The Nexus of Ecological Factors and Psychological Distress Among Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Homeless Youth

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Abstract

Research focusing on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) homeless youth has only recently emerged in the scientific literature and documents the serious psychosocial problems many of these youth face (Institute of Medicine, 2011). Not only are LGBTQ homeless youth overrepresented among all homeless young people, they are also disproportionately ethnic/racial minorities. The purpose of this article is to summarize findings from the first research study (Bidell, in-press) that explores the educational experiences of these youth as well as contextualizes the systemic relationships between school, home, and educational experiences of LGBTQ homeless youth.

Keywords: LGBT homeless youth, education, psychological distress, home/school climate

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Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning (LGBTQ) youth are at risk of becoming homeless and make up a disproportionate share of all homeless youth. Estimates of between 22 to 40 percent of all homeless youth identify as LGBTQ (Cochran, Stewart, Ginzler, & Cauce, 2002; Institute of Medicine [IOM], 2011; Ray, 2006). LGBTQ homeless youth are at higher risk for discrimination, physical and sexual abuse, HIV infection, risky sexual behaviors, depression, suicidal attempts, and substance abuse (Clatts, Goldsamt, Yi, & Gwadz, 2005; Cochran et al., 2002; IOM, 2011; Mustanski, Garofalo, & Emerson, 2010; Tyler, 2008; Van Leeuwen et al., 2006; Whitbeck, Chen, Hoyt, Tyler, & Johnson 2004). The issues negatively impacting homeless LGBTQ youth are in addition to the already elevated levels of serious psychosocial and educational issues impacting sexual orientation and gender identity minority youth regardless of housing status (IOM, 2011; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). Moreover, LGBTQ racial/ethnic minority youth make up a disproportionate number of youth on the street (Bidell, in-press; Fournier et al., 2009; Ray, 2006), thus they contend with multiple aspects of being marginalized (i.e., LGBTQ identity, ethnic/racial minority status, and homelessness).

Both home and school are central environments for youth, critical for healthy growth and development. Unfortunately, these are often places where LGBTQ homeless and non-homeless young people experience harassment, prejudice, and abuse. Like heterosexual youth, LGBTQ homeless youth most often report family conflict as the primary reason for leaving home, but LGBTQ youth are more likely to leave because of parental physical abuse and alcohol use/abuse (Cochran et al., 2002). Schools are another primary environment for LGBTQ youth and play a key role in shaping emotional, social, and educational wellbeing. To date, research conducted on the educational experiences of LGBTQ adolescents has been focused on non-homeless youth. This body of research shows that LGBTQ students report significantly higher rates of verbal, physical, and sexual harassment compared to heterosexual students (Berlan, Corliss, Field, Goodman, & Austin, 2010; Kosciw et al., 2010). LGBTQ-based school bullying can result in absenteeism, poor academic performance/achievement, and even diminished educational aspirations (Kosciw et al., 2010) as well as negatively impact mental health (Berlan et al., 2010; Kosciw et al., 2010). These negative outcomes increase as the levels of verbal and physical bullying escalate. LGBTQ youth experiencing higher levels of harassment missed over twice as much school, had lower grade point averages, described a lower desire to enter college, and also had higher rates of health risks (e.g., substance abuse, suicidal thoughts, and sexual risk taking) (Bontempo & D’Augelli, 2002; Kosciw, et al., 2010).

There remains a need to focus research on the educational experiences of LGBTQ homeless youth and the impact of home and school climate on their psychological health. Bidell (in-press) conducted the first study examining the nexus of educational experiences, home environment, and school climate among a group of LGBTQ homeless
youth (N = 89). Outlined next are major findings from the study that have important implications for psychologists and mental health professionals working with LGBTQ youth that are at-risk for or currently homeless.

School Climate and Educational Experiences:

38.2% of the LGBT homeless youth did not complete high school, a rate over four times the national status high school dropout rate of 8% (Aud et al., 2010), with the majority of LGBTQ homeless youth dropping out in grades 11 and 12 (69.7%).

