

# LGBT Faculty, Research, and Researchers: Risks and Rewards

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**ABSTRACT.** Self-identified lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) faculty along with heterosexuals with scholarly interests in these populations can face heterosexism, heterocentrism, homophobia, and hostility within and outside of social work programs. This article describes the risks and rewards of being an LGBT faculty based on the experiences of the authors. Myths and realities relating to coming out, promotion, and funding are discussed, along with the pitfalls of tokenism and the stress of being an LGBT faculty of color. Ways to endure and even thrive in spite of these potentially formidable burdens are also described.

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In 2003, The Traditional Values Coalition condemned 140 federally funded studies close to half of which examined lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) populations. Some of these studies were audited and members of Congress attempted to cut the funding of at least two of them. During the same period, several LGBT social work faculty heard comments from doctoral students and junior faculty such as: "I was told not to do an LGBT dissertation because it will hurt your chances on the job market," "My advisor said you cannot get tenure if all you do is LGBT research," and "Senior faculty tell me LGBT research is not fundable."

In response, several LGBT social work academics and those with substantive interests in LGBT issues approached professional organizations for assistance in responding to the political attacks and prevailing myths about LGBT research and related academic careers. The Institute for the Advancement of Social Work Research (IASWR) in collaboration with the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), and the Society for Social Work Research (SSWR) issued a public statement condemning the Traditional Values Coalition's efforts to censure federally funded research (<http://www.charityadvantage.com/iaswr/LGBTFINALREPORT.pdf>). In addition, as a result of these collaborations LGBT social work faculty and IASWR held a preconference workshop on procuring federal funding for LGBT research before the Ninth Annual SSWR Conference in January 2005. Panel discussions on the risks and rewards of an LGBT researcher/faculty career were held during the Ninth Annual SSWR Conference and at the Annual Program Meeting of the CSWE in February 2006. Furthermore, IASWR also convened a summit of LGBT researchers in June 2005 to chart the future of LGBT social work research. The purpose of this article is to disseminate some of the material discussed at these various meetings and workshops in order to provide information and guidance for LGBT-identified social work faculty. Some guidance for non-LGBT faculty doing LGBT research is also provided.

We posit that the material presented approximates many but not all of the experiences of LGBT social work faculty as it is based on the personal and professional experiences of the authors and attendees of the meetings previously described. Although faculty and doctoral students undertaking LGBT research, along with those seeking to support such students

and faculty, are the intended audiences, this article is also relevant to all academics who embrace the principles and values of social work. Self-identified LGBT faculty, whether or not they conduct LGBT scholarship, along with heterosexuals with substantive interests in these populations, may encounter misunderstandings, heterocentrism, heterosexism, homophobia, and hostility both within and outside of social work programs. Ways to cope, survive, and even flourish under potentially formidable burdens such as academic heterosexism, prejudice, and tokenism are discussed.

### *Out or Not?*

LGBT faculty (along with heterosexual scholars conducting LGBT research) must decide whether or not to disclose their sexual orientations in their academic settings. By choosing to come out and disclose, LGBT faculty members can avoid the stress of hiding their lifestyles. Despite the risks of encountering prejudice and harassment associated with coming out, those who are able to do so seem to benefit emotionally and psychologically, and their relationships with their partners also seem to benefit (Cain, 1991; LaSala, 2000). It is believed that organizations gain by establishing and maintaining tolerant workplaces where LGBT people feel free to openly disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity. This freedom allows individuals to contribute to the organizations at their greatest potential, unencumbered by a fear of prejudice (Appleby, 1998; Lydenberg et al., 1986). Arguably, social work faculty need to be free to be who they are to fully engage in the exchange of ideas essential to an intellectually stimulating and productive college or university.

However, a common method used by LGBT people for managing stigma has been to remain hidden or in the closet. In an attempt to fit into the dominant culture, LGBT people may attempt to "pass," presenting themselves as heterosexual or choosing not to correct the assumption that they are heterosexual (Barreto et al., 2006; Berger, 1990). In this manner, LGBT people can protect themselves from the consequences of social stigma and oppression (Kanuha, 1999). Although the stress of hiding oneself can be emotionally and physically draining (Appleby, 1998) in certain settings where intolerance exists, staying in the closet, or at least remaining unknown to colleagues and superiors, may be a reasonable choice especially for vulnerable doctoral students and untenured faculty.

