

*Creating Inclusive Curriculum: Incorporating LGBTQ+ Perspectives and Concepts in Counselor Education Courses*

Cory Gerwe, Eastern Virginia Medical School, United States

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**Abstract**

This conceptual framework examines the critical importance of incorporating LGBTQ+ perspectives and concepts into counselor education courses to foster inclusivity, cultural competence, and social justice among future mental health professionals. The authors provide an in-depth exploration of the societal context surrounding LGBTQ+ individuals, highlight the challenges they face in seeking mental health support, and emphasize the pivotal role of counselors in providing affirming care. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks, practical strategies, and counselor education experiences, this study presents a compelling argument for the urgent need to actively incorporate LGBTQ+ perspectives and concepts into counselor education curricula. Additionally, the framework explores two case studies showcasing the positive outcomes of implementing inclusive curriculum, further emphasizing the transformative potential of such an approach within the counseling profession.

Keywords: Inclusivity, LGBTQ+, Counselor Education

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## **Introduction**

In the field of counseling, the creation of inclusive curricula that addresses the unique needs and challenges faced by diverse populations is of paramount importance (Gess & Doughty Horn, 2018). Among these populations, individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ+) have historically faced significant barriers to accessing competent and affirming mental health care. Therefore, it is essential for counselor educators to proactively incorporate LGBTQ+ perspectives and concepts into counselor education courses, equipping future mental health professionals with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to provide culturally sensitive and inclusive counseling services.

This study delves into the historical and societal context surrounding LGBTQ+ individuals, shedding light on the pervasive impact of heteronormativity, stigma, and discrimination on their mental health and well-being. Drawing from literature and research, this conceptual framework highlights the critical role of counselors in challenging these systemic barriers and offering affirming care to LGBTQ+ clients (Bettermarcia, Matsuno, & Conover, 2021). Case studies will also be used to demonstrate the transformative impact of incorporating LGBTQ+ perspectives and concepts into counselor education. Additionally, practical strategies for integrating LGBTQ+ content into counselor education courses will be explored. These strategies include the development of LGBTQ+-inclusive syllabi, the use of case studies and role plays that address LGBTQ+ issues, and engaging students in critical discussions and self-reflection. The study also discusses potential challenges and resistance that may arise when incorporating LGBTQ+ content and suggests approaches to address these challenges, such as faculty development, fostering open dialogue, and addressing misconceptions and biases.

## **Literature Review**

A wealth of literature emphasizes the vital role that counselors play in confronting and dismantling systemic barriers that hinder the well-being and mental health of LGBTQ+ clients (Abreu, et al., 2022 ; Agramovich, & Scott, 2020; Parker-Barnes, McKillip, & Powell, 2022). The literature consistently demonstrates that LGBTQ+ individuals face unique challenges related to their sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression, which can lead to increased rates of mental health disparities, discrimination, and social marginalization. These systemic barriers manifest in various domains, such as healthcare, education, employment, and legal systems, creating an urgent need for counselors to provide affirmative care.

### ***Minority Stress Model***

The Minority Stress Model provides a valuable framework for understanding the impact of societal discrimination on the LGBTQ+ community (Meyer, 2015). This model highlights the unique stressors experienced by sexual and gender minority individuals as a result of their marginalized status within society. Numerous studies have consistently documented the detrimental effects of societal discrimination on the mental health of LGBTQ+ individuals (Addis et al., 2009; Et al.; McDonald, 2018). The constant exposure to prejudice, stigma, and microaggressions can lead to increased levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation. The Minority Stress Model posits that these mental health disparities arise from the chronic stressors experienced by LGBTQ+ individuals due to their marginalized status, including the concealment of their sexual orientation or gender identity, fear of rejection or violence, and internalized homophobia or transphobia (Meyer, 2015).

Discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community also significantly impacts social support networks and identity formation (Hinton, et al., 2022). LGBTQ+ individuals often face challenges in finding acceptance within their families, communities, and workplace environments, which can lead to feelings of isolation and rejection (Newcomb et al., 2019). The Minority Stress Model emphasizes that a lack of social support can exacerbate the negative effects of discrimination, amplifying stress levels and further impairing mental well-being (Meyer, 2015). Conversely, the presence of strong support systems, such as LGBTQ+-affirming networks, can act as a protective factor against the harmful consequences of societal discrimination (Meyer, 2015).

