

**School Counselor Preparedness: Examining Cultural Competence**

**Regarding Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Issues**

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### **Abstract**

Multiculturalism continues to be a powerful force within the counseling profession. While there appears to be an increase in the awareness of topics related to diversity, there are topics that continue to be underrepresented, particularly with regard to the training of future school counselors. One such topic is that of issues related to gay, lesbian and bisexual clients. This article examines the level of knowledge with regard to GLB clients and issues exhibited by counselor education students pursuing a master's degree in school counseling.

## **School Counselor Preparedness: Examining Cultural Competence Regarding Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Issues**

Multiculturalism is a powerful force within the school counseling profession that aids individuals in better understanding diverse groups and themselves, all while recognizing the complexity of culture (Pedersen, 1991). Even with this apparent increase in awareness of issues related to diversity, there continues to be areas in need of improvement related to the training and preparation of future school counselors (Cannon, 2005). Cannon (2005) suggests that multicultural competence should not focus solely on race issues, but on a number of social identities that intersect with individuals, organizations, and society. These other identities include, but are not limited to, gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation, socioeconomic status and sexual orientation. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) individuals continue to be misunderstood and stigmatized in various segments of society (Pearson, 2003).

As evidenced by accreditation standards (Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [CACREP], 2001), ethical standards (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2005), and professional guidelines (Association for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Issues in Counseling, n.d.), all counselors, including those who work in schools, are given the responsibility of providing GLB clients services which are both sensitive and competent (Israel & Hackett, 2004).

It stands to reason that counselor education programs responsible for the training and preparation of future school counselors would help students to develop the competencies necessary to provide appropriate service to GLB clients. In fact, Ametrano, Callaway, and Stickel (2001) noted that a current emphasis in the training of

professional school counselors is the importance of developing counselors who are culturally competent. Still, given the focus of the counseling profession on diversity over the past several decades (Tyler, et al., 1997) there is still a good deal of concern about the methods used in counselor education programs to prepare students to work with sexual minorities (Grove, 2009). Furthermore, even though outward attitudes of the counseling profession, as a whole, have become more accepting and tolerant towards GLB persons, clinical practice and training appear to still be lagging behind (Pearson, 2003). This is evident in findings of Eliason and Hughes (2004), who, in a study of treatment counselors in Iowa, found that counselors had little formal training regarding GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender) clients, and almost half of those surveyed held negative or ambivalent attitudes about these clients. They concluded that a significant number (of counselors) believe that GLBT people encounter prejudice and discrimination in treatment settings, experience difficulty “fitting in”, and are not as honest and open as needed to benefit from treatment. Grove (2009) concurred, noting that “while the counseling profession promotes the importance of working with differences, subtle negative biases toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) clients continues” (p. 78).

This quantitative study aims to illuminate current attitudes among master’s level students in training to become school counselors towards GLB clients and issues. It examines the need for counselor training programs to facilitate cultural awareness and counseling skills specifically related to GLB clients.

## Review of Literature

In examining issues of cultural competence and GLB issues, it is first important to define the terms used in this study, as well as the parameters of this research. There are a variety of terms used to define the concepts of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender. The American Psychological Association Committee on Gay and Lesbian Concerns noted, “no universal agreement exists on terminology, and...language and culture continually change” (2003, para. 1). In this study, a distinction between the concepts of sexual identity and gender identity has been made. This study focuses on sexual orientation, defined by Finnessy (2006) as “the attraction of a particular sex/gender to another specific sex/gender. This can be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or quite fluid (a characteristic of ‘queer’)” (p. 13). This study did not focus on gender identity, which is defined as “an individual view of one’s gender rather than the societal view. This can be incongruous with sex and/or gender and persons with such incongruities are termed transgender” (Finnessy, 2006, p. 13). Therefore, the acronym GLB is used throughout the study, rather than GLBT, which includes the concept of transgender.

