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# Center of Attention: a Qualitative Study of the Responses of LGBTQ Students to a Graduate-Level LGBTQ Diversity Training Course

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CENTER OF ATTENTION:  
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE RESPONSES OF LGBTQ STUDENTS  
TO A GRADUATE-LEVEL LGBTQ DIVERSITY TRAINING COURSE

A DOCTORAL PAPER  
PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE  
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF PROFESSIONAL PSYCHOLOGY  
OFFICE OF GRADUATE STUDIES  
UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE  
DOCTOR OF PSYCHOLOGY

BY  
Shoshana N. Aal  
July 2016

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## Abstract

The focus of this study is to examine the difficult situations LGBTQ students experience as they complete a training course on LGBTQ issues at a predominantly non-LGBTQ doctoral-level psychology program. Questions have arisen over the use of a diversity training course in preparing graduate students for their future as psychologists. Since diversity training courses are currently mandatory for APA-accredited graduate psychology programs and are the primary means of training students for treating a diverse array of clients, it is important to ensure that these courses are effective for all graduate students. The purpose of this pilot study is to acquire information concerning the experience of LGBTQ graduate psychology students who completed the LGBTQ diversity training course in a clinical psychology doctoral training program. The study focuses on understanding the pitfalls and highlights of the course from the point of view of the LGBTQ students who have taken them. Results indicated several themes, including: experiencing concern about representativeness and peer growth; feeling emotionally activated; experiencing microaggressions; experiencing in-group bonding; personal validation; gaining knowledge from the LGBTQ diversity training; and not gaining new knowledge from the LGBTQ diversity training. This research study has implications for addressing the current critiques of diversity training for diverse students, improving LGBTQ training courses, and informing efforts within the mental health community to address disparities in training. Lastly, recommendations for training programs and supervisors are also provided.

## Introduction

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) individuals report a higher occurrence of psychological issues than their non-LGBTQ counterparts (Institute of Medicine, 2011). Responding to this, the field of psychology has made efforts to ensure mental health professionals are competently treating this population. This is not an easy task, especially given that the field of psychology listed homosexuality as a mental disorder only a few decades ago. Since 1971, individuals within the field have been striving to prioritize providing training for culturally competent psychotherapy of diverse populations, including LGBTQ communities. The psychological community has made vast changes to the training curriculum mandated for clinical therapists. With this new training comes a need for more information about the effectiveness of the diversity training, even if the students who are being educated are learning about treating their own demographic group(s). Rooney, Flores & Mercier (1998) theorized that, because of cultural biases, the field of clinical psychology has assumed that many or most diverse students are experts on issues of race, discrimination, and culture, including their own. This bias may be a reason these diverse students lack adequate training on working with diverse clients. This bias may also greatly explain the paucity of research concerning the effectiveness of diversity training for historically underrepresented students.

For the purposes of this paper, the specific populations that will be examined will include the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and sexually Queer populations as these groups refer to sexual orientation, and not gender identity (as in transgender). In

order to make more meaningful and clear statements, I will focus strictly on sexual orientation, as I recognize and respect that sexual orientation is a distinct identity and phenomenon from gender identity. Accordingly, the standard acronym I will use in my paper will be LGBQ when referring to the populations represented in this study. However, when citing the work of others, I will use the acronyms provided in the cited works to avoid misrepresenting the populations studied. Furthermore, I will refer to the Graduate School of Professional Psychology (GSPP) graduate school training course being discussed in this paper as “the LGBTQ diversity training course,” as this reflects the populations covered by this course. Similarly, the client populations of interest in this study are those from the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer communities; hence, I will also be using the acronym LGBTQ. It is worth noting that many individuals who are members of the LGBTQ community identify with the group and term that fits them most specifically. This means that people typically identify themselves as lesbian, gay, or queer, may not identify or refer to themselves as LGBTQ.

*Diversity training* is defined in this paper as graduate-level training courses aimed at increasing the trainees' clinical ability, cultural and self-awareness, knowledge, and skills in order to better treat diverse clients. This paper will focus on exploring how LGBQ students experience LGBTQ diversity training in order to improve the training methods employed for this student population.

Only a few studies (Sewerd, 2009; Rooney, Flores & Mercier, 1998; Mathew, 2010; Curtis-Boles & Bour, 2010; Holcomb-McCoy & Meyers, 1999; Jackson, 1999) have examined the responses of racially diverse students to racial diversity training

courses. However, there has yet to be a similar study of the responses of LGBTQ students to LGBTQ diversity training courses. This study will review course experiences gathered from students to provide an initial examination of a particular diversity training course. In this paper, I will describe how some LGBTQ students reacted to the LGBTQ diversity training in an effort to help highlight possible responses to other current diversity training methods, and help direct the development of LGBTQ training for the psychology faculty, diversity training researchers, and individuals who are LGBTQ themselves.

At GSPP, doctoral students are required to complete a yearlong, four-quarter diversity course sequence. The four classes address: (a) racial/ethnic identity development; (b) social psychology of racism and oppression; (c) gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender issues; and (d) culturally competent psychotherapy. While the LGBTQ diversity training course changes somewhat from year to year, in general it explores various aspects of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender life. This can include the nature of homosexuality, effects of sexual identity and gender identity differences on daily life, the controversy of heredity vs. choice, the politics of homosexuality, and issues of oppression and discrimination. Students are expected to explore their personal awareness regarding individual who identify as LGBTQ in their everyday lives, and in a therapeutic context.

## **Literature Review**

Diversity training is a continuously growing and expanding area of work. The field has made great strides in its efforts to address the cultural-competency needs of the White students, with some research now looking into the training needs of the students of color. Currently, there are a few published sources, empirical and non-empirical, that discuss this aspect of training for LGBQ students. A review of the literature shows that there is a dearth of literature specifically on the topic of LGBQ students and their experience during training in graduate psychology programs, let alone their experience in LGBTQ diversity training courses. Because of this dearth, the author has chosen to expand the content of the introduction and the literature review sections to include four non-peer-reviewed journals, the doctoral dissertations by Gupta (2013), Sewerd (2009), Smith Goosby (2002), and Stolz (2009) as these papers provided some of the only information available on racially and sexually diverse psychologists in training. Furthermore, the author recognizes that the field is changing rapidly. The author used studies from as far back as 20 years ago in order to provide the most informative literature review possible for this topic. However, given the current changes in our culture's relationship with LGBQ individuals, some of these studies may no longer display an accurate representation of the current atmosphere.

### **Psychology and LGBTQ Clients**

In the United States, 3% to 8% of the population identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (Dillon et al., 2004). LGBT individuals utilize therapeutic services at rates

higher than the rest of the general population (Sanfort, DeGraf, Bijl, & Schnabel, 2001). These individuals often suffer from psychological issues including problems with drug abuse, unhappiness, neurotic disorders, depressive episodes, generalized anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, phobic disorder, suicidal thoughts, suicide attempts, and drug dependency at significantly higher rates than their non-LGBT counterparts. This is most likely influenced by issues arising from discrimination based on their sexual orientation and the resulting unfair treatment (Chakraborty, McManus, Brugha, Bebbington, & King, 2011). With such a high percentage of the population who identify as LGBTQ receiving mental health treatment, it is ethically necessary for mental-health professionals to be well trained in helping these individuals.

