

BREAKING THE SILENCE: SEXUAL ORIENTATION IN SOCIAL WORK FIELD EDUCATION

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The purpose of this study was to explore field instructors' experiences and insights in working with lesbian and gay MSW students. In-depth 1- to 1.5-hour interviews were conducted with 8 field instructors selected using purposive sampling. Data were analyzed using narrative thematic analysis and a constant comparative method. One set of themes emerged across all informants; a second set emerged exclusively from lesbian- and gay-identified informants. Dynamic interactions among the student, the field instructor–student relationship, and the agency context suggest the importance of moving beyond individual-level conceptualizations to address sexual orientation-related barriers and opportunities in field education.

FIELD EDUCATION, MORE SO than any other component of the social work curriculum, challenges students to integrate professional knowledge, values, and skills into their personal identity and sense of self. This multifaceted integration is clearly a process that takes place over the span of professionals' careers, as social workers examine, deconstruct, and reconstruct values, beliefs, and preferred practice approaches. However, opportunities early in students' professional education are crucial for learning about the ways in which the personal self and professional self are interrelated

(Bogo, 1993; Grossman, Levine-Jordano, & Shearer, 1990). Field educators and students have underscored the importance of an open, supportive, and trusting relationship with a field instructor as the ideal place for reflection on practice, increasing self-awareness, revealing vulnerabilities, and learning how to relate to clients (Bogo, Globerman, & Sussman, 2004; Walter & Young, 1999).

Conceptual frameworks that address educational processes in the field instructor–student relationship have generally been articulated at a broad level with the implication

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that they would apply to all students. For example, Bogo and Vayda (1998) provided a model that includes reflection on how personal aspects of the self are understood by students and brought into their practice both intentionally and in subtle and unintentional ways. They identified a wide range of individual student identity characteristics as illustrative of self issues that students are concerned with as well as approaches for field instructors. Recent empirical studies focused on educational processes for helping students with personal and professional integration have found that students in the final year of their social work programs improved in their ability to achieve a greater differentiation of their personal and professional selves (Deal, 2000) and to be self-critical (Fortune, McCarthy, & Abramson, 2001; Knight, 2001). However, these authors do not address specific social identity characteristics of students.

Social work theorists have incorporated an analysis of the effects of diversity, power, and social identity characteristics, such as race/ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ability, on practice and education. A recent text on field education advocates infusing content on cultural self-awareness and an understanding of power, privilege, and oppression throughout the field experience (Hendricks, Finch, & Franks, 2005). These authors briefly discuss unique concerns of lesbian and gay students and provide recommendations for field instructors in working with students "who are 'coming out' or being 'outed' in an agency" (p. 185). A review of the social work field education literature, however, found few studies that examine the possible impact of identity characteristics on the relationship between field

instructors and students. Investigations have focused on gender (e.g., Thyer, Sower-Hoag, & Love, 1987; Vonk, Zucrow, & Thyer, 1996) and race/ethnicity (e.g., Black, Maki, & Nunn, 1997; Gladstein & Mailick, 1986; Marshack, Hendricks, & Gladstein, 1994; McRoy, Freeman, Logan, & Blackmon, 1986). These studies suggest that participants largely downplay the impact of social identity. Furthermore, although field instructors reported being aware of cultural, ethnic, gender, class, and age similarities and differences between themselves and their students, they rarely discussed these issues with their students.

One recent study explored field education issues and concerns from the perspectives of 30 lesbian and gay social work students in field placement (Messinger, 2004). The majority of these students identified barriers or issues related to their sexual orientation on individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels. General feelings of lack of safety and anxiety pervaded students' experiences at all levels. Individual-level issues included managing disclosure and pressures in regard to hiding one's sexual orientation, identity development concerns, and issues around professionalism as a gay or lesbian person. Homophobic and heterosexist attitudes and behaviors and an unfriendly agency climate were characteristic of both interpersonal and institutional levels. At the interpersonal level, conflicts in relationships with field instructors or with intimate partners were raised as additional concerns. At the institutional level, participants identified lack of acknowledgement or discussion of gay and lesbian issues.

Despite the myriad concerns about field education raised by lesbian and gay social

work students, which traverse interpersonal and institutional as well as individual levels of experience, we are aware of no research that assesses the perspectives of social work field educators in regard to working with lesbian and gay students. Given the paucity of research literature in this area, we determined it to be premature to adopt a preconceived theoretical framework. We used a grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006) to explore, through in-depth interviews, the ideas, opinions, and knowledge of field instructors regarding lesbian and gay MSW students in social work field education. Grounded theory is particularly apropos of investigation in a domain in which scarce empirical data exists. The overall purpose of this formative investigation is to provide initial data to support social work educators, field instructors, and lesbian and gay students in addressing and negotiating sexual orientation-related issues that may arise in field education, and to serve as a basis for further empirical research.

Method

Eight key informants were identified by the investigators, in consultation with the school's field practicum director and faculty associated with the practicum, using purposive sampling. Given the preliminary nature of the study in a largely unexplored domain, we aimed to engage field instructors with advanced knowledge of field education and awareness of sexual orientation-related issues to generate ideas and explore their experiences rather than merely to assess knowledge and awareness across a representative sample of field instructors. Accordingly, selection criteria included having at least 5 years of post-

MSW social work professional experience and expertise in field education based on at least 3 years as a field instructor and performance in field instructor training seminars. In addition, selection of field instructors was based on their history of working effectively with lesbian and gay students or involvement in diversity training initiatives and on self-identification as lesbian or gay or being known as a heterosexual-identified ally to lesbian and gay communities. The selection procedure also attempted to include diverse key informants based on gender, race/ethnicity, and field practicum setting. All field instructors who were contacted agreed to participate and gave written informed consent. The study was approved by the Research Ethics Board of the University of Toronto.

