Heterosexual Students' Experiences in Sexual Orientation Intergroup Dialogue Courses

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Heterosexism contributes to an unsafe campus climate for lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) college students. Intergroup dialogue courses about sexual orientation seek to build awareness, cross-group relationships, and commitment to social action to address anti-LGB prejudice and discrimination. Although dialogue courses are growing in popularity, few courses address sexual orientation. To advance knowledge of these dialogues, this qualitative study explores heterosexual students’ motivations and expectations, challenges, and learning outcomes related to their participation in intergroup dialogue courses on sexual orientation. Core themes include desire to learn about the LGB community, concerns about offending classmates, anxiety around LGB stigma, conflict with classmates around controversial topics, affirming LGB people, and learning about heterosexism, privilege, and intersectionality of identity. Implications for intergroup dialogue pedagogy and research are discussed.

KEYWORDS bias, heterosexism, intergroup dialogue, sexual orientation, undergraduate students

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Campus climate, or the perceptions and experiences of students in and out of their classrooms, is a critical concept in higher education (Hart & Fellabaum, 2008; Hurtado, Griffin, Arellano, & Cuellar, 2008). College and university communities should be safe places both psychologically and physically for all students. Unfortunately, this is not the case, especially for lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students. A recent national study on the state of higher education for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students found that they generally feel unsafe, experience harassment and discrimination, and lack support (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). Further, LGBT students are more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to consider leaving their institutions (Rankin et al., 2010). Studies conducted at specific institutions have also documented a negative, unwelcoming campus climate for sexual minority students (Evans & Broido, 2002; Silverschanz, Cortina, Konik, & Magley, 2008; Woodford, Howell, Silverschanz, & Yu, 2012; Woodford, Krentzman, & Gattis, 2012; Yost & Gilmore, 2011).

A hostile campus climate can have serious ramifications for students’ health and wellbeing (Silverschanz et al., 2008; Woodford, Howell, et al., 2012; Woodford, Krentzman, & Gattis, 2012). Minority stress theory suggests that a hostile social environment, expressed both through overt and subtle acts, can negatively impact the physical and psychological wellbeing of sexual minority students (Meyer, 2003). Students can experience negative climate both through personal experiences of mistreatment and witnessing the mistreatment of others, both of which have been found to be related to negative outcomes for sexual minority students, as well as heterosexual students (Silverschanz et al., 2008; Woodford, Krentzman, & Gattis, 2012).

In addition, ubiquitous phrases like “that’s so gay” that are very common today can threaten LGB students’ health and wellbeing (Woodford, Howell, et al., 2012). Collectively, these studies highlight the importance of universities addressing heterosexism and discrimination to create safe and accepting places for all students.

Institutions often attempt to increase students’ awareness and acceptance of LGB people through speakers bureaus (Blackburn, 2003, 2006; Crawley & Broad, 2004) and ally or safe zone programs (Draughn, Elkins & Roy, 2002; Evans, 2002; Finkel, Storaasli, Bandele, & Schaefer, 2003; Poynter & Tubbs, 2008; Woodford, Kolb, Radeka, & Javier, in press). One particularly innovative intervention designed to improve relations between sexual minority students and heterosexual students and to contribute to pro-LGB social action is intergroup dialogue. Intergroup dialogue courses generally bring together students from two different, usually conflicting, social identity groups with unequal power. These groups are co-facilitated by peers who identify with each social identity group. Dialogue courses use experiential and didactic learning exercises, including activities outside the classroom, and aim to increase students’ awareness and critical analysis of the socialization process related to group identity and individual and institutional
privilege and oppression. These interventions also encourage students to develop skills for sustained communication across differences and engagement in individual and collective alliance building and social justice action (Zúñiga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007). Such awareness, skill building, and action with regard to sexual orientation may help to mitigate the problems of heterosexism and homophobia on college campuses.

Because dialogue groups on race/ethnicity and gender are popular, most research on this method focuses on these topics (Maxwell, Nagda, & Thompson, 2011). Two recent studies examined sexual orientation dialogue groups. Dessel (2010) used a three-session intergroup dialogue intervention with heterosexual public school teachers and adult LGB community members. She found that heterosexual teachers reported significantly more accepting attitudes, feelings, and behaviors toward LGB people after dialogue participation. In an earlier study, we examined campus-based sexual orientation dialogue courses from the perspective of participating LGB students (Dessel, Woodford, & Warren, 2011). Specifically, we explored students’ reflections about their motivations and expectations for participating in the courses, the challenges they experienced, and their learning. The results indicated that LGB students took the courses to create a more inclusive environment for LGB people, establish connections and community with other LGB students on campus, and explore their own identities and the LGB community. Concerning challenges, some students reported anxiety about “coming out” within the group (sharing experiences related to one’s sexual identity is part of the pedagogy) and experienced frustration with heterosexual students who they believed were not willing to honestly share their experiences and explore their own biases. Despite these challenges, important growth was realized, such as learning about their own and others’ identities, including intersecting identities, developing personal empowerment and critical consciousness, and intending to engage in social justice actions to address heterosexism.

Given the privileges that heterosexual individuals enjoy in society and on college campuses (Broido & Reason, 2005), in order to better understand sexual orientation intergroup dialogue courses it is important to explore these courses from the stance of participating heterosexual students. In this study, adopting an exploratory approach we examine heterosexual college students’ experiences in and learning from sexual orientation intergroup dialogue courses. Rather than evaluate the effectiveness of these groups, our overall aim is to advance understanding of intergroup dialogue on sexual orientation and to shed light on their potential to meaningfully engage heterosexual students in social justice education concerning heterosexism. Consistent with our previous study (Dessel et al., 2011) we examine students’ motivations and expectations, challenges participating in the dialogues, and learning outcomes. We report themes within each of these areas and discuss implications and recommendations for future interventions and research.
To frame the study, we first briefly review the literature on interventions designed to address bias and discrimination against LGB people.