Cultural competence is defined by Schim, Doorenbos, and Borse (2006) as “the demonstration of knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors based on diverse, relevant cultural experiences. It is the incorporation of personal cultural diversity experience, awareness, and sensitivity into practice” (p. 303). Those behaviors, they believe, are “based on personal exposure, experience with people from diverse groups, and awareness of individual and group similarities and differences” (p. 303). In order to

provide culturally competent care to patients and clients, it is important to understand those patients' beliefs (McCabe, 2006).

Cultural competence has been defined by Campinha-Bacote (2003) as “the process in which the (practitioner) continuously strives to achieve the ability and availability to effectively work within the cultural context of a client (family, individual, or community)” (para. 1) She proposes a model of cultural competence that starts with the desire to become culturally competent, the awareness of self, including awareness of one's own biases and prejudices toward other cultures, and the seeking of knowledge about diverse cultural and ethnic groups. Cultural skill is the incorporating of that knowledge into practice on two levels: first, the assessment phase and then the actual interaction or encounter phase.

Self-awareness is a recurring theme in the defining of cultural competence (Carter, 2003), and is an area that can be addressed in school counselor preparation programs. Carter (2003) developed a Racial-Cultural Competency Counseling model, which focuses on the counselor as a person. However, in their study of counselor preparation programs, Ametrano, Callaway, and Stickle (2001) contend that awareness is not limited to awareness of one's self, but also to awareness of “the inherent cultural bias in traditional counseling theories, the influence of culture on the client, as well as the influence of historical relationships between the client and the counselor's respective racial/cultural groups” (p. 3).

As the cultural landscape of the United States changes, it is important that counselor preparation programs keep up, and work to ensure that emerging school counselors are trained to effectively deal with various populations. Henriksen and Trusty

(2005) stated that future and current school counselors should master the basic skills of counseling as well as view themselves as part of a society comprised of persons with diverse needs and values. Cultural competence is a long-term process that starts in the classroom and is enhanced by experiential learning opportunities (Trusty, Looby, & Sandhu, 2002). In other words, if counseling programs want their students to be effective counselors when working with gay, lesbian and bisexual clients, then these issues should be discussed and infused into the course curriculum. Programs should seek to provide opportunities in which future school counselors can experience working with these populations.

While the counseling profession has made significant strides in its awareness of and policies regarding diversity, there are still advances to be made. Diversity has garnered a great deal of attention from counselors and the profession as a whole, as evidenced by the most recent version of the ACA Code of Ethics (American Counseling Association, 2005). However, the authors of this manuscript hypothesized that certain aspects of diversity often continue to be overlooked or ignored by students seeking a master's degree in school counseling. While the majority of students appear to easily explain the importance of diversity, they are too often limiting in their definitions of the concept, most often thinking of diversity solely in terms of race or ethnic background. The consequence of this limited view of diversity is that additional diverse populations, such as GLB clients, will not receive effective counseling services due to the counselor's inability to deal with the client's diversity in an appropriate and/or sensitive manner.

Research has been done on ways that GLB issues can be infused into counselor education curriculum. Matthews (2005) suggested that it should be incorporated into several areas of curriculum, including counselor professional identity, social and cultural diversity, human growth and development, career development, helping relationships, group work, assessment, research and program evaluation, and clinical instruction. She highlighted the importance of not simply allocating discussion of GLB issues to one or two course sessions and moving on. She noted “it is critical that students have opportunities to be actively involved in developing multicultural competency with this population, and with others, including the breadth and depth of attitudes, knowledge, and skills” (p. 170). Grove (2009) also noted the importance of personal and direct experience with LGB people as part of the counselor preparation process. Courses on human sexuality, which deal with sexual development, orientation, and homophobia, are also recommended, especially for counselor education students (Callahan, 2001). These types of courses should help school counselors recognize the possible role of sexuality issues when dealing with issues of suicide, dropping out of school, running away, pregnancy, and substance abuse (Callahan, 2001).

