

Coming of Age as an LGBTQ Social Work Educator: Reflections on a Personal and Professional Journey

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Abstract: Personal and professional identities intersect in the social work classroom, particularly for people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ). In this narrative, I reflect on the intersection of personal and professional identities in my own experience as a social work educator, recalling an experience in the classroom where conflict arose about LGBTQ issues. Additionally, implications for using the social work classroom to explore challenging issues are explored.

Keywords: LGBTQ issues; diversity; social work education

As a social work educator who has taught diverse students from unique backgrounds, I have struggled with balancing the need to deliver useful content in a way that is authentic to whom I am. I am a gay social work educator interested in engaging students in affirmative practice with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people and communities. I have come of age both as a person and as a social work educator during a time of incredible progress for LGBTQ individuals and communities. When I was coming of age in the 1990s, people from the LGBTQ communities were becoming more visible. Sitcom comedian Ellen Degeneres came out both on-screen in her popular television show *Ellen* as well as coming out publicly in her personal life (Hubert, 1999). President Bill Clinton vocally signaled his support for LGBTQ communities and subsequently courted LGBTQ voters in his run for the White House (Mertus, 2007). Yet, religion had incredible influence over the discourse on LGBTQ rights in the U.S (Fetner, 2000). Don't Ask Don't Tell was implemented in the armed forces, effectively banning LGBTQ people from openly serving in the military (Burks, 2011). Matthew Shepard, a gay college student in Laramie, Wyoming, was the victim of a violent hate crime (Boulden, 2001). Televangelist Reverend Jerry Falwell takes a stab at children's television character Tinky Winky, a purple stuffed teletubby that Falwell accused of promoting LGBTQ lifestyles (Hendershot, 2000). At the time, I was coming out to my deeply religious Southern Baptist family and community. All these experiences have profoundly shaped my identity as a gay person and social work educator. This narrative describes how my personal and professional life intersects when it comes to teaching about LGBTQ issues, including a reflection of the challenges of being an authentic person in the

classroom.

Fully realizing and embracing all our identities does not come quickly in life, but rather over many years. I am reminded of a particularly poignant example of how my identities intersect in the classroom by an experience I had in the classroom in Chicago when I was in my 20s. I was a lecturer for a generalist social work class at an urban community college. In the class, I taught students about strategies for engagement, assessment, and identifying concerns that brought the client to the attention of the social worker (Kadushin & Kadushin, 1997). However, teaching and learning always occurs within a social context (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Part of the social context was me. Like any other human encounter, I bring myself to the classroom—all my brokenness, successfulness, happiness, sadness, and wrinkledness that make up my life as a human being. Part of my experience is my own development. While I was teaching the course, I was going through my own developmental tasks of emerging adulthood. Arnett (2000) notes that work, relationships, and worldviews are the primary identity tasks of emerging adulthood, and these tasks were central to my life. In the classroom, I was still figuring out my place as a social work educator. I was learning out how to manage the challenges of teaching students who were sometimes twice my age and who often eagerly bring with them to the classroom a wealth of knowledge to share (Anastas, 2010).

Classroom encounters were exciting but at times also intimidating. While social work was my first and only professional role after University, I lacked some of the life experience that comes with living 40, 50, or more years. I did not always know the answers to all my students' questions. Surely, I knew the textbook

answers about how to engage in generalist social work practice. However, my real world experience was limited. I did not know all life's answers. Likely did none of them—maybe a few thought that they might have all the answers, but usually were searching just like the rest of us. Yet, some of the students knew a great deal. Some of my students had experienced the “hard knocks” of life. They lived lives that I could only imagine. For example, I did not know what it was like to be a single parent working three jobs in Chicago to make ends meet. I had no real experience living in poverty. As a college student from a middle-class family who could not contribute much to my daily living expenses, I knew what it was like to work with a barebones budget. I knew what it was like to make do on ramen noodles. Yet, I had the privilege of attending college and the advantage of family who could occasionally provide a few dollars to help me get by. Some of my students' families would have liked to be able to help out this way but could barely feed themselves or the other children in the home. I did my best to understand this reality although I would never know their experiences. I knew my subject, but they had the most expertise on their own lives. They knew their lives and how their lives had shaped their identities. I told them that I hoped we could learn a lot from one another.

