



Teaching Note -- Challenges In The Classroom On LGBTQ Topics And Christianity In Social Work

By: Adrienne Dessel, **Denise L. Levy**, Terrence O. Lewis, David McCarty-Caplan, Jeanna Jacobsen, and Laura Kaplan

Abstract

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ABSTRACT

This article provides guidance in facilitating the development of culturally sensitive skills for working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) populations that take into account power and privilege. Social work faculty and students have an ethical obligation to be competent and aware of privilege. When working with LGBTQ populations, this means addressing personal and social values and beliefs about gender and sexuality. Faculty may not feel prepared to address the influence of Christianity, the dominant religion in the United States, on social forces affecting LGBTQ populations and on social workers' religious feelings when working with these individuals. This article describes pedagogical techniques and provides guidance for developing faculty and student competence and awareness when working with LGBTQ populations.

Research suggests social work education does not adequately prepare students to work with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people and that LGBTQ faculty and students frequently feel uncomfortable or unwelcome in schools of social work, and Christian students have particularly low self-perceived competence to work with LGBTQ clients (Craig, McInroy, Dentato, Austin, & Messinger, 2015; LaSala, Jenkins, Wheeler, & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2008; McCarty-Caplan, 2017). Christianity includes many different denominations and groups whose beliefs range from traditional to progressive, and even within denominations, views about LGBTQ individuals are diverse (Levy, 2014; Lewis, 2015). This article focuses on conflicts between some conservative Christian beliefs and LGBTQ topics (Dessel & Bolen, 2014) and how these conflicts may influence social work education and the ability to ethically practice with LGBTQ populations. These conflicts may be particularly strong for individuals who identify as very religious, say that God plays a critical role in their lives, hold a literal view of the Bible, and believe that same-sex behaviors are sinful (Cragun & Sumerau, 2015; Jackle & Wenzelburger, 2015).

The intersection of these two topics continues to cause significant tension among social workers in social work practice (Dessel et al., 2017). However, given that social work education is expected to encourage self-reflection on intersections of personal identity and practice competence, religion is an important aspect of personal identity, and Christianity holds a privileged position in the dominant U.S. discourse, it is incumbent on social work faculty to engage students in a dialogue about how religious identity may affect one's capacity to support LGBTQ populations. Achieving this objective requires faculty to develop their own LGBTQ cultural competence and the communication skills necessary to facilitate challenging conversations about LGBTQ-affirmative social work practice (Morrow & Messinger, 2006).

The purpose of this article is to address faculty needs related to improving discussions of LGBTQ topics and conservative Christianity in social work education. First, we offer a brief review of the guidelines for culturally competent practice established by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2015) and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2015). Second, we share recommendations for the development of faculty self-awareness, knowledge, and skills for culturally competent practice with LGBTQ populations. Third, we provide recommendations for helping students to engage in this process as new social work practitioners, supplemented with additional resources regarding LGBTQ-affirmative social work practice.

Power, privilege, and competence: A developmental, continual process

Social work faculty and students have an ethical obligation to continuously pursue greater cultural competence, which includes understanding issues of power and privilege. The practice literature offers several definitions for cultural or multicultural competence (Cooper & Lesser, 2011; Murphy & Dillon, 2011; Sue, 2006). According to Sue (2006), culturally competent social work involves “the acquisition of awareness, knowledge, and skills needed to function effectively in a pluralistic democratic society ... [the] ability to communicate, interact, negotiate, and intervene on behalf of clients from diverse backgrounds” (p. 29). The NASW (2015) and the CSWE (2015) established standards for practice that require social workers to use evidenced-based knowledge, the best available research, practice wisdom, and critical self-reflection as tools in their development of cultural competence and explorations of power and privilege. A full discussion of the practice standards and competencies is beyond the scope of this article; instead, the focus is on the NASW’s first four standards: ethics and values, self-awareness, cross-cultural knowledge, and cross-cultural skills, which represent social workers’ internal developmental process of cultural competence as well as their explorations of power and privilege. Building on this foundation, social workers can deliver services, foster empowerment, and provide advocacy that honors the worth and dignity of every human being across diverse social identities. Although these principles can be applied when addressing all forms of diversity, this article demonstrates how to specifically apply the principles to issues related to conservative Christian beliefs that may conflict with affirming LGBTQ identities.