INTERVENTIONS TO ADDRESS HETEROSEXISM AND HOMOPHOBIA

Most interventions designed to change heterosexual students’ attitudes toward LGB people tend to be educational and rely on speaker panels or similar methods (Tucker & Potocky-Tripodi, 2006). Studies report varying degrees of success in obtaining positive outcomes related to homophobia and anti-gay prejudice. Researchers have examined the effects of college courses on human sexuality and the psychology of prejudice on anti-gay prejudice (Finken, 2002; Pettijohn & Walzer, 2008), and results have been mixed. Using pretest and posttest measures, Finken (2002) found that female students in the course showed decreased prejudice by the end of the semester, whereas male students did not. Pettijohn and Walzer (2008) found students, generally, showed significantly greater decreases in anti-gay prejudice compared to students in a standard introductory psychology course.

Several studies have examined the effect of one-time workshops on heterosexual bias. Hillman and Martin (2002) designed an active learning activity using a fictional scenario in which students experienced stereotyping and considered social stigma often directed toward gay men and lesbians. Pretest/posttest scores on the Homophobia Scale (Wright, Adams, & Bernat, 1999) suggested that the activity fostered more accepting attitudes toward gay men and lesbians. In 2009, Hodson, Choma, and Costello conducted a follow-up study that examined the psychological mechanisms underlying the active learning activity in Hillman and Martin’s (2002) study. Hodson et al. (2009) found that the activity resulted in higher levels of intergroup perspective-taking, empathy, and favorable attitudes toward LGB people and other marginalized groups. This remained true even after controlling for prior attitudes and ideological individual differences predicting anti-gay bias.

Some studies have used control and/or comparison groups to examine the efficacy of their interventions. Rye and Meaney (2009) examined the effectiveness of a homonegativity awareness workshop. The study indicated that workshop participants were significantly less homophobic and erotophobic (fearful of sexual matters) after the workshop compared to a control group of introductory psychology students. Another study compared levels of sexual prejudice and affect for students in rational training, experiential training (affective training), and control groups (Guth, Lopez, Rojas, Clements, & Tyler, 2004). The experiential group ultimately reported more accepting attitudes toward lesbian and gay issues compared to the control group. The experiential group participants also reported more positive affect.
compared to the other two groups, and more negative affect compared to the rational group.

Although these various interventions generally helped address LGB prejudice among heterosexual students, none of these approaches engaged students in facilitated learning processes over time and few involved both cognitive and affective learning (Nagda, Gurin, Sorensen, & Zúñiga, 2009). Further, the workshops and courses described in these studies were not specifically intended to prepare students to move from learning to action in addressing heterosexism. In addition to engaging students both cognitively and affectively, anti-heterosexist education requires preparing students to address heterosexism through skill building and action (DiAngelo, 1997; Woodford & Bella, 2003).

Intergroup dialogue is an intervention that engages diverse student populations in learning over an extended period that fosters democratic engagement, social responsibility, and ethical decision-making with regard to civic action (Nagda et al., 2009). Various studies demonstrate the effectiveness of this method (Nagda et al., 2009; Sorensen, Nagda, Gurin, & Maxwell, 2009). For instance, a longitudinal study of race and gender intergroup dialogue courses at ten universities, using random assignment and comparison groups, examined outcomes in three areas: intergroup understanding, intergroup relationships, and intergroup collaboration and engagement. The results demonstrate significant increases in awareness of institutional inequality, motivation to bridge differences, and personal responsibility for collaboration and social action (Nagda et al., 2009). Follow-up studies indicate students sustained their gains in learning and commitment to action after the dialogues ended (Gurin, Nagda, & Zúñiga, 2013). These studies suggest a clear connection exists between intergroup dialogue and prejudice reduction among students.

In this article, we explore the experiences of heterosexual identified students who participated in sexual orientation dialogue courses. Specifically, we investigate students’ motivations and expectations for joining a dialogue group on sexual orientation. We also report on the challenges they experienced in the courses and their learning outcomes.

**METHOD**

A qualitative research design was used for this study. We examined students’ participation in nine sexual orientation intergroup dialogue courses held between 2003 and 2011 at the University of Michigan. The data consisted of 46 heterosexual students’ final papers from seven dialogue courses held from Fall 2003 through Fall 2007, and post-dialogue semi-structured interviews held with eight heterosexual students who participated in one of two dialogue courses offered in 2011. Sexual orientation was not offered as a dialogue topic during 2008 to 2010. Interviews were conducted to
Intergroup Dialogue Courses

Triangulate findings from the analysis of students’ papers from the earlier dialogue groups (Sandelowski, 2003). This study received approval from the University of Michigan’s Institutional Review Board.

Sexual Orientation Intergroup Dialogue Courses

The dialogue courses were offered as undergraduate two-credit courses in psychology and sociology. Students selected the sexual orientation dialogue as one of three choices out of five options and rank ordered their choices. Each sexual orientation group had between 8 and 15 participants, with an average of seven heterosexual identified students, and was co-facilitated by two peers, one of whom identified as heterosexual and one who identified as LGB. Although dialogue courses are traditionally balanced relatively equally between the two participating identity groups (Hardiman, Jackson, & Griffin, 2007), one of the selected groups was less balanced, with six heterosexual students (5 women and 1 man) and two lesbian students.