And learn a lot we did. I learned from many of my students about the complicated nature of having multiple identities. For instance, I am reminded of Eduwa, a Nigerian woman in her mid-50s who came to class neatly dressed in colorful traditional dress, who taught me a great deal about carefully approaching sensitive subjects in class. (Key details in this narrative have been altered to protect privacy.) She spoke in a strong accent and stood out from the class of mostly African American students in their 20s. “Ms. Eduwa,” as most of her fellow students called her, came to each class with her assigned textbooks, sticky-notes coming from them, and a well-worn notebook, in which she actively recorded her notes. Eduwa had a strong presence in class, and I often felt intimidated by her. Like many adult students, Eduwa came to higher education because she saw education as a way to find her place in the middle-class (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). Eduwa hoped to use her education for a promotion to a management position at her social service agency. She firmly believed that

an education would help make her life better for herself and her children. Each learning activity in the class was viewed by Eduwa as either potentially relevant to her work or not. She was interested in learning what she needed to learn to be successful in the class, yet she was equally interested in why she needed to know it (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 1998). Eduwa was particularly engaged in the classroom when she considered the material to be relevant to her life and to her work. She was employed full-time as a case manager at a local social service agency providing outreach to people who were recent immigrants to the United States. In class, Eduwa had little time to socialize with the other students. She typically sat in the middle of the first row of class. She clearly wanted to communicate to others that she was serious about her learning.

Eduwa arrived to class late one week and sat conspicuously on the back row of class with her arms crossed. In the previous session, the class and I discussed the importance of respecting diversity of race/ethnicity, national origin, gender and gender identity, spirituality, sexual orientation, disability, and other factors (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008). The students engaged in active discussion around several case studies, one of which was an African American man who identified as bisexual, had different physical abilities, and was of a lower socioeconomic status. He walked with a cane for many years, but needed the help of a social worker in arranging new options for mobility. He had specific service needs in mind, but wanted a social worker who would respect *all* of whom he was as a person. At the time, Chicago had a visible LGBTQ disability community. Maybe, one student said, the client could be connected with the local LGBTQ community, if he was not already connected. Another student noted that the social worker might also benefit from connecting with this community, to get further consultation about how to best proceed with this client. In all, the class came up with what I thought were many creative ideas for engaging the client. Though some of the students talked about managing their beliefs around spirituality and sexual orientation, the tone of the class was respectful and productive. One student came out to the class as bisexual herself. I briefly talked about my own experiences in coming out. There were other LGBTQ students in the class and several others had come out to me privately after class. I am always encouraged when students feel safe enough to come out to me and

to their classmates. I believe that this type of openness and authenticity serves as a good model for future work with clients. In all, I felt like the experience had gone well, and I learned a lot from the discussion. I suspected by Eduwa's body language, however, that she had a different perspective on the discussion.

As is my routine, I began class with a review of our previous topic on diversity and set the stage for class activities for the day. This day, I talked about how excited I was by the active discussion on sexual orientation identity and other human diversity during the prior week. I shared that I learned a great deal from the class about how many people navigate multiple social and cultural identities in life. In the past, I have found that the strategy of review and repetition helps students solidify lessons learned in the previous session (Cowan, 2014; Foley & Kaiser, 2013). It is also an opportunity to seek clarification or to resolve uncertainties. I have learned in social work education that review and repetition helps me identify gaps in meeting learning objectives. For example, if many of my students are not retaining information within a reasonable degree of accuracy from week-to-week, review and repetition helps clue me into this. We might need to spend more time if there are huge gaps in learning. I thought this pre-class review, while productive, was fairly ordinary. It was no different from the other review sessions. I thought the day would be like any other.