Face-to-face, 1- to 1.5-hour interviews were conducted using a semistructured interview guide. Semistructured interviews were implemented to allow for broad exploration of field instructor perspectives and experiences in an under-researched area. One informant was interviewed by phone due to distance. The interview guide focused on informants' ideas, opinions, and knowledge regarding lesbian and gay MSW students in social work field education. Interview questions explored field instructors' perceptions about (a) the extent to which sexual orientation may or may not be a potential issue or challenge in MSW students' field education experience; (b) the extent to which aspects of sexual orientation may or may not engender particular issues or challenges in field education; (c) key elements in creating a positive learning environment for lesbian and gay students in field education; and, (d) if applicable,

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ideas for improving field education experiences for lesbian and gay students. The interview guide was elaborated upon in an iterative process to incorporate data emerging from key informant interviews as the research progressed (Schutt, 2004).

Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Multiple readings of the transcripts were performed by three independent investigators. Line-by-line review of the transcripts was conducted, and first-level codes (descriptors of important components of the interviews), including in vivo codes (using the language of participants), were noted in the margins (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978). Next, text corresponding to each of the first-level codes was reviewed by the investigators. Using focused coding and a constant comparative method from grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), first-level codes were further refined and organized into categories. Finally, theoretical coding was undertaken to identify higher level codes and relationships among categories, and to ensure saturation of categories (Charmaz, 2006). Member checking was conducted among stakeholders, including other field instructors and lesbian and gay social work professionals, to assess the credibility of the aggregate findings and interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The results correspond to the emergent categories and all quotations are drawn from the interviews.

Results

Participants

Five key informants (heretofore identified as informants) self-identified as lesbian (2) or gay (3), and three self-identified as heterosexual—

two women and one man. Informants were from diverse racial/ethnic communities including Chinese (1), South Asian (1), Black (1), Latino (1), and European/Anglo (4). Informants provided field education within a variety of government, hospital, community, and social service settings, including both lesbian- and gay-specific and general practice. Informants had from 4 to 25 years of professional field education experience.

Themes

One overarching set of themes emerged across all informants, both heterosexual and lesbian- or gay-identified. A second set of themes emerged exclusively from lesbian- and gay-identified informants. The first set of themes, from all informants, were (a) students' comfort level with sexual orientation; (b) management of self-disclosure of sexual orientation by students; (c) social work education as a barrier to safety; (d) agency context as facilitating/inhibiting safety; and (e) making it comfortable for lesbian and gay MSW students. The second set of themes that arose exclusively from lesbian- and gay-identified key informants were (a) self-disclosure of field instructors' sexual orientation; (b) role modeling professional boundaries for lesbian and gay students; (c) the use of self to facilitate student self-determination about disclosure; (d) gender stereotypes; (e) helping lesbian and gay MSW students to negotiate the system; and (f) power dynamics within lesbian and gay field instructor/lesbian and gay student relationships.

The five themes that follow emerged from all field instructors.

Students' comfort level with sexual orientation. All informants identified students' sense

of comfort and security in relation to sexual identity as influencing their ability to engage effectively and in a professional manner with clients. For example, a field instructor said, “not feeling the prohibition of revealing oneself [is] very important to a social worker” in his or her work with clients. Social workers who censor themselves in relation to their sexual orientation, “Oh, did I say something? Would they find out?,” may have difficulty functioning in a “professional way.”

Informants articulated a tension that might arise for lesbian and gay students who are not comfortable with their sexual identity:

I’ve had a situation where I’ve had a student who was really struggling with her sexual identity and was not clear for herself where she sat in terms of “Am I straight, am I bi, am I lesbian?” . . . I think for her it became a real struggle because the more she got into the work, the more it became right here, it was there in her face—like right there.

Not only does this excerpt articulate the tension that may arise for lesbian and gay students who are not comfortable with their sexual orientation, but it also underscores the significance to the learning experience of students’ ability to disclose and explore their sexual identity within the context of field education.

A field instructor also explained that students’ comfort level with their sexual orientation was viewed as a strength and a mitigating factor for lesbian and gay students with minimal social work experience in the context of a lesbian and gay-specific placement:

Students who had never done any work in the field but were more secure in who they were seemed to do better with clients because they were more comfortable in their own skin; maybe not the skin of a social worker but the skin of a queer woman.

Informants acknowledged that field instructors cannot “assume that students want that [sexuality] put on the table in relationship to their role as a student,” but they also expressed that disclosure could potentially enhance a student’s learning opportunities: “I think students need to come out to their supervisors to have . . . like you need to be out about all the stuff that’s going on so you can talk about what’s going on with your client.” Field instructors suggested that creating a safe environment through conversations about the agency’s experience of previous lesbian and gay students may be helpful for those lesbian and gay MSW students who desire to disclose their sexual orientation within field education settings. Caution must be exercised, however, in that conveying this message—for example, “you don’t have to come out, but if you want to, we’ve had students before who are queer”—may be perceived as confrontational by some lesbian and gay students who are not prepared to disclose or do not desire disclosure. Although this type of statement may be experienced as challenging, the intent based on field instructor responses is to convey a message of openness; informants indicated the alternative is often a pervasive and “silencing” assumption of heterosexuality rather than a “neutral” space.