The pedagogy of these intergroup dialogue courses is constructed in a four-stage model, informed by theories of group dynamics and individual learning (Hogg, Abrams, Otten, & Hinkle, 2004; King & Baxter Magolda, 2005; Zúñiga et al., 2007). In the first stage of the dialogue, which lasts two weeks, groups create guidelines, form relationships, and develop a shared understanding of intergroup dialogue communication practices. The second stage deepens when exploration of differences and commonalities occurs. In this process, students reflect on and articulate their lived experiences as it relates to the dialogue topic and often become vulnerable in the group setting. The third stage is reserved for dialogue on controversial topics (i.e., hot topics) relevant to the dialogue topic and of interest to the participants. This is often when the most conflict occurs. The dialogues close with stage four, which involves building alliances through an intergroup collaboration project and planning for future action outside of the dialogue (Zúñiga et al., 2007). This cumulative pedagogy allows for group members to challenge themselves over the semester while still receiving the support of their group members. Trust and community are developed before risk-taking and vulnerability happens. Experiential activities related to stereotypes, social identity, power and privilege, and heterosexism are designed to foster critical thinking and new learning.

Data Sources and Analysis

The final paper assignment asked the students to reflect on their dialogue experience and what they learned about their social identities and group interaction and communication. Students are also asked to discuss challenges and rewards of dialogue and future social justice engagement. Based on the initial analysis of the students’ papers, we developed interview questions that explored students’ motivations for taking the course and expectations
for the course, experiences, both positive and negative during the course, learning about privilege, oppression and heterosexism, attitudinal change, and views on being an ally, including interrupting or challenging sexual prejudice. All students who participated in two courses offered in 2011 (N = 26) were invited to participate in the study and eight agreed. Trained student interviewers conducted the interviews to foster an equal power balance in the interview process (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Interviews ranged from approximately 20 to 40 minutes, and were recorded with permission.

All data were analyzed using QSR NVivo 8 (QSR International Pty. LTD, Doncaster, Victoria, Australia). Data analysis began with an initial reading of all the papers. Next, two team members examined 10 randomly selected papers to create salient categories of information, or open codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). These open codes consisted of important meaning units (words, phrases, and sentences) that emerged from students’ writing. Each analyst’s open codes were compared and 70 core codes were identified through consensus. The remaining papers were then coded. As needed, additional open codes were created to capture other relevant meaning units not addressed in the initial coding framework. Axial coding was then conducted by interconnecting the previously created codes (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Some categories were combined or removed depending on the information provided. Throughout the analysis process, the constant comparative method was used to compare and contrast themes identified across papers (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

The interview recordings were transcribed and coded by two team members using the analytical procedures specified earlier. Next, comparisons were made between the themes derived from the papers and the interviews. To foster trustworthiness and credibility, throughout the data analysis process methodological and interpretive memos were kept and member checking was conducted with facilitators of a current sexual orientation dialogue course as well as two heterosexual student members, and peer debriefing occurred with two senior colleagues with expertise in dialogue methods (Creswell, 2007; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

RESULTS

Sample

As reported in Tables 1 and 2, of the 54 students in this study, 32 identified as female and 22 as male. Most students (n = 40) identified as White, with six African American students, three Latino students, three Asian students, and two not indicating race. Participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 24 years old, with more than one-half being 20 years old. Twelve of the students did not rank the sexual orientation dialogue as their first choice.
TABLE 1 Sample Demographics: Heterosexual Students in Sexual Orientation Dialogue Courses, Fall 2003 to Fall 2007, Final Papers, \( n = 56 \)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>( n )</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>28</td>
<td>60.87</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>39.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>78.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not indicated</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4.35</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Note. \( N = 46 \).

TABLE 2 Sample Demographics: Key Informant Interviews, Fall 2011, \( n = 8 \)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>( n )</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>50.00</td>
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<tr>
<td>Race</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino</td>
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<td>12.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>12.50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. \( N = 8 \).

Contact with LGB people has been shown to be associated with less sexual prejudice among heterosexual individuals (Engberg, Hurtado, & Smith, 2007; Woodford, Silverschanz, Swank, Scherrer, & Raiz, 2012); therefore, we document reported pre-dialogue known contact. Neither the final assignment or interviews explicitly inquired about pre-dialogue contact with LGB people; thus, we rely on students’ narratives. A total of 12 students (9 from the 2003–2007 groups and 3 from the 2011 groups) indicated having pre-dialogue contact with LGB people, specifically family members and friends. The remaining students (37 from the 2003–2007 groups and 5 from the 2011 groups) did not reference having any direct relationships with LGB people prior to the dialogues. In fact, four students from the earlier dialogues directly reported in their papers no known contact with LGB people.

Motivations and Expectations

All students entered the group wanting to learn more about the LGB community:
At the beginning of the semester I was very excited to learn that I was going to be taking part in LGB/H dialogue, as this particular group was definitely one I was most interested in and really wanted to broaden my knowledge base about. (White male participant)

Among those with prior LGB contact, they were specifically motivated to learn how they could better support their LGB family members and friends and address heterosexism. Some of these participants reported that they wanted to learn about LGB identity development, coming out, and the needs and strengths of the LGB community so they could better support their family members and friends. Many wanted to learn ways they could become involved with specific issues affecting the LGB community, such as same-sex marriage, to become (better) LGB allies. A few of these participants noted that they wanted to learn how to educate others about LGB people and the community’s needs, and how to fight heterosexism, such as how to best respond when someone makes a heterosexist comment. Some of these students noted that peers had recommended the dialogue group to them as a safe environment where they could openly acknowledge, explore, and discuss their support for the LGB community.

Concerning expectations about the dialogue group, some students, especially those who did not rank the sexual orientation dialogues as their first choice, raised concerns about participating in the groups. We identified three primary concerns, namely questioning the utility of dialogue method, the possibility of homophobic classmates and the impact on the dialogue process, and the possibility of participants themselves unintentionally offending LGB classmates.