Other researchers have examined specific counselor education teaching tools in which GLB issues can be incorporated (Griffith & Frieden, 2000; Matthews, 2005). Tools in which counselor educators should facilitate reflective thinking include Socratic questioning, journal writing, Interpersonal Process Recall, and reflecting teams (Griffith & Frieden, 2000). An example of the use of reflective thinking was described by Griffith and Frieden (2000) in working with a patient going through the coming out process. Other tools include the use of brochures and association resources, journals and



listservs, books, movies, videos, models of sexual orientation identity development, case studies, and resources (including speakers) from student or community organizations (Matthews, 2005).

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Questions**

As evidenced in the above paragraphs, education on GLB issues is important in increasing school counselor effectiveness. A first step in the process is determining the level of cultural competence with regard to GLB issues exhibited by counselor education students today.

The purpose of this study is to examine the level of cultural competence with regard to GLB issues exhibited by school counseling students. Specifically, this study aimed to address the following research questions:

1. What is the level of knowledge with regard to GLB issues exhibited by counselor education students pursuing a degree in school counseling?
2. Are there differences in actual knowledge levels on GLB topics and counselor education student demographic variables such as age, gender, race/ethnicity, and tenure in the program (length of time as a student pursuing the degree)?
3. Does tenure in the program affect counselor education students' knowledge of GLB issues?
4. What specific GLB issues are more clearly understood by school counseling students, and what issues are unclear?

### **Method**

In order to address the research questions, students enrolled in a counselor education graduate program pursuing a master's degree in school counseling were

given a survey on cultural competence with regard to GLB issues. All of the students surveyed attend the same university in the Southeastern United States. All students in the program (N = 87) were invited to participate in the study.

### **Instrument**

The Knowledge about Homosexuality Questionnaire, developed by Harris, Nightengale and Owens (1995), was used as a basis for this study. Although it was originally designed to measure knowledge levels of nurses, social workers, and psychologists with regard to issues of sexual orientation, it has been used to measure knowledge of college and high school students as well (Harris & Vanederhoof, 1995). The intent of this instrument is to measure a respondent's factual knowledge about issues surrounding sexual orientation. It does not address attitudes or opinions. The original instrument consisted of 20 true or false questions. The higher the number of correct responses, the higher the score, and the higher level of knowledge a respondent has regarding homosexuality. Mean scores for the original administration of the survey instrument were 16.3, with a Cronbach's alpha of .70 (Morgan, 2003).

The Knowledge about Homosexuality Questionnaire developed by Harris, Nightengale and Owens (1995) was modified by Koch (2000). Two items were deleted and the response "don't know" was added. Using the modified survey, Koch (2000) found that survey respondents who have more GLB-related education scored higher on this instrument. In this study, the researchers deleted one additional question that was determined to be confusing in its wording, leaving a total of seventeen survey items on this instrument (and therefore, a maximum score of 17). The deleted question was the following: "Heterosexual men tend to express more hostile attitudes toward

homosexuals than do heterosexual women”. Response options (true, false, and don’t know) did not change. Figure 1 is a list of survey questions used in this study.

- List of Survey Questions**

  1. A child who engages in homosexual behaviors will become a homosexual adult.
  2. There is a good chance of changing homosexual people into heterosexuals.
  3. Most homosexuals want to be members of the opposite sex.
  4. Some church denominations oppose legal and social discrimination against homosexual men and women.
  5. Sexual orientation is established at an early age.
  6. According to the American Psychological Association, homosexuality is an illness.
  7. Homosexual males are more likely to seduce young men than heterosexual males are likely to seduce young girls.
  8. Gay men are more likely to be victims of violent crime than the general public.
  9. A majority of homosexuals were seduced in adolescence by a person of the same sex, usually several years older.
  10. A person becomes a homosexual (develops a homosexual orientation) because he/she chooses to do so.
  11. Homosexuality does not occur among animals (other than human beings).
  12. Kinsey and many other researchers consider sexual behavior as a continuum from exclusively homosexual to exclusively heterosexual.
  13. A homosexual person’s gender identity does not agree with his/her biological sex.
  14. Historically, almost every culture has evidenced widespread intolerance toward homosexuals, viewing them as “sick” or as “sinners”.
  15. “Coming out” is a term that homosexuals use for publicly acknowledging their homosexuality.
  16. Bisexuality may be characterized by sexual behaviors and/or responses to both sexes.
  17. Recent research has shown that homosexuality may be linked to chromosomal differences.