We draw from an expanded framework of cultural competence that suggests it is important for faculty to simultaneously address concepts of intersectionality, critical consciousness, and cultural humility in the context of power and privilege. Intersectionality expands the concept of identity and recognizes that people have multiple intersecting identities and experience privilege and oppression based on these interrelated identities (Dessel & Corvidae, 2017; Parent, DeBlaere, & Moradi, 2013). Thus, dialogue on this topic should not polarize the issue as Christian versus LGBTQ but recognize the multiple identities that coexist and interact between and in religious and sexual or gender identities (Thumma & Edward, 2005). Critical consciousness, a concept developed by Freire (1970), extends the idea of awareness of self and others and includes both a deep understanding of power, privilege, and oppression and a call to action (Case & Lewis, 2012). Taken together, the concepts in this framework assist in understanding the whole person as well as multifaceted systems of oppression, such as heterosexual or Christian privilege. Using this expanded framework of cultural competence with the concept of cultural humility means recognizing that pursuing competence is a goal with no finite end point. Rather, cultural competence means engaging in a lifelong process of critical self-reflection, acknowledging a client as expert in his or her own experience, and identifying and challenging power hierarchies in the client and social worker relationship and oppressive structures of social institutions (Azzopardi & McNeill, 2016). We include all these concepts in our framework and use the term *cultural competence* to encompass an expanded developmental process of cultural humility, critical consciousness on power and privilege, and an understanding of intersectionality.

Therefore, cultural competence related to conservative Christian beliefs and LGBTQ populations should be ongoing and may involve critically reflecting on various historical perspectives,

understanding the power of words, and reframing scripture and religious traditions (Bowland, Foster, & Vosler, 2013). Rather than assuming specific beliefs or experiences simply because someone identifies as Christian, individuals should be open to the diverse range of Christian beliefs. In fact, many cisgender, heterosexual Christians work as allies to support social justice for LGBTQ populations (Lewis, 2015). In the same vein, LGBTQ individuals will have different experiences with religious institutions and hold diverse spiritual beliefs (Lewis, 2015; Thumma & Edward, 2005). Some LGBTQ individuals may experience homophobia and heterosexism from conservative Christian beliefs and practices (Bates, 2005; Brice, 2014), whereas others may experience welcoming and affirming congregations.

The learning process: Faculty journey

Faculty ethics, values, self-awareness, knowledge, and skills are critical components for effectively teaching students how to competently practice with LGBTQ populations. Faculty should model the lifelong learning process for students, which includes assessing the gaps in our own knowledge and skills, acknowledging our own discomfort with the topic or with potential student conflict, and actively engaging in the ongoing process of cultural competence. Questions faculty can ask themselves to develop self-awareness include, What are my personal social identities (e.g., sexual orientation, religious identity) related to these topics (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007)? How might all of my different and intersecting social identities influence the conversations (Dessel & Corvidae, 2017)? Am I aware of the power and privileges that society attributes to me because of my social identities, and the potential impact on my perspectives as a social work educator (Miller & Garran, 2008)? For example, how does being a Christian woman differ from being a Christian man in this conversation, or how does being a White LGBTQ person differ from being an LGBTQ person of color?

Faculty should also assess their knowledge base about the pertinent issues such as social work ethics and evidence-based practice with LGBTQ populations (Austin et al., 2016; Craig et al., 2016; Dessel et al., 2017; Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2015); guidelines for creating LGBTQ-friendly campuses (Messinger, 2009); the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ students, Christian students, and students with both these identities, as well as other intersecting identities (Craig et al., 2016; Joslin, Dessel, & Woodford, 2016); the scholarly literature on the topics of religion and sexual orientation, particularly on sensitive topics such as referring clients and reparative therapy (Craig, Austin, & Alessi, 2013; Dessel, 2014; Dessel et al., 2017; Levy, 2011; Maccio, 2010); micro practice factors (biological and psychological factors, stereotypes, social dominance orientation, gender essentialism) (Alessi, 2013; Collazo, Austin, & Craig, 2013; Morrow & Messinger, 2006); and macro practice factors (social identity, societal and structural oppressions such as heterosexism and religious privilege, socialization, segregation, processes involved in this social justice issue, and relevant policies; Adams et al., 2007; Maccio, 2010; Newman & Fantus, 2015).

