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Advancing the field of Human Services: LGBT Competencies

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Abstract

Ethical Standards for Human Services Professionals and Generic Human Services Professional Competencies adopted by the National Organization for Human Services do not include language or competencies specific to lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities. Without a specific ethical code and/or competency outlined by the field, human services practitioners do not have clear guidelines for their work with these populations. Additionally, researchers lack a way to formally measure professionals' abilities with these populations. This leaves potential for these historically marginalized populations to continue to be in a vulnerable position. To address these needs, authors reviewed established competencies in other helping professions (i.e., counseling and social work fields) relative to LGBT populations, and argue that creating LGBT specific competencies in the human services field will lead to more competent practice and support the purpose of ethical guidelines which in part is to serve as a basis for self-monitoring and improving practice. In addition, the development of these competencies would meet the goal of ethical guidelines, which serves to provide a framework for accountability. The authors also recommend developing one document focused on LGB clients as well as a stand-alone document outlining specific recommendations for working with transgender communities. Within the body of the article, the authors advocate for the adoption of specific competencies by human services professional organizations and governing bodies.

Keywords: LGBT, competencies, human services standards, NOHS

Introduction

According to the National Organization for Human Services' (NOHS) Ethical Standards for human services professionals (2015a) and Generic Human Services Professional Competencies (Johnson & Bonner; 2013; NOHS, 2015b), human services professionals (HSPs) have a responsibility to clients which requires them to recognize and build on clients' strengths. In order to do this while serving diverse populations, HSPs must be culturally competent. However, best practices or advanced competencies for service delivery with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) populations in the field of human services has yet to be defined.

Advancing the human services field by developing specific LGBT competencies offers an opportunity to set the standard for working with these populations and contributes to establishing a preventative culture. A preventative culture encompasses an ethics ideology which has a focus on preventing recurring ethical issues by developing ethical guidelines and quality control measures to address systemic gaps. The ultimate goal of this culture is to minimize or prevent future conflicts and improve service delivery to these populations (Foglia, Fox, Chanko & Bottrell, 2012; Levine & Arriff, 1990). Winfield, Sparkman-Key, and Vajda (2017) called on human services professional organizations to establish a preventative culture in the human services field. Winfield et al. (2017) argued that through the establishment of a preventative ethics culture in the human services field, organizations could better plan for situations that require intervention. Specific LGBT ethical codes and/or competencies would address this call by supporting the intent of ethical guidelines which are to: (a) educate professionals and the

general public about responsibilities; (b) provide a framework for professional accountability; and (c) serve as a basis for self-monitoring and improving practice (Corey, Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2015).

Additionally, the distinctive lived experience of individuals within LGBT communities requires unique competencies for human services practitioners. Specifically, what is needed are competencies that affirm LGBT communities by promoting and embracing LGBT relationships and identities while also acknowledging the impact of homophobia, transphobia, and heterosexism. However, presently there is no mention of this history detailed by NOHS, which allows any instruction regarding these populations to become subsumed under multicultural competencies, thereby often not giving professionals adequate training on working with these populations (Bidell, 2013; Bidell, 2014; Dickman Portz et al., 2015; Fredricksen-Goldsen, Hoy-Ellis, Goldsen, Emler, & Hooyman, 2014; Graham, Carney, & Kluck, 2012).

The NOHS Generic Human Services Competencies (Johnson & Bonner, 2013; NOHS, 2015b) and the NOHS Ethical Standards for Human Services Professionals (2015a) are considered to be the guiding principles for service delivery in the field of human services. Thus, it is problematic that neither includes competencies for working with specific populations. It can be argued that many human services agencies and human services professionals within the membership look to the NOHS Generic Human Services Competencies (2015b) and the NOHS Ethical Standards for Human Services Professionals (2015a) as a guide for human services practice. Without established competencies for work with LGBT communities, agency and practitioner interactions with LGBT populations could create barriers to competent service delivery, further oppress these populations, and/or be less affirming. Also, without an established standard for competent service delivery with this specific group of individuals, there is no standard by which to measure competent service delivery to these communities.

