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# **SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION**

## **From a lesbian standpoint**

by

Robin H. Stevenson

Bachelor of Arts, McMaster University 1993

### **Thesis**

Submitted to the Faculty of Social Work  
In partial fulfilment of the requirements  
For the Master of Social Work degree  
Wilfrid Laurier University  
1995

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## Abstract

This study looks at social work education from the standpoint of lesbian students and faculty. The literature indicates that many social workers manifest signs of homophobia, and that this affects the provision of services to gay and lesbian clients. The purpose of this study is to explore how issues of same-gender sexual orientation are addressed in schools of social work and to make recommendations for change.

My approach is based on the view that "knowledge" is reflective of the values and experience of those who create it and that education serves to perpetuate and reinforce dominant social values. Looking at institutions from the standpoint of marginalised groups can reveal the ways in which those institutions promote an oppressive ideology

I interviewed fourteen lesbians, including undergraduate and graduate students, recent graduates and faculty members from five Ontario schools of social work. These open-ended interviews focused on the participants' experiences and perspectives on social work education. I also facilitated two reflecting group discussions, each with five of the research participants, which supported and clarified the findings that emerged from the interviews.

The findings of this study suggest that social work education is structured by a hidden curriculum which promotes heterosexuality as the only normal and legitimate form of sexual and relational expression. Content on same-gender sexual orientation is excluded from the curriculum and discourse on lesbian and gay issues is suppressed. The lack of a supportive and safe climate in schools of social work limits disclosures of same-gender sexual orientation, reinforcing the institutional silence by keeping lesbian and gay experience closeted and invisible. Heterosexual students receive little or no education on same-gender sexual

orientation and consequently are unprepared to provide services competently to lesbian and gay clients

The results of this inquiry suggest the need for a multi-faceted approach to change in social work education. CASSW accreditation standards should be changed to require the inclusion of content on issues of same-gender sexual orientation. Schools of social work should adopt policies which prohibit discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation and statements of philosophy which clearly express opposition to heterosexism and other forms of oppression. Lesbian and gay faculty and students should be actively recruited as part of an effort to increase diversity in schools of social work. Issues of same-gender sexual orientation should be addressed in continuing education for faculty and in faculty evaluation. Feminist theory and critical pedagogy are identified as valuable resources in addressing heterosexism and lesbian and gay issues in social work education.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my thesis advisor, Dr. Martha Keniston Laurence, and my thesis committee members, Dr. Brian O'Neill and Dr. Carol Stalker.

I would also like to thank the women who shared their experiences and their thoughts about social work education, and those who also participated in discussion about the findings of this study.

I am grateful to the Bettina Russell Memorial Fund for their financial assistance.

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## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

In a society characterized by power imbalances and oppressive social structures, social work has a responsibility to advocate for marginalized groups and to challenge the structures that oppress them. Donadello (1986) writes, "It is essential that social work be openly and clearly active on behalf of all oppressed people and give up its ambivalent attitudes about lesbians and gay men for feminist visions to be realized" (p.296).

### The Problem

Despite legislative changes to protect lesbians and gay men from discrimination, societal attitudes towards same-gender sexual orientation remain generally unfavourable. Public opinion about lesbians and gays is filled with contradictions. As a society that purports to believe in individual rights, privacy and choice, prohibition of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation receives a considerable amount of support when framed as a civil rights issue, but this "liberalized public opinion coexists with strong heterosexist opinions about what is normal and abnormal, healthy and sick, right and wrong" (Rayside & Bowler, 1988, p.650). Public "tolerance" of lesbians and gays exists only as long as "the extension of their rights does nothing to infringe upon the dominant position of hetero-sexual practices and ideals" (Rayside & Bowler, 1988, p.650).

Within social work practice and education it seems that these same contradictions exist. According to the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) Social Work Code of Ethics (1994), the social work profession is based on humanitarian and egalitarian ideals and "social workers are dedicated ... to the achievement of social justice for all" (p.7). The

Social Work Code of Ethics (1994) also requires social workers to be competent in the areas in which they provide service. However, studies indicate that many social workers manifest signs of homophobia (DeCresenzo, 1984; Wisniewski & Toomey, 1987), and that this affects the provision of services to lesbian and gay clients (Newman, 1989).

The need for social workers to receive education about same-gender sexual orientation has been clearly identified (Donadello, 1986; Dulaney & Kelly, 1982; Newman, 1989; Woodman, 1992). However, Canadian undergraduate and graduate level social work programs, which I believe have an obligation to serve all of their clients with respect and compassion, still are not required to include curriculum content on lesbian and gay issues.

In addition to this obligation to clients, I believe that schools of social work education have a responsibility to provide a safe and supportive climate for their lesbian and gay male students and faculty. While very little research has been done on the climate in schools of social work, findings suggest that the climate is experienced as unsupportive, discouraging and frequently hostile by gay male students and faculty (O'Neill, 1994).

### Importance of the Problem

Lesbians and gay men constitute a large minority of the population, and are present in all social work settings. Lesbians and gay men represent "at least 10% of all persons regardless of ethnicity, rural or urban residence, or areas of the country. Including significant others of lesbians and gays, the population under concern increases to more than 40%" (Woodman, 1992).

Social service agencies rarely provide programs that address the needs of groups within the lesbian and gay population. In addition, many lesbians and gay men are reluctant

to use mainstream social service agencies due to concerns about the attitude and knowledge of heterosexual service providers (Gambrill, Stein & Brown, 1984). Lesbians and gay men who do use mainstream social service agencies frequently do not disclose their sexual orientation. For this reason, many social workers are unaware that they have lesbian and gay clients on their caseloads. Like heterosexuals, lesbians and gay men have a wide range of social service needs. However, they also face additional challenges as a result of the heterosexism and homophobia of our society (Schoenberg, Goldberg & Shore, 1985).

I will briefly discuss the client population of lesbian and gay youth as one of many possible examples. Described by Savin-Williams (1990) as a "forgotten, invisible minority"; they are, like members of other minorities, subject to prejudice and stigmatization. However, while "most members of minority groups, whether ethnic, national, religious, racial, or gender related, usually enjoy the support of and enculturation by other family and community members", gay and lesbian adolescents usually grow up in heterosexually oriented families (Uribe & Harbeck, 1991, p.12). They do not receive positive socialization about their subculture, history, or a sense of group identity, but instead are "socialized into values and beliefs not congruent with their self-definition" (Robinson, 1991, p.458). Studies have demonstrated that gay and lesbian adolescents are at an unusually high risk for parental rejection, verbal and physical abuse, loneliness, isolation, school drop-out, homelessness, substance abuse, and prostitution (Hunter & Schaecher, 1987; Uribe & Harbeck, 1991). The Department of Health and Human Services estimates that sexual minority youth are five times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers (Uribe & Harbeck, 1991), and their suicide attempts are more likely to be lethal (Kournay, 1987). Of juvenile prostitutes,

street-kids and runaways, 30-70% are estimated to be lesbian and gay youth (Ricketts, 1991)

Despite the evident need, most mainstream agencies lack appropriate programs for lesbian and gay youth (Mallon, 1992). O'Brien (1994) found that lesbian and gay youth in group homes had to contend with the risk of verbal and physical abuse and institutional silencing. Staff members often denied or pathologized their sexual orientation. Mallon (1992) reported that many lesbian and gay youth eventually conclude that "the streets meet their needs better than the service system (p.547-548). O'Brien (1994) suggested that this treatment of lesbian and gay youth is "socially organized by professional discourses of homosexuality and lesbianism as deviant and pathological" (p.54).

The lack of services for lesbian and gay youth is only one example of the ways in which lesbian and gay clients are systematically ignored, neglected, discriminated against and abused by the social service system. Dulaney and Kelly (1982) argue that the poor quality of services to lesbian and gay clients stems from the lack of training that social work students receive regarding same-gender sexual orientation. They write, "Because of this benign neglect, students are allowed to graduate with the same homophobic attitudes with which they entered social work school" (p.179).

In addition to my concern about the quality of services provided to lesbian and gay clients, I am also concerned about the climate in schools of social work regarding issues of same-gender sexual orientation, and the impact of this climate on lesbian and gay students and faculty. If it is not safe for them to be open about their sexual orientation, this will further suppress discourse regarding issues of same-gender sexual orientation, prevent them from advocating on behalf of lesbian and gay clients and stifle research on lesbian and gay issues.

### Overview Of Research Design

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which issues of same-gender sexual orientation are addressed in schools of social work, to identify areas where changes are needed, and to make recommendations regarding the ways in which these changes could occur. In this study, I investigated social work education from the standpoint of lesbian students and faculty. My methodology is based on a feminist perspective on research, and draws on the ideas of researching from the "margins" (Kirby & McKenna, 1989) and institutional ethnography (Smith, 1987).

I conducted fourteen open-ended interviews with lesbian students, faculty and recent graduates of social work programs at five Ontario universities. These interviews focussed on their experiences with social work education and their perceptions and recommendations regarding the need for change with respect to issues of same-gender sexual orientation. Several themes and questions emerged from these interviews, which formed the focus of two group discussions in which participants assisted in the research process by confirming and further interpreting the preliminary findings.

### The Researcher

Feminist theorists have criticized the tendency of traditional research to mask the subjectivity of the researcher by allowing him or her to remain invisible in the research process. Code (1993) argues that since the "ideal objectivity of the universal knower is neither possible nor desirable", it is essential that the subjectivity of the inquirer be visible and taken into account (p.31). For this reason, I would like to make clear my perspective by



situating myself in the context of this study.

I am a 26 year old white woman from a middle class background. My family immigrated to Canada from England in 1976. I am a graduate student in a Master of Social Work program at Wilfrid Laurier University. I am a lesbian and a feminist, both of which shape the way I perceive and experience the world. I believe all forms of oppression are inextricably linked. I am a member of two lesbian and gay groups at present -- a direct action group advocating equal rights for lesbian and gay relationships and families, and a lesbian and gay social work group which has several interrelated purposes including support, advocacy, and resource development.

I became interested in doing this research as a result of my own experiences in social work education. My study design evolved from my commitment to principles of feminist research and my desire to use my own experience and that of other lesbians as the starting point of inquiry. I hoped that, based on these experiences, I would be able to make recommendations for change in social work education which could be used in the effort to create a safer climate for lesbian and gay students, and to better prepare social work students to work respectfully and effectively with their lesbian and gay clients.

### Definitions

#### **Lesbian**

Donovan (1992) argues that lack of specificity and consensus regarding definitions of lesbian, gay and homosexual "confound comparative research and cumulative understanding because criteria for inclusion within the subject populations are often not specific" (p.31). He asserts that Lockard's (1985) statement that "a lesbian is anyone who says

she is" (p.84) will "do more methodological harm than good" (Donovan, 1992, p.31). Since the criterion that I used to determine whom I would interview was that each participant identify as lesbian, I feel I should articulate the reasoning behind my agreement with Lockard's statement.

Lesbian identity is achieved, often after considerable struggle, through a process of "self-discovery and self-naming" (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1993). Heterosexual identity, on the other hand, is assumed "by default, because it never occurs to many women to be anything else" (p.31). The power of compulsory heterosexuality is such that, unlike lesbians, heterosexual women are not required to think about why they are heterosexual, what this means to them, how they define and understand their heterosexuality, or how it impacts on their experiences and perceptions. It is adopted as "a default option, a life style entered into without conscious consideration of the alternatives" (p.32).

Different lesbians have different understandings of their identity -- as biologically determined, as environmentally influenced, as socially constructed, as primarily emotional, as fixed or fluid, as given or chosen, as a political stance and a politicized identity. For me to define "lesbian" in any way other than "a lesbian is anyone who says she is" would mean determining who could participate in this study according to my own construction of lesbian identity, which would not be congruent with my personal values and beliefs.

To define "lesbian" as "a woman who is sexually oriented primarily toward her own gender" would be to deny the reality that for many lesbian feminists, identifying as lesbian "is a defiant act of self-naming, in which we assert our refusal of the hetero-patriarchal order, and our commitment to women and lesbians" (p.33).

### **Social Work Education**

For the purposes of this study, I defined social work education as education received by students enrolled in Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work (CASSW) accredited social work programs at the university level. This includes B.S.W., M.S.W. and D.S.W. programs, and excludes social service programs offered through community colleges. B.S.W. programs train students for generalist practice, M.S.W. programs require students to specialize in a particular area (eg. clinical practice, community development or social policy) and doctoral programs prepare students for careers in teaching and research or social service administration.

In Canada, there are currently 27 post-secondary institutions which offer CASSW accredited social work programs. Between them, these institutions offer 24 programs at the bachelor's level, 20 at the master's level and 5 at the doctoral level.

### **Heterosexism**

I use the term heterosexism to refer to the social dominance of heterosexuality which is maintained through social institutions (the justice system, educational system, media, health care, etc). Through these institutions and their practices, heterosexuality is constructed and enforced as the only normal and legitimate form of sexual/relational expression. Heterosexism also refers to the assumption of heterosexuality and the exclusion, marginalization and silencing of lesbian and gay experience (Neisen, 1990).

### **Homophobia**

Homophobia is a term which describes hatred and fear of lesbians and gay men

(Gramick, 1983). By constructing the persecution of sexual minorities as based in "phobia", it individualizes and marginalizes oppression, while the term heterosexism emphasizes the structural nature of the oppression of lesbians and gay men, linking it conceptually to sexism, racism, ableism and classism.

### Parameters of This Study

In focusing on social work education from the standpoint of lesbians, I did not attend to the diversity among lesbians by focusing explicitly on differences of race, ethnicity, age, ability, etc. One research participant said "I don't pretend to speak for all lesbians and I think I'm a lesbian different from all lesbians, like all lesbians probably do...". Within the lesbian community, there are multiple overlapping and interlocking standpoints. I believe there are probably connections between the ways in which social work education addresses issues of same-gender sexual orientation and issues of race, ethnicity, gender, ability, etc. However, because I wanted to focus on same-gender sexual orientation, I chose to look at social work education from the standpoint of lesbians. Investigation of social work education from the standpoint of other marginalized groups would allow for a more complete analysis of the ways in which social work education constructs and perpetuates its dominant discourse.

### Presentation of This Study

In Chapter Two, I review the literature related to social work education and same-gender sexual orientation and situate my research in the context of this literature. In Chapter Three, I explain some aspects of the feminist perspective on research methods, the value of research from the margins and the framework of institutional ethnography. I then present the specifics of my research design. In Chapter Four, I present the findings that emerged from the

interview data and the reflecting group discussions. In Chapter Five, I review these findings in the context of the literature and discuss their implications for social work education

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter I will review the literature on same-gender sexual orientation and social work education. Since so little research has been done specifically on this subject, I will also discuss the literature on related areas. I will then identify areas where research is needed and situate my study in the context of the literature.

### Same-Gender Sexual Orientation and Social Work

Tully and Albro (1979) argue that although social work as a profession is ethically committed to issues of social justice and human rights, social workers "often mirror society through perpetrating prejudices and discrimination against homosexuals" (p.154). A 1987 survey measured the attitudes of social workers toward gays and lesbians, and found that social workers manifested signs of homophobia (Wisniewski & Toomey, 1987). DeCresenzo (1984) surveyed mental health professionals from different disciplines and found that social workers had the highest homophobia scores. She concluded that social workers are influenced by myths and stereotypes about lesbians and gays, and have limited factual information about this population.

DeCresenzo (1984) found that people who are aware that they know gays and lesbians "are less homophobic, see gays and lesbians as less sick, and do not see gays and lesbians in terms of stereotypes" (p.131). Because of the presence of heterosexist beliefs and attitudes that promote heterosexuality as the only "normal" form of sexual and relational expression, gays and lesbians have to cope with a stigmatized identity. Many lesbians and gay men feel that it is necessary to keep their sexual orientation hidden. Accordingly, "the predominant

situation for most gay men and lesbians is one in which they pass, that is, their homosexuality is not known to others" (Berger, 1990, p.328). This limited disclosure of sexual orientation allows many heterosexuals to maintain their belief that they do not know any gay men or lesbians.

The literature suggests that negative attitudes and lack of knowledge regarding same-gender sexual orientation affect the provision of services to gay and lesbian clients (Gambrill, Stein & Brown, 1984; Mallon, 1992; Newman, 1989; Potter & Darty, 1981). There is a shortage of programs and services for gay and lesbian client populations, and service providers in mainstream agencies are often hampered by a heterosexist bias and ignorance of issues of same-gender sexual orientation (Gambrill et al., 1984; Murphy, 1991). Graham, Rawlings, Halpern and Hermes (1984) surveyed mental health practitioners about their attitudes and knowledge regarding lesbian and gay clients. The results of their survey raise "serious concerns about the quality, or rather lack of quality of service that apparently many lesbians and gay male clients are receiving" (p.482).

In summary, the literature suggests that many social workers have negative attitudes towards same-gender sexual orientation and lack knowledge about the needs of lesbian and gay clients. Consequently, the social work profession may be failing to provide adequate services to this population.

#### Same-Gender Sexual Orientation and Social Work Education

Studies have shown that education about same-gender sexual orientation reduces homophobia (Larson, Cate & Reed, 1983; Serdahely & Ziemba, 1984). Donadello (1986) argues that schools of social work should train social workers "to work with all lesbian and

gay male clients"(p.295). A number of authors have urged schools of social work to address lesbian and gay issues (Dulaney & Kelly, 1982; Gochros, 1985; Newman, 1989; Woodman, 1992). Newman (1989) argues that "social work ethics demand responsibility toward maltreated populations and part of that responsibility is the inclusion of course content on gay and lesbian issues in the social work curriculum" (p.203).

The CASW Social Work Code of Ethics (1994) states that social workers should be competent in the areas in which they provide service and prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation. It specifies that social workers have a responsibility to "advocate for the elimination of discrimination" (p.24). However, although the need to address same-gender sexual orientation has been identified by numerous authors, Canadian accreditation standards still do not demand the inclusion of content on lesbian and gay issues (CASSW, 1992).

Little research has been done which focuses on same-gender sexual orientation in schools of social work. In a study of faculty members in American schools of social work, Humphreys (1983) found that very little content on lesbian and gay issues was included in the curricula, and that nearly one third of faculty members had negative attitudes towards same-gender sexual orientation. Cullen (1994) surveyed graduate and undergraduate students from five Ontario schools of social work, and found that almost 90% were unprejudiced. The mean score of the sample fell into the "mildly non-homophobic" range. Cullen found that students who had personal contact with lesbians and gays exhibited lower levels of homophobia, and that students who have had less social work course content on lesbian and gay issues showed higher levels of homophobia. Only 10% of Cullen's sample believed their social work education prepared them to work effectively with gay and lesbian people. In a Canadian study



of issues of same-gender sexual orientation in social work education. O'Neill (1994) interviewed gay male faculty and students from eleven Canadian schools of social work, and found that discourse about same-gender sexual orientation is suppressed in schools of social work. He identified two aspects to this suppression -- lack of curriculum content on gay and lesbian issues, and a climate which discourages discussion of gay and lesbian issues and limits disclosures of same-gender sexual orientation.

#### Barriers to Inclusion of Issues of Same-Gender Sexual Orientation in Social Work Curricula

Despite the clearly identified need, social work education has not taken up the challenge of addressing issues of same-gender sexual orientation. Instead, "the social work profession continues to collude in a conspiracy of silence" (Donadello, 1986, p.286). This silence seems to be partly related to the social work profession's traditionally conservative nature and emphasis on traditional patriarchal values.

Social work as a profession is filled with contradictions , both within its ideology and between rhetoric and reality (Mullaly, 1993). Mullaly (1993) identifies a conflict between conventional and critical perspectives. The conventional view, held by the majority, "is influenced by and reflective of popular beliefs and attitudes" and aims at helping individuals to "adjust to existing institutions" (p.31). The critical view holds that our present social institutions are inadequate and oppressive, and aims to eliminate oppression and inequality. Feminist, anti-racist and structural social work theories reveal and critique the patriarchal values inherent in the conservative view of social work.

Aronson (1995) argues that "the invisibility of lesbians in contemporary social work can be understood in general terms as a facet of the heterosexism in dominant society" (p 3).

The centrality of traditional values in the social work profession poses a barrier to the inclusion of lesbian and gay issues in social work education. Donadello (1986) writes that "a connection is made between lesbian and gay male experience and threats to the family, which is considered to be patriarchy's centrepiece" (p.284). This construction, in "its most extreme form ... casts lesbians as threats to normative social practices, carrying with them the dangers of pathology and contagion (Aronson, 1995, p.3). Social work education is informed by dominant social values which marginalize and pathologize lesbian and gay male experience.

Brown (1992) identifies another barrier to the inclusion of issues of same-gender sexual orientation when she discusses social work theory's roots in the psychoanalytic tradition. She argues that "social work's adaptation of psychoanalytic thinking and psychodynamic principles was often simplistic, reinforcing conventional prejudices about masculinity, femininity, correct gender-identification, and heterosexuality" (p.203). Much social work theory based on this tradition pathologizes same-gender sexual orientation. The influence of the psychoanalytic tradition in social work education may affect the way in which lesbian and gay issues are addressed.