THE UTILITY OF THE DIALOGUE METHOD

Although students elected to be in the dialogue courses (not always their first choice), a very small number were unsure about how effective a dialogue approach would be in teaching them about heterosexism, the LGB community, and how to address heterosexism. For example, in regard to the last area, one student wrote:

In the past, I have seen very little use of dialogues in situations where people share different beliefs. Usually, when people are talking and hold opposing viewpoints, they feel the need to defend themselves and view the opposition as a threat or an attack, because of this, debates and arguments are ultimately the end result a common understanding is hardly almost never reached. (White female participant)

Some students with no prior interactions with LGB individuals were especially worried and were not sure if they would relate to the experiences
of LGB individuals, which they understood as being important to the dialogue method. For instance, one student reported concerns about “being able to understand where the other group was coming from” (African American male participant). As discussed later, important learning was reported in this area.

Homophobic classmates in the dialogue groups

Some students from the earlier and later courses raised concerns about having extremely homophobic classmates who would hinder productive discussion: “I feared that there were going to be a handful of people that would be very entrenched in their homophobic ways, and therefore create constant tension within the class” (White male participant). Homophobic and intolerant students were feared to produce non-productive classes, where “constant tension” would polarize the room and discourage open communication. More specifically, some students were concerned that overtly homophobic students would offend LGB group members and create an overall unsafe and hostile learning environment. Such an environment would make it difficult to engage in meaningful dialogue because the trust and other conditions needed for successful dialogue would be absent or threatened, at best. However, it is useful to note that many students commented that once the dialogues began these thoughts diminished as facilitators helped produce a comfortable, safe environment and a lack of extremely homophobic views became apparent (which is related to group challenges; see the following section). Although several of the students still initially felt uncomfortable speaking and opening up the first few weeks of the dialogue, by the end of the course, most reported believing their classmates were trustworthy.

Unintentional offense to LGB classmates

Some students across the years, including some with LGB family members and friends, were concerned that they themselves might unintentionally offend their classmates. Generally, these students did not wish to come across as biased, “stupid,” or “naïve”: “I was nervous that my questions might seem naïve, because I knew so little about the LGB community and the difficulties they had to face” (White female participant). Related to this, some students were worried about not being able to express their opinions and views without upsetting someone else in the group. One student raised concerns about not knowing what LGB-related language would be most appropriate to use in the group given LGB students were participating (African American male student). It is interesting to note that a few of the students who reported these concerns noted how asking “naïve” and “stupid” questions was actually helpful in terms of promoting their and some colleagues’ learning.
Challenges

Two themes emerged regarding challenging experiences for students: Conflict within themselves and conflict with other group members. Students reported on intrapersonal conflict, such as when they experienced anxiety around the stigma of association with LGB peers, and they discussed experiences of conflict with other group members. These latter conflicts centered on a number of topics, such as the concept of allyhood (Edwards, 2006), same-sex marriage, and whether same-sex sexuality is biologically determined, as well as concerns about sounding politically correct.

INTRAPERSONAL CONFLICT

Among the students who did not report known pre-contact with LGB people, many were concerned about the stigma of being mislabeled as LGB at different stages of the course. For some, it was the sheer fact that they were enrolled in this section of intergroup dialogue (focusing on sexual orientation) that was enough to raise concern. Carrying the class books or even telling other people that they were a part of such a dialogue created potential for others to doubt their heterosexual orientation: “I had to field questions about my sexuality when telling my peers my class schedule for the semester. I started to feel like after telling people that I was taking this class they would question my sexual orientation” (White woman participant).

For others, the emotional reaction that resulted from the burden of stigma by possibly being perceived to be LGB was prompted by some of the class activities. These reactions to the stigma that LGB people experience daily helped some students learn about heterosexual privilege.

There were two activities during the dialogues that provoked strong reactions in some heterosexual students. It should be noted that these reactions were reported from the final papers between 2003 and 2007, but did not appear in the interviews from 2011. The reaction stemmed from an anxiety of being assumed to be LGB, revealing a stigma that exists in the minds of these heterosexual students. The first is an exercise where students were asked to go to the LGBT student resource center on campus and choose a pin from a sample of ally pins with different styles. These pins varied in terms of the degree to which it would be likely for passersby to assume the wearer was LGB. After choosing their pin, the assignment asks students to wear it on their backpack for two weeks. For some of these students, this time period spanned Thanksgiving break, which had different consequences given its public/family nature. Not all students completed this assignment fully. Many admitted to taking it off at certain times when risk felt higher for them, including in the presence of family.

Each time these pins were referenced in final papers, students discussed the fear of people judging their identity, fearful of being assumed LGB because of the public display of an ally pin. As one White man mentioned, in reference to his decision about wearing the pins:
I have not reached the point where I am comfortable with the possibility of being mislabeled . . . . I ultimately chose the second option, the rainbow ALLY pin. This pin, with its rainbow background, stood out as being a pin supporting LGBT rights. However, with the large ALLY printed in the middle of it, I felt comfortable that people who saw the pin would not mislabel my sexual identity. This activity gave me further insight into my own willingness and comfort levels in supporting the LGB cause.

These students were afraid of losing their heterosexual privileges of privacy and safety if someone assumed they had a minority sexual orientation, so they instead kept their participation in the dialogue a secret from many people.

The other exercise that was frequently referenced as similarly anxiety-producing was not assigned in every section. This exercise asked participants to pair up with someone who shared their gender identity and hold hands for 20 minutes in public. Students were instructed to walk across campus and record observations about reactions they received or perceived to receive. Through reading heterosexual students’ reflections on this activity, it is clear that these students were able to relate to and demonstrate empathy for their same-gender-loving peers, some of whom feel this vulnerability in their personal lives. As one White woman wrote, “I had never felt so exposed. I felt that every person was looking at me and judging me without even giving me a chance.” Students articulated feelings of discomfort, awkwardness, self-consciousness, and embarrassment. However, many (especially those with no prior known LGB interaction) remarked how eye-opening it was to engage in this level of perspective-taking and saw for the first time what people in same-sex relationships had to experience on a daily basis.