Other social services fields, like counseling and social work, have begun to address these concerns by articulating competencies specific to LGBT communities (e.g., AMCD, 2003; NASW, 2004). Presently, the human services literature lacks a discussion on the potential benefits of competencies for effective practice with LGBT populations. This article intends to start that conversation by contending that in order to better serve LGBT populations, consideration should be given to the development of competencies specific to the LGBT populations as well as the transgender population.

Brief Examination of Other Field's LGBT Competencies History

Social workers pioneered developing specific competencies for working with lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) individuals. In 2003, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) published a policy statement on LGB issues. The next year this policy statement was then used to affirm the association's position in support of same-sex marriage (NASW, 2004). In 2008, the Social Worker Policy Institute stated that the 2003 policy would be the gold standard when researching issues related to LGB populations. Fredricksen-Goldsen et al. (2014) then used this document to offer key competencies and strategies for appropriate practice with LGB older adults.

In the same year, the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development, a division of the American Counseling Association (ACA), adopted a statement that governed practice with LGBT individuals and was included in the multicultural competencies (AMCD, 2003). After a careful review of LGBT competencies in counseling, Perosa, Perosa, and Queener (2008), identified a need for competencies specific to transgender individuals. This was resolved when the Transgender Committee of the Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and

Transgender Issues in Counseling (ALGBTIC) developed counseling competencies specific to working with transgendered persons that were stated to be “collaborative with and celebratory of transgender experiences, individuals, and communities” (Singh & Burnes, 2010, p. 131). Harper et al. (2013) then went on to create competencies for counseling lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, and ally individuals. These movements within ACA advanced efforts within the field of counseling in providing competent practice with LGBT individuals and recognized the unique qualities and needs of these populations.

In both the social work and counseling fields, competencies agreed upon by the field’s respective professional associations have been the framework for competent practice with LGBT populations. Researchers also use the competencies as a standard by which to measure how well the field is doing in providing ethical services, both in workplaces and in educational institutions. For example, Graham et al. (2012) found that most counseling students’ self-perception of their competency was higher than their scored competency and recommended additional training through a counselor’s work span. In support of their findings, LGBT-focused training assisted school counselors to increase affirming behaviors and to meet competency standards (Hall, McDougald, & Kresica, 2013). Furthermore, other researchers have made similar suggestions that additional training on LGBT issues and more exposure to LGBT issues increases participants’ capacities to meet LGBT competencies (Bidell, 2013; Byrd & Hays, 2013; Porter & Krinsky, 2014; Rock, Carlson, & McGeorge, 2010).

Researchers in the social work field reached similar conclusions (Porter & Krinsky, 2014). In a social worker study, using the competent practice guidelines offered by Fredricksen-Goldsen et al. (2014), researchers found that most social workers lacked the appropriate knowledge and training to meet standards (Dickman Portz et al., 2015). After social workers received training specific to work with older LGBT populations, it was found that providers were more aware of issues faced by aging LGBT persons, were more likely to dispute homophobic remarks, and had more knowledge of policies that directly impact LGBT persons (Porter & Krinsky, 2014). Using the professional organizations’ competency standards to examine professionals’ self-perceptions of their competencies against their true competency scores is one way in which competency standards might be useful in the human services field.

These fields’ competencies/policy statements and subsequent studies highlight an important relationship. The competencies/policy statements articulated a field’s values at a particular moment in time, after which investigations were conducted to determine how well the field is meeting those standards. Thus, the competencies/policy statements became a benchmark by which a field could evaluate its adherence to these delimited expectations (Bidell, 2013; Bidell, 2014; Dickman Portz et al., 2015; Graham et al., 2012; Hall et al., 2013; Perosa et al., 2008; Singh & Burnes, 2010). In the same way, these competencies have aided the counseling and social work fields, and so could a human services LGBT competency document equally assist the field of human services. A document such as this would give professionals a clear guideline when working with LGBT clients. Additionally, such a document would support human services researchers in being able to evaluate how well organizations and institutions are meeting those agreed upon value codifications.