Students’ management of self-disclosure of sexual orientation. In the context of the possibility

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of student uncertainty about an agency or field instructor's openness and acceptance of lesbian and gay students, field instructors described the strategic use of personal narratives by lesbian and gay MSW students in field education to disclose their sexual identities. Informants largely articulated an understanding of lesbian and gay students' need to manage self-disclosure as not necessarily associated with their sexual identity *per se*, but rather as a result of the potential risks of heterosexism and homophobia.

Students' personal narratives described by informants included both personal and professional information: "They make it explicit, either mentioning things about their partners or you know it's clear from their résumé, that they bring this in terms of different organizations they've been involved with."

Within lesbian- and gay-specific field education settings, student self-disclosure of sexual identity was openly encouraged and supported through the use of personal narratives: "Now we would set up the interview a lot like the [name of agency] process where the question is, 'Tell us something about the coming out experience using your own experience, if you wish.'"

For lesbian and gay MSW students within social service settings that are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT)-identified, negotiating the self-disclosure of sexual identity through personal narratives expanded beyond field instructors and agency staff to include clients. A field instructor identified the "intense personal experiences" of one lesbian student who was cofacilitating a "queer women's group." A particularly relevant aspect of the students' self-disclosure experi-

ence was a parallel process of negotiating her role within the group:

. . . to be in a group of people who are talking about some of these deeper issues around coming out and internalized oppression and being in the community. They had never done that with their friendship circles. And so, sometimes people would talk about how they were having these intense personal experiences being in the group and they would have to sort of figure out, "what is my role here because all of a sudden I am feeling like a participant."

This informant positively framed the students' negotiation of self-disclosure of sexual identity as an opportunity for both personal and professional development, and a field supervision experience that "was more positive in that they can just be really open about 'this is where I am in this process. . . and I need to talk about that so I don't become a participant in this group.'"

Alternatively, some field instructors articulated an understanding of discomfort among some lesbian and gay students around their sexual orientation and self-disclosure, but only in relation to the student's personal "struggle" with sexual identity. For example, when an informant was asked by a potential student whether her lesbian identity would be a "problem," the informant recalled wondering if "this was a preoccupation she had, which doesn't have anything to do with the placement, with the situation, but her own history."

Social work education as a barrier to safety. Students' potential discomfort in self-disclosure of their sexuality in field education was described in terms of the history of omission in social work education of lesbian and gay issues. Informants relied on their own experience of social work education to articulate this understanding: "It wasn't in my social work education; that's for sure." Field instructors identified the legacy of psychiatry in the field of social work and its conceptualization of 'homosexuality' as a mental illness as having an influence on their social work education about lesbian and gay people and communities. Informants also identified the impact of in-classroom experiences on their own comfort level as students. A field instructor reflected on her experience as a lesbian MSW student to highlight how lesbian and gay issues continue to be omitted in her social work education:

I remember in my family practice class, when the instructor asked for feedback and I said, "You know it would be preferable if when they gave examples of couples, they actually talked about couples as opposed to married couples because you know many of us, or at least some of us in the class, may not be in heterosexual relationships." The professor got very defensive and said, "Well, that's who I work with."

Agency context as a facilitator or inhibitor of safety. Informants described the agency context as an important determinant of students' comfort level with their LGBT identity and disclosure in field education. Three major elements were identified within an agency con-

text that could provide a clear signal to students that it is "safe" or "unsafe" to disclose one's sexual identity: agency-wide diversity and human rights policy, staff practices, and physical environment.

The first element—agency-wide diversity and human rights policy—was seen as a signal to lesbian and gay students that "sexual orientation and gender identity are clearly prohibited grounds for discrimination." A field instructor explained:

I think some of the key elements would be, one is policy, and I think it's really important that they know our policies. If I was a student coming in and there wasn't a policy on discrimination, all those pieces, equity issues, cultural competency...if there wasn't a policy that addressed those things, that would make me nervous.

Informants also acknowledged limitations of policy in ensuring students of their safety: "That gave her a real sense of safety; as much as that can make it safe, just to have that defined in policy."

In particular, there was an identified need for the existence and implementation of consequences to policy violations in an effort to foster safer environments for students:

When you have really clear policies in the agency around not just antioppression, social justice and antidiscrimination, and not just the policy about 'it's not allowed,' but a consequence mechanism as well. . . . so, it's not just you can't use homophobic language and

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that's it, but hey you can't use homophobic language and if you do, these are the things that will happen.

Other field instructors looked toward macro and mezzo policy as establishing an agency culture of acceptance and respect in relation to issues of diversity and lesbian and gay students: "Because if you're able to really follow the rules of the [social work regulatory body], the code of conduct of the hospital and the overall statement in terms of human rights in Canada, there shouldn't be a barrier."

The second element, staff practices, was discussed as a way of demonstrating "our openness, our acceptance of diversity" to enhance the comfort of lesbian and gay students. A field instructor described a regular and ongoing process of debriefing with agency staff on a daily basis as useful for fostering an environment of openness and acceptance:

One of the things here at the end of the day is we do a debrief and in the debrief we talk about the stuff that's happened throughout the day and part of it is sometimes challenging ourselves around the stuff that's happened throughout the day.

In addition, informants expressed the importance of "out" agency staff in fostering a safer agency environment for students: "If there's no other people within the organization who've made it known that they are lesbian and gay, I think the student may be hesitant; students will be hesitant in declaring themselves." Field instructors described the

role of "out" agency staff in demonstrating that, "Okay . . . this is my sexual identity; and it doesn't change at all what happens." Notwithstanding the identification of the need for "out" agency staff, some key informants acknowledged that it was not automatically or unilaterally safe for lesbian and gay staff within all agency contexts to disclose their sexual identity. As an informant explained, "The field instructor should be able to disclose himself or herself too, I think." Agency-wide antidiscriminatory and anti-harassment policy may not only be relevant to the safety of lesbian and gay students in field education but also to ensuring the safety of lesbian and gay field instructors and other staff within agency settings.