Another barrier to the inclusion of same-sexual orientation in social work education that is identified in the literature is conflict between the archival and social change functions of social work education (Humphreys, 1983). Humphreys explains that while the "archival function transmits traditionally accepted knowledge, education for social change is frequently based on non-traditional conceptualization of society's needs" (p.56). Opinion is divided as to whether or not social work students should be educated for social change. Abramovitz (1993) argues that educating social workers for individual, institutional and structural change

is necessary "to prevent social work becoming the handmaiden of the increasingly conservative status quo" (p.6). She sees social work as inherently political, and suggests that "false notions of neutrality and objectivity represent a political stance that favours the existing ideology and arrangements by letting them stand unchallenged" (p 10). According to this view, the social work profession has an important leadership role in the fight for social justice

Bardill (1993) argues against the social change perspective in social work education, and writes that "ideologies, politics, and powerful special interest causes may well have prevented us from being an effective discipline...it is possible that we have already drifted too far into the narrow social change perspective"(p. 15). He expresses concern that education for social change would threaten education for direct practice. Loewenstein (1976) points out that some faculty view integration of new content as a euphemism for substitution, since the amount of content that can be included in curricula is necessarily limited. Decisions regarding curriculum development are influenced by the values of curriculum planners and faculty members (Humphreys, 1983). Therefore, attitudes and beliefs regarding same-gender sexual orientation "influence the kind and amount of course content on homosexuality" (Humphreys, 1983, p.56).

#### Same-Gender Sexual Orientation and Post-Secondary Education

Students are unlikely to receive education regarding same-gender sexual orientation prior to entering schools of social work (Newman, 1989). The information that they are exposed to is likely to be biased and to focus more on gay male sexual orientation than on lesbian sexual orientation (Newman, 1989; Weitz, 1982). In a survey of images of gay men and lesbians in sexuality and health textbooks, Whatley (1992) found that the photographs

generally portrayed "an inaccurate portrait of lesbians and gay men as white, young, and physically abled", and found more than twice as many pictures of gay men as of lesbians (p.197).

### Climate in Post-Secondary Institutions

Several studies indicate that the social and academic climate in post-secondary institutions is hostile to lesbians and gay men. In a study done at one American university, Yeskel (1985) found that 21% of lesbian and gay students, compared with 5% of the total student body, reported being physically attacked. Comstock (1991) found that lesbians and gay men were more likely to be victims of violence in school settings (25%) than victims of violence in general (9%). Berrill (1990) summarized the findings of several other studies, writing that "[In] studies of anti-gay violence and harassment at Yale (Herek, 1986), Rutgers (Cavin, 1987), and Penn State (D'Augelli, 1989), approximately 5% of respondents had been punched, hit, kicked or beaten at some point in their college careers; 16% had been threatened with physical violence, and 55% to 76% had been verbally harassed" (p.274).

Norris (1992) found that despite liberal attitudes and tolerance expressed by respondents at an American liberal arts college, lesbians, gays and bisexuals experienced widespread discrimination, victimization and isolation. He suggested that this paradox resulted from two competing sets of values -- a belief in equal rights and a heterosexual orthodoxy.

In summary, the literature suggests that lesbians and gay men are systematically excluded from university curricula, "subjected to institutional indifference and prejudice", and frequently targeted as victims of harassment and violence (D'Augelli, 1991, p.214; Herek,

1989). D'Augelli (1991) argues that this is because the "heterosexist presumption -- that heterosexuality is normative as well as superior to other forms of socio-emotional relating -- is deeply entrenched in the pedagogical and social structure of higher education" (p.214)

### Lesbian and Gay Faculty

Donadello (1986) writes that lesbian and gay social workers who remain in the closet "are not available as role models, advocates, or teachers with special knowledge and information ... if the climate of social work fostered and encouraged their visibility, then they could openly advocate for lesbian and gay clients" (p.286). O'Neill's (1994) investigation of social work education from the standpoint of gay men found that the climate in Canadian schools of social work education discourages and limits disclosures of same-gender sexual orientation by faculty.

While there is little literature on the experiences and perspectives of lesbian and gay faculty in schools of social work, the findings in the literature on lesbians and gay men teaching in post-secondary education may be relevant. A number of lesbians and gay men have written about their experiences teaching in post-secondary institutions (Adams & Emery 1994; Beck, 1994; Bennett, 1982; Klages, 1994; Manahan, 1982; McNaron, 1982; Mittler & Blumenthal, 1994; Segrest, 1982; Taylor, 1994; Wine, 1990). One theme that emerges overwhelmingly is the feeling of erasure and invisibility of lesbian experience that results from the intense heterosexism that pervades our educational institutions. Wine (1990) writes that lesbian "experience is denied and erased by the assumptions that underlie mainstream knowledge" (p.157).

In a study of lesbian experience in Canadian universities, Wine (1990) found that

academic institutions were silent on lesbian and gay issues, and that this was related to "the omnipresence of heterosexist assumptions that everyone is or should be heterosexual" (p.154). Her respondents reported infrequent experiences of overt homophobia, with ignorance and heterosexism being prevalent. Wine reported that those lesbian faculty who were tenured were certain they would not have got tenure if their academic work at the time had reflected a lesbian vision. Most respondents felt that the "liberal" academic environment would be tolerant of their "private" lives provided they not "allow their lesbian experience to inform their teaching and productive work in obvious ways" (p. 163).

The literature suggests that many lesbian faculty are forced to dichotomise their lives, separating their lesbian selves from their academic selves, and leading what Segrest (1982) refers to as a "double-life". Many lesbian faculty expressed fear that their openly identifying as lesbian could jeopardize their jobs and their chances of career advancement (Manahan, 1982; Segrest, 1982; Wine, 1990). Bennett (1982) describes hiding her lesbian identity as "the experience of the closet, of a void created by fear on one side and silence on the other" (p.4). She writes that because of the silence in academic institutions, "most of us do not dare to find out whether our fears are unfounded or not ... For most gay academics, even the tenured, this is, apparently, too great a risk to take" (p.5).

Despite this hostile climate, many lesbian and gay faculty members are choosing to come out to their colleagues and their students (Adams & Emery, 1994; Jenkins, 1994; Mittler & Blumenthal, 1994; Opffer, 1994). Two recent studies focus on the process of coming out to students by lesbian and gay male faculty (Opffer, 1994; Ringer, 1994). Opffer interviewed out lesbian faculty and found their reasons for coming out included concerns

about presenting accurate information about lesbians and gay men, providing personal and academic support for lesbian and gay students, teaching effectiveness and authenticity. Faculty members also spoke of their wish to change people's attitudes about same-gender sexual orientation by providing information and serving as positive role models. Ringer (1994) found that while the majority of his respondents had discussed issues of same-gender sexual orientation in their classes, few had disclosed their own sexual orientation. Concerns about job security and credibility influenced their decisions about coming out.

Jenkins (1994) points out that Opffer's respondents are full time and part time lesbian faculty, mostly untenured, whereas Ringer's respondents are predominantly tenured men. She speculates about the impact of age, gender and job security, in addition to the political climate, as influences on faculty disclosure of same-gender sexual orientation.

#### Recommendations Regarding Social Work Curriculum and Same-Gender Sexual Orientation

Lee (1992) argues that content on gay and lesbian issues should be integrated into a curriculum which has a philosophical and epistemological base that values difference. Integration of issues of same-gender sexual orientation should address both cognitive learning by providing accurate information about lesbians and gay men, and affective learning, by helping students to integrate personal and professional values and increase their acceptance and comfort level with gay clients (Forrister, 1992). Content should include information on different client populations and stages of development, such as gay identity formation (Lee, 1992), the coming out process (Newman, 1989), lesbian and gay youth (Bernard, 1992; Lenna, 1992), couples (Terry, 1992) and parenting (Newman, 1989) and non-traditional families (Gunter, 1992). Hidalgo (1992) discusses how gay and lesbian content can be

integrated into courses on program planning, administration and community practice.

Newman (1992) suggests that students be helped to gain an understanding of societal and institutional stresses and the impact of oppression on the gay population. He recommends that students also be helped to gain an understanding of how policy and legislation discriminates against lesbians and gay men, and encourages an emphasis on advocacy. Brooks (1992) suggests that research courses focus students' attention on the issue of heterosexist bias and how heterosexist ideology in research affects the production of knowledge. Woodman (1992) discusses the implementation of non-traditional field placements in services for lesbian and gay communities

Suggested methods for integrating lesbian and gay content into the curriculum include reading and discussion of the literature (Lee, 1992), reading and discussion of material written from lesbian and gay perspectives (Newman, 1989), presentation of accurate information and research which contradicts stereotypes (Gochros, 1985; Newman, 1989), viewing of films, and use of case material (Gochros, 1985; Lee, 1992). Forrister (1992) emphasises the importance of using experiential exercises to facilitate affective learning, and suggests use of discussion and role-playing as methods. Newman (1989) argues that students should explore their feelings and beliefs about their own sexual orientation and their attitudes towards lesbians and gay men. Lee (1992) emphasises the importance of students examining their values and their homophobia. Gochros (1985) stresses direct contact with lesbians and gay men, and proposes the use of guest speakers or panel discussions, with opportunities for students to ask questions.

Newman (1989) notes the importance of self-awareness among educators regarding



their own comfort level, and suggests faculty seminars, internal workshops and curriculum development meetings as ways of facilitating the inclusion of same-gender sexual orientation in the social work curriculum.

### Theory of Education and Critical Pedagogy

Critical pedagogy is an attempt to analyze and critique the operation of power through the processes of education (Rossiter, 1993, p.76). The influence of feminism has enriched critical pedagogy and led to "the recognition of the need to study the intersections of class, gender and ... race" (Rossiter, 1993, p.78). Rossiter (1993) argues that critical pedagogy offers insights which are crucial to social work, which she sees as "poised in a tension between social control and liberating potential" (p.78). For social work education to achieve its goals of inclusiveness it "must allow the study of the relations of domination to permeate the curriculum" (Rossiter, 1993, p.76). Without an analysis of the ways in which "specific forms and meanings penetrate, develop and are transmitted within the context of the classroom experience" the process of education can serve to reinforce socially dominant categories and values by functioning as "agents of legitimation" (Giroux, 1981, p. 63-64).

Through the legitimation of powerful institutions, such as the body of "knowledge" that constitutes social work theory, dominant discourses become powerful while alternate discourses are marginalized. Dominant discourses define what is "normal":

There are many groups and there are many truths. But some groups' truths are given more credence than others because they have the power to impose their constructions on those with less power. Most often, the so-called truth of the dominant group becomes the TRUTH, determining what is normative and what is right... (Middleman

& Wood, 1993, p.132).

The educational system is "a fundamental part of the power structure, ideologically and structurally committed to the socio-economic forces" that sustain it (Giroux, 1981, p.73). Through the processes of education, knowledge is produced, processed and disseminated as if it were value-neutral and objective truth. The means by which knowledge is shaped by dominant structures of meaning is obscured. Giroux (1981) writes that,

Educational practice embodies specific values, purposes and meanings. But all too often the various dimensions of the schooling process are viewed by teachers as apolitical and ahistorical in nature ... effectively remov[ing] the dynamics of schooling from the realm of ethical and political debate (p.80).

The ways in which some knowledges become truths are hidden from view. The "whole interpretive process itself (that someone decides what is a legitimate interpretation) is rendered invisible" (Gunew, 1990, p.15).

Giroux (1981) suggests that the key to the socio-political nature of schooling is the hidden curriculum -- "the unstated but effective distribution of norms, values and attitudes to students in classrooms"(p.64). He argues that in order to reveal and make sense of the hidden curriculum, "schools have to be analyzed as agents of legitimation, organized to produce and reproduce the dominant categories' values and social relationships necessary for the maintenance of the larger society" (p.72). This requires a view of education as "inextricably linked to a web of larger socio-economic and political arrangements" (Giroux & Penna, 1988, p.42). It means challenging myths of value-neutral and objective knowledge and considering education in context. In the analysis of the relationship between schools and the dominant

society in structural, political and normative terms we can uncover and encounter the hidden curriculum.

The development of a critical perspective is crucial to perceiving and understanding issues of same-gender sexual orientation in social work education. Rossiter (1993) writes that a unifying theme in the different versions of critical pedagogy is "its express opposition to the limiting of potential that occurs in relations of domination and oppression, primarily, although not exclusively, through race, ethnicity, class, gender, disability, age, and sexual orientation" (p.77). Adding content on lesbian and gay issues without the development of a critical perspective will not confront the problem of heterosexual dominance and compulsory heterosexuality. Writing about the inclusion of content on women in social work education, Davis (1993) suggests that while adding content on women may enrich the curriculum, it will not transform it. Tice (1993) agrees that simply adding content on women is a faulty approach as it "leaves untouched the paradigmatic norms which have the effect of either marginalizing and excluding women or treating them as a monolithic category" (p.134-135). I believe that the same dangers of universalization and marginalization exist if lesbian and gay issues are incorporated into a curriculum which lacks a critical perspective. Scott (1989) writes:

If we are to challenge heterosexism in education, it is important to understand how schools operate, both overtly and in the hidden curriculum. We need to look at ... the whole ethos of the school and its effect on the day to day reality of lesbian and gay students ... lesbian and gay teachers and support staff, and indeed anyone who chooses to live outside the heterosexual family unit... (p.249-250).

### Research Needs

The lack of research regarding same-gender sexual orientation and social work education is striking. Cullen (1994) suggests that his findings that social work students in Ontario exhibit low levels of homophobia, while encouraging, should be regarded with caution. In the light of Norris' (1992) finding that liberal attitudes towards lesbians and gays coexisted with discrimination and harassment of gay and lesbian students and faculty it is clear that research on the attitude of the majority cannot speak to the experience of a minority. Therefore, there is a particular need for research which focuses on the experiences of lesbians and gay men involved with social work education.

O'Neill (1994) identifies a need for research concerning.

1. The climate in schools of social work with respect to issues of same-gender sexual orientation;
2. Factors which create and maintain this climate;
3. Appropriate curriculum content regarding same-gender sexual orientation;
4. Effective methods of presenting such content;
5. Strategies and resources to bring about change in the climate of schools of social work with respect to same-gender sexual orientation (p.40).

O'Neill's (1994) study is an institutional ethnography of social work education conducted from the standpoint of gay men. He writes that, while his findings may have implications for how issues related to lesbian sexual orientation are addressed within schools of social work, lesbians and gay men have different standpoints. Therefore, he suggests, there is a need for a separate study of social work education from the standpoint of lesbians. This

study addresses itself to this gap in the literature by investigating social work education from the standpoint of lesbian students and faculty.

On a broader level, O'Brien (1994) states that there is a need for the proliferation of studies that investigate forms of heterosexual dominance in different sites, arguing that this will make possible "a broader theoretical analysis of the social organization of heterosexual dominance" (p.54-55). This study represents a contribution to that analysis.

## CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

My goal in undertaking this study was to research social work education in a way that reflects lesbian experience and can be used to make changes that will benefit lesbians -- students, faculty and clients. Donadello (1986) writes that research has the potential to "contribute significantly to the improvement in the status of lesbians ... but only when that research is *for* them, not *on* them" (p.296). My research design is based on a feminist perspective and draws on the ideas of research "methods from the margins" (Kirby & McKenna, 1989) and institutional ethnography (Smith, 1987).

### Feminist Perspectives on Research

Cummerton (1986) distinguishes between "non-sexist" research and feminist research, arguing that non-sexist research avoids obvious biases, while duplicating traditional, patriarchal models of research, whereas feminist research sees women's experience as constituting an entirely different ontology. There is no single feminist methodology, but rather a feminist perspective on research. Acker, Barry and Esseveld (1991) identified three principles of feminist research -- it should contribute to the development of a feminist critical perspective that challenges the dominant ideology; it should use non-oppressive methodology; and it should contribute to women's liberation by providing knowledge that can be used by women themselves.

A central theme in the development of a feminist critical perspective has been an analysis of objectivity, subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Feminist criticism has suggested that the "idealization of objectivity has excluded from science significant personal subjectively

based knowledge, and has left that knowledge outside of 'science'" (Jayaratne & Stewart, 1991, p. 98). The feminist perspective on research challenges the positivist epistemology underlying traditional social science, arguing that no "knowledge" or research is neutral or value free. Research methods that focus on objectivity as an ideal are "designed to separate the knower from the object of study" (Acker et al., 1991, p.140). However, this separation is an illusion, as "research is embedded in a definite social relationship in which there is a power differential in favour of the knower who assumes the power to define in the process of research" (Acker et al., 1991, p.140). A feminist perspective on research challenges this separation of the knower and the known, replacing the dichotomy of objectivity and subjectivity with intersubjectivity, "a dialectical relationship between the researcher and participants" (Cummerton, 1986, p.86; Westkott, 1979).

In this study, I attempted to adopt a methodology that encouraged this intersubjectivity. Cummerton (1986) writes that intersubjectivity permits the researcher to "compare her work with her own experiences ... This work can then be shared with the research participants, who may add their views to the research, which, in turn, might change it" (p.86). This approach suggests a more egalitarian relationship between the researcher and the participants. Within this framework, the research process becomes "a dialogue between the researcher and the researched ... both are assumed to be individuals who reflect upon their experience and can communicate those reflections ... neither the subjectivity of the researcher nor the subjectivity of the researched can be eliminated in the process" (Acker et al., 1991, p.140). The researcher-subject dichotomy is replaced by a notion of shared power which allows participants to become collaborators in the research process.

In this study, participants became collaborators in a number of ways -- sharing references; sending me articles; helping in the analysis and interpretation of data; phoning me to share memories jogged by the interviews and thoughts on a number of issues; forming committees to address some of the recommendations for change; making suggestions and becoming involved in disseminating the results of the research; and requesting copies of findings to use for purposes of promoting change in social work education and practice.

Cummerton (1986) argues that the "use of a feminist perspective moves the researcher into the role of change agent ... Feminist research always has a political focus. It is designed with social change in mind -- to further the interests of the participants and the population to which they belong. In no way need we be apologetic for this political purpose" (p.95). Traditional research has been used to oppress lesbians, by producing a body of "knowledge" which denies or pathologizes our existence. Feminist research can be used to challenge oppression. Mies (1983) writes that research, "which so far has been largely the instrument of dominance and legitimation of power elites, must be brought to serve the interests of dominated, exploited and oppressed groups" (p.123).

### Research from the Margins

Marginalized groups have often been studied by those with power, and the "knowledge" produced has been used to maintain oppressive relations. The production of knowledge reflects the distribution of power in our society; it constructs and perpetuates existing power relations (Kirby & McKenna, 1989). Oppressed groups have been "structurally blocked from the process of selecting, naming, disseminating and evaluating knowledge" (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p.28). Research from the margins begins with the experience and



research needs of those who have been silenced, thereby transforming the process of knowledge production and challenging the ideological power base (Kirby & McKenna, 1989)

Kirby and McKenna (1989) identify two interrelated processes in researching from the margins which connect the personal and the political -- intersubjectivity and critical reflection, an "examination of people's social realities" (p.28). People on the margins have a different experience of events and institutions than those whose lives construct and define the status quo. Often they find the status quo "outrageous, inequitable, and unsatisfying"(Kirby & McKenna, p.35), but their concerns are seen as an individual weakness, "a personal problem or failing rather than as a public issue" (p.28). When research from the margins focuses on oppressive structures, it can produce an understanding of how the ruling relations organize their exclusion and silence their experience, and it can be used by them to challenge the status quo. Research from the margins "is not research on people from the margins, but research by, for, and with them" (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p.28).

In a discussion of the sociological significance of black feminist thought, Collins (1991) argues that "outsiders" in academia may bring a critical perspective that is essential to the creative development of academic disciplines. The standpoint of marginal intellectuals contains "perspectives and insights ... available to that category of outsiders who have been systematically frustrated by the social system" (Merton, 1972). It promises to enrich contemporary sociological discourse by revealing "aspects of reality obscured by more orthodox approaches" (Collins, 1991, p.36).

### Institutional Ethnography

Institutional ethnography is a research methodology developed by Dorothy Smith

(1987) based on her conception of feminist standpoint theory. It is consistent with the feminist perspectives discussed and with the ideas of methods of research from the margins. O'Brien (1994) states that institutional ethnography is appropriate for "investigating how heterosexual dominance is accomplished in particular locations" (p.37). Khayatt (1992) adopted this methodology in her study from the standpoint of lesbian teachers, seeing institutional ethnography as "a methodology that could make visible the ways by which our lives have been and are denied" (p.86). I will briefly explain some of the central concepts in Smith's work, and outline the methodology she proposes.

Smith (1987) distinguishes the idea of a "standpoint" from the idea of "perspective" (p 107). To do research from the standpoint of a marginalized or oppressed group does not imply a common world view or experience, but acknowledges a common exclusion. Smith (1987) focuses on the standpoint of women, but recognizes that the "ruling apparatus ... also excludes the many voices of women and men of colour, of native peoples, and of homosexual women and men" (p.107). By researching from the standpoint of oppressed groups, different aspects of the ruling apparatus become visible.

Smith (1987) uses the terms "ruling apparatus" and "relations of ruling" as concepts "that grasp power, organization, direction, and regulation as more pervasively structured than can be expressed in traditional concepts provided by the discourses of power" (p.3). They identify the "complex of organized practices, including government, law, business and financial management, professional organization and educational institutions as well as the discourses in texts that interpenetrate the multiple sites of power" (p.3).