**Figure 1.** List of survey questions used in this study, based on The Knowledge about Homosexuality Questionnaire, developed by Harris, Nightengale, and Owens (1995).

## Data Collection Procedures

Prior to any data collection, the study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the researchers’ university. The survey instrument was set up using the university’s electronic survey system so participants could complete it online, using the

online survey tool SurveyMonkey. All school counseling students enrolled in the counselor education program at this particular university in the Southeastern United States were invited to participate. Invitations were conveyed electronically, via e-mail. The researchers employed a survey invitation and distribution procedure that is regularly used by the Social and Economic Sciences Research Center (Dillman, Tortora & Bowker, 1999) for online surveys. Those asked to complete the survey received four contacts via e-mail over a two-week time period. There was a pre-message requesting that potential respondents watch for the survey link, followed by a message that contained the link along with survey instructions, followed by an e-mail thank-you note or a reminder which also included the link, and a final reminder also with a link to the survey (Schmidt, 2004).

## **Results**

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 16. As noted previously, Koch (2000) found that survey respondents who have more GLB-related education scored higher on this instrument. Based on this conclusion, mean scores and analyses of variances (ANOVAs) were used to analyze the research questions.

Results include demographic statistics regarding the sample and results related to the four research questions.

### **Sample**

The first analysis was demographic statistics regarding the sample. It included frequencies and percentages of respondents' age, gender, race/ethnicity, and sexual orientation. A total of 46 participants completed the survey, for a response rate of 54 percent. Age options were originally categorized in five year increments beginning with

ages 20-25 and continuing through ages 51-55. A majority of respondents (n=20) were in the age category of 20-25. There were no students over the age of 55 in this study. Of the 46 participants, 43 were female and 3 were male. With regard to race/ethnicity, the largest respondent race was Caucasian (n = 32) followed by African American (n = 11), Native American (n = 1) and other (n = 2). Survey respondents were also asked to identify their sexual orientation by selecting from the following choices, heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual or prefer not to say. Of the 46 respondents 100 percent identified themselves as heterosexual.

### **Level of Knowledge**

The first research question examined the level of knowledge with regard to GLB issues exhibited by school counseling students. The average score of all survey participants was 11 out of 17, or 63 percent correct. In order to provide some perspective, Morgan (2003) notes a sample of mean scores from other research projects. While the following mean scores are based on the original 20-point scale, percentage correct scores can be compared equally. Mean scores of health-care professionals in the original study using this instrument were 16.3 or 82 percent correct. A 1995 study of high-school students conducted by Harris and Vanderhoof found mean scores of 12.7 or 63 percent correct. A study of college students conducted by the same researchers in the same year found mean scores of 14.4 or 72 percent correct. Bliss and Harris (1999) found mean scores of a sample of teachers to be 13.08, or 65 percent correct. Based on these comparisons, the average score of school counseling students was lower than these similar studies. It is the authors' conclusion that school counseling students should be more knowledgeable with regards to GLB issues.

## Student Variables

The second research question looked at whether or not there are differences in actual knowledge levels with regard to GLB issues and school counseling student demographics such as age, gender, and race/ethnicity. In order to address this question, mean scores of participants, broken down by the demographic categories (i.e., age, gender and race) noted on the survey instrument, were examined. Because of small numbers in some age categories on the survey instrument, ages were combined into three categories: emerging adults, including those ages 20-25 (n=20); students in early adulthood, including those ages 26-35 (n=12); and students in middle adulthood, including those ages 36-55 (n=14). As noted earlier, there were no students over the age of 55 in this study. Results of an ANOVA showed no significant differences in knowledge levels when examined by student age [ $F(2, 43) = .023, p = .977$ ].