Moving from critical self-assessment to the active pursuit of new knowledge and skills, faculty may consider the following guiding questions: What are the gaps in my knowledge about LGBTQ populations or conservative Christian social work students and serving these populations? Where would I go to gain more knowledge and skills in these areas? What are specific steps I am willing to take now to develop my knowledge and skills? What formal training resources are available through my college or university (e.g., LGBTQ 101, ally training sessions, courses rooted in LGBTQ perspectives)? What evidenced-based resources are available through my professional organizations? For example, the CSWE Learning Academy (<https://learningacademy.cswe.org/>) and the Council on Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Expression have produced articles and online training modules about culturally responsive and competent practice with LGBTQ populations (Craig et al., 2016; Dessel et al., 2017). In addition to formal professional development opportunities, faculty may find support from their own networks of colleagues and mentors.

In addition to engaging in an ongoing process of developing cultural competence, faculty should reflect on their comfort level and skills with facilitating discussions on LGBTQ topics and religion (Dessel, 2014; Melville-Wiseman, 2013). To facilitate student dialogue, faculty need to first consider what they need to become more comfortable with when engaging with these topics in the classroom. Understanding personal emotions over these topics can help faculty to identify and address triggers that support student engagement in the discussion rather than shutting down the conversation. However, this personal work should occur prior to the classroom because of the potential harm that could result in unintentionally using power to diminish either LGBTQ students or Christian students who may be struggling with how to affirm LGBTQ individuals given their religious beliefs. Social work students will be at various levels of competency and different stages of willingness to engage in critical reflection and change. Start where the students are and help support their process (Miller & Garran, 2008). It may be useful to consider various resources for addressing these topics in the classroom, such as bringing in materials or representatives from LGBTQ-affirming organizations and churches. Classroom presentations and conversations with LGBTQ-affirming religious representatives may have more influence with students who hold homophobic and heterosexist religious beliefs.

For more advanced learners, faculty can deepen their engagement with what it means to be LGBTQ, Christian, and a LGBTQ Christian. An intersectional approach can also be helpful in terms of learning about multiple levels of oppression (Rivera, 2017). For example, an African American transgender woman of Christian faith may experience racism, sexism, and transphobia. In addition, she may experience significant stigmatization and alienation within the African American Christian community (Griffin, 2006; Lewis, 2015). Culturally competent social work practice requires careful listening and respectful understanding of the multidimensional lived reality of every client, including identifying sources of strength and empowerment and sources of challenge and oppression (Alessi, 2014; Miller & Garran, 2008).

Finally, these topics do not come without risks and challenges. Faculty need to consider the challenges that may be unique to their educational setting and seek support from faculty colleagues as needed. For instance, faculty in religious institutions may not have the same supports as those in secular settings. Despite risks, faculty should be willing to step into discomfort and have challenging conversations (Laman, Jewett, Jennings, Wilson, & Souto-Manning, 2016) to model for students how to approach topics that may trigger intense emotions and discuss them in a manner that is respectful of the diversity in and beyond the classroom. Drawing on social work skills used in broader practice, faculty can model empathy, reframing, genuineness, imperfection, and mediation as they create space for diverse students grappling with this topic. Difficult conversations and teachable moments require social work faculty to create a learning environment that balances emotional safety and brave vulnerability, courageous honesty and humble listening, critical self-reflection, and constructive critical feedback (Dessel et al., 2017; Miller & Garran, 2008). Faculty can incorporate their own personal sharing to the degree that they feel comfortable doing so. This can be done as an example of balancing social power in the room and modeling for others how to share their experiences but not at the expense of the faculty's safety or creating a situation where students feel intimidated to share an opposing viewpoint.

As part of these classroom discussions, LGBTQ students could experience hostility (Chinell, 2011; Dentato, Craig, Messinger, Lloyd, & McInroy, 2014; Furrow, 2012). In attending to power dynamics, faculty need to address microaggressions that may occur and also ensure that diverse perspectives are included. If faculty members encounter a student who is uncomfortable or hostile toward LGBTQ issues because of religious or other beliefs, it is helpful to meet separately with the student to discuss relevant academic behavioral standards, including the NASW (2017) *Code of Ethics* and the CSWE's (2015) core competencies. Understanding students' perspectives and starting where they are in their maturity and learning may be instrumental in helping them appreciate the importance of change to develop cultural competence (Craig et al., 2016; Miller & Garran, 2008). Furthermore, it may be appropriate to engage students in a discussion of the reality that all social workers, regardless of their LGBTQ-related beliefs, will likely be required to

support LGBTQ clients. Juxtaposing this professional reality with the expectations of the *Code of Ethics* can be an immensely important challenge for all students to examine and integral to their self-reflection on their choice of career.

