

# Heteronormativity and the Experiences of Lesbian and Bisexual Women as Social Work Students.

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DESPITE SOCIAL WORK'S historic commitment to serving oppressed groups and to alleviating social and economic injustice, prior studies have illuminated the profession's ambivalent response to the needs of nonheterosexual individuals. Although professional standards-setting organizations have drawn policies that name gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals as within oppressed groups, these policies are often contradictory (Van Soest, 1996) and their implementation unknown. Students within social work education programs exhibit heterosexism (Black, Oles, & Moore, 1998), as do social work practitioners (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997). Lesbian and gay clients continue to express distrust of, and fear of discrimination by mental health professionals, including social workers (Lipton, 1996; Rabin, Keefe, & Burton, 1986). And gay, lesbian, and bisexual faculty report feelings of fear and ambivalence regarding their statuses and positions within academic institutional settings should their sexual orientation be disclosed (Aronson, 1995; Logan & Kershaw, 1994; Martin, 1995).

It is within this culture of competing values, latent homophobia, and manifest heterosexism that lesbian and bisexual social work education students first become socialized to the profession. Understanding the experiences of these students as they navigate this educational environment is essential to promoting their success and to ensuring their representation within the ranks of the profession. Tierney (1992) states "virtually all research on academic climates points out that individuals are most effective and efficient when they are able to study and work in an organization where they feel appreciated and affirmed" (p. 43). Conversely, the experience of prejudice or discrimination within education often results in isolation, alienation, distrust, and fear among lesbian and bisexual students. These feelings further inhibit learning and professional identification (D'Emilio, 1990; Ihrig, 1996). The importance of the environment in which learning is to occur has also been highlighted by the Council on

Social Work Education (CSWE) in their recently implemented Accreditation Standard 6.0. This accreditation standard (CSWE, 2001) explicitly requires that CSWE-accredited programs demonstrate that they provide a learning context that is nondiscriminatory and respectful of diversity.

This article presents findings of a study that examined the experiences of lesbian and bisexually identified female graduate students within social work education. In particular, this article focuses on the contextual factors framing the experiences of these students. Heteronormativity, or the privileging of heterosexuality, will be presented as a pervasive determinant of the women's experiences. Additionally, issues related to the regional context of the social work programs, structure of the program, presence of other lesbian, gay, or bisexually identified people within the programs, and the availability of campus-based groups for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) students are discussed as factors that served to mitigate the women's experiences of heteronormativity.

### Sexual Identity and Social Work

As agents of the dominant culture, helping professions such as social work and nursing have historically contributed to the invisibility and marginalization of lesbian and bisexual women (Aronson, 1995; Stephany, 1992). Prior to the 1970s, the predominant understandings of lesbian and bisexual women within the social and behavioral sciences, understandings that guided and shaped interventions by social workers, psychologists, and medical personnel, were pathologically oriented (Logan & Kershaw, 1994). Lesbian and bisexual women were labeled as deviant or mentally ill, or both, as evidenced by the classification of homosexuality under disorders of sexual deviancy within the first two editions of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (American Psychiatric Association, 1952, 1968). Through the implementation of these labels and diagnoses, professionals reinforced and perpetuated the status of lesbian and bisexual women as deviant. Further, labels of deviance and mental illness served to silence lesbian and bisexual women who were both members and clients of these professions.

The significant contributions of lesbian and bisexual social workers have been divorced from their personal lives and statuses as lesbian or bisexual. Prominent examples of this segmentation of professional identity from the sexual identity of lesbian and bisexual women within and outside the profession of social work include Jane Addams (Aronson, 1995; Faderman, 1999), famed anthropologist Margaret Mead (Faderman, 1999; Lapsley, 1999) and Eleanor Roosevelt

(Streitmatter, 1998; Faderman, 1999). The lack of recognition of the same-sex relationships of these women has resulted historically in the failure to recognize the significant interplay between the membership of these women in oppressed groups, their position as professional leaders, and their involvement in social activism (Aronson, 1995; Faderman, 1999). Further, the erasure of these significant relationships and identities within historical accounts denies lesbian and bisexual women important role models.