The dominant ideology that informs the relations of ruling consists of "the ideas,

images, and symbols in which our experience is given social form", and is "produced by specialists and by people who are part of the apparatus by which the ruling class maintains its control over the society" (Smith, 1987, p.54). Women are excluded from the production of ideology, "located outside sociological discourses... their reality is either discredited or denied" (Khayatt, 1992, p.87). Sociological discourse presents itself as objective and neutral, while "its methods, its conceptual basis, its whole framework articulates the concerns of men and for men; it advances and supports patriarchy" (Khayatt, 1992, p. 87).

Smith (1987) asserts that we are "ruled by forms of organizations vested in and mediated by texts and documents and constituted externally to suit particular individuals and their personal and familial relationships" (p.4). Through documents and texts, discourse is shaped in accordance with the dominant ideology, excluding marginalized and oppressed groups, thereby resulting in a "suppression of diversity" which "forces individuals to conform to the abstract definitions of reality contained in institutional texts" (O'Neill, 1994, p.22).

Women and individuals from other oppressed groups experience a disparity between their experiences, and what is represented as "knowledge". The awareness of this disparity, contradiction, or "point of rupture" is what Smith (1987) refers to as "the line of fault". She writes, "In the disclosures and discoveries of the women's movement, women's experience breaks away along this line of fault. It makes thus observable an apparatus of social controls in part ideological, in the sense of being images and symbols, and in part an organization of specialized practices" (p.54).

Smith (1987) proposes institutional ethnography as a methodology which entails doing research from the standpoint of marginalized groups in order to make visible the subtexts and

assumptions of sociological discourse, and "reveal the social processes and practices that organize people's everyday experience" (O'Brien, 1994, p.39). The focus of enquiry is "the discrepancy between allegedly neutral and non-discriminatory institutional practices and the experiences of members of oppressed groups" (O'Neill, 1994, p.23). Within the framework of institutional ethnography, the researcher gathers data from members of an oppressed group about their experiences in relation to the institution being studied. From this data emerge "problematics" -- contradictions between the officially "neutral" practices of the institution and the experiences of the participants. These problematics are then investigated to explicate the ways in which the institution being studied impacts or organizes those experiences. According to Smith (1987), institutional ethnography is "a commitment to an investigation and explication of how 'it' actually is, of how 'it' actually works, of actual practices and relations" (p.160).

### Overview of Research Design

This is a qualitative study based on fourteen audiotaped interviews with lesbian students, graduates and faculty from five Ontario schools of social work. I asked participants about their experiences with social work education and their recommendations for change. After transcribing and analyzing the data from these interviews, I conducted two group discussions, each with five of the original participants. These group discussions gave participants an opportunity to respond to the findings and to discuss their implications.

### Participant Recruitment

I used a "snowball approach" to contact potential participants, beginning with my personal contacts in both university and lesbian communities. These initial contacts spoke

with others and either gave my name and phone number to them or obtained permission to give their names and phone numbers to me. This "snowball technique" is an effective way of reaching people from "hidden" communities (Kirby & McKenna, 1989)

I did not attempt to gather a "random sample" of lesbians. In accordance with the framework of institutional ethnography, I was interested in studying how social work education worked from the standpoint of lesbians, how its "institutional practices penetrate and organize" the experience of lesbian students and faculty, not in studying lesbians or in generalizing to a larger population (Smith, 1987, p.187). I did attempt to contact as diverse a group as possible as I believed that this would lead to a more complete understanding of social work education.

#### Description of Research Participants

I interviewed a total of fourteen participants, all of whom identified as lesbian. Five of the fourteen were currently full time or part time students, four in Master's level programs and one in a doctoral program. Nine of the fourteen had completed their social work education; one with a B.S.W., two with a B.S.W. and an M.S.W., four with an M.S.W., and two with a Ph.D. Three were full time or part time faculty members, two with a Ph.D. and one with an M.S.W. All had recent involvement in social work education, having been either students or faculty members in the last five years. Between them, the fourteen participants had experience of five Ontario schools of social work.

#### Gathering Interview Data

I chose to gather data through the use of individual open-ended interviews. Reinharz (1992) writes that open-ended interviewing is appealing to many feminist researchers because

it produces non-standard data which allows researchers to make full use of difference, and allows access to people's ideas, thoughts and memories in their own words, rather than those of the researcher. Lesbians have often been the "object" of research and been treated as passive sources of data. In accordance with feminist research and the idea of research from the margins, I wanted to ensure that these interviews were conducted in a way that recognized the participants as "equally knowing subjects" (Kirby & McKenna, 1989, p.28).

The interview essentially took the form of guided conversations. The focus of the conversation was specified but I avoided a question-answer format as I felt this would put artificial limits and constraints on the interview process. I hoped that by avoiding a directive style, I could minimize the extent to which my questions would impose my preconceived ideas, thereby allowing what the participants felt to be important to emerge spontaneously (Acker et al., 1991). I had certain topics I wanted to address, but not specific questions. Dorothy Smith (1987) writes that open-ended interviewing should yield "stretches of talk that 'express' the social organization and the relations of the setting" (p.189). I decided I would encourage participants to take the lead in the interviews, but would use an interview guide for prompts when needed. I drafted this interview guide (see appendix C) based on the guide developed by Brian O'Neill (1994) in an institutional ethnography of social work education from the standpoint of gay men. Once I began interviewing, questions arose which I incorporated into the guide for use in later interviews.

Each interview was conducted at a time and place that was convenient to the participant. Most participants chose to be interviewed in their own homes or offices, but some chose to be interviewed either at my home or in another location, due to concerns about

privacy or confidentiality, or simply for convenience. The interviews ranged from approximately one to two hours in duration.

By the time I met with a participant, we had spoken on the telephone at least once and often several times, so the participants already had some understanding of the purpose of my study. However, I began by explaining this again, emphasizing that I was interested in focusing on the institution of social work education from the standpoint of lesbians. I answered any questions about myself and my research that the participants had, and explained the steps that I would take to ensure confidentiality. Participants read and signed a consent form which detailed the provisions made for confidentiality (see appendix A). When the interviews were transcribed, all identifying information was removed. Participants were identified by codes rather than by name, and no one other than myself and my hired transcriber, who signed a statement of confidentiality, had access to the transcripts. Tapes were erased following transcription. Participants' words are quoted in my work; however, no identifying material is in the quotes and participants do not exist as continuous persons in the text, thus further ensuring anonymity.

The fact that I am a lesbian and a social work student, and therefore shared some common ground with the participants, was very helpful in establishing rapport. In general, participants spoke very freely and openly, and I found that the conversation flowed naturally. I shared my own experiences and thoughts throughout the interviews, which seemed to help in maintaining the natural flow of the conversation and helped move discussion to a deeper level. Oakley (1981) suggests that the goal of finding out about people and their experiences is best accomplished "when the relationship of interviewer and interviewee is non-hierarchical

and when the interviewer is prepared to invest his or her own personal identity in the relationship" (p.41). I was surprised by the participants' willingness to share their memories and feelings. I found that for most interviews it was not necessary to use the interview guide, although I would look at it at the end of the interview to ensure that we had not missed any areas of importance.

After the interview, I asked participants how they had felt about the interview and if there was anything that I could have done differently that would have made it more comfortable for them. In general the feedback was positive: "it sort of flowed well without being interrupted with questions"; "it was good, I was concerned that it would be a list of questions but it wasn't"; "I felt very comfortable". One woman, who had been less comfortable taking the lead in the conversation, was concerned about giving the "right" answers and needed more reassurance. Acker et al.(1991) had a similar experience and understood this in terms of people's expectations about interviews: "people have ideas about what it is like to be interviewed and they want to be asked questions so they can give the right responses" (p.140). In retrospect, it might have helped if I had spent more time at the beginning of the interview to discuss what the interview would be like and to reinforce that I was interested only in hearing about the participants' experiences and thoughts on social work education. I wanted to hear about whatever the participants felt was important. In addition to comments about how comfortable the interview felt, many participants added that they had found it very helpful to discuss and clarify their thoughts, and that they had actively enjoyed the interview.

After the interview, I also discussed with each participant the possibility of either a



second interview or a group discussion. I was not certain at this point how I would proceed, but told participants that I would contact them after coding the data to discuss meeting individually or in a group to allow them to give feedback on the preliminary findings. Participants were also encouraged to contact me if they had any questions or concerns or wanted to add to what they had said. I also told participants that I would be happy to send them a copy of the findings and recommendations when the study was complete. In general, participants were very interested in the research and all expressed interest in learning about the findings.

### Interviewing Issues

The fact that the research participants and myself were members of the same marginalized community was helpful in conducting the interviews. We shared some common experiences, and were able to use language that we might not use in speaking with heterosexuals. I believe that it would have been more difficult for the participants to discuss their experiences and their thoughts with a heterosexual interviewer, and a few indicated that they would not have agreed to meet with me if I had not been a lesbian. Kirby and McKenna (1989) argue that "researching from the margins is best accomplished by those who live on the margins ... convincing testimony comes best from those who live it" (p.105).

Paradoxically, I found that sharing a common identity as lesbian with the participants also produced dilemmas for me as an interviewer. When participants talked about difficult experiences and expressed their anger and anxiety, my own emotional reactions were very strong as their words triggered memories and feelings in me. I found my own anger regarding my experiences in social work education increasing as I realized that others shared it.

I also found that sharing an "identity stake" with participants made me feel uncomfortable if a participant expressed a view that differed radically from my own. Krieger (1985) analyzes her experiences interviewing other members of a lesbian community, and theorizes that the "lesbian community might be functioning as an 'identity community' for its members, one in which the most intimate sense of self was frequently on the line, a community in which the power to threaten by lack of confirmation was as strong as the power to confirm" (p.316).

### Data Analysis

I began the task of organizing the data by listening to each audiotape, and then reading each interview several times, making notes of ideas that occurred to me as I did so. As I became familiar with the data, I began to notice themes that recurred frequently. Dorothy Smith (1987) points out that a common thematic structure may be provided by the interview procedure itself, and that recurrent themes and topics are reflective of the individual's participation in the generalized organization of the relations of ruling in the institution being studied. She rejects coding as a method of coming to an understanding of the data, as she sees the process of coding and interpretation as suppressing the standpoint of the participants -- "The standpoint becomes that of the discourse reflecting upon properties of the study population" (p. 182). While I did not see the women I had interviewed as a "sample", and was not interested in studying their characteristics or generalizing these to a larger population, I did feel that I needed some means of organising and understanding the data. I based my method of analysis on the methods used by Khayatt (1992), in the development of an institutional ethnography from the standpoint of lesbian teachers, and O'Neill (1994) in the

development of an institutional ethnography of social work education from the standpoint of gay men.

After reading through the transcripts several times to become familiar with the data, I read them through again, making notes in the margins indicating the theme or topic of each sentence, paragraph or combination of paragraphs. In this way, I avoided using concepts from social work theory which might impose an interpretation of the data from an institutional standpoint. I focused on themes that emerged from the data itself. Hornstein (1991) writes that one should strive "to allow categories to emerge from the data themselves, rather than from a preconceived theoretical or empirical framework" (p. 7).

I made a list of these themes, and then labelled large envelopes accordingly. Next, I cut up each interview by theme, and placed the pieces of paper in the envelopes. I then read through the contents of each envelope, refining, redividing and collapsing categories as seemed appropriate. A number of questions emerged from the data, mostly clustering around two central questions -- how are issues of same-gender sexual orientation marginalized in social work education? and how are lesbian students and faculty silenced in schools of social work?

### Reflecting Group Discussions

After my preliminary organization and analysis of the data, I facilitated two group discussions. I wanted to ensure that I had correctly understood the participants' experiences, and allow them an opportunity to give feedback on the preliminary findings. I also hoped that they would assist me in further interpretation and understanding of the material. According to Kirby and McKenna (1989), in "non-hierarchical, non-authoritarian, non-manipulative

research, participants can easily be collaborators" (p. 104). The discussion groups, therefore, had a dual purpose: first, to support and clarify the preliminary findings, and secondly, to bring the participants into the research process as collaborators.

I contacted all of the research participants and asked if they would be interested in taking part in a group discussion with several other participants and myself. I explained that I would give the group some feedback on the preliminary findings, and that they would have an opportunity to comment on these and to discuss questions arising from them. All participants expressed interest in attending, although some had schedules that did not allow them to take part. I told the participants who were unable to join the group discussions that I would be willing to meet individually with them to discuss the preliminary findings before completing the research, as I felt it was important that all participants had an opportunity to be involved in the process of making sense of the data if they so chose.

The discussion groups took place in rooms at two different universities. All participants signed a consent form explaining the purpose of the group discussion and detailing procedures regarding confidentiality, including an agreement that they would keep confidential the identity of the other participants (see appendix B). In reality, because of common membership in a small community (lesbians in social work education), and the snowball approach used to recruit participants, most participants already knew each other, at least slightly, which helped in generating a relaxed and comfortable atmosphere. I began by summarizing the themes that had emerged from the data, and shared some of the questions that had arisen for me during the process of data analysis. Discussion began from this point, and continued for about ninety minutes, ranging from casual and amusing to serious and

emotional.

The discussions were audiotaped and transcribed, and as with the individual interviews, identifying information was removed. I analyzed this data using the same procedure as with the data from the individual interviews.

### Ethical Considerations

I do not believe that my research posed any risks to participants. As the participants were colleagues rather than clients, there was no power imbalance present. The primary ethical issue was that of informed consent and confidentiality, and I believe I have taken the appropriate steps to address these issues. All informants read and signed consent forms for both individual interviews and group discussions (see appendix A and B). All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by my hired transcriber, who signed a statement of confidentiality. All names, places and other identifying material were removed and, after transcription, the audiotapes were destroyed.

I recognized that some people might not be comfortable being interviewed on this subject, but in general the participants approached me and expressed interest in being interviewed. They could withdraw at any time if they chose to do so and the voluntary nature of their involvement was clear. While I thought it possible that discussing their experiences might evoke strong emotions for some participants, I also believed that the opportunity to tell their stories and discuss their thoughts was likely to be beneficial.

The other ethical issue involved the use of the data and the purpose of the research. I emphasized to participants that I hoped to be able to make recommendations for change in social work education regarding issues of same-sex sexual orientation. They shared their

experiences and ideas in order to enable me to do this. For me to use their words for another purpose would clearly be unethical. I therefore feel that I have a responsibility to them to disseminate the findings and recommendations of this study.

## CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

In this chapter, I will present the findings that resulted from analysis of the data obtained from the individual interviews and the reflecting group discussions. I will begin with the experiences of lesbian students and faculty in relation to the climate and curricula of schools of social work. I will then present the findings related to the ways in which lesbian students and faculty responded to these experiences, their perceptions regarding social work education, and their recommendations for change. Data from both the individual interviews and the reflecting group discussions are incorporated into the body of the findings. I will also discuss some of the actions that are being taken as a result of this study.

### CLIMATE AND CURRICULA

#### Institutional Silence and Social Relations

Lesbian students and faculty spoke frequently of the overwhelming silence on issues of same-gender sexual orientation. Many could remember no incidents of lesbian and gay topics being discussed. A faculty member reported:

... in general it feels like silence has reigned for a long time ...

An M.S.W. student had a similar experience:

... it was just total silence on the matter -- I cannot say if there was prejudice because there was silence.

Another M.S.W. student explained that:

... it is not an issue that anyone ever raises or talks about or discusses, it is pretty

much ignored.

This institutional silence was connected to intense and pervasive heterosexism and the unspoken assumption that heterosexuality is universal. A doctoral student explained:

... there is an assumption that everyone is heterosexual. You just feel it; it is not even something that people have to say. You just know it and you feel it.

She reported that the denial of lesbian experience is embedded in a lack of institutional recognition of diversity.

... the presumption was that everybody was white, middle class and that we all believed in the same things, that everybody was straight.

The silence surrounding lesbian sexual orientation also seemed to be connected to silences about sexuality in general. Participants reported that sexuality was rarely discussed, and was either absent or relegated to one elective course. A doctoral student described social work as a whole as "sex-phobic":

... sexuality isn't even talked about. Nobody is a sexual person in social work. In the social work profession, nobody is sexual. Any kind of display of sexuality, in any way, would probably horrify people.

The silence surrounding issues of same-gender sexual orientation made it difficult for lesbian students and faculty to know how safe they really were. A faculty member explained:

... it wasn't talked about, it wasn't public, there wasn't a public agenda ... so you didn't know whether it was OK.

The institutional silence created a climate that was experienced as oppressive and unsafe. A recent M.S.W. graduate reported:



... I know that it isn't safe to be out in this program ... I have respect for the women who aren't out . . . because I know that it isn't safe to be out.

A doctoral student explained:

... I don't think that people there recognize how terrible it is for people . . . how oppressive it is for people ... having your whole life irrelevant to the program you are in.

A faculty member reflected on her teaching experience at another university.

... it seems like a really simple thing, but when I think about being there, I didn't feel I could really be myself. It would have been a lot easier if I could have been myself

The silence was so pervasive that some felt they only became aware of the full impact after they left. One faculty member said:

... [When I started a new job] I got all this validation, only then did I realize how I had been sort of starved, like how marginalized and not recognized I had been there.

Some students were aware of gay faculty who participated in the institutional silencing of discourse regarding same-gender sexual orientation. A doctoral student reported:

... one of the professors who taught us, I believe is gay. He is in the closet ... I believe he is gay, gay, gay, but there would never be any acknowledgement. So there were all these kinds of tensions hanging around.

Despite the perceived lack of safety, many students and faculty members chose to be out, either selectively to people they knew and trusted or in certain classes or more generally. Coming out, however, did not necessarily mean an end to the silence; as one faculty member explained:

... people knew I was a lesbian but weren't very comfortable with it ... they would never ask me anything about my life. It was sort of like I was off base or out of bounds, a very isolated place to be. Even though people knew, lots of people didn't acknowledge it.

A faculty member confirmed this in a reflecting group discussion and connected it to denial of any possibilities other than heterosexuality. She explained:

... you're always up against the constant assumption that everybody is straight. Even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary people will still make the assumption that you are straight.

One faculty member who had been out as a lesbian in a previous teaching position recalled:

... when I was leaving, they were having a goodbye dinner for me and I was really sort of questioning whether I should bring my partner, even though it was for partners ...

That sort of said a lot to me.

Some students identified this kind of isolation as a risk of coming out in an unsupportive classroom climate. A doctoral student explained this graphically:

... I think probably it would be kind of like ... this isolation, so the person just becomes isolated and then just kind of withers away. I would suspect that that would be kind of like putting someone in one of those cells where there is no light.

Heterosexual students also participated in maintaining the silence and lack of recognition of same-gender sexual orientation. An M.S.W. student who is out to the other students in her program explained:

... socially, there are a couple of people that ask me about my life, ask me if I am

seeing a woman or something like that, but otherwise ... "it's not an issue", it's "she's a lesbian but let's not talk about that".

A doctoral student reported a similar experience:

... they can talk about their husbands but [if I talk about my partner] it's personal. But people just never ask. That's the most silencing thing. People just don't usually ask.

An M.S.W. student also described this silence and silencing by heterosexual students

... [a] significant thing that I have found since being here is that ... silence about my involvements, my relationships ... from fellow students, from anybody ... on a couple of occasions when I did mention that I had a partner .. no further questions were asked.

This resulted in feelings of exclusion for some participants. While heterosexual students were able to discuss their lives, their relationships and their social activities, lesbian students frequently felt unable to do so. An M.S.W. student explained:

... we can talk about their fiancé, that's not a problem, everyone passes around pictures. Can you just imagine one of us coming in saying "this is my new girlfriend ... look at all these pictures". I cannot see that happening with my group ... I cannot picture going out with all the usual people and saying "look", the way they do.

However, one M.S.W. graduate reported a very different experience. She explained.

... for the most part, I felt like one of the group and not particularly outside or not particularly different or not particularly marginalized ...

Other participants reported that the silence and denial from other students produced feelings of erasure. A doctoral student explained that the intensity of the heterosexism and silence

surrounding issues of same-gender sexual orientation made her feel:

... kind of like the whole of my life is annulled ...

This silencing and exclusion were linked to the assumption of heterosexuality and led to suppression of discourse related to same-gender sexual orientation. While heterosexuality was taken as a given and heterosexual relations could be publicly discussed, lesbian sexual orientation was seen as private and personal. An M.S.W. student reported that her efforts to include her partner in social conversations was frequently interpreted as a political act:

... [other students] will talk about their boyfriends but they won't ever mention [student's partner]. They will expect their boyfriends to be included but they wouldn't include somebody's same-sex partner in the same way. I guess there is just that assumption that everybody is straight -- so if I was mentioning my partner, casually ... I would be seen as "flaunting it" or bringing it up for political reasons, when I was really only doing the same thing that they were doing in terms of talking about going to a movie the night before with their partner. For me to talk about my partner would be seen as political, as flaunting it, as something that it wasn't.

Participants reported silence surrounding issues of same-gender sexual orientation existing on both institutional and interpersonal levels. This silence seemed to be connected to an assumption of heterosexuality and a lack of recognition of diversity. Lesbian identity was excluded, avoided or denied by social relations in schools of social work.

