

Running Head: MAKING THE GRADE?

**Making the grade? Examining School Counseling Students' Sexual Orientation Counselor
Competency**

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Biographical Statement

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the sexual orientation counselor competency of school counseling students through a cross specialization comparison with community agency students. Results indicate that school counseling students had significantly lower self-reported sexual orientation counselor competency scores compared to community agency students. This relationship was also detected with multicultural counselor competency scores. Implications are discussed along with the role of professional school counselors regarding social justice advocacy for LGBTQ students.

Keywords: professional school counseling, lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender, sexual orientation counselor competency, and multicultural counselor competency

Making the grade? Examining School Counseling Students' Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency

Developing the necessary attitudes, skills, and knowledge to work effectively with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender clients is emerging as an important ethical imperative for counselors (Bidell, 2005; Carroll & Gilroy, 2002). Unfortunately, counselors can hold prejudicial views as well as lack specific skills and knowledge regarding minority sexual orientation and gender identity issues, impairing their ability to provide competent services (Barrett & McWhirter, 2002; Henke, Carlson, & McGeorge, 2009). Specific to school counselors, the American School Counseling Association Code of Ethics states that professional school counselors, “acquire educational, consultation and training experiences to improve awareness, knowledge, skills and effectiveness in working with diverse populations [regarding] ethnic/racial status sexual orientation, [and] gender identity/expression” (American School Counselor Association, 2010, p. 5). McFarland (2001) goes farther and argues that schools have a legal responsibility to provide competent services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) students that protect these youth from harassment and abuse at school.

Within the various specializations of counseling, school counselors may have additional challenges and resistance when addressing sexual orientation and gender identity issues from teachers, colleagues, administrators, parents, or even the board of education. Valenti and Campbell (2009) describe that teachers feared important aspects of their job such as tenure, dismissal, or retribution if they supported LGBTQ organizations (e.g., Gay Straight Alliances). The teachers also worried that their credibility might be undermined in the school and that some school personnel would assume they were LGBTQ or wanted to convert students. Professional school counselors likely share similar fears about addressing LGBTQ issues at their schools.

Singh, Urbano, Haston, and McMahon (2010) examined the experiences of 16 school counselors who self-identified as social justice agents. While the researchers did not explicitly ask about LGBTQ advocacy, the school counselors acknowledged that being a social justice agent and working on systems change was politicized and at times unpopular within their school.

The recent media reports of LGBTQ youth suicide and bullying underscore the exigent need for school counselors to become strong and visible social justice advocates for LGBTQ students and acquire the skills, awareness, and knowledge to support these youth. However, no studies have been published that expressly examine the sexual orientation counselor competence of professional school counselors. In addition, Holcomb-McCoy (2005) describes the lack of research examining how multicultural counselor competencies might vary among counseling specializations and work setting. The current study addresses these deficits in the professional school counseling literature by examining the differences between school and community agency counseling students regarding sexual orientation and multicultural counselor competencies.

A Crisis in Our Schools for LGBTQ Youth

The school environment can be treacherous for LGBTQ students. The 2007 National School Climate Survey conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) surveyed over 6,000 LGBTQ youth and provides alarming information about LGBTQ students' experiences while in school (Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008). According to the survey, nearly all LGBTQ students said "gay" was used in a pejorative way, causing them to feel bothered or disturbed; approximately 85% of the students were verbally harassed; and, almost half were physically assaulted because of their minority sexual orientation or gender identity. Other research (Berlan, Corliss, Field, Goodman, & Austin, 2010; Williams, Connolly, Pepler, &

Craig, 2003) confirms that LGBTQ youth are far more likely to describe being bullied, sexually harassed, and/or physically abused compared to heterosexual students.

Over 60% of LGBTQ students in the GLSEN study reported feeling unsafe in their school environment. This verbal and physical harassment can significantly impact LGBTQ students' educational life. LGBTQ students that are bullied suffer significantly more from absenteeism, poor academic performance and achievement, and diminished educational aspirations (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Jones & Clarke, 2007; Kosciw et al., 2008). LGBTQ students were about twice as likely to forgo post-secondary education planning as compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Kosciw et al., 2008).