This article will examine the latest LGBT competency documents from the fields of social work and counseling in order to note the nuances of each field’s documents. This examination is intended to offer to the human services field a starting place from which to consider what human services LGBT competencies might contain. Following a summary of these competency documents, this article will then compare and contrast their usefulness from the perspective of the human services field. Next, suggestions will be made to identify key

objectives that should be considered when developing human services' field LGBT competency standards. Finally, we will discuss how the suggested competencies might impact the field along with suggested ways to initiate the conversation. It is important for the reader to keep in mind that each fields' culture and history plays a fundamental role in the development of competencies, and thus the culture and history of human services should be a critical element influencing the development of human services LGBT competency standards.

NASW Competencies of Practice

The NASW produced a document on work with LGBT clients entitled *Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Issues* (2015a). It gives a concise and thorough history of systemic discrimination experienced by LGBT communities and points out that, despite progress, systemic discrimination still exists in the United States and globally. The document showcases some negative mental health impacts experienced by LGBT clients and emphasizes advocating on behalf of these communities as a critical component in ensuring culturally competent social work practice. It calls on social workers in all types of locations to affirm non-discriminatory practices and work towards ending all prejudices, discriminations, and oppressions impacting LGBT individuals. The document articulates standards, expectations, and codes of conduct: nondiscrimination and equality, professional and continuing education, education and public awareness, health and mental health services, policy action and advocacy, and research.

ACA Competencies of Practice

The latest ACA document related to LGBT issues arose out of work by ALGBTIC and details *Competencies for Counseling with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, and Ally Individuals* (Harper et al., 2013) with a separate document *Competencies for Transgender Clients* (Burnes et al., 2010). Competencies for counseling lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, and questioning (LGBQQ) individuals are divided into eight sections (a) human growth and development; (b) social and cultural diversity; (c) helping relationships; (d) group work; (e) professional orientation and ethical practice; (f) career and lifestyle development; (g) assessment; and (h) research and program evaluation. Related to working with allies, there are four competencies (a) awareness; (b) knowledge; (c) supporting individuals who are coming out; and (d) facilitate supportive environments. The document also addresses working with intersex individuals, specifically definitions and common issues, a listing of conditions that might cause intersex, how common it is, considerations if a child is considered intersex, and then the issue of concealment versus client-centered models.

Similarities/Difference in Competence of Helping Professions

Within the fields of social work and counseling, each national organization formed task groups to create documents that articulate the organizations' stances on LGBT issues. Both documents contain statements of non-discrimination and support of actions that increase the well-being of LGBT individual. They also emphasize the need for educated membership and the need for formal advocacy efforts. Some notable differences also exist between the two documents. NASW focuses on systemic change (laws and discrimination policies), while ACA focuses on the mental and emotional health and well-being of LGBT clients. Finally, the ACA document contains content that the NASW does not, including the importance of understanding development specific to each population, how members can assist clients with work and career goals, how members can best assist clients in appraisal of presenting problem and other starting

relationship potential issues, and the need to be sensitive to research that might not be applicable to these populations.

Implications for Human Services

The authors have included a discussion of documents developed by the sister fields of social work and counseling to serve as a guide for the field of human services. The authors suggest using competencies already outlined by NOHS in the NOHS Generic Human Services Competencies (2015b) as a foundation for developing two stand-alone documents that outline specific competencies: one that would focus on working with LGB individuals and another that would focus on transgender individuals. The authors’ suggestions seek to capture key elements included in documents in use by the social work and counseling fields, which are supported by empirical research. (Burnes et al., 2010; Harper et al., 2013; NASW, 2015a; NASW; 2015b). The suggestions made in Table 1 and Table 2 also capture recommendations for best practices for working with LGB (Budge, Israel, & Merrill, 2017; Bhugra, 2016; Gedro, 2010; McNamara & Ng, 2016) and transgender individuals (Chang, Singh, Gonsiorek, & Dickey, 2016; Frohard-Dourlent, 2016; Garrett, 2018; Köllen, 2016; Riggs & Bartholomaeus, 2015) that are supported by the current research with these populations.