### Overt Heterosexism

In addition to the impact of the silence which surrounded and denied lesbian existence, participants reported overt incidents and expressions of heterosexism which further

suppressed discourse regarding issues of same-gender sexual orientation and contributed to a climate that was unsafe for lesbians. One faculty member remembered:

... my door was routinely, had things written on it, and notices I put up outside and written on and things like that, and some of that was homophobic kind of stuff ... "lesbian, dyke, man-hating" ... often stuff would get defaced. I wondered if that might be students ...

She connected this expression of homophobia to the possibility of homophobic violence.

... the stuff outside my door, at times I would feel kind of uneasy. I was teaching there when that massacre occurred and that sort of, together with those things outside my door, would at times make me feel uneasy ... at times I would think about not being too safe there.

The seriousness of the lack of safety was also revealed in the language of fear and survival participants used in comments such as these:

... I didn't come out, for fear ...

... just unknown people, an unknown place -- and survival, that you don't go being openly out [as a lesbian]...

... a certain survival thing immediately comes up in you ...

Participants reported direct expressions of homophobia which contributed to the lack of safety. A student who recently completed her B.S.W. said:

... I see [homophobia] on individual levels, I see it on an institutional level -- there's been times where I have seen students put down or dismissed for being gay or lesbian ... that certainly happened to me before.

A faculty member recalled

... I had certainly heard homophobic comments from some people there, so that made me feel not very safe about being out with them.

Another faculty member reported that heterosexual faculty members warned her about the lack of safety:

... I talked to a couple of faculty I felt close to about the pros and cons of being more open ... and they were cautioning me. I felt they knew the climate better than me.

Participants made connections between the lack of safety for lesbians and gays and attitudes towards women and towards feminism, perceiving connections between sexism and heterosexism. A recent M.S.W. graduate said,

... it needs to become a safe place for students to come out and I don't think that it is ... [because] all the sexist pigs are for the most part homophobes too, I'm quite sure, even if I haven't experienced [homophobia] from them directly ... it is not a safe place to be out.

A doctoral student wondered:

... why would the professors even think that anyone would bring up anything about the fact that they were gay, when [it's not safe to discuss feminist issues]. Who in their right fucking mind would bring up that they are gay, you'd have to be insane ... I mean the whole system works so that doesn't happen. Honest to god, you'd be hanging yourself out in the breeze.

Some participants experienced incidents and expressions of overt homophobia from students.

A recent B.S.W. graduate recalled:

.. I remember one time being really shocked because this one woman came right over to me and started talking to me about "how disgusting homosexuals are" I remember feeling very humiliated after this experience.

.. this woman who entered the program with me, she was quite homophobic. Of course I told her that my partner was moving in with me and we were going to be living together. She was quite homophobic; she came out with all the stereotypes, just unbelievable things.

A faculty member recalled:

.. one student handed in an obscene evaluation and he didn't sign it but I knew who it was ... he was anti-woman, anti-lesbian, anti-feminist ... [he wrote] a whole page, kind of "fuck you" ... it did have some reference to dykes.

While incidents like these were upsetting and contributed to an unsafe climate, they seemed to be uncommon. Most participants felt that expressions of homophobia were generally more subtle. An M.S.W. student reported:

... generally, there is no blatant homophobic kind of stuff happening. There are subtle things, stereotypes coming out, but that is ignorance ...

Another M.S.W. student described a similar experience:

... the worst that happened is that the people who have a problem with it just avoid me. Nobody has said anything blatantly or deliberately offensive. There are people who are really ignorant and make ignorant comments but nobody has ... I haven't been harassed and threatened ...

One M.S.W. student wondered if a faculty member's evaluation of a paper written on an issue

of same-gender sexual orientation was influenced by his attitudes:

... there were some instances with particular profs ... but they are little subtle things, where my mark didn't reflect the work I put in, but it's hard to prove things like that ... it is hard to label them.

Some participants reported that expressions of homophobia were made indirectly. An M.S.W. student explained:

... because I was out, I wouldn't hear a lot of really negative things that were said ...

Another M.S.W. student remembered overhearing comments about a gay male student:

... there is one guy in my program who is gay and certainly comments were made about him by other students, not to me, but within my hearing -- you know, "he's a fag", that kind of thing ...

A recent M.S.W. graduate reported:

... [in a class presentation] I talked about my experience of being a lesbian ... For the most part it was well taken. However, afterwards, one of my friends told me that she had seen two of the women that she was sitting close to ... sort of snickering and elbowing each other throughout the presentation. Neither one of them ever said anything to me ...

Participants reported that some heterosexual faculty members used their authority as professors to reinforce negative attitudes and heterosexist stereotypes of lesbians and gay men. A recent graduate of a B.S.W. program recalled:

... there was [a heterosexual faculty member] who was very narrow minded, very white middle-class ... I remember getting really angry because she said "...feminists



are all radical lesbians" ... she often made sweeping generalizations

Several participants recalled incidents in which faculty members linked same-gender sexual orientation to child molestation. An M.S.W. graduate recalled:

... we spent quite a bit of time talking about violence ... and the linking of gay men to perpetrators of violence happened on one occasion where the prof put the two together ... he [the heterosexual faculty member] said "well, we don't understand why people are homosexual, we don't understand why people are pedophiles" ... and he just lumped those together ...

A faculty member remembered an incident in which a heterosexual faculty member expressed negative views about lesbians to her students:

... a student asked [a heterosexual faculty member] something in class, and she said "well, I don't condone lesbianism" or something like that

Some participants reported that the presence of heterosexist professors influenced their decisions about course selections, in some cases limiting their areas of study. An M.S.W. graduate reported:

... there were some [professors], I thought there's no way! I wouldn't say anything in front of them, [name of heterosexual faculty member] is one of them -- like, run and hide, you know? I never, ever chose a class from this guy after my experience with him, even though I am quite interested in a lot of the issues he is teaching. I just stayed away from him ...

While overt heterosexism threatened the safety of lesbian students and faculty and maintained negative stereotypes about lesbians and gay men, participants were far more concerned about

the silencing of lesbian students and faculty and the suppression of discourse about sexual diversity. This process of silencing was seen as a covert expression of heterosexism which was hidden and denied.

### Covert Heterosexism

#### **Dismissal of Issues Raised in Class**

The pervasive heterosexism and institutional silence made it difficult for students to raise issues of same-gender sexual orientation in the classroom. An M.S.W. student reported:

.. there were only two of us [lesbian students] and we were the only ones that ever raised gay and lesbian issues -- I talked about it with her and I know we both found it hard to do. We really had to force ourselves to do it ...

Lesbian students reported that raising issues of same-gender sexual orientation rarely led to class discussion. An M.S.W. student recalled:

.. in class when [a lesbian student] mentioned that homosexuality was categorized as deviant in the DSM, and so on and so forth, no discussion came of that. Nothing, nothing -- like, it's mentioned and it's dropped.

Another M.S.W. student described the usual response to issues of same-gender sexual orientation as silence:

... if ... we raised gay and lesbian issues ... the usual response would be kind of a long silence and then the subject would be changed.

Some heterosexual faculty members actively discouraged discourse related to issues of same-gender sexual orientation. An M.S.W. student reported:

... there was one class where the professor, I felt, actively discouraged discussion on

those topics. If I brought it up, it would be like, "Yes, O.K., now we will change the subject".

A recent graduate of an M.S.W. program remembered an incident in which a heterosexual faculty member dismissed her ideas:

... I had said something ... about lesbians being very involved in the women's movement ... and there was sort of no comment ... It was as though that was not an issue that was important. The prof sort of ended it by saying, "Oh, I didn't know that", but almost as if she didn't really believe me.

Other faculty members would play a more passive role in the dismissal of lesbian and gay issues, acknowledging the student's comments but failing to encourage or facilitate discussion

A recent graduate of an M.S.W. program explained:

... when it was raised, the prof acknowledged it. We were talking about families, and I said "gay families" and [the prof] said "yes" -- it wasn't sloughed off but it wasn't really acknowledged fully either, to an extent that would have felt comfortable

A B.S.W. graduate reported a similar incident:

... everybody in the class talked about different [definitions of family] and I finally said, "what about gay and lesbian families, they are families too". Although he was receptive to it, he really didn't want to talk about it ... We really didn't talk about the context of what it means to live in a gay or lesbian family.

Some participants felt that this was partly due to a lack of knowledge and interest on the part of heterosexual faculty members. A recent M.S.W. graduate explained.

... for the most part, the profs didn't have much of anything to say about it; "Oh, yes,

that too", and then they'd go on. They really don't know anything about the subject at all.

### **Tolerance**

Participants reported that within schools of social work, there is a level of awareness on the part of heterosexual students and faculty that overt heterosexism is not acceptable. One faculty member explained:

... I'm in academia at a time when people would just get trounced if they made blatant negative homophobic kinds of comments. I mean, it would be like running around and calling somebody a nigger. They may think it, they may feel it, they may be uncomfortable, but I don't think they would say it.

As a result, heterosexual students and faculty members were publicly tolerant of issues of same-gender sexual orientation. However, participants felt that this superficial tolerance sometimes masked homophobic beliefs. A recent graduate of an M.S.W. program explained:

... there was ... the stream of stereotype and myth that happens and either most of the people in the program had unlearned some of that, or they did a fairly good job of concealing their beliefs most of the time. Occasionally, it [homophobia] would surface.

This surface tolerance was experienced as unsafe, as what lay beneath it was not always discernible. An M.S.W. student expressed this concern:

... I don't know how much of that ... I wasn't always sure if they were just being politically correct or if it was real ... you couldn't always know if it was really O.K. or if people were not saying anything.

A participant in a reflecting group discussion agreed, commenting:

... it isn't politically correct to be anti-gay but they can do it on the side .

A recent graduate told of a time when a heterosexual faculty member entered a room in which she was discussing an issue of same-gender sexual orientation with other students

.. he came in ... afterwards I thought it was dangerous saying stuff around this man.

I mean, he does the politically correct motions but it doesn't mean anything

She wondered if he was trying to find out who the gay and lesbian students were

... I mean, was it a witch hunt, is that why he was there?

Tolerance was seen as very different from genuine acceptance. One student criticized the emphasis placed on tolerance in schools of social work:

... I think tolerance is kind of seen as almost the big goal of social work education and it is not a word I am comfortable with. The way that I see it, there is a feeling that goes with it that if you are being tolerated you had better not push it. Tolerance can be taken away.

"Tolerance" was understood by students as "lip service" and "hypocrisy". "Tolerant" professors dismissed and minimized the importance of lesbian and gay issues and the interests and concerns of lesbian students.. One doctoral student explained that research on lesbian and gay issues would be tolerated but not seen as important. She stated:

.. they might be receptive. No, I wouldn't say receptive, that's the wrong word. Tolerant, tolerant. I think they would be tolerant. I think they would say "oh, isn't that nice, kind of". But I don't think anyone would really take it seriously.

Another student reported:

... [heterosexual faculty] would be tolerant about [lesbians] students' concerns but I

don't think it would be taken up as an important issue.

Some lesbian faculty members felt that this superficial tolerance and "lip service" led to trivializing and dismissal of issues of same-gender sexual orientation by departments of social work. One faculty member explained how this worked in one department of social work.

... my experience is, rather than sort of incorporating an issue, that the school sort of takes an issue and runs with it for a year and then drops it and moves on to the next one. So I think heterosexism and homophobia were the issues in the early eighties and then it was like "we have done that, we don't want to hear about it any more", ... but in so many ways it wasn't part of who the school was.

She sensed a lack of genuineness on the part of most heterosexual faculty members who paid "lip service" to issues of same-gender sexual orientation:

... a couple of people maybe, in a genuine way struggled to incorporate it and other than that it would be nothing or a sort of lip service, you know -- that sort of mentioning it but not a real understanding of it or even comfort with it.

This faculty member perceived a gap between the official ideology of the institution and practices

... in so many ways there was rhetoric but no putting things into practice or struggling around that kind of thing.

### **Barriers to Employment and Career Advancement**

Participants were concerned that their sexual orientation would be a barrier to employment in the social services field or to their academic career. One faculty member who wanted to be openly lesbian in order to be a role model for lesbian students reported that she

was unsure of how much of a risk this would pose to her academic career. She explained

... I think there is a real need for good, positive role models, so that is why I am really struggling with how open to be -- what is the jeopardy of me being open in terms of continuing pursuit of an academic career versus wanting to be that kind of positive role model for students. I go back and forth on this the whole time ...

Another faculty member pointed to the risk inherent in disclosure of same-gender sexual orientation, saying that she had to balance her political sense that it was important to be out as a lesbian with "the knowledge that the worst possible consequence is losing your job"

Participants felt that discrimination based on sexual orientation would be denied. One faculty member explained:

... I think it [discrimination] would be very subtle; it certainly would never be blatant ... but yeah, it's a consideration.

Being openly lesbian was seen as a barrier to promotion within academia. One faculty member reported that she suspected that her openness about being a lesbian would be an impediment if she hoped to serve in an administrative position, saying:

.. the longer I'm here, the more out I am, I am dogged by thoughts about what the costs are ... with respect to being out in terms of your future life in the university .  
I guess I have wondered once or twice what would happen -- I don't have any aspirations, I don't want anything administrative. In twenty years, I don't want to be dean, but I suspect it wouldn't happen.

This institutional climate suppressed research on issues of same-gender sexual orientation. Lesbian faculty members who hadn't experienced discrimination themselves were aware of

others who had, which served to maintain a level of fear. A faculty member explained.

... this woman who I never knew, her research and her entire scholarly history got called into question because her lesbianism was central. Even though for myself I was feeling this was kind of paranoid, because I was very well received here -- and my work wasn't lesbian, they wouldn't have known from my work that I was -- it still loomed as the most material bad consequence, losing your job.

This fear of repercussions has the potential to discourage some lesbian faculty members from expressing an interest in issues of same-gender sexual orientation and prevented them from contributing to knowledge of gay and lesbian issues. A faculty member stated:

... I think ... the knowledge that somebody is a lesbian may discredit everything. I think, equally, you can have a tainted C.V. [which includes research on issues of same-gender sexual orientation].

In addition to concerns about promotion and tenure, lesbian faculty were concerned with loss of credibility or respect. One faculty member explained that only after she had built up a good research record and received tenure, did it feel safe to study issues of same-gender sexual orientation:

.. I didn't start publishing on anything that had anything to do with lesbianism until after tenure ... [which] meant I already had a tidy, respectable, fairly sturdy C.V.

Concerns about employment were also relevant to students. One participant chose not to come out in her placement for this reason:

... at school I was basically out, whereas in my placement I thought much more carefully about who it was safe to come out to. I was also thinking in terms of if I



wanted to get a job there down the line, was coming out going to jeopardize my chances of getting a job in that place ... certainly, I would not have felt it was a good idea to be completely out until I was hired and safe and secure

Being lesbian was perceived by students as a barrier to employment in the social work field. While those interested in policy or community work also expressed concerns, some participants felt that this was particularly true for those interested in clinical work:

... I would be a lot more concerned about being out if I was applying for a direct service position, I'd be a lot more worried.

Participants felt that stereotypes portraying lesbians and gay men as child molesters and beliefs that lesbians and gays stand in opposition to "family values" made social work with children and families a particularly difficult area for lesbians to work in. One graduate student explained that she would not feel safe being out as a lesbian if she was working with children:

... I think that any area working with kids is super sensitive or super homophobic, it's like teaching, like school boards ...

In a reflecting group discussion, a B.S.W. graduate who worked with people who have developmental disabilities confirmed this finding. She explained:

... if I came out at work, would people second-guess me or make assumptions? Every time I went up to give somebody a bath, would they wonder? what would that mean for me?

Another student reported that she felt she would be less likely to be hired for a position working with families if she disclosed her sexual orientation and connected this to beliefs about lesbians and gay men as "anti-family":

... gays are seen as anti-family, so how can you work with families if you are anti-family? If the "gay agenda" is to destroy the family? I wouldn't feel comfortable if I came out or I'd be less likely to be employed there if they knew I was gay . . . I don't know that I would risk it . . .

### Curricula in Schools of Social Work

Participants reported that issues of same-gender sexual orientation were excluded or marginalized by the social work education curriculum. Most participants could recall little or no curriculum content related to these issues. One recent graduate of a Master's program who also had a B.S.W. remembered:

... not a damn thing [during my M.S.W.], and I am thinking back to my undergraduate years ... there was absolutely nothing, I cannot really recall it ever coming up ...

An M.S.W. student from a different university shared this experience:

... I cannot remember a single time where we studied a single case of or had a discussion of any sort about people that were oriented towards their same sex.

When families and couples were studied, they were assumed to be heterosexual, reinforcing beliefs that gays and lesbians do not live in families and deepening the silence surrounding issues of same-gender sexual orientation. One recent graduate of an M.S.W. program recalled:

... there wasn't any mention in family classes, or in any classes, of any alternative family style ... when you worked with a family, it was a heterosexual nuclear family, unless it was a broken family or a step family ... there is never any gay or lesbian families. Even in the couples counselling class there was never any mention [of gay

or lesbian couples]

A student who is currently enrolled in an M.S.W. program also noted the absence of lesbians and gays from the families presented in the social work curriculum:

... nothing, in any course -- families course, it wasn't mentioned. It was assumed families were a man, his wife, and their kids ... Nothing was taught about it, it was never used in examples, it was never brought up.

Lesbians and gay men were made invisible by these definitions of family. As one participant said:

... if you didn't know that gay and lesbian people existed, you wouldn't have found out from any of those courses.

The exclusion of content on same-gender sexual orientation served as a means of silencing lesbian students. One graduate student connected this exclusion of course content on gay and lesbian issues and her own difficulty in raising the issue, stating:

... there was nothing directly addressing sexual orientation in any of the courses I took ... that omission would probably subtly have said to me, "this is still a non-topic"

Through the exclusion of gay and lesbian issues and experience from the curriculum, discourse around issues of same-gender sexual orientation was defined as "out of bounds" and a "non-topic".

Some participants could recall isolated occasions on which gay or lesbian issues surfaced in the classroom. Occasionally, material would be presented on a reading list but not discussed in class. An M.S.W. student recalled:

... the only course [in which gay and lesbian issues were mentioned] was, I had a prof

who handed out a bibliography, which had a section on gay and lesbian issues, and there were, like, three books, but she never mentioned it in class; it was never discussed

Another student remembered a part time faculty member who raised issues of same-gender sexual orientation:

one of the part time professors brought it up a few times ... when using examples she would sometimes actually throw in one [related to gays or lesbians].

The same student added:

... [the curriculum] doesn't deal with the issue enough. It doesn't recognize that there are differences there and it certainly doesn't talk about what those differences might mean.

Participants felt that when heterosexual faculty members did raise gay or lesbian issues, this was done in a "token" manner that further marginalized the issues. An M.S.W. student explained:

... what happened in classes is, they add it on the end of a sentence, like "and that would be different for people who are black or native or lesbian or gay"

A B.S.W. student had a similar experience:

... I think quite often what happens is that lesbian and gay issues, if they are talked about at all, are very marginalized, they are seldom really integrated into the course, they are sort of briefly mentioned because that's the ... politically correct thing to do.

"Token" mentions of same-gender sexual orientation served to mask the exclusion of content and suppression of discourse related to lesbian and gay issues. Participants made connections

between the ways in which lesbian and gay issues are excluded or marginalized and the handling of issues related to other forms of oppression within the social work curriculum.

... I don't remember issues like that ever being addressed, never... I mean, we hardly talked about any kind of oppression, let alone lesbians or gays

Participants felt that more attention needed to be paid to all forms of oppression and that more education was needed regarding issues of race, ethnicity, class and ability. However, they felt that while these issues were marginalized, gay and lesbian issues seemed to be an even lower priority. An M.S.W. student expressed this view:

... they have taken on racism issues in social work; they have taken on disability issues in social work. Although there can always be more education in terms of those areas in the social work program, they have at least tackled them. We are always on the way-side, and well, maybe you will pick it up and maybe you won't ... that's not a priority to social work, the fact that you are here.

Another M.S.W. student had a similar perception:

... in terms of what was brought up by the professors, there was a certain amount in the clinical courses on multicultural issues, done in somewhat a token way ... it was kind of token but it was there, but I found that when students brought up issues of race or racism ... there were quite a lot of discussions and that was encouraged by the professors, much more so than gay and lesbian issues. I think there was a greater awareness of racism. We had assigned readings on native issues, on racism, on women in third world countries, that kind of thing. Nothing assigned or required on gay or lesbian issues.

Participants felt that the resistance to issues of same-gender sexual orientation was greater than that to issues related to other minority groups, and that awareness was lower. This appeared to be related to the silence surrounding gay and lesbian issues, and to the emphasis placed on "traditional" families.

### Field Practicums

The institutional silence that was so pervasive within faculties of social work also operated within field placement agencies. One student who was out to her supervisor and other agency staff recalled an "unspoken agreement" to maintain this silence:

... there were a couple of people that were obviously not comfortable with it, who just ignored it. We worked together, but [my lesbianism] was just something they were going to pretend they didn't know and I wouldn't bring it up and there was kind of an unspoken agreement that it would just not be talked about.

This institutional silence made it difficult for students to raise gay and lesbian issues for discussion. A recent B.S.W. graduate explained:

... [gay and lesbian issues] were never mentioned and I wanted to talk about it and I couldn't ...