Regrettably, school staff can be direct or passive contributors in engendering or maintaining a hostile environment for LGBTQ students. Well over half of LGBTQ students heard school staff using prejudicial language and approximately 84% reported that school personnel frequently failed to intervene when in the presence of others making such comments (Kosciw et al., 2008). It is not surprising that the majority of LGBTQ students failed to report these incidents and believed that doing so would result in little or no action or make the situation worse (Kosciw et al., 2008). Of specific concern to professional school counselors, LGBTQ students often do not reach out to their school counselor for help when dealing with their sexual orientation or gender identity (Bidell, Orozco, Doherty, & Strom, 2007; Kosciw et al., 2008).

According to Meyer (2003), minority stress provides a valid conceptual framework to explain the higher incidences of mental health issues among LGBTQ individuals where "stigma, prejudice, and discrimination create a hostile and stressful social environment that causes mental health problems" (p. 674). While not studying LGBTQ students, Carney (2008) found that higher levels of trauma are associated with increased exposure to bullying at school. LGBTQ

youth reporting high amounts of bullying at school have higher rates of health risks (e.g., substance abuse, suicidal thoughts, and sexual risk taking) compared to heterosexual students reporting similar levels of victimization (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002). LGBTQ youth are also at greater risk for depression, low-self esteem, self-doubt, anxiety and fear of discovery and rejection by loved ones, as well as homelessness and the resultant problems LGBT youth face on the streets (Coker, Austin, & Schuster, 2010; Fontaine, 1998; Kelleher, 2009; Lewis, 2009).

Method

Participants

Participants were 147 (33 male and 114 females) master level students specializing in either school counseling ($n = 75$) or community agency counseling ($n = 89$). All participants ranged in age from 22 to 59 ($M = 32.13$, $SD = 8.83$) and were enrolled in one of seven CACREP-accredited counseling programs across the United States. Obtaining the sample from multiple universities, including two private and five public, ensured a diverse range of research participants. The ethnic make-up of the sample included: a) 15 (9.1%) African American/Black, b) 103 (62.8%) White/Caucasian, c) 14 (8.5%) Asian American/Pacific Islander, d) 20 (12.2%) Latino/Hispanic, e) 4 (2.4%) biracial, and f) 5 (3.0%) identifying as other. The majority of the participants self-identified as straight/heterosexual (90.2%) and the remaining 9.8% identified as LGBTQ.

Instruments

Multicultural Counseling Knowledge and Awareness Scale (MCKAS; Ponterotto, Gretchen, Utsey, Rieger, & Austin, 2002). The MCKAS is a 32-item self-report assessment scale measuring the multicultural counselor competency of respondents. Initial factor analysis produced three subscales that accounted for 38.5% of the variance and included 20

knowledge/skill based questions (labeled Knowledge) and 12 awareness or attitudes based questions (labeled Awareness). The third factor included seven questions inquiring about known or fictitious multicultural scholars, which the author removed when revising the scale. The MCKAS uses a Likert-type response that ranges from 1 (*Not At All True*) to 7 (*Totally True*) with higher scores indicating greater levels of multicultural counselor competency. Ten questions are negatively worded, thus are reversed scored. Coefficient alphas have been reported to range from .78 to .93 for the Knowledge subscale and .67 to .83 for the Awareness subscale. Test-retest reliability at ten-month was .70 for the Knowledge subscale and .73 for the Awareness subscale. The authors demonstrated convergent, criterion, and discriminant validity through a pattern analysis of correlations with established instruments that assess multicultural counselor competency, multicultural ethnic identity, and social desirability.

Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale (SOCCS; Bidell, 2005). The SOCCS is a 29 item self-report measure of lesbian, gay, and bisexual counselor competence. The SOCCS uses a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*Not At All True*) to 7 (*Totally True*) with higher scores indicating greater levels of sexual orientation counselor competency. Eleven items are negatively worded, thus reversed scored. A factor analysis yielded a three-factor solution that accounted for 40% of the total variance. The initial factor was labeled Skills with 11 test items dealing with specific lesbian, gay, and bisexual counseling skills. Comprised of 10 items, the second factor was labeled Attitudes and examines a counselor's LGBTQ prejudice. The final factor, labeled Knowledge, consisted of 8 items and examined specific issues facing lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients. The coefficient alpha for the overall SOCCS was .90, .88 for the Attitudes subscale, .91 for the Skill subscale, and .76 for the Knowledge subscale. Test-retest at one-week was .84 for the overall SOCCS. The author established criterion validity by demonstrating that

lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender respondents as well as those with more education scored significantly higher on the SOCCS. Convergent validity was established for the Attitudes, Skill, and Knowledge subscales where each subscale correlated the strongest with measures of lesbian/gay/bisexual bias, basic counseling skills, and multicultural knowledge, respectively. A weak relationship between SOCCS scores and a social desirability cluster supported divergent validity.

