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Affirmative and Integrative Counseling for LGBTQIA+ Individuals

Allison de Blois

A research project submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the degree of

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## Dedication Page

This research paper is dedicated to all LGBTQIA+ individuals who deserve the right to have access to affirming counseling services.

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## Abstract

Counselors are ethically obligated to serve LGBTQIA+ clientele and therefore should strive to integrate an affirmative approach to counseling. A counselor may say that they are providing affirming care, however it is important to reflect on what affirming counseling is in application. To better serve LGBTQIA+ clientele, counselors may grow their affirmative counseling approach by being knowledgeable of historical considerations, evidenced-based approaches to implement, clinical recommendations for a counselor to implement, and considerations on advocacy practices and resources.

*Keywords:* LGBTQIA+, Affirmative Counseling, Trauma-informed, Feminist, Inclusive, Counseling

## **Affirmative Counseling for LGBTQIA+ Individuals**

There is a need to advocate for beneficial counseling practices that are affirming, evidence-based, and valuable to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, and asexual and additional identities (LGBTQIA+) individuals (Johnson, 2012; Kort, 2018). In addition to the foundational therapeutic approaches, the LGBTQIA+ population may be further supported by counselors through an affirmative approach. Affirming care for this population is not only something to advocate for but also a humanistic approach and, therefore, foundational for counselors (Lemoire & Chen, 2005). With affirmative counseling and its humanistic core, clients deserve a level of care that is more beneficial, unlike what has been the case in the past for many LGBTQIA+ clients. In the past, healthcare and behavioral healthcare systems have lacked affirmative counseling when working with the LGBTQIA+ population. Affirmative counseling is strength-based and non-pathological, allowing counselors to best serve clients who identify with LGBTQIA (McKinney et al., 2020). With this population, literature is scarce on providing affirming counseling services to LGBTQIA+ individuals (Ormiston & Williams, 2021). In addition to the literature scarcity on affirmative counseling for this population, there is also a significant gap in research and literature on LGBTQIA+ individuals who are children, adults, and elderly, which must be noted. With counseling approaches, this paper will propose integrating affirmative, feminist, and trauma-informed approaches to better serve LGBTQIA+ clients and communities.

This project aims to explore specific counseling approaches that are beneficial and affirming when working with LGBTQIA+ individuals. In addition to highlighting approaches to utilize, there is an emphasis on the importance of relevant and historical

considerations and being well-informed of background and risk factors when counseling LGBTQIA+ clientele. The encouraged approaches to use with LGBTQIA+ clientele are affirmative, trauma-informed, and feminist when providing counseling services to this community. Following the recommended approaches, there is a section on the methods counselors can utilize while striving to provide affirmative counseling services. This paper will also address critical ethical considerations outlined by the American Counseling Association (ACA), examine the application of inclusive language, discuss suggestions for counseling settings, and provide an emphasis on liberation and advocacy.

### **Historical Considerations Relevant to Counseling LGBTQIA+ Clientele**

There are many critical historical events relevant to counselors working with LGBTQIA+ populations. One event is the historical event of the Stonewall Riots, which contributed to the LGBTQIA+ civil rights movement in the United States (Ginicola et al., 2017). The riots occurred due to harmful police raids of the Stonewall Inn in New York City, and LGBTQIA+ individuals during these raids revolted against the discriminatory raids (Varga et al., 2019). Primary leaders during this time were two transgender women of color, Marsha P. Johnson and Sylvia Rivera that contributed to the LGBTQIA+ civil rights movement at the Stonewall Inn and in creating the organization Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR), which supported transgender individuals (Strub, 2018; Trevor Project, 2019; Varga et al., 2019). It is important to highlight the important leadership and activist roles that transgender women of color played during these events. The most recognized Stonewall Riot occurred in 1969; this protest added to the LGBTQIA+ human rights movement and led to more protests for LGBTQIA+ human rights across the country (Varga et al., 2019). The historical events of the Stonewall Riots

resulted in increased momentum for LGBTQIA+ human rights. These events are essential for counselors to be aware of in further understanding the societal and historical backgrounds of LGBTQIA+ individuals.

As counselors, awareness of the history of the Stonewall Riots may increase historical knowledge and allow for more well-informed advocacy for clients. An article celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Stonewall Riots highlighted that the Stonewall Inn is the first U.S. National Monument in LGBTQIA+ history (Varga et al., 2019). The Stonewall Inn became a National Monument in 2019, symbolizing the LGBTQIA+ community and its history (Varga et al., 2019). Counselors must be aware of the historical events of the Stonewall Riots, the significance of the Stonewall Inn as a national monument, and other historical considerations in mind to serve LGBTQIA+ clientele best.

Another consideration that counselors should be aware of is the American Psychological Association's (APA) history of hostile actions, such as *homosexuality* being listed as a psychological disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) until 1973 (Johnson, 2012). With a history of recognizing homosexuality as a mental health disorder in the DSM, it has negatively impacted generations of individuals within the LGBTQIA+ community. Although APA removed *homosexuality* from the DSM, the effects of an LGBTQIA+ identity being previously listed in the DSM as a disorder has led to continued anti-LGBTQIA+ treatment from mental health professionals, such as the utilization of reparative and conversion therapies (Johnson, 2012).



