

Conservative  
Christian Beliefs  
AND Sexual  
Orientation  
IN Social Work

*Privilege, Oppression, and the Pursuit of Human Rights*

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EDITORS



*Alexandria, Virginia*

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# Introduction

This edited volume seeks to explore the different facets of the debate in social work regarding freedom of expression of conservative Christian religious beliefs and full sexual orientation affirmation, to provide a deeper understanding of topics such as social identity oppression, power and privilege, human rights and social justice, attitudes and prejudice, ethics, policy, and the law. We frame the book around human rights because we believe that gay rights, gay marriage, and related popular terms are less about being lesbian, gay, or bisexual and more about human rights for people who happen to love, be attracted to, and share their lives with others who share their same sexual identity (Chan, 2010; Dworkin & Yi, 2003; Ellis, Kitzinger, & Wilkinson, 2002; Graupner & Tahmindjis, 2005; Swigonski, Mama, & Ward, 2001). It is notable that this framing of oppression of LGB people as a human rights issue is found more often in examinations of international populations than of U.S. communities (Chan, 2010; Fish & Bewley, 2010; Formby, 2011; Graupner & Tahmindjis, 2005; Murrey, 2006). However, President Obama has recently and clearly outlined the inalienable rights of LGBT people (U.S. Department of State, 2011).

The book offers insight into the struggles within some conservative Christian communities around the tensions between certain belief systems and same-sex sexuality. Across a wide range of methodological and theoretical approaches, the authors of these chapters offer opportunities to learn more about the experiences of social work students, social work practitioners, and social work faculty as they engage with the struggles around these issues. Furthermore, this book addresses

a significant gap in the literature by discussing multiple ways of addressing and potentially resolving some of the conflicts between the beliefs of some conservative Christian social workers and LGB social workers at both individual and institutional levels. The third section in the book, "Transformation," is a critical contribution that offers theological and practice examples for conservative Christian social workers who hold beliefs with regard to sexual minority people that are in possible conflict with social work values. We also recognize that social workers holding certain liberal values may experience similar dissonance in working with conservative Christian clients, although we do not address that dissonance in this book. Intergroup dialogue, ethical and legal analyses, and a sociodrama approach offer other resources for social work faculty and practitioners. Authors of this edited volume, including Christian and LGB-identified authors, have been brought together to offer a wide range of perspectives as well as theoretical, empirical, and practice-based knowledge related to this conflict. Different terms and definitions are used across chapters as authors have described or defined the terminology they think is relevant for their work.

The book is organized in four sections, each with a unique theme: Section I, "Understanding Conservative Christian Experiences, Perspectives, and Actions"; Section II, "Biblical, Methodological, Legal, and Ethical Analyses"; Section III, "Transformation"; and Section IV "Interventions and Approaches to Resolving the Tensions."

The first section, "Understanding Conservative Christian Experiences, Perspectives, and Actions," includes empirical and policy chapters that examine Christian doctrine, the experiences and attitudes of Christian social work students, and LGB college students from conservative Christian families. Denise Levy reviews a wide range of Christian denominations and their doctrines related to sexual orientation, providing an overview of the policies and an analysis of the intersections with racial identity. A comparative table of 19 denominations outlines views of same-sex sexuality, status of lesbian and gay clergy and same-sex ceremonies, and views on inclusion of sexual orientation in hate crime laws. Then, Jill Chonody, Michael Woodford, Scott Smith, and Perry Silverschanz explore the role of Christian religious teachings about lesbians and gay men in some Christian social work students' antigay bias.



Eric Swank and Breanne Fahs continue the examination of the influence of religiosity, this time on the likelihood of gay and lesbian rights activism of BSW social work students. They examine the role of three variables—religious attendance, biblical literalism, and support of the Christian Coalition—on LGB activism in these students. (In the third section, “Transformation,” we return to the discussion of LGB advocacy by conservative Christian social workers in a chapter by Drumm and colleagues.)

N. Eugene Walls and Kristie Seelman examine cultural incongruence, that is, conflict with the perceived values of social work and a graduate social work program’s culture, between evangelical Christian first-year MSW students and other Christian and non-Christian first-year MSW students. Their study extends the examination of the role of religiosity by looking at social dominance orientation, right-wing authoritarianism, attitudes toward lesbians and gay men, and modern heterosexism as potential mediators of the relationship between conservative Christian identity and cultural incongruence.

In the next two chapters Warren J. Blumenfeld and Elliott DeVore first develop a literature review on lesbian and gay youth experiences in conservative Christian families. Then they report on a corresponding in-depth qualitative study of five college and graduate students who now identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual and who grew up in conservative Christian families. They describe themes that emerged, and from this analysis we learn more about the struggles and coping mechanisms of these young adults.

These six chapters offer an in-depth understanding of the range of perspectives within Christian denominations with regard to same-sex orientation. The authors provide recommendations for social work educators and community practitioners, and the chapters are a rich resource for faculty who seek to support students in becoming competent social workers.

The next section of the book contains four chapters on “Biblical, Methodological, Legal, and Ethical Analyses” with regard to religion and sexual orientation. Adrienne Dessel, Christine Shephardson, and Rebecca Bolen critique claims that the profession of social work oppresses conservative Christian people. This is done using a theological analysis of biblical scriptures, religious freedom of expression, and social work ethics. Social work and

human rights principles are discussed as a guide for negotiating these issues in the social work educational environment.

Next, Rebecca Bolen and Adrienne Dessel report on a methodological analysis of studies that analyze differences between social workers and the general public and claims that social work discriminates against conservative Christians. External, internal, construct, and statistical validity of these studies are reviewed.

