



Sexual Identities and Political Protesting Among Social Work Students

Brittanie Atteberry-Ash¹ · Eric Swank² · Jessica R. Williams¹

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Abstract

This study has three tasks. First, it establishes the extent in which current social work students engage in protest activities. Second, it analyzes the ways that a student's sexual identity may impact their tendency to protest. Lastly, the work explores the reasons why sexual identity may impact protest inclinations. Data for this study were drawn from a 2019–2020 national sample of social work students ($n = 811$) throughout the USA with over 76 schools of social work represented. Findings suggest that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer students protested more frequently than heterosexual students as did students who had LGBTQ friends, took or attended classes/activities on LGBTQ topics, joined advocacy groups, and had an activist identity. After running several regressions, the increased activist activity of LGBTQ students was mostly attributed to the fact that they felt a stronger commitment to being a person who works towards social change. A core tenant of social work is to address social injustice; often, this happens through some form of protest. This article explored a sexuality gap in protest behavior of social work students, while also examining other possible factors that may contribute to a gap in protesting behavior by using political distinctiveness theories to guide the exploration. Implications for social work education are discussed.

Keywords Protest · Civic engagement · Social work · Sexual identity

✉ Brittanie Atteberry-Ash
brittanie.ash@uta.edu

Eric Swank
eric.swank@asu.edu

Jessica R. Williams
jessica.williams2@mavs.uta.edu

¹ School of Social Work, University of Texas Arlington, Arlington, TX, USA

² New College of Interdisciplinary Studies, Arizona State University, Glendale, AZ, USA

Introduction

Social workers are called to be social change agents (Felderhoff et al., 2015; Pritzker & Richards-Schuster, 2016) and much of the social work mission is to take on the political work of challenging the unjust practices of institutionalized oppression (Feldman, 2022). The Council of Social Work Education has built commitments to political activism into their accreditation standards (Council of Social Work Education, 2022) and some social work organizations base their entire missions around politically mobilizing social workers (e.g. Social Welfare Action Alliance, Influencing State Policy).

Scholars have tried to understand why some social workers are more politically active than others (Felderhoff et al., 2015; Ostrander et al., 2017; Ritter, 2008; Swank, 2012), and various antecedents have been found. Studies examining social work education generally agree that social work students are more politically active when they take numerous social work classes (Swank & Fahs, 2013), specifically social work policy courses (Ostrander et al., 2017; Witt et al., 2020), macro-focused courses (Apgar, 2021; Dodd & Mizrahi, 2017; Ostrander et al., 2018), and connect social work to social justice (Richards-Schuster et al., 2019). Furthermore, personal characteristics often impacted political participation among social work students, including having a personal interest in politics (Ritter, 2008), having activist friends/family members (Ritter, 2008; Swank, 2012; Swank & Fahs, 2014), being members of political groups (Ritter, 2008; Swank & Fahs, 2013), seeing injustice in the world (Swank, 2012; Swank & Fahs, 2013), and feeling a personal responsibility to engage in political activism (Rome & Hoechstetter, 2010; Swank & Fahs, 2013).

Continuing this focus on personal characteristics, other studies have explored the political activism of social workers and connection to social identities. Two studies have found a sexuality gap in the activism of social work professionals and students—with LGB social work students engaging in greater amounts of activism than heterosexual students in the same program (Dodd & Mizrahi, 2017; Swank & Fahs, 2013). This sexuality gap is not surprising on several fronts. In general, lesbian and gay people are more likely to vote and attend protests than those that are heterosexual (Cravens, 2018; Hemer & Reason, 2021; Swank, 2018, 2019; Swank & Fahs, 2019; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2020), and in general, there is an increase in social movement participation for LGB people (Andersen & Jennings, 2010; Swank, 2018). Gay and lesbian people are more likely to engage in efforts to combat heterosexism compared to heterosexual people (Friedman & Ayres, 2013; Swank, 2018). Similarly, a sexuality gap is present in the tendency to join feminist (Friedman & Ayres, 2013; Hemer & Reason, 2021; Liss & Erchull, 2010; Moore & Stathi, 2020; Silver et al., 2019), antiracist (Fine et al., 2018; Fingerhut & Hardy, 2020; Terriquez, 2015), environmental (Fine et al., 2018; Swank, 2018), disability rights (Fine et al., 2018), and peace movements (Andersen & Jennings, 2010; Swank, 2018).