More recently, APA stated that conversion and reparative approaches to counseling practices are harmful and countertherapeutic (Johnson, 2012). Another critical aspect of APA to be mindful of is that APA had been a part of the systemic historical pathologizing among this population with actions such as having gender identity disorder listed as a disorder until 2013 (Levenson et al., 2021, p. 6). This past action contributes to pathologizing gender identities for individuals within the LGBTQIA+ community. APA's past, present, and future actions are essential in recognizing and addressing the most beneficial and affirming care for LGBTQIA+ individuals.

In addition to considering the historical impact of the APA on the LGBTQIA+ community, it is important to acknowledge additional negative societal actions that have impacted LGBTQIA+ clientele. Therefore, being more aware and knowledgeable of these events may improve the quality of affirming counseling services. One example of past events is that the mental health profession explicitly and implicitly marginalized this population (McKinney et al., 2020). The mental health profession has used overt and inherent biases that counselors may need to reflect on as they serve LGBTQIA+ clientele.

Since the 1980s and 1990s, the impact of the human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) epidemic has continuously negatively impacted the LGBTQIA+ community through the perpetuation of health disparities and lack of accessible care (HRC, n.d.; Emlet & Harris, 2020). The impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and societal reactions to it have previously and currently brought negative impacts to individuals within this population. The Human Rights Committee (HRC) notes how a diagnosis of AIDS can increase the risk of discrimination in social, medical, and counseling settings (HRC, n.d.). It is crucial to consider the impact of this

epidemic on the LGBTQIA+ community and the impact that an AIDS diagnosis may have on an individual. It is essential to recognize that assuming or generalizing that all individuals that identify with one or more identities have an AIDS diagnosis can be a harmful, untrue, and discriminatory assumption.

By considering these important historical events, counselors may also find it beneficial to be educated on recent events that have impacted the LGBTQIA+ population. In the past decade, there have been positive events such as the *Defense of Marriage Act* being repealed in 2013, the Supreme Court establishing marriage equality in 2015 with the *Obergefell et al. v. Hodges* ruling, and state bans on same-sex couple adoptions ruled to be unconstitutional in 2016 (Ginicola et al., 2017). These events, among others not mentioned, have continued to show the progress and push for LGBTQIA+ individuals to gain equality in human civil rights.

Although the previously mentioned events were positive for the LGBTQIA+ community, there are increasing concerns regarding LGBTQIA+ individuals losing access to their civil rights. In recent years, anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation has been rising, such as anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation like the transphobic *bathroom bills* which started in 2013 which has resulted in transgender, nonbinary, and gender-diverse (TNG) individuals “being denied access to bathrooms that correspond to one’s [identified] gender” (Horne et al., 2022, p. 2). The result of this anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation has shown to be harmful to TNG individuals. Researchers have highlighted that TNG individuals have reported increased negative health consequences for being denied public bathrooms, the pressure to present their gender as more feminine or masculine to avoid scrutiny, and increased assaults in public restrooms (Horne et al., 2022, p. 2). The report of increased negative

health concerns can also be combined with this population's general negative concerns. The additional negative health consequences LGBTQIA+ individuals are likely to face are an increased risk for mental health concerns, higher rates of suicide, being victimized, oppression, stigma and prejudice, potential family rejection, inability to cope socially, bullying, homelessness concerns, possible within group violence in one's community, et cetera (Horne et al., 2022; Madireddy & Madireddy, 2022).

In addition to these past positive and negative events that have affected the LGBTQIA+ community, we must consider the more recent anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation, the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, and additional supreme court cases (PFLAG, 2022, paras. 2-3). For example, the Trevor Project's CEO, Amit Paley made a statement regarding the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* and how it may impact the LGBTQIA+ community; he said that this case's decision "could also jeopardize the rights afforded to LGBTQ people in the landmark Obergefell and Lawrence [supreme court case] decisions — to love who you love and be who you are without fear of criminalization" (Trevor Project, 2022, para. 3). With the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, counselors may want to be mindful of the resulting adverse effects on the LGBTQIA+ community as well as future events and the potential impacts there may be on the rights of LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Another critical statement regarding the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* and its impact on the LGBTQIA+ community was made by a national affirming organization. This organization is known as Parents and Families of Lesbians And Gays (PFLAG), and this organization strives to create spaces to aid and support parents and families in being affirming to their LGBTQIA+ loved ones (PFLAG, 2022). This supportive and advocating organization's National Executive Director, Brian K. Bond, published the

