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# Testing the “Learning Journey” of MSW Students in a Rural Program

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### Abstract

A quasi-experimental one group, pre-test post-test design with non-random convenience sampling, the researchers assessed 61 Advanced Standing MSW students who matriculated at a rural Intermountain Northwest school of social work. Changes in students' knowledge and attitudes toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) people were measured using sub-scales of the LGB-KASH scale (Worthington, Dilton, & Schutte, 2005) and include knowledge of LGB history, religious conflict, internalized affirmation of LGB people and issues, hatred and violence toward LGB people, and knowledge and attitudes toward extension and exclusion of civil rights for LGB people. Completion of required, highly experiential, bridge course content regarding LGB history and experiences appears to be significant in reducing religious conflict, increasing knowledge of LGB issues, and increasing internalized affirmativeness of LGB individuals.

People who identify themselves as gay or lesbian often face discrimination motivated by homophobia. Homophobia is an "irrational hatred, fear, or dislike of homosexuals" (Morales, 1995) and is supported through cultural norms (Herek, 1996). The experience of homophobia appears to increase as gay men and lesbian women move further from city centers into more rural areas, as residents of rural America are more likely to have homophobic attitudes toward lesbian and gay (LG) people (Herek, 1994; Wills & Crawford, 2000; Herek, 2002; Eldridge, Mack, Swank, 2006).

While rural residence is a predictor of homophobic attitudes (Snively, Kreuger, Stretch, Watt & Chadha, 2004), additional correlates include higher frequency of church attendance (Koch, Preston, Young, & Wang, 1991; Sneddon & Kreme, 1992; Fisher et al., 1994; Cramer, 1997; Herek & Glunt, 1998; Esrada & Weiss, 1999; Herek, 2002), literalist interpretation of biblical texts (Seltzer, 1992; Green, Dixon, & Gold-Neil, 1993; Marsiglio, 1993), expression of Christian righteousness through contempt of homosexuality (Plugge-Foust, 2000), lack of exposure to gay and lesbian people (Snively, Kreuger, Stretch, Watt & Chadha, 2004), and fundamentalist religious orientation (Herek & Glunt, 1993; Fisher et al., 1994; Loftus, 2001). Not surprisingly, rural residing social work students are less likely to support same-sex marriage, allowing gay men and lesbian women to serve in the military, and extending civil rights to those men and women who identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Snively, Kreuger, Stretch, Watt, & Chadha, 2004) creating a need for specific curricula designed to reduce homophobia within social work students, especially rural social work students. The intentions of this article are to underscore the influence of increased homophobia within rural communities for social work educators and MSW students, to provide a snapshot of MSW students attitudes toward LG people upon entering and exiting a rural Intermountain Northwest school of social work, and provide a description of effective learning modules for a course designed to address this gap.

## Literature Review

### Homophobia Inside the Social Work Classroom

Social workers are not unaffected by homophobia (Black, Oles, & Moore, 1998; Messinger & Topal, 1997; O'Neill, 1995). Despite a century of working for social justice, the profession did not include a formal call for social work education to include content about the oppression of gay men and lesbian women until the early nineties. And even more recently when queried, social work students and professional social workers have been among the most biased of the helping professions (DeCresenzo, 1984). Given this, the importance of consistent and effective classroom strategies to decrease homophobia among social work students becomes evident.

In spite of this commitment to social justice, improving the plight of oppressed groups, and requirements to include diversity curricula, implementation of such content may receive relatively low priority in social work programs, are often inconsistent between universities (O'Neill, 1995), and little research exists about the effectiveness of these interventions (Black, Oles, Cramer, & Bennett, 1999), thereby making effective classroom strategies designed to reduce homophobic attitudes a significant gap. Even more illusive are strategies that address the specific educational needs of students likely to enter social work programs with higher rates of homophobia such as rural students, those with little experience or exposure to out gay or lesbian individuals, and those students with more fundamental religious values (Snively, Kreuger, Stretch, Watt & Chadha, 2004). Knowing that homophobia is supported by cultural traditions that are ubiquitous in rural regions, it is essential that social work educators develop specific strategies to meet rural social work students "where they are."

### Overcoming Homophobia and Heterosexism in the Social Work Classroom

The most effective strategies for reducing homophobic attitudes are those that create an affective and cognitive response (Tyler, Jackman-Wheitner, Strader & Lenox, 1997). Students appear to see homophobia as more acceptable than other forms of oppression such as racism (Snively, Kreuger, Stretch, Watt & Chadha, 2004) and, therefore, instructors must deliberately articulate the connection between homophobia and other types of oppression.

