

Sexuality in Graduate Curricula: Education, Integration, and Implication for Social Work

Jane James, JD, MSW

Clinical Assistant Professor

USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work

University of Southern California

With Collaboration by

Kelsi O'Connor, MSW, LSW

Abstract

Despite being fundamental to the biopsychosocial construct, human sexuality has been deprived its rightful place in graduate social work education. Particularly glaring in the face of a national shift toward inclusivity, accreditation standards and the NASW Code of Ethics have done little to foster a deeper understanding and appreciation for this basic human concept. Accordingly, this paper seeks to harness a pedagogy of difference - an approach which aims to educate and provide a compass for the competent practice of social work - to provide vigorous advocacy for the argument that sexuality education be included in graduate social work curricula. The history of sexuality will be discussed, followed by a proposal to adopt an intersectionality paradigm to integrate sexuality education into the MSW curricula.

Keywords: Sexuality, Gender, Heteronormativity, Intersectionality, Diversity, Social Work, Cultural Competency, Inclusion

Introduction

Human sexuality is a developing concept that warrants an attempt to capture its essence, and to understand how it fits within the social work practice paradigm. Students in Master of Social Work (MSW) programs pursue education to become skilled in providing social services to diverse members of populations in need. Historically, social work education programs have trained students to become ethical practitioners, committed to effectively helping people overcome some of life's wicked challenges; of these, homelessness, poverty, family crises, and mental illness are stark examples. To do this, social workers must be prepared and competent to enhance the wellbeing of increasingly complex populations. To be successful, social workers must challenge the repressive social structures that promote traditions and beliefs propelled by the status quo. While these standards have traditionally been organized along the axes of gender, identity, class, and race, Chilman (2013) noted that changing times and innovative knowledge require social work practitioners to be equally competent in the domain of human sexuality. Therefore, the time is now for requisite pedagogy in human sexuality to become a part of the graduate social work curriculum.

More than ever, the need to discuss human sexuality in social work education is imperative. Once seen as an isolated matter, social awareness of sexuality has raised it to a public, political, and modern issue worthy of attention. Indeed, sexuality is connected not only to visible social structures such as marriage, cohabitation, and parenthood, but to the very motivations that guide our behavior as individuals. Fundamental not only to human development but to both intra- and interpersonal health, social work must no longer proscribe sexuality from its scope of practice. To be sure, social workers themselves cannot avoid issues of human sexuality within their daily work as practitioners (Wineburg, 2015).

The principle providers of critical services to vulnerable populations, it is essential that social workers be equipped to work skillfully with all clienteles. In particular, a growing cohort of clients includes members from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, allies, asexual, and pansexual populations (LGBTQIAAP). For brevity and monikered as LGBTQ+ (Irvin and McKay, 2016), social workers are encouraged to use this acronym as an open, yet non-prescriptive lens through which to view a series of identities and behaviors allied with the expression of human sexuality. Highly susceptible to stigma and discrimination, social work students must be prepared to work competently with members of this population, just as they would with youth, the elderly, and those living with HIV/AIDS (Council on Social Work Education, [CSWE], 2022). Indeed, as the number of persons who identify as LGBTQ+ rises (Benson et al., 2016; Landsbaum, 2017), duty calls on social work education to heighten awareness and adopt inclusive curricula accordingly.

Definition and Scope: An Overview of Historical Norms

Arguably the forerunners of social innovation, the question begs why are leaders in the social work field so inattentive to incorporating sexuality into the educational curricula? Given its role as a fundamental aspect of human existence, there is no excuse for sexuality to remain absent from the social work purview any longer. To understand the roots of this dearth, it is appropriate to explore the historical and social context within which sexuality has developed. Indeed, any attempt to advocate for sexuality competency would be remiss sans a thorough examination of how such absence came to be.

In American society, heterosexuality has been viewed as the standard. Both historically and at present, this monocular lens has allowed, if not fueled, the stigmatization of any and all deviating orientation. The condemnatory reaction to “an attribute that is deeply discrediting,” stigma is a conscriptive form of labeling by which people become defined within their environment (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). Consequently, taking on the role assigned them by society and internalizing its characteristics, stigma and social roles shape the very core of a person’s identity (Thara & Srinivasan, 2000). Considered depraved, worthless, and adulterated, such societal categorization relegates the victim to a caste of social poverty, not least as a reflection of their sexuality (Rosenblum, & Travis, 2016). Often, those who are stigmatized attempt to reconstruct their impression of social disapproval, to pass as “normal.”