following statement on the U.S. overturn of *Roe v. Wade* which is that “Reproductive healthcare is for everyone, whether you were assigned female at birth, are intersex, are cisgender, transgender, or nonbinary” (PFLAG, 2022, para. 5). This highlights the importance and the direct impact that the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* has on individuals within the LGBTQIA+ community. When LGBTQIA+ people do not have access to abortion, research studies suggest that there are effects of education concerns, more significant mental health concern rates, and financial concerns (PFLAG, 2022, para 5). Therefore, various negative concerns may negatively impact LGBTQIA+ individuals without access to abortion. With the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*, there are increased concerns for LGBTQIA+ individuals, like how "LGBTQ+ adults are increasingly reliant on assisted reproductive technology, rather than intercourse—creating an unmet need for many LGBTQ+ people who may lack the economic resources to achieve their fertility goals. These methods, like IVF, are threatened if *Roe* is overturned" (HRC, 2022, para 18). The previous quote was written before the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. Nevertheless, it indicates the essential considerations for this population and areas to advocate for LGBTQIA+ civil rights now and in the future. As counselors, being aware and mindful of the potential barriers that LGBTQIA+ clientele have with family planning, abortion access, and increased mental health concerns are vital to consider to best serve this population.

### **Background and Risk Factors**

Reflecting on the past, present, and future civil rights considerations for LGBTQIA+ individuals, it is essential to consider the past failings within healthcare and behavioral health systems and their impacts on the LGBTQIA+ community. For example,

the recent COVID-19 pandemic is an area to investigate the quality of care for this population. After a couple of years of the COVID-19 pandemic, evidence-based research covers how this population has been impacted by the current disaster of pandemic and past disasters. It must be noted that the LGBTQIA+ community has historically received less support during disasters than heterosexual individuals (Hafi & Uvais, 2020). With the COVID-19 pandemic, various factors impacted LGBTQIA+ youth specifically, like LGBTQIA+ community spaces being temporarily closed, youth potentially having stayed in lockdown with family or roommates who may not have been affirming, lack of peer support due to severe isolation, and less youth feeling able to come out due to complex environments, lockdowns, working at home, the shutdown of schools, and the implementation of remote learning have increased the already high risk of mental health conditions (Hafi & Uvais, 2020; Ormiston & Williams, 2021). All these factors and the amplified risk of mental health concerns are vital to be knowledgeable and aware of when supporting LGBTQIA+ youth through counseling.

With the many risk factors for LGBTQIA+ youth, there are additional risk factors for LGBTQIA+ individuals in other age categories across the lifespan (Hinrichs & Donaldson, 2017). For example, an article by Hinrichs and Donaldson highlights how older LGBTQIA+ individuals are a growing population often unseen and unrepresented in studies (Hinrichs & Donaldson, 2017). There may be a lot of research focus on LGBTQIA+ youth and there is also a need for more research among all age groups. A takeaway from this article is that it is probable that COVID-19 has negatively impacted LGBTQIA+ individuals within various age demographics in addition to already present risk factors. With these considerations in mind, there is a need to support LGBTQIA+

individuals with comprehensive counseling services further, affirming, responsive, trauma-informed, and utilizing a feminist approach.

### **Suggested Counseling Approaches to Implement**

With the various considerations in mind, there is a need to support LGBTQIA+ individuals with comprehensive counseling services, affirming, responsive, trauma-informed, and utilize a feminist approach. An affirmative approach is strength-based and non-pathological, which lets counselors provide best practices when serving LGBTQIA+ clientele (McKinney et al., 2020). Utilizing a trauma-informed approach may also be helpful in keeping a humanistic affirming approach when providing beneficial counseling to LGBTQIA+ individuals. A trauma-informed counseling approach “delivers services in a way that incorporates evidence about the prevalence, neuroscience, and impact of trauma on thoughts, feelings, behavior, health, and psychosocial well-being” (Levenson et al., 2021, p. 1). Incorporating a trauma-informed approach adds these considerations, which can aid a clinician in best serving an LGBTQIA+ client. In addition to integrating an affirmative and trauma-informed approach, another helpful approach to incorporate is a feminist approach. Counseling with a feminist approach allows clients to feel validated, hear their own strengths, and build resilience (Negy & McKinney, 2006).

Additionally, a feminist approach focuses on how power and the gender binary affect an individual internally, societally, and relationally (Goldberg et al., 2011). For these reasons, a combined integration of affirming, trauma-informed, and feminist approaches to serving LGBTQIA+ populations is warranted. Below, please find additional information describing the individualized constructs of affirmative, trauma-informed, feminist, and the combination of these approaches.

## **Affirmative Approach**

An affirmative approach may be used by counselors to provide beneficial counseling services to LGBTQIA+ clients in an affirming, client-centered, strength-based, and mindful of the intersections of identities. The need for counselors to utilize an affirmative counseling approach is vital when providing beneficial counseling services to LGBTQIA+ clientele (McKinney et al., 2020). In using this helpful approach, researchers have noted that affirmative counseling is in line with foundational humanistic counseling approaches such as person-centered (Knutson & Koch, 2021). With affirmative being humanistic at its core, any counselor may be able to utilize this approach since the core aspects of a client-centered approach apply to all counselors. Affirmative counseling is humanistic in part due to the commonality of counselors engaging in collaboration with clients, viewing the client's awareness and background, and the personal dedication that counselors have in working with LGBTQIA+ clientele (Knutson & Koch, 2021). In addition to affirmative being a humanistic approach, it is a strength-based and non-pathological that allows counselors to best serve clients who identify with LGBTQIA+ identities (McKinney et al., 2020). The integration of strength-based and non-pathological aspects allows affirmative counseling to be inclusive, de-stigmatizing, and highlighting strengths to best support LGBTQIA+ clients. The affirmative approach does not require specific treatment interventions but integrates various components to consider when working with this population (Ginicola et al., 2017). An integrated approach and possible interventions used by an affirmative counselor would be engaging in self-determination with clients, highlighting a client's strengths, and acknowledging that the

counseling space is a place to identify homophobic/transphobia in one's life and among one's community.