The present study explores a possible sexuality gap in the political activism of social work students in the USA. When focusing on the protest behaviors of these

college students, we turn to LGB political distinctiveness theories to make sense of the sexuality gap in such actions (Egan, 2012). These political distinctiveness theories suggest that the relative liberalism of LGBQ people is not a natural or random event. Instead, queer liberalism is the result of unique social process that occur when a person “comes out” as something other than heterosexual. Most recently, “political distinctiveness” theories have been used to explore sexuality differences in protest activities among a general student populace (Swank & Fahs, 2019; Swank et al., 2020). In applying such theories to a sample of social work students, we discuss and test the relevance of specific selection, embeddedness, and conversion variables in a national sample of social work students.

Literature Review

The Importance of Protest

Protest, or the collective use of unconventional political methods to entice social change, often distinguishes social movements from routine electoral politics (Taylor & Van Dyke, 2004). Protest can encompass a wide variety of group actions, ranging from the less militant approaches of vigils, marches, and rallies to the more confrontational tactics of strikes, sit-ins, and violent acts that impose material and economic damage. While there is often much debate about the best tactic to employ at a given historical moment, several studies suggest that use of more radical and confrontational are an important factor in producing better social policies for sexual minorities (Kane, 2007), poor people (Piven & Cloward, 2012), people of color (Gillion, 2012), and women (Fassiotto & Soule, 2017). Although social workers often see protest as key tool in furthering social justice (Richards-Schuster et al., 2019), social workers seem to protest much less often than voting, giving political donations, contacting elected officials, or running for office (Felderhoff et al., 2015; Rome & Hoehstetter, 2010; Ostrander et al., 2018; Swank, 2012; Witt et al., 2020).

The growing literature in political science, sociology, and psychology finds a sexuality gap in protest participation among college students (Hemer & Reason, 2021; Swank & Fahs, 2019). This study merges the findings of these studies with Egan’s (2012) three-tiered explanation of greater LGBQ liberalism. Political distinctiveness theories suggest that LGBQ people are more liberal than heterosexuals because of the following: (1) the unique demographic profile of LGBQ people (i.e., the selection process); (2) a greater involvement in LGBQ communities (i.e., embeddedness forces); and (3) and exposure to heterosexist discrimination (i.e., conversion factors). The political distinctiveness theory has been used to explain the queer support of liberal political candidates (Turnbull-Dugarte, 2020) and progressive social movements (Swank, 2018). The rest of the literature review will recap this empirical evidence within the three types of variables that govern the “LGB political distinctiveness” theory (selection, embeddedness, and conversion factors).

Selection

The selection argument suggests that the link of sexual identities to protest tendencies is governed by another set of demographic factors. From this perspective, one can argue that sexual minorities protest more often than heterosexuals because they are younger or less likely to be married than heterosexuals (Swank et al., 2020). Although these factors could be pertinent to studies of older adults, the relevance of these topics seem less relevant to undergraduate students who are mostly single and young adults (Hanson, 2021). Other demographic variables, such as race, gender, and age, could be relevant predictor variables of protesting tendencies, but preliminary testing revealed no significant associations between these variables and protesting tendencies or sexual identities, thus, questions of exposure to different educational experiences seem most relevant to the current study.

In many ways, the collegiate experience inspires liberal activism. The reasons behind the liberalizing effects of college are complicated and multifaceted. College is often a time of learning, values exploration, and identity transformations for students (Astin, 1993). Younger students often gain independence from their parents, get exposed to new ideas, and meet people from different social backgrounds. This exposure to greater diversity of perspectives and types of people often enhances student commitment to the liberal ideas of tolerance and the need to lessen inequality and discrimination (Case et al., 2014). Moreover, particular classes within the humanities, social sciences, and social work often undercut hierarchical thinking and increases the liberal activism of students (Hemer & Reason, 2021) as does taking extracurricular workshops in diversity (Hemer & Reason, 2021) or engaging in intergroup dialogue sessions (Dessel et al., 2011).

Although collegiate experiences can politicize college students, the political consequences of college students are not uniform and universal. Queer students are often more receptive to classes that critically analyze conventional rules, norms, and laws (Johnson & Lollar, 2002) and seek out classes that are known as being LGBTQ affirmative (Gortmaker & Brown, 2006). Heterosexual students are generally disinclined to take classes that problematize heterosexual privilege so LGBTQ college students might protest more than their heterosexual counterparts because they have higher educational attainment and have a greater tendency to take classes that contain LGBT content (Swank et al., 2020). Specifically, for social work students, educational attainment predicted LGB activism for students of all sexual identities (Swank & Fahs, 2013).

