

## **Fostering Research and Diversity Competencies for Students and Scholars: The Case of an Interdisciplinary Research Seminar**

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### **Abstract**

*Social work education on LGBT populations has focused on practice with, rather than the challenges of research with, LGBT people. Similarly, scholarly attention has been paid to methods for teaching about research, but there is a lack of focus on the intricacies involved in conducting research with marginalized populations. To address this gap within social work education, the authors developed a new approach for teaching LGBT research and diversity competencies: a year-long LGBT Research Seminar. This outlines the process of developing the successful seminar and highlights the project outcomes.*

**Keywords:** LGBTQ, CSWE Competencies, Research, Vulnerable Populations, Social Work Education

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) code of ethics calls for social workers to treat people with respect, avoid discrimination, and “act to prevent and eliminate...discrimination against any person, group, or class on the basis of...sexual orientation, gender identity or expression...” (NASW, 2008 p. 1). Training future social workers to have the knowledge and skills to work effectively with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, including diverse sub-populations, is critical. Research suggests that LGBT individuals may face stressors based on their minority identity that can lead to poor outcomes in mental and physical health (Meyer, 2003). LGBT individuals with multiple marginalized identities, such as people of color, may face additional risks (CAP & MAP, 2015). Social work education is key to developing ethical, competent practitioners and researchers capable of reducing human suffering and generating new knowledge (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015) about LGBT populations.

The CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) specify that in order to be accredited, BSW and MSW programs must include curriculum related to professional and ethical behavior; diversity; human rights; research; policy; engagement, assessment, and intervention with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities; and evaluation of practice (CSWE, 2015). The EPAS research and diversity competencies are particularly relevant to social work education regarding LGBT populations, as social workers are expected to recognize oppression, marginalization, privilege, and power; be self-aware of personal biases; and “apply and communicate understanding of the importance of diversity and difference in shaping life experiences in practice” (CSWE, 2015, p. 7).

The connection between research and practice with LGBT populations has not been adequately addressed in social work education to date. Social work education has sporadically attended to LGBT populations in *practice* coursework and evaluations of cultural competency (Bassett & Day, 2003; Foreman & Quinlan, 2008; May, 2010; Van Den Bergh & Crisp, 2004), although research suggests this inclusion has been inconsistent or problematic at times (Craig, Iacono, Pacey, Dentato, & Boyle, in press). Less attention has been given to training students

to address the challenges of *research* with this marginalized group. Similarly, scholarly attention has been paid to various methods for teaching about research (e.g. Steinberg & Vinjamuri, 2014; Svoboda, Williams, Jones, & Powell, 2013), but there is a lack of focus on the intricacies involved in conducting research with marginalized populations specifically. Thus, students are left wanting in terms of an in-depth understanding and appreciation for the challenges of working with and researching concerns related to LGBT individuals, particularly individuals with multiple marginalized identities.

To address this gap within social work education, and to build stronger connections between researchers and practitioners serving LGBT populations, the authors developed a new approach for teaching LGBT research and diversity competencies in conjunction: a year-long LGBT Research Seminar. By connecting students and faculty researchers in social work and related disciplines with social service providers, we enhanced our shared knowledge of LGBT research and evidence-informed service; encouraged the advancement of higher quality research and practice with this population; decreased isolation among LGBT researchers and providers; maximized collaborations; and developed an educational seminar that others can replicate in their own communities. In fact, a main goal of the LGBT Research Seminar was to create an interdisciplinary community to promote knowledge exchange among diverse stakeholders to strengthen the field of LGBT studies. This paper describes the project, including its process and outcomes, with the goals of furthering discussions surrounding the process of teaching LGBT research and diversity competencies in social work, and connecting interdisciplinary scholars and social service providers to better address the concerns of LGBT populations.

### **Why the Need for an Interdisciplinary LGBT Research Seminar?**

Addressing diversity and research competencies in social work education is vital to provide strong, evidence-based practice with LGBT populations. Increasing the methodological skills of researchers will aid in the process of ensuring that social programs and interventions are effective for LGBT populations, rigorous measurement tools are being utilized, and findings on gender and sexual minorities are more generalizable and representative of the diversity within the LGBT community (i.e. for LGBT people of color, youth, rural populations, etc.). An increased focus on rigorous research with marginalized sub-populations within the LGBT community and an understanding of identity intersections will further this field of study and improve evidence-based practices available for social workers and other helping professionals working with LGBT individuals, families, and communities.