Less than one-fourth of the LGBT homeless youth reported attending a school with a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), compared to approximately 45% of non-homeless LGBTQ students in the recent GLSEN National School Climate Survey (Kosciw, et al., 2010).

Between 70% to 80% of the LGBT homeless youth in this study never sought out their school teacher or counselor for support, rates significantly higher compared with non-homeless LGBTQ students (Kosciw, et al., 2010).

Mental Health Issues

Over half (64.3%) of LGBTQ homeless youth had a clinically elevated BSI - Global Severity Index (GSI) score indicating significant mental health distress and symptoms, versus around 30% of non-homeless youth from another study (Mustanski et al., 2010).

Clinically significant BSI scores for were noted on the following subscales: Depression (M = 63.83), Paranoid Ideation (M = 66.54), and Psychoticism (M = 67.64).

LGBT homeless youth that completed high school had significantly higher BSI - GSI scores (M = 68.31, SD = 12.16) compared to dropouts (M = 61.23, SD = 13.27). There may be a psychological cost to obtaining a high school diploma if these youth are subjected to dysfunctional and non-supportive school and home environments for longer periods of time compared with dropouts.

Nexus of Home and School Climate

The BSI scores of LGBTQ homeless youth describing school harassment (M = 67.18, SD = 12.82) compared to those that did not indicate experiences of school harassment (M = 65.29, SD = 13.06) were elevated, but did not reach statistical significance.

LGBTQ homeless youth reporting harassments at home had significantly higher GSI scores (M = 68.46, SD = 11.73) compared to those that did not report such home harassment (M = 62.55, SD = 13.75); thus, family based harassment may be more psychologically distressful versus school based harassment among LGBTQ homeless youth.

The overview of findings from Bidell’s (in-press) research offers psychologists substantive research, training, and clinical areas to focus on specific to LGBTQ youth at risk for or currently homeless. Psychologists are well situated to address many of
the psychosocial and educational problems negatively impacting LGBTQ homeless youth by targeting school, family, and multicultural counseling interventions as well as more traditional individual or group psychotherapy services.

References


As an undergraduate student member of the DCRE, I never imagined that I would have the opportunity to represent the division at the New York State Psychological Association (NYSPA) convention. It was a great honor to be selected to speak on the division’s behalf and I was overwhelmed with joy from the moment I was selected to speak on the division’s behalf to the very moment the presentation was over.

On my way to the NYSPA convention at Saratoga Springs, I was nervous because I did not think that the professionals in the field would be interested on what I had to say about culture, especially since my presentation included my personal experience as a child of Chinese immigrants. However, the audience of professionals was anything but disinterested.

I felt a great sense of connection with the professionals in the field. The audience was attentive as I told them the story of my family’s struggle to America. The audience even shared similar stories about their own family’s struggles. The audience laughed when I told them about my rebellious, but funny early adolescent years that clashed with my family’s values and beliefs. Most importantly, the audience commended me for doing a “superb” job, even though I felt ambivalent about my presentation. The audience’s support made me feel more confident about my presentation, which encourages me to present again someday.

I was overjoyed to see how many people came to see a presentation on culture and how it can unify NYSPA divisions and psychologists everywhere. It shows that psychologists value the importance of culture. It also proves that psychologists still appreciate different cultures, whether they are in practice or doing research. I was fortunate to present with Daniel Kaplin, my mentor/professor at the College of Staten Island, who is very passionate about culture in and outside of the classroom and Anu Raj, who finds culture important when doing research. It was imperative that I presented to people who can truly appreciate culture like myself, Daniel, and Anu. They were both perfect co-presenters.