Embeddedness

Organizations, groups, and families often try to create heteronormative social spaces (Galupo & Gonzalez, 2013). This is often done to erase the existence of LGB sensitivities, and people who are not completely heterosexual are expected to “act straight” or risk the chance of being mocked, belittled, or expelled. Heterosexuals often feel comfortable in such settings while sexual minorities often do not (Kroeper et al., 2014). Over time, many sexual minorities seek respite from these hostile settings and turn to

LGB affirmative groups and peers who validate their identity (Frost & Meyer, 2012). Conversations with other sexual minorities can become “counterspaces” that lessen the blows of heterosexism and enhances emotional resiliency (de Lira & de Morais, 2018). Friendships and acquaintances with sexual minorities can elevate concerns for other sexual minorities and reinforce perceptions of the benefits of embracing one’s sexual identity and the value of challenging heterosexual privilege (Jones & Brewster, 2017; McClendon, 2014). This connection to LGB friends and the broader LGB community has several outcomes. Samples of college students have found that students were significantly more likely to go to protests (Swank et al., 2020) or attend gay pride events than those without such friends (Burgess & Baunach, 2014). Close emotional bonds to LGB people also seem to motivate higher levels of LGB related activism (Dunn & Szymanski, 2018; Montagno & Garrett-Walker, 2021), as does “hanging out” in queer social spaces. In fact, the simple acts of watching more LGBT television shows, spending lots of time in gay hangouts, and frequently socializing with lesbians or gays seem to spur more involvement in LGBQ activism (Foster-Gimbel et al., 2020).

Participation in student political groups also generally increases protest participation among college students (Hemer & Reason, 2021). Though joining a gay athletic club or a gay-friendly church often leads to greater activism among sexual minorities (Cravens, 2018; Foster-Gimbel et al., 2020), several studies indicate that membership in gay and lesbian community centers are the best predictors of LGB activism (Battle & Harris, 2013; Foster-Gimbel et al., 2020; McClendon, 2014). LGBT organizations often emphasize the importance of struggling against heteropatriarchy and institutionalized racism (Anderson-Nathe et al., 2018; Broad, 2020) and members of LGBT advocacy groups often convey the expectation that sexual minorities should attend LGB pride events as well as other protests for social justice causes (McClendon, 2014). Finally, sexual minorities are more engaged in political groups than heterosexuals and this disparity might be responsible for a sexual gap in protest inclinations (Swank et al., 2020).

Conversion and Protesting

Society often portrays the social order as proper, normal, and inevitable. By seeking widespread conformity, mainstream narratives can get people to subscribe to values, ideals, and self-definitions that bind them to their social location (Jost et al., 2004). A queer political consciousness debunks beliefs that justifies inequalities and motivates people into joining collective efforts that publicly seek social transformations (Duncan et al., 2017; Worthen, 2020). A queer consciousness as defined by Duncan et al. (2017) argues that heterosexual privilege is wrong, unacceptable, and dangerous and that queer people should unite against these unjust and harmful practices. This queer consciousness also adds that being gay should be important to a person’s images of themselves and heterosexist practices are obstacles to the well-being of sexual minorities.

Egan (2008) argues that sexual minorities are more likely to have a queer consciousness when compared to heterosexuals. Being the target of heterosexist discrimination often makes LGB people more suspicious and opposed to heterosexist discrimination

and the disclosure of a “‘stigmatized’ or ‘outsider’ status [may] lead gay people to sympathize with those who belong to other marginalized groups and thus support politicians and policies that they believe help these groups” (p. 14–15).

Studies often support this conversion argument. People who experience or observe heterosexist discrimination are more likely to join social justice movements than people who minimize the extent of heterosexist discrimination in society (Dunn & Szymanski, 2018; Swank & Fahs, 2013, 2014). Moreover, the pain of heterosexist bigotry can push sexual minorities into a general distrust of social hierarchies (Montagno & Garrett-Walker, 2021; Sheehan et al., 2021) and more liberal stances on the death penalty, legalization of marijuana, spending on social welfare programs, affirmative action, and the war in Iraq (Grollman, 2017; Jones, 2021; Schnabel, 2018; Worthen, 2020). When exploring commitments to social justice, many LGB individuals claim that heterosexism made them more “sensitive to prejudice and discrimination against others” and led them to “fight for the rights of others” (Riggle et al., 2014). In turn, this combination of greater liberalism and activist commitments among sexual minorities could be a source of increased protesting among LGBQ people (Swank & Fahs, 2019; Swank et al., 2020).