However, the difficulty in addressing these competencies is enhanced by several cross-cutting challenges in the field. The stigma associated with LGBT populations (and consequently LGBT research), can have an impact on academic research by silencing the discussion of LGBT identities (Epprecht & Egya, 2011). For example, scholars engaged in LGBT research “may encounter misunderstandings, heterocentrism, heterosexism, homophobia, and hostility both within and outside social work programs” (LaSala, Jenkins, Wheeler, & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2008, p. 255). This may lead to a lack of conversations about LGBT research in classes or with colleagues, as well as even hesitancy to engage in LGBT research in highly stigmatized environments. Additionally, research competencies with this population may be limited given the lack of focus on teaching about the unique methodological challenges of conducting LGBT

research, including ethical dilemmas (Martin & Meezan, 2003; Mustanski, 2011), sampling and recruitment of hidden populations (D'Augelli & Grossman, 2006; Dankmeijer & Kuyper, 2006; Hartman, 2011), and a paucity of adequate measurement tools. Finally, individuals working with and on behalf of LGBT populations may experience professional isolation when seeking to increase their knowledge and understanding. Student and faculty scholars studying LGBT individuals, families, and communities may be the only one, or one of a small number, of researchers studying these topics on a particular campus. This experience can be isolating for the researcher (LaSala et al., 2008) and leave them without colleagues who fully understand the methodological challenges inherent in LGBT research.

An LGBT Research Seminar can provide opportunities for students, scholars, and practitioners to discuss these common methodological challenges (D'Augelli & Grossman, 2006; Martin & Meezan, 2003). These conversations may reduce the isolation of LGBT researchers (LaSala et al., 2008) and stigma associated with LGBT populations (Majied & Moss-Knight, 2012). In addition, LGBT research seminars that include participation across disciplines can extend methodological training and skills, and generate interdisciplinary LGBT research opportunities. Bringing together scholars and practitioners to share and exchange knowledge will further stimulate cohesion in the field.

The purpose of this paper is to outline the process of developing a successful seminar, describe project outcomes, and provide suggestions for replication. Our goal is to extend the community of methodologically-considerate and highly skillful LGBT researchers and reduce the divide between researchers and practitioners in this area. We discuss the role of social work education, specifically, as a site best suited to lead these sorts of endeavors.

### **The Process of Creating an LGBT Research Seminar**

We sought to create an LGBT Research Seminar (“The Seminar”) to address some of the stated concerns of scholars who felt isolated and unprepared to address the unique concerns of LGBT research. By expanding the knowledge base on LGBT research across our campus, particularly in social work, education, and the social sciences, we hoped to de-isolate individuals focused on LGBT populations, attract and retain students and faculty interested in LGBT research, and connect practitioners to local LGBT researchers. The project proposed to strengthen the interdisciplinary connections between students, staff, faculty, and social service providers to create a local, national, and global community of scholars focused predominantly on LGBT research methods. Additionally, it provided an approach to teaching about research with a marginalized group in a new and innovative way.

The Seminar was intentionally interdisciplinary in nature, with two doctoral-level student leaders from Social Work and Family Studies and two faculty leaders with appointments in Educational Psychology; Education Policy, Organization and Leadership; and Gender and Women’s Studies. Other student and faculty participants were from Social Work and a variety of other social sciences, as well as STEM fields. While each of the Seminar activities took place at one university, to further our goal of creating a global network of LGBT researchers, we sought participation from local social service providers, as well as scholars from other universities and research institutes internationally through email, video conferencing webinars, and attendance at

the year-end symposium. The project, in its entirety, was funded through a grant from the host university's Graduate College.

The Seminar consisted of three primary educational activities: reading and discussion groups, panel presentations, and a one-day concluding LGBT Research Symposium. Seminar topics mirrored the research process: ethical issues and considerations; the complexities and diversity of identities; innovative recruitment and sampling techniques; the importance of taking an intersectional approach; unique coding techniques to ensure valid and descriptive data; how to blend quantitative and qualitative data seamlessly; tying research to practice; the use of technology in research; and various ways to use and disseminate data (see Appendix A for a fuller description of each topic).

Reading and discussion groups were held monthly for two hours. These groups, designed similar to a journal club, allowed for in-depth discussions surrounding the methodological issues presented in the readings. Discussion group participants were encouraged to reflect not only on the assigned readings, but on their own research. Four panel presentations were held throughout the year, and expanded on topics discussed in the reading and discussion groups. Bringing together larger audiences for these panel presentations also extended the conversation beyond the small group discussions to share ideas regarding the methodological topic at hand. We also provided a link to a free, live webinar for each panel, which allowed individuals to “attend” the panel and interact with speakers in real time. We also offered continuing education units (CEUs) to licensed social workers and psychologists in attendance for several panels.