Beyond agency programs, informants talked about the importance of school- or faculty- initiated practices that demonstrate openness, acceptance and support for lesbian and gay students. For example, a field instructor described a "paradigm" and workshop developed by a school of social work to assist field instructors and students in addressing power differentials in their relationship. Of particular significance for the field instructor was that the paradigm gave students the opportunity to give feedback to the field instructor and formalized an opening for dialogue around potentially challenging issues.

The third element, the physical environment, incorporates the power of signs and symbols in communicating to lesbian and gay students that an agency setting is lesbian- and gay-positive and/or affirmative. Positive or affirmative signs and symbols include the rainbow flag, "LGBT positive space" stickers, and posters for LGBT-related events. Some

informants relied on periodic agency-wide initiatives that occur during the city's lesbian and gay Pride Week: "It was interesting because it was during the Gay Pride Week, so I showed her the e-mail inviting people who wanted to go and participate." Other informants went beyond this in emphasizing the importance of visual cues as an effective means of relaying an immediate message of affirmation and fostering students' sense of safety:

They don't really have a lot of time to really find out if it's safe, just like clients are coming in for a short period of time. So you know the stuff in the waiting rooms and the walls and in the offices and the structures, like having notices that the Queer Caucus is meeting, like all those things have to be really obvious.

As another informant explained, "You may not have to say too much, but if you have the resources around and those pieces, then they begin to see that maybe in this setting, it's o.k."

"Let's talk about it": Making it comfortable for lesbian and gay MSW students. In addition to the impact of social work education and agency contexts on lesbian and gay students' comfort/discomfort and sense of safety within field education settings, field instructors described individual practices that they implemented to address the needs of lesbian and gay students. In particular, field instructors described the ways in which they conveyed "openness," "acceptance" and "tolerance" for lesbian and gay MSW students in

field education. Whereas some informants described simply "making myself available to the students," others emphasized the importance of dialogue to being "open and put[ing] things on the table." A field instructor described a process of sustained and ongoing dialogue to convey openness and acceptance to lesbian and gay students and to foster professional growth:

I firmly believe that only happens through dialogue. That only happens through. . . you face it, you talk about it, you explore it, you move on. You face it, you talk about it, you explore it, you move on, sort of thing.

Other informants provided direct practice examples of "talking about it" [sexuality] in relation to clients. One field instructor described a process of creating openness through sustained dialogue in response to a lesbian student being asked by a client if she was a "dyke":

And I remember speaking to the student about what that felt like, and processing that out and really checking with the student to make sure that they felt o.k. to continue on with that relationship with the person they were working with; and monitoring that actually for more than just a couple of weeks in terms of how the student was feeling.

Another field instructor emphasized the use of dialogue to help lesbian and gay students within LGBT-specific social service settings prepare their responses for clients who ask, "Are

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you a lesbian or gay?" Dialogue was used early in the field instructor/student relationship to facilitate students' preparedness: "I would sort of let students know kind of in the first week to think about how they would answer that question."

The following six themes emerged from lesbian- and gay-identified field instructors.

Self-disclosure of field instructor's sexual orientation. Lesbian- and gay-identified key informants described the decision to selectively disclose their sexual identity to lesbian and gay students in field education settings in a positive light: "I tend to weigh in on it's good to self-disclose around this piece." Informants talked specifically about how they disclose their sexual identity to lesbian and gay students: "I don't sit down and say 'Well, you know I am a gay man.' In the course of the conversation though, I don't censor myself in terms of talking about my life as it's appropriate."

Others expressed conscientiousness about how much information they disclose about themselves: "Now, you don't say, 'And I have a partner and a child and we've been together and I came out in 1990'; you don't disclose all that." Lesbian- and gay-identified informants also expressed an understanding of their own self-disclosure in terms of their role as field instructors in educating students in general about self-disclosure within the social worker–client relationship. As an informant explained, "My role is to talk about self-disclosure to students in practicum settings from a broad perspective in terms of when is self-disclosure effective, appropriate, clinically sound, therapeutically aligning."

Role modeling professional boundaries for lesbian and gay students. Lesbian- and gay-identified field instructors described their position as role models for lesbian and gay social work students. For some informants, their self-disclosure or visibility was integral to mentoring and role modeling for lesbian and gay MSW students:

You know I've had students come to me and say, you know, like I was a role model for them and you know, they'd come to me after the fact and say it was because of you that I've really come to terms with my sexual orientation.

Other lesbian- and gay-identified informants described their use of self to teach lesbian and gay MSW students about professional boundaries, specifically in relation to self-disclosure of sexual orientation in the social worker–client relationship:

If you're feeling that self-disclosure is going to be purposeful to the counseling relationship, you need to sort of approach me first to talk about processing that out. What are the indicators that demonstrated to you that, "Wow, self-disclosure might be helpful in this situation?"

Field instructors explained that MSW students in general often experienced challenges in field education in relation to boundaries in their work with clients and therefore benefited from a debriefing process to enhance their learning experience. As an informant described:

They [clients] were going around the room sharing in terms of their partners and I remember distinctly the student asked—I don't want to share a relationship story and I don't think it would be appropriate to the setting, the group setting, and these are the reasons why. And it all made sense to me.