Beyond mental health, the Minority Stress Model also underscores the influence of societal discrimination on the physical health of LGBTQ+ individuals (Meyer, 2015; Romanelli, & Hudson, 2017). Research has revealed higher rates of substance abuse, smoking, and alcohol consumption among sexual and gender minority individuals, often as a coping mechanism to deal with the stressors resulting from discrimination (Valdiserri et al., 2019). Additionally, LGBTQ+ individuals are more likely to face barriers to healthcare access, including discriminatory practices, lack of culturally competent care, and provider bias, leading to disparities in physical health outcomes (Nadal et al., 2016). These findings consistently highlight the adverse effects on mental health, social support, and physical well-being among sexual and gender minority individuals. Understanding these experiences is crucial for developing interventions and policies that promote equality, inclusivity, and support for the LGBTQ+ community.

### ***Counselors Role***

In recent years, there has been a growing body of research exploring the impact of counselors who actively challenge systemic barriers and provide affirming care for LGBTQ+ clients. These studies consistently highlight the significance of creating safe and inclusive spaces where individuals from the LGBTQ+ community can feel supported and understood. For instance, Israel et al. (2008) conducted a study examining the experiences of LGBTQ+ clients in counseling settings. The findings revealed that clients who perceived their counselors as actively addressing systemic barriers reported higher levels of comfort and trust in the therapeutic relationship. This underscores the importance of counselors' willingness to acknowledge and challenge systemic barriers, such as heteronormativity and cisnormativity, which can marginalize and invalidate LGBTQ+ clients' experiences.

Additionally, research has shown that affirming care from counselors plays a vital role in fostering a sense of safety and inclusivity for LGBTQ+ individuals seeking therapy. A study by McCullough et al. (2017), investigated the impact of affirming counseling practices on the psychological well-being of transgender and gender-nonconforming clients. The results indicated that clients who received affirming care reported lower levels of psychological distress and higher levels of self-acceptance. These findings suggest that when counselors actively affirm clients' diverse gender identities and expressions, it can contribute significantly to their overall therapeutic experience. By offering non-judgmental support and understanding, counselors create an environment where LGBTQ+ clients can explore their identities and concerns without fear of stigma or discrimination. Literature consistently demonstrates the crucial role that counselors play in challenging systemic barriers and providing affirming care, ultimately leading to safer and more inclusive spaces for LGBTQ+ clients in therapy (Astramovich, & Scott, 2020; O'Shaughnessy, & Speir, 2018; Troutman, & Packer-Williams, 2014).

Affirmative care involves recognizing and validating the diverse identities and experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals, understanding the impact of social and cultural factors on their well-being, and actively advocating for their rights and access to resources. By utilizing evidence-based practices, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, family systems therapy, and trauma-informed approaches, counselors can address the specific mental health needs of LGBTQ+ clients and facilitate their personal growth and resilience.

### ***Inclusivity in Counselor Education***

Recognizing the importance of fostering culturally competent counselors who can provide affirming and inclusive care to diverse clients, scholars and practitioners have emphasized the need for counselor education programs to address the specific needs and experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals (Pieterse et al., 2009). Several studies have highlighted the positive impact of integrating LGBTQ+ perspectives into counselor education courses, such as increased knowledge, awareness, and sensitivity among trainees, enhanced therapeutic skills, and the development of a more inclusive professional identity (Bidell, Markus, 2013; Rivers & Swank, 2017; Rutter et al., 2008). These findings underscore the value of preparing future counselors to work effectively with LGBTQ+ clients and advocate for their rights and well-being.

Despite the growing recognition of the importance of LGBTQ+ inclusivity in counselor education, various challenges persist in the implementation of such curricula. Research indicates that resistance from faculty, societal stigmas, and a lack of standardized guidelines pose significant barriers to the integration of LGBTQ+ perspectives in counselor education courses (Gess, & Doughty Horn, 2018; Moe, et al., 2021; Rivers, & Swank, 2017). Faculty resistance may stem from personal biases, discomfort, or a lack of familiarity with LGBTQ+ issues, leading to a reluctance to engage with or incorporate relevant content into their teaching. A lack of cultural competency among counselor educators was identified by multiple researchers as one of the obstacles to enhancing LGBTQ+ counselor competency (Bidell, 2013; Farmer, 2017; Gess & Horn, 2018). In correlation, societal stigmas often stem from long-held biases and misconceptions about LGBTQ+ individuals, making it challenging for counselor education courses to address these perspectives effectively (Hansbury & Bennett, 2013). Overcoming these stigmas requires a concerted effort to foster inclusivity and understanding within educational institutions and society at large (Carvalho, & Guiomar, 2022). This is especially true for the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Relational Educational Programs (CACREP). the absence of standardized CACREP (2016) guidelines and competencies for LGBTQ+ inclusion in counselor education curricula creates inconsistencies across programs and undermines the systematic implementation of LGBTQ+ content (Minton, Morris, & Bruner, 2018). While there have been updated competences from ACA's LGBTQ+ division, SAIGE (ALGBTIC, 2009), it continues to be left to each training program whether or not to acknowledge LGBTQ+ clients as part of the terms "diverse populations" or "multicultural groups" used by CACREP (2016). This leads programs to omit or have an ambiguous stance in preparing students to work with the LGBTQ+ population. As a result, counselor educators face the challenge of navigating these barriers and finding effective strategies to overcome them, ensuring that LGBTQ+ perspectives are adequately integrated into counselor education courses.