So, how do LGBT faculty and doctoral students decide whether or not to come out? One strategy often used is to gauge the environment of the school or department to determine whether one will encounter acceptance

or censure and rejection. Does the institution forbid discrimination against LGBT people in their antidiscrimination policies? Is the school or department housed in an institution sponsored by a religion that is hostile to LGBT people and their concerns? How do faculty address issues of diversity in the curriculum, among the students or staff, or between each other? Are gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues included in these deliberations? Often, based on the outcomes of these assessments, it is possible to determine if the environment is or is not receptive to LGBT people. Many LGBT people have extensive experience and abilities assessing environments for tolerance and safety—skills they had to develop to survive! So, assessing the academic environment to decide whether it is safe to come out might be a matter of reprising previously successful skills.

Another way some LGBT faculty may come out is to let their LGBT-related work “out” them rather than directly stating their sexual orientation. Although it is erroneous to presume that everyone who conducts research in LGBT substantive areas is LGBT, it seems reasonable to assume that LGBT-identified people may be overrepresented among those conducting LGBT research. Based on the substantive areas they are studying, colleagues often assume they are LGBT and LGBT faculty members may do nothing to contradict this assumption. As time goes on, LGBT faculty members might begin to feel safer and explicitly state their sexual orientation to others directly or indirectly by talking about a partner or other life experiences.

### *LGBT Persons of Color*

Up to this point LGBT people have been discussed as a monolithic group, yet it is important to acknowledge and understand that numerous factors add to complexities of social inclusion experienced by subgroups within LGBT communities. Racial and ethnic demographics, gender, age, and ability status can contribute to how LGBT scholars are perceived and received, and how they fit into their academic milieus. Racism and sexism are additional hurdles for LGBT faculty. Research suggests that heterosexuals may be oblivious to some of their economic and social privileges over gays and lesbians (DiAngelo, 1997). It is hoped that LGBT faculty would not perpetuate this indifference by ignoring white and male privilege and the additional hardships experienced by those who belong to multiple oppressed groups that have historically been marginalized. Though white gay male faculty may experience oppression due to their

sexual orientation, LGBT faculty who are female and/or not white will also likely experience sexism and racism. Black LGBT individuals, unable to hide their race, may experience an even greater amount of hostility due to their race rather than their sexual orientation (King, 2005).

Savage and Harley (2005) assert that the multiple forms of oppression faced by LGBT persons of color converge in such a way as to exacerbate already marginalized persons within the broader LGBT and academic communities and expose these persons to multilayered levels of discrimination. Coping for LGBT faculty of color must include strategies and skills to mitigate, simultaneously and continually, the forces of racism, heterosexism, homophobia, and gender biases. For sure, lesbian, African American, Asian, Latina/o, differently abled, and other LGBT persons from multiple oppressed groups need to consider carefully whether they are willing to risk what could be accumulative disadvantage.

Negotiating a hierarchical identity-disclosure strategy may be a prudent survival strategy for LGBT persons of color. Such a strategy might entail deciding between initially coming out as L, G, B, or T or first developing alliances with other faculty/staff around ethnic, racial, and/or religious identities. Although one does not necessarily preclude the other, for LGBT faculty of color, the impact of being in a multiple minority status might require this selective disclosure strategy. That stated, as noted above, the price one pays for not being authentic, complete, and visible, especially for LGBTs of color, is quite real.