I discovered that I was wrong. As Eduwa arrived, one student mentioned an LGBTQ advocacy event in Chicago and agreed to share the details of the event with interested students via email. I commented that it sounded like an interesting event and asked that the student include me on the email. The conversation continued and I casually mentioned that the visibility and support available to LGBTQ communities was a strength of the city. While there is surely work to be done in Chicago with LGBTQ communities, particularly around social justice issues like racism and class disparities, Chicago is largely a friendly place with a thriving LGBTQ community. Among other reasons, people come to Chicago so that they can be a part of a larger LGBTQ community. As I made these statements, I noticed tension in the back of the classroom. Reluctantly, Eduwa raised her hand.

When called upon, Eduwa said, "Professor, I do not appreciate you discussing homosexuality in class. It is against God's law." I responded that I appreciate that there may be some differences of opinion when we discuss diversity, but that social workers should strive to show respect despite the type of diversity. Eduwa then rose to her feet and shouted, "You are promoting homosexuality at a Black college!"

Another student, Ariana, stood and shouted, "Sit down!" Ariana was a charismatic African American woman in her early 20s who typically came to class in a Chicago Bulls basketball jersey, shorts, and a backwards baseball cap. Ariana was a student keenly interested in LGBTQ advocacy. Several weeks prior, Ariana had come out to me as a lesbian and introduced her girlfriend to me at a local event. Eduwa continued to shout, but Ariana stood her ground. She said, firmly, "You need to leave." Cheeks flushed and needing a moment to regroup, I suggested that we take a five-minute break. I was really in no position to continue without a few minutes to collect my thoughts. I also hoped to meet Eduwa outside during the break, to arrange a time to meet to further discuss her concerns. Perhaps we could talk about what happened in the classroom. If I am honest with myself and my readers, part of me wanted to reason with Eduwa.

Dealing with attitudes around sexual orientation identity was familiar territory to me. First coming out during my adolescent years, a time where social relationships and friendships are quite important to young people, I was no stranger to dealing with homophobic attitudes and beliefs from some of my peers (Crisp & McCave, 2007). High school was an uncomfortable place, at times wrought with coping with homophobic slurs and bullying from my peers. While I always had a love for learning, I had been quickly pegged in high school by some of my peers as gay. Surely, I thought that I probably was, yet I wanted to keep that part of myself under the radar, given my conservative family. Keeping that part of myself under the radar, however, was challenging when dealing with the taunts and sneers of my classmates. They thought they had me figured out. I did not engage in some of the activities that other boys enjoyed. I was not interested in sports, did not date, and had no interest in the cheerleaders. Surely, some gay youths are very engaged in high school sports, but I was not. Nearly as soon as I began high school, I anticipated moving on with my life. Though I found

solace in a few of my teachers—teachers that I now believe were probably LGBTQ themselves—I wanted to be finished with high school quickly. I dreamt of a college experience that would allow me to freely be myself. This would not come until many years later; yet, it was what I dreamed about at the time.

School experiences were complicated by my home experiences. My religious background taught me that same-sex attraction was wrong, and I had, by late adolescence, already struggled with managing family relationships around my sexual orientation identity. Adolescence was a tumultuous time for me, and high school was not a friendly place for a gay kid. Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA), which are now becoming more common in high schools, had yet to emerge in my own high school when I had graduated. Even had there been a GSA, I might have been too fearful of attending—too afraid of what my peers thought, too afraid of what my parents would say, and too afraid of what might happen to me if I acknowledged who I was. While bullying of LGBTQ students is more on the radar of educators today, then it was not unusual to hear anti-gay epithets at school. I had been called a “fag” more times than I could remember. In high school, I was deeply upset by homophobia. By my 20s, however, I had learned to internalize this sort of homophobia a lot less. Though homophobia still stung, I had learned to be less emotionally affected. In some ways, responding to homophobia was what interested me in social work education and advocacy. It was both a personal and professional journey.

