sexton, 2014). Vaccaro (2012) conducted a study of LGBTQ faculty, staff, and students from undergraduate and graduate programs such as social work, business, and law, and found that the intersections of social identity membership (e.g., LGBTQ) and students’ newly forming professional identity shaped their climate experiences and perceptions. LGBTQ students desired LGBTQ faculty support through modelling and mentorship, which would not only help them navigate the transition from student to professional but also the process of becoming an LGBTQ professional.

In light of this literature, the purpose of the current study was to explore the experiences of LGBTQ social work students through an intersectional lens in the social environment of schools of social work. Specifically, our research questions were the following: What are the identity-based experiences of LGBTQ social work students enrolled in social work programs? How do these experiences influence their intersecting identities as LGBTQ social work students? and What recommendations for social work educators emerge from these student experiences?
Methods

Procedures

An electronic survey was systematically distributed to all social work programs in the United States accredited by the CSWE and all programs in Canada registered with the Canadian Association for Social Work Education with a bachelor of social work (BSW) or master of social work (MSW) degree program offered in English. An e-mail containing a request for distribution and the survey link was sent twice to the dean or director of each social work school, department, or program as well as directly to student electronic mailing lists. Invitations to participate were also posted on major disciplinary electronic mailing lists (e.g., the Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors, the National Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work, and the LGBT Social Work Caucus, among others). Sample recruitment language from the online survey included, “LGBTQ social work students: Help us understand your experience in social work programs.” The 30-minute survey (available April–June 2012) required respondents \((n = 1,018)\) to confirm informed consent. Inclusion criteria were the following: age 18 or older, current enrolment in a BSW or MSW program, identification as LGBTQ, and fluency in English. The study was approved by a University of Toronto research ethics protocol.

Measure

The survey was developed by a working group of the Education Committee of the Council on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity and Expression (CSOGIE) at the CSWE. A draft survey was reviewed by non-CSOGIE educators and students and adapted to obtain face validity. The final measure consisted of 82 questions divided into personal, institutional, and program sections, soliciting input on the experiences of LGBTQ students. The survey included multiple-choice questions and options for qualitative responses. For this study, answers to the following three open-ended questions were analyzed: How often do you feel responsible to educate your peers, faculty, department and serve as a LGBTQ role model? Do you feel your needs as an LGBTQ student have been addressed during your social work education? and Based on your experiences, what would you suggest to help improve social work education for LGBTQ students to further address their needs?

Participants

Participants identified as women (73%), men (21%), transgender (6%), no gender (5%), or other gender category (e.g., intersex, 1%). With regard to sexual orientation participants were lesbian (30%), gay (17%), bisexual (25%), queer (17%), pansexual (5%), or some other identity (e.g., asexual, 6%). The majority of students were 39 years old or younger (84%); White, non-Hispanic (75%); and had a parent who completed a postsecondary degree (72%). Students mainly attended public institutions (75%) located in an urban setting of more than 50,000 people (79%). Nearly a 10th of the respondents (9%) attended religiously affiliated institutions. Most participants were enrolled in an MSW program (76%), with the remainder in a BSW program (24%). Students were geographically diverse, representing 136 institutions in 52 states and provinces. Nearly 90% of the participants were from the United States, with the remainder from Canada.

Analysis

Intersectional and grounded theory approaches were used for analysis of qualitative responses. A protocol informed by the LGBTQ and social work literature was used to guide the analysis. Intersectional approaches are frequently used to understand populations with multiple intersecting sources of oppression (Denis, 2008). To capture participants’ experiences of intersectionality in the analysis, we used Bowleg’s (2008, 2012) approach for qualitative research. Based on knowledge of the oppression encountered by marginalized groups, Bowleg (2008) suggests that analysis must consider that
“multiple factors uniquely combine to define an individual’s experience” (p. 319). Through this lens of intersectionality, the implicit experiences are made explicit through an exploration of how mutual identities intersect with one another and how this relates to social inequality (Bowleg, 2008).

Grounded theory analytic techniques were used to determine patterns and themes in the data (Charmaz, 2014). We independently manually coded the qualitative data using open and focused coding, and constant comparison within and across data. Through a series of four meetings, we discussed emergent categories and generated broader themes. To enhance the methodological rigor of the study and to ensure credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability of results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), we took several steps. Specifically, we used thick description (extensive use of descriptive quotes) and drew from our experience in social work education (spanning midcareer academic administrator to MSW student) and qualitative research studies. Finally, data triangulation (using memos and quantitative survey data) was used to confirm themes and to validate interpretations of the participants’ experience.

