

Sexual Well-Being Informed Social Work Practice: Harnessing the Power of Reflection and a Hallmark Experiential Sexuality Education Activity

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Abstract

Moving human sexuality beyond a specialty focus and establishing a sexuality discourse within social work's foundation may be challenging. Group process and reflection, hallmarks of social work, may be a way to integrate this sometimes overlooked and often taboo conversation into social work coursework. Undergrad students from two Mid-western universities reflected on the usefulness of an established experiential sex education activity. Qualitative analysis of student narratives resulted in seven themes describing the usefulness of this activity including: (i) emotional intimacy; (ii) connection; (iii) power of personal stories; (iv) normalising; (v) healing; (vi) clinical profile and (vii) RE-storying. These themes demonstrate that this activity has clear benefits and enriches the overall learning of the topic of human sexuality. Further, these themes fit nicely within a social work pedagogy teaching clinical practice skills such as group process, rapport building and use of self. Implications for social work are discussed.

Keywords: Practice, qualitative research, reflection, sexuality, social work student education, strengths perspective

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Introduction

Social work instructors from more traditional social work roles or backgrounds (e.g. child welfare, mental health, domestic violence and poverty) most likely will integrate exemplars and activities pulled from their areas of familiarity. Their lack of comfort or history with teaching human sexuality may predispose their lectures to sexual silence contributing to not only an overall lack of sexuality education in social work classrooms, but in the social work curricula (Ingersoll and Satterly, 2016; Dodd and Tolman, 2017; Turner, 2020). As Turner (2020) has noted, 'this gap in social work skills is problematic, negatively impacting social worker's ability to provide comprehensive, accessible, medically accurate, shame-free, inclusive and pleasure affirming, sex-positive informed client services' (p. 306). Furthermore, Dodd and Tolman (2017) have argued for social work to revive a positive discourse on sexuality; however, there is rarely room in the already burdened curricula to provide stand-alone, sexuality-focused courses. However, generalist social work academics unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the topic of sexuality may find it challenging to integrate sexuality content into their courses. Thus, following in the spirit of other scholars (Turner *et al.*, 2018) who have developed sexuality 'fill-in' activities for established non-sexuality, social work curricula, this research reviews a sexuality teaching activity that can be inserted within traditional and regularly offered social work courses. This article is an attempt to bridge this divide, a lack of sexuality discourse within social work professional preparation, by supporting social work instructors in incorporating sexuality content into their course. We aim to facilitate this by evaluating a hallmark sexuality activity based on reflection, a familiar social work skill. This may provide instructors wishing to integrate sexuality content into their courses a unique learning activity.

Reflection is a crucial skill that is used within social work curriculums to aid students' professional development. Faculty understands the importance and value of using reflective activities as a teaching tool to help students to explore their own experiences and to evoke awareness of their own biases. For example, early in social work education, reflective activities are helpful when students are reconciling their personal and family values with the values of the profession. In practice and field courses, reflective activities help students to integrate course content into practice and aids students in managing their biases (Lee and Fortune, 2013). Further, sexuality researchers (Schaub *et al.*, 2017) have discussed that some social workers engage in 'bracketing-off' (p. 440), thus potentially limiting their ability to join in relational aspects of social work.

Although we understand the value of reflective activities in teaching in the social work curriculum, it may be challenging to find reflective

activities that are shown to be effective and inclusive of a wide range of sexuality experiences and perspectives that students bring to the classroom. As a result, it is suggested that sexuality conversation and reflective activities are underused, particularly when exploring content that may be viewed as taboo, or emotionally provocative such as human sexuality. In this study, a reflective educational activity that is frequently used in college-level human sexuality courses (Walters, 2001) is presented as an example of how faculty can bridge social work pedagogy with the praxis goal of preparing sexually literate social work students for practice. Scholars across disciplines report that the activity aids students in re-evaluating their implicit and explicit norms related to human sexuality; an important consideration for students preparing for jobs in human services (Walters, 2001; Dupras, 2012).