Although, I initially believed that my presentation would be an imminent disaster, it was quite the opposite. I was relieved that the presentation went smoothly. The NYSPA convention was a memorable experience. Not only was it memorable because it was my first professional presentation, but because I had the opportunity to meet many professional psychologists all over New York. I was able to receive guidance from professionals who were more than willing to give me advice on graduate school and the field of psychology. I definitely recommend undergraduate and graduate students to attend a NYSPA convention because it is truly a valuable and unforgettable experience!
Heterosexism in the Classroom

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to distinguish between heterosexism and apply this principle to the classroom setting. The implications of heterosexism are introduced. Several common scenarios where classroom management could be useful are presented. The article concludes with practical advice creating an inclusive environment.

Key Words: heterosexism, classroom management, Safe Zone training, self-disclosure, sexual humor.
Heterosexism in the Classroom

Heterosexism refers to the belief that everyone is heterosexual and that this is the preferable sexual orientation (Flowers & Buston, 2001; Garcia, 2009). This is not to be confused with homophobia, which refers to an irrational fear of someone that is a homosexual (Garcia, 2009; Hodges & Parkes, 2005). The heterosexism can be an overt view or more commonly an implicit bias that a person acquires through socialization (Garcia, 2009; Lance, 2002). The goals of this article are to address how implicit biases of heterosexism occur in the classroom and provide suggestions for a more inclusive atmosphere.

Why it Matters

One might ask, “If heterosexism is merely a bias towards the heterosexual orientation, what is the big deal?” In other words, perhaps heterosexism is innocuous and does not need to be addressed. To address this concern, researchers have found that heterosexism and homophobia serve as the foundation of acceptance and propagation of hate crimes (Cowan, Heiple, Marquez, Khatchadourian, & McNevin, 2005). Garcia (2009) notes that heterosexism is associated with violence, vandalism, and discrimination. Consequently, heterosexism might be viewed as a gateway to homophobia and hate crimes.

Applications of Heterosexism

As noted above, a subtle example of heterosexism is to assume that everyone is heterosexual (Flowers & Buston, 2001; Garcia, 2009). As a professor, I have experienced incidents where students use heterosexist language regarding relationship dyads. A second example of heterosexism can be seen when a student feels compelled to announce their personal sexual orientation as heterosexual (Garcia, 2009). A third observation is the lack of sensitivity when it comes to sexually-based jokes (Jewell & Morrison, 2010).

Reducing Heterosexism

In response to the situations presented above, it is imperative that the instructor set the tone of the class. This includes using gender-neutral examples when talking about relationships (Garcia, 2009). For example, I tend to use the term “romantic interest” as a way of ensuring that all students feel comfortable. Other neutral terms such as “significant other” and “partner” are more inclusive terms (Garcia, 2009). If a student uses heterosexist language to discuss general relationships, I tend to ask questions like, “why does it necessarily have to be a boyfriend, girlfriend, husband, or wife?” This encourages a student to explore the possibility of other types of relationships (Garcia, 2009).

In response to a person feeling compelled to announce their sexual orientation, a professor could reassure students that their sexual orientation is not required to be disclosed (Ferfolja, 2007). This protects the sexual orientation of both heterosexual and homosexual students. In psychologically driven classes, a professor could also reflect on why the student feels that it is important to discl-
ose their sexual orientation as it could be relevant to personality style (Kim & Drolet, 2003). As a general rule, a professor should refrain from using the terms like “boyfriend” or “girlfriend” to discuss a person’s relationship unless it is first volunteered by a student.

A professor has to be exceedingly careful when using sexually-charged humor. Some researchers have found utility in sexual humor in creating a relaxed environment, but it is possible that a joke could be taken in an unintended way, which could make students feel uncomfortable (Adams, 1974; Philaretou, 2005; Schreier, 1995). Moreover, the professor sets the tone of the classroom. As a result, if a professor hears an inappropriate joke, it is imperative for them to address it because silence could be perceived as a tacit agreement with a joke.