Aronson (1995) suggests that the failure to explicitly recognize the presence and contributions of lesbian and bisexual women within social work is a function of the profession's intimate role in maintaining the social order. In particular, she states "[Inattention to the presence of lesbians] reflects, too, the culturally construed incompatibility of lesbian social workers practicing in fields concerned with the monitoring or nurturing of 'proper' family life--the cornerstone of patriarchal society" (p. 7). The historical willingness of social work professionals to attach deviant labels to lesbian and bisexual women can be viewed as evidence of our profession's willingness to collude with dominant societal perspectives in order to maintain the current social order. Literature from other helping professions, such as nursing and elementary education, suggests that the presence of lesbians and bisexual women within these professions has also been viewed as incompatible with professional missions (Evans, 1999; Randall, 1989).

### Sexual Identity and Social Work Education

The heterosexism and heteronormativity prevalent within social work is also evident within the profession's educational institutions (Aronson, 1995; Cain, 1996; Logan & Kershaw, 1994).

Heteronormativity refers to the privileging of heterosexual relationships and identities through the establishment of said relationships and identities as the norm by which all others are evaluated (J. T. Sears, personal communication, February 10, 2000). Reflecting pervasive heteronormativity, Morrow (1996) found that 81% of non-research textbooks published after 1984 within social work education either contained no references to lesbian, gay or bisexual issues, portrayed negative connotations of this population, or were minimally inclusive of such content. More recently, Van Voorhis and Wagner (2001) found that articles on gay and lesbian-related topics (excluding those articles dealing with HIV and AIDs) comprised only 1% of the content found in 12 prominent social work journals published between 1988 and 1997.

The findings of Mackelprang, Ray, and Hernandez-Peck (1996)

further support the claim of pervasive heteronormativity and heterosexism within social work education. In examining the efforts of social work education programs to ensure the inclusion of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals among their faculty and student populations, these authors found that sexual orientation was consistently ranked lower in importance and emphasis than were issues related to gender, race, and ethnicity. In particular, 66% of programs placed little to no emphasis on recruiting or retaining lesbian and gay students, and 69% placed little to no emphasis on recruiting, hiring, and retaining gay and lesbian faculty members (Mackelprang et al., 1996).

Through reflection on their personal experiences as faculty, other authors have provided valuable insight into the latent as well as the more obvious systems of heteronormativity operating within social work education (Aronson, 1995; Cain, 1996; Martin, 1995). In particular, the academic processes of tenure require a considerable amount of image management by all non-tenured faculty members, especially by those who claim a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity (Aronson, 1995). Pressures related to these processes often serve to silence lesbian, gay, and bisexual faculty members both personally and professionally (Aronson, 1995; Cain, 1996). The fear of poor evaluations from students, losing other aspects of one's identity, and negative reactions from colleagues who vote in tenure and promotion reviews often push lesbian, gay, and bisexual faculty members into the closet. Fear of public identification of their sexual identity often prevents these faculty members from conducting research on lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues. Furthermore, fear of negative student reactions, coupled with a lack of clarity regarding the purposeful use of disclosure in the classroom, interferes with the ability of these instructors to publicly disclose their sexual identity and to comfortably manage classroom discussions regarding lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues (Aronson, 1995; Cain, 1996).

Despite the availability of valid instruments to measure heterosexist attitudes, studies assessing levels of homophobia and heterosexism among social work educators and administrators have not been conducted. Studies of homophobic and heterosexist attitudes among educators in other professions, however, illustrate the need for such studies within social work education. In a study of homophobic and heterosexist attitudes of nursing educators, Randall (1989) found that educators may continue to harbor misinformation and distrust of lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons despite access to abundant information regarding human sexuality, adherence to a professional mission of service, and adherence to a professional code of ethics. The heterosexist beliefs of these educators are perhaps best

illuminated by Randall's (1989) finding that nearly 25% of respondents (N=100) believed that lesbian behavior is "just plain wrong." Similarly, over half of the nursing educators surveyed reported that lesbianism was not a "natural expression of human sexuality" (p. 304).