Research Questions and Hypotheses

This study addressed two research questions: (1) Do LGBQ social work students protest more than heterosexual students in the same major? and, if so, (2) What factors might account for the sexuality gap in protesting? To date, we have some preliminary studies that suggest that sexual minorities protest more than heterosexuals (Andersen & Jennings, 2010; Friedman & Ayres, 2013; Swank & Fahs, 2019) but we do not know if this phenomenon exists among college students who have chosen a social work major, which calls those in the profession to participate in political activism (National Association of Social Workers, 2021). We also add to the literature by sampling students from several college campuses and identifying some underlying causes of greater protesting tendencies among sexual minorities.

Political distinctiveness offers several explanations for the sexuality gap in protesting behaviors (Egan, 2012). Egan argues that greater protesting among sexual minorities can occur because (1) the demographic characteristics that make people more willing to adopt and disclose an LGB identity also makes them more likely to protest (selection hypothesis); (2) adult socialization within the LGB community increases access the desire and ability to protest for LGB interests (embeddedness hypothesis); and/or (3) experiences with homophobia motivate greater levels of protest among sexual minorities (conversion hypothesis).

Methods

Data for this study were drawn from a 2019–2020 national sample of social work students throughout the USA. An initial email was sent to chairs/directors/deans of 522 accredited schools of social work requesting their program’s participation in the study by sending along the survey to their students via email or student listservs.

Two weeks after the initial email, a follow-up email was sent to all schools who had not yet agreed to participate ($n = 485$), with a third reminder sent to 458 schools sent 2 weeks after the second reminder. Overall, 76 schools had students who activated the online survey. This study received IRB approval from the author's home institution.

Data Preparation

Overall, 1457 students agreed to take the online survey. Several steps were taken to arrive at a final analytic sample. First, respondents who agreed to take the survey but did not answer any survey items were removed, along with those who only answered the demographic questions ($n = 500$). The second step examined the amount of missingness from the 3 scales included in this research study. In this case, mean composite scores were calculated with a 75% cut-point for each of the independent variables. That is, participants had to have completed at least 75% of the items on a composite scale to receive a scale score (Downey & King, 1998; Gottschall et al., 2012). This process removed 73 additional cases bringing the analytic sample to 884. Lastly, missingness on all other variables ranged from a high of 3.73% to a low of 0%. Given that less than 10% of responses were missing on the variables, a listwise deletion method was used (Bennett, 2001) to bring the final analytic sample to 811.

Measures

This study examined participation in political protest activities; this was measured by participants indicating that they had participated in a protest or community rally in the past year. Several variables were included to measure components of political distinctiveness theories. Sexual orientation was obtained by asking the question, "What is your sexual orientation?" Response options included lesbian, gay, queer, bisexual, pansexual, asexual, heterosexual, and other—fill in the blank. For the purpose of this study, this was further collapsed to heterosexual and LGBQ (with everyone but heterosexuals coded at LGBQ). This approach overlooks issues of sociopolitical diversity within LGBQ communities, but other studies often find that differences within LGBQ communities are much smaller than the difference between heterosexuals and LGBQ populations (Jones, 2021; Schnabel, 2018).

Selection Factors For selection factors, educational attainment was measured with the question "What is your current student affiliation at your current university." Answers were translated into four binary coded of BSW undergraduate (yes = 1, no = 0), MSW student in advance placement (yes = 1, no = 0), MSW two year program (yes = 1, no = 0), and Ph. D student (yes = 1, no = 0). Participation in formal conversations on social justice issues was measured by asking "Have you participated in facilitated intergroup dialogues?" (Dessel & Rogge, 2008), with the response option of (yes = 1, no = 0). Lastly, encounters with LGB-related curricula

were measured with the statement “I attend conferences/lectures/classes/training on LGB related issues” (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Embeddedness Factors For embeddedness factors, the number of LGB friends was measured with the question “Thinking about your social/friend network or family members, how many lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer people do you know?” (none, 1, 2 to 4, 5 or more). To measure engagement with LGB people, participants rated the following statement, “I regularly engage in conversations with LGB individuals” (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). To measure engagement with LGB organizations, participants rated the following statement, “I am a member of one or more organizations and/or groups about LGB issues” (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Participation in any sort of political student groups was gathered by participants checking, political, after the question “What type of student organization(s) are you involved in?”

