EQUITY VS. INVISIBILITY:

SEXUAL ORIENTATION ISSUES IN SOCIAL WORK CURRICULA

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Introduction: The responsibility of the social work profession to be inclusive and equitable in its service provision is reviewed via policies relating to professional training regarding sexual orientation issues. A comparative review of Canada, the United States of America (USA) and United Kingdom (UK) and international standards regarding sexual orientation issues in social work codes of ethics and curricula policies was undertaken. The results speak to where consistencies exist and where they need to be established in order to develop an infrastructure that properly trains social workers for these populations.

A crucial backdrop to the training of social workers, and that with which curricula needs to be based on is social work ethics (Mulé, 1999.) As much as ethics need to play a solid foundational base to the training of aspiring social workers, ethics are also fluid in order to incorporate relevant developing sensitivities. The literature acknowledges this with regard to the development of the code of ethics in the USA. Reamer (1998) traces the historical evolution of social work ethics in the USA that progressed from periods of morality, values, ethical theory and decision-making to ethical standards and risk management. Walz and Ritchie (2000) argue enriching these ethics by incorporating Gandhi’s principles. With particular relevance to social work would be seeking truth through service to others, individual self-development, nonviolent social action, and material simplicity. As practitioners, social workers are called upon to subscribe to the highest of moral and ethical standards, at all times. It is necessary this includes the right of client self-determination and respect and support regardless of their sexual orientation (Wyers, 1987.) Social workers need to educate themselves and others on practice issues in working with lesbians, gays and bisexuals (Harrison & Dziegielewski, 1992.)

What of the social work profession’s systemic responsibility with regard to education on sexual orientation issues that backs up ethical standards?

Sexual minority issues were found to be either marginalized or excluded in a study of 37 gay men and their experiences in social work education. Curriculum content lacked accuracy amidst a hostile climate regarding public discourse of sexual orientation issues. Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work (CASSW) has accreditation standards that prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, yet lacks a requirement for
comprehensive inclusion of such issues which contrasts with policy relevant to other minority groups. Thus, individual schools of social work rarely make reference to sexual minority issues (O’Neill, 1995.) In preliminary research reviewing how difference is approached in curricula of 16 Canadian schools of social work, Stainton and Swift (1996) discovered that in most cases courses were offered focusing on specific oppressed groups (i.e. women, race and culture, First Nations, disabilities) as required by CASSW standards. Yet, they found no courses were offered that related specifically to sexual minority issues, which mirrors the lack of requirement by CASSW standards. Personal disclosures by lesbian and gay instructors can facilitate a learning experience for social work students regarding lesbian and gay issues inclusive of homophobia and heterosexism. In a study of 71 undergraduate social work students ‘coming out’ was seen as directly challenging the absence of this issue in academia. Only 19 reported that lesbian and gay issues were discussed in their courses, with the majority of these students stating such courses lacked depth. It was found the ‘out’ instructor contributed to lesbian and gay concerns being raised and encouraged thought with regard to homophobia and heterosexism (Cain, 1996.)

The literature repeatedly points out, that issues of homosexuality should not be compartmentalized to one portion of a “human sexuality” program, single class lecture or chapter in a textbook. Far more effective would be to have it integrated throughout a course study or program (Cain, 1996; DeCrescenzo, 1984; Ellis, 1985; Murphy, 1991; Rosser, 1986; Rothblum, 1994.) Care must be taken to develop curriculum that avoids usage of outdated materials that view homosexuality in the context of crime, illness or sin. A heterosexist bias such as questioning the cause of homosexuality rather than the cause of sexual orientation in general is inappropriate. Inferences to abnormality and alluding to the question of a cure only serves to denigrate sexual minority people (Baker, 1993; McNaron, 1989; Rothblum, 1994; Stevens, Hall, 1991.) Additionally, a discussion of how sexism, sex-role stereotyping, homophobia and heterosexism all interrelate would greatly benefit a curriculum. (Ellis, 1985; Pharr, 1988.)

Practicing social workers need to review their own homophobia and heterosexism as individuals and as professionals, regardless of their sexual orientation. Familiarization with the vast amount of diverse lesbian, gay and bisexual research, literature and resources that exist can assist one in becoming better informed. (Baker, 1993; Brown, 1998; DeCrescenzo, 1984; Morrow, 1993; Woodman, 1992.)