In a study of the experiences of lesbian students within Great Britain's diploma of social work programs, Harwood (1998) found that little is done to confront or rectify the dominance of heteronormativity within the profession's training institutions. Harwood (1998) reported that the six self-identified lesbian women she interviewed were constantly confronted with the pervasive presumption of heterosexuality. Unless they explicitly claimed and announced a lesbian identity within each separate social context, these students reported that their course instructors, field instructors, and peers assumed they were heterosexual and interacted with them in manners consistent with this assumption (Harwood, 1998). Further, these students reported that issues related to heterosexism and homophobia were "placed lower on the hierarchy of oppressions than were issues related to race and gender" (p. 167).

Based on the aforementioned research, the purposes in conducting this study were twofold. The first and foremost was to elicit an understanding of the experiences of lesbian and bisexual social work students so that we may further support and encourage their success within the profession. A second and tangentially related purpose was to provide feedback as to how well the profession is responding to the needs of lesbian and bisexual women. Two questions guided this study: (1) How do female students who identify as being lesbian or bisexual and are enrolled in master's-level social work education programs experience the environments provided by these programs? And (2) How do these students navigate these environments?

## Method

The sample consisted of 19 self-identified lesbian and bisexual female students enrolled in or recent graduates of CSWE-accredited master's of social work programs located within the Southern United States, including North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Louisiana. Although conceptual definitions of lesbian and bisexual women vary widely within the literature (Sells & Petruccio, 1996), the conceptual definition framing the recruitment of participants for this study was, simply, self-identification by a woman as lesbian or bisexual. Female students were therefore included based upon their self-disclosure of a lesbian or bisexual identity. Public disclosure of their sexual identity was not required. To ensure a depth and breadth

of experience within the social work program, only those students who had completed at least 24 credit hours towards their MSW degree, including a first-year field practicum, were invited to participate. Because of concerns about the number of students who might volunteer, women who had recently graduated (within the last 5 years) with a MSW degree from a CSWE-accredited program were also included.

Recruitment of participants began after approval to conduct the study was granted by the applicable Institutional Review Board. Snowball sampling procedures were implemented to recruit participants. Information regarding this study as well as copies of recruitment letters were provided to contacts affiliated with MSW programs throughout the South. In addition, word of mouth was used to reach potential participants who had recently graduated. In total, information regarding this study was provided to contacts affiliated with seven separate universities. Women at six of these seven universities initiated contact and subsequently participated in the study.

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with each of the 19 participants. To facilitate complete immersion in the emerging information, this researcher conducted all interviews. A semi-structured interview schedule consisting of primarily open-ended questions was employed during initial interviews. In accordance with the grounded theory approach to data analysis, this schedule was elaborated upon and changed as the interview and analysis process progressed (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The typical length of the interviews was approximately 2 hours, with all interviews lasting between 1 and 3 hours. Interviews were held over the course of a 12-month period. Each interview was tape-recorded.

Rather than using research as a method for testing pre-existing theories, grounded-theory method seeks to construct theory through an ongoing cycle of data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 1983; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Analysis began during the transcription of the first interview and continued beyond the completion of the transcript of the final interview. Once interviews were transcribed they were coded. Coding refers to the process of designating a word or phrase to represent a theoretical category (Charmaz, 1983; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In the initial phases of the research, the codes and the categories they represented were primarily descriptive. However, as the study progressed codes became more conceptual and often represented relationships between the earlier, more descriptive codes, and are referred to as "themes." Codes were placed in an index, with brief explanations as to their meanings. As the data collection and

analysis progressed, codes were moved, collapsed, and expanded within this index.

Memos were used to explain and represent the development of codes as well as to articulate emerging themes. Charmaz describes memos as, "written elaborations of ideas about the data and the coded categories" (1983, p. 120). As themes began to emerge, memos were incorporated into the aforementioned index. Questions designed to elucidate these emerging themes were then incorporated into subsequent interviews. Through the incorporation of these questions, emerging themes were tested, clarified, and, in some cases, refuted. In the course of this analysis, heteronormativity was found to be a central theme shaping the experiences of participants, while the three other thematic areas presented herein emerged as mediators of how the women experienced heteronormativity. Quotes from the transcripts that were determined to be the most concise and explicatory of the themes are used to illustrate the findings presented below. Pseudonyms have been used in place of names to ensure participant confidentiality.