CONFLICT WITH OTHER STUDENTS

Conflict among the students was primarily reported in relation to students striving not to appear unknowledgeable or to say the wrong thing, which led to some silence and frustration. The topics of religion and genetics with regard to sexual minority orientations, and disagreement about how to be an ally, were also areas of conflict. Although most students reflected that the dialogue produced a safe environment for open communication, several felt the need to be politically correct, or socially cautious in their word choices, especially at the start of the course. As one African American man reflected, “For the first few weeks of dialogue, I questioned my words and actions constantly, thinking any and everything I said would be offensive to the people surrounding me.” Withholding of complete honesty and openness at times created uncontroversial and “docile” classrooms that made students feel that homophobia was present but not expressed. Consensus among the group, although a great end-goal for the dialogue, was not actually how
all individuals felt throughout the course. Students shielded their true feelings periodically to avoid being targeted for criticism in class and to avoid potential class conflict.

Attempts to be politically correct and to hide their true thoughts led several students to believe that a true dialogue was not always met. In discussing the lack of conflict in the dialogues, one White woman noted:

A lot of people who identify with the heterosexual community began to censor their comments and just agree with people of the queer community, with the hopes of not offending anyone. This was very frustrating, because their [heterosexual students] feelings never came out in front of the people with different sexual orientations, but only came out when they were surrounded by other heterosexuals . . . the lack of opposition and conflict really made our dialogues uninteresting.

The heterosexual students who withheld their true thoughts created an environment where there was false consensus among the group. It was not until outside of the dialogue setting that these true thoughts came out, which meant points of disagreement were rarely discussed and opportunities to learn from each other were missed.

When discussing same-sex marriage and the church, the dialogic exchange described during this session helped students to feel like the conversation was constructive and that the differences in opinion were beneficial to everyone’s learning. As one student noted, “[M]any of the people in my class started to get emotional and it added a lot to the dialogue.” However, during discussions on whether not someone is born lesbian or gay, students moved into debate mode. One student reported: “[A]fter a while people were no longer listening to each other and trying to understand the other’s perspective but only were concerned with getting their points across. This eventually led to people primarily being defensive or attacking each other.” Facilitators needed to step in and bring the class back to a place where dialogue could again occur. However, students did note that they were not surprised that these conflicts arose as they were discussing politically controversial topics.

On the topic of being an ally, some students reported challenges in embracing the social justice component of being an ally. In one group, when a gay student participant had commented in the dialogue, “[Y]ou’re just a good friend, but you are not an ally unless you contact your state representative,” a White male heterosexual student reported countering with, “I don’t have time to do that.” A few students were inclined to believe that as long as they personally were not prejudiced or discriminatory against LGB people, there was no need for activism. Overall, students viewed intergroup conflict as needed in some cases, in that it produced shifts in perspectives.
Learning Outcomes: Awareness, Understanding, and Action

As described earlier, intergroup dialogue aims to foster student learning and growth in intergroup communication, understanding participating groups’ social identities and concomitant power, and promotion of social justice for marginalized groups. We focus our attention here on students’ learning related to social identities and oppression, and behavioral change related to anti-heterosexism.

Social identities and oppression

Cognitive learning is an important component of the dialogue process (Maxwell et al., 2011). Similar to traditional classes, students are assigned readings and other materials that aim to help them understand heterosexual and LGB identities, socialization processes related to group identity and heterosexism and heterosexual privilege, intergroup communication, and social justice and alliance building (Zúñiga et al., 2007). Alongside these readings, the dialogue process itself also aims to facilitate cognitive understanding and learning. Our analysis identified four main learning outcomes related to the dialogue process: affirming perceptions of LGB people and tackling stereotypes, understanding heterosexual privilege, understanding heterosexism, and learning about intersectionality.

Affirming perceptions of LGB people and breaking down stereotypes

Students with LGB family members or friends tended to enter the course with a well-developed sense of their perceptions toward LGB people, which were reportedly very positive. In contrast, among those who did not have such pre-course contacts, they generally reported they were unsure about how they perceived LGB people before participating in the course. Some indicated they had never really thought about LGB people or LGB issues in any great depth. Very few students admitted to possessing strong anti-gay biases before entering the group, yet many reported that they endorsed gay stereotypes they had been exposed to by the media and in popular culture. Across the group of students without any pre-group direct LGB contacts, participants unanimously concluded that partaking in the dialogue helped them to accept LGB people and better understand this community (and realize other important outcomes). In one case, a student went from “not liking homosexuals” to becoming friends with many of the LGB participants in the class and recognizing LGB persons as “normal” (White male student). Another student reported the following:

It is become even more evident after taking this class of how my surroundings and environment have molded my opinions and perceptions
of other groupings. I have learned to be more accepting to not only homosexuals and bisexuals, but to the ideas of sexual orientation as being different for everyone. (Hispanic male student)

For many of these students, including some homophobic students, the testimonial exercise played a critical role in helping them to be more accepting and understanding of LGB people. The testimonials, which occur during the fourth session, involve all students, including heterosexual students sharing their personal stories concerning their sexual orientation. Students are asked to disclose their current sexual orientation and to discuss when they first became aware of their sexual orientation, how it may have changed, and experiences with family and friends related to their sexual orientation (e.g., disclosing sexual orientation). This exercise brings students' own experiences into the classroom as a legitimate and authentic part of learning and promotes deeper connections and further learning from each other (Zúñiga et al., 2007). As reflected in the following quotation, many students, especially those who had no or very little prior known interactions with LGB individuals, experienced a very meaningful transformation through the testimonials:

My original thoughts of the other groups [LGB people] were that they were bad people and needed to be taught a lesson. But that all changed when I had that [sic] testimonials and I read the reading “Homosexuality and American society: an overview.” This brought me into the light as to where it was started and how they were treated. This changed my whole perception of the LGBH community. From here on out my views will be forever changed. (African American male participant)

Hearing the stories of others creates a deep sense of trust and openness among group members and promotes perspective taking, empathy, a sense of commonality, and a reduction in judgment of others (Zúñiga et al., 2007). Some students noted how this empathy and perspective taking helped to shift how they perceived the LGB community and personalized the oppression and stereotypes experienced by many target identity classmates.