Further affirmative interventions to use would be integrating Motivational Interviewing (MI) interventions. MI interventions may work well when combined with an affirmative lens since MI itself is strength-based, accepting, and non-judgmental. Therefore, when using interventions such as open questions, affirmations, reflections, and summaries (OARS), a counselor may apply the affirmative aspects when using OARS (McGeough, 2020). This integrative view of MI and affirmative can allow counselors to best serve LGBTQIA+ clientele through affirming, culturally competent, and strength-based interventions. MI's steps of engaging, focusing, evoking, and planning can also be adapted affirmatively by counselors. For example, MI interventions can be adapted by using gender-neutral language/pronouns, being non-pathologizing and not making assumptions, and being mindful of the client's identities and goals (McGeough, 2020).

An affirmative approach also aids promotes in clients the benefits of reaching developmental milestones and reaching a positive self-identity in a beneficial and affirming way (McKinney et al., 2020). As mentioned by Ginicola, to be an LGBTQIA+ affirming counselor, one should look into any heteronormative privilege and biases they have, along with being able to re-evaluate any attitudes that may come up in sessions (Ginicola et al., 2017). Similarly, counselors may find viewing themselves as an ally and an advocate for this population helpful in providing affirming best practices (Ginicola et al., 2017). Ginicola (2017) has defined an "*ally* as a person who has commitments to members of historically marginalized populations and communities and takes action to address and reduce injustice toward these people and communities" (Ginicola et al.,



2017, p. 345). It is important to note that aspiring to be seen as an ally and advocate by the LGBTQIA+ community is a lifelong active process for counselors. As counselors, being active and seen as allies is crucial when striving to be an affirmative counselor and serving the LGBTQIA+ population.

In addition to being affirming of LGBTQIA+ identities of this population, it is vital to affirm the various intersectional identities clients may identify with, such as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, religion and spirituality, age, and generation when working with clients (Ginicola et al., 2017). Counselors striving towards inclusivity and affirming all identities may allow clients to feel more seen, heard, advocated for, and supported.

### **Trauma-Informed Approach**

In addition to an affirmative approach, utilizing a trauma-informed approach when working with LGBTQIA+ individuals can acknowledge and attend to the various ways trauma can impact thoughts, feelings, behavior, health, and well-being (Levenson et al., 2021). It has been shown that there are similarities between affirmative and trauma-informed approaches. For example, both focus on aiding clientele to be mindful of strengths, resilience, and empowerment (Ellis, 2020). In addition, traumatic experiences may threaten an individual's self-esteem, sense of control, autonomy, and sense of self (Ellis, 2020). Focusing on how trauma impacts an individual and then applying a trauma-informed approach that helps build the client up may be helpful. With the multitude of potentially impacted areas of one's life that trauma can affect, it is helpful to remember the traumatic events that LGBTQIA+ individuals may have experienced. The shared traumatic events often experienced by members of this community are discrimination,

intimate partner violence and physical violence, verbal harassment, threats, victimization, hypervigilance, external and internal stigma, interpersonal rejection, prejudice, and minority stress (Ellis, 2020; Rostosky et al., 2021). These various examples of traumatic events that may impact clientele within the LGBTQIA+ populations show why there is a need to utilize a trauma-informed approach when providing counseling services. When counselors use a trauma-informed approach, they can screen for exposure to trauma, utilize a research-informed practice to promote physical and psychological safety, support healing, and enhance connection with clients (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.). Integrating affirmative and trauma-informed approaches, researchers have noted that doing so involves counselors to "not make assumptions about clients' affectional orientation, sexuality, gender identity, or trauma experiences" (Ellis, 2020). The integration of affirming and trauma-informed approaches has been encouraged to be used since it provides comprehensive mental health care to better support LGBTQIA+ clientele (Levenson et al., 2021). Although not every LGBTQIA+ client may identify as having gone through trauma, having a background on how to utilize a trauma-informed approach may be helpful in best helping LGBTQIA+ clientele.