## Findings

Of the 19 participants, 10 were enrolled in MSW programs at the time of the initial interview, and 9 were recent graduates. Participants ranged in age from 24 to 62 years. Although there was minimal diversity among participants in terms of race and ethnicity, this level of diversity was reflective of the overall diversity found within these programs (Lennon, 1999). Of the 19 participants, 2 were African American, 2 identified as Jewish, and the remaining 15 were Caucasian, not of Jewish ancestry. At the time of the interviews, 17 of the women reported being in committed relationships with same-sex partners during their MSW programs.

## Heteronormativity

With the exception of a few unusual incidents, participants reported that disclosures of their sexual identities were met with tolerance, acceptance, and even support. However, despite acceptance of their personal disclosures, participants encountered subtle forms of prejudice throughout their social work education programs. The subtleness of this prejudice and corresponding discrimination was articulated by Valerie: "I don't know how to stress the subtlety of it and the obviousness of it at the same time. I don't really know how anyone can capture that in a paper, but I don't think that it is any different than race or class."

Because of its subtly pervasive form, this prejudice most closely resembles the concept of heteronormativity. This privileging of heterosexuality inhibited the ability of some people to consider the potential implications inherent in the status of lesbian, gay, or bisexual. For example, Valerie went on to state: "Because most of the people were straight, it seemed like they just didn't think about it."

Discomfort. Heteronormativity was often evidenced by discomfort with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) issues. Participants observed that faculty members and peers often appeared to be uncomfortable in discussing LGBT issues or interacting with lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. This discomfort was reported to be particularly problematic in the classroom, where curricular content occasionally brought LGBT issues to the forefront. Rachel reported, "I think that people feel fairly uncomfortable even talking about gay and lesbian issues in class." One participant noted that a professor's discomfort with LGBT issues would not only negatively affect specific discussions, but also influence the overall comfort with issues of sexual identity experienced by students. Dee observed, "If the professors are uncomfortable in talking about it, obviously the students are going to feel uncomfortable talking about it." Further, participants observed that people who appeared uncomfortable with LGBT issues often succeeded in terminating class discussions related to said issues. Rachel recalls,

I had one professor who would continue to try to get people involved ... and it was painful, like pulling teeth. It may be that people have an opinion and are uncomfortable in expressing it, but [the discussion] tends to hit the floor.

Invisibility. Another and perhaps more insidious manner in which heteronormativity manifested for participants was the invisibility of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people within their social work programs. As well as being experienced on a personal level, this invisibility was also observed to be widespread within social work education. Invisibility was reflected by a dearth of information provided within the curriculum regarding LGBT issues, the absence of publicly identified lesbian, gay, or bisexual faculty and peers, a failure to incorporate LGBT issues in class examples, and a failure to incorporate sexual orientation in conceptualizations of diversity. In other words, not only did some participants attend programs where there were no publicly identified lesbian, gay, or bisexual peers or no publicly identified lesbian, gay, or bisexual faculty, LGBT issues were frequently not discussed at all. Faculty members were reportedly as likely to omit information regarding LGBT issues as were students. For example, Audre stated, "Most of the professors by and large do not talk about gay and lesbian issues." Regional Contexts

The Southern United States. The participants in this study attended a total of six different MSW programs located within five Southern states named earlier. Of these

six universities, five were public institutions. These programs ranged in size and location, with several programs being located in large urban areas, and an equal number being located in small to medium-sized cities. Overall, participants described the general region in which their social work programs were located, e.g. the South, as being highly stratified and somewhat culturally conservative. Stratification was observed to be based on gender, class, and race. These observations were made by women who had grown up in the South as well as women who had grown up in different regional contexts, but who had relocated to this region. For example, Dee stated "it is how it is supposed to be in the South as far as men and women and the traditional roles." As is evidenced in the statement below, these patterns of stratification and cultural conservatism were reflected in the MSW programs. "The social work program is a reflection of [the city in which it is located]. It is very conservative, very White, Southern, and 'old-school.'"