Within the construct of a heteronormative society, then, the stigmatized LGBTQ+ individual may strive for social acceptance via attempts to pass as heterosexual. Inarguably, this heteronormativity - the attitude that heterosexuality is the only normal or typical expression of sexuality (Habarth, 2015), is the lens through which American society has come to establish the power and control mechanism of heterosexuality.

Culturally and as individuals, we make assumptions about people’s sexuality. Objectively based on gender and outward appearance, the entrenchment of heteronormativity in American society relies on the underlying assumption that people are heterosexual until, or unless, recognized as otherwise. Contrarily, Airen (as cited in Adams et al., 2018) challenged us to reflect on this perspective. For instance, while a man and woman walking in tandem may be seen approvingly as a heterosexual couple, two men of the same ilk are apt to be looked upon as atypical, perhaps disapprovingly so. Though such introspection may seem exacting, this topic implores the reflection of assumptions which lead to sexual categorization such as these. Having projected our own social conditioning on our environment, we assume others to be hetero/homosexual based not on them as persons, but our own social definitions. Thus, practicing heteronormativity means projecting a person’s own social conditioning onto others, when perceiving people as heterosexual.

Interestingly, Thepsourinthone et al., (2020) argued that male homosexuality threatens male solidarity and superordination, for the reason that men in this role often take on effeminate characteristics. Though dominant Western ideology had long ordained that sexual activity is instinctual, findings from 19th century research revealed significant unconventionalism in sexual behavior and the attitudes attached to it. Consequently, non-conformity to heterosexuality was perceived as a threat to the longstanding ideology of sex as innate and natural (Hicks, 2015).

Concomitant with the spreading of sexual exploration, the distinct concept of sexuality was introduced to linguistics in the early 19th century. To Foucault (as cited in Cowher, 2017), the introduction of this distinction allowed sexuality to be seen not solely as a reflection of Western ideals but as a reflection of oneself, despite being linked to a system of rules and restrictions. Historically, the expression of sexuality was expected to occur solely within the context of private life, separate and removed from the public eye. Those who openly flaunted unorthodox sexual interests were often socially ostracized, if not imprisoned. Discretion in all things sexual became a prevailing value, setting the foundation for a systemic categorization of right and wrong

By the 20th century, federal officials played a heavy hand in the structurization of America as a “straight state” (Canaday, 2011). As bureaucracy grew and the permission of homophobia flourished, homosexuality was seen not simply as social deviance but as a determinant of morality. In fact, immigration inspectors who previously were allowed to refuse entry to those who were physically disabled, had their reach extended to the expulsion of those branded “sexually perverse.” Having linked immorality with economic dependence, both groups were excluded under the pretext of becoming a public charge (Canaday, 2011).

Notably, such fears of homosexuality shaped New Deal programs, as federal officials labeled *homeless* transients as “non-family people” or the “unattached” (Canaday, 2011). By the 1950s, federal policies overtly excluded homosexuals from welfare benefits, military service, and access to immigration and/or citizenship. This, Canady maintained, was achieved through a steady and prolonged process of state-building, founded on government officials’ attempts to create and censure a category of homosexuality.

Alternatively, Wheeler (2013) extended another perspective into how sexuality and its expression were reshaped in America during the 20th century. At the time, lawyers from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) played a crucial role in shifting both public view and the sensitivities of Supreme Court judges around the legal and social appropriateness of an increasingly broad range of sexual expression. Beginning in the 1920s and 30s, key players in the ACLU focused on civil liberties evidently articulated in the Constitution and defended sexual expression such as nudism and the distribution of pamphlets on birth control and sex education.

By the mid-1960s, ACLU leaders had committed themselves to advocating for a wider range of expressive behavior, justifying practices from sodomy to prostitution as “sexual expression.” Raising social consciousness of sexual behavior, the ACLU defined sexuality as a form of private, protected speech and thus secured under the First amendment. As reported by Wheeler (2013), it was the eccentric sex lives and relationships of early ACLU leaders which rendered their inclination to see sexual expression as a civil liberty worth advocating for.