Finally, we concluded the year-long Seminar with an LGBT Research Symposium (the “Symposium”). The goal of the Symposium was to bring together an interdisciplinary group of students, researchers, and practitioners to share their experiences with LGBT research across the social sciences. The one-day Symposium included three 90-minute breakout sessions with 22 presentations and a keynote address by two experts on the utilization of LGBT research to affect policy change. Continuing education units were provided for the keynote presentation as a way of encouraging participation from researchers and practitioners alike.

### **Outcomes of the Inaugural LGBT Research Seminar**

This Seminar provided a new approach for providing specialized research training pertaining to LGBT populations, specifically by addressing the EPAS diversity and research competencies in social work education (CSWE, 2015). In designing and implementing the educational research Seminar, we hoped to bring attention to the complexities of LGBT research and decrease isolation among scholars globally, while improving our ability to engage in research with, and on behalf of, LGBT populations. To measure these outcomes, we obtained feedback from participants at the discussion groups, panel presentations, and the Symposium, and administered evaluations at the panel presentations and the Symposium. The outcomes discussed below are based on these informal and formal assessment procedures.

## **Enhanced Knowledge of Methodologies**

First, Seminar participants reported enhanced knowledge of nuanced methodological choices to be made throughout the research process. By providing a forum to discuss the complexities of LGBT research, as well as the opportunities for collaboration, participants discussed their improved ability to engage in reflexivity to produce high quality research on LGBT topics. Participants reported increased knowledge about engaging in LGBT research in the social sciences.

## **Increased Community of Scholars**

Second, the level of participation among local scholars and practitioners, as well as those from other universities, surpassed our early expectations of modest involvement by a few invested local scholars. A larger, international network of scholars engaged in LGBT research began to develop, particularly among graduate students and new professionals. The relevance of an early goal in the development of the Seminar -- to decrease isolation and increase interdisciplinary collaboration among LGBT scholars and practitioners -- was made all the more evident at the early discussion groups and panel presentations. Participants expressed the need for such a seminar and, while research topics and disciplinary backgrounds differed, participants were able to find a local community with which to examine the issues each had struggled with regarding their own research. Symposium attendees also commented on this community building; one stated that the most meaningful aspect of the Symposium was networking with other LGBT professors and researchers. These interdisciplinary connections have provided opportunities for people involved with the Seminar to find others with similar scholarly agendas, thus de-isolating them as perhaps the lone LGBT researcher in their departments.

## **Launched Annual Conference**

Finally, the LGBT Research Symposium was so successful that an annual conference has been launched to continue meeting these needs longer-term. The conference has grown in size and scope, drawing participants from across the United States and internationally, as well as growing interest from practitioners. The Symposium allowed for a larger-scale network of scholars and practitioners to discuss the issues pertaining to their LGBT research or practice.

## **Discussion**

With LGBT issues at the forefront of many social debates today (see, for examples: Brown & Kershaw, 2008; Fingerhut, Riggle, & Rostosky, 2011), researchers have an important role in providing empirical data to scientifically inform practice and policy, with the goals of reducing discrimination and promoting well-being. Social work education should be preparing scholars who can provide relevant and rigorous research on the ever-changing landscape of issues affecting LGBT populations. Further, training practitioners who can critically evaluate and utilize research with LGBT populations will enhance the work with this population.

Through this Seminar, an interdisciplinary network of scholars and practitioners focusing on LGBT research has been established that may increase collaborative and interdisciplinary

work in the field. Participation in the Seminar also challenged undergraduate and graduate students alike, as well as professional scholars and practitioners, to think critically through the methodological choices of a research study. It is hoped that participants will use the discussions from this Seminar to move forward with more advanced research and critical thinking skills to enhance the quality of work in this area and contribute to enhanced social work practice with LGBT youth, families, and communities.

Social work, in particular, is an ideal discipline to lead such an endeavor. Schools of Social Work are primed to educate other professions about the complexities inherent in LGBT research because of their characteristically interdisciplinary nature and their commitment to social justice and supporting marginalized groups. In its code of ethics, the NASW describes the importance of cultural competence and diversity; respect for the dignity and worth of the person; competence in social work practice; and requires social workers to engage in ethically sound research and evaluation, contribute to the process of knowledge-development, and “educate themselves, their students, and their colleagues about responsible research practices” (NASW, 2008, sec 5.02p). Because of the complexities involved in LGBT research, it is imperative that Schools of Social Work engage in these specialized research trainings to promote more rigorous, useful, and ethically-sound research. One innovative way to do this is through the development of interdisciplinary research seminars that focus primarily on research with LGBT populations.