Social work educators use a variety of methods to increase student appreciation of diversity. One of the most common methods is providing focused readings about the experiences of vulnerable and oppressed populations such as gay men and lesbians. However, educational readings alone are not sufficient to generate a significant decrease in homophobic attitudes (Pratarelli & Donaldson, 1997; Cotton-Huston & Waite, 2000). This is especially important to note if all reading materials are not covered in class. While readings alone do not appear to stimulate a paradigm shift necessary to ensure cultural competence, other techniques have emerged that are promising.

Students who lack exposure to people who identify as gay or lesbian are more likely to be homophobic (Snively, Kreuger, Stretch, Watt & Chadha, 2004; Little & Marx, 2002; Black, Oles, & Moore, 1998) and rural residing students are less likely to have exposure to out gay men and lesbian women. Even a brief encounter, such as a LG panel presentation with a social work class, or with an openly lesbian woman or gay man decreases negative views of LG people (Cotton-Huston & Waite, 2000). Yet, increasing the quality of the encounter with an openly LG person also seems to be correlated to greater reduction in homophobic attitudes. For instance, those people with an openly LG family member or close friend are also less likely to have negative attitudes toward LG people (Berkman-Ziberg, 1997). Further, the longer and more intimate the relationship, the more significant the change in negative attitudes and willingness to oppose oppressive legislation and practices (Berkman-Ziberg, 1997). Among social work students, having an openly LG peer was more likely to reduce homophobic attitudes than work with openly LG clients, administrators, or faculty (Eldridge, Mack & Swank, 2006; Berkman & Siberg, 1997). When paired with lecture on heterosexism, oppression, or homophobia movies (Walters, 1994) and role-play (McGregor, 1993) are also an effective way to decrease homophobia.

Interventions aimed at the micro level alone may leave students with a great deal of empathy directed at injustices suffered by LG individuals, but few skills to provide interventions at the community level to alleviate such injustices. Thus, social work educators must also emphasize how effective community level interventions can generate positive change (Snively, Kreuger, Stretch, Watt & Chadha, 2004) and provide tangible techniques to approach rural communities.

## Method

Using a quasi-experimental one group, pre-test post-test design with non-random convenience sampling, the researchers assessed new Advanced Standing MSW students' internal development of affirmativeness, civil rights attitudes, knowledge, religious conflict, and hate pertaining to people who are lesbian, gay, or bi-sexual (LGB). The five domains of study were measured using sub-scales of the LGB-KASH scale (Worthington, Dilton, & Schutte, 2005).

## Sample

The sample frame consisted of the population of 61 Advanced Standing MSW students who matriculated at a rural Intermountain Northwest school of social work and were thus enrolled in a required diversity course—*Advanced Issues of Human Diversity*. Students were assigned to four class sections of approximately 15 students each. In the first class session, after informed consent, all students were afforded the opportunity to voluntarily complete the pre-test questionnaire, which was provided in paper form; 100 percent of students completed the pre-test. At post-test, which was conducted at the last class session, five students did not complete the questionnaire. Thus, the study sample was comprised of 56 students enrolled in the course and who completed both pre and post-test questionnaires. The five students who did not complete the post-test questionnaire did not significantly differ in demographic measures (age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, relationship status, number of children, religion, or patterned attendance at religious services) from students who completed the post-test. Participants reflect general patterns of student demographics in the Intermountain Northwest School of social work under study.

Students participating in the study had an average age of 32.08 years. While there was variation in self-expressed sexual orientation, 82 percent of students (n = 46) identified as “exclusively heterosexual,” while 13 percent (n = 7) identified as “predominantly heterosexual, only incidentally homosexual,” four percent (n = 2) identified as “predominantly heterosexual, but more than incidentally homosexual,” and one percent (n = 1) identified as “equally homosexual and heterosexual.” The majority of students were female (84%). While 70 percent of students were in a “partnered” relationship status, 32 percent identified as “single.” Students had an average 1.5 children per household, with 46 percent of students (n = 26) identifying as the parent of a child/children. Surprisingly, given the rural context of the MSW program, 25 percent of students (n = 14) did not self-identify as having a religious affiliation, with another 43 percent (n = 24) identifying as “other” (presumably including a large subset who affiliate with the Church of Jesus Christ of Later Day Saints, given the large concentration of 5Mormons in the community-surround and the significant number of incoming students who identified on their application to the program as “Mormon”), while 20 percent (n = 11) identified as Catholic, nine percent (n = 5) as Protestant, and one percent (n = 1) as Hindu. Furthermore, while 30 percent (n = 17) do not attend religious services, 41 percent (n = 23) attend “often” or “very often” and another 29 percent (n = 16) attend “hardly ever” or “not so often.”