For some students, this silence and silencing made it difficult for them to meet their learning goals. One student reported that she had hoped to work in the gay community, but was not aware of any placements that were available. Another student explained how institutional silence and fear of being identified as a lesbian impacted on her placement experience:

... when I was at [agency], I identified that I wanted to work with teenagers and ... I wanted to have experience with young people and the crises that they go through ...

particularly coming out, and suicide among gay and lesbian youth – so I was trying to find out whether [agency] had any programs that mentioned gay and lesbian issues, but I couldn't say those words because I felt that if I said them, they would just know automatically that I was lesbian ...

Most students were fairly guarded about disclosing their sexual orientation in field placements and many chose to stay closeted throughout their placements. Participants reported putting a great deal of thought and energy into assessing the advantages and disadvantages of coming out in their field placements. One M.S.W. student who was not out in her placement explained:

... it's just about making an assessment whether your life is going to be made more difficult or easier.... Is the emotional release of telling people going to give you more advantages than the negative effect of keeping quiet?

Another M.S.W. student who decided to disclose her sexual orientation to her supervisor and other staff went through a similar process:

... I wasn't out initially but I came out to my supervisor after I had been in the placement for a couple of weeks, once I knew her well enough to know that she was not homophobic, and that it would be safe to do so and that it would not make the rest of my placement uncomfortable.

Another M.S.W. student, who chose not to risk disclosure, explained her reasoning

... I have been closeted in my first placement and I'm planning on remaining that way in my second one too. I've thought about coming out. I've tested the people, you know how we test the waters to see what their attitudes are and I just didn't feel

coming out would benefit me ...

Students used a number of strategies to assess the safety of the field placement. An M.S.W. student explained:

... it is a judgement about how safe you will be, are there any others that have come out that you can look at as models; what do they talk about in the coffee room?

One student decided not to come out partly because of staff reactions to a gay male friend who visited her at the placement agency:

... I have friends come in and visit, one is quite obviously gay .. I would see how they would react to him and after he would leave I would hear, "is that one of your friends?", "ugh, is he gay?" and "why are you his friend?". So that's how I tested the waters ...

An M.S.W. student perceived a connection between attitudes towards feminism and attitudes towards gays and lesbians, and used this to ascertain the climate in her agency. She explained:

... how I usually test people is by bringing up feminist issues and if they are anti-feminist they are going to be, more than likely, anti-gay. So that's how I usually bring things up. I bring up feminist theory, feminist ideology ... and just watch their reaction.

If they just sort of listen and don't comment or don't seem interested, I just stop there.

One M.S.W. student who was out in her placement felt that staff member acceptance of her was conditional upon her not expressing her political views. She explained that she did not feel she could challenge homophobic statements made by staff without jeopardizing this "tolerance":

... I would always want to say something when those kinds of [homophobic]



conversations were going on . . . but you sort of start feeling like . . . you are pushing it. These people have been very tolerant and you don't want to push it . . . if you say too much or your views are too political, they won't accept you any more. I was too intimidated or worried about jeopardizing their acceptance of me. I obviously felt that their acceptance of me was conditional on my being non-political or at least not overly political.

This student also linked the agency staff's tolerance to her conformity to gender stereotypes

... I was an O.K. gay person because of the way I dressed, but if I dressed like a dyke, then I wouldn't be an O.K. gay person. There were like, good gay people and bad gay people and if I wanted to be accepted I would have to be a good gay person and not say "well I am just like those bad gay people".

She felt that the staff's acceptance of her stemmed partly from the fact that her traditionally feminine appearance allowed them to deny her lesbian identity. She explained.

... I think that a big part of the reason I was accepted so easily was . . . that I don't look like a lesbian. I have long hair, I wear skirts, this makes it O.K. If I fitted more with their idea of a stereotype of a lesbian, I think I would have been less accepted. I think there was a lot of people thinking "she is not really like a lesbian"

Students who chose not to come out in their field placements also felt that they had to present an image that conformed to gender stereotypes and heterosexual norms. An M.S.W. student recalled:

. . . I was thinking the other day, should I shave my legs? Everybody else at [the agency] has got polished nails. They are all the epitome of what a good heterosexual

woman should look like

Participants explained that one of the effects of this aspect of closeting made them feel that they could not be themselves while in their placement, but were forced to play a part. An M.S.W. student explained:

.. I feel like I am almost playing someone I am not while I am there. I am like someone in this little movie. I get up every morning and do my drag thing -- you know, get the nylons on and the heels; I am just someone totally ... not me, the lesbian feminist that I am in my own circle of friends. I am, god knows what I am in their eyes.

Another M.S.W. student referred to a similar feeling of maintaining a heterosexual facade.

... there is an overlay of incredible conservatism, it seems like it is an absolute fashion parade every day ... so I'm trying to join in ... I do wear a skirt and suit and that sort of stuff, and stockings and make up and blah, blah, blah. It's not the sort of stuff I wear at home ... so I'm putting on a persona that's not mine.

This constant separation between the true self and the persona took a great deal of energy to maintain and came at a personal cost to students:

... if you can get into the acting part of it, you can do it ... but it leaves you a little bit guarded, you are constantly guarded. You cannot crack the same jokes that you might do or tell little stories about your life ... there is a constant editing process ...

Participants reported that nothing was taught relating to issues of same-gender sexual orientation in their placements. One student who was out reported:

.. if anything, I probably taught my supervisor and colleagues a lot about issues of

sexual orientation...

This student had felt it safe to come out to her supervisor despite the silence around lesbian and gay issues because of her supervisor's articulated views on feminism and oppression. She explained:

... my supervisor was very open-minded and very political, very feminist, and very keen to avoid discrimination in her own practice or stereotyping in her own views knowing that that was her belief system made a big difference

Students who chose not to come out generally reported that they felt homophobia would be covert and expressed indirectly. An M.S.W. student who chose not to come out in her placement explained:

... not that I was afraid that they would say "oh, you're a dyke, how disgusting" because even if they felt that, they are civil enough not to say it. I didn't want to have to deal with gossip behind my back.

During a reflecting group discussion, an M.S.W. student commented:

... a gay or lesbian student could be put in a placement that was very damaging you would hope it wouldn't happen, but disclosing to a supervisor might affect how you are evaluated ...

Participants reported that because of a climate that made disclosures of same-gender sexual orientation too risky, they were unable to fully take advantage of supervision. A recent graduate of an M.S.W. program explained:

... I couldn't share this personal dilemma that I had in placement ... I couldn't share what was happening with me personally ... you see [your supervisor] on a weekly

basis, you talk about what you do, you talk about how you do it, you talk about yourself, you look at yourself. There is a mirror around you all the time ... [for me] one third of the mirror wasn't there ...

One student who was counselling heterosexual couples had difficulties related to her work that she was not able to discuss in supervision:

... like, do men and women act this way, is this normal? Just things like that, because men and women get along differently than women and women ... It would be great if I could talk about those things but where am I going to go? I can call [a friend], but I shouldn't have to meet my needs outside the placement where other students can bring up things in supervision and I cannot. It is discouraging.

She felt that if her supervisor and agency staff were openly supportive of lesbians and gay men she would be able to use supervision more fully for learning and support:

... it would help so much if my supervisor and other people on the team were gay positive ... because there would be a chance for me to discuss, get some opinions about things ... It would be fabulous if I could say "I am experiencing a lot trouble right now because this family is asking me a lot of personal questions about my life and I am stuck" ... It would be great if I could be out in that way and get the support I need because [heterosexual students] can do it, about whatever issues they are having and I cannot. So, I think I am lacking a lot of support in areas where other people [are getting support].

Participants working in clinical placements with children had a particularly difficult time, due to myths and stereotypes of lesbians and gay men as "sexual predators" and "child molesters".

One graduate student felt that it would not be safe for her to disclose her sexual orientation but worried that this choice might be misinterpreted by agency staff. She explained

... my big issue right now is getting close to kids and what if it's found out at some point that "yeah, she's a lesbian". how is that going to come back in my face? How am I going to deal with it then? ... Staff [thinking] "why did she hide it from us" and "I've seen her really close with little girls" ... I chose not to be out because I didn't want people second-guessing me -- if I see that a child needs a hug, I'm going to say "I'll give you a hug" ... but I am worried in the end, if they find out I'm a lesbian, they'll say "she was hugging little girls all the time". God knows, god knows what will happen. That stresses me out.

Having to hide one's sexual orientation had personal costs for some students. One M S W student explained how she sometimes felt

... I'm hiding it; therefore, it is wrong ... I'm a sick deviant ...

### **Services to Lesbian and Gay Clients in Field Placements**

A number of participants reported experiences involving lesbian and gay clients while in field placements. Many expressed concern about the quality of services that these clients received. One B.S.W. student placed with a school board reported an incident in which her supervisor challenged negative stereotypes and advocated for two lesbian mothers

.. I ran across a family where there were two lesbian mothers. A lot of the teachers and the principal said, "no wonder the kid has problems, she comes from a lesbian family". My field instructor did a lot to educate around that, saying "that's not what it's about, it's about other things going on in this family".

However, other than this one incident, participants generally reported that gay and lesbian clients received poor quality services. This seemed to be due to ignorance and false beliefs about same-gender sexual orientation on the part of social workers and other staff. A B.S.W. graduate reported:

... one of [an adolescent client's] issues was "I'm a lesbian, I know I am a lesbian" and my field instructor kept saying "it's a phase, you will get over it" ... she would say "she was raped and maybe that has something to do with it all".

An M.S.W. student remembered several incidents in which gay or lesbian clients received poor quality service:

... there was a couple of clients we interviewed, one was a child and her father was gay. Two of the therapists were discussing the case. One said, "Was this woman's husband abusive?", and the other one replied, "Oh well, he was homosexual", as if that was equivalent to being abusive ... and there was another case, where a child had been taken care of for a couple of weeks by an aunt who was a lesbian and this was a big thing ... the fact that she was a lesbian was an issue ...

This student also felt that there were times when "the issue should have come up but didn't":

... I thought that it was ignored in that there were teenagers that we saw where I wondered if sexual orientation was an issue, but it was never discussed ... there were times when I think we probably did people a disservice by not raising the issue

Negative attitudes towards gay and lesbian clients also contributed to the silencing of lesbian students:

... because of comments people had made there, I did not feel comfortable in that

setting. In fact, there were comments made about gay clients that were negative enough that I decided not to come out

Another student, referring to comments made by a psychologist about a lesbian client, said ... when you hear things like that, that is very homophobic ... and I don't want to come out to people like that because if they are therapists and they have that attitude, it's too risky.

### Dominant Values in Schools of Social work

Participants saw social work education as a very conservative institution which reflects and perpetuates the values that are dominant in our society. Rather than looking critically at these dominant values, social work education supports and reinforces them. A doctoral student shared her view:

... I cannot understand how social work can still perpetrate this narrow kind of thinking ... It's like everything is taken like the status quo and there is an assumption that everybody believes the same thing.

The values of dominant groups are presented as universal truths, excluding the perspectives of groups that are subordinate. One M.S.W. graduate explained that in social work education

... it may not be just that gays and lesbians were excluded; it may be that everyone was excluded other than this possibility, this sort of upper middle class family

The values and experience of marginalized groups are absent from the dominant discourse in schools of social work. One M.S.W. graduate argued

... that really comes from an endemic problem of social work education. It is a very white, male [institution] . . . It is reflective of that

Participants were frustrated by the lack of questioning of dominant values. A doctoral student asserted

... they are so entrenched in the white middle class model. They perpetuate that that's the right way to think and they don't even question that. That, to me, is ignorance of the worst kind.

A recent M.S.W. graduate reported that the majority of social work students seemed to accept the dominant values and rarely challenged them:

... for the most part, they are not political at all and don't have any concept that that is a problem ... they don't question things.

Some heterosexual faculty members appeared to actively discourage questioning. One student reported:

... one professor, he was talking about the role of social work ... and I said, "what about client advocacy?" and he replied, "oh well, if you want to talk politics, if you don't want to learn anything and just talk politics". It was not appropriate to raise that subject; it wasn't open for discussion.

Another student recalled:

... being political was actively discouraged, totally discouraged by some of the professors. This left some students feeling that students' thoughts and what they do aren't valued.

An M.S.W. graduate expressed her frustration with the lack of room for difference or questioning and the lack of encouragement of critical thought:

... so many of the faculty expected you to adopt their voices, to accept what they said



as gospel and to go on in that direction rather than in the direction of finding your own voice ... [the school] felt very stifling ... like "Don't go with your thought process, this is the truth and this is the way you are going to experience it" ... you didn't have a voice to say what you needed to say and be who you needed to be .

A graduate student in a clinical program argued that the political and value-based aspects of clinical social work were denied by some faculty members. She stated

... they pretend that politics has nothing to do with therapy which of course is absolute bullshit.

Participants felt that the presentation of dominant values as universal values was connected to an assumption of sameness and a denial of diversity. A graduate of an M.S.W. program described her school of social work.

... this is a school that is used to middle class people and understands that .. but doesn't validate that the majority of the world is a world of diversity rather than a world of sameness.

Several participants connected the denial and devaluing of difference with a patriarchal belief system. An M.S.W. graduate explained:

... there is a whole layer of sexism that can just as easily and almost certainly does translate into heterosexism ... it's a power thing. Women are shit, anyone who is really different is shit.

The lack of a framework which allowed for a questioning of dominant values and an awareness of oppression made it more difficult for lesbian faculty to incorporate issues of same-gender sexual orientation. One faculty member explained:

if the school had more of a structural bent and I had entered with that as the emphasis, then I would have thought there were probably lots of areas where [gay and lesbian issues] could have been on the agenda. Certainly homosexuality and race would have been appropriate topics but that's not the orientation of the school at all.

The dominant values of social work education determine what is an appropriate topic and place constraints on the production of knowledge by defining what constitutes good research and which subjects are worthy of research. A faculty member stated:

.. I see what a tremendously conservative institution this is ... I still feel startled to think how the dominant images of what proper research is and what proper research subjects are, how powerful they are and how much they hold sway.

#### Institutional Suppression of Student Resistance

The ruling apparatus in schools of social work is organized to protect the dominant discourse and dominating structures. Criticism of social work education was suppressed and the climate discouraged students from making complaints. Participants expressed a concern that criticism of the program would have repercussions. An M.S.W. student explained:

.. people are so pissed off with the program and so frustrated ... I know a lot of people don't complain because they are worried about it. They need the marks and there have been repercussions. People who have like an A or A+ in everything, get E- in the course they complained about.

A doctoral student asserted:

.. the way that the structure in this school works now is, students are afraid, at every level, to complain, to say this teacher is racist, to say this teacher is sexist, whatever.

This finding was confirmed in a reflecting group discussion. One participant commented that some M.S.W. graduates were afraid to complain because they believed it would affect their chances of admission into a D.S.W. program. She explained:

.. two or three students didn't want to do anything [about their complaints] because they wanted to apply to the doctoral program and [they felt] that there would be repercussions. Even after they graduated! So those things are indeed real .

Participants reported that student resistance to the dominant discourse was pathologized. Students who complained were silenced and made to feel that the problem was their own. A doctoral student asserted:

... in the end, if somebody is complaining, well, it's somebody's personal problem. "They are angry", "they are too angry", "they are causing trouble", "they have personal problems".

An M.S.W. student explained how she was made to feel like a "trouble-maker".

... if you didn't like anything here, you didn't belong in the program. Basically, that was the attitude -- anything you didn't like, that was your fault ... You couldn't suggest that there might be any differences in the way that things were done ..

She reported that, at the time, she had been silenced by this attitude:

I was made to feel like a trouble-maker. It was because I was a trouble-maker, not because there was a problem here. That works really well. I was feeling shitty, I was depressed about the whole situation. It worked!

A reflecting group discussion supported this finding. A doctoral student agreed.

... that is very true, you're identified as ill or weird or sick or angry or bothered or

troubled or mentally ill ...

One recent graduate speculated that the organization of the program was designed to isolate and disempower students:

... it was like they didn't want students to connect. It was random assignment [to classes] so you didn't get to know any, I mean, I always thought it was set up so you didn't get to know anybody, so you couldn't become a community, because if you did, there might have been anarchy.

A doctoral student argued that students' anger about their oppression was pathologized:

... people have a right to be angry about a lot of the things that happen [in the school of social work] but their anger is pathologized ... because there is no analysis in terms of the way people are made to feel like nothing or the way they are oppressed. Anger is seen as something that originates in the family of origin, so if somebody isn't listened to, well, that's got to do with their personal problem with their father. It's got nothing to do with the fact that they are treated poorly in the social work department

Participants reported that schools of social work were organized to protect the dominant discourse from challenges. Student complaints were "absorbed" by the system and rarely resulted in change. A student explained:

... the whole system kind of absorbs or co-opts what happens with student complaints ... they are minimized ... nothing ends up happening, students feel diminished, people are silenced.

Another student, whose experience was similar, reported:

... the way the complaint process works now, the complaints just vanish ...

One participant reported that the faculty often functioned as "an old boys network" that was "self protective and protective of each other". Students who tried to complain were frustrated by a process which singled them out as "trouble-makers" or "shit-disturbers" and minimized or dismissed their concerns. A doctoral student described one occasion when several students complained as a group:

... the structure or the bureaucracy ... diminished the students' complaints ... what they had to say just became meaningless or cleansed or clean.

The result was that some lesbian students felt disempowered and pessimistic about the possibility of change regarding issues of same-gender sexual orientation in social work education. This was apparent in statements like these:

... I feel like it's pointless [complaining] and that's really frustrating ... but complaining to the department gets you nowhere ...

... that is part of the disempowerment thing ... you cannot make any changes

... I don't believe they are going to change ... if changes are made, they are going to be surface changes and it is not going to mean anything.

## **IMPACT OF CLIMATE**

### Limited Disclosure Of Lesbian And Gay Identity

One of the main effects of the silence and lack of safety in the climate was the limiting of disclosures of same-gender sexual orientation. Some lesbian students and faculty felt that it was unsafe to identify openly as lesbian in schools of social work. Few students openly identified themselves as lesbian before being accepted into a social work program. Students

applying to schools of social work generally excluded any information that might identify them as lesbian as they feared it might jeopardize their chances of being accepted. A B.S.W graduate applying to a Master's program reported:

... I didn't mention anything that would make them suspicious that I was gay. I certainly covered my tracks; I didn't want to be excluded on the grounds of being a lesbian

Some students put a great deal of thought into making decisions about being open about their sexual orientation and were upset by feeling it necessary to hide it. One participant expressed her feelings about this:

... I wish I would have been [out on my application]. I debated over it for days and days. I ended up talking to several people to see what they thought. It was very stressful for me.

For some, mentioning gay issues was a compromise, as revealed in the following statements by students talking about their applications to graduate social work programs:

... I was as pro-gay as I could possibly be without outing myself, but I didn't [come out]. I wish I could have.

... I didn't know if [coming out] would jeopardize my chances of being accepted ... but I did mention gay issues, indirectly ...

... I compromised by -- I wasn't going to be out on the application, but I talked about a relationship with a gay male friend.

Some admissions forms contained questions that were particularly difficult for lesbian students to answer. One participant explained:

... I was very put off by the admission form – one of the questions was "describe significant relationships in your life", and I don't know what they expected to receive as a result of it, but I certainly wasn't going to write down, "I'm a lesbian and most of my orientation is towards women, and this woman is significant, and that one" – I didn't do that at all, I simply made up a story that I thought they would want

Avoiding disclosing their sexual orientation forced some students to omit relevant work or volunteer experience. A student reported that in her application to an M S W program, she omitted potentially "identifying" information:

... there was a question about volunteer work and groups that you belonged to and that kind of thing, and I didn't put any of the gay political groups ... on the application. I went through a real struggle ... wanting to say "I belonged to this group", but you would be outing yourself. You actually end up limiting the experience that you are including.

Some students were concerned that their feminism might damage their chances of acceptance

One participant reported:

... I took out a lot of my political feminist stuff ... I didn't want to be eliminated because of that.

Another student who shared this concern linked possible negative attitudes to feminism with homophobia:

... there is often that equation, feminist equals lesbian to some people, doesn't it?

Two of the women I interviewed had identified themselves as lesbians during the admissions process, one because she felt it was important politically "not to hide", the other because she

was identified by her work and her research. The latter was able to evaluate the safety of her decision by contacting an openly gay faculty member who was on the admissions committee.

She explained:

... [a gay man] chaired the admissions committee and I knew that. I actually called him prior and said "I am thinking that I am outing myself in this letter and is that going to be any kind of a problem?", and he said "not a chance" He didn't think it would be a problem with the other people, but he also chaired the committee, so there was a lot of security put in place.

Even after acceptance into a school of social work, some participants felt that it was not safe to be openly lesbian. A B.S.W. student explained:

... I think it is a lot easier being gay or lesbian and being able to go through school if you choose not to be out ... it is hard and creates its own problems but you can get by without anybody ever knowing.

Choosing not to identify openly as lesbian was experienced by some as a splitting of the self, evidenced in these statements:

... I'll pretend I'm heterosexual in this setting and I can be myself in that setting ... a dichotomy of experience ..

... I went back and forth between two worlds; it was very much a dichotomy ... I still very much presented myself as a straight person. Whenever I raised lesbian issues, [ I said] "I'm straight, but I really want to know" ...

... it's like, very schizophrenic ... you just learn to edit ...