Table 1
Current Human Services Competencies and Suggestions for LGB Competencies

Generic Human Services Competencies	Suggestions for LGB Competencies
<p>Understanding the nature of human systems: individual, group, organization, community and society, and their major interactions. All workers will have the preparation which helps them to understand human development, group dynamics, organizational structure, how communities are organized, how national policy is set, and how social systems interact in producing human problems (para.15).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Include specific language highlighting the history of discrimination toward LGB individuals. ● Include specific language highlighting the importance of continued professional development as a way to gain knowledge of historical and current issues of discrimination and marginalization in the LGB community. ● Include specific language about the LGB communities and supports offered.
<p>Understanding the conditions which promote or limit optimal functioning and classes of deviations from the desired functioning in the major human systems. Workers will have an understanding of the major models of causation that are concerned with both the promotion of healthy functioning and with treatment-rehabilitation. This includes medically oriented, socially oriented,</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Include specific language highlighting the importance of human services practitioners’ awareness of the historical and systematic conditions that promote a limited optimal functioning. ● Include affirming language that emphasizes the importance of creating a SAFE space for LGB individuals.

<p>psychologically-behavioral oriented, and educationally oriented models (para.16).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Include specific language that highlights the need for advocacy by human services practitioners and organizations for LGB individuals.
<p>Skill in identifying and selecting interventions which promote growth and goal attainment. The worker will be able to conduct a competent problem analysis and to select those strategies, services or interventions that are appropriate for helping clients attain the desired outcome. Interventions may include assistance, referral, advocacy, or direct counseling (para.17).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Specific language should be included that highlights the importance of human services practitioners' awareness of community services, agencies, and resources tailored to LGB individuals. ● Specific language should be included highlighting the need for culturally sensitive interventions when working with LGB individuals. ● Specific language should be included highlighting the need for ongoing professional development related to LGB issues.
<p>Skill in planning, implementing and evaluating interventions. The worker will be able to design a plan of action for an identified problem and implement the plan in a systematic way. This requires an understanding of problems analysis, decision-analysis, and design of work plans. This generic skill can be used with all social systems and adapted for use with individual clients or organizations. Skill in evaluating the interventions is essential (para.18).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Specific language should be included emphasizing the importance of human services practitioners' awareness of effective service delivery models specific to working with LGB individuals. ● Specific language should be included emphasizing the importance of continued professional development. ● Include specific language highlighting the importance of measuring competencies for work with these populations based on current research.
<p>Consistent behavior in selecting interventions which are congruent with the values of one's self, clients, the employing organization and the Human Service profession. This cluster requires awareness of one's own value orientation, an understanding of organizational values as expressed in the mandate or goal statement of the organization, human service ethics, and an appreciation of the client's values, lifestyle and goals (para.19).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Specific language should be included highlighting the importance of human services researched focused on working with LGB individuals. ● Include specific language highlighting the importance of professional development. ● Include specific knowledge highlighting the importance of competent skill delivery. ● Include specific language emphasizing the importance of human services

	<p>agencies developing statements that are LGB affirming.</p>
<p>Process skills which are required to plan and implement services. This cluster is based on the assumption that the worker uses himself as the main tool for responding to service needs. The worker must be skillful in verbal and oral communication, interpersonal relationships and other related personal skills, such as self-discipline and time management. It requires that the worker be interested in and motivated to conduct the role that he has agreed to fulfill and to apply himself to all aspects of the work that the role requires (para.20).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Include specific language highlighting the importance of practitioners’ knowledge of the literature on LGB populations. ● Include specific language related to using appropriate language when working with LGB individuals. ● Include specific language that encourages self-reflection and checking biases.

Table 2
Current Human Services Competencies and Suggestions for Transgender Competencies

Generic Human Services Competencies	Suggestions for Transgender Competencies
<p>Understanding the nature of human systems: individual, group, organization, community and society, and their major interactions. All workers will have the preparation which helps them to understand human development, group dynamics, organizational structure, how communities are organized, how national policy is set, and how social systems interact in producing human problems (para.15).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Include specific language highlighting the importance of knowing the present cultural and systemic issues confronted by transgender individuals, particularly as it relates to the discourse regarding gender and sex. ● Include specific language highlighting the importance of familiarity with current research focused on transgender individuals. ● Include specific language highlighting the importance of measuring competencies for service delivery with these populations.
<p>Understanding the conditions which promote or limit optimal functioning and classes of deviations from the desired functioning in the major human systems. Workers will have an understanding of the major models of causation that are concerned with both the promotion of healthy functioning and with treatment-rehabilitation. This includes medically oriented, socially oriented,</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Detail the medical complications and hurdles experienced solely by transgender individuals. ● Emphasize the importance of using affirming language when working with transgender individuals. ● Include specific language that highlights the need for advocacy by human services practitioners and