Procedures

Since level of training has been shown to impact multicultural and sexual orientation counselor competency scores, only school or community agency master level counseling students in their second year of training were recruited as a means to control for the effects of education (Bidell, 2005; Ponterotto et al., 2002). Students were recruited during class, and all those present in class that day agreed to voluntarily participate. All participants received an informed consent form/information sheet, demographic questionnaire, and the Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale and the Multicultural Counseling Knowledge and Awareness Scale.

The demographic survey assessed the number of graduate multicultural courses taken, as well as participants' age, gender, ethnic background, sexual orientation, and number of LGBTQ friends and acquaintances. Since these variables have been shown to impact LGBTQ attitudes and knowledge, they were assessed in the current study as potential covariates (Bidell, 2005; Herek, 2009).

Results

Correlations between the seven potential covariates and overall scores on the SOCCS and MCKAS scales were generated to facilitate a parsimonious selection of possible covariate

variables. An a priori decision was established to include only those variables with correlation coefficients over .35 as a covariate. The correlation coefficients comparing the SOCCS with multicultural coursework, age, gender, ethnic background, sexual orientation, and number of LGBTQ friends and acquaintances (.002, .07, -.09, .02, .32, .38, and .32, respectively) produced only one variable meeting the a priori decision rule. No potential covariates met the decision rule when MCKAS scores were compared with multicultural coursework, age, gender, ethnic background, sexual orientation, and number of LGBTQ friends and acquaintances (.26, .01, .05, .004, .08, .22, .13, respectively). The SOCCS and MCKAS mean scores and standard deviations for each student group are presented in Table 1.

To examine the differences between school and community agency counseling students' overall SOCCS scores, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was performed, covarying out the effect of reported numbers of LGBTQ friends. Number of LGBTQ friends was significantly related to overall SOCCS scores, $F(1, 161) = 20.12, p < .001$. The main effect for program specialization was significant, $F(1, 161) = 25.70, p < .001$, with community agency students reporting significantly higher SOCCS scores than school counseling students. Subsequent analyses (utilizing the same covariate) revealed significant differences for each subscale on the SOCCS. School counseling students scored significantly lower on the Awareness subscale, $F(1, 161) = 10.01, p = .002$; the Skill subscale, $F(1, 161) = 10.54, p = .001$; and, the Knowledge subscale, $F(1, 161) = 12.53, p = .001$, compared to community agency students. In addition, the covariate was significantly related to the Awareness, Skill, and Knowledge subscales, $F(1, 161) = 3.90, p < .05$; Skill, $F(1, 161) = 19.27, p < .001$; and, Knowledge, $F(1, 161) = 4.28, p = .04$, respectively.

The ANOVA to assess differences between school and community agency students' overall MCKAS scores was significant. School counseling students had significantly lower MCKAS scores compared to community agency students, $F(1,162) = 9.89, p = .002$. Subsequent univariate analyses revealed significant differences were found for both the Knowledge and Awareness subscales, $F(1,162) = 8.51, p = .004$, and $F(1,162) = 5.63, p = .019$, respectively.

Implications for Professional School Counselors

Results from this study indicate that school counseling students reported significantly lower levels of self-reported sexual orientation counselor competency compared to their community agency counterparts. The potentially sensitive and political nature of addressing sexual orientation and gender identity in the schools may be one of several explanations why school counseling students had lower SOCCS scores. However, it was an unexpected finding that school counseling students also reported significantly lower levels of multicultural counselor competency. It should be noted that while there were significant differences for both SOCCS and MCKAS scores between the counseling specializations, sexual orientation counselor competency represented the largest disparity. Specifically, school counseling students felt considerably less competent regarding LGBTQ versus ethnic minority populations.