### **Feminist Approach**

Using an integrated affirmative and trauma-informed approach, a counselor may increase the benefits of LGBTQIA+ clientele by utilizing a feminist approach. As stated previously, a feminist approach acknowledges clients so that they may receive validation, be reminded of their strengths, and increase resiliency (Negy & McKinney, 2006). Counselors utilizing a feminist approach may focus on these aspects and societal considerations. A feminist approach looks at the roles of power and the gender binary and

how they affect an individual in many ways (Goldberg et al., 2011, pp. 377-378). A counselor utilizing a feminist approach when serving LGBTQIA+ clientele entails counselors to examine LGBTQIA+ clientele “the layers of oppression at the intersections of orientation, race, and gender” (LaMantia et al., 2015, p. 138). Another aspect of oppression that researchers highlight is that stressors of oppression can be external and internal (Woulfe & Goodman, 2020). External stressors are experiences of discrimination, rejection, and hate crimes, while internal stressors include internalized stigma (Woulfe & Goodman, 2020). In using a feminist approach, looking at the various aspects of oppression as it relates to identities provides an intersectional view for counselors to be with clients in learning more about themselves and growing empowerment (LaMantia et al., 2015, p. 138). Counselors keep in mind the various aspects of intersectionality along with knowing how oppression may help best serve LGBTQIA+ clientele. For example, different forms of oppression that this population experiences are discrimination or stereotyping, heteronormative assumptions, intolerance, microaggressions, and violence (Levenson et al., 2021, p. 9). When working with an LGBTQIA+ client, being knowledgeable about forms of oppression and intersectionality can aid in learning more about a client and what they experience in the world. Another reason why incorporating a feminist approach would be helpful for the LGBTQIA+ population is that “feminist therapy reflects an adherence to the notion of equality and that “. . . the personal is political” (Negy & McKinney, 2006, p. 72). This is relevant since it highlights that a feminist approach prioritizes equality and the personal being political, which are important affirming aspects for counselors. Lastly, a feminist approach for counselors entails mindfulness of language. Feminist counselors would be aware of gendered

language, acknowledge the social and political reality, and know how language can express and conceptualize a client's experiences (Negy & McKinney, 2006, p. 73).

The counseling approaches of affirmative, trauma-informed, and feminist each benefit in better supporting LGBTQIA+ individuals during the counseling process. Although there is a lack of literature on the integration of affirming, trauma-informed, and feminist approaches, there is a need to start addressing the potential benefit of integrating these three in counseling LGBTQIA+ individuals would be beneficial.

### **Striving Towards Being an Affirmative Counselor**

Being determined to be an LGBTQIA+ affirming counselor is a lifelong learning process that leads to cultivating best practices for serving LGBTQIA+ clientele. Striving to be an affirmative counselor entails being familiar with ACA's *Code of Ethics*, statements from ACA's Society for Sexual, Affectional, Intersex, and Gender Expansive (SAIGE) *competencies taskforce*, *The Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies* model, creating a safe and inclusive counseling setting, and being an active aspiring ally and advocate for LGBTQIA+ clients and their civil rights. Being mindful and knowledgeable of these affirming actions may allow counselors to provide best practices to their LGBTQIA+ clientele.

### **ACA Code of Ethics**

The ACA *Code of Ethics* (2014) requires counselors to be attentive to historical prejudices in diagnosis, to be conscious of personal values, counselors cannot refer clients based on value conflicts, to cultivate multicultural counseling competencies to be beneficial for clients of a variety of intersectional identities, lastly continuing education to improve one's multicultural competence is also crucial (Ginicola et al., 2017).

Additionally, the ACA has outlined how "There is no question that all counselors may find themselves with a lack of competence when serving a specific client; however, all counselors are required to seek supervision and consultation, make ethical decisions, and build their competence" (Ginicola et al., 2017, p. 301). This quote regarding the code of ethics showcases the importance of counselors reaching out for additional support and knowledge to provide counseling services to LGBTQIA+ clientele ethically.

In addition to being well-informed and practicing the ACA's *Code of Ethics* (2014), it is also beneficial to be aware of the Society for Sexual, Affectional, Intersex, and Gender Expansive (SAIGE) and the counseling competencies for serving LGBTQIA+ clientele. Formerly known as The Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues in Counseling (ALGBTIC), SAIGE developed the *competencies taskforce* in 2013 that stated that counselors should be "versed in LGBTQI+ issues, exhibit ally behaviors, and self-identify as allies" (Ginicola et al., 2017, p. 4, p.117). The competencies created in 2013 are the standard SAIGE competencies for counseling LGBTQIA+ clientele (SAIGE, 2020). The competencies established by SAIGE highlight the essentials for counselors in working towards being well-informed on LGBTQIA+ concerns, striving to be allies, being supportive, and additional competencies when providing counseling to LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Counselors determined to continue affirming and adhering to the SAIGE competencies may find it beneficial to also turn to the affirming and inclusive competencies laid out by the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development. This association of ACA created *The Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies Model* (Ginicola et al., 2017, p. 4). The model highlights the importance of

being aware of “a variety of cultures through counselor self-awareness, client worldview, counseling relationship, as well as counseling and advocacy interventions” (Ginicola et al., 2017, p. 4). Counselors may provide improved support for clientele through affirmative and intersectional lenses by keeping this model and the SAIGE competencies in mind. Another significant aspect of the model is an emphasis on counselors to better understand the perspectives of a “privileged or marginalized counselor as well as a privileged or marginalized client” (Ginicola et al., 2017, p. 4). The takeaways from the model are for counselors to promote their self-awareness, the counseling relationship, and advocacy practices and to offer enhanced support through the use of affirmative and intersectional lenses.