Yet the field of psychology has not always been of help to this population. The American psychological community initially regarded homosexuality as pathological based on a theory put forth by Sandor Rado. In Rado's theory, "adult homosexuality [was] a phobic avoidance of heterosexuality caused by inadequate early parenting" (Drescher, 2008, p. 447). It was from this frame of mind that American psychologists added the diagnosis of homosexuality to the first and second editions of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) from 1952 to 1974. A person who engaged in any gay relationship or act was considered sick and in need of help.

The 1970s reflected a variety of extraordinary changes to the dynamic between the gay community and the field of psychology. In the early 1970s, gay activists began to protest against the position taken by the American Psychological Association (APA). In 1973, the APA voted to remove homosexuality from the DSM.

At the same time, the American public mirrored this response to homosexuality, as their views on homosexuality began to shift, moving slowly away from the original biases.

Change continues to come slowly. In 1986, an APA task force surveyed a large sample of psychologists, and found that “psychologists vary widely in their adherence to a standard of unbiased practices with gay men and lesbians. The research also showed that a wide range of negative biases and misinformation about homosexuality has persisted that could affect therapy practice” (Bieschke, Perez, & DeBord, 2007, p. xii).

LGBTQ individuals continue to be one of the most widely disparaged groups in America. In the 1980s and 1990s, certain studies presented some startling statistics, with the majority of Americans reporting some level of discomfort concerning gay men and lesbians (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 1999). More recent studies continue to show persistent discrimination. In 2003, 16% of hate-motivated crimes in the U.S. were directed towards homosexuals (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2004), while a study on sexual victimization throughout the life cycle found that heterosexuals reported less physical and sexual victimization than their LGBTQ counterparts (Balsom, Rothblom, & Beauchaine, 2005). Based on this data, LGBTQ victimization must be regarded as an ongoing issue.

### **History of Diversity Training**

There has been an increased awareness of the importance of diversity training in general. When the Vail Conference on Professional Training in

Psychology met in July 1973, interest groups focused on a variety of important categories, including social responsiveness and explicit evaluation of psychology training and services. One recommendation from the Vail Conference was that “training must take into account the diverse service needs of various target populations and alternative services-delivery models to meet those needs” (Fretz, 1974, p. 66). After the conferees met for five days, it was determined that when it came to social responsiveness and expansion of the range of persons served, it was recommended that training be further developed “to include, in all levels of professional psychology, curriculum on psychological issues of race and sexism” (Fretz, 1974, pp. 65-66). From that point on, it became mandatory for all counseling and clinical psychology students to receive diversity training (ACA, 2005; APA, 2003).

Mandatory training has led to the incorporation of diversity content into a variety of classes. In 1982, Derald Wing Sue and his colleagues created a model of multicultural educational training in which they defined competency as including three areas: awareness of personal beliefs and attitudes toward culturally diverse clients, knowledge of diverse cultures, and skills that utilize culturally appropriate techniques (Sue & Sue, 2008). The current diversity training courses, while varying in curriculum, purpose, and goals, are generally designed to provide students with this cultural competence.

While great strides have been made, there are limitations when it comes to LGBTQ training courses. Bidell, Ragen, Broach, & Carillo (2007) found that while many programs discussed the inclusion of diversity training, most focused

exclusively on ethnic and racial diversity without including LGBTQ diversity training. Furthermore, Alderson (2004) reported that students often felt unprepared to provide therapy to LGBTQ clients. To better support LGBTQ training programs, a panel of LGBT experts was constituted by Godfrey, Haddock, Fisher, & Lund in 2006. They came up with a list of recommendations of what to include in LGBT diversity training courses. They concluded that there were three primary components that needed to be incorporated: addressing heterosexist biases and homophobia, understanding the strengths and challenges of the populations, and teaching the practical skills therapists should have when working with the LGBT population.

Currently, diversity training courses have been found to vary considerably in the content included, diversity groups addressed, and pedagogical style used (Priester, Jones, Jackson-Bailey, Jana-Masri, Jordan, & Metz, 2008). In response to this finding, multiple training modalities have been created to try to generate interest in, as well as provide knowledge and awareness of, LGBTQ issues. There have been a number of studies that have found that the use of speaker panels and workshops can be helpful training tools in graduate studies (Fell, Mattiske, & Riggs, 2008). Yet there remains a lack of research on the courses as a whole. “Although there are many training manuals offering guidance about how training should proceed and [recounting] anecdotes from the authors’ own experiences of training, there is no research based on the direct observation of what actually happens in training” (Peel, 2009, p. 272). Currently, LGBTQ training programs have not been sufficiently researched and, therefore, their effectiveness is unknown.

### **Needs of Racially and Sexually Diverse Student Therapists**

Generally, the discrimination experienced by persons of color is clearly not the same as that experienced by the LGBTQ population, in terms of its origin and basis, as well as the differences regarding apparent recognizability by others. Individuals can have a wide array of diversity identities and the intersectionality of these identities makes for a variety of experiences. Individual who identify with either a racial minority group and/or a sexual minority group share the need to negotiate societal discrimination, and thus can be compared for the current purposes (Greene & Croom, 2000). Research into the needs of students of color in diversity training courses is minimal, yet far more prevalent than the research into the needs of their LGBTQ counterparts. Therefore, this study will rely on the body of literature regarding students of color for guidance that can be applied to training for working with LGBTQ students.

Diversity training has been criticized for ignoring the diversity training needs of students of color (Negy, 1999; Pope-Davis et al., 1997). "The multicultural counseling training literature appears to mirror society's habit of considering racial, ethnic, and other groups of diversity to be invisible" (Pope-Davis et al., 1997, p. 239). This conclusion may be based on the past assumption that trainees of color were thought to have more to teach than to learn about multiculturalism (Jackson, 1999), even though students of color were unavoidably socialized to have their own biases (Rooney et al., 1998). Recently, a few researchers have thus taken it upon

themselves to look at the experiences of students of color in diversity training courses.

The findings of Sewerd (2009), indicating many negative responses by students of color to their diversity training experiences, are concerning. Students reported the following: (a) they did not feel the training courses were beneficial to their learning, (b) they felt the classes were designed for their White counterparts (often focusing on a racial majority-therapist-minority-client dyad in the counseling session), (c) the classes were less attentive to their needs, and (d) that the classes brought up emotional difficulties in their need to protect or advocate for themselves as students of color.

The idea that these classes do not meet the needs of the students of color has been supported by several studies. A particular finding is that diversity training courses ignored the cultural-development needs of students, and had limited effectiveness with students of color (Negy, 1999; Pope-Davis, Breaux, & Liu, 1997). In diversity training classes, students of color may find the psychology curriculum inadequate, missing important parts of their distinct experiences (Sue et al., 1999). Additionally, these students may fear having to discuss the issues because of the lack of attentiveness the dominant culture shows to their needs as a person of color (Jackson, 1999).