Perhaps because of the stratification and conservatism of this region, participants observed that many of the people with whom they came into contact had little or no awareness of marginalized groups, including lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. This observation was most clearly articulated by one of the participants who also identified as being Jewish. Judy reported, "Since I have been in Georgia, I have met people who have never met a gay person. And I have met people who have never met a Jewish person, which is a shock for me." The lack of exposure to openly LGBT people as well as to LGBT-related issues was given by several of the participants as a principal reason for disclosing their sexual orientation. In addition, many of the women discussed this lack of exposure as an impetus for their feelings of responsibility to educate their peers about lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues.

Lynn: I have a responsibility to myself, to my community, and to my classmates to expose them, whether they like it or not, to [LGBT] issues.

Audre: And I am here to say [to the class], "That is not true. You do know me. You do know someone who is gay. And not only do you know me, but you like me. And you like me because I am a lot like you, and it is okay."

Religion emerged as a particularly significant factor influencing the experiences of participants. Contextually, religion was presented by several of the women as a determinate of the regional culture. Participants distinguished the religiosity evident in the South from religiosity in other regions of the United States. This religiosity was described as pervasive, and predominantly Protestant, in particular Baptist. For example, Judy found that "... people from the South are very religious. The religion is different from the religion up north. There are a lot of Baptists." Religion and regional context were frequently linked and associated with negative attitudes in regards to LGBT people. This sentiment is evidenced in Dee's statement: "I know that a lot of people who did have objections, they were from the South and were very religious."

Rural and urban settings. Although all of the women attended programs within the Southern United States, variances in regional contexts among these programs

contributed to the variance in experiences among participants. In particular, differences resulting from urban versus rural locations were found. These differences revolved around general levels of tolerance of LGBT people and the presence and accessibility of an LGBT community. Women who attended programs in medium-sized or small cities experienced difficulties in accessing lesbian and gay-related resources within the community.

Lynn: There is no distinct community that we have found here yet.

Rachel: I actually attempted a couple of times to contact the [gay and lesbian] community center and I didn't get very far. I got a recording most of the time. There just wasn't a whole lot going on there.

The lesbian and gay communities in the small or mid-sized cities were often limited, with very little to offer people who have a diversity of interests. Furthermore, the dearth of agencies providing services to the lesbian and gay community precluded many participants from realizing their goal of working with lesbian-, gay-, or bisexually identified people. Kate reported, "I would have loved to have been able to find a field placement that focused on [LGBT issues], but this is [a small city] and that is not possible. "The lack of opportunity to work with lesbian-, gay-, or bisexually identified people resulted in decisions by a number of participants to move after graduation to larger cities that have well-developed social service systems that address LGBT issues. Unfortunately, the constant migration of these students to urban areas perpetuates the dearth of social service providers in rural areas who are sensitive to and interested in LGBT issues.

In contrast, the women who resided in urban areas, such as Atlanta, Charlotte, and New Orleans, were not only able to identify and access lesbian and gay-related resources within the community, many of them were actively involved in said communities. It should therefore not be surprising that the two women who were able to find field placements in agencies that focused primarily on LGBT issues resided in large cities.

### Program Size and Structure

The size and structure of the MSW program also appeared to be of particular importance in shaping the experiences of participants. The size of the social work program was strongly related to the sense of community experienced by the women. Women who attended smaller programs described stronger feelings of community with their peers than did those women who attended larger programs.

Rea: The [satellite program's] cohort was about 23 or 24. We all went through the program as a cohort. So, there were close bonds created among our cohort.

Amy: In the [satellite program] you got really close. I went to classes with the same

people for two years.

The small size of some of the programs resulted in obligatory interaction with the same peers over and over again. Through this obligatory interaction, participants were exposed to and became familiar with the histories, prejudices, interests, and passions of their peers. Simultaneously, their peers were developing the same familiarity of the participants. This exposure and familiarity facilitated the desire to understand and learn from one another.

Rae: Something that helped about [Tracy] and I being open and out was seeing and knowing someone who was gay or lesbian. I think that several people in our cohort had never known that they knew someone who was gay or lesbian. So, I became a resource, and that was okay.