In addition to growing competence in these ways, there is the general importance of self-reflection for counselors to best serve and advocate for LGBTQIA+ clientele. It is outlined that for counselors to build up their affirmative and LGBTQIA+ ally competence, continuous self-reflection is necessary (Ginicola et al., 2017, p. 348). On top of self-reflection, it has also been highlighted that seeking supervision for client cases is helpful, and there is a need to advocate for affirmative supervision. In relation, it has been pointed out that "research in the helping professions notes affirmative supervision as imperative to adequately serving the LGBTQI[A]+ community" (Ginicola et al., 2017, p. 117). This means that counselors within any setting, whether they are a supervisor or supervisee, must promote affirmative counseling practices and supervision. When there is a lack of access to other affirming or aspiring to-be affirming counselors, it is essential to continuously consult with affirming professionals (Ginicola et al., 2017). Doing so allows

counselors to grow further, learn, understand, and have empathy to improve their counseling practice and competency with LGBTQIA+ clientele.

### **Counseling Settings**

To make a counseling space affirming for LGBTQIA+ individuals, the authors of *Affirmative Counseling With LGBTQI+ People* have compiled various ways to increase the chance of counseling waiting rooms and therapy rooms being affirming. For example, the authors mention that LGBTQIA-affirming signage and stickers on office doors and windows that state *Safe Zone* or *Safe Place* may provide a sense of safety and openness for LGBTQIA+ clientele (Ginicola et al., 2017). Similarly, to make a counseling setting more affirming counselors may display pride flags, stickers, and art that is relevant and inclusive for LGBTQIA+ individuals. Doing so may aid in further building rapport with clients and show clients that the therapeutic space is safe and affirming of all identities. Another beneficial way to make a counseling setting more affirming for LGBTQIA+ clientele is to have accessible gender-neutral restrooms (Levenson et al., 2021). With gender-neutral restrooms available to clients, they may feel fewer concerns regarding feeling unsafe or having their identity invalidated and more affirmed in counseling settings. In addition to implementing these suggestions within a counseling setting, additional ideas are to display affirming LGBTQIA+ periodicals and resources in the office and create affirming intake paperwork (Ginicola et al., 2017). Some examples of creating affirming paperwork include sections asking about one's identified gender, gender expression, and affectional orientation identities. Another way to make counseling paperwork affirming is to use affirming terminology, like listing out *partner* rather than a gendered-relationship titles like *boyfriend/husband* or

*girlfriend/wife*, a section for the client's name without using gendered surnames, and asking for a client's name that they identify as and that reflects their identity (Ginicola et al., 2017, p. 114). Creating affirming intake and additional paperwork may allow LGBTQIA+ clientele to feel seen, safe, and affirmed in initial counseling sessions.

### **Language**

An essential aspect of striving to be an affirming counselor is to know the acceptable language for all identities an LGBTQIA+ individual may identify with, be mindful of pronouns, and use affirming and non-stigmatizing language for LGBTQIA+ clientele. With the LGBTQIA+ community, it is essential to be familiar with and continuously learn about all identities within the acronym, such as identities of gender, gender expression, biological sex, and affectional orientation (Ginicola et al., 2017, p. 7; Killermann, 2020).

The identities and spectrums of gender, expression, biological sex, and sexual orientation are further examined. *Gender identity* is how individuals identify their gender within themselves rather than their biological sex assigned at birth (Ginicola et al., 2017, p. 8). Gender identity is not a binary; instead, it is on a continuum including female, genderqueer, nonbinary and gender expansive, transgender, and male (Ginicola et al., 2017, p. 8). Being knowledgeable of the continuum of gender identity might benefit counselors and therefore prevent any harmful misgendering of clientele.

Another continuum of identity to be aware of is *gender expression* or *presentation*. This aspect of an individual's identity identifies themselves through clothing, actions, and demeanor which can be on a spectrum of feminine to androgynous to masculine and may change from daily (Ginicola et al., 2017, p. 184, Killermann,



2020). Gender expression is like other various identities within the LGBTQIA+ population and is unique to each individual.

In addition, an essential aspect of language to be cognizant of is the term *biological sex*. This medical term represents the physical characteristics and body parts that an individual is assigned at birth with a classification of female, intersex, or male (Ginicola et al., 2017, p. 368, Killermann, 2020). This term has been commonly problematic for several reasons; therefore, fully accepting a client's gender identity is vital rather than referring to their biological sex assigned at birth.