One M.S.W. graduate felt that her decision not to come out was due, in part, to her



own homophobia -- negative attitudes towards same-gender sexual orientation which she had internalized. Foucault (1982) identifies the internalized personal discourse by which people conduct themselves in accordance with social norms as a mechanism of social control. This student reflected.

... if there wasn't homophobia and I didn't have this internally, then probably I wouldn't have to choose not to be out ...

Many participants selectively disclosed their sexual orientation in classes where the climate was safer or to particular students and faculty perceived to be potentially supportive. A graduate student who had worked as a T.A. recalled:

... when I was a T.A., a number of the women came out, not in class, but when they came to talk to me . . .

Another student observed:

... if you have someone who is quite receptive or gay positive . . . students will come out. If you have someone who is totally closed and doesn't even want to think about anything like that, people are terrified ...

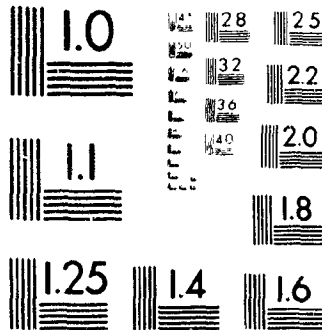
Clearly, individual faculty members have a great deal of impact on the climate in the classroom, which in turn affects the likelihood of disclosures of same-gender sexual orientation. This limiting of disclosure of sexual orientation further suppressed discourse on gay and lesbian issues. In a reflecting group discussion, an M.S.W. graduate commented

... if you are not out, I think it is even more terrifying to raise issues like that . . . it's more terrifying to talk about those things . . .

The climate in schools of social work also served to limit disclosures of same-gender sexual

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orientation by lesbian and gay faculty members. A faculty member explained

... when I came here, I felt quite ambivalent or muddled about how to be out, how not ... I was doing battle with a strong political sense that I ought to be out but clearly something was stopping me ... I was scared

Participants expressed concerns about the lack of safety as one factor that prevented them from coming out. An M.S.W. graduate who taught as a T.A. explained

... my partner worried about my safety if I came out ...

Participants also explained that concerns about loss of credibility and job security prevented them from disclosing their sexual orientation. Being unable to come out meant that lesbian and gay faculty were not able to be a visible support to lesbian and gay students. A student who worked as a T.A. expressed that not being out might have reduced her effectiveness as an instructor:

... I felt that because I wasn't out, I wasn't able to effectively take a stand against some of the shit that happened in that classroom, against the racism and homophobia

### Heterosexual Students

The exclusion and marginalization of content on lesbian and gay issues, and the suppression of discourse related to same-gender sexual orientation means that many heterosexual students have little knowledge of the needs of lesbian and gay clients. Heterosexist attitudes frequently go unchallenged. Participants expressed concern about the lack of awareness evidenced by heterosexual students. A graduate student reported an incident which showed this:

... she [a heterosexual student] said, "well, nobody in here would be gay or lesbian"

I just looked at her and thought "oh my god, she has no idea" ...

Participants also reported that many heterosexual students believed negative myths and stereotypes about lesbians and gay men. An M.S.W. student recalled:

one of the girls in my class was going on about how she thought there were lesbians who were really lesbians because they had a bad experience with men ...

A graduate of an M.S.W. program recalled an incident in which a student "linked being gay with sexually abusing children". Another student reported having to answer a lot of questions from heterosexual students that revealed a lack of awareness and belief in stereotypes:

... it is really difficult to cope with ... all these questions about "why do you think you are gay?" ... or "if you don't want to be with a man, how come you act like a man?", that sort of stuff ...

One student recalled an incident in which a faculty member challenged the heterosexist attitudes of a heterosexual student. However, most participants reported that heterosexual faculty rarely did this. An M.S.W. student explained:

. I found it quite scary that some of the people in my class are going to be having clients that are lesbian and gay. That's a scary thought, and the lecturers are not taking any responsibility for teaching anything about it ...

Another M.S.W. student said that her program did not prepare students to work with lesbian and gay clients:

... not at all! Not at all! You learn nothing about gay and lesbian issues as an undergrad; it is just not discussed. It is certainly not discussed in high school other than "so and so is a fag", so I don't think most people know anything about lesbian

and gay issues coming into this program, and they certainly don't learn anything in this program ...

A recent graduate of an M.S.W. program expressed concern about this

... the scary part of it is ... that you can graduate from this program without ever having to come to terms with the fact that a tenth of your client population is going to have a totally different experience of the world than you

Participants were very concerned about how the lack of attention to lesbian and gay issues would impact on the quality of services lesbian and gay clients would receive. A doctoral student reflected that the lack of awareness might mean that social work students would assume their clients to be heterosexual. She asserted:

... even if it is in front of their eyes they wouldn't see it ... It's like "well, we know gays and lesbians exist but they are somewhere over there. WE don't know any" ... They wouldn't extend themselves to think, "perhaps a client of mine would be gay" ... It's that kind of tunnel vision ...

Some participants worried that lack of knowledge and heterosexist attitudes would lead to harm to lesbian and gay clients. An M.S.W. student explained:

... it really makes me shudder to think that some of the people in my class are going to be doing home studies to decide is this person O.K. to adopt or foster ... They are going to be doing parenting assessments and I know they think that gays and lesbians shouldn't have kids because they will abuse them or be bad role models or whatever

Another participant agreed:

... so people are going out into their little middle class house and fixing things without

ever knowing what they are fixing, without ever being aware that some of their fixing does more harm than good because they don't understand the first thing about [lesbian and gay issues].

Another student expressed a similar concern:

...it scares me 'cause they are going to go out there and if they are not aware of what lesbians and gays are going through in our society, the kind of oppressions, I feel really badly for [clients] their paths end up crossing ...

She reflected on her own experiences as a lesbian client dealing with coming out issues as a factor that increased her concern:

... it makes me so angry ... I shouldn't have had to go through that ... we have enough resources to start educating the students about this, so that they can go out there and we can save a lot of young lesbian people from going through what I went through.

### **CHALLENGING THE DOMINANT DISCOURSE**

Despite the unsupportive climate, many participants did choose to come out. Students and faculty talked about how and why they chose to disclose their identity as lesbians and the benefits and costs of this choice.

#### **Impact of Openly Lesbian Students**

Lesbian students gave a number of reasons for their choice to openly identify as lesbian. One M.S.W. student felt that it was necessary for her to be out in order to meet her learning goals. She explained:

... I was interested in getting the most I could out of this education ... I am very

interested in lesbian and gay issues. I want to end up counselling lesbians and gays and bisexuals ... and if I don't have the opportunity to focus on that area in my studies and research and papers then I'm not going to be getting the maximum out of this degree. Several participants said that one of their reasons for choosing to be out was wanting to be able to form genuine friendships with other students. An M.S.W. student explained

... when students get together and go out, I don't want to have to make things up put on that whole charade ... It helps in terms of making friends so they understand you as a whole person ...

Many participants explained that they chose to openly identify as lesbian for political reasons.

A recent M.S.W. graduate explained that she "felt visibility was important politically."

Another graduate student explained:

... I think the fact of being out is very, very helpful because then your friends can actually be your friends and see what it means in your life and they can relate it to everyone. I think that is a big thing and that it makes for change ..

Another M.S.W. student explained how the fact that she had been out in her field placement had raised consciousness about lesbian and gay issues in the agency.

... there were a lot of people who had never really thought about [lesbian and gay] issues... who probably thought they didn't know any gay people and probably held a lot of stereotyped beliefs ... but because they got to know me they sort of thought about ... I had a lot of people come up to me and say that they had been following Bill 167 [a provincial NDP bill that would have extended spousal benefits to same sex couples] ... People who probably wouldn't have taken any interest in the issue if they

didn't know me, were really supportive and concerned ...

Students put a great deal of thought into how to come out in a way that would be politically effective. A recent graduate of an M.S.W. program explained:

in some cases where people get to know you first by default, as a heterosexual woman, they make that assumption about you ... with the political awareness I have, that feels dishonest, but it is a strategy that I am willing to adopt as the occasion demands ...

Decisions about coming out -- when, how, who to, for what reason -- constituted an ongoing process for students. This process demanded a great deal of energy, as evidenced in these statements, all made by M.S.W. students:

... a lot of my energy has gone into counselling, me being the client. Going in and having some counselling around what it's like to be a lesbian in social work ...

... the degree of difficulty in coming out ... It is never easy .. you work out how safe it is, and sometimes you misjudge that and then you get an awful bloody rude shock and you go back into your shell for a few decades .... [straight people] don't realize how much energy goes into making those decisions all the time ...

... I feel that being a lesbian in this program demands that you be ready to put energy into areas other people don't even have to think about ... often times I'm not even aware of the energy that I'm putting into it ... and then it's five o'clock and I am exhausted. I'm not surprised because I'm constantly worried. I'm constantly investing energy, a lot of energy.



### Lesbian Students as Educators

Lesbian students reported that institutional silence and exclusion of lesbian and gay issues from social work curricula left them feeling responsible for raising issues of same-gender sexual orientation. One M.S.W. graduate explained:

... the faculty don't give a shit ... without [lesbian and gay students] speaking about it, gay and lesbian experience just doesn't exist.

Participants were concerned that heterosexual students were receiving no education regarding issues of same-gender sexual orientation, and felt that it was left up to them to take this on.

An M.S.W. student explained that this was one of the reasons that she chose to come out:

... I was basically out because I was quite frustrated by the silence in the classes on those issues and feeling that a lot of people, they were going to be working with gay and lesbian clients and they didn't have a clue. I was really worried about that ...

A recent graduate of an M.S.W. program expressed similar feelings:

... it felt like it was necessary to be educating the other students to go out and work with [lesbian and gay clients] ... It felt sort of like a mission at times.

Lesbian students took an active role in challenging negative stereotypes about lesbians and gay men, both directly and indirectly, by being visible. Lesbian students also actively worked to create a safer climate. An M.S.W. student explained:

... the atmosphere of acceptance that may exist this year is basically created by us, the students that have an "in your face" attitude -- "here we are and we expect to be accepted". It's not coming from up, down, it's coming from down, up. It needs to come down from the faculty more ...

Lesbian students resisted the dominant discourse of heterosexism and challenged institutional silence by coming out, confronting ignorance and stereotyping, working to create a more supportive climate and advocating for lesbian and gay clients' right to receive social services from educated workers. However, many participants were angry that they were not supported by heterosexual faculty in doing this. An M.S.W. student explained:

... no profs whatsoever have educated. There have been a couple that have said the words "lesbian" and "gay" but never in the context of educating about the lesbian and gay population ... The only time I see any education happening is when lesbian and gay students take on the onus of educating the straight kids about us. That's the only time it happens and it is not fair ...

Another M.S.W. student expressed a similar view:

... I don't think it should have to be the students taking the initiative to educate the professors and the straight students; I think the responsibility should be on the faculty to initiate that teaching ...

An M.S.W. student commented during the reflecting group discussion that this put a great deal of pressure on lesbian students. She stated:

... I feel like there is this sort of ethical, unwritten code for lesbians that you are supposed to come out and you're supposed to educate...

A recent B.S.W. graduate drew a parallel between her own experience as a lesbian student, and a friend's experience as a black student. She explained:

... the onus was always on her to tell them that they were being racist. It was very much her responsibility to educate other people. As a white person, they should take

the responsibility to educate themselves ... I have a problem with the idea of the oppressed group being responsible to educate the oppressor ...

### Impact of Lesbian Faculty

Lesbian faculty, like students, challenged institutional silence by introducing content on lesbian and gay issues into their courses and class discussions and by identifying themselves as lesbian to their students and colleagues. They used their personal experiences and identities to facilitate students' understanding of oppression, served as role models and supported lesbian students' interest in issues of same-gender sexual orientation. Lesbian faculty contributed to heterosexual students' understanding of same-gender sexual orientation by incorporating lesbian and gay issues into the classes they taught. One faculty member explained:

... I focus on gay and lesbian social work practice ... as part of the way issues get woven throughout the courses so that it involves both what as a lesbian or gay social worker you could bring to practice and policy and what as a straight social worker you could do ... how to understand what your limits are and what to do when you reach them...

Faculty members also invited lesbian and gay social workers to speak in their classes. One faculty member reported:

... I would have a panel of people from the community, gay and lesbian social workers from all different areas of social work ...

Another faculty member organized classroom presentations that would help students to understand the impact of heterosexism on lesbian and gay clients. She explained:

... I had someone come in and talk about homophobia and do a presentation, again emphasizing youth, street youth, and its impact on them ...

Faculty members talked about their efforts to avoid marginalizing lesbian and gay issues by integrating them throughout their courses. They also discussed their efforts to present lesbian and gay content in the context of a structural analysis of oppression. One faculty member reported:

... over the years I taught it, I moved more towards trying to incorporate it as a sort of analysis throughout the course, using examples and readings by lesbians ... Trying to move things from being a topic to being a part of the analysis and being woven throughout ...

Lesbian faculty sometimes used disclosures of their sexual orientation in order to raise awareness of lesbian and gay issues. One faculty member explained that by coming out to students, she encouraged them to think about lesbian sexual orientation and challenged some of the stereotypes. She explained:

... it means that whatever mix of views people come in with, thinking lesbian is and lesbianism is, that they will have to examine it a bit ... the fact that they know one is probably going to challenge some of the stereotyping ...

Faculty members not only used self-disclosure to facilitate students' understanding of heterosexism, but also to teach about other kinds of oppression. One faculty member explained:

... I can use my parallel, my experience of being an outsider or unseen or different or whatever and get them to think other differences and reflect on who is inside and who

is outside ... I don't want to use it just as a way of teaching about sexual preference or heterosexism but also other inequities and oppression

An M.S.W. graduate who taught a B.S.W. course as a T.A. described using self-disclosure to contribute to student understanding of oppression. She explained

... it feels important to be able to stand in a place of personal knowledge of some kind of oppression and to challenge their notions of what it means to be silenced or to be marginalized ...

Faculty members put a great deal of thought and energy into decisions about how to use self-disclosure most effectively as a teaching tool. One faculty member explained

... [it takes] a huge amount of energy. From a teaching point of view, it feels like bobbing and weaving in a way that I sometimes get angry about but since from a teaching vantage point what I want is to create the best circumstances so that people will really think ... to use myself as a context, I'm prepared to bob and weave

An M.S.W. graduate who taught B.S.W. courses as a T.A. had a similar experience. She explained:

... there was an awful lot of energy that went into trying to decide about that because it felt so important politically and at the same time as an educational thing. I didn't know the best way to use myself as an educational tool. It just felt very complicated

Faculty members were conscious of not wanting to put gay and lesbian students in an uncomfortable position where they felt pressured to come out also. A faculty member explained during a reflecting group discussion:

... [I am] mindful of wanting to say at some point ... "look, I do [come out] for a

reason and I have the privilege of some power to be able to do it. Other people are in different situations, either as students or workers in different contexts ... and may not be able to ...

Lesbian faculty also reported wanting to be visible as a support to lesbian and gay students

One faculty member explains:

I think it is important for gay and lesbian students to know that there is someone on faculty ...

A T.A. concurred, stating:

... it is particularly important for gay and lesbian students to have gay and lesbian profs and teachers and teaching assistants and staff people out there doing their thing so they are not quite so isolated ...

Lesbian and gay faculty members were the primary source of information on issues of same-gender sexual orientation. Lesbian students spoke of the impact of gay and lesbian faculty as sources of knowledge and support, as resource people and as role models. One B.S.W. student stated that a class taught by a gay man provided education about lesbian and gay issues:

... there was lots of opportunity to get information about ... the lesbian and gay world and lots of access to the literature in his class, more so than in any other class that I have taken. He made an effort to talk about lesbian and gay issues.

An M.S.W. student reported that a gay male professor integrated lesbian and gay issues into the classes he taught. She explained:

... it is just such a revelation; it is wonderful to behold. It's probably the first time it

has been brought up in any social work education class that I have ever done. So I mean, it is unique .

An M.S.W. graduate spoke of how a lesbian faculty member introduced a critical perspective saying:

... she would consider things like "what are the exclusions and what's been glossed over here and when we talk about family ... what does that actually mean?" ... she would surface all that kind of stuff .

Lesbian students also reported that openly gay and lesbian faculty gave support to the legitimacy of research on issues of same-gender sexual orientation. An M.S.W. graduate explained this added to the further development of knowledge by enabling students to do research on lesbian and gay issues. She stated,

... if there was any shit whatsoever about being a lesbian, any kind of exclusion about that, any kind of dismissiveness about that as a topic, a legitimate academic topic they would be right there ...

Lesbian and gay faculty played an important role in developing awareness within schools of social work. An M.S.W. graduate reported that her ease in coming out and doing research as a lesbian was related to the presence of lesbian and gay faculty. She explained

... [it] has a lot to do with the work that [lesbian and gay faculty] have done in the department around raising these issues and attending to different sites of oppression

Students also spoke of the importance of openly lesbian and gay faculty as role models and supports to lesbian and gay students. A B.S.W. graduate explained:

... [being in his class] was a very healing time, one more positive experience, meeting

another gay person. It was really neat that he came out ... He very much comes from a pride perspective, very positive and open and political. He was so strong and proud of who he was ...

An M S W student explained that an "openly gay and comfortable" faculty member had been "very helpful in terms of normalizing the whole thing". Another M.S.W. student explained that lesbian and gay faculty members "have served as role models.. I think it has maybe made it easier". She added that if she were younger and less secure in her identity, "it would be really important for me to have them identify openly". Openly lesbian and gay faculty were also a support to each other. Knowing that one was not alone as a lesbian faculty member made it easier to come out. One faculty member explained:

... the thing that makes a difference is, am I alone?

Another faculty member explained that coming out to classes was possible because she felt supported by other lesbian and gay staff. She stated:

... I know there is support in the school so that makes a difference. I know if there were problems, there's people here that I can trust to help sort it out ... if I didn't know that there were any gays or lesbians on faculty, I think I would probably feel more uneasy ...

Lesbian students and faculty challenged the dominant discourse of heterosexism in a number of ways. Lesbian students frequently chose to identify openly as lesbian, raising awareness of issues of same-gender sexual orientation and confronting ignorance and stereotyping. Lesbian faculty members introduced content on issues of same-gender sexual orientation into their courses and often used self-disclosure to contribute to students' understanding of



heterosexism and other forms of oppression. Lesbian students and faculty advocated for the rights of lesbian and gay clients and played a key role in working to create a safer climate in schools of social work.

## **PARTICIPANTS' RECOMMENDATIONS**

### Policies in Schools of Social Work.

Participants felt that official statements that recognized and valued diversity would help to create a more supportive climate for lesbian and gay students and faculty. An M S W graduate suggested:

... what would make it better for gay students would be ... addressing the reality that we all have something to contribute, naming some things ... inviting gay and lesbian students to be visible if they are able because they have a unique viewpoint that can be enhancing or valued ...

A faculty member also felt that this official recognition would be helpful for lesbian and gay faculty. She explained:

... it would have made it better if it was like: "we really need lesbians and gays here and it is important for students and it is important for us and it is important for social work. You are needed and wanted and what you have to say is important .."

Participants also suggested that schools of social work should adopt mission statements or statements of philosophy which emphasized the role of social work in understanding and working towards the dismantling of oppressive structures. They recommended that these official statements specifically mention heterosexism as a form of oppression. A faculty

member who has taught in several schools of social work explained:

... where [such statements] do exist, it automatically creates more comfort. You feel like you can say the words without it being an issue. Where it's silent, it just leaves you in a position of not knowing ... where the school stands ...

She added that the presence of such statements helped enable her to incorporate content on lesbian and gay issues:

... it gives you permission to do stuff and it indicates a willingness to be more open.

On a personal level it makes it safer ...

Another faculty member commented, during a reflecting group discussion, that this kind of statement can provide a degree of accountability:

... its very presence is a way of calling people to account ...

Another faculty member commented that such statements of philosophy or mission statements had an impact on the institutional climate. An M.S.W. graduate explained that this kind of statement also helped legitimize research that focused on lesbian and gay issues and issues of oppression.

In addition, participants suggested that schools of social work should advocate for same-sex spousal benefits within the university. They recommended that social work faculties have policies protecting lesbian and gay professors and staff from discrimination. One recent M.S.W. graduate commented:

... at least that would acknowledge to professors that if they choose to come out, they could do that and not lose their jobs ...

Participants recommended that sexual harassment policies should explicitly prohibit

harassment based on sexual orientation. An M.S.W. student explained

... it needs to be specified that lesbians and gays are protected by that and not just sort of assumed ...

Policies protecting lesbian and gay faculty from discrimination and harassment, official recognition of the value of diversity and mission statements emphasizing social work's role in challenging oppressions were seen as essential in creating a safer climate. That would make it more possible for lesbian and gay students and faculty to openly identify themselves if they choose and to pursue research interests related to same-gender sexual orientation.

#### Faculty Recruitment

Participants recommended that schools of social work actively work to develop diversity among their faculty. They felt that openly lesbian and gay faculty were crucially important in making changes in social work education with respect to issues of sexual orientation and to creating a more safe and supportive climate for lesbian and gay students.

An M.S.W. student explained:

... it would be nice if there were people on staff who were openly gay because I think they are very powerful models ... it's twofold, it's models for students but it's also about saying "I'm a lesbian and I'm a professor" -- lesbians can be intelligent, can do good things in society ...