There is also the need to respond to the emotional activation that can be experienced by any student of color in diversity training courses. Sewerd noted that students of color in these classes often felt they had to choose between being active or inactive, with both options resulting in a loss of learning. "In this sense, students

experienced a choice to be active, or not, in class to further their own cultural understanding or focus on protecting clients of color from culturally unaware White counselors” (Sewerd, 2009, p. 65). Such fear could cause students of color to respond by remaining quiet as a way to manage their anxiety (Jackson, 1999), because students may believe it too daunting to be different from or to challenge other students (Carter, 2007). This response was also found to lead students to feel helpless to act as advocates in changing their classmates' racial viewpoints. The diversity course can thus result in negative emotional reactions by the students (Jackson, 1999; McDowell, 2004; Smith Goosby, 2002). In reaction to these issues, Sewerd noted that students reported such emotional reactions as “trepidation over being alienated from peers . . . and concerns about feeding into racial stereotypes” (Sewerd, 2009, p. 64), which could also be described as a fear of becoming the token representative for their group.

Research thus far has concluded that diversity classes can be experienced negatively by students of color. So far, the data informs us that students of color can experience a variety of difficulties including: (a) feeling that the classes are directed towards their White counterparts, (b) fearing marginalization and being ostracized, and (c) feeling that they are being placed in the teaching position, rather than being allowed to remain in the standard student role. In sum, all these experiences suggest a lack of effective training for students of color. Some of these difficulties could also be applied to LGBTQ training classes.

## **Needs of LGBQ Student Therapists**

The training needs of LGBQ students in the in LGBTQ diversity training courses are unclear at this point. If we are to address the needs of the LGBQ students, then it is necessary to explore and identify those needs first. The findings that do exist show that LGBQ students are distinct from their non-LGBQ counterparts, because the former are not only developing as psychologists, but also as LGBQ persons (Stolz, 2009). These intersecting identities development can affect both the students' level of disclosure of their sexual orientation, or "outness," and their experience of safety in regard to speaking up on LGBQ issues in the school (Lark & Croteau, 1998).

Others may directly link concerns about safety and disclosure to fears of biased treatment. An examination of LGBTQ Social Work students found that a student's outness was significantly correlated with six environmental factors: (1) LGBTQ student perception of other students' overall level of comfort with their sexual orientation or gender identity within the program; (2) the number of faculty who know about their sexual orientation or gender identity; (3) the number of students who know about their sexual orientation or gender identity; (4) how supported they felt with regard to their LGBTQ identity within the program; (5) the percentage of faculty who are supportive of LGBTQ issues, and (6) awareness of openly LGBTQ administrators or staff members (Dentato, Craig, Messinger, Lloyd, & Mcinroy, 2013). Another study found a correlation between a student's level of outness at school and their corresponding history of being out to themselves and others (Lark & Croteau, 1998). It appears that when a student feels surrounded by

those they regard as supportive, either because the person identifies as LGBTQ themselves or has shown themselves to be supportive, the student is much more willing to be out in school, possibly leading to a more effective learning environment.

The majority of research into the LGBTQ student experience in graduate school has been on the mentor-mentee relationship, looking at dyads that span the spectrum of LGBTQ student-teacher relations. Russell and Horne (2009) argued that it is mainly because we have to learn to work in environments characterized by sexual prejudice that it is important to consider LGBTQ students' mentoring relationships as distinctive. This research looked at the relationship and how it was influenced by a stigmatizing society.

As a result of their research, Russell and Horne (2009) suggested that an LGBTQ-friendly environment be maintained while minimizing blame. Similarly, being clear about the issues of stigma and social prejudice helps break down the "don't-see-and-don't-tell culture" that hides many of the issues. Lark and Croteau (1998) argued for the use of inclusive language, openly offering students safe havens, having faculty examine their own status as LGBTQ or non-LGBTQ mentors along with the developmental process surrounding that, and acknowledging that LGBTQ student's needs that might differ from those of their classmates. They felt these would all be useful strategies for working with LGBTQ students.

To an LGBTQ student, graduate school can be a distinctly difficult experience. Stolz (2009) concluded that if students do not feel accepted by the psychology program in which they are enrolled, they may begin to feel less at home than

heterosexual students, which in turn could affect their ability in the future to provide effective services to their clients. Additionally, studies found that there are biases and discriminatory behavior from psychology professors regarding sexual orientation and social class, possibly making it more difficult for LGBTQ counseling students during their graduate-school experience (Miller, Miller, & Stull, 2007). A student should thus be allowed and encouraged to be open about their identity in graduate school, and a safe environment should be created for them (Stolz, 2009).

These issues may have led to a reduced number of LGBTQ students in graduate psychology programs despite recent recruiting efforts for LGBTQ psychology graduate students and professionals (Phillips & Fischer, 1998).

“Students and professionals who identify as LGBT face not only the usual challenges of personal and professional development, but also the additional stresses created by the need to manage stigma” (Russell and Horne, 2009, p. 195).

The voices of these students regarding their experience of diversity training remains to be heard. Overall, a review of the literature suggests that a look into the experience of the individual LGBQ student in a diversity training program is one of the next steps in preparing American graduate-school training programs to meet the needs of all their counseling students. This study is intended to open the door to this important topic.

### **Assumptions and Biases**

It is understood that researchers will determine the subject under study and the means of going about that study. Given the researchers' idiosyncratic

perspective regarding their own research, it is necessary for qualitative researchers to consider the assumptions and biases that they bring to each step of the process.

This author developed an interest in the present subject during her training at the Graduate School of Professional Psychology at the University of Denver. She was involved in the four-quarter diversity course sequence, and her cohort spent time in and out of the classroom discussing the experience of the class and the student's minority and/or majority statuses. A special focus was on how the experience of the class differed depending on the student's statuses. From these discussions, this researcher developed an interest in investigating the experiences of diverse students in general, and LGBTQ in particular, in diversity training courses.

To monitor biases, the researcher applied a number of strategies. First, she self-monitored by exploring her known biases on the research topic. For example, based on her previous experiences and the articles she had read, she found herself assuming that she would find LGBQ students responding to the class differently from their peers who identified as part of the majority in terms of sexual orientation. Additionally, based on her readings and experience, she was inclined to expect many of them to feel that the class did not meet their needs.

In order to control for these biases as much as realistically possible, she disclosed them to her doctoral paper committee and her peers. Additionally, she took part in peer meetings with other psychologist candidates who discussed their research and academic projects. She searched for negative case data and disconfirming evidence to avoid any confirmation biases. In order to do this, she looked for information that contradicted or was inconsistent with her expectations

and findings to date. She then included questions in the interview protocol that asked participants for instances that challenged her findings, and highlighted instances that contradicted her themes. Finally, she conducted a validity test in which a colleague was given the emergent themes, and asked to look through the transcript to determine whether they felt those themes were present.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

Interviewees were recruited through the use of a purposive-opportunity sample on the basis of their participation in the LGBTQ training course in the GSPP doctoral program in clinical psychology. The sample was recruited through student and alumni e-mails, flyers, and word of mouth.