Additionally, faculty need to be critically aware of their position in the classroom. Because of factors like their academic credentials, grading power, age, or experience, many faculty reflect a level of power that can intimidate or silence students. It is important for faculty to recognize this dynamic and take action to minimize its negative impact on classroom discussions, especially with complex topics like the intersections of religion and LGBTQ issues.

The learning process: Supporting a student's journey

Skills are also needed to create an inclusive classroom environment where all students can tackle tough questions regarding LGBTQ identity and cultural competence when considering certain conservative Christian belief systems. Because religion can be the fundamental identity individuals use to model their lives and make decisions, any idea or topic that challenges a student's religious beliefs can be disorienting and confusing. Still, the classroom is an important place for students to explore biases and learn about various cultures and issues related to identity, power, and oppression (Adams et al., 2007). In addition to learning about others, students can also explore and examine their own identities and cultures. However, students who represent a minority identity should not be tokenized or expected to teach the class about their experiences related to identity and oppression and asked to represent an entire population or group (Miller & Garran, 2008).

Students may experience conflict between their religious beliefs and affirmation of LGBTQ people and may not know how to express themselves in class discussions. On the other hand, LGBTQ allies may have little patience for beliefs they perceive as discriminatory. These conflicts are important learning moments that can be addressed in the classroom, if appropriate, or in one-on-one consultations. Faculty should provide a space to discuss these differences that accommodates discomfort while holding students to the *Code of Ethics* (NASW, 2017). There are a number of resources to support social work students' exploration of these topics (Dessel & Bolen, 2014; Lewis, 2015).

Faculty can create a classroom environment that encourages sharing, safety, reflective learning, vulnerability, and bravery (Dessel, 2014; Miller & Garran, 2008). Attention to physical space is one approach, such as arranging chairs in a circle without tables, and small-group work. Icebreakers and personal narratives can be used to create a safe space and community. Community agreements or class guidelines developed with students is another approach. Establishing ground rules based on the NASW's (2017) *Code of Ethics* and providing students with a clear path to address hostility may encourage a safer space. Students should be reminded that in addition to refraining from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity or religion, the *Code of Ethics* requires social workers to treat colleagues with respect and for social work educators to evaluate students in a way that is fair and respectful. Faculty should talk with students about how to create a classroom environment where they can explore their own beliefs systems and gain the knowledge necessary for affirmative and ethical practice with LGBTQ populations (Dessel & Bolen, 2014; Levy, 2011; Lewis, 2015; Melville-Wiseman, 2013). Community agreements can include sharing time to speak and moving up or moving back, honoring confidentiality, using *I* statements, actively listening, suspending judgment and examining one's own assumptions, communicating honestly and authentically, having respectful dialogue even when disagreeing, committing to learn more about different viewpoints and perspectives, and reflecting on one's own contributions to the discussion. In this way, students can move from safe spaces to brave spaces that offer the opportunity for continued learning. Indeed, these community agreements combined with authentic, vulnerable sharing provides an environment where gentle challenging of assumptions and identification of microaggressions in a classroom can occur.

Another way to discuss such topics can be to use activities like anonymized question-and-answer in-class electronic surveys (e.g., Kahoot! or Poll Everywhere) or data from research that has examined social worker views on LGBTQ issues as conversation starters. Using such anonymized

individual or aggregated information can reveal real-world diversity in social work pertaining to intersections of religious identity and LGBTQ topics, without outing any individual student's identity or beliefs. Finally, faculty can incorporate experiential learning activities to examine socialization, power, nonviolent communication practices, social justice coalitions, and ally work (Dessel, 2014; Lane, Chiarelli-Helminiak, Bohrman, & Lewis, 2017).

Concluding thoughts

The development of cultural competence and cultural humility is a collaborative educational process that requires critical self-awareness, the pursuit of culturally valid and empirically based sources of knowledge, the use of evidenced-based practice with diverse populations, and reflective evaluations of practice. The CSWE (2015) and the NASW (2017) provide standards for culturally competent practice; however, social work faculty have the challenging responsibility of developing curriculum and teaching methods to help students meet those standards.

From the stance of being lifelong learners, faculty can prepare to teach LGBTQ subject matter by engaging in critical self-assessment and developing knowledge about power and privilege. With this foundation, faculty can create a learning environment that empowers students to engage in their own journeys toward LGBTQ cultural competence, which honors the equal worth and dignity of LGBTQ communities and takes into account that competence is a goal that is never fully reached. In today's society, it is rare to find diverse individuals talking openly and respectfully about difficult topics. May our profession and our classrooms be examples to others.

Notes on contributors

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Additional Resources

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