

Coming Out in Field Placement: Some Considerations for LGBT Students

Contributed by Joe Dooley, Ph.D., LCSW

Students approaching their field placements experience a mix of emotions, expectations, and apprehensions. For lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students, the anticipation of the field placement may bring about issues that are related to sexual orientation or transgender status. Issues of disclosure and concerns about how field instructors, agencies, and potential clients might respond to LGBT students may be prominent. {mosgoogle right}

Social work ethics compel social workers to work against discrimination for a wide variety of populations at risk, including sexual orientation. However, research suggests that some social workers' attitudes toward LGBT persons may not be congruent with that ethic. Berkman and Zinberg's (1997) research suggests that a majority of social workers studied held heterosexist attitudes, and approximately 10% harbored homophobic attitudes. Another factor is that some agencies and social organizations where students may be placed are affiliated with groups whose beliefs may conflict with this social work ethic (e.g., placements affiliated with some religious institutions). Many LGBT students are aware of these issues, and therefore anticipation of placement may arouse anxiety.

The following are considerations and ideas in helping LGBT students to have a successful placement experience.

Cost/Benefit Analysis

One of the most important issues that LGBT students think about is whether or not to disclose their sexual orientation/transgender status to the field director and, ultimately, to a field instructor. In the best of all possible worlds, this would not have to be something to consider, and for some students the decision to disclose is not particularly anxiety producing. However, in some environments, LGBT students are cautious about coming out, as they are concerned about negative attitudes and how their coming out might affect their evaluations. For example, it is possible that in some rural environments, attitudes toward LGBT persons may be more conservative and prevent students from feeling comfortable in fully disclosing their status. Or, disclosure may have negative repercussions in close-knit communities in that this information may be difficult to control once disclosed. It is up to the individual to make choices about if and how to disclose, given how much they feel safe in doing so.

Hunter & Hickerson (2003) suggest that a cost/benefit analysis to determine whether or not one wishes to come out in a particular environment is a way to decide how open an individual might wish to be about her or his orientation. In respect to field placement, some questions that might be pertinent to this analysis are as follows:

- How comfortable am I with my gay/transgender identity? How much anxiety do I have about coming out in general? Am I ready to make this identity part of my professional self?
- What goals would I want to accomplish by coming out to the field director, faculty, and field instructors? Are these goals attainable given current information?
- Does the environment appear open to my disclosure? How safe is it for me to come out? Will my grade suffer? What would I have to lose by coming out?
- Are there other LGBT students? Faculty? If so, how do others respond to them?
- Are there supports in place for me if I come out? Are there people I can talk to about my field experiences as a LGBT person?

For most LGBT persons, this type of assessment is done reflexively in new situations, but it would be important to do it in a planned and objective manner for students concerned about coming out in their field placements. Writing down or talking over with another student or friend what benefits there might be to coming out (e.g., feeling free to discuss one's life and opinions) can be productive. Likewise, identifying drawbacks (e.g., anxiety over lack of safety or conflicts with agency culture) helps to clarify one's choice. In addition, in thinking about what might be important in forming a positive field experience for LGBT students, Messinger (2004) suggests that interpersonal supports and institutional resources are needed. Interpersonal supports consist of LGBT faculty members and agency staff, as well as educated heterosexual field instructors and agency staff. Institutional resources include resource information for LGBT students (such as lists of gay/transgender-friendly agencies and placement sites) and supportive resources for LGBT clients. Students might consider whether these supports and resources exist and/or if they might potentially be put into place.

In the course of this analysis, a student may decide that the costs outweigh the benefits and choose not to disclose. It is very important to note that not disclosing is not a failing of the student. Moreover, some students may feel that it is not an important aspect of their lives to share. If a student decides not to disclose this information, it would be important to leave the door open if, at a later time, she or he may choose to disclose. In some cases, it might be possible to "be out" to some people in the placement but not to others. In any event, if the student does not disclose, she or he should be sure to have support from outside the field placement. In arranging such supports, it would be important that confidential information of any type is not shared with persons outside of the agency.