In serving LGBTQIA+ individuals, knowing affirming language regarding how one identifies their attraction to others is vital. Instead of saying sexual orientation, there is now a switch in language to use *affectional orientation* over *sexual orientation* since it can “purposely broaden the focus of discussion LGBTQIA+ people to their relationships rather than their sexual behavior” (Ginicola et al., 2017, p. 7). In using particular language such as affectional orientation, counselors can model a safe space and relationship that shows nonjudgment and may be seen as affirming. Additionally, using the term affectional orientation highlights the relationship over sexual experiences, since sexual orientation may contribute to negative stigma. Counselors should be familiar with LGBTQIA+ affectional identities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans/transgender/two-spirit, gender expressive/gender-expansive/nonbinary, queer/questioning, intersex, agender/asexual/aromantic, pansexual/pan/polygender, and various other identities (Horne et al., 2022, p. 1; McKinney et al., 2020, p. 176). These identities within the LGBTQIA+ acronym may not account for the many other identities that clients may use or future developments in identity labels that individuals may identify as.

In addition to being well-informed about identities and their intersections, pronouns are essential to utilize since they represent one's identity, thus working with LGBTQIA+ clientele, it is important to be knowledgeable and respectful in using a client's pronouns in their preferred manner (Trevor Project, 2020, para. 2). The Trevor Project mentioned that pronouns commonly used among LGBTQIA+ individuals are they/them, she/her, he/him, a blend of any of these, and some individuals use neopronouns like ze/zir or fae/faer (Trevor Project, 2020, para. 1). In the Trevor Project's research brief on pronouns, it is mentioned that "affirming LGBTQ youth's gender by using pronouns that align with their gender identity has been shown to improve mental health outcomes" (Trevor Project, 2020e, para 2). The Trevor Project also mentions that an excellent way to confirm someone's pronouns is to start by introducing yourself with your pronouns, which can then lead to a safe and affirming environment for that individual to share their pronouns (Trevor Project, 2020, para. 7). In using and respecting a client's pronouns this aids in creating a more affirming environment for the client. If counselors can implement and respect pronouns with LGBTQIA+ clientele in an affirming way, then this practice may lead to clients identifying the counseling setting as an affirming environment.

### **Further Considerations**

In addition to being knowledgeable and aware of the *ACA Code of Ethics*, making a counseling space, and being an aspiring ally and advocate for LGBTQIA+ clientele, it is also important to consider further considerations. The added considerations outlined here are among a few of many that counselors may find beneficial to utilize in working towards being affirming counselors. Furthermore, additional considerations for

counselors to reflect on are utilizing a liberation psychology lens, engaging in applicable continuing education (CE) credits, promoting counselor advocacy practices, and being knowledgeable of national and local LGBTQIA+ resources.

### **Liberation Psychology**

Another consideration when working with LGBTQIA+ clients is using a liberation psychology lens in addition to the counseling approaches mentioned previously. Liberation psychology examines how systemic concerns in society impact one's mental health; keeping this perspective in mind then promotes a liberation psychology counselor to mirror to the client the systemic impacts on their mental health (Singh et al., 2020). By taking in how systemic issues impact a client's mental health, a counselor with this lens promotes the counseling process to focus on transforming the client and their community (Singh et al., 2020). The liberatory psychology lens may be used with LGBTQIA+ clientele in addressing societal and systemic concerns and their impact on the mental health of the individual and their community. This approach invites counselors to learn and grow their comfort with broaching and labeling systemic concerns such as power differentials, societal barriers, and additional reasons clients may not fully engage in therapy due to historical contexts (Singh et al., 2020). In doing so, liberation counselors can continuously grow their knowledge and aid in liberating and transforming LGBTQIA+ clientele and communities. With this lens, another consideration to be aware of are systems of oppression in society and becoming knowledgeable of the beliefs, norms, and structures of oppression inside communities (Singh et al., 2020, p. 220).

Additionally, counselors may reflect on how societal oppression has impacted LGBTQIA+ clientele. As Singh (2016) explains, a counselor using a liberatory lens would allow for self-reflection on how gender training and stereotypes impacted another's mental health experiences and well-being (Singh, 2016, p. 758). Additionally, counselors might reflect on affirming questions that LGBTQIA+ individuals may have needed to hear during their life, such as "What was lost along the gender journey?" or "What power or powerlessness did I feel along my gender journey?" (Singh, 2016, p. 758). Being mindful of questions like these can cultivate further empathy and understanding of what an LGBTQIA+ client may have experienced and lead to helping them process such through an affirming and liberatory approach. Counselors are encouraged to engage in relevant and tailored self-reflection by utilizing a liberatory perspective. This can be done by reflecting on questions such as "When did I first become aware of my race? When did I first learn my own gender? What has been lost and found in the development of your identities (both privileged and marginalized)?" (Singh et al., 2020, p. 220).

By using this lens, counselors are encouraged to be aware and continuously learn about systemic concerns, societal beliefs and norms, and structures of oppression, and be willing to do self-reflection work to best be a witness and advocate for all LGBTQIA+ clients.

### **Lifelong Continuing Education**

It is common knowledge within the ACA that continuing education (CE) is vital for counselors. Ginicola (2017) highlights the importance of LGBTQIA+ CEs since "Remaining cognizant of, and gaining continuing education in, LGBTQI[A]-affirming

practices and research through workshops and conventions (such as ALGBTIC's biennial conference and ACA's annual conference) is essential; counselors should also stay up to date with current LGBTQI[A]+ popular literature and events" (Ginicola et al., 2017). The emphasis on counselors to continue to be aware of and increase their knowledge on LGBTQIA+ affirming practices, research, interventions, workshops, and conventions, and being up-to-date on current events and relevant literature are helpful recommendations in striving towards being an affirming counselor.