Focused seminars such as this one can be used as a beneficial educational tool in the field of social work as a way to augment existing anti-oppressive frameworks and curricula, and bring greater attention to the substantive complexities that arise when working with marginalized populations. This approach can be used not just with LGBT populations, but as a way to promote research and diversity competencies overall—perhaps even with other marginalized groups. This type of seminar process can also be replicated (on perhaps a smaller scale) to connect researchers with local service providers in other communities to continue the growth of collaborative networks supporting LGBT populations.

### **Considerations for Replication**

Those who aim to replicate this Seminar project should be aware of challenges that naturally arose throughout the course of the Seminar. While the benefits of interdisciplinary study have been well-documented, engaging in interdisciplinary conversations surrounding research presented challenges. The ways in which research is approached and discussed varies greatly across disciplines. These alternative, and sometimes conflicting, theoretical lenses and standpoints, while pushing scholars to think about and engage with the work in new ways, can also feel like language barriers in interdisciplinary collaboration. However, the ability to engage in these cross-disciplinary conversations is a vital skill for future interdisciplinary and collaborative scholarship and, thus, is another beneficial outcome of this project.

Finally, although the Seminar aimed to bring together researchers and practitioners, the divide that seems to separate these groups presented difficulties at times. Both groups were invested in supporting LGBT communities, yet there were difficulties in generating equitable buy-in from researchers and practitioners about the importance of bridging the divide that sometimes separates them. For example, it can be challenging to underscore the importance of

high-quality research methods to students who are adamantly practice-oriented or engaging researchers with the idea that it is essential to make research accessible and available to practitioners. It is imperative that social work education and education within the social sciences broadly, attend to the methodological issues inherent in studying the various populations whom they serve. Social work and other related fields should be teaching students at the intersections of research, policy, and practice as they intricately inform one another in real world settings. Addressing the unique methodological challenges and opportunities inherent in conducting research with diverse populations is as vital to the field of social work as culturally competent practice with this population.

Using an interdisciplinary approach to teach specialized research through seminars similar to the one described, has the potential to move social work education beyond the practice of teaching broad, technical research skills to incorporating an anti-oppressive framework when conducting research with marginalized populations. Our focus on LGBT populations highlighted the diversity within the community, the complexity of sexual and gender identities, and particular ethical considerations, but similar concerns may exist for other marginalized groups or hard-to-reach populations, as well. Seminars such as this one have the potential to advance the way we teach research within the field of social work and engage students, faculty, and social service providers to think about research methods in new conceptual ways.

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## **Appendix A: Themes of exploration throughout the year**

### *Ethical Concerns*

We examined the unique ethical considerations that arise when studying LGBT individuals across the lifespan. We drew from the expertise of IRB reviewers and community members to discuss ethical concerns from both the institutional and participants' perspectives.

### *Defining without Stereotyping*

We examined approaches for labeling and categorizing a group which has fought to defy reductionist labels. With the variety of complex identities adopted by people to define behaviors of affection and sexuality, we discussed the possibility for coding and analysis, as well as measurement strategies for capturing such multifaceted variables.

### *Recruitment and Sampling Techniques*

Given the difficulty many researchers have in reaching hidden populations, we spent several meetings discussing recruitment and sampling techniques specific to seeking out LGBT individuals. We explored the role of insider/outsider status of the researcher, sampling techniques to use with youth, and how to access this population without 'outing' participants.

### *The Forgotten Diversity*

We focused on exploring the diversity within the LGBT community -- differences that are often ignored when studying sexuality-related topics. Specifically, we discussed research related to the elderly, and various religious and cultural groups. Our aim was to uncover the unique subcultures that exist, and yet are often blurred together, in discussing LGBT issues.

### *More than Sexual Identity*

Building on the previous discussion of diversity within the LGBT community, we focused on the idea of intersectionality. Topics included: sexuality and disability, race, class, gender, religion, and national origin with a focus on global human rights issues. We discussed how to study LGBT individuals holistically rather than pulling out one aspect of their identity.

### *Tying Research and Practice*

We hoped this seminar series would influence policy and practice work, as well as academic research. To meet this goal, we spent time discussing the mutual feedback between research and practice in community organizations, schools, and other settings with LGBT individuals. We identified gaps of learning and service that are being overlooked.

### *Tying Quantitative and Qualitative Methods*

We hoped to help students cross the boundaries between quantitative and qualitative research, providing relevant exposure to the gamut of methods and measures that are valuable in LGBT research, including mixed methods. Ways of developing standardized instruments and conducting psychometric analysis for known measures were introduced.

### *Using Technology with Research*

We examined the use of technology to conduct research with LGBT populations. We brought in examples of different technological advances (e.g. The Kinsey App, Facebook, and other social media) and how they could be used to enhance LGBT research.

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