<p>psychologically-behavioral oriented, and educationally oriented models (para.16).</p>	<p>organizations for transgender individuals.</p>
<p>Skill in identifying and selecting interventions which promote growth and goal attainment. The worker will be able to conduct a competent problem analysis and to select those strategies, services or interventions that are appropriate for helping clients attain the desired outcome. Interventions may include assistance, referral, advocacy, or direct counseling (para.17).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Specific language highlighting the importance of human services practitioners’ awareness of community services, agencies, and resources specific to transgender individuals. ● Specific language highlighting the need for culturally sensitive interventions when working with transgender individuals that have intersectional historically marginalized identities.
<p>Skill in planning, implementing and evaluating interventions. The worker will be able to design a plan of action for an identified problem and implement the plan in a systematic way. This requires an understanding of problems analysis, decision-analysis, and design of work plans. This generic skill can be used with all social systems and adapted for use with individual clients or organizations. Skill in evaluating the interventions is essential (para. 18).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Specific language emphasizing the importance of human services practitioners’ awareness of effective service delivery models specific to working with transgender individuals, including the obstacles that might be encountered that are specific for these populations. ● Specific language emphasizing the importance of continued professional development specific to working with transgender individuals, including research focused on these populations.
<p>Consistent behavior in selecting interventions which are congruent with the values of one's self, clients, the employing organization and the Human Service profession. This cluster requires awareness of one's own value orientation, an understanding of organizational values as expressed in the mandate or goal statement of the organization, human service ethics, and an appreciation of the client's values, lifestyle, and goals (para.19).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Include specific language highlighting the importance of continued professional development for working with transgender individuals. ● Include specific knowledge highlighting the importance of competent skill delivery with transgender individuals, along with unique possible struggles of intervention implementation. ● Include specific language emphasizing the importance of human services agencies developing statements that are transgender affirming.

<p>Process skills which are required to plan and implement services. This cluster is based on the assumption that the worker uses himself as the main tool for responding to service needs. The worker must be skillful in verbal and oral communication, interpersonal relationships and other related personal skills, such as self-discipline and time management. It requires that the worker be interested in and motivated to conduct the role that he has agreed to fulfill and to apply himself to all aspects of the work that the role requires (para.20).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Include specific language encouraging self-reflection and checking biases when working with transgender individuals. ● Unique skills needed in order to advocate for transgender clients, including within own organization if needed. ● Include specific language highlighting the importance of language when working with transgender individuals.
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Recommendations for Human Services

Currently, there are six competencies outlined in the NOHS Generic Human Services Competencies (2015b). These competencies delineate professionals’ responsibility to clients and the profession and highlight the importance of culturally competent human services practice; however, they are broad and general. Thus, an HSP working with LGBT individuals looking for guidance could lean on these competencies, but they lack the specific way NOHS would recommend work with LGBT individuals. Furthermore, this article has used the language LGBT as a possible means to classify sexual minorities, as these are the categories used by NASW and ACA. However, there is new research from Legate and Rogge (2019) that offers a data-driven classification system, which might better serve NOHS. Winfield et al. (2017) state that NOHS has been leading the profession in developing ethical guidelines. The authors recommend that leadership organizations in the field of human services should create a task force to develop competencies to be endorsed by the members and the organization.

Conclusion

The unique needs of LGB and transgender populations have not yet been adequately addressed by the human services field through the creation of a population-specific competency statement. Consequently, the field of human services is behind other helping professions in embracing a specific guideline that sets a standard for competent service delivery to LGB and transgender individuals. The commonalities found in social work and counseling documentation of service delivery to LGB and transgender individuals highlight the importance of stand-alone documents that include the following elements: professional development, need for advocacy, history of discrimination, and best practices for working with LGB and transgender individuals. It is the national organization’s responsibility to lead HSPs to competent service delivery, and the first step for these populations lies in the development of specific competencies that detail human services practices with LGB and transgender individuals.

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