A final recommendation is that both professors and students do Safe Zone training if possible. This training can help teach the skills that will reduce pre-established negative affect (if applicable) and help promote the most inclusive environment (Draughn, Elkins, & Roy, 2002; Rye & Meaney, 2009). Once a professor receives this training, they can hang the sign outside their door signifying that they are an “Ally,” which encourages support and open discussion regarding issues pertaining to the LBGTQ community (Draughn et al., 2002). Research suggests that exposure has a profound impact on homophobia and one’s level of discomfort expressing individual differences at both undergraduate and graduate levels (Finkel, Storaasli, Bandele, & Schaefer, 2003; Lance, 2002).

References


The NYSPA Diversity Award will be presented annually to a psychologist who has demonstrated an unusually strong commitment to diversity and inclusion through NYSPA’s programs and goals. The award recognizes the service and passion related to issues of diversity by sustained dedication and involvement in NYSPA. The inaugural winner of the NYSPA Diversity Award was Ruth Ochroch. The following themes emerged when Dinelia Rosa, Carmen Vasquez, and I spoke to Ruth about this honor.

Ruth stated that her interest in diversity stemmed from the belief that “all men and women are equal.” However, the overarching sentiment when she began her career in psychology was that it was a club for “White males.” Ruth was a founding member and driving force in the creation of the Division of Culture Race and Ethnicity (DCRE). With this in mind, she began to develop a committee to address this imbalance. Co-founders included Carmen Vasquez, Rafael Javier, Kirkland Vaughn, Lisa Suzuki, etc.

Ruth stated that, “there has been prejudice from infancy onward” and “continues to be a problem.” She was emphatic that “someone has to take on the issue of prejudice because it is poisonous.” As a division, she wishes that DCRE educates other psychologists through a series of conferences, writing to media outlets (e.g. New York Times), and developing a documentary where psychologists share personal accounts where they were discriminated based on gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and so forth.

Ruth also discussed her work with the Division of Women’s Issues (DOWI). She noted that when she considered putting DOWI on the agenda as a division, “Some man were angry and left.” However, “after a series of speakers and discussion, “It passed.” However, the disturbing issue for Ruth was that, “People fight not to give up power…It is kind of egotistical.”

Ruth had the following advice for Early Career Psychologists (ECP) regarding issues of Diversity. “You have to get into the universities and teach culture at the collegiate level.” She also advised ECPs to “reach out to other associations such as the Asian American Psychological Association, National Latino Psychological Association, and other associations that promote diversity.” She felt that by making connections, issues of diversity would come to the forefront of our consciousness.

Aside from her contributions to DCRE and DOWI, Ruth was a tremendous advocate for psychology at both state and national levels. Ruth served on APA’s council of representatives, Ethics committee, Division 39’s executive committee, twice as NYSPA’s president (1983, 2006), President of the Clinical Division, and so forth. As a result, Ruth has been awarded countless honors. When we asked Ruth what it meant to be the inaugural recipient of the NYSPA Diversity Award, she said, “I was floored and honored.” She said she was “doing many of these things automatically.”

We, the members of the NYSPA community, would like to thank Ruth Ochroch for her contributions to NYSPA, DCRE, and psychology. Congratulations on this wonderful honor.
Transgender: Popping the Bubble on Societal Gender Norms

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Abstract

Society portrays many gender standards for people to abide by and transsexuals do not fit in these expectations. This leaves many transgender individuals at high risk for discrimination. This study measured the levels of transsexual tolerance in a sample of college students. The Genderism and Transphobia scale and International Attitudes towards Transsexual scale were used to measure the participants' feelings towards transgender individuals. Participants read one of four stories involving almost identical people: trans Tina, Tina, trans Tom, or Tom. The participants who were less tolerant of transgender individuals were more likely to be prejudiced toward transsexuals. Also many participants confused gender identity with sexual orientation, assuming that Tran's individuals were most likely homosexual. The results of this study support that more research needs to be done in this area to bring better awareness about the transgender community and to educate society to view all gender roles with an open mind.