Results

Three major themes emerged from the analysis, with two themes also having subthemes. First, participants reported that social work programs needed to make a more concerted effort to promote personal LGBTQ identity and emerging social work professional identity integration. Second, participants found a lack of LGBTQ content in the curriculum that hampered identity integration. Third, participants largely pointed to unsupportive LGBTQ school climates. These findings are described using participants’ own words and include their gender or sexual identity as well as the social work program they are enrolled in (BSW or MSW).

The need for greater personal and professional identity integration

A strong overarching theme emerged, explicitly and implicitly from students’ responses, indicating that their social work programs needed to better support the integration of their LGBTQ and emerging social worker identities. Students wanted more education about what it is like to be a practicing social worker who is also LGBTQ. A lesbian BSW student stated, “I think they have mostly talked about LBGTQ individuals as clients, not as social workers. There is still a disconnect.” Because of this disconnect, students described lacking the ability to understand how to fully integrate their two identities. As one pansexual female BSW student stated, “I don’t feel that I am prepared to make use of my experiences and identity as a bisexual woman in a clinical setting and/or with a client because this has never been directly addressed in any of the classes or modules… I feel we have been left “on our own” to sort out how to help our gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender clients.

Students wanted to better understand how being an out LGBTQ social worker could affect them professionally, as indicated by a gay MSW student:

I’d like to know more about how being out as a LGBTQ affects me as a social work professional. I understand that there is self-disclosure and cultural competence, but how do I as a social worker educate peers, and others about the isms of what it means to be in this minority group?

In addition to concerns about being an out LGBTQ social worker, some students indicated they were not adequately trained to integrate their LGBTQ identity with their professional social work identity. A queer/other gender identity BSW student stated, “The most important thing I can think of is the need for an integration of these identities and experiences into all issues of SW [social work]—not just an isolated week of talking about LGB people in a vacuum.” A lesbian MSW student indicated she would have liked to have conversations about the integration of these identities: “I feel like I have questions regarding it [being a lesbian and social worker] especially going into field next semester and I don’t know who to go to.”

Some students feared hostility from clients because of their LGBTQ identities and were unsure how to address it in the practice setting. According to a lesbian/queer MSW student, “No, nothing
has addressed how to handle homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia directed toward the worker in the client-worker relationship."

Students expressed a sense of feeling unprepared to be a practicing LGBTQ social worker. Many cited the need for more of a direct focus on this issue and suggested having explicit classroom discussions on the intersection of personal and professional identity development and integration. As one lesbian MSW student noted,

None of my instructors discusses challenges I may face as an LGBTQ practitioner. Often, I feel as though I have to force a place for my voice to be heard in discussions of challenges we may face as practitioners. As the only queer student in each of my classes thus far, I often feel like the guinea pig where LGBTQ issues are concerned. Living in the Midwest, I feel as though these issues are something my instructors ought to be preparing me for.

Some students were able to obtain the practice knowledge they felt they needed to integrate their LGBTQ identity and social work identity to effectively serve LGBTQ clients but often had to take the initiative in learning this on their own. As one lesbian MSW student said,

The additional layer of being LGBTQ in the field is difficult to navigate. I luckily had an amazing BSW field instructor who helped me tremendously as she had already been through it. I don’t know if school and my courses could prepare me for the barriers/issues of being gay in a professional social work setting.

Another lesbian MSW student stated,

Being LGBTQ and a social worker hasn’t been discussed much…. Self-disclosure is a big issue for LGBT social workers and I wish that it was discussed more in class. It is something that I definitely face in the field.

Similarly, a bisexual female MSW student stated, “I was not prepared for work as a professional LGBT social worker.”

**Lack of LGBT content**

Students overwhelmingly expressed major concern over the lack of LGBTQ content, including an absence of integration within and across all their required and elective courses, a lack of depth when LGBTQ topics were covered, and a sense of student burden to educate their peers on LGBTQ issues.