Problem statement

'The strengths perspective perfectly positions social workers to be sexual health/well-being practitioners, researchers, and educators' (Turner, 2020, p. 305); however, there is little preparation of social workers to engage clients around sexuality. Answering the call by Dodd and Tolman (2017), this article provides a social work voice to the sexuality discourse, in an attempt to 'add important nuance and complexity to research and practice beyond the boundaries of the profession' (p. 229). By reviewing the effectiveness of a common sex education reflective activity, Best of and Worst Of (BOWO), the goal was to illuminate an easy to integrate activity that social work faculty without expertise in human sexuality could utilise to bring a sexuality discourse into the preparation of social work students.

While another publication presents themes of 'Best of' and 'Worst of' sexual experiences generated by these university students from the activity (Turner *et al.*, 2021), this article is based on the value assigned by students regarding the effectiveness of this activity. The goal of this research is to qualitatively answer the question: What are the responses of the students to the usefulness of the BOWO activity (Walters, 2001)? In this article, a review of the relevant literature is presented, human sexuality from a social work perspective is explored and then the results of this study are presented. Finally, implications for social work teaching and research are reviewed.

Literature review

For many young people, tertiary education often is the final chance for academic-based sexuality education (King *et al.*, 2020). This is important because research studies indicate that sexuality education improves

behaviours, reduces risks and improves health outcomes (Kirby *et al.*, 2007). Further, college students who had taken more comprehensive courses benefited by increased knowledge, better self-image and greater comfort with their own sexuality, greater tolerance of others including sexual minorities, and better communication with partners and their own children (King *et al.*, 1993; Goldfarb, 2005; Rogers *et al.*, 2009; Pettijohn and Dunlap, 2010; Rutledge *et al.*, 2011; Henry, 2013).

Olmstead *et al.* (2020) noted that the sexuality seminar of their research helped students co-construct guidelines around asking questions, sharing thoughts, beliefs and experiences; however, it was not clear if these process skills were utilised consistently during learning activities or if any specific days were dedicated to processing student lived experiences. Further, while not a formal part of the course description, processing the course content with others outside of the seminar, was a part of the research. Olmstead *et al.* (2020) suggests a ‘one size fits all approach to sexuality education, while ideal, may miss the mark in accounting for the nuances in participant identity and exposure to robust and relevant sexual health information’ (p. 312).

Research (Aistle *et al.*, 2021) indicates that students want an all-inclusive discussion around mental, emotional, relational and social aspects of sex. Additionally, participants noted instructor characteristics were important, highlighting that they should be professional and trained. Of particular interest, participants also noted ‘age’ as an important characteristic, stating, ‘more interesting to hear from someone like closer’ (p. 9). This may support more peer-to-peer, process-oriented activities. Further support for sexuality courses being more discussion focused and inclusive of emotional intimacy is provided by Allen (2008) who reported that participants critiqued traditional sexuality education as ‘de-eroticised and didactic’ (p. 573) favouring instruction on how to increase sexual pleasure.

Walters (2001) described an educational activity that is commonly used in college-level human sexuality courses. Research was conducted using this un-graded activity where students are asked to anonymously write a brief narrative describing their best and worst sexual experience. Scholars (Walters, 2001; Dupras, 2012) have reported that students describe this activity as a valuable, fun and memorable learning experience. Further, the activity is reported to aid students in reevaluating their implicit and explicit norms related to human sexuality; an important consideration for students preparing for jobs in human services. However, there has not been an in-depth exploration of what students felt about the experience.

Human sexuality: a social work perspective

Human sexuality is a fundamental part of being alive. It is an essential element of both general well-being (Office of the Surgeon General,

USA, 2001; [World Health Organization, 2006](#)) and intimate relationships ([Timm, 2009](#)). Its significance in human life demands that social workers are knowledgeable, skilled and comfortable with sexuality. [Turner \(2020\)](#) argued that, ‘the strengths perspective perfectly positions social workers to be sexual health/well-being practitioners, researchers and educators’ (p. 305). However, he notes concern that if social workers are not prepared to work with client sexuality, they will arguably be unprepared to fulfil what the [Council on Social Work Education \(2015\)](#) states is ‘the purpose of the social work profession- to promote human and community well-being’ (p. 5). Additionally, [Dodd and Tolman \(2017\)](#) advocated for a social work voice to be added back to the discourse on sexuality, noting that it ‘would add important nuance and complexity to research and practice beyond the boundaries of the profession’ (p. 229).

Methods

Design

Qualitative methods were used to explore students’ responses to the usefulness of the BOWO activity. Qualitative data related to the responses of the reflective activity were qualitatively analysed to identify codes and themes that emerged. Ethics application was approved by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board (Ethics ID 16050403) for this analysis to be undertaken.

