Case Studies on Sexual Orientation and Gender Expression in Social Work Practice

Grace A. Telesco
Nova Southeastern University, gt243@nova.edu

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Grace A. Telesco PhD BCETS

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This case study workbook can be used to complement Messinger and Morrow’s text, *Sexual Orientation and Gender Expression in Social Work*
Practice: Working with Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender People. This ground-breaking educational supplement can be used in social work courses such as: Cultural Diversity, Human Behavior in the Social Environment I and II, Social Work Practice, and any upper level course at the undergraduate or graduate level.

Each chapter contains a case study with questions for discussion along with exercises that are clear, easy to follow, and are an excellent way to assess students' abilities to bridge the gap between social work theory and practice. The cases examine a variety of real life experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) clients and highlight the need to examine the implications of the many systems in which the client operates. This case study workbook can be used to introduce real life client stories into the classroom, and to provide students and instructors with graphic illustrations of social work practice with a unique client population. This methodology can foster discussion of complex concepts. Messinger and Morrow meet the objective of presenting authentic scenarios involving genuine people who are not the “assumed” heterosexual or gender-conforming client.

The workbook contains five segments: individuals, couples and families, groups, organizations and communities, and policy and research. Each case study addresses a wide range of issues such as coming out, living with HIV, lesbian and gay elders, youth homophobia, transphobia, addiction, and disability. A valuable feature of the workbook is a chapter index that outlines the title, author, and issue at a glance, affording instructors the opportunity to appropriately select specific cases that are relevant to the particular subject matter of the session.

Part One examines individual lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender clients and is formatted as either narrative or an actual case history. While the individual experience is the primary focus, each of the studies also examines the larger systems of family, work environment, social service agencies, religious institutions, legal systems, and communities as a whole. Sandy Miller's Competency, Religious Beliefs, and Homophobia is an example case found in Part One, and it is an examination of the client as well as the social worker and the unique issues confronting them both. After revealing to her social worker that she thinks she is a lesbian, the client is faced with two dilemmas: How does she handle questioning her identity and how does she handle her Southern Baptist social worker's response? The case illustrates the complexity facing both client and social worker in the face of strong belief systems and questions of identity, along with the role that social work plays in negotiating both. The questions at the end of the case ask students to explore the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics for social workers and the NASW policy statements regarding homosexuality.

Part Two explores the sociological context of the family system based in various beliefs, norms, cultures, religions, roles and expectations, and legal
statuses. Politicians and political scientists argue that gay marriage is part of a “culture war”, while social constructionists posit that “family and marriage” is a product of a patriarchal construct whose aim is to keep women subordinate and men in power. For gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and people of transgender experience, coupling and families present unique and challenging struggles. In addition to the alienation that individual LGBT clients face from religious groups, society, the legal system, and even the workplace, these individuals also face a disenfranchisement of the entitlement to “couple” and create and maintain a family system. Part Two examines several issues related to coupling and the family including adoption, health problems, and sexual and gender identity issues that challenge the strength of a couple’s relationship.

*From Lesbian Relationship to Trans/Lesbian Relationship* is a case study that explores the struggle between a lesbian couple who are facing the reality that one of them identifies and seeks to fully transition from a woman to a man. This complex and “real life” issue examines the many facets of a client’s identity. The sexuality and gender identity of both individuals are being questioned and the belief system and competency of the social worker challenged. The exercise at the end of the case further explores the difference between gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation.

Part Three examines the use of group work in social work practice with LGBT clients. The three case studies address homeless LGBT youth and LGBT community center support groups. Some of the discussion questions focus on facilitator skills and training. Part Four explores policy concepts and community organizing. Some of the issues raised in these case studies include written organizational policies regarding LGBT employees, and anti-discrimination policies that are in line with state and local governments. Central to this part of the issue is that social workers are agents of change and that social work practice is not exclusively or necessarily direct practice only. A mission of social work is social justice that includes the enfranchisement of LGBT people rather than pathologizing them. Part Five addresses the need for non-heterosexist and homophobic empirical research. Social workers can heed the call to contribute to the empirical literature and explore the LGBT population objectively and without bias.

The need to illustrate the pressing and complex issues of the LGBT population is critical to the education and practice of social work. Far too often social work texts “include” a chapter on diversity-yet are consistently inclined to be heterosexist and binary gender assuming. Messinger and Morrow bring the all too neglected subject to light that not all of “us” (client, student, social worker, instructor) are necessarily heterosexual, gender conforming, or allies of LGBT people.

The issue of cultural competence comes alive in this workbook as it encourages both the student as well as the educator to go deeper than the
heterosexist and genderconforming social constructs of society and the systems which operate within it. The discussion questions at the end of each case study provide both a micro as well as a macro lens for the student to examine the role of social work practice for LGBT clients and the call for a culturally competent response rather than mere “tolerance” or pathology.

What is particularly relevant to social work practice and social work education are the issues of internalized and institutionalized homophobia and internalized and institutionalized gender conformity and transphobia, all of which are raised in the questions for discussion and exercises.

The questions and exercises at the end of each case provide an excellent tool for measuring student comprehension and learning outcomes. Instructors can use the questions as assignments, quizzes, or in group discussions. The individual cases can also be used as structured improvisations or sociodrama exercises in class. Messinger and Morrow have included index cards at the back of the workbook that include a scenario and character background information for nine clients (characters) for use in a formalized structures improvisation. This can serve as a practicum at the end where up to ten students can be involved or a fish bowl activity can be developed.

Messinger and Morrow’s workbook is user friendly for both student and instructor including notations identifying the related chapters in the text as well as additional readings. This affords the student and instructor the opportunity to review theories and concepts presented by the authors of the text as well as other viewpoints.

The strengths of this workbook are the case studies and the clients themselves who are made real for the student. The instructor is afforded the opportunity to facilitate a learning process where theory meets practice. The format is clear, easy to follow, and examines a variety of real life LGBT client experiences, and highlights the need to examine the implications for the many systems that the clients operates in. The workbook also contains thought-provoking questions and experiential exercises that can be used for practical application of theoretical concepts.

The limitations of the workbook mirror the need for further research and empirical examination of the LGBT population, in particular that of the transgender population. What seemed to be lacking was more case examples of the experience of female to male transgender clients.

While male to female transgender people may be more visible to the social worker and society as a whole, the experience of the female to male transgender client may be glossed over and inaccurately assessed exclusively as a lesbian client rather than a person of transgender experience. Additionally, the DSM IV diagnosis of Gender Dysphoria was not clearly raised in contrast to the sociological notion of gender as a construct. This particular issue seemed to be a gap in the workbook.
Overall, the strengths of this workbook far outweigh its limitations, and it is a wonderful contribution to the social work education literature.

Grace A. Telesco, PhD, BCETS
School of Justice
Miami Dade College