Conversion Factors The Activist Identity Scale included three items from the “openness and support” subscale of the Ally Identity Measure (Jones et al., 2014). These items deal with public commitments to challenging heterosexism with statements such as “I have taken a public stand on important issues facing gays and lesbians,” “I am comfortable knowing that people may assume things about my identity because I am ally to lesbians and gays,” and “If I see discrimination I would I actively work to confront it if it” (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Scores for these questions were averaged and the scale had an α of 0.70. Liberal political ideology was gathered with the following question “In general how do you characterize your political views?” Response options were on a scale of 1 through 7, (1 = extremely conservative, 7 = extremely liberal). LGB positivity (Jaffee et al., 2016) was measured with the six items about the acceptance of same-sex intimacies, a desire to be around lesbians or gay people, and the approval of sexual minorities publicly disclosing their sexual identities ($\alpha = 0.70$). A social dominance orientation (SDO), or the belief that one’s own social groups should have more power over other groups, was measured by the SDO7 scale (Ho et al., 2015). Scores for these questions were averaged and this 8-item scale had an α of 0.67.

Data Analysis

All analyses were conducted using Stata 16.1 (Statacorp, 2019). Descriptive statistics were run, followed by five separate logistic regressions predicting participation in political protests. Adjusted odds ratios (AOR) determine whether the probability of a binary event (attending or not attending a protest) is the same or differs across two groups (sexual minorities versus heterosexuals). AOR offer the direction and strength of associations with scores above 1 indicated a positive relationship and below one is a negative relationship. Chen et al. (2010) suggest an AOR of 4.55 should be considered a large relationship, 2.67 a medium relationship, and 1.50 a small relationship with a sample of this size. In order to examine a direct link between sexual identities and protesting, we placed these variables in several

multivariate contexts. Model 1 is a baseline model which estimates the relationship of a LGBQ identity to protesting, while the following models explore sexuality differences in protesting when holding types of selection, embeddedness, and conversion covariate constant. A final model explores the association of sexual identities to protesting when controlling for all the variables in the study.

Results

Descriptive statistics for all variables are provided in Table 1. For the dependent variable, over 60% ($n = 521$, 64.2%) of the sample had participated in a political protest in the past year. Just over a quarter of the sample ($n = 290$, 27.1%) was identified as LGBQ. For the selection factors, the majority of the sample were advanced standing MSW students ($n = 363$, 44.8%), followed by BSW students ($n = 284$, 35.0%), most had not participated in a formal dialogue ($n = 496$, 61.2%), and the majority of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that they had attended LGB-related activities ($n = 352$, 43.4%). Looking to embeddedness factors, most participants reported having 5 or more LGB friends ($n = 612$, 75.3%), while the majority also reported engaging in conversations with LGB people ($n = 668$, 82.4%). Fewer students reported being a participant in an LBG-related student group ($n = 510$, 62.9%), or being in an explicitly political student group ($n = 21$, 2.6%). Lastly, for conversion factors, the average score for the activist identity scale was 4.00 ($SD = 0.80$) out of 5, indicating that students, on average, endorsed an activist identity. For liberal political ideology, the average score was 5.53 ($SD = 1.29$) out of 7, indicating slightly more liberal views. The average score for the SDO7 was 1.96 ($SD = 0.76$) out of 7, noting that students, on average, endorsed lower levels of social dominance. Lastly, for positive attitudes towards LGB individuals, the average score was 4.36 ($SD = 0.60$) out of 5, indicating that students, on average, endorse positive attitudes towards LGB people.

Table 2 examines sexual identities' impact on the tendency to protest. For the first logistic regression, LGBQ participants were significantly more likely (AOR = 2.18, 95% CI [1.53, 3.10], $p < 0.001$) to have participated in protests in the past year compared to heterosexual participants (model 1 in the left columns functions as a baseline comparison). This supports the sexuality gap literature that finding greater protesting proclivities among sexual minorities. However, the LGBQ bump to protesting is not that massive among social work students since the AOR calculation would be classified as small by Chen et al. (2010). The rest of the regressions explore the possibility of this sexuality gap disappearing when attending to selection, embeddedness, and conversion factors.