On average, females answered 63 percent of the questions correctly (an average score of 11 of 17 questions correct) while males answered 55 percent correctly (an average score of 9 of 17 questions correct). A t-test comparing mean scores with gender showed no significant differences based on gender [ $F(1, 44) = .495, p = .552$ ].

Examined in terms of race/ethnicity, the percentage of correct answers in these categories was as follows: Caucasian 64 percent, African American 43 percent, Native American 82 percent and other with 74 percent. A t-test was conducted based on the two largest groups in this category to respond to the study; African American and Caucasian students. It was found that Caucasian students scored significantly higher on this knowledge test than did African American students [ $F(3, 41) = .156, p = .000$ ].

## Time in the Program

Research question three examined whether the amount of time the student has spent in the counselor education program is related to knowledge of GLB issues. At the time this research was conducted, the counselor education program at this university was a two-year, 48-credit program. On the survey instrument, participants were asked to note the number of credit hours that they have completed in the counselor education program. Responses were then categorized by year, with first-year respondents having completed between one and 24 credits, and second-year respondents having completed 25 or more credits at the time the survey was conducted. Results of a t-test showed no significant differences in scores based on year in the program [ $F(1, 44) = 2.447, p = .256$ ]. Table one is a summary of all statistical analyses found in questions two and three.

**Table 1**

*Summary of data regarding demographic variables and GLB knowledge:  
Descriptive Statistics (N = 46)*

<b>Variables</b>	<b>N(%)</b>	<b>Mean (SD)</b>
Race**		
African American	11(23.9)	7.73 (2.24)
Caucasian	32(69.6)	11.47 (2.58)
Age		
Emerging Adult	20(43.5)	10.60 (3.46)
Early Adult	12(26.1)	10.83 (2.73)
Mid Adult	14(30.4)	10.64 (2.68)
Year in Program		
First	26(56.5)	10.23 (3.33)
Second	20(43.5)	11.25 (2.48)
Gender		
Female	43(93.5)	10.74 (3.03)
Male	3(6.5)	9.67 (2.52)

\*\* Significant at  $p < .05$

## **Student Understanding of GLB Issues**

In order to examine the specific GLB issues that are both understood and misunderstood by school counseling students, analysis of each question in the survey was conducted. The percentage of students answering each question correctly and incorrectly was tabulated, as was the percentage of people answering “don’t know” to each response.

There were two questions that received extremely high correct response rates. One hundred percent of respondents knew that “coming out” is a term homosexuals use to publically disclose their homosexuality. Ninety-six percent knew that bisexuality is characterized by sexual behaviors and/or responses to members of both sexes.

On the other extreme, over 50 percent of respondents answered the following question incorrectly “Historically, almost every culture has evidenced widespread intolerance toward homosexuals, viewing them as ‘sick’ or ‘sinners’.” A majority believed that this statement was true, when it is, in fact, false. A majority (54 percent) of the participants responded “don’t know” to this question, “Homosexuality does not occur among animals (other than human beings)”, which is a true statement.

## **Discussion**

Survey results showed that there is a wealth of information on GLB-related issues that school counseling students should be taught. The average overall score of 63 percent is a score that could be improved upon by incorporating more GLB topics in course curriculum. In addition to addressing the overall issues, it is important to look at specific questions that students were either incorrect or unsure of. Strategies should be incorporated to address these issues in school counseling classrooms. For example,



information could be presented in courses which teach students more in-depth information regarding the history of homosexuality with regards to the mistreatment or intolerance of such persons throughout various cultures. Certainly this information could be addressed in some detail in the multicultural course required of counselor education programs. An understanding of the individual issues addressed in this survey will lead to a more clear understanding of GLB issues in general, which will benefit both future counselors and the students they counsel.