### **TOKENISM**

If a faculty member decides to come out and is the only LGBT person or the only scholar of LGBT substantive issues, or even one of a small handful of LGBT faculty in the social work department, school, or university, it is reasonable to suspect that he or she will experience the deleterious effects of *tokenism*. According to Kanter (1977, 1980), a noted expert in this area, if the proportion of a particular type of person in an organization is less than 20%, it is likely that tokenism is occurring. Some institutions and organizations consisting mostly or entirely of whites and male faculty may be under institutional, social, and sometimes legal pressure to recruit and promote women and faculty of color. In response, such organizations have traditionally hired a small number of "tokens." Rather than making systemic changes in the organization that would increase diversity and diminish institutional discrimination, administrators

often hire one or two members of an oppressed, underrepresented group as a demonstration that the organization is "doing something" in response to social pressure to be more inclusive. In writing about Latina female tokenism, Medina and Luna (2000) describe how such hires are "window dressing" and do little to make departments more inclusive, culturally competent, or diverse. It is important to note that schools and departments of social work are not obliged by either affirmative action practices or federal equal opportunity employment (EOE) regulations to hire a representative proportion of LGBT professors, so there is little or no legal pressure to recruit LGBT faculty and encourage them to succeed. However, a few departments and schools of social work are hiring LGBT persons in an effort to establish a diverse workplace, to comply with the social work Code of Ethics (National Association of Social Workers, 1999), which prohibits discrimination against LGBT persons, and to better serve LGBT clients and communities. Nevertheless, when such hires reflect tokenism they likely will have the following harmful effects on the LGBT faculty person.

### *Heightened Visibility*

Out LGBT tokens, like women tokens and tokens of color, are usually highly visible in their departments and schools. After 2 years on the job, one of the authors found that students and some colleagues referred to him as "the gay professor." Because openly LGBT faculty members are more likely to stand out, they may also be more likely to be scrutinized. There might be increased pressure to perform, and also a higher likelihood that when they make mistakes, these errors will be noticed and harshly criticized (Kanter, 1977, 1980). This could lead to significant psychological pressure on "token" LGBT people to succeed and believe they cannot make *any* mistakes—certainly a difficult standard for any new faculty member or doctoral student. These pressures are likely magnified for LGBT people of color. Whereas there is no research on the effects of tokenism on LGBT faculty, research on non-LGBT African Americans and women tokens suggests that this intense scrutiny, combined with pressure to succeed, can lead to high levels of work stress along with burnout and both physical and emotional symptoms (Jackson et al., 1995; Pelletier et al., 1996). In addition, such tokens often have additional role demands since LGBT students and community members will likely have unmet needs and will seek out their ongoing support and assistance.

## ***Isolation and Boundary Heightening***

Isolation occurs when members of the majority exaggerate their own commonality in the presence of tokens, reminding the latter of their differences (Kanter, 1977, 1980). The majority faculty member does this through joking, loyalty tests, and exclusions. Tokens are not seen as real people with feelings, but instead as symbols of an outside group, if they are acknowledged at all. An example of boundary heightening might be when a heterosexual man refers to a lesbian colleague he finds attractive "as a waste" because she is not heterosexual and therefore sexually or romantically unavailable to him. Another example could be when male colleagues joke about sex and engage in "locker room talk" around a gay man—or when they fail to invite him to attend their poker nights, golf games, or other sporting events.

One of the authors of this article lost important professional relationships after coming out. As a tenure-track assistant professor, he regularly played doubles tennis with his department chair, dean, and the chancellor of the university. When he came out immediately prior to his tenure decision, the invitations to these weekly events stopped. Each of these tennis players was part of the chain of votes for the tenure decision and he worried that these formerly helpful connections might now be hurdles to achieving tenure. No doubt, such boundary heightening could lead the LGBT faculty member to feel vulnerable and isolated, not knowing who can be relied on for professional and personal support.

## ***Role Encapsulation***

Majority members in organizations typecast and stereotype tokens in ways that constrain them (Kanter, 1977, 1980). For example, role encapsulation might be occurring when a gay man is considered an expert on fashion or decorating his office, but rarely on teaching or scholarship. Such a biased perception might prevent colleagues and superiors from seriously evaluating and supporting his performance in these areas.

