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Career Counseling with LGBT Clients:

What Practitioners Need to Know

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Introduction

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals face very real challenges in their professional development. Croteau's (1996) review of research on the work experiences of LGBT employees showed that between 25% and 66% of LGBT employees reported experiencing discrimination at work based on their sexual orientation. Unfortunately, this estimate may be low because of samples that draw predominantly from states that prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and because many LGBT people do not choose to reveal their sexual orientation at work (Ragins & Cornwell, 2001). LGBT people often keep their sexual orientation a closely guarded secret on the job, and even go so far as to fabricate social lives that include dates with persons of the opposite sex, bring an opposite sex date that had been secured to help cover their secret, and refuse to share vacation photographs with their coworkers (Pope, Barret, Szymanski, Chung, Singaravelu, McLean, & Sanabria, 2004).

Little emphasis has been placed on career counseling with LGBT clients (Hetherington, Hillerbrand, & Etringer, 1989). In addition, few studies have focused on LGBT career development (Pope, 1995). While the development of LGBT individuals has received increased attention from researchers and theorists in recent years (Chung, 2003; Phillips, Ingram, Grant Smith, & Mindes, 2003), this area of research is still considered to be in its infancy (Croteau, Lark, & Lance, 2005). Using the literature that is available on LGBT career counseling, this guide will present topics that may be of interest to LGBT clients as well as specific strategies that career counselors can implement to better serve LGBT clients. The guide also includes information specific to LGBT young adults and LGBT people of color.

Creating an LGBT Affirming Environment

LGBT clients may not feel comfortable discussing issues related to their sexual identity without cues from the environment that reveal that it is safe to share. While there is no guaranteed way that career counselors can elicit discussions of sexual identity from their clients, there are specific ways to

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help create a supportive atmosphere. LGBT clients commonly report scanning the offices of counselors to get some clue as to whether this person would be receptive to disclosure of the client's sexual orientation (Elliot, 1993). One strategy that can increase the likelihood of openness is to have a published, visually prominent policy in the office denouncing discrimination of all types including sexual orientation (Elliot, 1993). Posting a statement by a national organization of which the career counselor is a member, such as the American Psychological Association or American Counseling Association, may be sufficient. Placing LGBT literature in the office waiting room will send a very overt signal that the counselor is LGBT affirmative. Having LGBT books, along with other professional literature, that address career development on the bookshelf will help some clients realize that counselors are prepared to work with sexual minorities (Pope et al., 2004). Popular magazines such as *The Advocate*, *Curve*, *Genre*, *DIVA*, and *Out* also send obvious signals to all clients and may help clients in general gain more information about LGBT coworkers.

Counselor Preparation

The first step for career counselors working with LGBT clients is to take a personal inventory of the ways that often subtle or unconscious biases may influence the counseling process (Bieschke & Matthews, 1996). Bias toward this oppressed minority will have an impact on interventions that the individual career counselor chooses to use (Belz, 1993; Chung & Harmon, 1994; Morgan & Brown, 1991; Pope, 1995). For example, a career counselor may assume maladjustment or pathology when LGBT clients show interest in stereotypical occupations for LGBT persons; as a result, the counselor may attempt to facilitate explorations in gender-traditional or "heterosexual" interests (Chung, 2003).

Because misinformation or misunderstanding will quickly be evident to sexual minority clients, and may cause them to seek help elsewhere or not get help at all, counselors must be familiar with LGBT

culture so they are credible and congruent in their attitudes (Pope, 1992). Attending workshops, reading literature, and participating in LGBT cultural events are effective ways to acquire knowledge about LGBT people and their culture (Pope et al., 2004). Former clients and friends who identify as LGBT are also invaluable sources of information.

Career counselors must realize the need to assess their competency in career counseling with LGBT people and be open to seeking consultation and referral when necessary (Chung, 2003). Further, career counselors who cannot be LGBT affirming in their attitudes are ethically required to acknowledge their limits and to consult with an LGBT expert or refer the LGBT client to a counselor who has experience with sexual minorities (Pope & Tarvydas, 2002). However, referral should not be used as an escape from striving for growth in proficiency.

Interventions

Counselors must be aware of how social stigmatization, such as oppression, stereotypes, and discrimination, may influence clients' vocational self-concept, world views, career decisions, and vocational adjustment as this may affect the client's life and occupational choices (Chung, 2003). Career counselors must realize that their clients' goals for counseling may be influenced by their experiences with stigmatization. Such awareness is helpful for assisting clients in examining rationales for presented goals and facilitating informed decision making. For example, some LGBT clients may desire to develop more "gender-appropriate" interests or to explore career options that are stereotypical for LGBT people. Counselors may help these clients explore how their goals are related to social pressure, internalized stereotypes, or perceptions of limited occupational opportunities.