Keywords: Gender, transgender, transsexual, transphobia, LGBT, sex, discrimination, gay, homosexual, harassment, MTF, FTM
Introduction

The objective of this study was to better understand the negative feelings people have for individuals who are transgender. It involved students from the College of Staten Island psychology department, and surveyed for their opinions on transgender individuals. According to Hill and Willsoughby (2005), transphobia is “an emotional disgust towards individuals who do not conform to society’s gender expectations” (p. 533).

It may be hard to comprehend how one can be born a certain sex and feel they fit another gender role. For some, having a penis is the definition of a male, and having a vagina is the definition of being female. Society then places certain gender criteria on us from infancy. Boys are expected to act aggressive and girls are expected to act lady like. Once the expectations of either of these gender roles are rejected, then they are often rejected from society. This is why people who are transgender are often ostracized from their peers, family, and community.

People who are transgender are being subjected to daily discrimination because they are a minority group. Since individuals who are transgender are part of a minority group they are looked down upon as powerless, and therefore are inferior to others. This places them at higher risk of being murdered or assaulted because they are often a target for harassment. Many studies have found that people who are transgender have experienced many sorts of discrimination across their lifetime. In a study done in the United States, 60% of the participants had experienced violence and/or harassment (Lombardi, 2009). In other studies, more than half of the participants had lost their jobs, 80% had experienced verbal abuse, and 30% were physically abused (Clements, 1999).

According to the Gender Education and Advocacy, at least one person a day has died in the last decade due to being transgender (Kidd & Winter, 2008). The website “Remembering the Dead” provides acknowledgement to 350 people who were transgender who died due to extreme abuse (Winter, 2008). It may seem absurd to many to hear that these people have reported abuse before and were mocked and ridiculed by police. A individual who was transgender was arrested for cocaine and was verbally abused by cops, who teased the individual for having a “pussy” rather than a “dick” and forced them to pull down their pants and prove their gender. Nepalese police are on the hunt for “metis” which is individuals who are trans, and are summoned to arrest them. They believe them to be a “public nuisance” (Kidd et al, 2008, p.45). In other countries police harass, torture and murder people who are transgender, and have no fear of being reprimanded. It’s hard to turn to law enforcement for help when having dealt with mockery once before, therefore most people who are transgender continue to be hazed sometimes ending in the worst way, losing their life.

It’s difficult to comprehend what can make an individual hate another so much to cause such harm, and this is why transphobia is such an important issue. Some excuses given are religious beliefs. Many cultures’ religious views play a huge role in their daily lives. Therefore, when someone threatens these beliefs, the individual will most likely get defensive and reject anything that does not coincide with their religious standards. Another reason is the stigma psychiatry places on individuals who are transgender by labeling them with gender identity disorder, ultimately claiming they are mentally ill. Many people judge those who suffer from mental illness. Another reason for ignorance among people who are transphobic may be due to the fact that many people who are transgender want to live with stealth to avoid harassment. This invisibility causes many people to make their own assumptions.

Another cause could be that people often confuse orientation with gender. This means that
some individuals who are homophobic are also transphobic. Homophobia is the non-acceptance of someone’s preference for a same sex partner. This confusion between gender role and sexual orientation causes an underlying hatred towards people who are transgender, thereby assuming that transgender people are automatically homosexual, which may not be the case.

Chaz Bono was one of the first celebrities to openly write a book on his transition from female to male (FTM; Bono & Fitzpatrick, 2011). He opened many people’s eyes to the transgender community. In his book he describes his transitioning process from FTM. Many people were outraged by Cher’s child publicly portraying his story. People displayed words of disgust and hatred towards his choice to change his gender. Chaz stood strong and said he did this to set an example for those who are living silently and are uncomfortable within their bodies.

Method

This study explored how college students think and feel about people who are transgender or transsexual. This is a 2 (trans vs. not trans) X 2 (male vs. female target) independent groups design study. However, the hypotheses above only relate to univariate main effects of the trans variable and correlations, so I did not test for the interaction effects or the effect of the sex of the target.

Participants

There were 491 volunteers for this study. Their average age was 20.2 years, ranging from 18-62 years of age. Most were, women (69%), heterosexual (92.1%), non-white (51.9%), and the most common ethnicity was American (32.4%).