Moving to model 2, examining sexual identities with the selection factors, LGBQ participants remained significantly more likely (AOR = 1.73, 95% CI [1.19, 2.50], $p < .01$) to have participated in protests in the past year compared to heterosexual participants. Additionally, 2-year MSW students (AOR = 1.49, 95% CI [1.07, 2.08]) and participants who had attended LGB educational activities (AOR = 1.39, 95% CI [1.22, 2.58]) were both more likely to have participated in protests in the past year

Table 1 Descriptive statistics for all variables

Variables		<i>n</i>	%	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>Dependent variable</i>					
Political protest activities	No	290	35.8		
	Yes	521	64.2		
<i>Independent variables</i>					
Sexual orientation	LGBQ	220	27.1		
	Heterosexual	591	72.9		
Selection factors					
Student level	BSW	284	35.0		
	MSW advanced	363	44.8		
	MSW two-year	144	17.8		
	PhD	20	2.4		
Intergroup dialogue	No	496	61.2		
	Yes	315	38.8		
LGBQ-related curricula	Strongly disagree	101	12.5	3.07	1.23
	Disagree	192	23.7		
	Neutral	166	20.5		
	Agree	257	31.7		
	Strongly agree	95	11.7		
Embeddedness factors					
LGBQ friends	None	5	0.6	3.73	0.54
	1	16	2.0		
	2–4	178	22.0		
	5 or more	612	75.3		
LGB ally conversations	Strongly disagree	15	1.9	4.21	0.93
	Disagree	31	3.8		
	Neutral	97	12.0		
	Agree	290	35.8		
	Strongly agree	378	46.6		
LGB org member	Strongly disagree	199	24.5	2.41	1.22
	Disagree	311	38.4		
	Neutral	138	17.0		
	Agree	94	11.6		
	Strongly agree	69	8.5		
Political student group	No	790	97.4		
	Yes	21	2.6		
Conversion factors					
Activist identity scale				4.00	0.80
Liberal political ideology				5.53	1.29
Social dominance orientation				1.96	0.76
LGB positivity				4.36	0.60

Table 2 Logistic regression exploring likelihood of participating in a political protest ($n = 811$)

	Baseline (model 1)		Selection (model 2)		Embeddedness (model 3)		Conversion (model 4)		Full (model 5)	
	Odds ratio	95% CI	Odds ratio	95% CI	Odds ratio	95% CI	Odds ratio	95% CI	Odds ratio	95% CI
LGBQ	2.18***	(1.53, 3.10)	1.73**	(1.19, 2.50)	1.50*	(1.02, 2.21)	1.38	(0.94, 2.03)	1.29	(0.86, 1.93)
<i>Selection</i>										
Education level (BSW)										
Advanced standing			1.29	(0.83, 1.98)					1.20	(0.77, 1.87)
Two-year			1.49*	(1.07, 2.08)					1.27	(0.89, 1.80)
PhD			2.50	(0.78, 8.01)					1.84	(0.55, 6.09)
Intergroup dialogue			1.33	(0.97, 1.82)					1.27	(0.92, 1.75)
LGB classes/lectures			1.39***	(1.22, 2.58)					1.17	(1.00, 1.37)
<i>Embeddedness</i>										
LGB friends/family					1.32	(0.98, 1.76)			1.14	(0.84, 1.56)
LGB conversations					1.26**	(1.06, 1.50)			1.00	(0.82, 1.22)
LGB group member					1.22**	(1.05, 1.40)			1.05	(0.89, 1.25)
Political group member					1.57	(0.51, 4.82)			1.57	(0.49, 4.99)
<i>Conversion</i>										
Activist identity							1.71***	(1.36, 2.13)	1.43**	(1.11, 1.86)
Liberal political identity							1.08	(0.94, 1.23)	1.05	(0.92, 1.20)
SDO							0.92	(0.75, 1.15)	0.92	(0.74, 1.33)
LGB positivity							1.25	(0.91, 1.70)	1.18	(0.86, 1.63)

compared to BSW students and those who had not attended any LGB-related activities, respectively.

For the regression examining sexual identities and embeddedness factors, LGBQ participants remained significantly more likely (AOR = 1.50, 95% CI [1.02, 2.21], $p < 0.05$) to have participated in protests in the past year compared to heterosexual participants (model 3). It should also be noted that adjusted odds ratios barely remained significant and that embeddedness factors shrunk the OR more than the selection factors. Regardless of a person's sexual identity, participants who had engaged in conversations with LGB people (AOR = 1.26, 95% CI [1.06, 1.50], $p < 0.01$) and who were members of a group about LGB issues (AOR = 1.22, 95% CI [1.05, 1.40], $p < 0.01$) were both more likely to have participated in protests in the past year.