Not only did dialogue help change students’ attitudes, but it helped to break down stereotypes, such as all of their gay male classmates would be flamboyant and attracted to all men, and to assume all lesbians would have short hair and act butch or masculine. From the very first session, students began to realize that these perceptions were not always accurate and that they had stripped all uniqueness and individuality from LGB persons: “It is not as obvious to distinguish between members of the different groups because members of the LGB community do not look any different than
members of the heterosexual community” (White male student). With their assumptions challenged, these students began to recognize that every individual, regardless of identity, has a unique persona, and that the stereotypes they had seen in the media were just that, stereotypes. This revelation made students see that judgments based on appearance are not always accurate, and to see that LGB persons are present in every aspect of society.

**HETEROSEXUAL PRIVILEGE**

To examine social systems, power, privilege, and oppression, participants need to better understand their own identities and roles in society. Scholars of privilege point out that privileged groups are traditionally much more inclined to examine the experiences of marginalized groups than to turn a critical eye toward their own advantages and power (Case, Iuzzini, & Hopkins, 2012; Walls, 2010). The defensiveness and denial present for many privileged groups is both a part of a psychological process and a social function of the invisibility of privilege (Pratto & Stewart, 2012). The analysis indicates that participants were able to explore and recognize heterosexual privilege through engaging in readings, hearing the testimonials, and engaging in dialogue with classmates.

Students with known prior direct interactions with LGB individuals differed slightly in their outcomes than those with no known direct interactions. Heterosexual students with previous interactions tended to indicate that they entered the dialogues with some acknowledgment and recognition of their heterosexual privilege, whereas those without these interactions did not have this same self-awareness. Dialogue helped students with LGB friends and family members to deepen their understanding of their privileges and understand the complexity of the heterosexist society in which they live.

For students without known direct interactions, dialogue played a revelatory role in thinking about their identity and unpacking the rights allocated to them simply by identifying as heterosexual. This student provided powerful illustration of this learning:

> As a heterosexual, I never thought about how much my sexual orientation impacts by life on a daily basis. There has never been a time when I felt discriminated against or was harassed because of my sexual orientation. It never occurred to me how lucky I am that I can display my affection for my boyfriend in public without fear. There is no time when I have to consciously consider the extremely negative consequences that could result from kissing on the sidewalk or holding hands while walking around campus. (White female participant)

Many participants recognized that, prior to the dialogue there was no reason to explore privileged group identities because as an agent group
member their identities are part of the social norm. For one White male participant, “recognizing and coming to terms with privilege was easily the greatest challenge, and I’m very grateful that the dialogue curriculum was conducive to this introspection regarding my own role in the system of oppression and privilege.”

Participants who recognized their heterosexual privilege were able to describe the tangible privileges of agent group membership. For example, one participant reflected:

I have never thought twice about how easy it will be for me to get married, how I won’t have to think about how to have children, how if I want to adopt children it won’t be a difficult issue, and how every day of my life I can walk uninhibited around campus holding my boyfriend’s hand without receiving disapproving looks. (White female participant)

Another student acknowledged the experience of benefitting from privilege: “I took advantage of my own privileges and did not actively support the surrounding minority groups because their interests did not seem to affect me” (White female participants). Through the dialogue, these privileges became recognized as part of a system of power, privilege, and oppression that best serves those who are members of the agent groups.

Intergroup dialogue can risk creating imbalanced learning where privileged groups only learn about experiences of marginalized groups (DeTurk, 2010). Through gaining this knowledge and understanding, heterosexual students moved beyond simply learning about marginalized groups to recognize their role and responsibility in dismantling oppression, discrimination, and heterosexual privilege. For many students this movement included engaging or intending to engage in pro-LGB behaviors (discussed later) and for some it involved changing their attitudes on civil rights for LGB persons, such as LGB-bullying protections, open participation of LGB people in the military, and legal recognition of same-sex relationships. For instance, one student who indicated initially “not liking homosexuals” and supporting the federal government’s ban on same-sex marriage reflected that he gained a greater consciousness about LGB individuals and issues and began to reevaluate his opinions and biases. By participating in the dialogue process, including the testimonials, this student started to understand all the benefits that come with being able to get married, the importance of these benefits to members of the LGB community, and why it was so important to stop this institutionalized discrimination.

Reflecting on their heterosexual identity, including its concomitant privileges, and being exposed to LGB students was vital to their transformation. Many of participants noted that the testimonials were the first time they had ever reflected on or had been invited to reflect on their sexual orientation.
Intergroup Dialogue Courses

Heterosexism

Participants universally indicated a deeper understanding of heterosexism and how it perpetuates discrimination and oppression of LGB people. Students reported gaining an awareness of how the media and various institutions, such as religious organizations and government, as well as individuals, promote and project heterosexist norms. Heterosexist culture discriminates against the LGB community (Case & Stewart, 2010), and students realized that they live in a heterosexist world. As one student reflected, the dialogues promoted his reflection on “how engrained heterosexuality is with the idea of normalcy in our society” (White male participant). Another student indicated the following:

Many people consider heterosexuality to be the only “correct” form for relationships because they have been told that their whole lives along with the fact that our society’s culture is built so strongly around rigid gender roles. Just the fact that heterosexual unions are the only legally recognizable form of marriage allowed in the United States is one of the countless examples showing how American culture blatantly institutionally discriminates against homosexuals. (White female participant)

Numerous students highlighted the problematic and unjust nature of heterosexist marriage laws.