More recently, a plethora of scholarship has emerged and added to the understanding of sexuality. Essentially the coalescences of people’s sexual interest in and attraction to others, and their capacity to have carnal experiences and reactions, describe sexuality as a culturally produced, historical wonder (Halperin, 2003,). Indeed, Caplan (1996) recognized an individual’s sexuality as a vital part of self-identity and “core of the self” (pg. 2). This in mind, the historical disavowal of anormative sexuality no longer holds a place in social work - to be sure, modern social work practice is founded not on personal agreement with another’s behavior, but on the fundamental premise of dignity and worth of all persons (NASW, 2021).

The Problem: Evidence in the Literature

Though recent decades have led to heightened interest in sexuality education, graduate social work curricula have shown little concern for policies, programs, and practice problems associated with human sexuality (Bolin et al., 2018; Chilman, 2013; McCave et al., 2014; Wineburg, 2015). Interestingly, Wineburg noted that one of the first social work courses in human sexuality, offered in 1969 at West Virginia University and taught by Harvey Gochros, manifested subsequent to his writing, an article on the dearth of this very topic. Since that time, though sexuality has become a central part of the social conscience, social work education has not found it necessary to address the cavernous dearth of its dissemination at the master’s level. Indeed, that pedagogy in sexuality is not already an integral part of the social work curriculum, is a salient finding alone.

For example, Wineburg (2015) examined the curricula of the top twenty-five MSW programs in the United States and found none that require human sexuality as a holistic course. Sexuality education in graduate schools of social work is an area that has been generally and perhaps blatantly overlooked. Such exclusion is like eating the “apple of discord,” and conflicts with standards of diversity competency training, set forth for social work students by the Council on Social Work Education [CSWE] (2022), and by the National Association of Social Workers [NASW] (2021). Wineburg (2015) also noted that while there are a few journals or publications that address sexuality, there is a need for those that specifically focus on human sexuality written by, and for social workers. Social work students cannot be adequately prepared as competent practitioners, without possessing the knowledge and skillset related to addressing issues of sexuality, personal relationships, and intimacy.

There lies an inherent social agenda to venerate individuals who fit neatly within the categorical norm of female/male, feminine/masculine. Indeed, to use such biological differences as the fulcrum of rightness/naturalness is the foundation of essentialism, that is, a belief that certain phenomena are natural, predictable, and genetically determined and thus paradigmatic of the heterosexual archetype (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998; Halperin, 2003). Sexuality, then, is recognized as falling into one of two opposing categories: either gay or straight (Ore, 2006). Though traditionally these categories have been seen as polar opposites, each being fundamentally different from the other (Ore, 2006), Jonathan Katz’s “*The Invention of Heterosexuality*” (2007) pointed out the difficulty in maintaining such a dichotomy. As Ore (2006) noted, current philosophies about sexuality constitute sexuality as a fluid form of social expression. In this light, educational institutions must recognize that sexuality is no longer a biological disposition but an expression of sexual desire, lifestyle, and character (Rahman & Jackson, 2012).

Intrigued by how categories of sexuality have been altered into systems of inequality, Katz (2007) demonstrated how this classification has been molded through changes in economic, religious, scientific, and social institutions. In the United States, for example, certain policies and practices acknowledge particular forms of sexuality while shunning others (Katz, 2007; Ore, 2006). Case in point, the United States Supreme Court voted 5-4 in 2019 to support then-President Donald Trump’s policy of banning transgender persons from serving in the United States military.

Citing “tremendous medical costs and disruption,” Trump’s policy goal was an overarching disenfranchisement of transgender Americans willing to participate in active duty, despite any constructive or proven argument to support his position (Feldscher & Seligman, 2021). Such phobism is exemplary of the endemic nature of attendant institutionalized disparity. In 2021, President Joe Biden repealed the Trump era legislative ban through executive order.