During break, I learned that Eduwa had left campus for the evening. Outside the classroom, I met another student from the class. Keon, an African American young man in his early 20s, was visibly upset. He tearfully shared with me about how disturbed he was by Eduwa’s statements in class. Keon had recently come out to his mother, who he said had a similar reaction as Eduwa. Because of the conflict with his mother, Keon had moved out of his mother’s house and had been sleeping on friends’ sofas for the last several weeks. I hugged Keon, told him that he was brave for coming out, and assured him that his family would come around. My family, which once had very negative attitudes about LGBTQ people, had become supportive over the years, I said. There still might be hope for his family. Obviously, I could

not give Keon any such guarantee about his family. Yet, the statement felt right at the time. Maybe I wanted to reassure him that life would get better. Life does not always get better or at least not in the way that we plan. I wish, in retrospect, that I had told him that things with his family might not get better, but that he would become stronger over time. He would overcome this. He would develop the support that he needed to feel safe in the world.

After the class resumed, we continued discussing diversity, particularly that it was not an easy topic. Race/ethnicity, national origin, gender, and gender identity, spirituality, sexual orientation, disability, and other diversity factors are challenging to discuss. At times, discussing diversity issues can evoke strong emotions. The conversation can be deeply personal, especially for students who have experienced some form of social marginalization. I always hope that my students feel comfortable talking openly about their uncertainties around diversity. Surely, this discussion needs to occur in a respectful way. It has been my experience that, in the right space, students are comfortable exploring their uncertainties. I believe it is possible to talk both about firmly held beliefs and to explore new possibilities under the right conditions. After Eduwa’s outburst, several students talked at length about how our discussion affected them. Eduwa’s outburst in class, as well as Ariana’s response, had become a teaching moment about how social workers can engage others in important dialogue around diversity, power, and privilege.

Eduwa never returned to the class or, to my knowledge, to the college. She never answered my e-mails or calls inviting her to an individual meeting to talk about what happened in class. She might have not felt comfortable facing her classmates or me ever again. Maybe she thought I would not try to understand her position. Though I have clear thoughts about how social workers should treat LGBTQ people as human beings with all the rights and responsibilities of the rest of society, fueled both by my experience as an LGBTQ person and as a social worker who served LGBTQ clients, I hoped that I would have been able to listen to Eduwa, to hear her unique story. Yet, there could have been other reasons why she did not return. Perhaps, despite her years of experience, Eduwa was not fully able to examine her feelings around diversity and sexual orientation identity. She also might have just been unwilling to do so. She could have decided

that the social work value of showing respect for a person's sexual orientation identity was a step too far. Conceivably, Eduwa might have decided that LGBTQ identity was too opposite her values, religion, or belief system. She might have found a vocation that was more aligned with her religious beliefs. I also sometimes wonder whether she met her goal of making life better for her and her children. I hope she did.

Eduwa may have also made the decision to continue working as a case manager at her social service agency without further exploring her attitudes about diversity and sexual orientation identity. Maybe she decided her dream of becoming a social work manager was not so important. Despite where Eduwa ended up, I regret that I could not more fully engage her. After witnessing in my own life about how attitudes can change around sexual orientation identity when a person has a personal relationship with an LGBTQ person, I cannot help think that progress could have been made with Eduwa. Perhaps there was something more that I could have done for Eduwa. I could have provided her some further support to explore her uncertainties about LGBTQ, ideally in a 1:1 setting where she did not have the added pressure of having an audience. I might have been also able to connect her with others from Nigerian or other religious communities who were active in LGBTQ advocacy. Even the college counseling center might have helped for engaging her in these issues. Of course, Eduwa may have declined any or all these interventions. She might have been perfectly fine with her current beliefs. Yet, regardless the result, I would have liked to get to know Eduwa better and to help her feel safe enough to explore her attitudes and beliefs in our class.

Since my experience with Eduwa, I have learned more about myself as a social work educator. Now in the latter half of my 30s, I have grown as an individual. Like many of my other contemporaries in my 30s, I have worked towards a stable relationship, job, and finances (Hutchison, 2012). I have worked to build a life that is more secure and satisfying. Life has become more established and routine. I now have a decade more of responding to homophobia and other sexual orientation issues. One gets very good at developing a tolerance for and an ability to respond to people who try to place us at the margins.