Looking to conversion factors, having an LGBQ identity lost statistical significance (model 4). This absence of a significant relationship suggests that sexuality differences in protesting are partially an outgrowth of divergent political sensibilities for LGBQ and heterosexual students. Endorsing an activist identity was significantly associated (AOR = 1.71, 95% CI [1.36, 2.13]) with past year protest activity; specifically, for each one-unit increase in endorsement of activist identity, there is a 71% increase in the odds of past year protesting. The other conversion factors, such as liberal identities, authoritarian inclinations, and positive impressions of sexual minorities, were not direct major sources of increased protesting. Thus, conversion factors seemed to explain increased protest activists of queer social work students and activist identities were the most pivotal of these conversion variables.

In the final total model, the LGBQ significant link to protest again was no longer significant. Controlling for all variables, endorsing an activist identity was the only variable to retain significance suggesting that for each one-unit increase in endorsement of activist identity, there is a 43% increase in the odds of past year protesting (AOR = 1.43, 95% CI [1.11, 1.86]) to have participated in protests in the past year. Previously significant factors like level of education, access to a LGB curriculum, and belonging to LGB groups disappeared suggesting that educational and group contexts like these are important to increased LGBQ activism because they cultivate or reinforce the increased activist commitments of sexual minorities.

Discussion

This study serves three purposes: (1) establish the extent in which social work students attend protests; (2) explore the ways that a sexual identity is associated with protest tendencies of social work students; and (3) explain why LGBQ students might protest more than their heterosexual counterparts. To address these goals, this study gathered data from 811 students who attended 76 schools of social work. Such a large number of students from so many campuses run counter to most social work studies that have fewer students from one or two universities (Dodd & Mizrahi, 2017; Ostrander et al., 2018; Witt et al., 2020). Moreover, the larger sample also offers an adequate number of LGBQ students for a quantitative analysis. The study also draws on theories (i.e., Egan, 2012) and research from the broader social scientific literature

(Swank et al., 2020; Turnbull-Dugarte, 2020) to build a comprehensive model of factors that can be related to both sexual identities and protesting proclivities.

In general, the students in the current study had high rates of protesting (64%, $n = 521$). This was slightly higher than Mizrahi and Dodd (2013) (54.7%, $n = 160$, MSW only), almost double the percent found in Hylton's, 2015 study (32%, $n = 32$) or Felderhoff and colleague's 2015 study (39.3%, $n = 789$, NASW members), and more than triple the percent found in Swank and Fahs (2013) (16.6%, $n = 159$; BSW students only). A newer study found similar rates of protest for both BSW and MSW students (64%, $n = 47$) (Witt et al., 2020). These newer and higher rates may be explained by different political times, as the 2016 presidential election led the largest protests in US history (Fisher et al., 2018) and greater interest in political activism among social workers (Lane et al., 2021).

As we hypothesized, LGBQ students were just over two times as likely to have participated in a protest compared to heterosexual students; this is in line with studies with general college students (Swank & Fahs, 2013; Swank et al., 2020) and with social work students (Mizrahi & Dodd, 2013). After establishing a sexuality gap in our study, we then moved to understanding possible explanations behind this gap through the theories of political distinctiveness. In presenting a three-part theory, Egan (2012) argues that LGB individuals are more liberal than heterosexuals because of (1) key demographic differences across sexual identities (selection); (2) greater LGB involvement in communities that support social change (embeddedness); and (3) exposure to heterosexism creates a desire to challenge customs and laws that punish sexual minorities and other marginalized groups (conversion).

When adding our educational selection factors, LGBQ students continued to have higher odds of protesting compared to their heterosexual peers (Hemer & Reason, 2021; Swank et al., 2020). This suggests that LGB identities' impact on protesting endures outside of that classroom and extracurricular experiences. Two selection variables significantly contributed to higher odds of protesting on their own, being a 2-year MSW student compared to BSW students, and taking courses with LGB course content. Thus, we discovered that taking a class or attending lectures that specialize in LGB topics is crucial to social work student protesting and there seems to be a curvilinear relationship in that students with the middle amount of education protested the most (2-year MSW students, not PhD students). We are not certain as to why this occurred but something in MSW programs inspired more protesting than in BSW or Ph.D. programs (Lightfoot et al., 2018; Witt et al., 2020). This is an area for more exploration and perhaps a call for both BSW and PhD programs to incorporate more critical and reflective curriculum.