Role modeling professional boundaries and providing debriefing opportunities were identified as particularly salient for lesbian and gay students working with LGBT clients and within LGBT community settings:

With gay male students there's a piece around a sort of familiarity with the community and knowledge of, I guess, community mores. . . . the experience of being a gay man. And with that also brings the issues around boundaries and role of a professional working within one's community.

Use of self to facilitate student self-determination about disclosure. Informants in general talked about conveying openness, acceptance, and tolerance to lesbian and gay students in an effort to make them feel comfortable within field education settings. Lesbian- and gay-identified field instructors described in detail their use of self in relationship with lesbian and gay students to facilitate student's feeling safe in making choices about self-disclosure. Lesbian- and gay-identified informants expressed that "not all people have to share," but that it is important to "create safety for choice." Some informants cautioned

against creating a scenario where a student feels you've "already predetermined who they are and what their story is." Lesbian- and gay-identified field instructors expressed the need to create "a context that allows gay or lesbian, bisexual, or transgender students to feel comfortable that they can express themselves." Furthermore, lesbian- and gay-identified field instructors described their role of modeling and creating comfort for lesbian and gay students: "Wherever I've been out you become a magnet for, I think, queer-identified students, number one. Number two, I think it creates a level of comfort in some cases to be able to talk about these issues."

Gender stereotypes. Lesbian- and gay-identified field instructors highlighted the influence of gender role conformity and non-conformity. Informants suggested that students' presentations of gender (i.e., femininity and masculinity) and the perceptions of field instructors and other agency staff influenced students' experiences of either disclosing or not disclosing their sexual identity. Field instructors explained that lesbian and gay students who did not fit stereotypes, for example, who did not present as a "butch lesbian" or an "effeminate gay man," were confusing for agency staff. Even if students chose not to disclose their sexual identity, some were "assumed to be queer because of how they looked." Lesbian- and gay-identified key informants also differentiated the experiences of lesbian and gay students based on the perceived degree of gender norm violations. For example, an informant stated, "a tomboyish female student in a practicum will. . . probably suffer less in terms of harassment than a feminine male."

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Helping lesbian and gay MSW students negotiate the system. Lesbian- and gay-identified field instructors expressed a belief that as role models they could help lesbian and gay students learn how to negotiate their sexual identities, develop their professional selves, and facilitate students' abilities to create change within the context of institutionalized heterosexism and structural barriers. It is important to note that informants identified varying positions on how to create change within the context of institutional heterosexism and structural barriers based on sexual prejudice. For some, their role was to help lesbian and gay students to understand that "if you want to make some changes in the system, you become part of the system; you don't go outside." Alternatively, other informants conceptualized their role as helping students to "infiltrate" the system by finding "like-minded people" and trying to encourage students to see the ways to be "subversive and also be in a large institution and how you hold your own politics." Lesbian- and gay-identified field instructors also emphasized the importance of helping lesbian and gay students in field education settings to understand that "change is going to be incremental."

Power dynamics within lesbian and gay field instructor-lesbian and gay student relationships. Lesbian- and gay-identified field instructors described a need to recognize and attend to the specific power dynamics that might exist between lesbian and gay field instructors and lesbian and gay students. On one hand, informants expressed concern about the potential for lesbian and gay students to feel intimidated by the experience of working with an "out" field instructor. A field instructor

explained: "If you are queer and you have got a queer student, I guess you have to be aware that you might be really intimidating to your student, that the student may not have had a lot of opportunity to work with queer people so it's going to be kind of mind blowing." On the other hand, informants talked about the potential for boundary violations on the part of lesbian and gay students because of a shared group membership with "out" lesbian and gay field instructors. Potential boundary violations were described in terms of students' inappropriate levity in field instructor/student interpersonal relationships: "Oh well, we're both gay men so let's sort of joke around this stuff; you know that's not appropriate." Boundary violations were also discussed in terms of student evaluations: "I've had queer students that handed papers in late in the class. They're like, 'Oh here, it's a couple of days late.' I'm like, 'Well, it's a couple of marks off.'"