In total, five participants took part in the interviews. The participants included GSPP students who identified as LGBQ and had completed the LGBTQ diversity training course during their time at GSPP. The mean age of participants was 31.4, with a range from 26 to 48. In terms of gender, three identified as female and two as male. Regarding sexual orientation, two identified as gay, one as bisexual, one as lesbian, and one as pansexual. In terms of race, all identified as White. Concerning their graduate-school status, three were alumni, one was in their fourth year, and one was in their second year.

## **Procedures**

Students who met the interview criteria were directed to contact the researcher to obtain more information about the study. Before interviews took place, interviewees were e-mailed information about the researcher, the purpose of the study, the procedures, the types of questions to be asked, confidentiality, the voluntary nature of participation, audio-taping of the interviews, the potential benefits and risks of participating, and compensation. Additionally, potential participants were asked to fill out a demographic questionnaire and sign a consent form to demonstrate an understanding of their rights and willingness to participate. To promote recruitment, interviewees were offered \$25 as compensation for their participation.

Participants were informed that the interview would be conducted by phone or in person, and could last up to two hours. Interviewees were asked to provide a pseudonym, and include it on their questionnaire so that their name would never be used during the interview. Interviewees were only referred to by their pseudonym during recorded phone calls in order to provide anonymity on tape as approved by the IRB.

## **Measures**

Interviewees were contacted via telephone, or in a predetermined and secure environment at the specified time. Interviews started with a basic overview of the study being conducted, and a reiteration of the interviewee's rights in regards to the interview and the data they would provide. They were asked nine questions in a

semi-structured interview format, which allowed for deviations from the script if and as necessary.

The nine questions included the following: (1) How do you self-identify in regards to your sexual orientation and gender? (2) What was your openness about your identity in school? (3) What was positive about your experience in the LGBTQ training course? (4) What was negative about your experience in the LGBTQ training course? (5) What aspect(s) of the class had the most impact on your experience? (6) What do you wish you had learned that you didn't in your LGBTQ training course? (7) How do you think your experience was different from non-LGBQ students? (8) What did you learn about yourself or other LGBTQ groups during the LGBTQ training course? And (9) What recommendations do you have for future classes?

If the interviewees gave short or incomplete answers, the interviewer used such prompts as “Could you give me an example of that?,” “Could you say more about that?,” and “Are there other times when you felt similar to/different from that?” to elicit a more detailed response. At the end of the interview, the interviewer and the interviewee determined whether any personal identifying information had been provided and discussed its possible inclusion with the interviewee. Any unwanted identifying information was taken out of the interview during the transcribing. The interviews were generally forty-five minutes to an hour and a half in length.

## **Data Analysis**

After each interview was done, the audio recordings were transcribed and the transcripts were reviewed once for themes. Then they were cross-compared for similar themes using the contrast comparison method to a line by line analysis. After themes were found and each transcript was considered analyzed, a validity test was done. The validity test consisted of a colleague being given the themes, and asked to go through the scripts and pick out times in the script where they believed these themes were presented to determine if their experience of the transcript coincided with the investigator's analysis. The results of the analysis are reported below.

## **Results**

The five interviews were analyzed to develop an understanding of the general and individual experiences of the students during their time in the LGBTQ training course with their peers. The focus of the analysis was on the student's personal experience of how this class affected them as a member of this particular marginalized group in an LGBTQ diversity course. Efforts were made to identify experiences that would be distinct to LGBQ students in a LGBTQ diversity course, as opposed to experiences that would be experienced by both LGBQ students and their non-LGBQ peers.

Generally speaking, more than one individual described several overall themes as part of their training experiences. These included experiences of frustration, growth, and empowerment. During the interviews, participants

described several themes, sometimes even contradictory themes in the same interview. This interviewer categorized the themes into three areas: distinct concerns, distinct benefits, and learning experiences. Additionally, this interviewer found that some students discussed personal experiences that were not endorsed by any other students. Some of these have been included in a section dedicated to these experiences, as they still appeared to be noteworthy. Finally, each student discussed their recommendations for facilitating the growth of LGBQ students in the future. The names listed below are pseudonyms to maintain the privacy of the participants.

### **Distinct Concerns**

This category includes any experiences endorsed by multiple students that are considered distinctly difficult experiences. The following three themes were identified in this category: (a) feeling emotionally activated, (b) experiencing concern about representativeness and peer growth, and (c) undergoing incidents of victimization and/or microaggressions.

| <b>Individual experiences of distinct concerns by participant</b> |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|
|   | <b>Distinct concerns:<br/>Concern about<br/>representativeness<br/>and peer growth</b> | <b>Distinct concerns:<br/>Experience of<br/>microaggressions</b> | <b>Distinct concerns:<br/>Becoming<br/>emotionally<br/>activated</b> |
| Tanya   | <b>X</b>   | <b>X</b>   | <b>X</b>   |
| Tara  | <b>X</b>   | <b>X</b>   | <b>X</b>   |
| Harvey  | <b>X</b>   | <b>X</b>   | <b>X</b>   |
| Paige   |  |  |  |
| Jonathan  | <b>X</b>   |  |  |

### **Concern about representativeness and peer growth.**

Of concern to the majority of the interviewees was the training of their fellow students. Interviewees discussed their own preoccupation with information given to their classmates during the training experience. These fears extended to the interviewee's own actions, as well as the presentations of others acting as possible representatives of LGBQ community, and the information given by non-community members presenting on LGBQ topics. There was a preoccupation with the material that extended past their own personal drive or wish for growth. Several students mentioned a fear that non-LGBQ peers would receive incorrect information from the representatives. Other students described feeling pressure to watch their own actions as possible representatives of the LGBQ community. Across these respondents, the need to represent their sub-group triggered different

actions; some feeling that they should act more passively than usual, while others feeling obligated to speak up in the class. They explained how they acted out of a feeling of “responsibility.” This was described as a response to being focused on by teachers, students, or themselves.

*Tanya:*

*It does feel like there is a little of that obligation when you hear someone say something. Sometimes its pressure because you feel like there is an opportunity, something that might be helpful, and sometimes it's like I need to say something because this is pissing me off and people don't realize...*

*Jonathan:*

*Basically some speakers were kind of terrible. Some of them kind of had strange morals that would come off. So, you know, like, cheating was acceptable, you know. So [the presenter] was talking about her discovery that she was bisexual. It came out that she left and cheated on her spouse without him knowing to hook up with people, and she mentioned the setting multiple times. She kind of left it there. So it was kind of like she was the representation (sic) for people who are bisexual. So all bisexual people cheat on their spouse is how it came off.*

Harvey:

*I'm the only voice of a gay male in our cohort. Like, I don't know, I guess now that I'm thinking about it, I remember my peers. This would be one negative thing, my peers... if the instructor talked about something, my peers looking at me. People looking at me like, 'what do you think' or 'what are you going to say'. Deferring to me. I remember some days wanting to like, I'm in class and I showed up, but I want to show up at 60% because I have this going on, or I have that going on, or I am tired, but you can't. I couldn't in that class, I really had to show up at 100%. I think I remember feeling resentful about it.*

### **Experience of microaggressions.**

Many interviewees noted that other students mis-stepped when discussing the topics, and thereby enacted numerous microaggressions during their class. Negative, inappropriate, or confused reactions by peers were noted as sometimes expressed as microaggressions. All participants identified non-LGBQ students as the agents of these microaggressions. Most participants noted that the individuals responsible for the microaggressions appeared to be coming from a non-malicious, impulsive, or even curious position. In almost all cases of microaggressions, the LGBQ students found themselves becoming emotionally triggered by their classmates.