**Integration within and across curricula**

The first subtheme under a lack of LGBTQ content that emerged from the analysis was the sense that LGBTQ content is not being adequately integrated within and across social work curricula. A bisexual female MSW student said students wanted “more LGBTQ specific course content interwoven into all core courses.” Students described how LGBTQ content was sometimes relegated to a specific course, sometimes an elective, or not discussed at all. A lesbian MSW student stated, “I am graduating in May, and I am greatly disappointed in the lack of inclusion of GLBTQ issues in the curriculum and in class discussions. Diversity is not integrated throughout the curriculum, as our faculty claim it to be.” A bisexual female BSW student stated, “GLBTQI [gay, bisexual, lesbian, transgender, queer, intersex] issues have been rarely or never addressed within the classrooms.” A gay MSW student said,

I think there’s an assumption that people going into this field don’t need that [LGBTQ content] as much as people in other fields. I don’t believe that’s true. Even those who are supportive can learn a great deal about appropriate terminology. This is true even just for LGBQ issues, but even more so for trans issues.

Thus, students described a need for more LGBTQ content to be integrated across courses rather than delegated to a particular lecture or a diversity course.

**Lack of depth in content**

The second subtheme was that students were concerned about the level of depth LGBTQ issues were given in class. One gay BSW student described LGBTQ issues as being given “lip service,” and a lesbian MSW student called this problematic because “this is something that MSWs will frequently encounter.”
A gay BSW student stated that “GLBT issues are never given any in-depth conversations, no substantive time is ever given to any GLBT issues.” A lesbian MSW student said, “We have gotten very little education on how to work with this population.” The lack of depth of LGBTQ issues in course work, then, contributed to students’ feeling as if they were not adequately prepared to integrate their social worker and LGBTQ identities.

**Burden of educating peers**

The third subtheme that emerged was students’ pervasive sense of burden with respect to informing and educating their peers about LGBTQ issues. The lack of integration of LGBTQ issues, as well as a lack of depth when discussed, left LGBTQ students feeling responsible to initiate these conversations or act as the expert on all things LGBTQ. According to a lesbian MSW student, “I’m the one addressing these as nobody else does,” and a bisexual female MSW student said, “I don’t know that I have any special needs other than a desire to not feel obligated to educate others on LGBTQ issues because the faculty is not taking the lead.” A bisexual male BSW student explained that he “would always have to go out of [his] way to help heterosexual students understand,” and a lesbian, other gender identity, MSW student noted, “Too often, I have been the primary voice in classes and internship challenging heterosexism and cissexism.”

The burden of educating peers and faculty affected LGBTQ students’ own education. A queer female BSW student explained, “I feel as if I have been used more for my extensive knowledge about the community, tokenized, and whitewashed. I am more of an educational tool, rather than a student with specific needs.” A queer transgender male MSW student described having a similar experience: “If I were not queer/trans I would be totally ill prepared as a SW [social worker] to work with gender and sexual minority folks.”

Many students felt the need to educate others about their intersecting identities because it was not an implicit part of classroom discussion. As one lesbian MSW student phrased it,

> Since I am a lesbian and the majority of the people that I have taken classes with in this program have been heterosexual, I feel that it is important to speak up about my experience as a lesbian Latina social worker.

Or as a queer female MSW student stated,

> Although people are very positive about queer issues, I have felt like there is a lack of discussion on the issues of being a queer social worker. I brought it up very early on in my practice class, regarding the discomfort I have felt around addressing/not addressing my sexuality in field. No one else had anything much to say about it, and that was disappointing. Sometimes I feel like I have to remind everyone that we exist and have needs.

The stress of having to be the LGBTQ voice and educate their peers contributed to a feeling of frustration between students and their social work programs, which compromised the ability of some LGBTQ students to integrate their professional and personal identities.

**Unsupportive LGBTQ school climate**

The final major theme that emerged from the data centered on a widespread lack of support for LGBTQ social work students. The major factors that contributed to an unsupportive school climate were prejudice and discrimination such as homophobia, transphobia, biphobia, and heterosexism; a lack of mentoring or visible LGBTQ faculty; and a lack of LGBTQ community, such as a LGBTQ student association or group in the social work department or a national or international social work LGBTQ student association. These three subthemes are explored next.