In terms of how individuals contribute to heterosexism, in addition to acknowledging how heterosexual privilege fosters heterosexism (including their own heterosexual privilege), students discussed the role of individual-level perceptions and behaviors attitudes:

When heterosexual people see two lesbians or gay men kissing they see it as them flaunting the fact that they are members of the LGB [community]. However, it almost sounds absurd when turned around to think that when a man and a woman kiss they’re flaunting there heterosexuality. (White male participant)

In terms of understanding how heterosexism operates, a considerable number of students reported gaining rich insights about the challenges their LGB classmates experienced with “coming out.” Coming into the dialogue, many of the study participants without pre-group LGB friends and family members did not understand why an individual would hide their sexual orientation and not be honest with their family and friends. Some could not grasp why LGB persons were not be “proud of who they were.” But, hearing the LGB classmates’ narratives, most often reporting struggles and fears about their safety and judgments or rejections by family members, conflicts with religious upbringings, and experiences of harassment, helped to
deepen understanding of the complexity of coming out, and why the LGB community sometimes seems invisible.

Students also reported they learned about LGB harassment and discrimination. In addition to learning from their LGB classmates’ experiences, some participants also indicated that exercises helped to develop personal insight about heterosexism. For example, reflecting on the exercise in which students walk through campus holding the hands of a student of the same sex, a participant reported the following:

After holding hands with another man even for only fifteen minutes, I realized how socially unacceptable it was by the second[hand] looks and stares we received. The double standard for heterosexual and homosexual people stuck with me after that day and realized that not only was homosexuality looked down upon but also it can be unsafe. (White male participant)

IDENTITY INTERSECTIONALITY

Intersectionality of social identities speaks to the presence and overlapping or intersectional nature of social identities such as race, gender, class, sexual orientation, nationality, and others. This approach to identity serves to expand the discourse around power and oppression and emphasizes that multiple social identities must be taken into account when seeking to understand an individual’s experiences (Case et al., 2012; Cole, 2009). Participants, often connected to understanding heterosexual privilege noted their learning about the intersections between various identities, especially sexual orientation and race, gender, and religion. Related to learning about their heterosexual privilege, numerous students across the years noted how participation in the dialogues helped them appreciate their privileged identities beyond their heterosexual identity: “I began to think more about how my race, sex, and sexual orientation played such a significant role in shaping me” (White female participant). This mirrors the learning LGB students reported earlier in regard to intergroup dialogue courses (Dessel et al., 2011). Religion and race were particularly salient identities for many participants. For example, students who came from religious backgrounds felt that discussions about LGB issues were absent from their upbringing, and they also felt somewhat defensive or feared being misunderstood on the topic of sexual orientation. Regarding race, students recognized the impact of intersectionality on oppression; “At times I felt I related to the LGB group because of the fact that I am a Latina woman, also a minority in our society by race and gender.” An African American woman reflected:

If I was a lesbian I may be like working class, AA [African American], woman, I would be all kind of screwed. No one ever thinks how each
social id [identity] ties into one. Its [sic] funny how they all intersect and can change at any time.

In one group, further highlighting the importance of race, students commented how during the hand-holding exercise (described earlier), they noticed that the interracial male couple received more negative stares than the White couple, and the male couple more than the female couple.

Furthermore, participants were able to recognize connections and relationships between their different identities and the experiences of sexual minority students. In particular, participants were able to identify shared experiences among targeted identity groups, such as similar problems faced by being female or a racial minority.

Changes in Behavior

PROMOTING ANTI-HETEROSEXISM

Participants discussed the formation of strong alliances with LGB students, and the various ways in which to disrupt heterosexism to avoid maintaining an unjust social system. Students reported changes in behavior they intended to make following the end of the dialogue, as well as reported actual changes they had begun to implement in their lives already. These changes were noted to occur interpersonally, with changes to relationships with others, intrapersonally, with changes to the individuals’ own knowledge and actions, and on a systems or societal level, with intent to change institutional problems. We report on these levels within the domains of intended and actual behaviors.

INTENDED BEHAVIORS

On the interpersonal level, students left the dialogue feeling as if they could begin to change the behaviors or actions of people in their lives and also have increased relationships with LGB individuals. They planned to do this by interrupting discrimination and offensive language used by peers or family members, provide support to LGB friends, and by simply gaining more friends and acquaintances who are sexual minorities. One disruption mentioned was to no longer be a bystander when acts of discrimination or oppression were seen or heard. Students recognized that they needed to stand up against oppressive behaviors and institutional practices to break the cycles of injustice and let LGB individuals know that they have support systems. Students were no longer going to be passive and dismiss hateful things said, and they gained a sense of agency and power. As one student said, “By taking a class and making friends, I changed without even realizing it. I have become an ally and am no longer afraid or too naive to
speak my mind.” Intrapersonally, heterosexual students intended to further educate themselves on LGB issues and be more open as an ally by displaying rainbow/pride ribbons or buttons on their personal belongings.

In addition, some students noted intentions to attempt to change large societal and institutional problems by voting for equal rights measures, attending pro-LGB marches and rallies, and becoming a dialogue facilitator themselves to influence the lives of others and perpetuate change. Although follow up will need to occur to determine to what extent these intended changes took place, many students nonetheless displayed an increase in potential and desire to become active, and left the course “feeling great responsibility” to advocate for social justice.

**ACTUAL BEHAVIORS**

Reports of actual actions taken that were attributed to the dialogue occurred with over one-half of the participants, many of whom were students who had previously reported no known contact with LGB people. Students had begun to challenge friends and family when hearing negative stereotypes and they promoted dialogic communication in their other classes about LGB issues. As one student reported, “I now confront and/or educate people who use the word gay or fag in a negative way.” At the same time, students had begun to understand that words matter and they challenged their own language patterns, and either stopped completely or corrected themselves when they used “fag” or “that’s so gay.” Some students had also already placed ally and support buttons on their personal belongings and had researched specific LGB issues to better inform themselves, so that they could be better advocates when confronting homophobia.