## Course Design

Recognizing the need for individualized education among rural residing students to reduce homophobia, participants were enrolled in and completed a mandatory ‘bridge course’ on advanced issues of human diversity designed to augment knowledge obtained in the Bachelor of Social Work coursework and in preparation for commencement of Advanced Standing Master of Social Work coursework. The class met twice a week, for three hours per class, for eight weeks. The course was highly experiential, requiring overt and candid investigation of personal identity development. Course educational objectives included: (1) demonstration of commitment to seeking strengths in all forms of human diversity; (2) articulation of student’s own identity development process and its implication for social work practice; and (3)

demonstration of commitment to critical self-assessment and reflective practice. A significant portion of the course was dedicated to presentation of oppression, and identity development and direct and intentional correlations to LG experiences were made.

### **Data Collection**

A staff member who was not a part of the research team provided informed consent documents at the conclusion of the first class meeting. The staff member provided a verbal explanation including the purpose of the study, efforts to maintain confidentiality, and instructions to contact a member of the research team or IRB for further clarification. Paper pre-test questionnaires were provided to students who self-selected to participate. Students were instructed to list their first and last initial and the last four digits of their Social Security Number (SSN) on the questionnaire for tracking purposes. The completed questionnaires were placed in an envelope, which was then sealed and returned to a research assistant who did not have access to students' names or SSN. Data from the questionnaire were entered into an electronic database, which was password protected. The paper questionnaires were destroyed upon completion of the study. These procedures were repeated at the last class meeting for the post-test measures. Students were provided the same questionnaire packet, minus the demographic measures, at the post-test. Once the post-test scores were entered into the database, the case identifiers were erased so the researchers could not identify participants.

### **Instruments**

Students were provided with a questionnaire packet that consisted of an informed consent letter, demographic face sheet, and measures of knowledge and attitudes about people who are lesbian, gay or bisexual on the LGB-KASH scale. The LGB-KASH is a 28-item scale that measures five domains of the subject's knowledge and attitude about people who are lesbian, gay, or bi-sexual: Internalized Affirmativeness (5 items); Civil Rights Attitudes (5 items); Knowledge (5 items); Religious Conflict (7 items); and Hate (6 items). Each of the items in the subscales is measured by a Likert scale (range 1-6), from *very uncharacteristic of me or my views* (1) to *very characteristic of me or my views* (6). The subscale scores are summed totals of each item within the subscale. Examples of items from each of the domains include: "I have close friends who are LGB" (Internalized Affirmativeness); "I think marriage should be legal for same sex couples" (Civil Rights Attitudes); "I am knowledgeable about the significance of the Stonewall Riot to the Gay Liberation Movement" (LGB Knowledge); "I keep my religious views to myself in order to accept LGB people" (Religious Conflict); "I sometimes think about being violent toward LGB people" (Hate). See Table 1 for sub-scales and measured items.

The LGB-KASH has high discriminat validity, as well as internal consistency and validity. Test-retest reliability scores for each of the domains are reported as: Internalized Affirmativeness ( $\alpha = .90$ ) Civil Rights ( $\alpha = .85$ ); LGB Knowledge ( $\alpha = .85$ ); Religious Conflict ( $\alpha = .77$ ); and Hate ( $\alpha = .76$ ). Internal consistency was measured as: Internalized Affirmativeness ( $\alpha = .59$  to  $.90$ ); Civil Rights ( $\alpha = .73$  to  $.92$ ); Knowledge ( $\alpha = .81$ ); Religious Conflict ( $\alpha = .54$  to  $.76$ ); and Hate ( $\alpha = .68$  to  $.81$ ) (Worthington, et al., 2005).