In the same vein, Messner (2015) provided a striking proposal for the continuity of alpha masculinity within the context of sports. An institution created by men, for men, Messner posited that sports serve as a context in which traditional conceptions of masculinity are sustained for heterosexual men by (Weber, 1998) separating them from anything considered to be feminine. Often accomplished through misogyny and homophobia as displayed in appallingly derogatory language toward women and gay men, Weber maintained that “expressing strong anti-gay sentiments empowers men to be intimate without being sexual, and that objectifying women through derogatory language enables men to be sexual without being intimate” (1998, p. 26). Fundamental to the preservation of male domination, such embedded bigotry makes permanent the position of men, not only over women but over other men seen to be in a lower rank of class, race, or sexual hierarchies (Messner, 2015; Spallacci, 2020; & Weber, 1998).

As though static in time and space, Ingraham (2013) argued that by allotting heterosexuality a normative function in society, institutions confirm it as the standard for socio-sexual behavior. Though cross-disciplinary research has worked tirelessly to illuminate the historical, social, and material environments that such institutionalized heteronormativity has conserved, Ingraham (2013) argued that one need look no further than modern-day American society to recognize the values at stake.

Ever the more diverse, the sociocultural environment in the United States is constantly in flux, continually evolving to create a landscape where individuals are free to express themselves sexually. Confined within the social construct of heteronormativity and bias, sexual hierarchies embedded within the fabric of the selfsame nation have resulted in systemic inequality and oppression. Through this lens, there appears to be a deliberate failure on behalf of those same institutions to admit that the meaning of sexuality is neither fixed, incontrovertible, nor collective, but a result of group struggle for community-valued resources, self-valuation, and self-determination (Habarth, 2015; & Weber, 1998). In this arena, non-selective material must be introduced to the educational scope of future social work practitioners. To be sure, society cannot afford the cost of continued ignorance and silence.

Salting the wound, Barnett (2014) implicated a paucity of depth in the already pitiful dearth of training. In one study conducted among participants whose experience in the field ranged from 4 to 34 years, primary findings showed that graduate-level clinicians are not thoroughly trained to address issues of sex, gender, and sexuality. Given that 27% of participants provided direct care for clients who identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community, it is unsettling to find that practitioners reported a deficit not only in training, but in the “language and questions to ask when thinking about how to approach clients’ needs around the topic of human sexuality” (p. 22). Indeed, 100% of participants felt inadequately prepared to address clients’ concerns regarding sex, gender, and sexuality, and used their own personal experiences to guide their work in this realm.

Of courses specifically, the findings are just as unnerving. Whereas 33% of interviewees had taken no classes at all, 60% of participants reported to have taken only one class on human sexuality while in graduate school. Of these, 63% were in fact more akin to general overviews on cultural diversity, whilst only 18% were acutely focused on human sexuality (Barnett, 2014). Even more intriguing, classes were split evenly between being electives versus required. Unsurprisingly, one student’s takeaway was that “in terms of how to use [what I learned], I don’t feel I was well prepared. I have often felt that when sexuality or gender is an issue for a client, I feel pretty constricted in working on this with them” (p. 24). More shockingly, one participant bluntly described his class’s approach to sexual orientation as “it was basically like, people are gay. You’re going to have to work with them. This is what they might be like” (p. 24). Through telling examples of the current state of sexuality education in graduate curricula, these findings underscore the evident unpreparedness of professional social workers, ill-equipped to address concerns in the field.

The Social Construction of Gender

Although in doing so they may beg ignorance, educational institutions unwittingly assert their overriding view as the sieve through which all material must be filtered. As part of the dominant group, institutions thus set the parameters within which subordinates must operate. The wielders of relative power and authority, these institutions can dictate how their influence is used, such as deciding which histories will be taught and which relationships are valued (Adams et al., 2018). Because, like sexuality, categorization of gender is constructed within the mold of institutional contexts, the oppressive traditionalism of heteronormativity seeps likewise to the misinterpretation of sex as gender.

Because biological sex is often conflated with the social construct of gender, a resultant appearance of gender nonconformity may be interpreted as behavior uncharacteristic of one's gender. Of this phenomenon, Foucault (as cited in Halperin, 2003) proposed that associating natural sex with both a discrete gender and supposedly natural attraction to the opposite sex, is a peculiar social device articulated solely in the service of reproductive interests.