Discussion

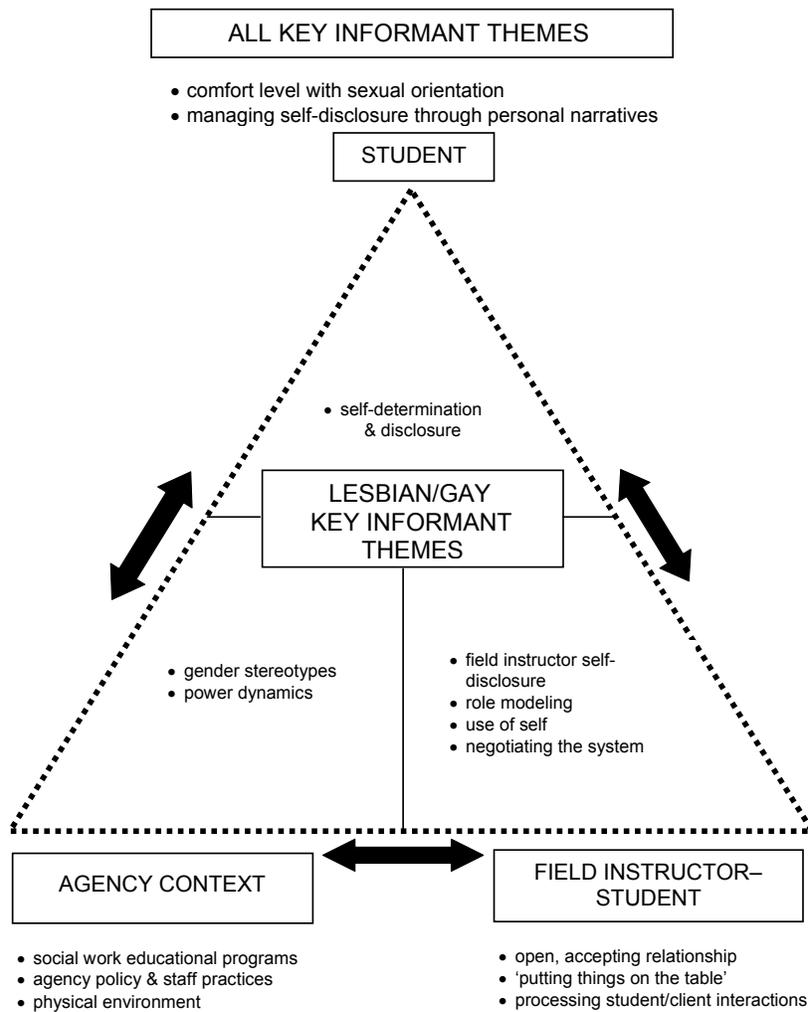
This preliminary qualitative exploration of field instructors' experiences and insights in working with lesbian and gay MSW students suggests that field instructors may face many of the same overall challenges in working with lesbian and gay students as they do with heterosexual students. These challenges include the field instructor's use of self in developing open and accepting relationships with students, the field instructor's addressing and modeling appropriate student-client interactions, and the impact of agency practices and policies on the field instructor-student relationship. Although the present findings are not intended for generalization to other field instructors and settings, they provide evidence

of important challenges that arose among the field instructors interviewed in terms of working with issues around sexual orientation and lesbian and gay students: students' comfort level with their sexual orientation; concerns about self-disclosure of sexual orientation with field instructors and with lesbian and gay clients; lesbian and gay field instructor self-

disclosure of sexual orientation with lesbian and gay students; agency diversity policies and contexts that are not inclusive of sexual orientation or lesbian and gay persons; and the impact of gender norms and stereotypes about lesbian and gay persons.

Figure 1 depicts a tentative conceptual model of sexual orientation-related issues in

FIGURE 1. A Preliminary Conceptual Model of Sexual Orientation-Related Issues in Social Work Field Education



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field education that emerged from the field instructors in this study. The various themes are conceptualized in three domains: the student, the agency context, and the field instructor–student relationship. The model illustrates the reciprocal and mutually reinforcing relationships among the three domains, as well as themes within each domain that arose across all key informants (outside the triangle) and themes that emerged only from lesbian and gay key informants (inside the triangle).

Notably, the three domains that emerged from field instructors in the present study map onto the major themes identified in Messinger's (2004) study of field education from the perspective of lesbian and gay MSW students: individual (here described as the student), interpersonal (the field instructor–student relationship), and institutional (the agency context). This suggests points of shared experience and perspective between field instructors and lesbian and gay MSW students that may be valuable in initiating important conversations about sexual orientation in field education. The present study, however, suggests the particular importance of field instructors in addressing issues and concerns around sexual orientation in field education and differentiates insights born of the lived experience of lesbian- and gay-identified field instructors from those of heterosexual field instructors.

Issues around sexual orientation in field education, even when they are considered salient, are often addressed as individual-level phenomena, for example, in lesbian and gay students' struggles with sexual orientation vis-à-vis self-esteem and identity development. The preliminary conceptual model

suggests that students' comfort level with their sexual orientation and self-disclosure to a field instructor or staff in the agency setting, for example, is influenced by the larger agency context, including agency diversity policies (e.g., sexual orientation is not included), agency staff practices (e.g., not "safe" for lesbian and gay agency staff to be "out") and signs and symbols in the agency setting of lesbian and gay acceptance and respect. The agency context also provides a milieu for the student-field instructor relationship, regardless of sexual orientation. Agency diversity policies and staff practices, for example, may influence the extent to which issues regarding sexual orientation, as they relate to field education and professional development, are open for discussion in the student-field instructor dyad. Diversity policies and staff practices also may influence the field instructor's degree of openness in discussing student-client issues and experiences regarding sexual orientation and in discussing their own sexual orientation. The conceptual model suggests that various agency policies, practices, and the field instructor–student relationship are likely to be integral components of lesbian and gay students' comfort or discomfort with sexual orientation, open discussion, and self-disclosure in the field setting.

Perhaps the most important implication of the present investigation is that a predominant focus on lesbian and gay students themselves as the source of issues and concerns about sexual orientation in field education may overlook power relationships, agency-level policies and practices, and societal sexual prejudice. These are significant components of a social–ecological perspective, which is

central to social work assessment, problem-solving, and education. Lack of focus on wider issues and concerns that may arise around sexual orientation in field education, which appears to be the norm in social work education (Messinger, 2004; Van Voorhis & Wagner, 2002), is perhaps more subtle than a perspective that articulates individual lesbian and gay students as potentially “problematic.” Yet both may have the same result: The student is left to bear the onus and responsibility for any challenges that may arise.