Role encapsulation is related to a type of marginalized position in the organization identified by Burghardt (1982) as Spokesperson/Invisible Man/Woman. Tokens are called upon to provide information about their own groups (whether or not they are experts on these groups) but not about anything else. There are many LGBT faculty who specialize in LGBT scholarship; however, if one is expected, perceived, and encouraged to be exclusively interested in LGBT issues, the scholar's

professional development may be hindered and her or his academic freedom compromised. There are out LGBT social work scholars who are experts in child welfare, family violence, and social work administration who have not done any scholarship in LGBT areas. There are others who have done some LGBT scholarship but who also work in other nonrelated areas. However, their expertise in other non-LGBT areas might be discouraged or overlooked. For example, a lesbian professor might have a strong background in child welfare, but is only consulted about issues related to the LGBT community; whereas other colleagues, including those less qualified, might be called upon to discuss child welfare. As Burghardt suggests, she is called upon to be a spokesperson for her group, whether or not this is her area of expertise, but becomes invisible when other issues, including her specialty area, are discussed. Conversely, if a faculty person is interested in LGBT substantive issues, she or he will likely be perceived to be LGBT. This stereotyping combined with the false assumptions and the lack of tangible rewards may all work to encourage the faculty person to assume another area of scholarship.

### *Pitfalls of Tokenism to the Academy*

Perhaps, the most egregious problem related to tokenism is that it impedes the free exchange of ideas necessary for the building and transmission of knowledge. Certain areas of LGBT scholarship challenge relatively unquestioned norms related to sexuality, gender, and social justice (see, e.g., Herek, 1998; Jagose, 2002; LaSala, 2007; Warner, 1999). A critical mass of LGBT scholars (more than 20%) in a school or department of social work can support each other to build knowledge in these areas and can in turn encourage their colleagues and students to think critically about such issues. For sure, students and academics suffer when LGBT intellects and voices are not engaged in the debates over what defines male or female, gay or straight.

### **LGBT SCHOLARS AND LGBT SCHOLARSHIP**

As stated previously, it is important to recognize that there are lesbians, gays, bisexual, and transgender professionals who make significant contributions to fields that *are* and *are not* LGBT-related. In addition, there are heterosexually identified people doing important teaching and research in



LGBT areas. Each of these groups faces special concerns and challenges, some of which are addressed in this section.

### *It's Personal*

Although the number of social and behavioral studies related to sexual orientation has been increasing, particularly since the onset of HIV/AIDS, more are needed to increase the knowledge base of the social work profession, to improve services for LGBT persons and their families and communities, and, as stated earlier, to further challenge previously unquestioned norms. Major rewards of such work include being actively involved in innovative, emerging areas of scholarship, providing needed student support, building a new knowledge base for the social work profession, and having the opportunity to build diverse multicultural collaborations across multiple identities.

However, if one is LGBT and teaching and conducting research in this area, the work can be very personal—it is about you and your life. This perspective is not without its benefits. It is perhaps easy to maintain the interest, enthusiasm, and energy needed to overcome the obstacles inherent in research and scholarship. Like others who conduct research on their own groups, LGBT researchers have endemic perspectives that help them articulate relevant research questions and perform sensitive data analysis (LaSala, 2003). They might also have insider knowledge on how to gain access to information on the community and its literature, and on how to reach its members.

However, people who study their own groups are susceptible to having their work marginalized as less meaningful and objective than other types of research. It has long been thought that the feelings and commitments of inside investigators to fellow group members interfere with their ability to remain objective (Aguilar, 1981; Chilungu, 1976; Hayano, 1979; Merton, 1978; Srinivas, 1967). This thinking underscores the tensions behind the assumptions of neutrality and the insider/outsider debates.

As noted by Medina and Luna (2000), research examining one's own group is seen by some as unscholarly, overly narrow in scope, and lacking in rigor. For example, a gay male assistant professor of law at Yale cautions that some academics label such work *mesearch* and describes how his colleagues and superiors warned him that his research describing LGBT civil rights would not earn him tenure (Yoshino, 2006). A colleague asked one of the authors if his research was based on men he met in gay bars, insinuating his work was biased and lacked rigor.