Culturally, expectations decree that one's gender must be consistent with one's sex category. Proposed in 1987, sociologists West and Zimmerman suggested that this notion - that of gender - is a socially designed activity of managing conduct, measured against cis standards to evaluate behavior and attitudes as appropriate for one's sex category (as cited in Macht, 2019). In this pursuit, West and Zimmerman suggested that men and women participate in the *doing of gender*, which "involves a complex of socially-guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine or feminine natures" (p. 126, as cited in Macht, 2019). By this token, people can "pass" for a gender incongruent with their sex, by which they have demonstrated they are capable members of society. Conversely, those who do not "do" their gender correctly are regularly castigated (Macht, 2019).

Noteworthy is Butler's argument that rather than being an indispensable quality consequent to biological sex, gender is an *act* which develops from, and is bolstered by social norms that engender the illusion of binary sex (as cited in Macht, 2019). As it has come to be accepted, gender is in fact a complex manifestation of much more than one's biological sex. Experienced in innumerate ways, one's gender identity is thus contingent on the context in which it is experienced; it is not, as history has suggested, an immutable crux of essentialism to be defined in binary terms. In fact, to do so endorses the caustic shadow of heteronormativity. Interestingly, though the American psyche has long seen gender through this bifocal lens, history suggests that other eras and cultures have not always seen it as such.

Sheppard and Mayor (2013) drew attention to the fact that many global indigenous cultures held more fluid perspectives of gender before systemic invasion by the Western world. They argued that even within Western cultures, the attributes linked to one gender or another have changed innumerable times historically. In the face of the societal perception that people fall into distinct categories of gender, Miller and Garran (2017) have noted a shift from representing gender in binary and essentialist terms to being ardently "challenged and problematized" in the 21st century. Despite this reported shift, much attention has not been paid to the importance of human sexuality and to how it can become part of an inclusive MSW curriculum. It is important to note that while the majority of people may identify as male or female, an increasing number refer to themselves as transgender, transsexual, or gender indeterminate (Miller & Garran, 2017).

The Present State of Sexuality in Social Work Curricula

Nonetheless, social work education fails to effectively address this demographic shift. In 2017, a Gallup survey of 1.6 million people revealed that 4.1 percent of U.S. adults - approximately 10 million people - identified as LGBTQ+ (Gates, 2017; Landsbaum, 2017). An increase from 3.5% in 2012, the survey uncovered that millennials comprised 60 percent of adults identified as LGBTQ+ in America, while the largest inter-population increase was in Asian Americans (from 3.5 to 4.9%) and Hispanics (4.3 to 5.4%). Interestingly, analogous increases in White, Black, and "Other" populations was .4, .2, and .3%, respectively. Though it is perhaps beyond the scope of this paper, astute social workers will consider that these numbers reflect increases not only in self-identification but in cultural acceptance.

Given such evolving data, social workers have no choice but to be prepared in the delivery of service to LGBTQ+ needs. Like any population, only a comprehensive understanding of both personal and community norms will allow for health and wellbeing to be met. Unfortunately, this gold standard of inclusivity has been sorely abandoned by the ill-equipped standard of LGBTQ+ curricula. Though addressing such a disparity will require a robust evaluation of social and institutional norms, the time is now for social work students and educators alike to challenge the expectations of their own profession.

While some facets of social identity are imbued with social privilege and power, others are beleaguered and disparaged (Miller & Garran, 2017). For example, invisibility of the LGBTQ+ community often leads to presumptions of heterosexuality - or, where a population is recognized, members may find themselves on the receiving end of bias and stereotype. Often, members are perceived as a homogenous group (indeed, *members* itself implies cohesion among ranks) where needs are not seen as inclusive, but based on partisan expectations contrasted with heterosexist norms. Without relying on their own experience and environment, social workers must develop the necessary skills to navigate such underserved populations (Miller & Garran, 2017), skills which cannot be learned if repeatedly left out of graduate schoolwork curricula.

Consistent with other forms of inequality, Miller and Garran (2017) proffered that sexual minorities are enclosed within a web of oppression. Though unfortunate, one can thus expect that social workers who lack knowledge of the nature of both diversity and oppression, will inherently run the risk of sanctioning services that are insensitive to clients' needs.

Guided by maxims of nonmaleficence and beneficence, the NASW Code of Ethics specifies that social workers seek to understand the nature of diversity and oppression with respect to race, ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, or expression (NASW, 2021). Unfortunately, would-be social workers are bereft all recourse to this expectation if the very institutions charged with their education lack thorough guidance on human sexuality. By correlation, then, those same individuals whose aim is to support and uphold inclusion become acolytes to the very discrimination they condemn.

