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Creating welcoming communities for LGBTQ migrants: Living room-style chats for service providers

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ABSTRACT

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning/queer (LGBTQ) people face widespread oppression around the world, leading some to decide emigrate, and some to be forced to seek refuge in other countries. As a result of past human rights abuses, often by their own ethnic communities, many are reluctant to connect with their co-nationals once in a new country. This leaves them isolated with no community to turn to. Hence, it is critical to enhance service providers' knowledge and attitudes about this population, thereby enhancing their capacity to serve these clients effectively. We describe a training for service providers in the form of a "living room-style chat." A pilot evaluation of the training indicates that participants' confidence in working with LGBTQ migrants increased across several dimensions. We present recommendations for replicating these living room-style chats in other communities.

KEYWORDS

LGBTQ; immigrants;
refugees; agency; training

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning/queer (LGBTQ) people face widespread oppression around the world. Seventy countries criminalize same-sex sexual relations, including 11 where such acts are punishable by death (Mendos, 2019). In many more nations, pervasive homophobia and transphobia legitimize or create a cultural norm that allows and sometimes encourages discrimination and inhumane behaviors against LGBTQ individuals (Heartland Alliance, 2012). In this context, some LGBTQ people may decide to emigrate, and some are forced to seek refuge in other countries.

LGBTQ immigrants, refugees, asylees, and asylum-seekers (hereafter collectively termed "migrants") usually experience abuse from an early age perpetrated by family members or friends; this lack of familial and social supports can lead to complex mental health problems (Alessi, Kahn, & Chatterji, 2016). Challenges continue in the post-migration period, including revealing their sexual orientation or gender identity (SOGI), experiences of

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racist and homophobic discrimination, renegotiation of socioeconomic status, identity and affiliation challenges, and hardships that can impact their health (Fournier, Hamelin Brabant, Dupéré, & Chamberland, 2018). As a result of past human rights abuses, often by their own ethnic communities, many are reluctant to connect with their co-nationals once in a new country. This leaves them isolated with no community to turn to.

Social service agencies are often ill-equipped to meet the needs of LGBTQ migrants in an intersectional manner either due to limited knowledge on the LGBTQ community, limited knowledge on how to work with migrants, or both. Hence, it is critical to enhance capacity among service providers to serve these clients effectively.

Living room-style chats

During the past three years, we have conducted annual two-hour trainings for service providers in a U.S. metropolitan area with large populations of both LGBTQ people and migrants. The format of the trainings has been a living room-style chat in which “living room guests” (panelists) and a “host” (facilitator) chat in a staged living room before the audience of participants. The host was the first author, who holds a Master of Laws in Human Rights and has many years of experience with individuals who have been victimized, either on an interpersonal level or through systems and entities acting under the color of law, including domestic and sexual violence, human trafficking victims, refugees, survivors of torture, and LGBTQ refugees and immigrants.

The living room-style format was specifically selected as a contrast to typical classroom-type, lecture presentations and to stimulate conversations that participants could continue in their own living rooms. The trainings have taken place at arts venues including museums and a small theater. The trainings have been attended by approximately 150 participants.

Purpose of chats

The living room-style chats aim to enhance service providers’ knowledge and attitudes about LGBTQ migrants and to provide professional networking opportunities between LGBTQ- and refugee/immigrant-serving agencies. The end goal of the project is for refugee agencies to examine their practices, improve their procedures (such as displaying symbols of an LGBTQ safe space and creating SOGI-inclusive intake forms), and integrate welcoming/affirming systems that are inclusive of LGBTQ migrants. At the same time, the dual purpose of the project is to work to build the capacity of LGBTQ organizations, increase their knowledge around the persecution LGBTQ migrants face, patterns of human rights violations carried out based on an individual’s sexual orientation and/or gender identity and learn ways to avoid retraumatization/triggering survivors.

With this level of collaboration, providers will be better positioned to provide quality services, fill gaps in service, bridge resources and build on social capital. Through these activities LGBTQ refugees who are at the furthest point on the margins will have safe spaces within organizations that are able to provide culturally competent services.

Content of chats

A multidisciplinary group of living room guests from LGBTQ-serving organizations, refugee resettlement agencies, religious institutions, academia, and the LGBTQ migrant community, have shared their experiences and knowledge about working with LGBTQ migrants. The living room host poses questions (developed in advance by the guests), which the guests answer as the attendees listen and participate. Topics have included challenges faced by LGBTQ migrants while in transit; legal issues pertaining to asylum; organizational procedures and logistics for creating a welcoming environment; trauma-informed care; and psychotherapy with these populations. Two continuing education units (CEUs) were provided to licensed social workers, mental health counselors, and marriage and family therapists.

Study hypotheses

We hypothesized that participants' levels of confidence in working with LGBTQ migrants would improve. Further, we hypothesized that self-awareness of one's own sexual orientation and gender identity would not change over the course of two hours, based on prior research (Dillon et al., 2015).

Pilot evaluation

Instrumentation

Eighty of the participants have completed a voluntary pretest and posttest immediately before and after the training. The measure is an adapted version of the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Affirmative Counseling Self-Efficacy Inventory Short Form (LGB-CSI-SF), a validated instrument that assesses service providers' levels of confidence in working with LGB clients on five subscales: application of knowledge, advocacy skills, self-awareness, assessment, and relationship with the client (Dillon et al., 2015). Respondents rate their level of confidence in each of the five areas by answering three questions using a Likert scale ranging from 1 ("not confident") to 5 ("extremely confident"), resulting in a range of scores from 3–15 for each of the five subscales.