Although students are in the position of lesser power in relation to field instructors, professors, and professional agency staff, some students may be adept at dealing with challenges that arise around sexual orientation and sexual prejudice in field education. Nevertheless, a primary focus on the individual level reduces the possibility of enduring change on a larger systems level that may benefit all lesbian and gay students in field education, lesbian and gay clients, and social work field education as a whole. Rather, some individual students may successfully negotiate challenges and move on in their careers, with each new lesbian and gay student facing similar challenges anew. Furthermore, those lesbian and gay students who appear not to successfully navigate the multilevel challenges and prejudices in field education around sexual orientation may be viewed as the source of deficits or problems. An individualistic perspective also entails an implicit if not explicit assumption that issues that arise around sexual orientation are solely personal in nature—reinforcing the student category as the primary if not the only locus for challenges and change. This privileging of the student

domain, albeit unwitting, reinforces sexual prejudice and antilesbian and gay stigma (not unlike a “blaming the victim” mentality)—the opposite of what one would hope for from the social work profession.

In addition to conveying the importance of a social-ecological perspective, the tentative conceptual model suggests that sexual orientation-related issues that arise in field education may be best understood as a process rather than as a static phenomenon. For example, the individual student’s comfort level with sexual orientation and self-disclosure may be informed by the students’ ongoing assessment of subtle and direct cues that help them to determine whether to disclose their sexual orientation or not to agency staff and field educators, and how cautious they should be in disclosing. Agency context, such as the presence or absence of LGBT-affirming signs and symbols, may inform students’ comfort level and self-disclosure. A student-field instructor relationship that provides ongoing opportunities for lesbian and gay students to process their assessments and experiences with a competent field instructor may be invaluable to students in navigating the agency context and gaining insights into the process of self-disclosure (Newman, Bogo, & Daley, 2008). It is important to note that issues around sexual orientation and self-disclosure may arise for heterosexual students as well, and these too may need to be processed. Furthermore, we do not contend that each and every lesbian and gay field instructor or student must come out as a prerequisite to a positive learning experience in social work field education. Nevertheless, the weight of history (including, until 1973, a diagnostic

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category in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* that codified all lesbian and gay people as pathological) and the context of ongoing antigay prejudice, violence, social policies and law (Herek, 2004; Herek, in press) render discussion of sexual orientation more fraught with reality-based concerns about stigma and discrimination for lesbian and gay students—and field instructors—than for their heterosexual counterparts. This context highlights the importance of viewing issues around self-disclosure and sexual orientation as a process rather than a one-time event; it also raises the particular importance for lesbian and gay students of being able to process issues around sexual orientation and self-disclosure with their field instructors without additional barriers and stigmatization.

Along these lines, the preliminary conceptual model also suggests a differentiation among issues identified by *all* field instructors and issues identified by *lesbian- and gay-identified* field instructors, a contrast that emerged inductively from the data. Although the findings may not generalize to other field instructors and settings, all field instructors in the present study provided important insights into sexual orientation as a facet of social work field education; however, lesbian- and gay-identified field instructors drew on their personal and professional lesbian and gay identity-related experiences to lend greater depth to their understanding and suggestions. These lesbian- and gay-identified field instructors were keenly aware of the nuances and dynamics for lesbian and gay students around self-disclosure and context-related issues such as the impact of gender stereo-

types on how lesbian and gay students are perceived in field education settings. Additionally, the lesbian- and gay-identified field instructors in this study articulated lesbian- and gay-specific field instructor-related issues, such as role modeling professional boundaries for lesbian and gay students working with lesbian and gay clients and communities. The preliminary conceptual model raises the value of standpoint (Reed, Newman, Suarez, & Lewis, 1997) and suggests the importance of including lesbian- and gay-identified field instructors in developing and enriching the knowledge and skill base of social work field education.

The concept of “double vision” (Hooks, 1984; Reed et al., 1997) suggests that lesbian and gay field instructors—and students—bring a unique perspective to social work education, often having lived from the standpoint of one who had to negotiate a stigmatized identity in a sometimes hostile social context (Newman, 2002). As a result, they may become adept at negotiating two different cultures: lesbian and gay culture and a heteronormative society. Particularly as informants occupied multiple social identities—by gender, ethnicity, and culture—it is important to acknowledge these intersectionalities and the complexity of “double vision,” which exists beyond a dichotomous framework (Reed et al., 1997). It may be valuable for social work professionals and field educators to actively welcome and engage the standpoint and vision of lesbian and gay field instructors and students to optimize the value that sexual diversity has for social work education and the profession as a whole, in addition to better meeting the needs of lesbian and gay students.

Limitations to this study include the small, nonrandom sample of field instructors who were knowledgeable about issues around sexual orientation and sexual prejudice; caution should be exercised in making inferences about other field instructors and settings. Nevertheless, we used purposive sampling and were successful in including men and women, heterosexual-identified and lesbian- and gay-identified, with a range of professional experience and across a variety of field settings. Additionally, the focus of this formative qualitative investigation was not to generalize across field instructors; it was to generate a preliminary conceptual understanding based on field instructors' perspectives on sexual orientation in field education. The preliminary conceptual model provides tentative guidelines for engaging in critical discussions about sexual orientation-related issues in field education and may serve as a useful heuristic for further research. The study is also best understood as focusing on sexual orientation, rather than gender identity, which are distinct albeit interrelated phenomena. The study is also limited by the absence of field instructors' insights and experiences on the field practicum experiences of bisexual and transgender MSW students. Broadening the focus of future research to specifically include the perspectives of self-identified bisexual and transgender field instructors may help to develop understanding of the field practicum experiences of bisexual and transgender MSW students and to explore different experiences among LGBT students in field practica.