As with all research, this study has some limitations. The SOCCS focuses on sexual orientation (i.e., lesbian, gay, and bisexual) and not gender identity. Thus transgender counselor competency was not explicitly examined. No competency instrument has been published specifically focusing on training issues concerning transgender individuals and represents an important area of inquiry for the counseling profession (Bidell, 2005; Carroll & Gilroy, 2002). The limitations of self-report multicultural counselor competency instruments are also emerging. Issues identified with these scales include their tri-component model, reliance on self-report

responses, measurement of explicit attitudes versus implicit bias, as well as the lack of attention to clinical outcome, case conceptualization, and client perspective (Dunn, Smith, & Montoya, 2006). Since the SOCCS is fashioned on the multicultural counselor competence scales, it is probable that similar issues apply.

Limitations notwithstanding, the results from this study have obvious and important implications for the school counseling profession. Two primary concerns warrant exploration and future examination by professional school counselors. First, it is important to develop an understanding why school counseling students reported significantly lower sexual orientation and multicultural counselor competencies. Second, there is a need to explore the role counselor education plays in preparing future school counselors.

Sexual Orientation and Multicultural Competency of School Counselors

Data from this study highlight the importance for professional school counselors to explore variables that impact multicultural and sexual orientation counselor competencies. One explanation of the results found in this study center around the school counselors' work environment and addresses the concern of Holcomb-McCoy (2005) that,

There has been no research on the effect of counseling . . . work setting (e.g., school vs. community agency; elementary school vs. high school) on a counselor's perceived multicultural competence. Clearly, one's experience in the counseling field or work setting could be related to one's perceived and actual multicultural counseling competence (p. 415).

School counselors typically work within large political systems governed by local, state, and federal laws, making it more challenging and potentially risky to advocate social justice for ethnic, sexual orientation, and gender identity minority students (DePaul, Walsh, & Dam, 2009;

Singh et al., 2010). More research needs to be conducted examining if and how counseling work environments impact various aspects of multicultural and sexual orientation counselor competencies.

Characteristics of professional school counselors and trainees may also provide additional information regarding discrepancies in multicultural and sexual orientation counselor competencies. Sexual orientation and gender identity can generate strong prejudices and responses that are often related to deeply held religious beliefs (Herek, 2009). Counselors and trainees reporting more LGBTQ prejudice, religiosity, and conservative religious orientations have significantly lower SOCCS scores, especially regarding attitude based competencies (Bidell, 2005; Henke et al., 2009). A recent study (Satcher & Leggett, 2007) examining LGBTQ prejudice with regard to school counselors found that frequent church attendance was significantly associated with increased LGBTQ prejudice.

While affirmative LGBT counseling is advocated within the counseling field, religiously conservative counselors may see LGBT individuals as immoral and hold the erroneous characterization that sexual orientation and gender identity are choices that can be changed with inclination, willpower, or religion (Herek, 2009). The recent lawsuits involving the counselor education programs at Eastern Michigan State and Augusta State University highlight the complex intersection between teaching affirmative LGBT counseling and some students' religious views (*Keeton v. Augusta State University*, 2010; *Ward v. Eastern Michigan University*, 2009). The two plaintiffs, both specializing in school counseling, argued the counseling faculty violated their civil rights by imposing affirmative LGBT counselor education and training. More research needs to examine the role of religious beliefs on school counselors' sexual orientation counselor competence.

Results from the current study also highlight the minimal number of school counseling students in this sample identifying as LGBTQ. This finding might be an indicator that openly LGBTQ counseling students worry about the possible repercussions of being out in a school work environment and therefore choose other counseling specializations. While universities and counseling programs typically do not collect demographic data specific to sexual orientation and gender identity, more research needs to examine how school counselor education can recruit and support LGBTQ students, supervisors, and instructors. Even though few school counseling students identified as LGBTQ, it is note worthy that SOCCS scores correlated the strongest with the number of LGBTQ friends reported by study participants. This relationship is supported by Satcher and Leggett's (2007) finding that school counselors with more LGBTQ personal acquaintances report significantly lower levels of moral and social based LGBTQ prejudice. When recruiting open LGBTQ students, staff, supervisors, and faculty, counselor education programs not only become more pluralistic, but may also facilitate meaningful relationships that enhance awareness, knowledge, and understanding regarding sexual orientation and gender identity.