Participants

In keeping with [Walters \(2001\)](#) original design, participants were not asked about their demographic information. The course instructors provided demographic information. Students ($N=113$) from two US Mid-western university undergraduate, human sexuality courses were invited to participate in this study during their regularly scheduled human sexuality class. These classes were open to all students across the university. Ninety-one students identified as female, ten male and two as non-binary/agender/trans. Regarding standing, most students were juniors and seniors. Eight students identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual and eleven students identified as non-Caucasian (African American, Latina and Asian).

Data collection

During the development of this study, the possibility of students having an emotional reaction to the content was considered and this concern

was also reviewed with members of the Institutional Ethics Review Board. In agreement with board guidelines, participation was voluntary. All students were also provided a board-approved list of counselling and support services available on their campus and in their local campus community. Students were reminded at multiple points during the study that participation was voluntary, and they were reminded of resources available.

To understand the purpose and the methods of this study, it is crucial to first understand the Walter's 'Best of/Worst of study (for a more detailed discussion, see [Walters, 2001](#)). In replicating that activity, on day 1, we invited students to anonymously write about their 'Best of' and 'Worst of' sexual experiences. Students were given a sheet of paper and the same type of writing utensil to ensure that all data sheets maintained anonymity. Students were informed that the study was voluntary and that they could opt out of the study. Students could opt out of either the research project or opt out of having their papers read out loud or opt out of both by marking the corresponding boxes at the top of the paper. If they chose to opt out of participating in the research, they were asked to write about what they wanted for their birthday as an alternate so that their peers would be unaware of their decision to not participate.

To avoid the coital imperative ([McPhillips et al., 2001](#)), students were informed that they got to define 'sexual experience' and that it could be activities beyond vaginal/penile intercourse. Alternate activities such as anal intercourse and holding hands were noted by the facilitator. Students were asked to maintain silence and to keep their eyes on their own papers. Additionally, to provide structure and focus, students were allotted a minimum amount of time for writing before they could excuse themselves while the remaining could finish. Responses were collected and reviewed by the facilitator, noting those who did not want their entries read or had opted out of the study.

On day 2, the facilitator reminded students that participation (listening to the narratives) was voluntary. Furthermore, he set the tone by reminding students of the emotional intimacy that their peers were engaging in with the activity. Students were prompted to be present, respectful and to honour the moment. A request that all phones and laptops be put away was announced, as was a disclosure that the sheets were not altered and would be read 'as is'. Students were prompted to be aware of any feelings or thoughts experienced during the reading and told that a discussion would follow. The facilitator and instructor then took turns reading aloud the narratives until all were shared.

Following the completion of Days 1 (writing) and 2 (reading) which was the original Walter's activity, students were invited to participate in a discussion, the results of which became the data for this study. The discussion sought to illuminate their experience and their evaluation of the BOWO activity. Prior to engaging in this processing discussion, students

were reminded that participation was voluntary as well as provided the campus counselling resources again. The following questions were used as a semi-structured guide to lead the discussion that followed: What was the activity like? What was it like to hear your story out loud? What was it like to hear others' stories? Course instructors served as scribes to capture quotes and topical themes. The facilitator also asked students for clarification, summarising their comments and noting generic themes throughout the discussion. Responses were collected by a notetaker. Following the class, the facilitator also interviewed instructors to explore their responses to the activity.

Analysis

Notes from the facilitated discussion with students and instructors were transcribed in such a way as to capture participants' responses to the processes and analysed as data along with field notes. Of key interest were the participants' own words. This allowed researchers to look at participants' perceptions and meanings by the way they talked about their experiences. Several steps were followed to analyse the emerging themes. Coding, which was the next step, involved a combination of deductive and inductive analysis. Next, an inductive technique (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) was used in which research findings emerge from frequent or dominant themes. Thematic extraction was done in an inductive manner that follows basic tenets of qualitative content analysis (Silverman, 2011). The final stage of cross-case thematic analysis involved creating a model of themes and sub-themes, which were then presented using illustrative quotes and other evidence from the data, in order to best answer the research questions.