An additional limitation may be seen in the focus on field instructors rather than on

lesbian and gay MSW students' perspectives. It was our intention, however, given the general silence in the social work field education literature with regard to sexual orientation and sexual prejudice to focus on the perspectives of field instructors, half of whom were able to draw on their own experiences as lesbian and gay former MSW students in field education. As suggested by the data, a continuing focus on lesbian and gay students risks reinforcing an individual-level perspective that positions individual lesbian and gay students to bear the onus for articulating the issues, problem-solving, and developing competency in social work field education around sexual orientation challenges. This is precisely the status quo in social work education: As suggested by other studies, heteronormative assumptions are pervasive and often go uncontested—unless individual students feel emboldened and safe enough to challenge them (Hylton, 2005; Messinger, 2004). Further research incorporating the perspectives of lesbian and gay, and bisexual and transgender students, as well as heterosexual-identified students—in the context of a broader social-ecological framework and a multilevel approach—may enrich our understanding of the challenges around sexual orientation and sexual prejudice and contribute to the development of strategies for enhancing social work field education for all students.

Implications for Practice and Research

Given the preliminary nature of this study of a small, select sample of field instructors, implications for practice are necessarily tentative. Nevertheless, several possible strategies

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are raised for addressing sexual orientation-related challenges that may arise in field education. Most important, this study suggests directions for further research that will help to evaluate the appropriateness and effectiveness of various strategies for field education across different schools and field settings. Overall, the reciprocal relationships among the three domains of student, field instructor–student relationship, and agency context suggest further research pursue multidimensional approaches in assessing and enhancing opportunities for productive field education experiences for lesbian and gay students—rather than pursuing a path that focuses predominantly on individual students’ experiences.

One direction for future research and practice is a focus on the processes whereby schools of social work recruit new field agencies and contract annually with existing field sites. The present study raises the possibility that these may be opportunities for examination and discussion of agency policy and climate around sexual orientation. Drawing from our preliminary findings, schools might assess the degree to which the agency has formal antidiscrimination policies as well as procedures to address problems, along with informal practices that communicate openness and commitment to ongoing dialogue; these factors may enhance opportunities for lesbian and gay students to experience a positive learning environment in the agency. When appropriate policies and a positive climate are not fully present, schools might engage with prospective field instructors and their colleagues in raising awareness and taking action to change the agency environment to one that would support learning for all stu-

dents. Or, in the absence of positive change, the school might appropriately decide to forgo the use of the setting as a site for social work field education. Schools also may benefit from including as field sites agencies that provide programs specifically designed to serve LGBT populations. In addition to expanding field education opportunities, field instructors from such programs may represent an invaluable resource for advising the school with respect to curriculum, service issues, and field education practices.

A second area of research might address situations in which a school has established that a positive agency climate exists around sexual orientation, along with other oppressed social identities, that is, studying and evaluating interventions that focus on field instructors and the crucial role they play in facilitating all aspects of students’ learning. Several studies have concluded that the student–field instructor relationship is the primary factor in promoting student learning and satisfaction in field education (Alperin, 1998; Fortune et al., 2001; Knight, 2001; Raskin, 1989). Informants in the present study provided support for this finding and suggested that it is the field instructor who is in the best position to work with students in processing sexual orientation-related issues, such as self-disclosure to colleagues, staff, and clients. The importance of maintaining boundaries, as field instructors work with students to integrate salient aspects of their personal and professional selves, is a fundamental principle in the field education literature (Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Bonosky, 1995; Congress, 1996; Hendricks et al., 2005). It may be that this principle has been taken too literally,

however, as both students and field educators repeatedly identify the need for a safe space in which students can examine, discuss, and process personal and emotional reactions arising from their practice (Bogo et al., 2004; Grossman et al., 1990; Walter & Young, 1999). Social work educators might be well-served in developing both generic educational approaches as well as practices for students with diverse social identity characteristics to facilitate the development and integration of students' professional selves (Newman et al., 2008). It is the responsibility of schools of social work to work collaboratively with field instructors to develop these approaches and to incorporate new knowledge in the orientation and training of field instructors.

Finally, another dimension for further study is identifying resource persons for lesbian and gay students other than their field instructors. Although some faculty field liaisons may be able to provide specialized knowledge and support, schools might identify additional resource persons who could be available to LGBT and questioning students. Field instructors in this study who identified as lesbian or gay shared their own unique experiences as students and workers. The perspectives of LGBT field instructors may be particularly valuable to lesbian and gay students. Similarly, lesbian and gay alumni of the school and social workers in the community might provide additional learning opportunities and serve as role models for lesbian and gay students. Lesbian and gay mentors and role models may serve to validate students' experiences and to demonstrate the broad range of possibilities that exist for professional growth and development, including ways

to challenge the field to develop greater competence in embracing sexual minority populations and to contest sexual prejudice in the social work profession and society at large.

In conclusion, social work field education provides an ideal opportunity for professional growth and the integration of personal and professional selves—for all students. A pedagogical model that acknowledges the student as an adult learner, as a whole person, who brings an array of life experiences and knowledge to the field, is particularly important for the field education component of social work education (Bogo & Vayda, 1998; Hendricks et al., 2005). This model suggests that sexual orientation is one of an array of social identities that is germane to social work education, not simply as a personal developmental journey, but as one of the components of the development and integration of personal and professional selves. It is incumbent on social work educational institutions to ensure that field instructors, field liaisons and social work faculty are educated about and aware of issues that may arise around sexual orientation and, moreover, sexual prejudice and heteronormativity, and to ensure that agency contexts are respectful and inclusive of LGBT communities within the fabric of diversity and social justice. In so doing, we ensure opportunities for LGBT students to learn and flourish as part of the social work community and to enrich the profession as a whole.

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Accepted: 07/07

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This study was funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Institutional Grant and the RBC Chair in Applied Social Work Research. We are grateful to all participants for sharing their experiences.

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