**DISCUSSION**

This study examined experiences of undergraduate heterosexual students who participated in sexual orientation intergroup dialogue courses over the span of nine years, during a time in our country’s history when public attitudes have been marginally improving with regard to homosexuality and the rights of sexual minority people (Gallup Politics, 2012; Pew Forum, 2012). The results of this qualitative analysis offer important insights into this intergroup social justice education method and the outcomes it can produce.

First, participants overall expressed that, although they were products of a society that has socialized them with stereotypes, fears, and lack of information about LGB people, they were open to learning about the oppression that LGB people experience, and outcomes about the unearned privileges that heterosexuals, including themselves, are afforded in society
Intergroup Dialogue Courses

were documented. In addition to promoting understanding of heterosexual privilege, dialogue was a useful tool in combating false stereotypes held and for some students they finally had faces to put with the LGB community. Not only did students without known pre-group contact with LGB people finally get a chance to meet and interact with sexual minority individuals, but dialogue also became a safe place where ideas, questions, and opinions regarding LGB issues could be shared, explored and cultivated. Despite the challenges noted earlier, it is clear that heterosexual students developed a sense of empathy and understanding of their LGB peers, and many reported a reduction in bias. These are known outcomes of optimal intergroup contact that is structured and personal (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Participation in these dialogues combated the lack of known prior interactions with LGB individuals that can contribute to a misunderstanding and intolerance toward sexual minority individuals (Engberg et al., 2007). An especially noteworthy positive outcome is the actions that students reported engaging in to cease and prevent verbal harassment among their peers.

Second, participants generally gained a great deal of important knowledge about themselves in terms of their own heterosexual privilege and our heterosexist society. They reflected beyond interpersonal relationships on larger unequal societal structures, such as marriage, and how they may be able to challenge them. Critical consciousness has been found to be a key outcome of intergroup dialogue participation for LGB students in sexual orientation dialogues, as well as for both target and agent students in race–ethnicity and Arab–Jewish dialogues (Dessel & Ali, 2011; Dessel et al., 2011; Nagda et al., 2009). Studies on intergroup dialogue show that awareness about structural inequality can lead to commitment to social change actions (Gurin-Sands, Gurin, Nagda, & Osuna, 2012). By the end of the course, students who lacked direct relationships with LGB people before the groups no longer felt confused about their positions on LGB topics and intended to further their education about sexual minority and social justice issues.

Campus climates are still far from ideal for sexual minority students (Rankin et al., 2010; Woodford, Silverchanz, Swank, Scherrer, & Raiz, 2012) and some heterosexual students in the dialogues we examined noted that they or others were reluctant to fully express what might be perceived as biased views. Students with more negative views toward LGB people may have had a very difficult time participating in this dialogue topic, but also may potentially have more to gain. Our specific analysis does not shed light on this; thus, we recommend future research in this area.

Third, conflict can be a positive learning experience when properly facilitated (Pettit, 2006). Students recognized that a lack of conflict may occur when students withhold their true feelings, and that this can lead to lost learning opportunities. In some cases, hot topics, such as conservative religious beliefs and the causes of sexual orientation, may need further exploration in the dialogues.
Recommendations for Pedagogy

In their papers and the interviews, we asked students to offer any suggestions for ways to improve the dialogues. Students noted the need for racial and other sexual identity diversity in some of the groups. This means recruitment from the LGB community needs to focus on underrepresented identities such as people of color, bisexual people, and religious minorities. It also means strategic outreach to minority groups within the heterosexual student population. The lack of diversity may have created a room devoid of much conflict and deep learning in the course. Certain sexual minority viewpoints were not present, so some students thought the course missed important perspectives and did not have the opportunity to become allies to the full LGB community. Related, the binary intergroup dialogue model may imply a homogeneous experience for any particular social identity group. We emphasize that within group diversity needs to be recognized, as LGB individuals’ experiences vary greatly. Our participants likely had different experiences and learning based on the identities represented in their specific dialogue group.

Limitations and Future Research

Although producing important insights about sexual orientation dialogues from the perspective of heterosexual students, this study has several noteworthy limitations. Our sample is a convenience sample and students are not randomly assigned to dialogue topic groups. Therefore, it is possible that many of the participants, including those who held homophobic views prior to the group, were at least somewhat predisposed to being open to discussing and learning about minority sexual orientation experiences. The use of student final papers can present bias due to the influence of receiving a grade. As well, post-dialogue reflections run the risk of recall bias and make it difficult to be assured of objective reporting of one’s views. These data also represent the current time period in which they were collected; thus, given the growth in public discourse in LGB rights in recent years, some interesting changes may be seen in future studies.

Future research analyzing intergroup dialogue courses can complement the methods used here. Studies that meet the conditions of causality are needed to examine the effectiveness of dialogue. Specifically, the use of random assignment and comparison groups should be considered. As well, quantitative pre/post dialogue surveys will offer another means of determining the change that may have taken place in attitudes and knowledge. Analyzing these data by gender and other social identities would provide a more nuanced picture of the gender differences that may exist in attitudes and experiences.

Sexual orientation prejudice is a persistent societal problem that requires attention at all levels of interaction. Intergroup dialogue courses have much
to offer all students who participate (Dessel et al., 2011; Nagda et al., 2009). Higher education provides an opportunity for learning across differences, and the development of critical thinking with regard to socialization, power, and social justice. We offer this model as one method to pursue these educational goals in regard to sexual orientation and social inclusion for LGB people.

REFERENCES