Cultural Competence Mandate in Social Work Education: Connection to Sexuality

Defined as the processes by which systems and individuals respectfully and effectively respond to people of all cultures (Sue et al., 2016), cultural competence is a nonnegotiable tenet of social work. Encompassing the knowledge and skills that social workers must harness for effective client work, cultural competence is more than just cultural sensitivity - it is a synergistic harmony of appreciation for difference and applicable skills in the workplace (vanWormer et al., 2017). For social workers, this correlates to *cultural role taking* (Sue et al., 2016) - the necessity for social workers to empathize with the worldviews of culturally diverse clients in a non-judgmental way. To do this, social workers must a) understand and take responsibility for their own beliefs and attitudes, b) learn about and increase multicultural experiences, and c) use their knowledge to become advocates of multiculturalism. Of course, such introspection must be paired with an astute evaluation of societal prejudice (including, but not limited to, ethnocentrism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and racism) as well as a thorough grasp on how such norms have shaped one's own perspective (Sue et al., 2016; & vanWormer et al., 2017). Understandably, such a task requires unremitting discipline and resolve - though in committing oneself to such high standards, social workers inherently become more adept at creating pathways toward the identification of resources for intervention, consistent with the customs and ideals of community and client, with whom they work (Fong, 2001; vanWormer et al. 2017).

With no room for notions that negate a person's inimitable existence, social work seeks to acknowledge the relationship between one's individuality and identity. To be sure, remonstrances such as "just stay in the closet and you will be okay" or "don't ask don't tell" fundamentally deny a crucial piece of the person behind the label (vanWormer et al., 2017). Instead, social workers are implored to respond in ways that recognize, affirm, and value the worth of persons, families, and communities, as well as protect and preserve dignity (NASW, 2021).

Upholding Accreditation: Incorporating CSWE and NASW Standards

With its assertion that master's level social work shapes the profession's future, institutions of higher education must be subjected to both professional judgement and guidance for the continuity of competent practice (CSWE, 2022). Indeed, proficient social work education supports public confidence in both practice and providers. The increasing nuances of service delivery mean that "even experienced social workers may encounter situations requiring knowledge and skills beyond the scope of their usual practice setting" (NASW, 2016, pg. 19). Accordingly, educational programs must provide fundamental knowledge and training in "all social work practice specialties" (pg. 18) to develop a conscious understanding of both the human psyche and social environment.

Crucial to identity formation, social workers must understand how diversity and difference characterize the human experience (CSWE, 2022). Yet, Sue et al., (2016) averred that the American educational system has done great damage to subgroups by perpetuating the structure of values, beliefs, assumptions, and practices, through a narrow lens of only one cross-section of the population. Rather than educate and offer insight, traditions both past and present have restricted, stereotyped, and oppressed the culturally unconventional (Sue et al., 2016), a direct attack on equal access and opportunity.

As the social condition erodes and issues such as sexuality become global concerns, the impact of international advances on U.S. policy cannot be overemphasized. To be sure, worldwide interaction and interdependency have become not the outlier but the norm, and cultural competence grows ever more critical in the provision of effective social work practice (vanWormer, et al., 2017). Conduits of connectedness and communication, social workers must thus be fully trained to work within parameters beyond the boundaries of this nation, ceaselessly striving to produce an archetype of competent professionalism.

Inclusivity vs. Exclusivity in Social Work Education

As noted by Sue et al. (2016), social work education seeks first to assist students in increasing self-awareness of their own potential biases, assumptions, and values about human behavior, and secondly, to foster the acquisition of knowledge of the history, culture, and life experiences of various racial and ethnic groups. To do this, the CSWE (2022) has adopted a competency-based framework of inclusivity via which competence is founded on social workers' knowledge, values, and skills, the latter of which includes affective processes such as critical thinking, emotional reactions, and exercise of judgment in unique practice situations.

Given that competence naturally shifts over time, the CSWE insightfully recognized that continual learning is a critical facet to the effective delivery of social services in the modern era. Of this ilk, the CSWE posits that integrating human sexuality into practice allows social workers to think critically while mediating affective processes, and intervening on the impact of social, economic, and political structures on sexual wellbeing. To date, however, such a reality has yet to be seen - despite the accrediting board of social work all but decreeing its inception.