Jay Kaplan describes recent federal litigation involving, among others, Christian graduate social work students who requested exemptions from school nondiscrimination policies protecting LGBT people, and a Christian family who sued a public school system when a teacher discussed LGBT bullying. These unprecedented attempts to carve out religious exceptions to nondiscrimination policies for nonreligious activity have been faced with sustained safeguards from the federal courts applying First Amendment principles.

Frederic Reamer then provides an analysis of the ethical issues, challenges, and moral dilemmas faced by social work faculty with regard to conservative Christian students. He discusses dilemmas of prohibiting discrimination against LGB people and respecting conservative Christian students' free speech and religious beliefs regarding same-sex sexuality within the arenas of admissions, classrooms, and field placements.

These chapters tie together challenges that arise for future practitioners, educators, and researchers with regard to social policy and research methods in the areas of conservative religiosity and sexual minority populations. In some ways Reamer's chapter is the true beginning of the next section, "Transformation," because it provides social workers, and especially social work educators, with guidelines for approaching the tension from the perspective of social work ethics and values, whereas the next section approaches this conflict from the perspective of Christian identity.

The third section of the book illustrates the potential for transformation of some conservative Christian social workers who may move from more polarized views of LGB people toward greater affirmation of LGB people while still retaining their strong Christian identities. This critical section offers role models, guides, and pathways to LGB human rights affirmation. Tanya Brice

asks and answers the question of whether homophobia is a Christian value. In this chapter she outlines the biblical scriptures used to justify homophobia and discrimination, the process by which some Christians attend to certain biblical passages and not others, and where biblical mandates align with social work values.

Allison Tan takes this idea further in her empirical study of 127 Christian practitioners regarding their attitudes toward and practice behaviors with LGBT clients. She does so for the purpose of providing a practitioner-focused response to the question of how this type of practice can be done effectively and compassionately.

René Drumm, Kristie Wilder, Evie Nogales Baker, Lauren Souza, Zaire Burgess-Robinson, and Jennifer Adams extend the transformation into the arena of LGBT advocacy. Their qualitative study of 21 social work practitioners, administrators, and educators who self-identify as Christian LGBT advocates seeks to understand the paths these professionals took in understanding sexual orientation, their advocacy role within the faith community, and the barriers for furthering the dialogue among the Christian community and LGBT people.

All of these role models offer a critically important analysis as they integrate sexual orientation knowledge, theological understanding, and social justice action. Across all three of these chapters, the authors tackle difficult questions surrounding the understanding of oppression and affirmation, and they provide direction for social work professionals who struggle with these questions.

The last section, “Interventions and Approaches to Resolving the Tensions,” includes chapters that discuss interventions aimed at reducing or resolving this tension in social work. Adrienne Dessel provides an overview of intergroup dialogue pedagogy and practice as an important method to bridge the divide between people who hold certain conservative Christian beliefs and LGB individuals. This chapter highlights the large and growing community of intergroup dialogue researchers and practitioners in the field of social work.

In a later chapter, Dessel, Michael Woodford, robbie routenberg, and Duane Breijak describe a qualitative study of the experiences of 54 hetero-

sexual undergraduate students in a sexual orientation intergroup dialogue course. Religious identity was recognized as salient for some and as an area of conflict in the course, and the results have implications for practitioners who seek to bridge the religion–sexual orientation divide.

Joseph R. Miles, Christy Henrichs-Beck, and Jon R. Bourn describe a mixed-methods analysis of 32 students and facilitators in an intergroup dialogue undergraduate counseling psychology course at a large public southeastern university with a strong conservative Christian culture. Topics included in the course were sexual orientation and religion.

N. Eugene Walls and Julie Todd present a qualitative study of an innovative and important graduate social work course, “Disrupting Privilege Through Anti-Oppressive Practice,” which supports students in examining Christian privilege. Through an analysis of weekly blogs for 13 graduate students, the authors describe the themes that emerged and offer insights into how Christian privilege intersects with other forms of privilege to maintain systems of oppression.

Finally, Patti Aldredge used sociodrama and dialogue in a novel social work course designed specifically to address significant conflict between conservative Christian and LGB social work students. This powerful case study describes how the students engaged and joined with each other over concerns about biased curriculum, negative classroom interactions, and dissonance between personal and professional values.

All chapters have in common the purposeful attempt to understand and move beyond the tension in social work between certain conservative Christian beliefs and same-sex sexuality. These chapters do so by reviewing doctrines regarding same-sex sexuality across multiple Christian denominations, illustrating the views of social work students in regard to this tension, the lived experiences of LGB people growing up in conservative Christian environments, and addressing theoretical, methodological, legal, policy, and ethical issues. These chapters also provide methods that can be used in classrooms and that speak to growth and transformation processes available to those social workers holding conservative Christian belief systems regarding LGB individuals. A highlight of the book is the group of chapters by Brice, Tan, and Drumm and colleagues

that explore how to move from identifying as a conservative Christian social worker with an anti-LGB bias to one who retains a deeply rooted Christian identity while also avowing the human rights and dignity of LGB people. For some, this transformation includes the capacity to advocate for LGB people.

We offer this book not to further antagonize or incite this tension but to ameliorate the passions elicited by it, not to sever relationships but to bind them together, not to recriminate but to reconcile, and not to find fault but to find hope. We offer this book not with the desire to hurt but to heal. We hope this book finds a place in this process for all those caught in the vexing conflict between certain conservative Christian beliefs and basic human rights for those celebrating their love through same-sex sexuality. Very little has been written about this highly sensitive and controversial topic within social work, and we hope this book is just the beginning of an exploration and extended conversation on these important issues for our field.

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