Helping clients overcome internalized negative stereotypes is another task of the career counselor (Chung & Harmon, 1994). Oppression impacts even mentally healthy and well-adjusted

people in cultural minorities. Societal messages repeated over and over again about being evil, sick, and sinful people may be believed and accepted at some conscious or unconscious level, and these messages permeate the U.S. dominant culture. When the client is a sexual minority, a gender minority, and a racial or ethnic minority, these issues are intensified (Keeton, 2002). Culturally appropriate self-esteem interventions, such as positive self talk, reframing, and forgiveness, can be used to overcome these internalized negative stereotypes (Pope et al., 2004). It is important that career counselors understand and appreciate the impact of these messages on their LGBT clients.

LGBT clients may seek out a career counselor to discuss disclosing their sexual minority status, also known as “coming out”, at work. Issues to address in such a discussion include why coming out is important and how to go about coming out (Croteau & Hedstrom, 1993). Professional counselors can help their clients consider the advantages and disadvantages of coming out in the workplace or school (Adams, 1997; Morrow, 1997). They can provide clients with opportunities for behavioral rehearsals that are directed toward developing strategies for informing others (Pope et al., 2004). Special attention must also be paid to the issue of coming out in families from cultures that do not readily accept same-sex sexual orientations (Pope et al., 2004). When assisting an LGBT client with this decision, it is important to realize that choosing to hide sexual minority status often leads to poor self-concept and other emotional problems (Elliot, 1993). Although it encourages the internalization of negative concepts (Weinberg & Williams, 1975), public attitudes toward LGBT people make hiding their sexual identity a realistic adaptation. It can, however, lead to the development of a belief system that devalues the client. Over the years, these devaluations of self can have a cumulative, negative effect (Fischer, 1972). Myers, Haggins, and Speight (1994) argued that optimal career development cannot occur when people are forced to suppress parts of their identity that are devalued by society. In spite of this, Fassinger (1995) indicated that approximately two-thirds of lesbians come out to their employers and only one-third of

lesbians come out to their coworkers. This suggests that barriers can create potential conflict between sexual and career identities. Career counselors must be prepared to address these complexities with LGBT clients.

As simple as it may seem, talking openly with clients about issues of employment discrimination is very important. Discrimination against individuals on the basis of their race, ethnic origin, gender, disability, religion, political affiliation, or sexual orientation is a not uncommon occurrence in U.S. society (Croteau & Hedstrom, 1993). Career counselors who fail to recognize this and do not assist their clients in coping with this reality do a disservice to their clients. Issues of dual and multiple discrimination must also be addressed when providing career counseling services (Van Puymbroeck, 2002). For example, lesbian women face at least two virulent forms of discrimination in U.S. society: sexism and heterosexism. Openly addressing these issues and preparing clients to cope with the more overt manifestations of racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and ageism are important and primary roles of the career counselor. When these issues are openly and fully discussed, such discussions lead to improved decision making (Pope et al. 2004). Even if clients do not bring it up, the issue ought to be discussed so that the client is aware both of the career counselor's sensitivity and of his or her knowledge in this area (Croteau & Hedstrom, 1993).

Occupational role model and networking interventions are necessary for populations who have historically been limited in their occupational choices by some type of societal stereotyping (Adams, 1997). Gay men have been stereotyped as hairdressers, florists, dancers, actors, secretaries, nurses, flight attendants, and other occupations traditionally held by women and lesbian women have been stereotyped as truck drivers, athletes, mechanics, and other occupations traditionally held by men (Pope et al., 2004). These very narrow stereotypes serve as safe occupations, in which lesbian and gay people may feel more accepted and more able to truly be themselves. However, clients could also be limited

because they see these occupations as the only possible choices. Career counselors must assist LGBT clients in making the scope of possible occupations as broad as possible, while still affirming their choices of occupation.

It is also critical that counselors become aware of resources that they can use to connect LGBT clients to professionals within their community. First off, career counselors can work to create relationships with LGBT professionals who can serve as role models and sources of informational interviews or mentorship for LGBT clients (Chung & Harmon, 1994). Career counselors can also connect LGBT clients with local and national LGBT networks of professionals (Elliott, 1993). Additionally, career counselors can arrange career shadowing opportunities with other LGBT professionals (Belz, 1993). Lastly, career counselors can also share information on existing local LGBT community resources with their clients (Elliott, 1993). For a list of LGBT professional organizations, visit www.catsaunders.com/resources/.