Procedure

Participants completed questionnaires measuring anti-trans prejudice and their past experiences. They then read one of four randomly selected stories: Tom, Tina, trans Tom, or trans Tina. Trans Tom and Tom had the same photograph; Tina and trans Tina had the same photograph, and the stories were identical except that trans Tina and trans Tom were labeled as transsexuals.

Results

The results of this study imply that even though these characters only differed in their transsexual status, anti-trans prejudice was evident. Many of the participants rated trans Tina negatively. Also, ratings of masculinity and the probability of the character being gay were the strongest effects.

Discussion

The results of this study imply that even though these characters contained the same pictures, their images were contorted by people’s perceptions on the definition of transsexuals. Trans Tina had the same story and picture as Tina, and yet she was rejected. Reasons for this underlying favoritism for FTM individuals may be due to many factors; homophobia could be the base to this result. People may be more comfortable with a female becoming a male because women are seen as inferior. Subconsciously, people may be feeling more threatened by a male becoming a female (MTF) because they would feel betrayed. It’s almost a double standard in society, because a female expressing their sexuality towards another female is considered sexy, whereas a man expressing their feelings to another man is looked down upon as unnatural. Therefore, when a man transitions to a female, society looks down upon it. Also, since men are considered to be masculine, and aggressive, this may make many people unintentionally uncomfortable with MTF individuals. The levels of sexism in society seem to transfer over to the world of homosexuality, as well as for transgender individuals. More research could be done in this area to measure the levels of MTF versus FTM tolerance.
In terms of homosexuality ratings for the characters, trans Tom and trans Tina were rated more likely to be gay than Tom or Tina. The participants are confusing gender identity and sexual orientation. The reason for this confusion could be because societies’ familiarity with the LGBT (Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender) abbreviation. They think of this, and assume that LGBT revolves around sexual orientation awareness and subconsciously places people who are transgender within this group, assuming they are gay. Within the transgender community sexual orientation coincides with the gender identity of the individual, not necessarily the sex organ they were born with. Therefore the individuals’ sexual orientation relates to the gender they live everyday.

Discrimination toward transgender individuals will not stop until knowledge of the transgender community is spread. Once people become familiar with gender non-conformists, then anyone can begin to express their gender openly. Chaz Bono stated, “It is sad that though things have changed since I was a kid, we still send the message to children and teens that something is wrong with you if you are different. With the proportionately higher suicide rates among LGBT youth and rampant bullying, sending these types of messages can have dire consequences” (Bono & Fitzpatrick, 2011, p.53). Transgender individuals are just popping the bubble on societal gender norms, and this world needs to embrace them.

References


My experience at the 75th annual NYSPA convention can be described as both inspiring and reassuring. The atmosphere was exhilarating. I had the opportunity to meet numerous professionals in the field of psychology as well as other peers, who were more than happy to give advice to a fellow upcoming graduate student. As a recent graduate student and an aspiring psychologist, I appreciated the fact that many professionals were willing to give advice on the graduation process. I have always had doubts about whether psychology is the right path for me, but after this convention, I slowly felt my anxiety and confusion diminish. I am extremely happy at where I am now because the convention attendees helped me confirm my current career path. I am currently enrolled in the mental health counseling program at the College of Staten Island. After I obtain my masters, I plan on obtaining a PhD.