**Prejudice and discrimination**

Numerous students identified LGBTQ prejudice and discrimination as pervasive in their programs and demonstrated in the following two ways: witnessing anti-LGBTQ sentiment from other students and faculty and staff not responding to anti-LGBTQ comments and behavior. A bisexual female MSW student described how “every time a student began a presentation on the topic of [LGBTQ issues], others
would roll their eyes, scoff, and the professors wouldn’t control the classroom.” A lesbian MSW student said that despite pressure to educate their peers, some LGBTQ students were fearful to speak up: “I think that most of the students lack of addressing [an LGBTQ issue] comes from fear of being singled out as ‘the gay’ in response to the adamant beliefs of the many homophobic.”

Students expressed concern that faculty in their departments were not responding to homophobic, transphobic, or heterosexist comments or behavior in class. A lesbian MSW student reported feeling like “the faculty has failed the hetero and homosexual students.” A queer ally female MSW student agreed with many students in stating that “staff need to be more vocal about standing up and speaking against discrimination,” and a bisexual male BSW student said that “faculty need to do more to snuff out homophobia.” This concern was often connected to the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics, as illustrated in the following comment from a queer female MSW student:

I believe the school of social work needs to be less heterocentric and address the issues in class. Faculty need to address their own lack of knowledge and intervene when students show homophobia and transphobia and a lack of commitment to the NASW code of ethics.

A lesbian MSW student stated,

I think the responsibility falls squarely on the shoulders of the faculty and administrators. If homophobic comments were not tolerated and were treated as a violation of the social work code of ethics, LGBTQ students would feel validated. The overall effect of this is to remind me that I attend a dangerously heterosexist program that gives lip service to LGBTQ issues.

**Lack of mentoring or LGBTQ faculty**

A second subtheme was that students regarded the absence of supportive LGBTQ faculty that might provide them mentorship, guidance, and support as a great disadvantage. Students explicitly stated that they needed out LGBTQ faculty in their programs who could help them navigate homophobic or transphobic contexts, figure out what it means to be an LGBTQ social worker, and mentor their social work development. A female multiple sexual identities MSW student described how they felt alone in their department as the sole LGBTQ person: “I do not feel supported as a LGBTQI [intersex] student. The majority of the students and many faculty are heterosexual, and therefore the content of the coursework and types of dialogue about social work reflects this.” A gay MSW student explained why he felt the need for more LGBTQ faculty mentors by stating that “most people do not understand that it is extra challenging to be a gay person in social work and to live in fear.” A lesbian MSW student noted that having a faculty member discuss identities would be beneficial, saying, “I feel like I should have a faculty member discuss with me the impact of being a lesbian social worker.”

The responses of these LGBTQ social work students highlights the importance of social work programs to actively promote identity integration by encouraging faculty, staff, and students to integrate discussions of intersecting identities into the educational context. Participants particularly describe a need for mentorship and guidance in developing and integrating personal and professional identities.

**Lack of community**

Finally, students widely agreed that a sense of LGBTQ community in their social work programs was largely absent and greatly needed. Students repeatedly spoke about a need for more specific spaces for LGBTQ social work students and increased awareness of LGBTQ people in the program. A lesbian MSW student talked about the need for “visibility such as a LGBTQ group for MSW students [which] would be a great start.” A bisexual male MSW student said his program needed “awareness, awareness, awareness. The faculty should help facilitate more clubs or associations for LGBTQ student body to help create an even more inclusive environment in the MSW program.” Numerous students expressed the need for an LGBTQ group specific to social work students, even if there was already an LGBTQ student group on campus. A lesbian MSW student described this group as a “support group,” whereas a gay MSW student saw it as potentially “beneficial to brainstorm and [offer] specific ideas for the LGBTQA [asexual] community in the program.”
Many students also spoke about the need for a national or international space for LGBTQ social work students that could foster a sense of community across social work programs. A gay MSW student stated, “As a social work student, I think there should be a national space, conference and/or event catered to LGBTQ social workers in the professions and students.” Students talked about the importance of having LGBTQ-specific conferences for social work students, possibly connected with the CSWE’s annual conference.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to use an intersectional lens to explore the experiences of LGBTQ social work students to enhance understanding of how their educational experiences influenced the integration of their LGBTQ and social worker identities. Findings indicated that LGBTQ social work students could benefit from programmatic efforts to promote the integration of LGBTQ and social worker identities. Additionally, students indicated that their programs lacked LGBTQ content and were often unsupportive climates for LGBTQ students, both of which hampered their personal and professional identity integration. This attention to the intersections of personal identity characteristics and social worker identity in social work education is a unique contribution of this research.