Sometimes criticisms reflect unacknowledged homophobia, heterosexism, and heterocentrism. For instance, LGBT research is criticized and marginalized for being descriptive of the LGBT population rather than theory driven. However, research describing LGBT populations is severely lacking because theorists and empiricists typically ignore these groups. An anonymous peer reviewer commented to one author that a "pro-gay" perspective biased his article on helping gay men cope with abuse and stigma at the hands of heterosexuals. When that same author was an assistant professor, he was accused by a senior colleague of viewing the world through *pink-colored glasses*, because his work did not relate or build on preexisting, overarching psychosocial theories of stigma and oppression—theories that excluded LGBT people in the first place!

Investigators who produce intellectually and empirically rigorous LGBT scholarship can combat the perceptions that such scholarship is overly biased and lacks rigor. Like others who do insider research, LGBT investigators conducting LGBT research are vulnerable to the pitfalls of this work. These pitfalls include but are not limited to investigators prematurely assuming common understandings with their respondents, not noticing the familiar, projecting their feelings onto their respondents, and not acknowledging or trying to minimize respondent biases such as social desirability effects. However, there are safeguards researchers can take to avoid these pitfalls, and increase the credibility of their work (Anastas, 2004; LaSala, 2003; Van Heughten, 2004; Waldrop, 2004). Overall, it is essential for LGBT investigators (as well as other researchers) to fully describe their methods along with steps taken to avoid projecting their biases onto their respondents, such as member checking and peer debriefing. It is also important for LGBT researchers to guard against social desirability and to clearly state the generalizability limits of their findings. Consistent employment and explication of rigorous research methods helps strengthen the credibility of LGBT scholarship.

### ***It's Radical***

Some non-LGBT social work academics will support the work of colleagues who undertake research or teaching that describes LGBT groups and explicates their stigmatization and oppression, since concern for marginalized populations is traditionally within the domain of social work academic scholarship. However, areas of LGBT scholarship that may have the most potential to contribute to general understandings of human behavior are often quite radical and thereby challenge heterosexist assumptions,

the heterocentrist status quo, and, perhaps by association, heterosexual colleagues. Queer theory, for example, challenges norms governing sexual behavior and gender in potentially disquieting ways. Even the most liberal-minded, heterosexual colleagues might be uncomfortable with the examination of the social, political, and psychological meaning of sexual behavior that falls outside the traditional norms, such as transgender issues or open sexual nonexclusivity in couple relationships. The conceptual separation of sexual orientation and gender along with the consideration of psychological gender on a continuum rather than in binary male/female categories may be a troubling idea to many. Two of the authors work with heterosexual colleagues unfamiliar with queer theory who are uncomfortable hearing or repeating the term because they are accustomed to the use of *queer* as invariably pejorative and they understandably do not wish to offend. However, these and other aspects of queer theory are potential components of LGBT scholarship. LGBT scholars might need to persistently and clearly explain these ideas to colleagues along with the scholarly rationale for their importance.

### ***Yes—It's Fundable and Tenure-able!***

Perhaps the most disturbing misinformation we have heard propagated in the social work academic community is that those who undertake LGBT research exclusively will invariably disqualify themselves from promotion and tenure. This information is not accurate and may reflect the ignorance, bias, and prejudice of those who dispel it. Furthermore, such a "policy" could further oppress LGBT people and scholars by discouraging the knowledge building that would challenge misperceptions and inform practice for this marginalized group. There are many LGBT scholars (including some of the authors of this article) whose scholarship has been exclusively in LGBT areas and who have achieved tenure. However, this does not mean that it is possible at all schools.

How does one determine whether a particular department, school, college, or university will be receptive to LGBT scholars and scholarship? As a start, it might be advisable for job candidates to search school Web sites to identify those schools where there are LGBT scholars who have achieved tenure. Tapping into the network of LGBT social work scholars (related suggestions follow later in this article) might be another way to find out which schools and departments are supportive of LGBT scholars and scholarship. In addition, it might be useful to take a straightforward approach, directly asking potential employers such questions during job

interviews. This method, however, runs the risk of "outing" the faculty candidate and resulting in a unfavorable hiring decision. Testing the waters during this exploratory period may indeed be preferable to sinking into an unsupportive quagmire after one is hired.