Life also gives us other experiences. For example, since the incident, I had an experience dealing with job discrimination at a social service agency because of my sexual orientation identity. That experience taught me a great deal about the importance of standing up for myself, which has, in turn, taught me a great deal about how to teach my students how to stand up for others that are at the margins of society.

Fortunately, significant progress has also been made in LGBTQ social justice. A great deal has changed in U.S. society around certain civil rights, such as the freedom to marry. To be sure, not everyone is protected. The Trump administration has made attempts to roll back protections for LGBTQ people. More progress is still needed on the horizon around other civil rights issues, like the freedom from discrimination in employment and housing. Violence against people because of their gender identity and expression is still a significant social welfare problem (Flores, 2015). Yet, each of these changes in society has given me moment to reflect on the importance of social justice issues for LGBTQ communities. Each of these issues continues to give me fodder for discussion in my classes, particularly as I engage students in conversations about important social justice issues of today.

Today, I am continuing to engage my students in discussion around issues of race/ethnicity, national origin, gender and gender identity, spirituality, sexual orientation, disability, and other forms of diverse identities. Students in my classes continue to explore their deeply held beliefs around sexual orientation, albeit the landscape in talking about LGBTQ issues has changed greatly. While I certainly remember Eduwa when I engage in these conversations, I no longer hesitate to talk about my own experiences when the topic of sexual orientation diversity comes up in class. It feels far less controversial than it once did. Possibly this is a result of my own advancement further into adulthood. I am more certain of myself and, with a decade more of experience talking about diversity, with any luck more equipped to handle these conversations. In these conversations, I am also reminded of students like Ariana and Keon who need an authentic and open teacher who is willing to take the time to help them feel safe in the classroom.

Interest in talking about sexual orientation identity issues has also seemed to increase. In the last several

decades, most mainstream professional organizations in the helping professions have, not only denounced conversion “ex-gay” therapy or other sexual orientation efforts, but have also acknowledged that sexual orientation identity is part of the normal spectrum of human experience and promote affirmative practice with sexual minorities (American Counseling Association, 2013; American Psychological Association, 2008; NASW, 2005; Council on Social Work Education, 2015). This has resulted in more students being interested in sexual orientation issues in the helping professions. Of course, my experience in urban geographical settings may be influencing these experiences. Talking about sexual orientation diversity may be very different in Chicago than it is other areas of rural Illinois or other rural areas in the United States.

Several years ago, I developed an elective practice course on engaging people of diverse sexual orientation identities. Though I firmly believe that discussion about LGBTQ identities and other diverse identities needs to be infused across the curriculum, I enjoy having a concentrated opportunity to engage students in productive discussions about how social workers can make life better for LGBTQ-identified people. I am energized and encouraged by my students’ interests in the lives and well-being of LGBTQ people. Hearing the stories of LGBTQ social work students who are willing to be open and authentic in their agencies also encourages me. Their stories are what encourage me to continue in my journey as a social work educator.

Future research must continue to explore the experiences of LGBTQ faculty in the helping professions. Additional narratives about the experiences of other LGBTQ faculty, including faculty reflections about decisions to disclose or forego disclosure, would be an excellent start to increasing discussion about LGBTQ faculty issues. Further, additional empirical research is needed to explore how experiences of openness and outness can positively impact faculty and student experiences in the classroom. Researchers should also examine whether there are differences in experiences of LGBTQ faculty in urban versus rural contexts. Coming out in the classroom may be quite different in major metropolitan areas versus more rural settings.

Additionally, much progress is still needed around LGBTQ social justice advocacy. If we are ever going to make a difference in responding to imbalances in privilege and power, social workers need to continue to have conversations around diversity. Great diversity exists even within the LGBTQ communities. For example, a white gay male from a higher socioeconomic class is often in a very different social position than a lesbian woman of color that is living in poverty. LGBTQ communities are complex. The complexities of the LGBTQ communities make the conversations around diversity to be challenging. Nonetheless, these conversations can be productive and significant. Our students will continue to explore their uncertainties about how to fit these discussions about sexual orientation identity into their cultural frameworks. Yet, social work educators can continue working to create a safe and respectful space for these conversations.

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