

Research Proposal: LGBT Couples Counseling

Author's Name

University's Name



Abstract

Kathleen and Lisa are a lesbian couple that initially came into an agency for couples counseling services. During the delivery of these services, however, it became apparent that Kathleen and Lisa were thinking of starting a family and were concerned that the counselor assigned to them did not have enough experience working with LGBT clients. Even though the counselor did all they could to convince Kathleen and Lisa that they were competent enough to help treat them, there were still multiple instances where there was a disconnect between the couple and their counselor. Unfortunately, many of these disconnects were the result of the counselor being straight and unable to fully identify with Kathleen and Lisa's perspectives. This may be the sign of an underlying problem in the social services industry, as many counselors are graduating from counseling education programs that are not properly preparing them to work with LGBT people. This paper will be a research proposal for a stand-alone literature review that will explore counseling education programs and their apparent lack of effectiveness in terms of preparing straight counselors to work with LGBT clients.

Keywords: LGBT clients, counseling education, literature review

Research Proposal: LGBT Couples Counseling

Kathleen and Lisa had valid concerns when they began their couples therapy. As members of the LGBT community, they had probably gone through experiences when they were offered LGBT support services by a straight person who did not understand what exactly they were going through. People who identify as sexual minorities experience levels of ignorance that often make them want to stop using therapy services and other social support programs that can help them plan families or adjust to life as an uncloseted individual (Boone, 2018; Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2012; Vanmeter, 2019).

While previous research has made note of how LGBT clients are often underserved by counselors who are not from the community and do not understand the social, familial, and marital pressures of being an LGBT individual, a great deal of this information is scattered. New counselors that want to learn why they need to broaden their perspectives and become more accommodating to LGBT clients and their experiences may find that multiple useful sources are actually out-of-date. In an effort to help the field and modernize the current body of literature and knowledge, a stand-alone literature review will be done to consolidate the current materials and resources. This review will include relevant information surrounding the topics of LGBT counseling, affirmative interviews, and relationship interventions for same-sex couples, while the need to improve counselor education programs will be discussed.

Research Problem and Research Question

Kathleen and Lisa expressed that they were feeling unsure about going to a nonprofit agency to help them plan a family. Despite multiple family planning options available to lesbian couples nowadays, unfortunately, Kathleen and Lisa are just one example of how LGBT couples often miss out on learning what it takes to start a family and prepare for parenthood in a world

that still does not understand the way LGBT families live, work, and function. These missed opportunities are often the result of a low number of LGBT programs, amid concerns and skepticism about how well such programs can fit the needs of LGBT clients (Scott & Rhoades, 2014). Thus, research needs to be done on how well counseling education programs are preparing counselors to serve LGBT people, and if the counselors coming out of these programs are capable of providing effective social treatment and services to LGBT clients.

The research question of this project is: “Are counseling education programs preparing professionals to offer adequate social services to LGBT people?” A literature review seeking to answer this question is needed because Kathleen and Lisa took a long time to warm up to the counseling program offered by the agency in question. This is because they were apprehensive due to prior poor experiences. Also, there are instances where a disconnect comes into play, mostly because agencies providing couples counseling services employ non-LGBT counselors who have never gone through the family planning difficulties that lesbian members of the community have.

Concepts and Variables That Will Be Examined in This Project

The concept of LGBT counseling services will be examined during the course of this literature review project. This concept is important because A) LGBT counseling services relate directly to the research question and B) many of the social service organizations that offer counseling services to LGBT couples also provide family planning services (Scott, Whitton, & Buzzella, 2018). Counseling services offered to LGBT couples are vastly different than those offered to straight couples. These differences are so apparent and vast that they have caused some authors to question whether or not counselor education programs are properly serving LGBT clients, or students that go on to join such programs without having the proper tools and

skill sets in their backgrounds to be successful (Lindsay, 2018).

The independent variables are as follows: Counseling education programs; Method of counseling/therapy used by a counselor. For example, the counselor Kathleen and Lisa worked with had graduated from a counseling education program that provided its participants with opportunities to better serve LGBT clients – especially within settings that highlight the need for increased awareness of the LGBT community and their issues among would-be and practicing counselors. And while the counseling education program itself cannot (and probably will not) be changed once this literature review project is complete, the competency of counselors that graduate from existing education programs, and a sense of satisfaction shared by LGBT clients enlisting such services will be used as dependent variables.