Colleagues who are either naïve or heterosexist might discourage LGBT scholarship and research because they think there is no available funding to support it. (This raises another issue that is beyond the scope of this article, namely, the profession's obligation to confront discriminatory practices including those of funding sources.) At an IASWR preconference institute for the SSWR Annual Conference, as mentioned earlier, panelists undertaking federally funded LGBT-related research discussed this topic in an effort to put an end to this myth. Those who presented have, along with the authors, received internal, private funding, as well as federal funding, for research with LGBT populations. In addition, the National Institute of Mental Health has recently renewed a call for research proposals on LGBT people, and numerous private foundations such as Wayne Placek and Gill also fund LGBT research. National organizations, such as the National Lesbian and Gay Task Force, provide resources that explicate potential funding sources available to support the development of LGBT services and scholarship.

### *SURVIVING AND FLOURISHING*

No LGBT academic is an island—nor needs to try to be. It is important to seek social and academic/professional support during all phases of one's professional development. LGBT people's historic exclusion from and oppression by the majority have forced many to develop good networking abilities, and it is these very skills that aid them in their academic careers.

As a start, doctoral students and new faculty members can seek support within both the social work school or department and the housing institution. Where are other LGBT faculty? Are there areas for potential collaboration? Can other LGBT colleagues and heterosexuals who do LGBT research help doctoral students and junior faculty understand the climate of the institution and how to navigate it? These are important things to consider as one explores the job market and the institutional setting. Formal and informal collaborative relationships that are local and accessible could certainly decrease feelings of isolation and increase the chances for academic success.

Second, there is a vibrant, active community of LGBT social work faculty and scholars throughout the country who are ready to help. This

community includes the LGBT Mentorship Program sponsored by the CSWE Council on Sexual Orientation and Gender Expression. In this program, doctoral students and junior faculty are matched with senior faculty mentors. These mentors offer assistance that ranges from reading drafts of manuscripts to helping faculty procure research funding to coaching new faculty to navigate the choppy waters of institutionally entrenched heterosexism and homophobia. The Caucus of LGBT Faculty and Students of Social Work is another important, available resource. This group, which interacts as part of a listserv, meets during the SSWR Annual Conference as well as the CSWE Annual Program Meeting. The Caucus is an informative, accessible, reliable source of support, advice, and assistance. Currently, all Caucus members receive free editions of the *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Social Services*, which is the primary venue where LGBT social work research and scholarship is described and debated. Anyone interested can contact any of the authors for information about how to join the Caucus.

Today LGBT academic/professional organizations can be found in most fields; for example, the American Society on Aging (ASA) and the Gerontological Society of America (GSA) each have their own LGBT research groups. Such groups bring together both those with substantive interests in LGBT aging-related research and practitioners in the field of aging.

### ***PREPARING FOR LEADERSHIP***

The current antigay movement epitomized by battles against same-sex marriage suggests that LGBT people are under political attack. A recent article in *Social Work* suggests that there is a growing backlash against LGBT tolerance in our own profession (Hodge, 2005). Despite (and perhaps because of) these and previously described obstacles, LGBT scholars and scholarship are desperately needed. LGBT social work academics are necessary in positions of leadership in order to influence curricula and to educate social workers to work with this vulnerable and historically marginalized population. There is a need to increase the number of LGBT scholars and educators on boards of professional organizations like NASW, CSWE, and SSWR. Furthermore, LGBT social work faculty, with their unique perspectives, need to challenge previously held assumptions about gender, sexuality, and social justice.

Our experiences suggest that although there are several challenges inherent in being the only one, or even one of a small group of LGBT faculty,

the rewards can be many. LGBT social work faculty, along with heterosexuals who do LGBT research, have the ability to enlighten the field about an oppressed population that is resilient, diverse, and unique. If LGBT scholars are to succeed in this endeavor, institutional commitment and resources are essential. LGBT people have much to teach the general society about gender, sexuality, and social justice, and we must nurture ourselves and each other in ways that help us overcome the obstacles to achieving this important objective.

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