*Harvey:*

*There was a microaggression that happened during that class. I remember I was just learning about microaggressions. I think it was the next class or a couple of classes later, I did actually drum up enough courage to talk about it. There was talk about going out to drinks with some of the guys. I suggested having it be a gay bar. And that person just very impulsively, just very naturally, sort of automatically [said], 'I don't want to do that, I don't want to be seen there' or 'I don't want guys to hit on me'. I remember that was really painful, because it hurt but I couldn't, I think this is sort of true for microaggressions, but I couldn't put it together in the moment. And, the other thing that makes it really complex is that I was, I think during that course, was examining my own internal phobia at a deeper level. And I think for me it was sort of this waking up of 'hey wait a minute, that's messed up'!*

*Tara:*

*I heard a lot of comments particularly in a few classes that were about 'I don't believe it's okay to be LGBTQ,' or some people would say it more artfully in a way such as 'if a provider, if a mental health provider does not believe that LGBTQ was okay, is there a way to graciously refuse to see people in the LGBTQ community, or to serve them without addressing the LGBTQ lifestyle in a way that wouldn't make me feel uncomfortable so that I am still able to treat them.' And I think that for me was shocking.*

**Becoming emotionally activated.**

Because of the personal nature of the course, three interviewees discussed feeling emotionally triggered by teachers, other students, activities, and/or presentations. They described feeling activated, either by feeling drained by the class, participating in a class activity or reading, or by experiencing a microaggression during their participation in the LGBTQ training course. Some interviewees noted that seemingly neutral content could cause a surprising large amount of emotional activation. Other students commented on the emotionally triggering experience of acting as a representative of their sub-group. However, the issue that was mentioned as the most emotional and activating was the experience of microaggressions, describing their emotional responses as varying widely, including responses such as emotional pain and feeling unsafe.

*Tanya:*

*I remember feeling more triggered whenever we talked about homophobia, whenever we talked about sexual violence. I remember there was one day when I walked out of class. Having had quite a number of friends who had been sexually assaulted or molested by family members as an attempt to make them straight. It's real.*

*Harvey:*

*I remember feeling really resentful during the class as I started to realize, like, oh, my peers are so different from me in this way. So I think for me, that was another painful experience.*

*Tara:*

*More than anything, it was just shocking to me to see that people around me . . . people that I cared about, people that I respected, would respond that way, and it made me really angry. . . There is that like a little bit of ‘well, I wish I hadn’t shared so much with that person. They are way less safe than I thought.’*

### **Distinct Benefits**

This category includes any experiences endorsed by multiple students that were considered to be a distinctly beneficial experience that would only be encountered by a LGBQ student in the LGBTQ diversity course. Included here are two types of experiences: personal validation and in-group bonding.

| <b>Individual experiences of distinct benefits by participant</b> |   |  |
|---|---|--|
|   | <b>Distinct benefits:<br/>Personal validation</b> | <b>Distinct benefits:<br/>In-group bonding</b> |
| Tanya   |   | <b>X</b>                                       |
| Tara  | <b>X</b>  | <b>X</b>                                       |
| Harvey  | <b>X</b>  | <b>X</b>                                       |
| Paige   | <b>X</b>  |  |
| Jonathan  | <b>X</b>  | <b>X</b>                                       |

**Personal validation.**

Experiences of personal validation occurred through classwork, experiential exercises, and peer interactions. Some individuals reported experiencing validation from non-LGBQ peer responses to the class. Experiential exercises on privilege were noted by three students as being distinct moments of validation. One student discussed seeing his own lack of privilege clearly for the first time, and the experience of feeling validated by his community once they demonstrated gaining insight into this experience. Two individuals mentioned feeling that their classmates created, in general, a supportive atmosphere.

*Tara:*

*A big 'ah hah' moment that I recall for everyone was, 'Oh just because you are LGBTQ does not mean you get along well, and specifically you know bisexual people or pansexual people. We [are] all kind of having specific stereotypes within the LGBTQ community.' So, personally for me I thought that was rewarding that that got addressed."*

*Jonathan:*

*We had the [heterosexual] privilege list. So we went through [it] and we said things we would remove from the list, and things we would add to the list, and I thought that was just a cool experience, just to see everyone else's answers. I think I can remember some of their answers. I did feel supported. Like they understood maybe some aspect of what I was going to have to go through.*

Paige:

*I just felt that everyone showed a real genuine interest in understanding perspectives and experiences that were different than theirs. Which of course you would hope for in a grad psychology class. Which is not always the case, but I just felt that people were very interested in wanting to provide excellent care to people who are LGBT, but also want[ed] to connect with people in their life who are LGBT.*

### **In-group bonding.**

Four of the students endorsed experiences of becoming closer to their LGBTQ peers during the training course. Such times were often marked by a realization of similar childhoods or shared experiences. Others discussed the in-group bonding as a coping mechanism to help them work in a class environment they found overwhelming.

Tara:

*I guess part of getting singled out in a class, it's not like the professor would single you out or anything like that. I feel like everyone ended up talking about their identity a lot, and so one of the popular outcomes was people who did identify within that culture ended up kind of being pushed together. It created in unintentional camaraderie of those who identify as LGBTQ, and so then it was a sense of otherness that worked to bring us into a new group of togetherness.*

*Tanya:*

*We had one class member who was pretty vocal. It made it nice because there are moments when you don't want to speak up and say anything, and then you feel that internal guilt and shame of like, 'oh but I should but I don't want to.' So it was nice to have other people for support, and to feel like you did not carry all of the responsibility.*

### **Learning Experiences**

This category is dedicated to the individual interviewees' experiences of their own personal learning during the class. No instrument was used to assess the students' learning experiences. Instead, students commented on whether they felt they had gained any information of importance from their participation in the class. There was a divide in students' feelings about the class's effectiveness in helping them grow. The majority of comments were on the lack of useful training that the interviewees received from the course. Yet some students stated that it helped them with their personal growth in understanding both their own and other LGBTQ individuals' orientation.

| <b>Individual experiences of learning by participant</b> |  |  |
|--|--|--|
|  | <b>Learning experiences:<br/>Gained knowledge from<br/>the LGBTQ diversity<br/>training course</b> | <b>Learning experiences:<br/>Did not gain knowledge<br/>from the LGBTQ diversity<br/>training course</b> |
| Tanya  | <b>X</b>   | <b>X</b>   |
| Tara   |  | <b>X</b>   |
| Harvey   | <b>X</b>   |  |
| Paige  | <b>X</b>   |  |
| Jonathan   |  | <b>X</b>   |

### **Gained knowledge from the LGBTQ diversity training course.**

There were several instances when interviewees mentioned having learned from the class. Some interviewees talked about becoming aware of in-group differences and other aspects of their own group. Interviewees described gaining a larger understanding of their own biases towards some groups in the LGBTQ community. One individual who identified as lesbian discussed learning more about the coming-out process, and how the experience of coming-out as an adolescent differed from her own experience of coming-out in her 20s. Another interviewee commented on how much he had learned about transgender individuals from a presentation by an individual who identified as a male to female transgender person. Multiple interviewees discussed experiencing personal growth that helped them further their own understanding of their LGBTQ status.