It is important to note that the obligatory and constant interaction present in smaller programs was not present in the larger programs. Although the wide range of course offerings and large cohorts provided by the larger programs might imply more opportunities for exposure to diversity and the development of community with similar others, in actuality, the size of these programs had significant implications for participants. First, participants reported that students were able to select courses taught by instructors who held ideological positions that were congruent with their own. While this congruence might make the educational experience of these students more enjoyable or comfortable, it also has the potential of reducing exposure to a variety of ideological positions. Second, participants reported that students were able to coordinate with friends within the program to take the same classes, thereby further decreasing their opportunities for exposure to the diversity among their peers. Once again, this self-selection enabled students to avoid exposure to people, beliefs, and information that they found discomfiting or with which they disagreed. In contrast, Audre explained that the small size of her program facilitated her relationships with peers that she might otherwise never have selected to interact with on her own: "It brings something for me as well because I have been really insular in a lot of ways. I have been pretty much surrounding myself with people with like minds, with like worldviews, with like politics."

Not the "Only One"

Factors emanating from within the social work programs influenced the experiences of participants. In particular, the presence of other people who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual was frequently discussed by participants as important in shaping their experiences. The presence of lesbian-, gay-, or bisexually identified people was associated with feelings of support, acceptance, comfort, and connectedness with others. These sentiments are illustrated in the comments provided below.

Alex: I am finding a lot of lesbians. Not just gay people, but lesbians. So, I sort of feel like, "God, I fit in."

Diana: It is a weird place to be. You come to this school of social work to learn to work with all different kinds of people and populations. You just assume that everyone is going to be open-minded and respectful. You have these ideals, but the reality is that [those ideals] are not always the case. So, being on your own would be kind of discomfoting.

Unfortunately, two of the participants in this study reported that they knew of no one else in their program who identified as lesbian, bisexual, or gay. Both of these women described themselves as being very out regarding their lesbian identities. One of the participants, Audre, expressed disbelief in being the only out lesbian:

There are no gay or lesbian professors that I know. There are no gay or lesbian students that I know. There is nobody in my classes. I am the only lesbian. I can't believe it, but I am the only one who is out.

When questioned about the effects of being the only out lesbian on their experiences within their social work programs, both women acknowledged feelings of isolation or disconnectedness. Furthermore, both expressed a desire for interaction within their programs with other lesbian-, gay-, and bisexually-identified people. Rachel: I felt isolated. I think I would have felt a lot more isolated if I wasn't in a relationship. I wonder how people who aren't in relationships who are not heterosexual fare and if they have been able to create a sense of community.

Audre: It would have been wonderful to have somebody else that when something is said I could look to, or they could look at me with that knowing glance, that little affirmation or validation. I would have loved to have somebody else, without a doubt. Without a doubt.

LGBT peers. In addition to the aforementioned participants, several of the other participants stated that they believed that they were the only lesbian, gay, or bisexual person among their peers. In these situations, the women were aware of faculty who had disclosed either gay or lesbian identities, but were unaware of any lesbian, gay, or bisexually identified peers. Laura recalls, "I really think that I might have been the only one in the part-time program," and Alex states, "I don't think anybody else is gay. But who knows?"

Feeling as though they were the only one to identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual among their peers, was related by the participants to their inability to discern whether or not others in the program identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. This inability was most likely due to the absence of definitive physical or cultural characteristics by which to identify the sexual identities of others.

LGBT faculty. In addition to lesbian, gay, or bisexually identified peers, participants also discussed the significance of lesbian, gay, and bisexually identified faculty on their experiences within their MSW programs. The presence or lack of lesbian, gay, or bisexual faculty members who were out was evenly divided among the six programs. Participants at three programs reported that there were no out lesbian, gay, or bisexual

faculty members whereas participants attending the remaining three programs were aware of at least one lesbian, gay, or bisexual faculty member. The women associated the presence of lesbian, gay, and bisexual faculty with feelings of comfort, support, and attachment.

Judy: My liaison for my practicum last year and this year, she told us on the first day of class that she is a lesbian and that she is Jewish. Of course, I felt a little bonded to her.

Sarah: Just knowing that they're there certainly makes it easier. I mean, just knowing that they are there makes me feel comfortable.