Field Placement Planning

If students decide to come out, it would be important to discuss their orientation/transgender status with the field director. This discussion should be straightforward and include the student's strengths, abilities, goals, and possible concerns. Transgender students should be prepared to be detailed in this discussion, as the particular concerns and needs of transgender persons may not be as familiar to some faculty. A frank discussion will help the director to

develop a plan for a placement that is congruent for the student. The director may be aware of placements that are particularly appropriate for LGBT students and/or may know field instructors who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender who could serve as role models for students. If there is a LGBT community center or related services, the field director may be able to arrange a placement there, even if one has not existed before.

Frank discussions are also important in preliminary interviews with prospective field instructors. Coming out to potential field instructors can give the student some indication of how the instructor and agency will respond to the student's orientation or status. If the student has concerns regarding these discussions with field instructors, it is important to alert the field director and field liaison regarding these concerns. Effort in the planning phase of a field placement will set the stage for a successful placement.

Development of "Professional Self" as an LGBT Person

A demeanor of openness and helpfulness is important in learning to integrate one's LGBT and social work identities and provides a way to develop one's "use of professional self." In relationships with other staff members, as well as with clients, it is good to try to be a model of professionalism by remembering the feminist statement, "the personal is the political." This means that others make decisions about a particular group from how its individual members act; this can have political implications for that particular group. How one acts as an LGBT student may have implications for other potential LGBT students and LGBT professionals, as well as LGBT clients. Being open in professional settings about one's sexual orientation/transgender status carries responsibilities.

Coming Out to Other Professionals

In coming out to others in professional contexts, it is not always necessary to make a big pronouncement. Hunter and Hickerson (2003) discuss that a calm, factual disclosure that does not invite probing questions and one that presents a positive sense of self may be the best choice. For example, in interactions with new professional colleagues, I usually find some reason to mention my male partner. This sort of brief, casual disclosure alerts others to my sexual orientation in a matter of fact way. Listeners typically accept this information without needing elaborate detail.

Coming Out to Clients

One of the primary issues that LGBT students will grapple with in the field is the issue of coming out to clients. The question of when to self-disclose to clients is a major learning experience in keeping appropriate boundaries as a professional, yet being "genuine." As in any self-disclosure to clients, the main issue is whether or not the disclosure is important to the client's care. In many cases, disclosure of one's sexual orientation or transgender status is not crucial to the client's care in any way. In other cases, it might be important—for example, when the client is lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. In any case, it is very important to discuss this with one's field instructor to evaluate its impact on particular clients. Learning experiences such as these help build a repertoire of choices that are important in professional development.

Helping Make Organizations Welcoming

Whether students decide to come out in their field placements or not, there are some ways for them to improve the agency environment for LGBT persons. Organizations that have social work field students often feel that students provide "fresh eyes" in looking at the day-to-day operations, policies, and procedures of the agency or program. LGBT students can be particularly helpful to agencies by providing ideas about how the organization could be more amenable to LGBT clients. For example, paperwork that clients fill out upon intake may require more inclusive language (e.g., including the category "partnered" for marital status). Another example is displaying LGBT symbols, such as a diversity flag or pink triangle, which can welcome and reassure clients. Another area is helping workers in the agency to better tailor their practice to LGBT clients when the situation permits. This type of activity can be viewed as a form of advocacy for the client. If the student is to give these sorts of suggestions, it is best to do so in a helpful fashion, rather than one that could suggest prejudice or ill intent on the part of the agency. Suggestions should be discussed first with the student's field instructor, and collaboratively they can be forwarded through the organizational system.

For all students, it is important to remember that integrating one's LGBT identity with professional self is an ongoing process that begins with the field placement and continues to develop throughout one's career. It is a learning process that builds over time and produces many challenges and successes. Most assuredly, it is possible to integrate these two facets of one's life in a meaningful way that is helpful to others.

References

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