One participant expressed feeling that the class caused him to change his original understanding of himself as a gay male and his own internalized homophobia. He explained that he had originally thought very little about the privilege of being heterosexual, and his internal response to dominant culture. When taking the class, he was able to recognize his own lack of privilege by watching his classmates grapple with their experiences of heterosexual privilege.

*Paige:*

*I think sometimes we talked in fairly explicit terms about sexual practices. She [the teacher] helped people, myself included be clear about, "oh wow, oh golly, turns out I have a little more squeamishness around some things than I thought that I did. And she was just really (sic). She demanded of us that we look at ourselves and be really honest. She was not going to let us be like "oh ok, lesbian people are lovely and we are all one under the skin." And she was just good at saying, as in any diversity when you are learning about people who are different than you, being able to recognize similarity, but also being clear about differences. Being clear about your own counter-transferential (sic) reactions.*

*Harvey:*

*I remember having a deeper appreciation for my friend's experience in terms of identifying as bisexual. Because I will be honest, this is horrible but it is the truth, I was so dismissive of a bisexual orientation prior to the class. I really was. So that is one way in which I was changed for the better. Like that is a legitimate identification. I*

*guess the bisexual orientation to me was probably the orientation that I needed to do the most work on. I think for me acknowledging and taking responsibility, but checking myself on this huge bias I had that was so offensive.*

*Harvey:*

*I guess for me it made me realize that for a bisexual person, for a transgender person, for a lesbian person, all these [are] different experiences. Even though I am part of this LGBTQ community, I really only have the lived experiences of a gay man. There are actually some big differences in the group. Even just to examine, just to acknowledge that just because I'm gay doesn't mean that I know what it's like to be transgendered, or to be a lesbian. That all of those experiences, even though we sort of identify as the same group are just so different.*

**Did not gain more knowledge from the LGBTQ diversity training course.**

One of the most commonly mentioned issues was a lack of useful LGBTQ diversity training for individuals who identified as LGBQ. Multiple reasons behind this issue were cited, including previous classes taken on the topic, personal history, and a lack of LGBQ therapist-client-dyad-specific material. Often students cited their coming-out experience as one of the bases for their knowledge. One of the students identified her focus on teaching her classmates as part of the reason she felt she did not learn in class, believing that she would have been able to learn more if she had not felt the need to educate her classmates.

Tanya:

*I don't feel that I learned . . . It seems like it [the class] was just dipping your toe in. And that's the challenge because not everyone in the class is at a place to do that, and that's the challenge for an instructor. How do you do the scaffolding for those who need it, and maintain the challenge for those who are at a different place, and I think particularly when you identify as that status that's frustrating. I think a piece of that is inherent when you identify as the minority status. Your own experiences and your own process of coming out has informed you on the topic and has made you into an expert when the rest of your class has not. Inherent in that is a discrepancy in terms of what would be helpful and what would have pushed me to grow as opposed to other students.*

Jonathan:

*I'm not sure I learned about anything specific, because I learned a lot about the groups in previous undergrad classes. I went through a lot of courses that cover[ed] the same topic. So not sure I really learned too many new. It didn't expand my knowledge not to the extent that I would want.. Like I didn't learn a specific new topic or skill out of this if that makes sense.*

Tanya:

*I think inherently in those classes you try to educate other people, because you can speak on your experience, and that inherently takes away from you being the student in the class, because you have examples that you can give.*

### Individual Experiences of Note

Included in this category are the two experiences that were discussed by only one individual, but were worth mentioning.

| <b>Individual experiences of note by participant</b> |   |   |
|--|---|---|
|  | <b>Individual experiences of note:<br/>No personal differences from<br/>one's peers</b> | <b>Individual experiences of note:<br/>Lack of training for the LGBQ<br/>therapist/LGBQ client dyad</b> |
| Tanya  |   | <b>X</b>  |
| Tara   |   |   |
| Harvey   |   |   |
| Paige  |   |   |
| Jonathan   | <b>X</b>  |   |

#### **No personal differences from one's peers.**

Jonathan endorsed feeling that his training experience was no different from the training experiences of his peers. While the rest of the interviewees described feeling that, for the most part, their experience was significantly different than their non-LGBQ peers, it is important to note that one of the five interviewees did not have this experience, possibly because he felt that his LGBQ identity did not make him distinct among his peers. During his interview, Jonathan noted that many individuals in his group identified themselves as having a sexual or gender identity that was not strictly heterosexual or cisgendered. He noted that he felt well accepted

by his classmates, including feeling that his identity did not place him in the minority.

Additionally, he felt that each person's experiences were so individualized that he could not claim to have had any experiences that varied greatly from his peers, based purely on sexual orientation. When asked the question "How do you think your experience was different from non-LGBQ students?" he expressed uncertainty as to why his training might be different from that of his peers. He expressed feeling supported by his peers to the extent that he had no negative experiences based on his sexual identity.

*Most of the time I felt in unison with my class. It was probably only different for that one [gay] speaker. Hearing someone [speak] on transgender . . . I'm probably in the same boat as the rest of my class who don't identify, because I don't identify as transgender. I can relate on some points, but you know I'd say [for] most of it, I would be in the same boat as the rest of the class. Everyone is just such an individual.*

### **Lack of training for the LGBQ therapist/LGBQ client dyad.**

Tanya discussed her frustration with not being trained on how to conduct therapy in a LGBQ therapist/LGBQ-client dyad. Tanya stated that she had been raised in an accepting environment, and had some difficulty with treating clients who had more difficult experiences in their home environment. This led to problems that left her feeling that she had not been adequately trained. She explained how she faced issues later on in her career when she started to work with LGBQ clients whose experience of their LGBQ identity greatly varied from hers.

*A lot of the focus in the course was assuming the therapist was straight and you're working with someone who does not identify as straight, or does not identify as cisgender[ed]. I find that is where I wish I [would have] had more guidance. I wish there had been more of a focus on more complex cases. Especially when you see someone with a lot of internalized homophobia because of [their] religious lens, and especially someone who is out and helping someone who is not. I think this would have helped me work with clients that struggle. Opening [the training] up to the idea that many of your students might not have been from the majority culture. Can we create space for the complexity of identities that our clients bring into the room and that we hold?*

### **Recommendations**

Many of the individuals interviewed gave recommendations for addressing the concerns they described. These included a variety of areas they felt were in need of improvement, including the usefulness of everything from experiences and presenters, to possible topics to discuss in the future, and the benefits of having more direct conversations.

