

Graduate Psychology Students' Preparation for Sexuality Related Counselling

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This literature review examined graduate level programs in North America regarding the level of preparation, effectiveness of preparation, and gaps in the training of psychologists working with sexuality related issues. Three areas are examined: (a) graduate level psychology education programs in North America and the inclusion or lack thereof of sexuality training, (b) graduate level students and practicing psychologists' perceptions of self efficacy in counselling clients on sexuality topics, and (c) explanations for the current level of preparation provided by graduate psychology education programs. Literature search strategies were limited to peer-reviewed journals, and published theses and dissertations. As a paucity of published literature exists, the review is based on key historical articles and current and relevant literature.

Historical trends in literature revealed very limited research on the topic, and inconsistencies in education and training of graduate level psychology students. An increase in sexuality training at the graduate level corresponded with the HIV/AIDS epidemic, which was related to stereotypical attitudes towards gay men and HIV. However, a positive influence of this trend has been the increase of training on sexual orientation. Early studies also focused on surveying graduate program and training directors on the extent of training provided on specific topics. However, more recent Canadian studies have surveyed practicing psychologists about the level, comprehensiveness, and effectiveness of their training. Practicing psychologists reported that they obtained sexuality information through self-learning and workshop. Surveys also indicated that providing sexuality training at graduate level would increase self-efficacy and competency of psychologists, which was also found to be related to the practitioners' awareness of and willingness to address sexuality issues in therapy.

A review of the literature found that little research exists that systematically assessed the outcomes of sexuality training programs. However, the literature suggested that sexuality be consistently addressed in all graduate psychology programs, by integration into other courses, training, supervision, observations, and continuing education. This may be ideal considering that practitioners who obtain specialized sexuality training often feel ill prepared, and those who wish to obtain specialized training are constrained by time, cost, and accessibility specialized training programs.

The gaps in research alert us to areas that require more information so that we can move forward in providing sexuality related training at the graduate level more consistently, in an ethical and effective manner. For example, one gap is the lack of research on clients. We need to ask clients about their sexuality concerns and their comfort broaching topic with their psychologist. We also need to ask clients who they prefer discussing sexuality issues with, such as their psychologist, doctor, nurse, or sex therapist. Another gap in the literature was the lack of consideration of culture and ethnicity as variables in surveys. There is a lack of pre and post program evaluations of the training programs of various formats, delivery, and teaching models. Longitudinal studies are required to observe how level and type of training is related to self-efficacy and comfort over time. Lastly, more qualitative studies would provide greater insight into the subjective experiences of psychologists providing sexuality-related counselling.