Why will these two dependent variables be very important for this literature review? Current literature is critical of counselors' ability to properly respond to and treat LGBT clients, and members of other minority groups and populations (Boone, 2018; Lindsay, 2018; Scott et al., 2018). Likewise, there is literature available describing the feelings of disappointment and frustration experienced by LGBT clients who were failed by the agencies and counselors, whom they trusted to discuss their problems with (Scott & Rhoades, 2014; Vanmeter, 2019). Analyzing the customer feedback, along with the information gathered from various sources on the clients' experiences with counseling agencies, is important when attempting to address gaps in knowledge and practice. Despite the fact that this issue has been around for more than 10 years, recent literature shows that when it comes to serving the interests of LGBT clients, there is still a considerable disconnect between counseling education programs and the competency of their graduates.

Literature Review

Literature shows that there is still a lack of proper and relevant services for LGBT clients. Heck, Fentje, and Cochran (2012) write that many counselors are open to working with LGBT clients but lack the experience to properly do so. According to the authors, this is why the intake interview process is so important when trying to familiarize oneself with LGBT clients. Being able to properly familiarize oneself with such clients may or may not be a skill that is being taught in current counseling education programs. More research will need to be conducted into this particular aspect as Lindsay's (2018) paper states that counseling education programs are not properly preparing their graduates to work with sexual minorities. This sentiment is matched by Vanmeter (2019) who states that LGBT clients are "at greater risk for having unsatisfactory mental health treatment, a higher risk of stressors, a higher risk of comorbidity, and a higher risk of marginalization in the health field" (p. 15).

Scott, Whitton, and Buzzella (2018) mention the fact that many relationship intervention services are designed to help different-sex couples. Owing to this, relationship counselors are often tasked with having to adapt their prior education, skill sets, and relationship intervention programs to same-sex couples that have different needs, perspectives, and experiences than the different-sex couples the counseling programs were designed for. Scott and Rhoades' (2014) paper mentions this as well, since one of the stated reasons for lesbian couples being wary of using relationship counseling services is that there is a lack of lesbian-affirming counseling services available to them at the moment.

How This Study Will Address a Gap in Existing Knowledge

While there are studies that either explore the effectiveness of counseling education programs or how LGBT clients feel dissatisfied with the services that are being made available to them, there are few studies that attempt to unify these topics and determine how subpar

counseling education programs are leading to LGBT clients being unsatisfied with the social services presented to them. Qualitative and quantitative methods are used by authors who discuss these topics. The authors cited in this research proposal are examples of how quantitative and qualitative research designs have been used to add to the field and objectively study how counselors and LGBT clients are being affected by lackluster counselor education programs.

Due to this project being a literature review, its qualitative nature will aim to use authors' prior research and experiences to depict how and why counseling education programs are under preparing new counselors and, in turn, leading to a low number of competent social services and agencies being available to LGBT clients in need of couples counseling or family planning services. In order to fully depict the frustration and stagnation that many straight counselors and LGBT clients are feeling in their professional relationships, the social and professional consequences of lackluster LGBT counseling services must be researched and academically discussed. Without a thorough explanation of how straight counselors and LGBT clients are both underserved by poor counseling education programs, this ever persistent problem may never be rectified.

Conclusion

This research project will explore the effectiveness of counseling education programs and whether or not they are leading to the low quality of service many LGBT clients are experiencing from the nonprofit and public sectors. Many of the services designed for same-sex couples were created for the straight ones. This means that many LGBT couples will often go to social service agencies that are trying to adapt their methodologies and tactics to people who are different than the ones they were actually designed for. This may not be the complete fault of the counselors who create and run these programs. There is a possibility that counseling education programs

that refuse to change could be the cause of this long-standing problem in the nonprofit sector.



References

- Boone, L. M. (2018). Investigating relationships among counselors' gender, race, multicultural competency when counseling sexual minorities. *Walden Dissertations and Doctoral Studies Collection*. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6188&context=dissertations>
- Heck, N. C., Flentje, A., & Cochran, B. N. (2012). Intake interviewing with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender clients: Starting from a place of affirmation. *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy, 43*(1), 23-32. doi:10.1007/s10879-012-9220-x
- Lindsay, P. (2014). Counselor education and addressing the needs of the LGBT community: Are we doing enough? *Alabama Counseling Association Journal, 42*(2), 73-89.
- Scott, S. B., & Rhoades, G. K. (2014). Relationship education for Lesbian couples: Perceived barriers and content considerations. *Journal of Couple & Relationship Therapy, 13*(4), 339-364. doi:10.1080/15332691.2014.930704
- Scott, S. B., Whitton, S. W., & Buzzella, B. A. (2018). Providing relationship interventions to same-sex couples: Clinical considerations, program adaptations, and continuing education. *Cognitive and Behavioral Practice, 26*(2), 270-284. doi:10.1016/j.cbpra.2018.03.004
- Vanmeter, J. (2019). The lived experiences of Lesbian and Gay clients who terminated counseling prematurely. *Walden Dissertation and Doctoral Studies Collection*. Retrieved from <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=8622&context=dissertations>