### **Topics to Cover**

As mentioned earlier, one student suggested that classes should include at least some discussion on the LGBTQ-therapist/LGBTQ-client dyad. She felt that this would allow the clinician to recognize and respond adequately to possible issues that could arise during this kind of dyad. Other students discussed the lack of time

spent on the issue of suicide in the LGBTQ community, the mental disorder rates, and the lack of training on treating LGBTQ adolescents. One respondent stated, “I work more with kids, and there was no conversation about youth and that coming-out process that probably should've been covered more.” Another described the topics she found most useful in the class, “I liked how she [the teacher] brought in religion and the obstacles unique to people who don't identify as heterosexual in this country.”

It was also suggested that a more advanced class be offered to students who already understood the information covered in the LGBTQ class. This new offering would allow students to learn at their own levels.

### **Experiential Exercises**

Experiential exercises on privilege, sex, gender status and coming out were all mentioned as useful tools. One student discussed how the experiential exercise on privilege revealed his own lack of privilege to him in a new light, thereby helping him to see his own identity more clearly. Of note were experiential exercises including watching risqué television shows or movies on LGBTQ communities, asking students to read LGBTQ magazines in public, and discussing heterosexual privilege.

### **Presenters**

The majority of students requested that presenters be used during the training course. One student discussed the importance of finding appropriate

presenters for the class. He explained that they had had a variety of presenters, but that it would be best to find LGBTQ speakers who understood that they were to be representatives for the community, and were not just there to discuss their personal experiences. “It was kind of like if you represent a group, one, you have to acknowledge that you’re not representing the whole group, and two, you have to accurately represent what proportion you can; otherwise maybe talk about the things you don’t know or . . . [what] other people in the group are like.” To give an example of an ideal presenter, he discussed the transgender presenter for his class. He described this person as “a representation for the whole group . . . , and she wasn’t just talking for herself as the whole group; she was also giving us little caveats of what different people experiencing different ways and have a look at it differently.”

### **Direct Conversations About Biases**

With a topic like diversity, the issue of biases inevitably comes up. Or does it? While some students discussed how useful the discussion on biases was, others gave voice to the lack of discussion in their class. All interviewees who talked about this issue advocated for the use of direct conversations about biases in the LGBTQ diversity training course. One individual noted why she felt such discussions were so important for future classes. She stated, “I think the challenging conversation is at the core of multicultural development in terms of our own professional development, and I think my experience is that people tend to stray from the really

challenging conversations, and that is where I find the richness and where I see myself growing is in those conversations.”

### **Discussion**

All the LGBQ student interviewees experienced the LGBTQ diversity training course as containing both distinct benefits and distinct concerns. This finding is consistent with the research on trainees of color and their experience of diversity training courses (Curtis-Boles & Bourg, 2010; Jackson, 1999; Seward, 2009; Smith Goosby, 2002). There were a variety of experiences, often contradictory, ranging from positive growth-oriented ones to negative, vulnerable experiences. Most of the participants expressed feeling that the training experience could be better directed to meet the needs of LGBQ students. The majority described feeling unchallenged, vulnerable, and/or triggered by the content. However, this study also affirmed that the LGBQ students might be receiving some positive experiences from the training program. Finally, the majority viewed themselves as in need of further LGBTQ training, interested in further learning, and currently lacking in knowledge in certain areas.

This study affirmed the idea that LGBTQ diversity training is of interest to LGBQ students, a finding that has been reported for ethnic-diversity students by Barnel et al. (1999), Gupta (2013), and Toia et al. (1997). Furthermore, the majority did not feel challenged by the training, citing their LGBQ status and previous work on identity as the reason for their lack of learning. While it is not mandated that every class offer information that challenges its students, it is hoped that they will

have the opportunity to learn something that helps them grow as clinicians, especially when the student shows an interest in the material.

In this study, the students reported feeling as if they had to act as representatives for their LGBTQ group. They added that this pressure came from all sides: other students, the teachers, and their own internal pressure to respond. This experience, in part, supports findings by Rooney et al. (1998) who found that the students continue to feel a pressure to be “experts” in aspects of their identities. However, this statement appears to place the blame on the field of psychology or the teachers, something that at least one of the respondents specifically denied. When talking about where the pressure to speak in class came from, she described it as an “internal” pressure. Not knowing where this pressure comes from, or having it come from multiple places makes it difficult to be certain what efforts by students or faculty could decrease the pressure. However, no matter where the pressure comes from, even when it is an internal pressure to speak, students may benefit from instructors acknowledging this issue and offering support. As Sewerd noted, “Instructors who recognize that students struggle with being minority ambassadors and confronting classmates or professors can help address feelings of marginalization” (2009, p. 144).

Many students described experiencing microaggressions or other activating experiences. Such events often led to feelings on their part of being triggered and vulnerable. The interviewees described experiencing emotional responses similar to those found by Smith Goosby (2002) among students of color, who noted that Black students in diversity classes processed course material with stronger emotional

reactions than their White peers. While the professor cannot control for all triggering experiences or even for all microaggressions, recognizing that this is an issue and looking for possible areas for change are imperative. One possibility would be to support the students' use of reflective modes of learning, supporting a less reactive mode in order to facilitate insight, as was found to be helpful in a study by Curtis-Boles & Bourg (2010) of students of color.

Students reported some positive consequences of the class that were unique to them as LGBQ students. In-group bonding was an unforeseen and previously unmentioned benefit discussed by several students. It was explained by one student as a helpful response to feelings of isolation in the class. Additionally, some actively felt vindicated by the work done by their fellow students, the sharing of their own stories, and the responses of their classmates. One student described an experience of previously unmatched closeness with her classmates. From this we can see the variety of possible experiences and possibility of positive occurrences that are available to the LGBQ students in these classes, something that has previously gone unmentioned in other studies and should be explored further.

Several students mentioned how they had gained knowledge about other areas of LGBTQ life through the class, discussing how they had little previous experience with large aspects of LGBTQ life. Similar results have been found in a study by Curtis-Boles and Bourg (2010) with students of color in which they found that the students reported learning about other groups of color during the training. One interviewee discussed his own realization that he had bias towards bisexuals. Another discussed with frank honesty how her teacher helped her uncover her

own biases towards gay men. Far from the idea that LGBTQ students know everything about LGBTQ sub-groups, these students gave excellent testimony to how much growth they were capable of having in such a class. "In some ways I guess you would assume that the LGBTQ class was a class where I don't have to think so much about my identity because this was a group that I was a part of, but then coming to realize that, oh yeah, this holds a whole other raft of identity issues."

Results indicate that LGBTQ students can receive an important education from attending LGBTQ classes, but that additional work needs to be done to meet their needs and protect them from unnecessary turmoil. A student taking a class that specifically applies to him or her may experience triggering events, but it is important for the teacher to lessen the impact of these events whenever possible.