Crabtree and Miller (1999) suggest 'chunking' and 'displaying' data to make connections during the analysis phase. Chunking allows for identification of patterns by examining several paragraphs of text that have been similarly coded. A map or matrix is used to display the data, allowing the researcher to compare and contrast data, and explore relationships among categories. For the purposes of this study, the code manual became the organising matrix as authors re-ordered and re-organised codes, finding that some codes in the preliminary manual were not needed and determined that they were either represented through other codes or that the concepts underlying those codes provided context to the study and therefore were not showing up in the data.

Results

This study sought to illuminate the responses of students to the usefulness of a hallmark experiential sexuality education BOWO activity

(Walters, 2001). Seven themes emerged from the inductive analysis: (i) emotional intimacy; (ii) connection; (iii) power; (iv) normalising; (v) healing; (vi) clinical profile and (vii) Re-storying. As themes are introduced, excerpts from the transcripts are provided in an effort to illustrate and illuminate the rich responses of participant's voices.

Emotional intimacy

Emotional intimacy was defined as vulnerability, risk taking or a willingness to be known (Dailey, 1981). Students noted that vulnerability required 'trust' and while it was 'really easy to write [it was] hard to listen'. Some noted that hearing the stories was more challenging because they were present in the room and had been nervous to come the day of the readings. Students shared that 'even the things we have repressed' were 'no longer just my memories'; now I am 'having it out there'. Some students struggled with the gravity of the created intimacy, sharing, 'I was very unprepared' and another stating, 'I felt really uncomfortable and that created intimacy with everyone and I felt bad about that. I'm a private person and I felt like I was in everyone's bedrooms and I don't feel like I should be there. Even though we consented I felt bad about it'.

However, students overwhelmingly noted positives responses, such as recognising a connection between emotional and physical intimacy. Another positive mentioned was witnessing how the group would receive the story. Others shared, 'I struggle with being emotionally available, this has helped to reassure my ability to be more open, even with my close friends'. Students contemplated 'Do I really want these people to hear it' but also noting 'I like being in control of telling my story'. This was reflected by others too who stated, 'I had it in my mind when I was writing. What experiences would I be comfortable sharing out loud. I knew that I'd be ok with it being read out loud, so maybe I chose the story because of that'.

Overall, students were most impressed with the level of intimacy expressed. One student shared, 'I felt kinda like naked. Even though no one knew it was me I felt embarrassed ... what if they know... what if they found out. I felt exposed'. Students described how the activity 'created a deeper connection with myself'. The instructors also remarked that initially they were concerned students would be hesitant to share; however, they were 'pleasantly surprised' that 'most seemed to honestly share an experience' and underscored 'What surprised me most was how explicit students' responses and personal reflections of "good and bad" sex experiences were'.

Connection

A sense of community, similarity or ‘creating a common ground’ defined this theme with one student noticing, ‘I was able to connect to that story’. Despite the anonymity, students appreciated the power in their mutual stories with one student reflecting, ‘having an, even anonymous, shared experience creates a common experience’. Yet another student related the increased intimacy with building ‘connection with the classroom’. Others used phrases, such as ‘subconscious connections’ and ‘knowing others intimate moments’ Yet, another student hypothesised that they, ‘will have even better discussion in [future] classes’.

While student narratives were sometimes troubling, students expressed gratitude for the camaraderie stating, ‘especially with the worse ones it didn’t make you feel all alone. Everyone will have had a bad experience ... a weird sex experience’. This sentiment was echoed by another student responding, ‘It was nice to hear we share some of the same experience, not nice, but nice to relate’.

Instructors also commented on the increased classroom kinship, with one stating, ‘the project seemed to help them connect their own experiences with those of their classmates, whether they were similar or different’. Another instructor made this observation

As I and Dr. Turner were reading out loud, the classroom grew hushed, slightly fidgety, and reactive to what they were hearing. Because students were not used to hearing voices they knew [their peers] present sexual experiences so explicitly, I took a brief moment to remind them that they were adults who gave consent to this process and could exit at any time they felt a desire. No students left. All students remained engrossed in their collective voice.

Power of personal stories

The power of personal stories was described as ‘reassuring’ and as ‘This is real stuff’. While some noted that it ‘wasn’t as hard to hear’ others shared that ‘wasn’t easy to write, I try to erase the negative memories’. However, other students noted the intensity of the exercise sharing, I ‘Thought I like was going to throw-up during’. and yet another stated, ‘I [just] told everyone in class and before I had only told 4 or 5 people’. This was echoed by another student reflecting, ‘you felt the gravity, the weight of this... Oh shit its real!’ Students seemingly were tuned into the ‘tension felt... it was raw!’ and resonated with their peers’ stories. ‘There were three stories I related to and one I really related to’.

The advantages listed included, ‘having my story read [anonymously] allowed me to get my story out and feel relieved and still being heard’. Other students ostensibly had a moment of transcendence, where their

agenda changed. For example, a student stated, 'I thought I wanted to figure out who was whose. Once we got into it I didn't want to know ...It was intimate and personal'. This sacredness was echoed by an instructor sharing that it was 'a truly magical large lecture course moment that I will repeat each semester because of the profound, rare and moving results that students and I experienced'.

Normalising

This theme was captured by students stating, 'you think that no one else knows what you went through –good or bad', yet you learn from shared stories, 'we are all human' and 'you are not alone'. However, some students were nervous with the activity. One shared, 'I chose not to share because I would have been anxious, I was able to empathise with people. I would have been anxious and distracted if I was waiting to hear my story'.

Students elaborated that a benefit of normalising is that they didn't feel 'abnormal' and that having other people relate to their story and think it was interesting had a 'healing aspect'. Yet, others recognised an expanded understanding that despite knowing that 'this couldn't have happened to me', there was a profound impact grasping, 'but it happened to someone else in this room'. Perhaps one of the therapeutic benefits of a group sharing activity, is as one student decreed, 'hearing it out loud, the good didn't sound as good and the bad didn't sound as bad'. An instructor echoed these observations by sharing, 'the project seemed to help them connect their own experiences with those of their classmates, whether they were similar or different'.

Healing

This theme was characterised by a curative, therapeutic or soothing quality experienced by students. Student noted that the act of 'hearing people's stories' was beneficial, highlighting that it 'made it useful to hear' similarities with others. One student observed, 'I felt very shocked because I was feeling very reassured'. Another student commented, knowing, 'other people might have related to my story and I thought that was interesting. Oh other people relate to you..it kinda had a healing aspect'.

Clinical profile

This theme was defined as the early development of a clinical presence. This constellation of practice-oriented aptitudes speaks to a social

workers therapeutic connection with clients. This budding social work portrait contained several sub-themes including: critical thinking, skill-building and gratitude.

Critical thinking was defined as a deep analysis. Students considered a range of topics with one student stating, ‘the worst ones were when you were made to be an object. No one wanted to feel like an object’ Others contemplated shame noting its presence in the bad sexual experiences. One student after connecting culture and emotional intimacy to shame, queried, ‘Although the stories were different, shame was a common thread. What do you make of that?’ And despite there being no identifiers another student made a gender observation, stating,

I was paying attention to the guy stories. It would be interesting to have more guy input. You noticed the female stories had to do with shame. Guys didn’t talk about shame so much. You don’t hear guys say they didn’t feel sad about it. It’s a cultural norm for sure but I also don’t think that guys aren’t ...well, they usually initiate sex and if you’re someone initiating then you’re not going to feel bad about it. ...or guilty or shamed’.

Other students also noted a gendered sexuality, sharing cultural messages such as ‘pure and good’ in relation to women and a policing of women by other women. In contrast, men ‘get applauded for having sex’. The taboo nature of sexuality was questioned, pondering why society can neither talk about sex nor acknowledge in relation to ‘other hardships’.

Skill building was highlighted by students discussing a range of clinical abilities such as managing their emotions. A student conveyed, ‘It was hard to not hear the tone of the stories...you really didn’t want to react. My worst was funny, but others thought it was serious’. Others stated that they were able to be present and attentive. A student revealed, ‘I learned to be more mindful of what others stories are’ . Another student discussed increased empathy, stating, ‘I felt a deep sadness even worse than what I felt about my own [story]. Looking at other people and knowing ... that they have guilt.. I wanted to comfort them and tell them it’s not their fault’. Further, one student discussed an increase in empathy sharing, ‘when you would reading the “worst of” stories I would put myself in their shoes [and] this made me want to get to know everyone better’. Another example of student empathy was articulated by a student stating, it ‘breaks my heart to know that this has happened to someone next to me’.

Gratitude was when students displayed an appreciation. One student disclosed, ‘It was just a privilege to hear these stories. It was such a gift ... In no other class would I experience this’. Yet, another student recognised the personal aspect of this exercise, illuminating, ‘You are putting a face(s) to what story has happened’.

The instructors contributed their observations to this theme. The unique learning of this activity and how it contributed a potential clinical profile was noted. One instructor elaborated, 'It provided them [students] with an opportunity to understand issues of consent, violence, healthy sexuality, kink, etc. in a way that they may not have been able to otherwise'.

Re-storying

The re-telling of a sexual story is an important developmental aspect. In owning a story, a person is able to recreate the narrative. Student quotes that demonstrate this are, 'I glossed over the bad', 'Dissociate and compartmentalise the bad situations'. The instructors also commented on this aspect. One stated, this research experience was valuable in many ways. 'I'm sure that the data collected will be helpful to the article's agenda; however, the real win was for my students who were able to hear, contemplate and reflect on their experiences'.

Discussion

Conversations around the sexuality of young people are frequently centred on risk and morality (Mellor and Epstein, 2006). Some may even question, if talking about sex is unduly harmful; however, scholars have noted that people can benefit from telling their sexuality narratives (Turner and Crane, 2016a,b). Tom Shakespeare (2000) contends that a sexual person must have self-assurance. They need the ability to communicate, to tell their story. This act of self-love—of authenticating one's life—perhaps counters the pervasive negative social messages. This study explored the effectiveness of a common sex education reflective activity in an effort to illuminate an easy to integrate activity that social work faculty without expertise in human sexuality could utilise to bring a sexuality discourse into the preparation of social work students.

This activity is relatively simple and can be framed within the social work skill of reflection to augment student learning. The emerging adults in this study noted the effectiveness of this reflective activity using first-hand narratives of college students. Their stories, often steeped in sexual shame and guilt and plagued by misunderstandings, myths and misinformation, highlight the pivotal role that social worker instructors could make in delivering human sexuality courses or incorporating sexuality content into existing courses. Facilitating student reflection can address a student's sense of isolation, normalise sexual experiences and provide students an opportunity to change their sexual script moving forward.

The results of this study indicate that examining student perspectives about sexuality education will provide a more in-depth idea of what

effective human sexuality courses should address and may speak to what social work education might address to prepare highly qualified social workers. Social work students who increase their skill building around narrative approaches that illuminate a client's story, especially marginalised voices, can help facilitate client construction of a counternarrative to shame-filled or trauma-focused sexual history narratives. Helping clients frame a 'resistance' narrative (Fivush, 2010) where they own their story and they become the author of its re-telling can be a powerful intervention. Witnessing others' sexual stories provide an opportunity for students to re-write their master narrative, situating a new version of themselves within the newly gathered sexuality discourses. Exposure to how their peers structure their sexual stories, provides students a normalising opportunity. This re-framing may contribute to an easier story-making process. Further to this point, understanding the politics of storytelling is ideally situated in social work education and its focus on public policy and social advocacy. The revelation of the meaning students give their sexuality stories could provide evidence to advance sexual justice (Turner *et al.*, 2018).

It is important to note, that some students might encounter difficulties with experiential learning activities. Students who are accustomed to more traditional didactic lectures or students who are more private and guarded might experience the activity like the following student:

I have really mixed feelings about this activity. I didn't share mine. I wasn't comfortable. I felt like I was violating because I didn't share. I just felt I didn't even know their name and they're sharing that... kinda weird to share it without knowing names.

Also, not all students had favourable experiences. One student noted that their 'worst' experience was recent and brought up emotions. And yet, another disclosed 'I chose not to have you read the worst due to it being a sexual assault... and it would have been triggering'. While challenging, it is important to note that bad or traumatic experiences are not in and of themselves a reason to dismiss this activity because it might be problematic. To the contrary, creating space for a person's trauma and processing those feelings is a case for both: (i) to have a trained clinical social worker facilitating these intense but educational activities and (ii) to model for social work students the intensity of lived-experiences that clients may potentially share regarding sexuality. It is important to note that all students were provided with resources on their campuses and in their communities available to them for further support.

Implications for social work practice

A skilled clinical social worker does not avoid the negative experiences in the room. Similarly, a seasoned educator will take those student challenges and use them to enhance the learning environment. For example,

a student expressing ‘I felt really uncomfortable and that created intimacy with everyone and I felt bad about that. I’m a private person’ suggests that the student is not avoiding or suppressing the ‘bad’ feelings. This response provides an opportunity to explore those feelings further by continuing to ask reflective questions. A sexuality educator and clinician are aware that emotional intimacy can be elusive for many and frightening for some. This type of reflective activity serves as a potentially powerful teachable moment to model and demonstrate how challenging and intimate conversations can yield high rewards in social work practice.

Implications for social work education

There is a paucity of examples of teaching activities integrating content about sexuality within established social work curriculum. The results of this study highlight an effective tool for social work academics who may not be sexuality experts but familiar with reflective activities to integrate within a variety of social work courses. As discussed in the literature review, sexuality education is a valuable learning experience for students. And as researchers have looked at the importance of experiential knowledge to aid social work students in practice areas such as substance use/recovery (Weerman and Abma, 2019), these results support the need for examining the differences between academic courses focusing on facts and theory versus those which have a reflective focused component allowing students to process their lived experiences and feelings and most importantly engage in meaning making.

This study has important implications for social work education and practice. First, are the emerging adults of this study any better off since many were babies at the time the ‘Surgeon General’s Call to Action to Promote Sexual Health and Responsible Sexual Behavior’ (Office of the Surgeon General, 2001) provided an urgent message that the sexual health of the nation needed attention. There is a critical breach in sexual health praxis and social workers are perfectly aligned to fill this practice gap (Turner, 2020). If social workers are going to become ‘sexual health social workers, the front-line experts in facilitating client sexual health, thereby contributing to healthy communities’ (Turner, 2020, p. 318) then comprehensive human sexuality education needs to be explicitly incorporated into the social work curriculum. A Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) standard for social work sexual health would provide all social workers with core competencies around crucial sexual literacy for practice. This discussion targets the ‘Grand Challenges’ by helping social work pedagogy to address the preparation of social work practitioners to ‘close the health gap’. Through constructing stories, students (and social work clients) give meaning to their experiences (Bruner,

1990). Our findings are important to consider in light of fundamental skills needed by social workers to engage clients in history taking, including an often overlooked area of *sexual* history. While specific sexual history interviews ‘provide the most readily accessible source of behavioral data related to sexual risk’ (Kurth *et al.*, 2005, p. 373), they are often reserved to reproductive health centres, Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI) clinics and other sexual health-specific settings. We argue that all social workers need a baseline ability to gather information and discuss relevant issues regarding their client’s sexuality. Being knowledgeable, skilled and comfortable around sexuality is the best practices and since social workers are often the frontline in assessment and primary mental health coordinator for many, this is a fundamental skill set.

Implications for social work research

Asking social work students to extend their evaluation beyond the questions of this research to how the activity ties into social work values or practice skills would be insightful. Investigating the receptiveness and barriers of how social work academics who use reflection activities might integrate the activity into a generalist social work class could also provide useful understanding.

Limitations

Limits to the generalisability of this qualitative study include that students who chose to enrol in a human sexuality course may be more comfortable talking about their sexual experiences. Results should not be generalised to non-college students or even all college students. Future studies should explore the diverse ethnic background of emerging adults in different college environments (e.g. urban commuter colleges, historically Black colleges). Understanding how individuals from diverse backgrounds describe sexuality, will inform more robust scholarship.

Conclusions

Normalising both negative and positive experiences and modelling skills for discussing a taboo topic that faculty, students, practitioners and clients often see as difficult was described as the most powerful benefit. Reflective activities such as the ‘BOWO’ activity presented here provide opportunities for students to explore their personal value systems and begin to explore how their perspectives may influence professional skill

development such as for social work practice. Although reflective activities can be very intimate, when conducted in a systematic way, emotions can be managed effectively and used to facilitate learning in a manner that is ethical, respectful, empowering and transforming for students. The positive and meaningful response to this structured reflective activity also suggests that it holds value for application in other courses. Further work needs to be done to explore how this activity can be adapted and applied in other content areas. In many ways, the sentiments shared by Weiss *et al.* (1992) still hold true in that ‘the study of the effects of sexuality education is still in its infancy. Many puzzling and complex questions remain to be examined’ (p. 58).

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