## **Considerations for Educators**

The research presented so far in this conceptual framework provides a comprehensive examination of the broader societal context surrounding the minority stress model, the counselor's role in providing LGBTQ+ affirming care, and inclusivity in counselor education. This next section will delve into the significance of integrating LGBTQ+ perspectives and concepts into counselor education courses, with the aim of cultivating inclusivity, cultural competence, and social justice among future mental health professionals. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks, practical strategies, and real-life counselor education experiences, the case studies will provide context on the pressing need to actively incorporate LGBTQ+ perspectives and concepts into counselor education curricula. Furthermore, this framework will delve into strategies for inclusivity in counselor education. By exploring these considerations, educators can better equip themselves to foster a more inclusive and compassionate learning environment that prepares future mental health professionals to be effective advocates for LGBTQ+ individuals.

### ***Case Studies***

Incorporating LGBTQ+ perspectives and concepts into counselor education courses is a crucial yet challenging endeavor that requires intentionality and cultural awareness. The following two scenarios demonstrate specific instances of including LGBTQ+ affirming concepts into counselor education courses. These scenarios focus on a counseling theories course and a diagnosis course. It is important to note that the names, demographics, and situations presented are amalgamations of education experiences and do not correspond to specific individuals. While these scenarios are related to counselor education, this framework can be transferred to any educational profession.

This case study explores the impact of implementing an inclusive curriculum in a counseling theories course. Specific focus will be on students' awareness of the unique concerns faced by LGBTQ+ individuals, as well as the curriculum's influence on their confidence and competence in providing affirming care. The aim was to create an educational environment that fosters cultural sensitivity, empathy, and competence as it pertains to theoretical understanding and implementation.

This counseling theories course historically utilized a curriculum which primarily focused on traditional theories and approaches, neglecting to adequately address the specific needs and concerns of LGBTQ+ individuals. Recognizing this limitation, Dr. Smith sought to implement a more inclusive and comprehensive curriculum that encompassed a range of diverse populations, with a particular emphasis on LGBTQ+ issues. To introduce an inclusive curriculum, Dr. Smith revised the syllabus to incorporate additional content related to LGBTQ+ concerns within each relevant counseling theory. The topics included understanding sexual orientation and gender identity, challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals, affirmative therapy approaches, and ethical considerations in working with this population. The instructor also invited guest speakers from local LGBTQ+ organizations to share their personal experiences and provide real-world perspectives on how to integrate affirming practices into their theory.

In addition to the theoretical aspects, the curriculum incorporated experiential learning activities. These activities included case studies, role-playing exercises, and group discussions focused on scenarios that highlighted experiences from LGBTQ+ and other marginalized

populations. For example, the class engaged in a round robin activity that allowed the students to take turns in providing Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) to a mock transgender client. The client's presenting issue was distress from family's rejection based on the mock client's gender identity and the client's inability to regulate corresponding emotions. The specific event highlighted an argument that happened during a thanksgiving meal which led to shouting, crying, and intense emotionality. The aim was to encourage students to apply their knowledge, explore their biases, and develop skills in providing affirming care to LGBTQ+ clients through specific theories. In post course surveys, students reported an increased awareness, competence, and increased confidence in the integration of Counseling theories and of LGBT+ affirming concepts as a result of the inclusive curriculum.

In a counseling course focused on diagnosis, Professor Anderson recognized the need to broaden the curriculum to include diverse perspectives. The course primarily covered mental health disorders, but lacked a comprehensive exploration of the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals. Professor Anderson believed that incorporating LGBTQ+ case studies would not only promote inclusivity but also enhance students' understanding of intersectionality and the complex dynamics affecting LGBTQ+ mental health. To that end, Professor Anderson presented a case study on James who identifies as gay and experiences symptoms of an anxiety disorder. He is a 25-year-old gay recently came out to his conservative family and is also questioning his gender identity. James reports that religion has been a bit part of his life since he was a kid and contradicts his newly discovered identity, thereby creating internal distress. He experienced anxiety symptoms, including constant worry, restlessness, and difficulty sleeping. The case study explored the various factors that contribute to James's anxiety, including societal homophobia and transphobia, fear of rejection, and internalized shame.