### **Recommendations for Training Programs and Supervisors**

According to the National Science Foundation, as of 2009, students of color received 24% of doctoral degrees. Since psychology graduate programs are making continuous efforts to increase the number of culturally diverse doctoral students they enroll, there is a continuing need to improve the curriculum to respond to this change in the student body. Studies are finding that students of color report having different needs in the classroom than their White peers. It is thus important to assure that each student receives an education designed to meet them where they are, and not ignore the needs of any students. It is thus time to implement some helpful changes and make an effort to determine what works.

A variety of possible interventions were discussed with participants both during and after the interviews. Additionally, based on this study and my review of the literature, there are many suggestions that I think the diversity training course could benefit from implementing. For instance, the curriculum should include information on navigating a therapy session between an LGBTQ therapist and an LGBTQ client. When this is not included, the LGBTQ students lack a chance to learn one of the fundamentals that the course is supposed to cover; how their identity may affect the therapeutic relationship with LGBTQ clients. Also, the students with the most positive things to say about the class were the ones who had guest presenters during their classroom experience. Consequently, such presentations may be a particularly useful experience for LGBTQ students. One student also noted that the presenters would have been even more effective had they been in a position to speak more effectively on their community, either by having experience giving such talks, being active community leaders, or being prepared beforehand for their role as presenters and representatives.

Additionally, I feel that having a designated impartial third-party support system would be a benefit to the students. While GSPP currently has a student advocate, it may be beneficial to include a confidential advocate specifically for diversity training issues. The diversity ally should be appointed at the start of the diversity training sequence. This advocate would be someone who might be open to meeting with any students experiencing difficulties in the class, but would be specifically concerned with helping diverse students experiencing any concerns.

This would not only acknowledge overtly the difficult position that many students face in these classes, but also provide a possible solution to this difficulty.

Another idea may be to have additional electives for students who would like to take advanced diversity training courses to meet the needs of anyone who may feel they did not receive what they wanted from the general training course, or who would like to go further in their training. Finally, multiple students mentioned the usefulness of professors incorporating difficult and uncomfortable discussions that allowed for emotional vulnerability around the discussion of LGBQ issues—something that, despite being uncomfortable, should be encouraged by the class instructor.

### **Limitations**

This was an exploratory study and should be taken as such. With no previous studies on the experience of LGBQ students to LGBTQ training, this study attempted to provide an initial exploration of this topic. The primary aim of this study was to provide an opportunity for students to describe their experiences to help determine what further research on the topic should take place.

As always, there are limitations to this study that are important to note. First, the study would have provided more information if each interviewee had been given an evaluation to assess for their level of identity development at the time of the interview. Even more beneficial would have been to give the students an identity development evaluation at the time of the diversity training class. The students interviewed may have been at different stages of identity development during the

interview as compared to when they took the class, which could account for many of the differences in experiences between them. For example, individuals who discussed experiencing little difference between themselves and their classmates also described either coming out later in life, or a lack of disclosure about their sexual orientation to their cohort and professors.

Second, the study did not represent the full LGBQ spectrum. Noticeably missing were any students who identified as questioning, leaving out important voices in this discussion. Third, the study also did not include anyone who identified as transgender. While it was beneficial to focus on students who identified as LGBQ, I also feel that this paper would have benefited from an exploration of the point of views of gender variant students, as they are also addressed in the LGBTQ diversity course curriculum. Fourth, students who met criteria were limited in number, causing a small sample size. A large sample size would be recommended for future studies. Finally, the study focused on individuals who had taken the training course in different years. Many of the students had different teachers, a different syllabus, and different classmates. These meaningful differences could account for the variety of experiences had by the different students. Only two students were from the same year, and both of those students mentioned similar themes.

### **Future Research**

Future research can build on this exploratory study. Additional research should focus on a larger population allowing for a broader range of individuals, to include the involvement of some groups that were not addressed in this study.

Attempts should be made to include individuals from across the entire spectrum of sexual orientations and gender identity including, transgender, asexual, questioning, and queer individuals. With a larger sample, a quantitative study could examine the correlations between individual experiences and demographic characteristics.

In any future study, it is recommended that if implementing a quantitative study on this material, the researcher include a measure to assess individuals' stages of identity development. While this study did not include any such measure, statements during the interviews suggest that it is possible that the variety of response to the questions could be related to variations in stages of identity development. It is recommended that future research assess for stages of identify when the students took the class, as well as when they participated in the research.

One complementary avenue of study would be to implement some of the strategies suggested by the interviewees to determine if these strategies might improve the LGBQ students' experience in such classes. Providing more community representatives, an advanced LGBTQ class, or outside support, and comparing student satisfaction and levels of learning to those of a control group could shed light on which improvement strategies provided the most positive changes for the students.

Another possible avenue would be a quantitative study looking at responses of LGBQ students to LGBTQ training courses . This could include an exploration of positive and negative responses compared with demographic information such as age, marital status, personality type, SES, ethnicity, stage of change, country of origin, acceptance from the community, and/or acceptance from their family of

origin. It may also be revealing to compare student responses to teaching style, classroom demographics, and the sexual orientation of the teacher.

Finally, these studies should assess for differences between lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and questioning students. There is great variability and diversity within the LGBQ population, which was not taken into account in this study. Future quantitative studies would benefit from determining whether differences in responses to the class are correlated to differences in sexual identity and identification among participants.

### **Summary**

The focus of this study was to examine what issues LGBQ students might experience during a training course on LGBTQ psychotherapy. Studies have found that therapists of color have a distinct experience of diversity training courses. This includes having unique needs, both academic and emotional. In this study we found the response of students of color to diversity trainings was, in many ways, mirrored by their LGBQ counterparts with LGBQ students also having distinct needs in a LGBTQ diversity training course. LGBQ students described having a number of negative and positive experiences that seemed related to their sexual orientation.

Results included several themes such as LGBQ students experiencing concern about representativeness and peer growth, feeling emotionally activated, undergoing experiences of microaggressions, experiencing in-group bonding, and LGBQ students gaining or not gaining useful information from the LGBTQ diversity training course.

From this study, we now have a better understanding of the personal experiences of a sample of LGBQ students in a diversity training course. We can use these findings as a basis for conducting quantitative studies to address the current critiques of diversity training with LGBQ students, improve LGBTQ training courses, and inform efforts within the mental-health community to address disparities in training. Additionally, I wish to validate the needs of the LGBQ students and other minorities who may find themselves having difficulties with such courses, but might not have an opportunity to express their concerns.

I can only hope that training programs and supervisors will be empowered by some of the findings in this paper, and make an effort to implement some of the recommendations. These include some ways of recognizing that LGBQ students may have different needs than their counterparts in a LGBTQ diversity training course, and finding ways to make sure those needs are met. Recommendations also include a number of options for allowing some of the difficulties of LGBQ life to be acknowledged both in and outside of the classroom, a need stated multiple times during the interviews. There are many things that we in the psychology community can do to reduce the experience of isolation among LGBQ students in an open classroom.

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