



No more 'NEEDS': growing confidence and improving skills around sexuality in social work research, learning and practice

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Activity details

What we did

A national Special Interest Group called the *Sexuality Symposium* was established as a community of practice to enhance discourse and debate between practitioners, research, academics and students in social work. The *Sexuality Symposium* is a virtual and real support network aimed at providing mutual support, an increased knowledge base, growing confidence and enhancement of practice around sexuality.

Why we did it

Social work is familiar with concepts such as social exclusion, marginalisation, anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice which imply that social workers are adequately prepared to embrace equality and diversity; become 'culturally competent' and subscribe to moral and ethical standards which include the rights of service users to respect and support regardless of their sexual orientation.

However, research continues to document that sexual orientation issues are still mismanaged, marginalized or excluded in social work practice and education programmes. For example:

- In education - personal experiences of students *and* educators revealed that the emotional impact of heterosexism in the learning environment can inhibit or damage successful learning for all concerned.

In practice - technicist approaches to assessment and service provision have emerged which seek to develop an understanding of particular 'needs' of non hetero-sexual people. This cultural approach and its underlying assumptions have been criticised.

What we wanted to achieve

To begin to extend and strengthening the knowledge base by:

- Providing a friendly and safe forum for discussion and dissemination of ideas
- Sharing and developing best practice examples
- Supporting and sustaining each others' interests and endeavours
- Contributing to and collaborating on practice innovations and projects
- Contributing to and collaborating on research projects and publications.

A short description of what I did

We began by speaking to and e-mailing friends and colleagues who we knew might be interested in developing a network. We welcomed social work and allied academics, researchers, practitioners, students and service users with interests in sexuality issues, created a database of members and called ourselves the

Sexuality Symposium.

We planned to:

- Share the database of contacts
- Engage in regular postings to each other to share information, news and ideas
- Contribute to each others 'reading lists', with recommended favourite(s) & No more 'NEEDS': growing confidence and improving skills around sexuality in social work research, learning and practice accompanying reviews
- Host regular meetings, seminars and conferences
- Bid for and undertake research projects
- Collaborate in writing and publishing.

Achievements

1. Symposium began in June 2004
2. First meeting in July 2005 (JSWE conference, Loughborough University) with 20+ members
3. First conference (hosted by ATSWE) in York in March 2006
4. Second meeting in July 2006 (JSWEC conference, Cambridge University) with 40+ members
5. Short series of articles in *Community Care* magazine
6. Second conference at London South Bank University in October 2006 with 50+ members
7. First 'overseas' member (New Zealand)
8. Research workshop in York in May 2007
9. Third annual meeting in July 2007 (JSWEC conference, Swansea University)
10. Further publications by members
11. Third conference at Salford University in October 2007
12. Application to ESRC for '*Seminar Series*'
13. Special issue of *Social Work Education* journal in February 2008

What worked well

The establishment of a forum was very successful and continues to be a 'place' to plan regular events, develop ideas and collaborate on research projects and publications.

Problems and/or issues

- No funding
- No website
- We are unable to fully include members who cannot get funding to attend events and meetings.

What students thought about it

Students have attended our conferences and feedback has been excellent. Where they have been able to form local groups, the Symposium has also provided useful information and direction for students in their own local settings. However, we are not able to fully support students without funding and other resources. Students have also used the network for taking forward their research projects.

Key messages

- Sexuality continues to be overlooked or poorly-managed in social work
- Technician approaches to assessment and service provision and cultural and empowerment models in education (which identify particular 'needs' of 'minority' populations and focus on non hetero-sexual people) need to be challenged
- *Communities of practice* are easy to establish
- The Sexuality Symposium has achieved a great deal in a short time
- Members have grown in confidence and improved their skills around sexuality in research, learning and practice.

Related documents or links

Link to information about our special issue of *Social Work Education* journal:

<http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/spissue/cswe.pdf>

The web links below provide a number of media resources on issues around lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people:

http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Managingyourorganisation/Equalityandhumanrights/Sexualorientationandgenderidentity/DH_065333

http://www.csci.org.uk/about_us/news/lgbt_conference/watch_our_lgbt_conference_welc.aspx

<http://www.nooutsiders.sunderland.ac.uk/>

<http://www.pacehealth.org.uk/>

<http://www.womenandequalityunit.gov.uk/lgbt/orientation.htm>

<http://www.naz.org.uk/index.html>

<http://www.stonewall.org.uk/>

<http://www.tht.org.uk/>

<http://www.al-bab.com/arab/background/gay.htm>

Any other comments

Forthcoming events

- Special issue of *Practice* journal (2009)
- Fourth annual meeting in July 2008 (JSWEC conference, Cambridge University)
- Fourth conference at Middlesex University in December 2008

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