**Table 1 LGB-KASH Subscales**

<b>LGB Knowledge</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I feel qualified to educate others about how to be affirmative regarding LGB issues.</li> <li>2. I could educate others about the history and symbolism behind the “pink triangle.”</li> <li>3. I am knowledgeable about the significance of the Stonewall Riot to the Gay Liberation Movement.</li> <li>4. I am familiar with the work of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.</li> <li>5. I am knowledgeable about the history and mission of the PFLAG organization.</li> </ol>
<b>Civil Rights</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I think marriage should be legal for same sex couples.</li> <li>2. Hospitals should acknowledge same sex partners equally to any other next of kin.</li> <li>3. It is important to teach children positive attitudes toward LGB people.</li> <li>4. Health benefits should be available equally to same sex partners as to any other couple.</li> <li>5. It is wrong for courts to make child custody decisions based on a parent’s sexual orientation.</li> </ol>
<b>Internalized Affirmativeness</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I have close friends who are LGB.</li> <li>2. Feeling attracted to another person of the same sex would not make me uncomfortable.</li> <li>3. I would display a symbol of gay pride (pink triangle, rainbow, etc.) to show my support of the LGB community.</li> <li>4. I have had sexual fantasies about a member of my same sex.</li> <li>5. I would attend a demonstration to promote LGB rights.</li> </ol>
<b>Religious Conflict</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. I have conflicting attitudes or beliefs about LGB people.</li> <li>2. I can accept LGB people even though I condemn their behavior.</li> <li>3. I have difficulty reconciling my religious views with my interest in being accepting of LGB people.</li> <li>4. I keep my religious views to myself in order to accept LGB people.</li> <li>5. I conceal my negative views toward LGB people when I am with someone who doesn’t share my views.</li> <li>6. I try not to let my negative beliefs about LGB people harm my relationships with lesbian, gay, or bisexual individuals I know.</li> <li>7. I conceal my positive attitudes toward LGB people when I am with someone who is homophobic.</li> </ol>
<b>Hate</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. It is important to me to avoid LGB individuals.</li> <li>2. I would be unsure what to do or say if I met someone who is openly lesbian, gay, or bisexual.</li> <li>3. Hearing about a hate crime against a LGB person would not bother me.</li> <li>4. I sometimes think about being violent toward LGB people.</li> <li>5. I would feel self-conscious greeting a known LGB person in a public place.</li> <li>6. LGB people deserve the hatred they receive.</li> </ol>

## Data Analyses

SPSS 17.0 was used to complete data analyses. Data were entered and summary variables were checked for any missing data. Because five respondents did not complete the post-test, their scores were dropped from analysis. A paired samples t-test was completed for each domain of the LGB-KASH scale to determine if measured changes from pre-test to post-test were statistically significant ( $\alpha = .05$ ).

## Findings

As is seen in Table 2, of the five domains tested, significantly different mean scores from pre to post-test were found in Knowledge (KashKnow mean = 11.29, KashKnow2 mean = 16.57;  $t = -7.88$ ,  $p = .000$ ), Religious Conflict (KashRelConflict mean = 17.92, KashRelConflict2 mean = 16.69;  $t = 2.17$ ,  $p = .035$ ), and Internalized Affirmativeness (KashInternal mean = 16.90, KashInternal2 mean = 18.06;  $t = -2.76$ ,  $p = .008$ ), while the other two domains, Hate (KashHate) and Civil Rights (KashRights) did not yield significantly different mean scores from pre to post-test.

Paired Samples	Mean	Residual	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig.
KashKnow	11.29	-5.27	4.78	-7.88	55	.000
KashKnow2	16.57					
KashRelConflict	17.92	1.24	4.07	2.17	55	.035
KashRelConflict2	16.69					
KashInternal	16.90	-1.16	2.99	-2.76	55	.008
KashInternal2	18.06					
KashHate	6.92	-.412	2.81	-1.04	55	.300
KashHate2	7.33					
KashRights	25.35	.000	4.04	.000	55	1.00
KashRights2	25.35					

For the three significantly different pre to post-test means, residuals indicate the amount of movement on the Likert scale for the domain measured. For the domain 'Knowledge,' participants moved up the scale 5.27 points from 11.29 at pre-test to 16.57 post-test, out of a possible maximum subscale score of 30 points. In regards to Religious Conflict, participants experienced a slight decrease in internalized religious conflict, moving down the scale 1.24 points, out of a possible low score of zero. Finally, regarding Internalized Affirmativeness, participants scored slightly higher pre to post-test, moving up 1.16 points, from 16.9 to 18.06 out of a possible 25 points.