The Excluded Student: When Inclusivity Fails its Own Practitioners

Incontrovertibly, research findings reveal an across-the-board dearth of sexuality education in the prevailing social work curricula (McCave et al., 2014; & Wineburg, 2015). Given such clear mandates as those espoused by the NASW and CSWE, such findings are disconcerting, underscoring the need for graduate programs not only to addend current curricula with courses in sexuality education, but to carefully consider the implications of not doing so - one of which is the forced exclusion of students who themselves identify as LGBTQ+. Through this lens, not only do institutions fail their patrons as students, but so too they risk deserting the very identities of those who walk their halls. Accordingly, it is not just curricula which beg inclusivity, but the very learning and social environments wherein vulnerable students place their trust.

Not surprisingly, exclusion and discrimination against social work students who identify as LGBTQ+ can adversely impact academic performance, as well as personal and professional identity development (Gates, 2017). Unfortunately, schools themselves contribute to the stigma and isolation that LGBTQ+ students face, and while increased attention has shifted the national awareness, students continue to encounter severe social and institutional discrimination across the United States. In many cases, however, personal beliefs are invoked as a justification for harassment - such as in 2017, when students at a California high school published an article concerning the LGBTQ+ population. In response, they were met with biblical remonstrances from a teacher, whose proclamation that "[those committing homosexual acts] deserve to die" resulted in school administrators declaring that both teachers and students "do not shed their First Amendment rights [at school]." Though indubitably such a right is granted by the Constitution, it can be countered that such freedom of speech is representative of the harassment and discrimination leveled against students by school personnel (Abreu et al., 2018).

Understandably, prospective college students are driven as much by their interests as by their hopes to find a supportive environment where they are free to thrive. Though a 2016 Pew poll found movement toward positive change in this matter, it was found that in 2015, only 25 of more than 500 colleges and universities had partnered with the Consortium of Higher Education LGBTQ+ Resource Professionals, to request the addition of gender identity and sexual orientation questions on the Common Application (Bestcolleges.com, 2019).

It comes as no surprise that the American Psychological Association (APA) (2018) identified negative psychological effects of prejudice and discrimination on people who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. However, as modern society faces a reckoning on identity, it is not simply bi- and homosexuality that must be addressed; now, micro populations such as those of transgenderism have risen to the forefront of national attention. Along with increased awareness, such populations have borne the brunt of prejudice and discrimination. One study by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), revealed that 87% of transgender students reported having been verbally harassed because of their gender expression, while 53% reported physical harassment (Gates, 2017). Expectedly, it was shown that the more harassment students faced, the less likely they were to maintain higher GPAs, attend all classes, and plan for the future.

Herein, of course, lies a herculean task: though social workers are taught to *meet clients where they are*, doing so can become a complex undertaking when working with those from a foreign (to us) sexual background. While the crux of empathetic care may span all clients, a lack of awareness not only creates a barrier to the provision of services, but serves to foment a rift between client and clinician - which, perhaps even more so than tangible resources, fractures the very core of social work practice.

Social Workers: Problem-Solvers or Problem-Makers?

Although revered for their professional expertise, social workers themselves are far from unsusceptible to human weakness. Though a paucity of research impedes clarification, evidence suggests that social workers not only harbor judgement, but have shown bias toward the LGBTQ+ population (Logi et al., 2007). Of course, to carry forward the lessons of our own experience is only human - and social workers are far from perfect. Nonetheless, Healey (2000) questioned whether the notion of social workers as “powerful” and “experts” obscures the actuality of their own oppressor status - which, he cautioned, must not be expunged solely by professional status.

Certainly, social workers are naturally driven to their trade by a commitment to the betterment of humankind. Along with such passion, however, must come an ethical commitment to the conscious evaluation of one’s own experience, particularly as it shapes one’s role in the continuity of injustice and oppression. Administrators and stakeholders too, must perform an about-face of traditional norms. Indeed, to ignore social development purely for its being controversial, serves only to castigate minorities and perpetuate policies built on sociocultural beliefs of gender inequity (Mayo, 2011). Mayo asserted that by “creating policies that prevent innovative and democratic refiguring of sexuality, institutions themselves create sexuality-based risk” (p. 406). In this light, it becomes clear that leaders in the profession not only must begin to see sexuality as an element of professional growth, but must reckon with the coexistence of values disparate from their own. Until and unless such occurs, it is apparent that discourse on discriminatory and oppressive practices will constitute a lost occasion.