Role of Counselor Education and Training

There is a need for counselor educators in general and school counselor educators in particular to explore the role of graduate training in preparing school counseling students to work competently with a diversity of clients. Looking first at multicultural competency and training, the fact that school counselors in this study scored significantly lower on multicultural counselor competence raises important issues. All students in the study were recruited from CACREP-accredited programs with multiple counseling specializations and undoubtedly took a common, core, required multicultural counseling course. Reviewing research of semester long

multicultural courses, Malott (2010) concluded that “researchers have demonstrated that a single multicultural counseling course can positively affect variables related to multicultural competency” (p. 58). If students are taking a common core multicultural course, school counselor educators need to develop studies that examine the short and long term impact of such coursework on the multicultural competency of school counseling students. In addition, research needs to identify if and how specific counseling program specializations provide unique and expanded multicultural training. Such information would strengthen our understanding of multicultural pedagogy for general and specialized counselor training.

While it appears that most required multicultural counseling courses include sexual orientation as a course topic (Priester, et al., 2008), counselors frequently report their education has not adequately prepared them to work with LGBTQ clients (Bidell, 2005; Rock, Carlson, & McGeorge, 2010). Results from this study suggest that counseling students receive inadequate or limited training in generalized multicultural counseling courses to work competently with LGBT clients. While predictive of MCKAS scores, multicultural coursework had a nominal relationship with SOCCS scores. More research is needed on how generalized multicultural counseling courses prepare students to work with a variety of specific minority and diverse populations like LGBTQ students.

LGBTQ focused workshops and trainings are being shown to positively impact sexual orientation counselor competency (Bidell, 2005; Grove, 2009; Rock, et al., 2010; Rutter, Estrada, Ferguson, & Diggs, 2008). Satcher & Leggett (2007) found school counselors reporting lower levels of moral and social based prejudice regarding LGBTQ people had significantly more LGBTQ training and worked with more LGBTQ clients. There is a need to better understand the common and unique ways various counseling specializations prepare students to work with

LGBTQ clients and issues. In addition, data from the current study indicate that sexual orientation counseling skills were almost half compared to knowledge and attitude competencies regardless of specialization. It has been noted that Skill scores on the SOCCS are consistently the lowest of the three subscales (Bidell, 2005; Grove, 2009; Rock et al., 2010). Future research needs to examine various forms of counselor pedagogy and training that improves LGBTQ counselor competency overall, but particularly regarding the acquisition of skills.

Conclusion

Schools can often be hostile environments for LGBTQ students fueling educational, emotional, and social problems. The harassment and abuse many LGBTQ students experience during primary education can have profound and lasting health consequences, which reach into adulthood. Furthermore, LGBTQ youth often cannot draw on the support, experience, and wisdom of their family regarding how to navigate a minority identity within the dominant hetero and gender normative culture. Thus, LGBTQ students are often intensely isolated with few sources of support to draw upon.

Professional school counselors play a vital role in supporting LGBTQ youth. Becoming a visible advocate for LGBTQ students makes the school environment a safer place to learn and develop socially. When school counselors “monitor and expand personal multicultural and social justice advocacy awareness, knowledge and skills” (ASCA, 2010, p. 5) for LGBTQ students, they are better prepared to lead and create systemic change that redresses the serious problems facing LGBTQ youth in our schools.

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Table One

SOCCS and MCKAS Scores for School and Community Agency Counseling Students

Assessment Instrument	<u>School</u>		<u>Community/Agency</u>	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
MCKAS-Total	5.33	.90	5.72	.69
Awareness Subscale	5.71	.77	5.99	.75
Knowledge Subscale	5.09	1.17	5.55	.83
SOCCS- Total	4.03	.68	4.64	.66
Attitude Subscale	5.96	1.13	6.50	.76
Skill Subscale	2.26	.88	2.91	1.14
Knowledge Subscale	4.07	1.16	4.70	.84

Note. MCKAS = Multicultural Counseling Knowledge and Awareness Scale;

SOCCS = Sexual Orientation Counselor Competency Scale.