A couple of the women associated the presence of lesbian, gay, and bisexual faculty members with their self-imposed feelings of responsibility to advocate for and educate others about LGBT issues. In particular, these women reported feeling as though lesbian, gay, and bisexual faculty were potential sources of support for them as they enacted their roles as educators and advocates.

Laura: I am glad that they are on the faculty. It is nice to know that I have someone who is also a lesbian that I can go to, especially in that I don't have any classmates. If I needed to vent I could go to her. I think she knows where I am coming from, so it makes it really easy for me to talk to her.

In addition to feelings of support, comfort, and attachment, participants also described functions and roles performed by lesbian, gay, and bisexual faculty members. Participants reported that lesbian, gay, and bisexual faculty members often served as resources in regards to LGBT issues. In particular, lesbian, gay, and bisexual faculty provided participants with additional readings related to LGBT issues, direction regarding LGBT issues in their field placements, and general information regarding lesbian and gay-related professional events or activities. Diana summarizes this resource function in her description of the impact a lesbian-identified adjunct instructor had on her experiences in the MSW program:

It was pretty cool to know that I had someone I could go talk to who was also interested in gay and lesbian stuff; having someone as a resource for information and readings. Just having someone I could talk to about stuff made a big difference.

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual faculty members were also viewed by some participants as role models. The presence of these faculty members provided participants with examples of how they can integrate their sexual identities with their emerging professional statuses. Sarah stated of her experience, "I have just never had the opportunity to be around lesbians previously. I think in a general way they've been like role models for me." Another role assumed by lesbian, gay, and bisexual faculty, which was not assumed by heterosexually identified faculty members, was that of advisor to LGBT student groups.

Given the unequal size of the MSW programs and the unequal distribution of participants among the schools, a majority of the participants attended the three programs in which there were no out lesbian, gay, or bisexual faculty members. In total, 14 of the 19 participants attended programs devoid of publicly identified lesbian, gay, or bisexual faculty members. The lack of LGBT faculty members caused at least one participant to question her program's inclusion of sexual orientation in their conceptualization of diversity. Audre observed, "It just seems like they have everything under the rainbow pretty much, except an out gay or lesbian faculty member."

Participants identified several potential ramifications of having no out lesbian, gay, or bisexual instructors among the faculty. For example, Valerie noted that, "If the faculty members were out and accepted, then maybe the students would be accepted too. If the faculty are in the closet ... it is hard for the students to be out too." Valerie's comments are particularly relevant given that several of the women believed that there might have been lesbian, gay, or bisexual faculty members who were closeted in professional contexts. Natalie observed, "I don't think that I ever had a professor who was gay, except there was one woman who I thought was. She has lived with another woman for years. But she never talked about it." Further, Diana identified another impediment she experienced that resulted in part from the lack of full-time, tenure-track faculty who identified as gay, lesbian, or bisexual: Trying to find a professor to sponsor an independent study [on LGBT issues] was difficult. It was difficult trying to find someone who had an interest in the field.

LGBT student groups. Many of the participants, particularly those women attending programs in which there were no lesbian, gay, or bisexual faculty or few lesbian, gay, or bisexual peers, expressed a desire for a stronger sense of community with other LGBT students. The establishment of LGBT student groups within the social work programs was provided as a possible means by which to facilitate community. LGBT groups were associated with the provision of mutual support, information sharing, professional networking, and the development of strategies to effect change.

Jill: It would have been wonderful if there had been some sort of community. We would have definitely benefited from having known each other.

Kate: I would love it. And I would be more likely to do it from a professional standpoint for the networking possibilities, and to discuss the kinds of things we would be interested in from a professional standpoint.

Of the six universities represented in this study, two had established groups for LGBT students that were closely associated with the social work programs themselves. However, neither of these groups were sponsored nor facilitated solely by or within the social work programs. One of the groups was facilitated jointly by the university's school of public health and school of social work. Two of the participants who were involved in this group, Erica and Vanessa, reported that students enrolled in master's programs in both colleges were invited to attend, and leadership was maintained by both

colleges. The other group that was closely affiliated with a social work program was led by a social work faculty member. This group served as the central LGBT group for the entire student population at a large university. Perhaps resulting from this faculty member's involvement, Lynn, the only participant who attended this particular program, reported that the group's presence was clearly visible within the social work program. "I met four other women in the second year of the MSW program and then someone in the Ph. program through the group. The social work building is just lined with [LGBT student association] notices and meeting times."