## Discussion

For the three domains that yielded significant changes in the mean scores on the KASH subscales, residuals indicate movement in the lessening of the participants' homophobia. Students seem to perceive substantial acquirement of knowledge regarding LG populations, having moved more than five points up the scale. However, with only approximately 17 points out of 30 possible, students self-perceive as still having much room for growth in knowledge of LG populations. Interestingly, as the participants' knowledge goes up, their internal religious conflict decreases, albeit by a small margin. Further, as with Knowledge, participants still remain fairly religiously conflicted about the LG population, with a score of nearly 17 points away from absence of reported internal religious conflict (signified by a score of zero). Adding evidence to the positive impact of the bridge course being tested, the participants indicated a growing

internal affirmativeness towards LG populations. Again, as with the other two domains, there is still quite a bit of growth needed in internalized affirmativeness in the group of participants being studied, having scored 18 points out of 25 possible on the post-test.

While the results of the study seem to indicate the importance of the course as a means of helping incoming Advanced Standing students journey towards preparedness to work with and advocate for members of LG populations, the study methodology does not lend to providing strong evidence. Some concerns in the design include the absence of a comparison group of Advanced Standing students who have not received a bridge course. It is possible that all students entering the MSW program are socialized into readiness to work with members of LG populations through the multiple methods of messaging that faculty, practicum instructors, and fellow students employ in the informal educational process inherent in any MSW program. Along similar lines, when students enter an Advanced Standing cohort, they seem to most often develop into a community of learners, where mores and norms regarding communication in discussion regarding LG populations are shaped positively more than negatively. Further, without a comparison group, it is unknown if the instructors of the course themselves are the cause of change, perhaps compelling students to respond at the post-test in socially desirable ways that would meet the expectations of a professor they have come to know and, presumably, admire. Finally, without more sophisticated design in the methodology, it is unknown if outside events and other classes or learning sources had as much or more to do with the changes that were observed than the class itself.

The limitations notwithstanding, this study has provided an indication that bridge courses in human diversity are a necessary piece of Advanced Standing MSW curriculum in programs where students come from rural, remote communities in which encountering LG populations is unlikely and often socially prohibited. Careful design and implementation of an experiential human diversity course is a good start for the learning journey towards bias free delivering of professional social work services. Further investigation should include expansion of sample size to include multiple cohorts and expansion of data collection to include comparison groups of Advanced Standing students attending universities in urban settings. It would also be noteworthy to consider the differences between Advanced Standing and Two-Year students.

## **Implications**

### **Increasing Knowledge**

Knowledge in relation to the history of oppression and discrimination experienced by lesbian and gay persons significantly increased thus suggesting that presentation of historic events such as the Stonewall Riots, the history and significance symbols such as the pink triangle, and resources such as the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and PFLAG are effective tools in combating homophobia among rural residing MSW students.

### **Decreasing Religious Conflict**

Rural residing MSW students are more likely to hold fundamental religious beliefs that contradict social work's position on equality and affirmation of LG identities that may generate significant intrapersonal conflict for students. Thus, social work educators must acknowledge the allusion of personal values, especially the intersection of faith driven, personal, and professional values. Students experienced a significant decrease in religious conflict at the conclusion of the bridge course indicating they less likely to be stalled by the dichotomy of a personal and professional desire to affirm a LG individual and their religious/moral convictions suggesting otherwise. Respondents reported less need to repress acceptance of LG lifestyles to openly homophobic individuals and less difficulty reconciling personal religious views and their interest in accepting LGB people. Results indicate that the participating students held significant religious beliefs and traditions that were generating intrapersonal conflict that can be significantly alleviated with specific instruction related to religious tolerance.

### Acknowledging the Multidimensionality of Homophobia

Educators should come to view homophobia as not one-dimensional, but rather a complex component of identity that includes dimensions of knowledge of LGB history and oppression, beliefs about the extension or exclusion of civil rights, religious attitudes and traditions, and avoidance and violence toward LGB persons. Much like the model of White Identity Development postulated by Helms (1990), decreasing homophobia within any given individual may move forward and backward in any given dimension without changing other dimensions. Educators understanding the multidimensionality of homophobia as a central aspect of identity will encourage students to engage in exploration of their own identity striving for critical consciousness of sexual self-awareness, sexual privilege, religious conflict and messages, social construction of stereotypes, sexual mores and prejudice that prevent willingness to engage in prosocial advocacy on behalf of LGB individuals. Assignments requiring such exploration were a part of this bridge course and appear to have significantly impacted students as they were more willing to participate in advocacy activities such as attending demonstrations and rallies that promote LGB rights and displaying a symbol of GLB support.

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