Social work education stresses the importance of developing an identity as a social worker, yet there is little empirical understanding of how this happens (Shlomo, Levy, & Itzhaky, 2012), particularly in the context of other marginalized identities. In social work education, the “use of self” (Wiles, 2013, p. 861) in social work practice has been noted as critical, yet there is a need to better understand “how and when to draw on personal history and experience” as a social worker (p. 861). Many of the participants in this study indicated they received little or no guidance about how to integrate use of self as LGBTQ social workers.

In a study of 1,430 health and social work students, Adams et al. (2006) found that personal characteristics such as sexual orientation, previous work experience, “cognitive flexibility” (p. 570), and the availability of out faculty role models were most critical to professional identity development. Additionally, the professional culture is critical to the development of one’s professional identity (Webb, 2015). For LGBTQ social work students, the elements of professional culture emanate from their experiences in social work degree programs and school environments. Participants in this study cited numerous examples of how their social work programs inhibited their ability to integrate their LGBTQ and social work identities, thus affecting their readiness to practice as competent social workers after graduation. The CSWE (2015) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards states that the social work practitioner “identifies with the social work profession and applies ethical principles and critical thinking” (p. 11). The results of this study suggest that the development of a competent professional identity includes the integration of a personal identity in a comprehensive approach to professional growth.

Consistent with empirical research (Pfohl, 2004), participants in this study indicated their educational programs lacked LGBTQ content across the curriculum and addressed LGBTQ topics with limited depth, ultimately resulting in the burden of having to educate peers about LGBTQ issues. The scarcity of LGBTQ content within and across social work curricula can exacerbate the sense of isolation, as highly supportive student environments include curricula and classrooms where LGBTQ content, issues, and perspectives are an integral component (Longerbeam, Inkelas, Johnson, & Lee, 2007). Similar to this study, other social work education research has found that students have concerns over the lack of LGBTQ content (Messinger, 2002). It is important then to consider the level of perceived support among LGBTQ students as this can greatly affect their academic experience and their level of readiness to competently practice with diverse and marginalized communities (Craig et al., 2016). Although LGBTQ students may voluntarily provide LGBTQ-related information to their non-LGBTQ peers, this additional burden leads to increased stress to act as an LGBTQ educator or ambassador and may take students away from focusing on their course work and developing supportive communities (Sears, 2003).

Additionally, participants reported discriminatory attitudes from peers and faculty, a lack of LGBTQ role models, and a lack of community in their programs. Prejudice and discrimination in the classroom setting affect LGBTQ social work students at the microlevel (Dentato et al., 2014). Although increased efforts have
been made to address discriminatory attitudes and practices within the academic context, negative educational experiences persist (Fine, 2011), which influences students’ overall mental health (Lapinski & Sexton, 2014). The findings from this study illustrate the importance of addressing professional and personal identity integration into social work education to develop competence in social work students.

**Implications for social work education**

In keeping with Wiles’s (2013) recommendations of explicit discussion of integration of professional and personal identities in social work, several strategies are offered. First, for LGBTQ students to be able to effectively integrate their professional social worker identity with their LGBTQ identity, schools of social work should include accurate and affirming content on LGBTQ individuals across the curriculum. Pföhl (2004) suggests that social work programs should also include specific content on managing one’s LGBTQ identity in the social work professional workplace. For example, students may not be prepared to address their gender or sexual identity in field placement (Messinger & Topal, 1997) or in their first professional job, but course content could provide opportunities for discussion of potential scenarios and practice. In addition to increasing course content on LGBTQ issues and discussing them in depth, it may be important to use different pedagogical strategies. For example, Nordenstoft and Wistoft (2012) found that collaborative learning approaches (e.g., dialogues with peers) increased nurses’ reflexivity and competency as well as increased self-awareness pertaining to their professional and personal position and possibilities as school nurses. In a social work classroom, a similar strategy could allow students to discuss the integration of their personal identities with that of a social work professional identity in their field placements and future workplaces. In addition, discussion and analyses that include redefining stigma, redefining the profession, and redefining the self may provide a pathway for students to navigate the intersection of personal and professional identities and their ongoing integration (Slay & Smith, 2011).