Method: Canada, the UK and the USA were chosen for the comparative review. National social work codes of ethics were reviewed for each. Policies for accreditation in curriculum were reviewed from each of the respective countries’ national schools of social work accreditation bodies. As a further comparison, international ethical standards were reviewed, as stipulated by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). The International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) does not provide accreditation standards as this is seen to be a complicated process considering the diversity of the profession in nations throughout the world.
Comparative Subjects

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Subjects</th>
<th>Professional Bodies</th>
<th>Codes of Ethics</th>
<th>Curricula Accreditation Bodies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW)</td>
<td>Code of Ethics of the CASW</td>
<td>Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work (CASSW)</td>
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<td>United States of America (USA)</td>
<td>National Association of Social Workers (NASW)</td>
<td>Code of Ethics of the NASW</td>
<td>Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)</td>
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<td>International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW)</td>
<td>International Body</td>
<td>International Declaration of Ethical Principles of Social Work</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW)</td>
<td>International Body</td>
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N/A – Non Applicable

Comparative Analysis:

**Codes of Ethics:** The International Federation of Social Workers in its International Declaration of Ethical Principles of Social Work includes sexual orientation as a grounds for which there should be no unfair discrimination (IFSW, 1994.) Similarly, Canada through the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW, 1992), the UK through the British Association of Social Workers (BASW, 1996) and USA through the National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 1999), also include sexual orientation accordingly in their respective codes of ethics. Although Canada’s inclusion of sexual orientation is prominently featured in the philosophy section of its code, the UK’s speaks to “the value and dignity of every human being” irrespective of their sexual orientation, prohibits discrimination against clients and will not tolerate such actions on the part of colleagues and others. The USA refers to sexual orientation in the following four sections: cultural competence and social diversity, respect, discrimination, and social and political action. Thus, by including it in four different sections of the code, the USA presents the strongest of the three perspectives of valuing sexual orientation in varying aspects of social work practice.

**Curriculum Standards:** An international standard of social work curricula is not provided by the International Association of Schools of Social Work, as this has proven to be a difficult task given the broad variance in social work definitions, training and education, and cultural values internationally (Garber, 2000.) The Council on Social Work Education is the USA’s accrediting body for both undergraduate and graduate studies. Their policies require curricula content to include sexual orientation under diversity, and targets gay and lesbian persons for which “theoretical and practice content about patterns, dynamics, and consequences of discrimination, economic deprivation, and oppression” must be presented (CSWE, 1994.) The Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work also accredits both undergraduate and graduate studies in that country. Sexual orientation is specified once in the general introduction dealing with the “admission of its students and promotion and placement policies,” and under non-
discrimination/freedom from harassment that deals with the learning environment (CASSW, 1999.) Although Canadian standards encourage the study of oppression, nowhere does it require such study specific to sexual orientation. The UK’s Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work who provide Diplomas of Social Work (Dip SW) maintain anti-discriminatory standards, yet do not specify sexual orientation issues (Trotter & Gilchrist, 1996.)

Even though Canada the UK and USA’s codes of ethics include sexual orientation, consistency with regard to this issue in curriculum standards only appears to be in place in the USA. How the USA got to this place is worth noting. Trolander (1997) speaks to the important role minority and female members of CSWE played in shifting its approach from equal opportunity to affirmative action. She also acknowledges the historical climate of federal affirmative action policies, funding initiatives and Supreme Court decisions that made for an environment of change towards equity in accreditation, student and faculty recruitment and curriculum. A backlash that took place in the late 1970s and early 1980s calls for vigilance in protecting such standards and policies even till this day. The CSWE’s Curriculum Policy Statement mandating attention to broader human diversity has seen most of it focused on race and ethnicity. Very little attention has been paid to sexual orientation issues (Almeida & Devore, 1997.) Despite the requirement that sexual diversity be included in social work curricula, controversy continues as to whether conservative religious colleges be granted an exemption. Arguments against speak to compromised ethical standards and inherent contradictions in accrediting social work programs in a setting in which homosexuality is seen as a sin. Not only does this mandate lead the world in ensuring the inclusion of sexual orientation content in the curriculum, this requirement simply does not exist in other disciplines (van Wormer, Wells, Boes, 2000.) There are apparent gaps in both Canada and the UK’s standards for social work curricula on sexual orientation content, that may not adequately prepare social work students to abide by the code of ethics in working with these populations.

### Inclusion of Sexual Orientation Issues

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<tr>
<th>Standards</th>
<th>Canada</th>
<th>UK</th>
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<th>IFSW</th>
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N/A: Not Applicable, ( ) denotes partial inclusion

**Recommendation:** That both the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work and the UK’s Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work strengthen their standards for educational curricula by mandating the inclusion of sexual orientation issues in both undergraduate and graduate social work studies.

**Conclusion:** Ensuring that code of ethics and accredited curricula standards are parallel on sexual orientation issues, creates a consistency in the training of social workers and expectations of them as professionals in the field. The social worker benefits by having a
more comprehensive knowledge base when practicing with sexual minority communities and the sexual minority client benefits by having a more sensitized worker that will impart accessible and equitable services. The American model is a positive example by means of the comprehensive inclusion of sexual orientation issues and its clear and strongly worded requirements. Both the Canadian and UK models display inconsistencies between professional ethical expectations and adequate training standards that would appropriately prepare social workers to engage in the provision of effective and relevant services to sexual minority populations. Further study would need to look at the degree to which sexual orientation issues are covered in actual curricula at both the undergraduate and graduate studies levels in Schools of Social Work.

References:


