



**UNDERSTANDING THE TENSION: CHRISTIAN SOCIAL WORK
STUDENTS & LGBT CLIENTS**

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**Presented at:
NACSW Convention 2015
November, 2015
Grand Rapids, Michigan**

Understanding the Tension: Christian Social Work Students & LGBT Clients

Presented at North American Christians in Social Work Conference
November 14, 2015

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Workshop Objectives

- * Introduce the two studies upon which this data is based: one practitioner-focused, one student-focused.
- * Introduce the two scales used to measure Attitudes and Comfort Level with regard to LGBT issues and individuals.
- * Share the surprising findings (based on original hypotheses) and insightful words of students.
- * Begin a dialogue with attendees about implications.

The Two Studies

Practitioner Study (2013)

- * Web survey distributed to NACSW practitioner list serve (1,100+)
- * 127 completed surveys

Student Study (2015)

- * Web survey distributed to NACSW student list serve (600+?), via Facebook group, and through snowball sampling
- * 69 completed surveys

Four sections:

Demographics, Attitudes Scale, Comfort Scale, Experience/Exposure
Open-ended optional shared strategies

The Two Scales

- * Attitudes Scale
- * Comfort Scale
- * Both 7-point Likert designs.
- * Kronbach Alpha scores all high enough to view responses as a single measure.

Attitudes Scale

7-point Likert continuum from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree

- Homosexuality is a sin.
- Someone can be both Christian and homosexual.
- People in LGBT relationships can be committed and monogamous.
- LGBT individuals should be able to get married.
- LGBT individuals should be able to adopt children.
- LGBT individuals have chosen to be gay, and can therefore change their sexual orientation.

* *First and last items were reverse-coded.*

Comfort Scale

7-point Likert continuum from Totally Uncomfortable to Totally Comfortable

I am comfortable with...

- ... individuals in my family who are gay.
- ... having friends who are gay.
- ... interacting with LGBT people in social situations.
- ... providing social work services to LGBT clients when the presenting problem is not their sexual orientation (i.e. seeking housing assistance, case management, etc.)
- ... an LGBT client seeking counseling regarding relationship issues.
- ... an LGBT client seeking counseling regarding coming out, discrimination, etc.
- ...an LGBT client expressing a need for help in finding a religious community to support him/her.

The Student Sample

Characteristic	Percentage of Respondents (n=69)
Educational Setting	
Christian/Faith-Based College	42%
Secular College	56.5%
Program Type	
BSW	36.5%
MSW	54%
Doctorate	9.5%
Non-Denominational Christian	55%
Attend Church Weekly	88%
Race/Ethnicity	
White/Caucasian	76.8%
Black/African American	18.8%
Hispanic	3%
Age	
18-21	17.5%
22-25	21.7%
26-35	29%
Over 35	32%

Hypotheses about Students...

- 1) Students will report more “liberal” perspectives on LGBT issues than the practitioner sample.
- 2) Students will report higher levels of comfort with LGBT people in family and social situations than the practitioner sample.
- 3) Students from Christian colleges will hold more “conservative” stances than those from secular colleges.

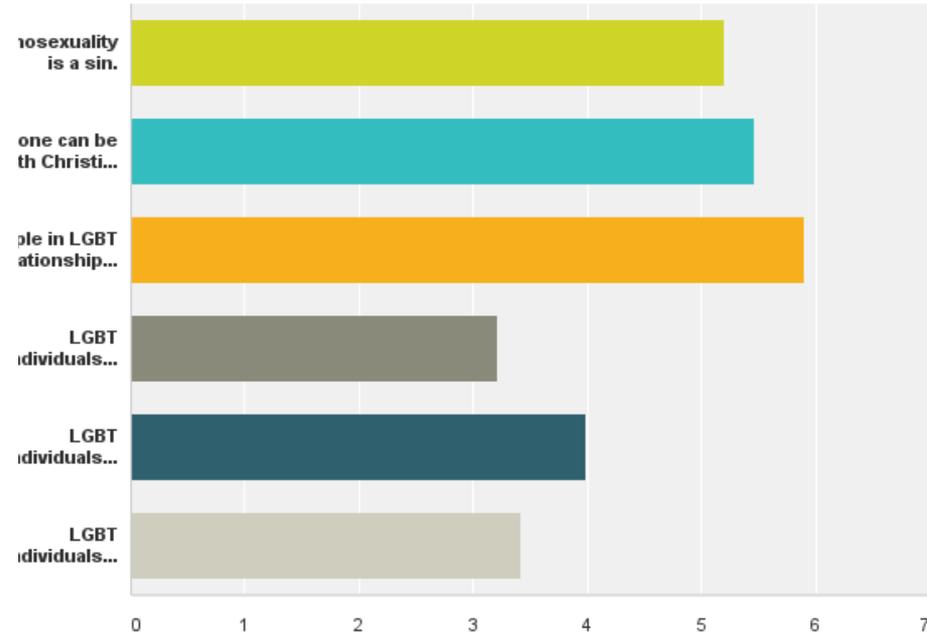
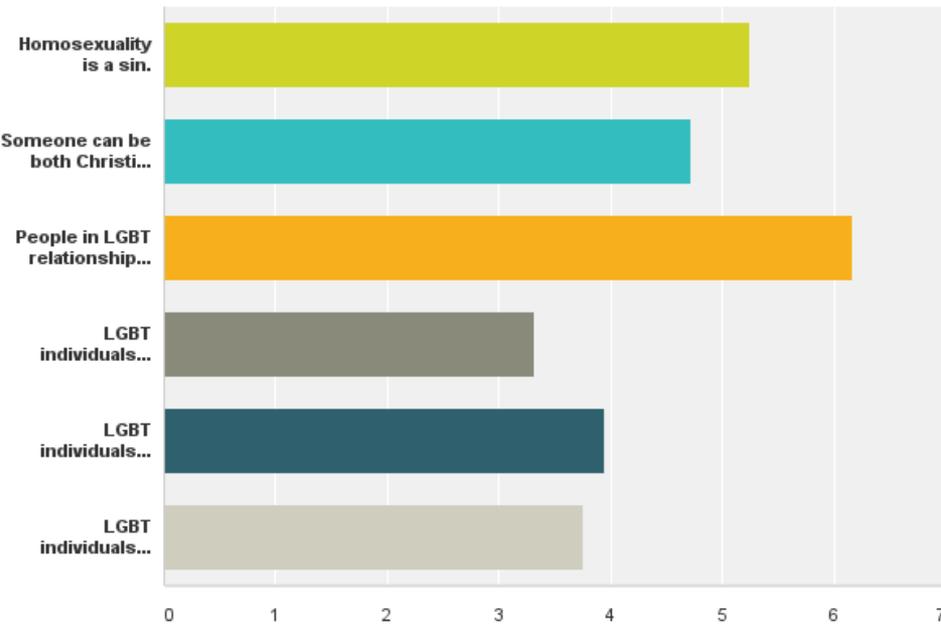
The Findings: Hypothesis One

Students will report more “liberal” perspectives on LGBT issues than the practitioner sample.

 **FALSE**

Students
Scale Mean = 4.19

Practitioners
Scale Mean = 4.38

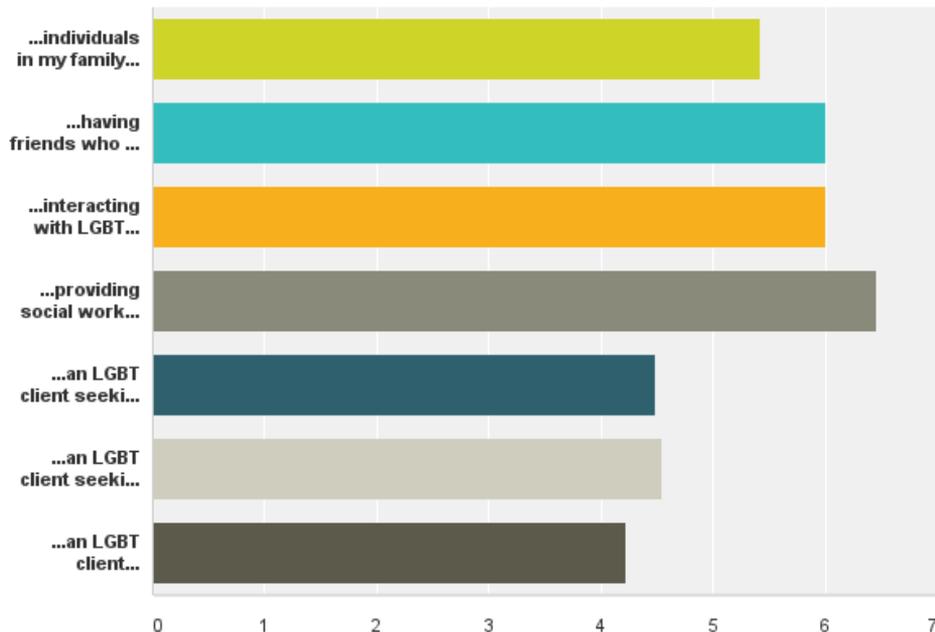


The Findings: Hypothesis Two

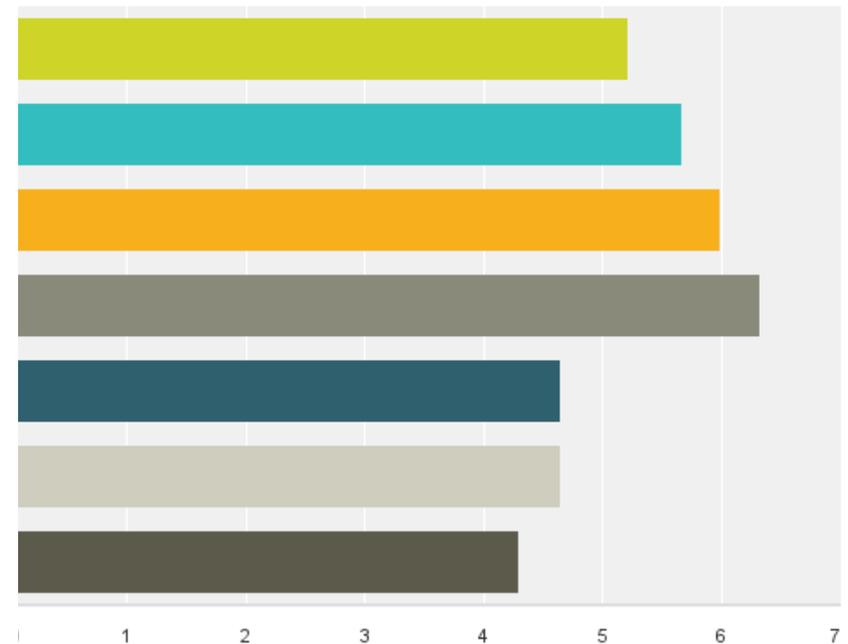
Students will report higher levels of comfort with LGBT people in family and social situations than the practitioner sample.

 **FALSE**

Students
Scale Mean = 5.32



Practitioners
Scale Mean = 5.3



The Findings: Hypothesis Three

Students from Christian colleges will hold more “conservative” stances than those from secular colleges.



FALSE

Correlations

		TypeSchool	Attitudescale	Comfortscale
TypeSchool	Pearson Correlation	1	-.103	-.146
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.428	.257
	N	62	61	62
Attitudescale	Pearson Correlation	-.103	1	.376**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.428		.003
	N	61	61	61
Comfortscale	Pearson Correlation	-.146	.376**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.257	.003	
	N	62	61	62

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).



Dr. Tan's Simplistic Interpretation:

Christian = Christian



Dr. Tan's Slightly Richer
Interpretation:

Comfort Level > Attitudes Measure =
“Navigating the Tension”

A few words from students: “Text Book” Navigating the Tension

“As a social worker, I respect all people as God’s creation. I am not called to judge; I am called to lead and empower individuals to make informed decisions for themselves... I am obligated to put my personal feelings and opinions aside. I am there for the client, not self.”

“As a social worker, my clients have the right to self-determination, and it is my job to serve them with unconditional positive regard, not judge or change them. It is the same attitude I have towards heterosexual clients who have sex outside of marriage.”

A few words from students: Navigating the Tension Strategies

“It is a privilege to be able to walk alongside someone else in their journey. Don’t degrade it by assuming you know what’s best. If someone is gay, straight, Asian, homeless, a substance abuser, a child molester, or a divorcee, we all have a story...helping someone with whom you disagree doesn’t equal support of the issue. It simply says that you hold the person as valuable regardless of disagreement.”

“Listen. Hear people’s stories and support them from where they are coming from and where they want to go.”

“The approach I have had success employing is one based on, I believe, Jesus’ final commandment. Before my God left this world, He didn’t ask for help with judging; He knew the world would need more loving. So, His final commandment is to love others. So, my approach is: Listen, Observe, Validate, Empathize, Encourage, Empower: LOVEEE!”

A few *surprising* words from students: Navigating a DIFFERENT Tension

“My biggest struggle is with fellow Christians who don’t like that I don’t believe homosexuality is a sin.”

“The tension for me is not because I feel I cannot serve LGBT clients well. Its that I know I risk being hated and ostracized by my own church family. Just like there is no place in the Church for those who were born gay, there is no place for those of us who love them and believe Christians can love Jesus and be gay.”

“What saddens me is that I have to keep my thoughts on homosexuality to myself. Sharing my position with my faith community will cause me to be let go from my position as a worship leader and member of the leadership team. I love my church family and I love being on the worship team. I am greatly challenged by the ethics of staying with my church. It is very challenging to be both a Christian and a social worker. I think in the same shoes, Jesus would choose the path of the social worker – they love better.”

Your Experiences,
Questions, Thoughts,
Wonderings...