Career Counseling with LGBT Young Adults

Much of what has been published in the career literature indicates that the trajectory of vocational identity development for LGBT young adults may be different from that of their heterosexual peers as a result of the stigmatization and social marginalization experienced by this group (Morrow, 1997). Career counselors must understand the process of developing an LGBT identity (Croghan, 2001). Early stages of identity development can be fraught with confusion, inner turmoil, and feelings of personal alienation, and internal psychological conflict that LGBT young adults experience as they begin to recognize that their sexual identity is different from the sexual identity of the heterosexual majority (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Schmidt & Nilsson, 2006).

Given the additional psychological energy that LGBT young adults need to devote to negotiating a marginalized sexual identity, it is important to examine how development in this realm of identity may influence other areas of their lives. It has been suggested that there is a limited amount of psychological energy that can be committed to any one aspect of identity (Raskin, 1989). Thus, if LGBT individuals are channeling more psychological resources into sexual identity processes, it is likely that career development may be affected (Fassinger, 1996). It is believed that because sexual identity development and vocational identity development are active during the same phase of life, these processes might exert influence on one another (Fassinger, 1996; Morrow, 1997). Therefore, if one area of identity is not fully integrated into the self-concept, other areas of identity will inevitably be affected (Dunkle, 1996).

Dunkle (1996) hypothesized that the early stages of sexual identity development, characterized by high levels of internalized homophobia, fewer social supports, and higher levels of distress for LGBT young adults, are likely to be related to lower levels of vocational maturity and higher levels of career indecision. Due to these struggles, LGBT young adults may not be able to negotiate the career development process at the same time they are beginning to recognize and understand that their sexual identities are different (Schmidt & Nilsson, 2006). Therefore, LGBT people who are early in their sexual identity development might put other aspects of development, such as career exploration, on hold (Hetherington, 1991).

There are many ways that career counselors can better serve LGBT young adults. When conducting career counseling with LGBT young adults, it is important to address potential sexual identity concerns such as how these individuals are coping with their sexual identity development, homophobia, and heterosexism (Schmidt & Nilsson, 2006). Also, any career interventions aimed at assisting LGBT young adults should take into account how career and sexual identity development may be influencing each other, rather than examining one aspect of development as isolated from the other (Hetherington,

1991). Since inner sexual identity conflict can impact the career development process for LGBT young adults, career counselors should assess where LGBT young adults are placing the majority of their psychological energy (Schmidt & Nilsson, 2006). By knowing where individuals are focusing their energy, counseling professionals can attend to what is most salient for them and begin to try to help them allocate resources to other areas that are in need of attention. Since social support has been identified as a necessity in career exploration and decision making among LGBT individuals (Nauta, Saucier, & Woodard, 2001), career counselors can help generate social support to increase the perceived amount of resources that are available to cope with these difficulties.

Career Counseling with LGBT People of Color

LGBT people of color not only face discrimination from mainstream American culture, but also from the LGBT subculture based on race or ethnicity (Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000). They may also experience discrimination from their families and ethnic communities about their sexual orientation (Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000). Some LGBT people of color may decide to hide their sexual identity to maintain important connections to others (Morrow, 1997). Consequently, career development processes and identity management strategies may differ for LGBT people of color. Very little research has examined LGBT career development issues for people of color (Lonborg & Phillips, 1996). However, one study examined themes related to career development among lesbian and gay Latino adolescents through a descriptive qualitative study (Adams, Cahill, & Ackerland, 2005). The themes that emerged from the semi-structured interviews were: feeling like they were different from others because of their LGBT identity, experiencing within-group prejudice, having restrictions to career choice, feeling that there was an intersection between the developmental tasks of sexual identity and career development, showing resilience in the face of heterosexism, and navigating identity management in the workplace.

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When providing career counseling to LGBT people of color, it is important to address both identity management and discrimination management strategies (Adams, Cahill, & Ackerland, 2005). Counselors need to recognize that identity management strategies are highly individualized and what works for one individual who is at a certain stage of identity development in a particular setting may not be effective for someone else (Adams, Cahill, & Ackerland, 2005). Helping clients assess their self-efficacy for coping with heterosexism is also essential (Chung, 2001). Prevention efforts could take the form of career education efforts that would address the specific challenges that LGBT people of color face during the career development process (Adams, Cahill, & Ackerland, 2005). It may also be helpful to connect LGBT people of color with LGBT professional groups and to connect them with mentors who can describe how they managed their identity in the workplace (Byars & Hackett, 1998).

Conclusion

This guide was designed to serve as an introduction to topics that may arise when working with LGBT clients and to expose career counselors to specific interventions and strategies that can be used with this clientele. It is the hope of the author that this guide will be a helpful resource to career counselors who aim to better serve LGBT populations. To become even more familiar with the needs of LGBT clients, the author encourages readers to seek out local or national LGBT professional organizations to find out more information.

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