A recent B.S.W. graduate explained that having openly lesbian and gay professors on faculty made it easier for lesbian and gay students coming out. She explained:

... it certainly helps when there are professors that are out on faculty ... making space for lesbian and gay students to speak out ...

Participants also suggested that schools of social work should actively recruit faculty who are politically aware. An M.S.W. graduate expressed her frustration with trying to make changes in her school of social work and added:

... if I just had a magic wand and could do whatever I wanted. I'd eliminate most of the faculty. I'd start over again, hiring people who are very aware and recognize therapy as political ...

Participants also recommended that schools of social work hire more faculty who are feminist, and who have an interest in women's issues. A student argued:

... they need to hire feminists ... hire people who are not only aware that women's issues exist but see them as very fundamental to therapy and to their work and see feminism as fundamental to that ...

Feminist and pro-feminist faculty were considered likely to be supportive of efforts to build a more inclusive curriculum and to challenge traditional hierarchical structures in schools of social work.

#### Continuing Education for Faculty

Participants noted that many faculty members lacked knowledge of same-gender sexual orientation. One M.S.W. student commented:

... some of them got their education ages ago and believe that being gay is psychopathological, and has something to do with the wrong attachments in the pre-oedipal phase or something ...

Participants recommended that schools of social work provide training to heterosexual faculty regarding issues of same-gender sexual orientation. A B.S.W. student commented:

... I think it has to start by going back to the very core and sort of re-teaching professors, re-teaching lecturers .. educating them about the issues before expecting them to go into a class to speak to those issues ...

An M.S.W. student argued that this kind of training be mandatory.

... they should hold workshops on marginalized groups so that people of colour, gays and lesbians, differently abled people, oppressed groups would have some time ... All faculty would be required to attend these workshops, every single one of them

Faculty that are not motivated to go to these workshops should be held accountable

An M.S.W. graduate who had taught B.S.W. courses as a T.A. recommended that TAs receive better training, particularly about how to effectively address issues of prejudice and stereotyping in the classroom.

### Faculty Evaluation

Participants recommended that faculty evaluations should be used to promote accountability. They suggested that student evaluations should focus on whether attention was given to marginalized groups, including lesbians and gay men. A faculty member explained:

... for each course there might be some questions, something that might say "in the context of the course focus was there attention to racism as it affects practice and policy issues ... my fantasy was that there would be questions involving ... each axis of those divisions ... being poor, being a visible minority, being lesbian ...

An M.S.W. student argued that evaluations should be used to ensure faculty accountability to students. She explained:

... students are the ones that should be evaluating the profs; all these evaluations should be recorded and taken into consideration during future [decisions] and any kind of teaching award ..

### Student Recruitment

Participants recommended that schools of social work actively work towards diversity in the student body. They suggested that admissions procedures be investigated to determine the barriers that might be keeping marginalized groups out. A recent M.S.W. graduate commented:

... in terms of selection of who gets into the school ... we are just replicating an elitist white profession ... I think by not mentioning lesbian or gay or diversity or something, just to say 'we are open to this' ... [The admissions package] is all very straight: 'here is our school, here is our picture, here are our profs' ...

A faculty member suggested that schools of social work should re-examine their admissions process:

... look at what your standards are and where those standards come from and who decides and try to include different perspectives ...

Participants recommended that schools of social work look for ways to be more welcoming to lesbian and gay students and other minorities. An M.S.W. student pointed out that it should be made explicit that the school welcomes applications from lesbian and gay students:

.. they need to make it clear, somewhere in the brochures or something, that they are O.K. and happy ... about lesbianism and gayness ... otherwise, you assume by inference that they are not happy about ...

A faculty member agreed:

... to just put "and other" at the end doesn't do it; you need to name it ...

A recent M.S.W. graduate suggested that the admissions package include a statement of philosophy which includes the school of social work's position on heterosexism

... a belief statement that [the school of social work] is non-racist, non-homophobic, and promotes the elimination of those things ... and "we encourage diversity in our student population"...

Most participants recommended that educational equity programs be implemented. However, some felt that the current climate in schools of social work was unsafe and were concerned about backlash against minority students. An M.S.W. graduate explained.

... this educational equity thing ... they are trying to bring people into a situation but basically they are bringing them in to get screwed, because that is what is going to happen if they come here, not understanding that this equity thing isn't real, it is all a surface thing ...

A doctoral student who supported educational equity also expressed some concern. She asserted:

... I would definitely implement some kind of educational equity program. The way that you do that has to be defined very carefully, as to the mechanics for implementing it, so as not to stigmatize the people you bring into the program ...

Participants felt that schools of social work should actively look for ways of increasing the diversity of their student population and should "take a more aggressive approach to ensuring equality".

### Support for Lesbian and Gay Students and Faculty

Participants recommended that lesbian and gay students be supported in schools of social work. A faculty member explained:

... I think we might need to shelter their presence once they are here and make the kinds of inviting or hospitable gestures ...

Participants suggested that groups of gay and lesbian students and faculty were an important source of support. An M.S.W. graduate commented:

... knowing that there are groups, gay and lesbian associations, space to talk about issues would give the support ...

A faculty member agreed stating:

... even if there wasn't support in the department [of social work] ... if there was in the university a lesbian faculty group ... that would give you some support to go back to the department ...

Another faculty member noted that lesbian and gay student and faculty groups not only provide support but also create visibility and the potential for political strength. She asserted:

... having faculty, student groups are kind of validating ... I think it is a great thing. It creates visibility, also it creates a political advocacy group or the potential for that, where they can be influencing not just school policy and practice but also broader practice as well ...

### CASSW Accreditation Standards

Participants felt that schools of social work should be required to include content on lesbian and gay issues in the core curriculum. An M.S.W. student explained:



... I think that the quickest way to have curriculum changes is through the accreditation process ... the accreditation process should require ... certain areas of study ... and part of that should be lesbian and gay stuff ...

Changing CASSW accreditation standards to require the inclusion of content on same-gender sexual orientation would ensure changes to curriculum in all Canadian schools of social work

### Core Curriculum

Participants felt that lesbian and gay issues should be integrated into the curriculum. Since lesbians and gay men form a large minority of the client population, it is important that social work students have an awareness of issues of same-gender sexual orientation. An M.S.W. student said:

... they have to have some practical knowledge and this program should teach it. It is a sizable minority of the population and is going to be 5-10-15% of their clients they need to be familiar with the literature and the research ...

An M.S.W. graduate agreed and added that she thought lesbian and gay issues should be integrated into all core courses:

... there's no facet of human life that I don't see lesbian and gay people ... it is in everything, they do get old, they do live in families, they do commit suicide, they do access the health system, so I cannot see anywhere it is not ...

An M.S.W. student emphasized that faculty should avoid dealing with lesbians and gays in a "token" manner, saying:

... if they could talk about lesbians and gays as though they were real people instead of an add on to a sentence, it would be helpful for the students ...

In addition to educating heterosexual students, participants felt that changing the curriculum would help to create a climate that was more supportive of issues of same-gender sexual orientation. An M.S.W. student explained:

... I think if there was a lot more dialogue on our issues, there would be an atmosphere of acceptance ...

Another M.S.W. student pointed out that including lesbian and gay issues in the core curriculum would be validating and empowering for lesbian students. She stated:

... I think for lesbian students that if you changed the curriculum to represent the reality of more than one group, like the reality as we might see it, then I think they might see themselves, and once you see yourself, then you have the power to do anything.

### Elective Courses

Participants reported that elective courses on lesbian and gay issues would be insufficient, as only a few interested students would enroll. An M.S.W. student commented:

... I really wouldn't want to see "O.K., here's our gay course, we teach it every second year for half a credit" ... and only six people take it because they are gay and lesbian or think it would be neat because there might be colour slides or something ...

A faculty member expressed concern that an elective course would attract only the students who least needed to take it. She explained:

... I have a feeling that if you had a specific course, you might have all the gay and lesbian students coming in ... but they are already the converted, so to speak ...

She added that, despite this, she thought it would be a good idea to offer elective courses on lesbian and gay issues:

... having said that, I still think it has to happen, because then maybe ten years down the road everybody will be taking it ...

### Methods of Teaching

Participants suggested that an emphasis on the ethics of social work be used in helping students to clarify their values and beliefs and become more self-aware. In this way, one M.S.W. graduate suggested, students may unlearn some of their prejudices. An M.S.W. graduate explained:

...social work education has this massive job of unteaching or helping students unlearn the stuff they have learned about a lot of things -- what helping means, what relationships are about, about culture, race, community, disability, age, sexual orientation. It seems to me that the project of social work education is to get rid of all that stuff. That doesn't happen in a traditional class room kind of way. If we could adopt methods that addressed attitudes and beliefs and values, we'd get through to some of that stuff and give people a chance to look at it .

Participants also suggested using small group discussions, workshops, role plays, writing assignments, videos, required readings and inviting speakers from gay and lesbian communities.

### Teaching From a Critical Perspective

Participants recommended that schools of social work develop critical perspectives which allow for greater questioning and greater awareness of the political nature of social work practice, centering social work curricula around an analysis of power. A faculty member explained that she would use a critical perspective to address different forms of oppression,

including heterosexism

... I would like to see that kind of greater questioning of all our theories and practices and sort of making an analysis of power central to the curriculum . . . one of the facets of that analysis of power is looking at heterosexism and homophobia . . .

An M.S.W. graduate explained that this kind of critical framework for social work education would facilitate challenging dominant values and accepted understandings. Rather than a "rote" addition of lesbian and gay men to a list of groups that must be mentioned, it would allow "the constant surfacing of the possibility of difference". She suggested that a critical perspective would demand that students develop an awareness of how they are situated within a society characterized by oppressive structures and power imbalances. She explained:

... let's think about gays and lesbians in their context -- let's spend time deconstructing heterosexual privilege or deconstructing race privilege or deconstructing male privilege in the world, so that you are not just tacking another group to your existing understanding but you are required to question your own positioning in your own position of privilege in the world ... you decentre yourself so that you no longer understand yourself as normal ...

An M.S.W. student commented that she thought this would enable gay and lesbian students to be out and would support education on issues of same-gender sexual orientation:

... I think that if the attitude of the program was more political, more critical and more geared to fighting oppression, gay and lesbian students would be more out and more education on those issues would happen.

Reflecting group discussions supported this finding. Participants called for:

... more attention to issues of social structure and oppression, recognition that we don't live in a vacuum ...

Another participant argued for:

... an analysis where people learn the systems of power that mean that we basically know about the judeo-christian religion and we basically know about white people and we basically know about straight people and that's because there is a power structure that means that all those other groups are marginalized and silenced and we don't tend to know very much about them.

This approach, rather than aiming for tolerance or acceptance of differences, would aim at decentering the dominant group and deconstructing the dominant values.

### Field Practicums

Recommendations from participants addressed supervisor training and the creation of non-traditional field placements in lesbian and gay communities.

### **Supervisor Training**

Participants recommended that field placement supervisors receive training in issues related to same-gender sexual orientation. Heterosexual supervisors should be comfortable working with lesbian and gay students and have some understanding of issues that might arise in supervision. An M.S.W. student who had observed poor quality of services to lesbian and gay clients in her field placement suggested:

... there should be a lot more onus put on supervisors to have information ... if they don't know anything about lesbian and gay issues and students don't know anything about those issues, if a lesbian or gay client comes in ... it's going to be a sad story

A participant in a reflecting group discussion recommended:

... it's important that field teachers be able to address personal issues ... also some education about how to deal with clients so that you are not ... heterosexist ...

Participants also recommended that lesbian and gay supervisors have access to support regarding issues related to supervision and coming out to students. An M.S.W. graduate who supervises M.S.W. students commented that it would be helpful if the field instruction courses offered through schools of social work addressed some of the issues that might arise when student and supervisor have different sexual orientations:

... it would be helpful if there were some acknowledgement that there are issues, some readings to do ... if there was acknowledgement, it can hopefully be talked about ... as an area we need to explore, at an academic level and a personal level ...

### **Non-Traditional Field Placements**

Participants recommended that field placements which serve lesbian and gay clients be made available to students. Some lesbian faculty members had taken an active role in the development of these non-traditional field placements. A B.S.W. graduate explained that one of the difficulties seems to be that many of these potential placements are grassroots organisations which may not have a social worker with an M.S.W. on staff. She suggested that efforts be made to find a way round this difficulty:

... if you really want to be inclusive ... look at these as legitimate field placements: what benefit could this organization offer to our students and how could it enrich their education? I think there are creative ways of [arranging it], perhaps finding people that could go in and do supervision with the on-site field supervisor and the student ...

[but] it requires more commitment on the part of the schools ...

## EFFECTING CHANGE

### Barriers To Change

Participants reported that professional discourses of same-gender sexual orientation as a perversion constitutes a barrier to change. An M.S.W. student explained:

... there are a lot of profs who still see [same-gender sexual orientation] as a developmental disturbance. I mean, these guys were studying it 30, 40 years ago and were taught that homosexuality was the result of arrested psychological development ... and they still see it as a mental disorder ... That is a pretty big barrier to change ...

Social work has a traditional function of social control. It defines what is normal and acceptable and what is deviant and pathological. An M.S.W. graduate commented

... psychiatry is very much in the business of defining what is normal and it has a certain amount of control over that. I think social work is in a similar kind of business ... there is a sense of what is healthy and what is normal and what is standard and there is an effort to preserve that ...

Like social work, education also has a social control function and serves to maintain and reproduce the status quo. A doctoral student who identified this as a barrier to change regarding issues of same-gender sexual orientation, stated:

... the whole thing of what a university is for ... they are institutions that perpetuate the way things are, so why should [schools of social work] be any different!

Participants commented that social work is a very conservative profession and resistant to change. Another barrier to change that participants identified was the centrality of the traditional family to social work. An M.S.W. graduate explained:

... the emphasis on family is a barrier, a traditionally defined understanding of family ... in the history of social work ... like the women's temperance union and Y.W.C.A. and women preserving the family, that it was the most important thing above all others ...

She argued that without deconstructing our traditional ideas of family, it is difficult to present alternatives:

... the nuclear family is so tied into capitalism and the subordination of women that unless that structure is looked at for what it is and what it perpetuates, it is very difficult to suggest other ways for women to be in the world, and to suggest other ways for constructing social relationships more generally ...

Some participants speculated that attending to lesbian and gay issues and raising awareness of heterosexism was seen as a threat to the traditional family centred values of social work. An M.S.W. graduate pointed out that gay and lesbian sexuality is viewed as an issue of morality in a way that heterosexuality is not. She commented:

... as long as our sexuality is a moral issue, it becomes really difficult to address on a level that isn't contentious ...

Another barrier that participants identified was the tendency of people who are in positions of privilege to be invested in maintaining that privilege. An M.S.W. student explained that because of their privileged position, heterosexual administrators and faculty are unable and



unwilling to acknowledge the need for change:

... the inherent thing in compulsory heterosexuality ... is that it is almost inherent that the person won't see it. That is part and parcel of being privileged and with power, because you don't have to see, so why would you? ... They are threatened because they are too invested in their position and their personal self is so invested in what they are teaching ...

An M.S.W. graduate who shared this analysis commented that this constituted a barrier to the development of a critical perspective in social work education. She stated:

... there is a lot of investment on the part of a lot of people in maintaining their position as central and normal and maintaining their position of privilege ... it is rooted in the power structures of our world; nobody gives up power voluntarily ...

Some lesbian faculty members were constrained in their efforts to raise awareness of lesbian and gay issues and of heterosexism by conservative administrators and faculty. A doctoral student explained:

... one of the professors who is in charge of the program, I am not sure he will be receptive to the kinds of things I want to teach ... I think basically things are pretty regimented and you have to teach the courses ...

She explained that she believed the barriers were the conservative nature of the school and resistance to acknowledging privilege and oppression. She asserted

... things are just so conservative that there is not much room ... to teach about different kinds, different levels of oppression ... I think that would be a threat to people.

Participants saw social work education as "entrenched" and "resistant to change". Participants reported that due to a lack of awareness, the need for change in social work education regarding issues of same-gender sexual orientation was not recognized or seen as an important issue. A faculty member saw this lack of awareness as related to the institutional silence around issues of same-gender sexual orientation -- "a fallout from the silence that has surrounded this" The invisibility of lesbian and gay clients and the limited disclosure of sexual orientation by social workers, students and faculty were identified by a B.S.W. graduate as factors that made "it just too easy for everybody to pretend the issue doesn't exist". An M.S.W. graduate connected this lack of awareness to an unwillingness to make space for lesbian and gay issues:

... I bet most of the faculty think they don't know any lesbians and gays and don't realize that a percentage of their clients are lesbian and gay. I think gays and lesbians are very invisible to them and will be invisible to them. I don't think that is going to change. I don't think it is because we are invisible. I think it is that they are not willing to make more space ...to give an inch..."well, I have to give five minutes at the end of the class to multicultural people and I have to give one class out of my twelve to women and I am not going to give up any more of my Freud" ...

A faculty member also sensed that some professors felt burdened by what they saw as political demands to add new content to the curriculum -- "a sense of fatigue on the part of faculty, sort of 'oh no, we are expected to wrestle with this too?' " An M.S.W. student connected this to the backlash against "political correctness". She commented:

... some of the older faculty are really digging in their heels against what they see as

being this whole "political correctness thing". It's like they're saying, "I have twelve classes, I already have to give up one for women's issues, that only leaves me eleven to teach men's issues. When am I going to fit this gay stuff in?" They don't see that it's an important issue; they see it as a concession to political correctness.

Lastly, participants identified the transitory nature of the student body as a barrier to change.

A faculty member explained:

... with the constant turning over of students every year, it is very hard to get that continuous push for change...

An M.S.W. graduate from a different school stated

... I have heard from other students that the same things come up year after year ... with the students turning over every year, it is hard for the push from students to be consistent ... we do have a lot of power but we enter school not realizing it ... and then we are graduating anyway ...

### Strategies and Resources for Change

Participants felt that change would occur primarily as a result of pressure from lesbian and gay students and faculty. One M.S.W. graduate commented.

... probably nothing will change if we leave it up to the powers that be. Bottom up change, I think, is required ...

Participants advocated working for change on all organizational levels, including CASSW policies and accreditation standards, university policies and statements of philosophy or mission statements within schools of social work. Participants also recommended involvement of the OAPSW where appropriate. Participants emphasized the importance of a collective

stand by lesbian and gay students, a strengthening and politicization of gay and lesbian students and their ability to insist that heterosexism be on the agenda.

Primary resources identified were lesbian and gay men in social work education and in the field. Gay-positive heterosexuals were also identified as a resource and support for change. An M.S.W. graduate explained:

.. [ a heterosexual student] was just fascinated and has learned so much from me coming out to her and she knows all the gay issues now and is this gay advocate ...

Participants also saw feminism and feminist theory as an important resource. Feminist students and faculty were seen as potentially supportive. Feminist epistemology was identified as a resource for lesbians who wanted to study issues of same-gender sexual orientation. An M.S.W. graduate explained:

... because of feminist analysis around doing research from the inside, I felt that being a lesbian gave me more credibility and I didn't feel that that was in question ... there were lots of holes poked in the myth of objectivity in research ...

Feminist critical theory was also seen as important in making connections between forms of suppression, revealing "all the cracks" in social work education, and incorporating analyses of gender, race, class and sexual orientation into the curriculum.

## **REFLECTING GROUPS**

### **Findings**

Two reflecting group discussions allowed me to present my findings to participants and receive feedback about interpretation which was extremely helpful. The reflecting groups

supported the findings and helped to clarify themes and connections. The data from the reflecting groups is incorporated into the body of the findings.

### Further Outcomes

The reflecting group discussions enabled participants to become collaborators if they chose. They also seemed to be a powerful experience for participants and for myself, and the recognition of shared experience was validating and surprisingly politicizing. A number of plans regarding dissemination and use of the findings and recommendations were made as a result of these discussions.

These plans included the formation of a committee that will advocate for the inclusion of content on same-gender sexual orientation in the social work curriculum. This committee will also look at other recommendations made in this study and explore ways in which changes might be implemented.

A second outcome was that some participants were interested in forming a group of lesbian and gay social workers who would be available to speak to social work classes about heterosexism and lesbian and gay clients, and available to give presentations or workshops for faculty in schools of social work.

A third outcome of the reflecting group discussions was the decision to incorporate the findings of this study in a presentation or workshop for field instructors and other service providers interested in lesbian and gay issues in social work education and the impact on services to lesbian and gay students, faculty, workers and clients.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Participants described institutional silence on issues of same-gender sexual orientation. Lesbian and gay experience was excluded and marginalized by assumptions of heterosexuality as the only legitimate form of sexual and relational expression.

Incidents of overt heterosexism including comments and acts of heterosexual students and faculty contributed to an unsafe climate for lesbian and gay students. However, participants felt that such incidents were infrequent and were more concerned about the pervasive and covert heterosexism which constructed the process of silencing lesbian and gay students and faculty and suppressing discourse about same-gender sexual orientation.

Content on lesbian and gay issues was generally excluded from social work curricula. Participants reported that little or no mention was made of lesbian and gay issues in social work courses. When issues of same-gender sexual orientation were addressed, this was usually done in a "token" manner which served to disguise the heterosexual subtext of the curriculum. The discussion of lesbian and gay issues was discouraged and when students raised the issues in class, they were generally dismissed.