Placing the responsibility for educating other students and faculty about LGBTQ issues on the token LGBTQ social work student can have a negative impact on learning (Austin, Craig, & McInroy, 2016) and affect the student’s ability to integrate his or her personal and professional identities. Schools of social work can also incorporate panel presentations with LGBTQ-identified social workers representing a broad perspective of identities and intersectionality (e.g., race or ethnicity, gender identity, professional roles, etc.) to support the development of personal and professional identity integration. Guest speakers could provide personal insight into the realities of working as an LGBTQ social worker across diverse practice settings. Black, Oles, Cramer, and Bennett (1999) argued that a multiphased intervention process is important to influence students’ attitudes and their professional behaviors toward LGBTQ people, stressing consistent opportunities for structured interaction (i.e., panel presentations) between students and the LGBTQ community. This may help facilitate the integration of LGBTQ social work students’ personal and professional identities as well as provide opportunities for all students to develop competence in working with the LGBTQ population.

Second, it is important for schools of social work to create safe and supportive spaces for LGBTQ students. This is critical, as these spaces provide the opportunity for community building and support among LGBTQ students and allies (Westbrook, 2009). As suggested by students in this study, an LGBTQ student social work association can help connect students to foster a sense of solidarity and community and help shape social work educational policy, curricula, and so on.

The role of LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ faculty in promoting the integration of LGBTQ and social worker identities is important. Institutionalizing support for LGBTQ students through networking and mentoring by LGBTQ alumni, faculty, or local health professionals is critical (Vaccaro, 2012). LGBTQ social work faculty who are out and visible is crucial, as they are able to validate and support LGBTQ students and foster greater identity development and professional competence (Dentato et al., 2014; Diehm, 2004). For instance, it has been found that counseling psychology LGBTQ students who have a supportive LGBTQ faculty mentor feel safe, affirmed, and better able to develop as professionals (Lark & Croteau, 1998). Other studies have found that mentoring relationships between faculty and students who are members of marginalized groups provide many benefits, such as mentors who are advocates and
agents of professional socialization (Atkinson, Casas, & Neville, 1994; Bruce, 1995; Holland, 1993) and within-community role models (Gilbert & Rossman, 1992) who affirm students’ minority identity (Watts, 1987). LGBTQ faculty role models, mentors, and the presence of LGBTQ campus preprofessional organizations have also been found to positively shape the academic context (Vaccaro, 2012). By using such strategies, schools of social work can actively promote an affirmative educational climate for LGBTQ students.

**Limitations**

This study has several limitations. Although there was a wide range of participants, they may not be representative of LGBTQ social work students across North America. Participants were more likely to be White and female, however, this is fairly representative of social work student populations across the United States and Canada (CSWE, 2012). This online study is also limited to students who have access to the Internet and felt comfortable participating in online surveys. Further, participants in this study consisted of bachelor’s- and master’s-level social work students, thus not capturing the experiences of doctoral students. The length of time students were enrolled in their social work program was also not stated, which could be a factor that affected the level of identity integration. Although participants identified as LGBTQ, and some made their other intersecting identities (e.g., race, ethnicity) explicit, data on students’ other intersecting identities were not systematically collected; this limited us in conducting a more robust intersectional analysis. Future studies should more comprehensively capture the various identities as well as the perspectives of LGBTQ faculty, administrators, and staff with regard to important facilitators of identity integration. Despite these limitations, the current study adds to the social work educational literature by highlighting ways social work programs can enhance personal and professional identity integration among LGBTQ students that contributes to the development of competent social work practice. Further, students in this study provide insight on how social work administrators and educators can create more equitable and affirming environments for LGBTQ students.

**Conclusion**

Using an intersectional lens, this qualitative study investigated LGBTQ student experiences in social work education. This study uniquely contributes to the social work and LGBTQ literature by focusing on the need for greater attention to the intersections of personal and professional identities in social work education. To effectively support the development of competent emerging social work professionals, administrators of social work programs are encouraged to further incorporate strategies to reflect on and engage with these identities to promote social justice (Craig et al., 2016; Heydt & Sherman, 2005). Social work administrators and educators have a unique opportunity to proactively foster the development of competent social work practitioners by making explicit the factors that facilitate the integration of personal and professional identity development. Moreover, this can strengthen the social work profession by helping ensure that LGBTQ social work students have an affirming experience that maximizes the development of their intersecting identities for competent and effective social work practice.

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