Although all of the universities had general LGBT groups on campus, none of the women attended these groups (with the exception of the aforementioned group in which a social work faculty member was the advisor). The lack of involvement in these groups was due largely to the age of other participants (the groups were reported to be predominantly attended by younger, undergraduate students), and time limitations emanating from enrollment in the MSW programs.

## Discussion

Overall, participants found their social work programs to be reflective of the regional context in which they were located. As such, participants were constantly confronted by the presumption that they were heterosexual and by the privileging of heterosexuality. This privileging of heterosexuality, or heteronormativity, emerged within their classes, in their field placements, and among their peers. The manner in which participants experienced and reacted to such prejudice was mitigated by a myriad of contextual factors including the size, structure, and locations of the MSW programs. However, the most frequently reported influence on the experiences of these women within these predominately heteronormative settings was the presence of other known lesbian, gay, or bisexual people.

Involvement with other lesbian, gay, or bisexual people was associated with support, comfort, and connectedness. Significantly, several of the women reported that there were no other publicly identified lesbian, gay, or bisexual people in their programs. Given these findings coupled with desire to establish supportive educational environments, it is incumbent upon social work education programs to assist lesbian, gay, or bisexual students in developing supportive alliances while in school. A significant contribution that some programs have already made is to facilitate the establishment of lesbian, gay, or bisexual student associations. Lesbian, gay, or bisexual groups can be run as caucuses under larger social work student associations. Other suggestions for structuring such groups can be derived from the two examples presented in the preceding section of this paper. In addition, social work education programs can help students identify supportive allies by implementing a "safe space" program. These programs ask that faculty and staff who are knowledgeable about issues related to and supportive of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people prominently display symbols acknowledging their willingness to be resources for LGBT students.

The decision as to whether or not lesbian, gay, or bisexual faculty should disclose their

sexual identity within the classroom has been discussed extensively within the literature (Cain, 1996; Martin, 1995). Findings from this study indicate that such disclosures can be beneficial to lesbian, gay, or bisexual students (of course, individual faculty members must determine if disclosure could be detrimental to their careers). Out faculty were viewed by participants as role models, resources regarding LGBT issues, and sources of support. Furthermore, the presence of these faculty members could be seen by students as indicators of what they can accomplish as lesbian or bisexual women.

As with other forms of diversity, the inclusion of lesbian, gay, or bisexual people among the faculty and student populations within programs of social work education can be highly beneficial. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual students and faculty have the potential to enlighten and educate people about this underserved and highly stigmatized population (Ihrig, 1996). Without the presence of lesbian, gay, or bisexual people in social work education programs, discussion of LGBT-related issues is purely abstract for many students. Suggestions for how programs can recruit or attract lesbian, gay, or bisexual people are: inclusion of sexual orientation in all printed statements pertaining to diversity; inclusion of sexual orientation in the program's nondiscrimination clause; provision of partner benefits for faculty and staff; increased opportunities for students to work with LGBT people during field practica; establishment of lesbian, gay, and bisexual student associations; and recruitment efforts in lesbian, gay, or bisexual forums, such as undergraduate LGBT student associations.

In accordance with CSWE's (2001) Accreditation Standard 6.0, social work education programs must demonstrate the specific actions they have taken to create a learning environment that is respectful of diverse groups and nondiscriminatory. The subtle yet pervasive prejudice experienced by participants of this study illuminates the need for examination of said learning contexts. Studies to evaluate the effectiveness of initiatives and measures designed to build supportive learning contexts for LGBT students would yield valuable information that could then be used by social work education programs in their efforts to conform to Accreditation Standard 6.0. In addition, studies similar to this one should be conducted with gay and bisexual male students as well as in different regional settings to determine whether the same or different patterns of prejudice and support exist. Studies such as the aforementioned will help answer a fundamental question inherent in Accreditation Standard 6.0: How can we, as social work educators, effectively practice what we teach in regards to diversity and social justice?

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