The embeddedness model suggests that immersion into the LGB community produces greater liberalization and activism among sexual minorities. While conversations with LGB individuals and memberships in LGB groups significantly increased protest behaviors (Hemer & Reason, 2021; Swank & Fahs, 2019; Swank et al., 2020), these factors did not eliminate significant link of sexual identities to protesting. This could mean that greater access to queer social spaces is not behind increased LGB protesting, but none of our measures addressed participation in the LGBQ community beyond the campus. It is possible that we overlooked a crucial embeddedness

factor like membership in a local LGBT center, living in a lesbian or gay enclave, or being in a same-sex marriage.

The conversion model insists that exposure to heterosexist discrimination produces a stronger desire and ability to join protests that challenge current social norms and laws. When controlling for the four conversion factors, differential protesting based on sexual orientation loses significance in the conversion model. Given that an activist identity significantly linked to protest behaviors, post hoc tests found that an activist identity was obscuring the significance of sexual orientation. Thus, increased protesting among LGBQ social work students is partially due to a greater commitment to social justice and a desire to work against heterosexism (see Swank & Fahs, 2013; Swank et al., 2020).

The final model included all the selection, embeddedness, and conversion factors. The combination of these resulted in LGB identity losing significance (Swank & Fahs, 2019; Swank et al., 2020). The only variable that retained significance in the final model was endorsement of an activist identity. Thus, the study suggests that a commitment to publicly challenging heterosexism is the major reason for greater protesting among LGBQ social work students. This finding may mean that heterosexual social work students are less likely to join political protests because they generally want to keep their commitments to LGBQ rights private. This possible heterosexual quest for privacy may suggest that many heterosexual people are reluctant or afraid to openly align with queer liberation if such actions carry some risks.

Implications for Social Work Education

With classes on LGB content increasing protest engagement, it is clear that social work programs can impact students' civic engagement, which is a stated ethical standard of the profession (National Association of Social Workers, 2021). This can be done through infusing content throughout courses, including readings by LGBTQ+ authors, and through stand-alone sexuality courses. Similarly, with activist identities also guiding activist behaviors, professors should reveal the connections between client well-being and injustices in families, agencies, and political arenas. Likewise, educators can underscore that politics is not a "spectator sport"; that is, social work ethics requires involvement in political struggles that challenge conventional power relationships (National Association of Social Workers, 2021; Pritzker & Richards-Schuster, 2016; Richards-Schuster et al., 2019). In doing so, professors must help students move beyond a hidden, discreet, or provisional commitment to social justice and queer liberation. Moreover, educators should develop assignments and exercises that offer opportunities in advocacy practice (Meehan, 2021; Witt et al., 2020).

Social work programs can also augment their policy classes by providing more instruction on social action, connecting students to issue-based advocacy groups, and offering greater access to political field practicums (Ostrander et al., 2017; Pritzker & Lane, 2018; Reisch, 2017). Social work programs can also include opportunities within their own halls to host opportunities that include intergroup dialogues (Dessel et al., 2011), and have the infrastructure to support student led organizations. These suggestions may address the criticisms that social work

programs often do not prepare students to engage in policy practice, including advocacy (Ostrander et al., 2017; Pritzker & Lane, 2018; Ritter, 2008).

Limitations

By only sampling social work students, it is impossible to know how much these findings apply to the protest actions of practicing social workers or the general student population. Our study used cross-sectional data, meaning that these data are only representative of a single point in time. Although this is the case with most survey research, no claims of causation are possible. The measure for protest activities overlooks the reason for protesting, so it is impossible to know if the motivation behind protest participation. The Activist Identity Scale was developed for this study, and although adequate reliability was observed, more testing is warranted. Measures on the political content in field placements might have increased the impact of educational selection factors and a question on joining LGBTQ advocacy groups might increase the impact of embeddedness factors. Furthermore, several constructs in this study, for example, political orientation, were measured with single items, and with such constructs, it would be sounder to use tested scales. Finally, other demographic factors, such as race or gender/gender identity, or other social work education measures, like concentration or courses taken were not included in this exploration of Egan's theory on protesting. This is an area for further research, especially given our current political context.

Conclusion

It is a core tenant of social work to address social injustices and one way this can be done is through protesting. Given this, it is important to explore protest activities of social workers. This article explored a sexuality gap in protest behavior of social work students, while also examining other possible factors that may contribute to a gap in protesting behavior by using political distinctiveness theories to guide the exploration. While a sexuality gap was established, the statistical significance of sexuality differences disappeared when controlling for an activist identity. Through identifying characteristics that are related to protest participation, social work education can better attune itself to producing politically active social workers.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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