With regards to the second research question, it was interesting to examine the results of the survey based on demographics such as age, gender and race/ethnicity. Although statistical analyses showed no significant differences in mean scores when examined by respondents' age and gender, there were significant differences in scores when examined by race/ethnicity. African-American students scored significantly lower on the knowledge assessment than did Caucasian students (two respondents who classified their race/ethnicity as "other" and one who identified him/herself as Native American were not considered in this ANOVA because of their small numbers). This may be due to a variety of factors, including life experience. What is interesting is that the minority represented in this study (African Americans) scored lower on this instrument than did members of the majority Caucasian culture. It would be interesting to further this study by examining potential reasons for this disparity in scores.

Models suggest that the development of cultural competence begins with cultural awareness, followed by acquisition of knowledge, and the incorporation of cultural knowledge into practice (Campinha-Bacote, 2003). It may be that Caucasian students have had greater levels of awareness with regard to GLB issues, and are

farther along in the development of their own cultural competence in this area than are their African American counterparts. Counselor educators might consider students' race/ethnicity when developing curricula, and school counseling programs should consider providing opportunities for exposure to GLB issues for all students. This may increase the students' awareness of such communities and the diverse issues faced by gays, lesbians and bisexuals. In addition, all students may benefit more from a focus on knowledge seeking and skill development so that they are better equipped to work with GLB clients in their future roles as counselors.

Regardless of differences in knowledge based on demographics, study results revealed that there are some issues regarding GLB populations that are clearly understood by most school counseling students, and some that are misunderstood. While all students in the study knew the term "coming out" referred to the public disclosure of homosexuality, most did have what could be considered an expanded knowledge of GLB issues, including roles and perceptions throughout history (among other topics). This more expansive knowledge would also aid in awareness and understanding, thereby helping students develop cultural competence.

### **Limitations**

One limitation of this study relates to the diversity of the participants. Ideally, it would be beneficial to conduct a similar study with a more diverse group of respondents. For example, it would be helpful to have more males in the study, as well as a greater representation of ethnic groups other than Caucasians. Furthermore, it would be interesting to have persons who identify themselves as either being gay, lesbian or bisexual as part of those surveyed. Just because a person identifies

him/herself as gay, lesbian or bisexual, does not guarantee that such a person would be more knowledgeable or possess greater skills related to the GLB population, although such a presumption is often assumed.

The number of programs studied and the number of participants were also limitations in this study. Only one counselor education program was surveyed for this study. Although the survey response rate was 54 percent, there were only 87 students in the program at the time the survey was administered (forty-six of whom responded to the survey). The low numbers with which to work made data categorization somewhat difficult, and left some categories with unusually small numbers of responses, which could skew study results.

### **Implications for Counselor Educators**

As with any study, the question often becomes, “So what?” What does the information from this study mean for counselor educators who prepare future school counselors? First, it suggests that students who enter counselor education programs often do so with limited knowledge and skills regarding GLB populations. Counselor educators should take it upon themselves to create opportunities for students to be exposed to such cultures, such as guest speakers, internship experiences involving GLB people, or exposure to GLB-related resources and organizations on the university campus. It will be important for the school counseling students as well to be proactive in looking for opportunities to learn about diverse groups of people, including GLB populations.

Another interesting finding from the survey was a potential role that race/ethnicity may play in regards to knowledge and awareness of GLB issues. The survey suggests

that African Americans scored lower on GLB knowledge than those students self-identified as being Caucasian. While further research is encouraged, this does in part suggest that African American school counselors could benefit from additional knowledge regarding GLB issues. While this research did not explain these scores, it could be related to cultural norms or experiences that keep African American school counseling students from learning more about this population. It will be important for school counseling programs to be aware of this trend as they attempt to educate all of their students on this topic. This study points to the importance of future research on the relationships between cultural competence and different dimensions of diversity, such as the relationship between race and ethnicity and GLB cultural competence.

Finally, it is important for counselor educators to be aware that not all students enter counseling programs with the same level of knowledge or cultural sensitivity. Instead, it is the responsibility of school counseling programs to inform and expose students to GLB clients and potential issues that may arise for GLB students. It is our hope that this will help future school counselors become more sensitive and effective counselors.

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