At the NYSPA convention, I had the opportunity to present a poster on the benefits and liabilities of psychologists prescribing medication otherwise known as RxP. My mentor/former professor Daniel Kaplin and I have done research on this topic in hopes to allow future psychologists to prescribe medication. The poster showed that RxP has the potential to be a very good tool for psychologists. The poster highlighted the impact that RxP would have on the underserved and minority population. Nearly all underserved minority populations have a lack of psychiatrists to treat those who are mentally ill. As a result, the underserved population must refer to general practitioners for medication. Most general practitioners are not fully qualified with mental health issues, which may have detrimental effects on the patients. Minorities that do not speak English well enough, such as the Asians or Latinos may not be able to convey what their problem are. For example, the Asian population is routinely underserved due to lack of psychiatrists, let alone psychiatrists that speak the language. Populations such as the Asian population would certainly benefit from RxP and the higher availability of access to more prescribing professionals in the field of mental health.
LGBT Discrimination in Immigration Cases

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Abstract

LGBT persons experience discrimination in various settings and in a wide variety of contexts. Drawing from a recent immigration case involving a removal proceeding as an example, the author examines the potential impact of discrimination LGBT persons encounter in Peru in a woman facing deportation to Peru along with her bisexual husband. Discrimination based on sexual orientation is widespread in Latin America and countries around the world as noted in the recent governmental publication: U.S. Department of State, 2011 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices May 24, 2012. Many persons who have experienced persecution in their country or have a well-founded fear of persecution seek refuge in the U.S. and apply for refugee or asylum status. Training is necessary to prevent further discrimination as these cases are processed.

Keywords: LGBT, discrimination, immigration
Consider the following vignette:

You are a 35-year old bilingual, English-dominant man who came to the U.S. from Central America as a child. You are a U.S. citizen. You formed a friendship as a young adult with an older female who originates from Peru. The friendship grew and you were married six years ago. You are bisexual and have been open about your sexual orientation.

Your wife has been facing an emotional roller coaster ride because she faces possible removal (deportation) to Peru. The mere thought of you accompanying her to Peru leaves your wife wide-eyed and tearful. Although you don’t relish the idea of leaving the U.S., preserving the marriage and family life with your wife and step-child that you have raised for several years means a lot to you. You have felt secure, loved, and cared for in a way you have not felt in any other relationship you had. ¿Por qué? (Why?) you ask your wife, does the possibility of going to Peru if she has to leave mortify her so much? And she tells you the many horror stories she heard about how homosexuals and bisexuals are treated in her country. And as you look into this, you see source upon source about the discrimination against lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in Peru. You learn that, although legal in Peru, homosexuality still is looked upon as an illness and that outward displays of “abnormal sexual orientation” expose individuals to overt prejudice and potentially dangerous situations.

You are left facing the equally distasteful choice of losing your wife to deportation and the destruction of your family, or running the risk of what might happen if – because you are open about your sexuality – you choose the other “evil” and give up your lifestyle in the U.S. and try to adapt to one in Peru as a bisexual man.

The above “story” stems from a recent case I worked on and remains unsettled for this couple at the time of this writing. A closer look at some recent newsworthy events in Peru caught my eye as I worked the case:

1. Miss Peru Universe 2012, Cindy Mejia, recently was asked how she would react if she had a son who is homosexual. Her reply was, “I don’t think that would happen to me because those things happen when the father is absent, when one is raped, and when one lives alone with mother and sisters. When I have kids, I will entrust them to God completely. They will have two parents and I will raise them properly.” (1) She has since apologized for her homophobic statements.

2. Mayor José Benítez of the coastal city of Huaraney attributed the increased homosexuality in his town due to presence of the metal strontium in the water.

Peru is not alone. LGBT discrimination and homophobia occur in many Latin American countries. For instance:

1. **El Salvador**: there is widespread discrimination based on sexual orientation. The Solidarity
Association to Promote Human Development of Transsexual, Transgender, and Transvestite Men and Women stated on 09/18/11 that, “as of September, the media reported 17 killings; 23 cases of police mistreatment; and injuries to 13 individuals, three allegedly injured by police”, and that there were “six “hate crimes” and four attacks on LGBT persons.”

2. Honduras: The 2011 Human Rights Report indicated that “The National Police reported 30 violent deaths of LGBT individuals during the year” and that “Criminal investigations do not recognize a “transgender” category.”