During the class session, Professor Anderson presented the case study to students, encouraging them to analyze James's experiences through an intersectional lens. The discussion revolved around how societal stigma and discrimination can exacerbate anxiety symptoms in LGBTQ+ individuals. James's identity complicated the diagnosis of Generalized anxiety disorder but provided a good example of how to consider cultural context when rendering a diagnosis. The class also explored the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in terms of acceptance, coming out, and finding support networks. Students were prompted to consider the impacts of societal norms, family dynamics, and cultural backgrounds on LGBTQ+ mental health. Student surveys suggested that students felt more confident about incorporating LGBTQ+ identity in the diagnosis process as a result of the inclusive curriculum.

### ***Strategies for LGBTQ+ Inclusivity***

Creating LGBTQ+-inclusive syllabi, incorporating case studies and role plays that address LGBTQ+ issues, and facilitating critical discussions and self-reflection are essential strategies to promote LGBTQ+ inclusivity and awareness in educational settings. First, developing LGBTQ+-inclusive syllabi involves integrating readings, resources, and discussions that explore LGBTQ+ history, literature, and social issues. This approach ensures that LGBTQ+ voices and experiences are represented and validated, promoting a more inclusive learning environment. Moreover, educators can invite guest speakers from the LGBTQ+ community to share their personal experiences and insights, fostering a deeper understanding of the challenges and perspectives faced by LGBTQ+ individuals. Secondly, using case studies and role plays that address LGBTQ+ issues, allows students to engage with real-life scenarios and challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals. Incorporating inclusivity in this way helps to

challenge stereotypes and misconceptions about the community, fostering a more nuanced and informed perspective. It also empowers students to critically analyze societal norms and structures, encouraging them to actively contribute to dismantling barriers faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in their future personal and professional endeavors. Consequently, students are equipped with problem-solving skills that are culturally alert and context-specific. Lastly, engaging students in critical discussions and self-reflection provides an opportunity for them to examine their own beliefs, biases, and prejudices. These discussions foster an open and respectful dialogue where students can share their perspectives, challenge stereotypes, and learn from diverse viewpoints while evaluating their own attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, creating a safe and non-judgmental space for LGBTQ+ affirming discussions allows students to build meaningful connections with their peers, promoting empathy and solidarity among classmates. It also empowers LGBTQ+ students by validating their experiences and perspectives, boosting their self-esteem and sense of belonging within the academic community. By immersing students in these experiences, they can gain insight into the complexities of LGBTQ+ lives and become advocates for equality and social justice.

## **Conclusion**

Incorporating LGBTQ+ content in educational settings may encounter potential challenges and resistance due to various factors such as cultural norms, personal beliefs, and misconceptions. One of the main challenges is the existence of bias and prejudice against LGBTQ+ individuals, which can lead to resistance from some students or faculty members who may hold discriminatory views. This resistance can manifest in the form of objections to including LGBTQ+ content in curriculum or reluctance to engage in open discussions on the topic.

To address these challenges, it is crucial to invest in faculty development programs that promote inclusivity, cultural competency, and awareness of LGBTQ+ issues. Providing resources, workshops, and training sessions can help educators gain a better understanding of LGBTQ+ identities, history, and experiences. Additionally, fostering open dialogue within the academic community can create a safe space for students, staff, and parents to express their concerns, ask questions, and share their perspectives. This can be achieved through forums, panel discussions, or guest speakers who can offer different viewpoints and experiences related to LGBTQ+ topics.

Another essential approach is addressing misconceptions and biases head-on. Educators can proactively address common myths or stereotypes surrounding LGBTQ+ individuals and provide accurate information to dispel misconceptions. This can be done through classroom discussions, guest presentations, or the inclusion of LGBTQ+ narratives in relevant subjects such as history, literature, or social studies. Additionally, implementing an inclusive curriculum should begin at CACREP (2016) standards. Specifically, CACREP should push to acknowledge LGBTQ+ clients as part of the terms “diverse populations” as referenced in their 2016 standards (CACREP, 2016). Doing this would create the necessary momentum for individual programs to prioritize inclusive curriculum that is specific, intentional, and impactful. Overall, addressing challenges and resistance when incorporating LGBTQ+ content requires a multifaceted approach that involves faculty development, fostering open dialogue, and actively combating misconceptions and biases. By promoting inclusivity and providing accurate information, institutions can create an environment that celebrates diversity in counselor education and supports the well-being of LGBTQ+ clients.

In conclusion, the urgency and ethical responsibility lie with counselor educators to actively incorporate LGBTQ+ perspectives and concepts into counselor education curricula. This conceptual framework highlights the transformative potential of inclusive curriculum in fostering cultural competence, enhancing therapeutic relationships, and ultimately improving mental health outcomes for LGBTQ+ clients. By embracing this imperative, counselor educators can play a vital role in advancing inclusivity and social justice within the counseling profession.



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