Participants reported that social work education perpetuated and reinforced dominant social values and failed to address issues of privilege, power and oppression. Participants reported that there was a fear of repercussions which prevented dissent and those students who challenged or objected to the existing structure in schools of social work were silenced and their complaints were dismissed. This fear seemed to be related to the hierarchical structure and the ways in which power is exercised within schools of social work.

The lack of safety and support in schools of social work limited disclosures of same-

gender sexual orientation, further reinforcing the invisibility of lesbian and gay experience. The combination of the lack of curriculum content and lack of discourse on lesbian and gay issues meant that the attitudes and beliefs of heterosexual students went unchallenged and they were given no specific knowledge that would prepare them to work with lesbian and gay clients. Participants expressed concern about the impact that this lack of education and awareness might have on service provision to gay and lesbian clients.

Despite the unsupportive climate, some lesbians and gay men in schools of social work choose to openly identify themselves. Participants explained that openly lesbian and gay students and faculty create a visible presence which raises awareness of issues of same-gender sexual orientation in schools of social work. Out faculty and students also provide support for other lesbians and gay men in social work education. Lesbian and gay faculty frequently integrate content on issues of same-gender sexual orientation into the courses they teach and sometimes use self-disclosure to challenge stereotyping and increase awareness. Participants reported that lesbian and gay students also play a central role in educating heterosexual students about lesbian and gay issues.

Participants recommended that schools of social work ensure that policies specifically protect lesbians and gay men from harassment and discrimination and adopt mission statements or statements of philosophy which emphasize the role of social work in understanding and challenging oppressive structures, including heterosexism.

Participants suggested that schools of social work actively work to increase diversity among their faculty and student bodies and that faculty receive continuing education on issues of diversity including same-gender sexual orientation. They proposed that faculty

accountability be built into the evaluation process.

Participants felt that CASSW accreditation standards should require the inclusion of content on lesbian and gay issues and that this content should be integrated throughout the core curriculum. Participants advocated the use of feminist and critical perspectives in social work education and saw these as a means of facilitating education about heterosexism and other forms of oppression. They argued that social work education's emphasis on tolerance should be replaced by an emphasis on analyzing power and deconstructing privilege.

Participants identified a number of barriers to change, including the social control function of social work, professional discourses of same-gender sexual orientation as pathological, the centrality of traditional family values to the social work profession, a lack of awareness of the need for change and the constant turnover of the student body.

Participants felt that change would occur from the bottom up as a result of pressure from lesbian and gay students and faculty. Resources identified were lesbiars, gay men and pro-gay heterosexuals. Feminist critical theory was also seen as an important resource in effecting change.



## CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

In this chapter, I will review the results of this study and compare them with the results of other studies on social work education and same-gender sexual orientation. I will discuss the implications and recommendations for change in social work education, consider some of the limitations of this study and make suggestions about possible directions of future research in this area.

### Conclusions

Schools of social work act as agents of social control, perpetuating and reinforcing the values of dominant groups. Through a heterosexist ideology embedded within the curriculum, heterosexuality is promoted as the only normal and legitimate form of sexual expression. Lip service to issues of diversity serves to mask the hidden curriculum, while the promotion of the liberal ethos of individual rights diverts attention from the structures that lie beneath it. This pattern produces a contradiction between the official ideology of social work education and the experience of lesbian students and faculty within its institutions.

The CASW Social Work Code of Ethics (1994) prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation and requires social workers to be competent service providers, but schools of social work exclude content on lesbian and gay issues from their curricula and suppress discourse on issues of same-gender sexual orientation. This exclusion of content and suppression of discourse combine to create a climate that is experienced as unsupportive and unsafe by lesbian students and faculty, limiting disclosures of same-gender sexual orientation and reinforcing the invisibility of lesbian and gay experience. Heterosexual students receive little or no education on issues of same-gender sexual orientation and consequently are

unprepared to provide services competently to lesbian and gay clients

### Comparison Of Findings With The Literature

I will compare my findings with those of Cullen's (1994) study of homophobia among students at Ontario schools of social work and O'Neill's (1994) institutional ethnography of Canadian social work education from the standpoint of gay men.

Cullen (1994) found that students in schools of social work in Ontario exhibited low levels of homophobia. However, participants in my study reported being silenced and excluded by heterosexual students and felt that many heterosexual students held negative and stereotyped views about lesbians and gay men. The contradiction between the non-homophobic views expressed by Cullen's respondents and the experiences of silencing reported by my research participants is consistent with the findings of Norris (1992).

Norris (1992) found that expressions of support for lesbians and gay men co-existed with acts of discrimination. He hypothesized that liberal values of equal rights were in conflict with a strongly enforced heterosexual orthodoxy. Participants in my study were aware of this tension and referred to it when they spoke of lip-service and "surface" tolerance in schools of social work. This finding reinforces the need for further research from the standpoint of marginalized groups within social work education.

O'Neill (1994) found the climate in Canadian schools of social work to be unsafe for the discussion of issues of same-gender sexual orientation and found social work curricula to lack accurate content on lesbian and gay issues. The findings of my study are consistent with this and support the conclusion that issues of same-gender sexual orientation are excluded and marginalized within social work education.

However, comparison of my findings with those of O'Neill's (1994) study reveal differences between the standpoint of lesbians and the standpoint of gay men. O'Neill (1994) observed that gay men seem to prefer strategies of reform and compromise in negotiating change. He speculates that this may be due partly to the fact that gay men benefit from male privilege and may wish to work towards acceptance without endangering this privilege.

Lesbians, however, are differently situated than gay men and have a different standpoint. The women I interviewed consistently emphasized the connections between different forms of oppression and the need to work towards an understanding and dismantling of oppressive structures. Lesbians occupy an outsider position both as women and as lesbians and while some may have access to privilege due to their race or class, all are oppressed by patriarchal systems.

Ristock (1990) sees this difference in emphasis between strategies of compromise and reform and strategies aimed at radical social change as exemplified in the different goals of feminism and gay liberation politics. She writes, "feminism is a movement oriented towards social change, which seeks to end the oppression of women by challenging the male supremacy that underlies our culture, while much of the gay liberation movement focuses on the desire to have gay men ... accepted within the existing (dominant) political and social structure" (p.78). Lesbians are less likely to work towards assimilation into this dominant social and political structure as it legitimates and supports the subordination of women. Aronson (1994) argues that for lesbian feminists "to aim for integration into an oppressive social order is not the end in view" (p.18).

### Findings in Relation to Critical and Feminist Pedagogies

Participants felt that it was important to integrate content that focuses on the needs of lesbian and gay clients into the social work curriculum. However, they also expressed concern that this alone was insufficient and advocated an approach that focuses on interconnected forms of oppression and the processes and structures that maintain them. We should not merely be adding content on lesbian and gay issues, but seeking to reveal and challenge the heterosexist subtext of social work education

Social work education's liberal ideology and emphasis on fostering individual attitudes of tolerance ignores the reality of socially constructed systems of power. Kitzinger (1987) argues that "liberalism's failure to examine the structure of institutionalized power not only leaves such power unacknowledged but, through distracting attention away from structural oppression in favour of a focus on individual relationships, actually serves to reinforce that power" (p.197). By focusing on individualistic liberal goals of tolerance and acceptance, social work education masks and obscures its hidden curriculum which perpetuates dominant social values. Critical theory offers the possibility of revealing and dismantling this hidden curriculum

Rossiter (1993) points out that if one attempts to teach from this critical perspective "in a traditional educational format, contradictions between the content and the process immediately surface ... the university classroom is never free from domination, hierarchy, paternalism and systems of threat and exclusion structure our practice" (p.77). The hierarchical structure and the ways in which power is exercised within schools of social work were revealed in the ways participants in my study spoke of fear of repercussions, of being

evaluated by faculty or administrators and of the ways in which dissent was suppressed. One participant pointed to the irony inherent in a system which simultaneously disempowers its students while teaching them to "empower" their clients. The contradiction between content and process was clear in the results of my study.

The control of students and faculty and the suppression of dissent connected to the hierarchy within the schools of social work was crucial to the silencing of discourse on lesbian and gay issues. Within this hierarchical power structure, people are afraid to reveal their differences. Truame (1994) refers to this fear of revealing differences as "a cost-effective silencing tool of the academic community .. [which] makes the act of silencing a remarkably quiet act" (p.212-213). Without less hierarchical and more egalitarian structures and processes in schools of social work, efforts to teach from a critical perspective will be impeded.

Tice (1990) suggests that while an inclusive curriculum is important, "it is also essential that educators examine pedagogical styles and the classroom dynamics that they help to produce" (p.138). Critical and feminist pedagogies offer alternatives to the traditional, hierarchical authority structure in the classroom. Dore (1994) writes that "feminist pedagogy perceives the traditional classroom structure, which deifies teachers and emphasizes knowledge as received truth and a significant impediment to empowering students and achieving a sense of community" and argues that this structure does not permit students "to openly explore or respond to challenges to their personal beliefs or ethical understandings" (p.99).

## Implications and Recommendations For Social Work Education

### **Policy**

CASSW accreditation standards should be changed to require the inclusion of content on same-gender sexual orientation in the core curricula of social work education.

Schools of social work should ensure that university and departmental policies specifically and explicitly prohibit harassment and discrimination based on sexual orientation. In addition, schools of social work should clearly state their commitment to challenging all forms of oppression, including heterosexism, and should adopt mission statements or statements of philosophy that express this commitment.

### **Recruitment Of Faculty And Students**

Schools of social work should work to increase diversity among their faculty and students. Since the visible presence of lesbians and gay men seems to be crucial in promoting discourse on issues of same-gender sexual orientation, schools of social work should actively recruit lesbian and gay faculty and students.

The process for admissions into schools of social work needs to be examined and steps taken to address potential barriers for lesbian and gay students. I believe that educational equity programs should be implemented in all schools of social work.

### **Support**

In addition to recruiting lesbian and gay faculty and students, schools of social work need to work to create a climate that would allow lesbians and gay men currently involved in social work education to become more visible. While this will require a multi-faceted approach, one important component is support. Schools of social work should encourage the

formation of lesbian and gay groups for support. Such groups might also facilitate change by increasing visibility, raising awareness and advocating for lesbian and gay clients, students and faculty.

### **Continuing Education And Evaluation Of Faculty**

To ensure that heterosexual faculty have sufficient awareness and knowledge of issues pertaining to same-gender sexual orientation, continuing education should be provided within schools of social work. Student evaluation of courses should include questions on how issues of diversity are addressed and should be used to increase faculty accountability.

### **Curriculum**

Content on lesbian and gay issues should be integrated throughout the core curriculum of social work education. Since students will have lesbians and gay men among their future clients, it is essential that they be adequately prepared to work respectfully and effectively with this population. Students should be given access to accurate information about same-gender sexual orientation and should be encouraged to explore their own beliefs about lesbians and gay men. Preparing students to work with lesbian and gay clients involves both increasing knowledge and decreasing heterosexist attitudes.

In addition to the integration of content on same-gender sexual orientation into the core curriculum, schools of social work should also offer elective courses which focus on particular issues related to same-gender sexual orientation (e.g. social policy and lesbian and gay families) or particular client groups within the gay and lesbian population (e.g. clinical social work with lesbian and gay youth).

**Field Practicums**

Schools of social work should ensure that field placement agencies are aware of the philosophy of the school regarding issues of diversity. Students should not be placed in agencies which condone discrimination against lesbians and gay men.

Training provided to field placement supervisors should address issues of same-gender sexual orientation. Heterosexual supervisors need to be comfortable working with lesbian and gay students and should have some understanding of issues that might arise in supervision. Lesbian and gay supervisors should have a forum for discussion of concerns about coming out to students and other issues related to same-gender sexual orientation.

Schools of social work should actively work to create field placements in agencies that provide service to lesbian and gay clients. Where lack of qualified supervisory staff is a problem, creative ways of arranging alternative supervision should be sought.

**Critical And Feminist Theory**

There are serious limitations inherent in an approach which merely adds content on lesbian and gay issues to the existing social work curriculum. This approach marginalizes lesbians and gays as yet another "special population" to be considered, while leaving unchallenged the heterosexist assumptions which underlie and structure the traditional core curriculum. Schools of social work should strive to make an analysis of race, gender and class, heterosexism and ableism central to their curricula rather than viewing these as special topics. Through a continual surfacing of difference and possibilities for difference, social work education should strive to make visible the links between intersecting oppressions and reveal and challenge the structures and processes which suppress diversity and multiplicity.



Feminist theory and critical pedagogy are valuable resources in this endeavour. In addition to offering insights into theories of power and oppression, critical and feminist pedagogies also suggest methods of teaching that are congruent with this analysis. A less hierarchical, more egalitarian model of teaching, emphasizing empowerment and sense of community, would allow students to reveal their differences and explore their ideas more safely.

### Outcomes

My goal in undertaking this investigation was to add to the knowledge of social work education and same-gender sexual orientation and to make recommendations for change. I hoped that the results of this study would stimulate interest in this area and lead to changes in social work education that would benefit lesbian students, faculty and clients.

Cummerton (1986) writes that "a feminist perspective moves the researcher into the role of change agent" and suggests that feminist research "is designed with social change in mind -- to further the interests of the participants and the population to which they belong" (p.95). Theories of research from the standpoints of marginalized groups also stress the political nature of research and emphasize the involvement of the participants in the research process.

In this study, the use of a research design based on a feminist perspective allowed participants to become involved as collaborators. Initial outcomes suggest that this approach was effective in producing knowledge that could be used by participants to stimulate change. A number of participants have become involved in making plans for the dissemination and use of the findings and recommendations of this study. These plans include the formation of a

committee to advocate for the implementation of changes based on the recommendations of this study, the decision to create a group of lesbian social workers who would be able to give presentations in schools of social work and the decision to incorporate the results of this study in a workshop for field instructors and service providers

### Limitations of this Study

One limitation of this study is the lack of diversity among the participants. While I sought to interview as diverse a group of women as possible, the participants were predominantly white and young. Greater diversity in age, race and ethnicity would have added to the richness and complexity of the data.

A second limitation was that, despite varying degrees of openness about their sexual orientation, none of the women that I interviewed was extremely closeted. While it would be difficult to contact very closeted lesbians, they might have a different experience of social work education.

These limitations may be due in part to the inherent limitations of the snowball approach to participant recruitment. While this approach is useful for gaining access to hidden and marginalized groups it may have contributed to the lack of diversity. Since the snowball approach relies on personal contacts of the researcher and the initial participants to recruit further participants, some similarities among the members of the final group are likely. It is probable that there other lesbians whose experiences and perspectives on social work education are different.

Lastly, it is not always possible to determine how a participant's experience in social work education is influenced by her sexual orientation as compared with other factors. For

instance, one participant explained that her feminism was at least as significant an influence on her perspective. Another felt that her working class background gave her a different standpoint and shaped her experiences and ideas about social work education. It is not possible to separate the different elements of an individual's identity or to disentangle the factors which constitute her standpoint.

#### Suggestions For Further Research

This research suggests a number of areas for further exploration. To understand more fully the social organization of heterosexism within social work education, interviews with heterosexual students, faculty and administrators should be conducted. The processes of student admissions, faculty recruitment and curriculum development should be investigated. It would also be interesting to explore further some aspects of the institutional suppression of student resistance by focusing on the complaints process within schools of social work.

My findings suggest that lesbian students and faculty perceive crucially relevant links between heterosexism and other forms of oppression. Research that adds to our understanding of the connections between forms of oppression is vital to our efforts to work together with other minority groups to dismantle the structures that oppress us. Investigation of social work education from the standpoint of other marginalized groups would permit a more complete analysis of the ways in which social work education constructs and perpetuates its dominant discourse.

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**APPENDIX A****INFORMATION ABOUT THIS STUDY**

I understand that I am being asked to participate in a research study which is being conducted by Robin Stevenson, and advisor Marty Laurence, of the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University.

The purpose of this study is to examine lesbian experiences in social work education and to look at social work education from a lesbian perspective.

This will be a qualitative study utilizing semi-structured interviews which will be audiotaped and transcribed. I understand that the proposed length of my participation in this study will be approximately one to two hours.

I understand that my participation is voluntary. I may refuse to participate in this study. I may also withdraw from this study at any time. I may choose not to answer any question.

I understand that my research records will be kept confidential and that I will not be identified in any publication or discussion.

I understand that sections of this interview may be used in this study and in future publications, and that there will be no identifying references in any quotations used.

I understand that I have a right to have all questions about the study answered by the researcher or research advisor in sufficient detail to clearly understand the answer.

If I have any questions about the research, the procedures employed, my rights, or any other research related concern I may contact the researcher or her research advisor.

I acknowledge receiving a copy of this informed consent.

---

Researcher

Participant

Researcher : Robin Stevenson 905-523-1778  
Research advisor : Marty Laurence 519-884-1970

## **APPENDIX B**

### **CONSENT -GROUP DISCUSSION**

I understand that I am being asked to participate in a group discussion which is part of a study being conducted by Robin Stevenson, and advisor Marty Laurence, of the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University.

The purpose of this group discussion is to ensure the accuracy and credibility of the preliminary findings by allowing participants an opportunity to give feedback. This discussion will be audiotaped and transcribed. The proposed length will be approximately one to two hours.

I understand that my participation in this group is voluntary. I may refuse to participate, or withdraw at any time. I may choose not to answer any questions.

I understand that research records will be kept confidential and that I will not be identified in any publication or discussion.

I understand that sections of this group discussion may be used in the study and in future publications, and that there will be no identifying references in any quotations used.

I understand that my participation in this group discussion means that I will meet up to five of the other participants in this study.

I agree to keep the identity of the other participants confidential.

I understand that I have a right to have all questions about the study answered by the researcher or research advisor in sufficient detail to clearly understand the answer.

If I have any questions about the research, the procedures employed, my rights, or any other research related concern I may contact the researcher or her research advisor.

I acknowledge receiving a copy of this informed consent.

-----  
**Researcher**

-----  
**Participant**

**Researcher : Robin Stevenson 905-523-1778**  
**Research advisor : Marty Laurence 519-884-1970**

## APPENDIX C

### Interview Guide

1. Describe study and answer any questions the participant has about its purpose
2. Explain that the interview will be open-ended and unstructured and answer any questions the participant has about the interview process or format
3. Explain provisions for confidentiality and obtained signed consent
4. Ask participant to talk about her experiences as a lesbian in a school of social work  
Prompts if needed:
  - how out were you?
  - what influenced your decision about coming out?
  - were you out during the admissions process?
  - tell me about your experiences/feelings about other students in relation to lesbian and gay issues.
  - tell me about your experiences/feelings about faculty in relation to lesbian and gay issues.
  - what kinds of comments or discussions can you remember about lesbian and gay issues?
  - were there any other lesbian or gay male students or faculty? How did this affect you?
  - were you aware of any policies that made it easier or more difficult for you as a lesbian student?
5. Ask participant to talk about how lesbian and gay issues were addressed in social work curriculum.  
Prompts if needed:
  - what was taught on lesbian and gay issues?
  - what courses included content on lesbian and gay issues?
  - how was this content taught?
  - were issues of same-gender sexual orientation raised in class? By whom? What kind of discussion resulted?
6. Ask participant to talk about her experiences as a student in field placements  
Prompts if needed:
  - how out were you?
  - what influenced you in your decision about coming out?
  - tell me about your experiences/feelings about your supervisor and placement agency in relation to lesbian and gay issues.
  - did issues of same-gender sexual orientation ever arise in your placements? How were they addressed?
  - were you aware of any lesbian or gay clients? How did this affect you?
  - what was taught relevant to lesbian and gay issues? How was it taught?
  - what kinds of comments or discussions can you remember about lesbian or gay issues?

-were you aware of any agency policies that made your placement easier or more difficult for you as a lesbian?

(If participant has taught or is currently teaching in a school of social work)

7 Ask participant to talk about her experiences as a lesbian teaching in a school of social work

Prompts if needed

-how out were you with colleagues?

-how out were you with students?

-what influenced you in your decision about coming out?

-tell me about your experiences/feelings about colleagues in relation to lesbian and gay issues

-tell me about your experiences/feelings about students in relation to lesbian and gay issues

-what kind of comments or discussions can you remember about lesbian and gay issues?

-were there any other lesbian or gay male students or faculty? How did this affect you?

8 Ask participant to talk about how lesbian and gay issues were addressed in social work curriculum

Prompts if needed

-do you include content on lesbian and gay issues in the courses you teach?

-do you come out in the classroom? What influences your decisions about this? What responses do you get from students?

-were you aware of any policies that made it easier or more difficult for you as a lesbian faculty member?

(Ask all participants)

9 How well do you think social work education prepares to eventually provide social work services to lesbian and gay clients?

10 How would you change social work education to make it better for lesbian students and faculty?

11 How would you change social work education to better prepare students to work effectively and respectfully with lesbian and gay clients?

12 Tell me about any ideas you have about how these changes can be implemented?

13 What do you think some of the barriers to change might be?

14 What supports, resources and strategies for change do you see?

15 Is there anything that we haven't covered that you think is important?

16 How did you find the interview? Was there anything that I could have done differently that would have made it better?