3. Colombia: there were reports of at least 51 killings as of December 31. Problems reported by Colombia Diversa included police abuse, threats against human rights defenders, crimes against LGBT members not being pursued, and victims not seeking legal redress because they feared retaliation. Bogota’s Department of Sexual Diversity reported in a study in 2010 “that 98 percent of the LGBT community faced discrimination, particularly in schools and workplaces.”

4. Guatemala: there were complaints that “members of the police regularly waited outside clubs and bars frequented by LGBT persons to demand that those engaged in commercial sexual activities provide protection money or pay police to avoid being put in jail”, and that “gay men and transgender persons experienced police abuse frequently because of their visibility and the number of places in which they were known to socialize.” LGBT rights groups reported that “when bodies of LGBT persons were found, the victim’s genitals were often mutilated and insults were written on the body or burned on the skin.”

5. Ecuador: there were reports that “police and prosecutors did not thoroughly investigate deaths of LGBT individuals” and that “LGBT persons were interned against their will in private treatment centers to “cure” or “dehomosexualize” them, although such treatment is illegal.” It also was reported that the clinics “used cruel treatments, including rape, in an attempt to change LGBT persons’ sexual orientation.”

Nor are the problems encountered by LGBT persons limited to Latin American countries. Around the world LGBT persons are subject to violence and very serious discrimination.

Large numbers of individuals apply for refugee status and asylum status in the U.S. because they fear that they will suffer persecution due to:

1. Race
2. Religion
3. Nationality
4. Membership in a particular social group
5. Political opinion

Applicants must have experienced persecution in their country or have a well-founded fear of persecution in the future to qualify. A growing number of these claims have been reported. Fear of persecution includes serious physical and sexual violence and consistently denied access to services ordinarily available to non-LGBT individuals at work, educational settings, legal settings and matters pertaining to health and welfare. LGBT indivi-
duals may also experience psychological harm.

Many jurisdictions now recognize that “persecution does not cease to be persecution because those persecuted can eliminate the harm by taking avoiding action.” There is no duty, therefore, to hide one’s sexual orientation.

LGBT claims are rooted most frequently in the “membership in a particular social group” category noted above. There are many jurisdictions that recognize that homosexuals may constitute a particular social group; this also may extend to bisexuals and transgender individuals, albeit less commonly.

Federal circuit courts in the U.S. have ruled consistently that individuals persecuted because of their sexual orientation or gender identity are protected under the Refugee Act.

For many reasons, quantitative data are lacking in the U.S. The agency, Heartland Alliance, estimated that there were 4,750 ORR-eligible (Office of Refugee Resettlement) LGBT persons in 2010.

Winning asylum poses a tough slippery slope. The success rate of LGBT asylum claims has been improving; notwithstanding, LGBT applicants continue to experience homophobic or discriminatory beliefs in the adjudication of their cases.

Given the large number of LGBT refugee and asylum seekers in the U.S. noted above, it is imperative that their needs be adequately met and that they not encounter untoward barriers to access to services. And, consistent with the tenets of cultural and diversity-based competence, it behooves Asylum Officers to be properly trained in matters pertaining to the LGBT populations they serve including sexual orientation and identity, the conditions in their countries of origin, and specific problems they face. This caveat extends to interpreters.

The last thing that individuals who are discriminated against and persecuted need, is to encounter further discrimination at the hands of the very people whose job it is to protect them from discrimination and persecution and give them safe haven.

References

9. People outside of the United States must apply for refugee status.
10. People who have already made it to the United States border or the interior can apply for asylum status.
12. Ibid., p. 7.
13. Ibid., p. 9.
15. Ibid., p.15.
17. Ibid., p. 11.
18. UNHCR, op. cit., p.17.
The Winter edition of The Cultural Spotlight will explore the unique challenges that face religious minorities. We welcome clinicians, individuals working in public sector, academics, and students alike to offer submissions to this publication. Submissions should include an abstract, complete reference page, and the content of the article should range between 500-1000 words. The deadline for the Fall edition is November 1, 2012. If you are interested in submitting an article, please contact the editorial staff at DCREsubmissions@gmail.com.

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