Proposed Model for Incorporating Sexuality in the MSW Curriculum

To best prepare MSW students for the pedagogy of sexuality, as well as to challenge traditional policies that perpetuate oppression, the writers of this paper propose an inclusive framework of intersectionality. Founded on the notions of justice and inclusion, an intersectionality perspective suggests that people experience deprivation through multiple axes, which are founded on identity symbols such as gender, class, race, socioeconomic status, disability, religion, and sexuality (Anderson & Collins, 2004). Because people experience manifold layers of identity concurrently, no single determining factor can encapsulate a population; as such, intersectionality highlights and hinges on the relationship between identity and social structure (Crenshaw, 2016). Intersectionality theory suggests that our identities based on race, gender, class, and sexuality are present in every social interaction, rendering it the most relevant approach to teaching sexuality (Veenstra, 2011).

Itself a multifaceted expression of identity, sexuality education serves a paradigmatic opportunity for the application of intersectionality. Indeed, such an approach would extend sexuality education outside a heteronormative and cisgendered viewpoint to create a more inclusive and socially informed perspective, aiming “to capture both structure and dynamic consequences of the interaction between two or more axes of subordination” (Crenshaw, 2000, p. 9). Functioning as a mechanism for social change, an intersectionality perspective would challenge the status quo by implicating social institutions and social policies that maintain traditional practices of exclusion, dominance, and privilege (Collins et al., 2021).

Though the foundation of social work rests within the context of equality, the United States has come to define categories of race, gender, class, and sexuality through more hegemonic norms (Phillips, 1991; & Veenstra, 2011). Concomitantly by way of transferring culture, educational institutions function as instruments of social reproduction - effectively making them the drivers of such hegemonic processes (Veenstra, 2011). Thus, a call for intersectionality not only would accentuate the present paucity of perceptive viewpoints in academia, but would assist MSW students in their endeavor to understand how race, class, socioeconomic status, and sexuality interconnect to create systems of privilege, injustice, and oppression.

Once higher education institutions accept the responsibility of revolutionizing content, so too must they overhaul their approach by developing curricula that include intersectional pedagogy. Such education is most favorable when classroom activities encourage positive inter-group interaction; that is, facilitating discussion and activity between students who identify across a range of gender, class, race, and sexuality. In doing so, members of dominant groups who perhaps, and by no fault of their own, were under-educated on subordinate populations - become exposed to and educated on not just the academics of intersectionality but the actuality of the humans sitting before them. Because students hailing from dominant groups already have the upper hand - indeed, Weber (1991) noted that dominant group members are more likely to speak in class, receive eye contact, have their ideas credited, and their contributions shape group responses to tasks. The educational strategies proposed, not only acknowledge such predispositions but challenges them, upsetting the normative balance of power in the classroom.

Conclusion

This paper calls on graduate social work education institutions to holistically integrate human sexuality pedagogy into their MSW curricula. A proposed intersectionality framework can help social workers confront heteronormativity and disrupt its preservation of oppressive attitudes and actions. While historically, members of marginalized groups - such as the elderly, youth, and homeless - have been subjected to the insidious detriment of marginalization, the time is now to confront the reality of sexuality in an equally vulnerable population, LGBTQ+. Though Airen (2018) asserted that heteronormativity can be undone through the unlearning of assumption-based constructs, it is evident that the mere premise of inclusion is not enough to manifest its existence.

Indeed, a searing evaluation and thorough unpacking of heteronormativity is the only viable option to move forward, not only as a conduit to the promotion of human rights, but as a reconstruction of sexuality in a way that refuses to demoralize one's very essence of being human.

If nothing else, we simply must do better - as individuals and as a society - than to perpetuate stereotypes that lead to categorization and discrimination. In a world where the promotion of human rights serves as both a fulcrum and indicator of progress, social workers must responsibly exercise their onus not just for clients, but for all.

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