The original scale items were reworded to address LGBTQ migrants. For example, the item "Identify specific mental health issues associated with the

coming out process” was revised to “Identify specific mental health issues associated with the coming out process of LGBTQ refugees and immigrants.” Alpha coefficients for the revised subscales, based on pretest data, ranged from .86 to .90. The alpha for the instrument as a whole was .93.

Participant demographics

Among the participants who completed the pre- and posttests, 43% had an undergraduate degree and an additional 40% had a graduate degree. For 59% of the participants, this was their first training on working with migrants, for 49% this was their first training on working with LGBTQ people, and for one-third this was their first training regarding either client population. Sixteen percent worked in agencies that primarily served migrants, 15% worked in LGBTQ-serving organizations, and the remainder worked in other settings or did not work. Data on other demographic characteristics were not collected due to the exploratory, pilot nature of this study.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed with paired t-tests using SPSS Version 20. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen’s *d*. An effect size is an indicator of clinical significance. Cohen’s *d* effect size of around 0.2 is considered a small effect; around 0.5 is deemed a moderate effect, and a value of 0.8 or higher is considered a large effect (Cohen, 1988).

Results

The results are summarized in Table 1. The mean self-rated level of confidence of participants in application of knowledge in working with LGBTQ migrants showed a large increase, representing substantially greater confidence in applying knowledge in identifying mental health issues of LGBTQ migrants, assisting them to develop effective strategies to deal with stigma and discrimination, and helping them in the coming out process. The mean confidence of participants in advocacy skills for LGBTQ migrants also demonstrated a large increase, indicating substantial improvement in their confidence in advocating for LGBTQ migrants’ legal rights and social support.

Table 1. Pre- and Post-test Scores

Subscale	Pretest <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	Posttest <i>M</i> (<i>SD</i>)	<i>t</i>	Cohen’s <i>d</i>	<i>p</i>
Application of Knowledge	6.7 (3.0)	9.2 (2.6)	9.7	0.8	.000
Advocacy Skills	7.0 (3.2)	10.4 (2.8)	10.0	1.1	.000
Assessment	6.5 (3.3)	8.7 (3.3)	7.7	0.7	.000
Relationship with Client	8.3 (3.3)	10.7 (3.1)	7.7	0.7	.000
Self-Awareness	11.3 (2.8)	12.2 (2.4)	3.7	0.3	.000
Total Scale	39.9 (12.4)	51.1 (11.7)	11.0	0.9	.000

Participants' confidence in conducting assessments of LGBTQ migrants further demonstrated a large increase representing substantially more confidence in conducting intake assessments, assessing LGBTQ migrants' mental health, and assessing the role of alcohol and other drugs in their social and interpersonal functioning. A large increase was also seen in the mean self-rated level of participants' confidence in their relationship with LGBTQ migrant clients, indicating substantially greater confidence in creating a safe space and an atmosphere of mutual trust and affirmation for LGBTQ migrants. As expected, the mean level of self-awareness of participants' own sexual orientation and gender identity increased minimally with a small effect size. Finally, the total scale score also showed a large increase. Thus, all hypotheses were supported.

Implications for practice

Our experience yields several recommendations for replicating this project in other communities. First, due to high staff turnover at social service agencies, the living room-style chats should be held periodically to continuously educate new staff. Second, it is vital to include the voices of LGBTQ migrants themselves, but we found it challenging to find many who were willing to speak, due to continued stigma and fear. Future project implementors should begin establishing trust with potential migrant participants early in the project planning phase. Further, compensation for these participants should be considered.

Third, attendees should be provided with brief written materials summarizing the issues of concern, references for further reading, and a list of local resources. Fourth, sufficient time should be planned to allow attendees to interact with the "living room guests" during the workshop as well as afterward. A social hour following the workshop presents an excellent opportunity for attendees to network.

Fifth, partnership with arts venues, particularly those committed to community education and social justice, may enhance participants' experience. These settings often have concurrent exhibits or performances that complement and connect with the subject at hand. For example, our first chat was held at a Jewish museum that had a temporary exhibit on hate across time and place, which dovetailed with the subject of the living room-style chat. Our second chat was at a Gilded Age estate that provided free admission to its formal gardens for attendees after the chat; this allowed attendees to stroll together and forge connections among themselves. Our third chat was at a small theater in an LGBTQ neighborhood that produces LGBTQ-themed performances. This allowed attendees unfamiliar with this neighborhood to raise their awareness of it and its rich cultural offerings.

Finally, our pilot evaluation had limitations in scope and methodology; hence, we recommend strengthening the present pre-experimental research design to an experimental design, as well as measuring the impact of the training on the actions of both practitioners and agencies, and ultimately on the well-being of

LGBTQ migrants. Another limitation in this study was a response rate of just over half of the participants. This may be due to a lack of incentive for responding; future studies should consider the use of financial incentives, as these have been shown to increase response rates (Rubin & Babbie, 2015).

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Data availability statement

The data described in this article are openly available in the Open Science Framework at DOI:10.17605/OSF.IO/TPA6U.

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- Rubin, A., & Babbie, E. (2015). *Essential research methods for social work* (4th ed.). Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole Table 1. Pre- and Post-Test Scores.