### **Advocacy**

With counselors engaging in continuing education (CE) credits, another consideration is advocating for LGBTQIA+ clientele. To be an aspiring advocate for LGBTQIA+ clientele, "Counselors must also demonstrate active engagement with ally behaviors, both in and outside the counseling office, as these characteristics demonstrate both affirmative counseling and acting as a continual advocate and ally" (Ginicola et al. 2017, p. 119). Therefore, counselors should be advocates for their clients in sessions and outside of sessions within one's community. For example, advocacy efforts taken on by a counselor can be promoting social justice on behalf of one's client, encouraging affirming wellness in one's local schools and community, and helping in building settings that are equitable for LGBTQIA+ individuals (McKinney et al., 2020, p. 182). Advocacy efforts may be within the therapeutic relationship and showing up in public as an advocate for affirming, inclusive, and equitable environments.

### **Resources**

Researchers have illuminated the importance of counselors being knowledgeable about and providing access to specific LGBTQIA+ resources (Paceley et al., 2021).

Doing so can aid LGBTQIA+ individuals in feeling that their identities are validated and that their unique needs are heard and cared for (Paceley et al., 2021). It is vital to have LGBTQIA+ individuals feel seen, validated, and best supported by their identities. In relation, it has been shown that counselors being aware and knowledgeable of LGBTQIA+ resources may provide further support to those in this population negatively impacted by societal barriers and stressors (Fish et al., 2020). By being aware of resources that may be beneficial, counselors may better serve LGBTQIA+ clientele in scenarios in which negative societal barriers and stressors happen. The following section will highlight national resource organizations and those with local chapters.

With being educated on national mental health resources, there is a multitude of resources available by using the search tool on the GLBT National Resource Center database website, which aids users in locating resources based on topic and one's zip code (GLBT, n.d.). The GLBT resource search tools allow one to find resources on the topics of HIV/AIDS, LGBTQIA+ community spaces, affectional identities, business/employment, crisis, cultural, fundraising, health/mental health, hotlines, political, affirming religious resources, recovery-related, social, for youth and seniors, for students, sports-associated, support and financial aid for those seeking gender-affirming surgeries, as well as affirming resources for travel purposes (GLBT, n.d.). This resource search tool may be helpful for counselors and clients to use on their own; it is essential to note that it can find national and local resources.

There are numerous resources available to provide further support for LGBTQIA+ individuals. Therefore, this part highlights beneficial resources for counselors to be aware of that may be helpful for LGBTQIA+ clientele. For example, the

National Alliance on Mental Illness has a resource directory and a LGBTQI mental health resource page (NAMI n.d.; NAMI, 2022). The emphasized resources from the NAMI resource directory and webpage are The LGBT National Help Center, The National Center for Transgender Equality, The Trevor Project, the SAGE National LGBT Elder Hotline, Parents Families and Friends of Lesbian & Gays (PFLAG), It Gets Better, Trans Lifeline, The Jim Collins Foundation, Lambda Legal, National Center for Transgender Equality, Transgender Law Center, Stateside Legal (LGBTQ Military), and the National Queer and Trans Therapists of Color Network (NQTTCN) (NAMI n.d.; NAMI, 2022). The resources highlighted above may provide support for a variety of presenting concerns, such as crisis services, support over the phone, affirming family support and loved ones of LGBTQIA+ individuals, gender-affirming surgery financial aid, blogs and discussions for individuals in the LGBTQIA+ community, legal aid, as well as clients searching for counselors who identify as queer and/or as a person of color. If a resource is applicable and beneficial to what an LGBTQIA+ client is looking for then sharing it with them may be helpful. This may aid the client in feeling further supported and build up more external resources and coping strategies.

In addition to counselors being aware of resources that may be helpful for their LGBTQIA+ clientele, it is wise for counselors to be familiar with resources, organizations, and associations for mental health and healthcare professionals to utilize. For example, resources like The Association of Gay and Lesbian Psychiatrists, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and their National Committee on Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender/Queer+ Issues (NCLGBTQ+), The Gay and Lesbian Medical Association's Provider Directory, and SAIGE are all valuable resources for

mental health and health care professionals to be familiar with (NAMI n.d.; NASW n.d.). Being aware of such resources may allow counselors to build their competencies further and connect with other affirming mental health and health care professionals. These resources are not only helpful for counselors, they may also be useful for clientele who are searching for affirming providers. Lastly, following the conclusion, there is a resource list under Appendix A, which has information and resources for counselors to turn to. It is important to note that the resource list only includes some LGBTQIA+ resources and is not comprehensive.

### **Conclusion**

This Ed.S. project provided specific counseling approaches that are helpful and affirming when working with LGBTQIA+ clientele. The focus on utilizing affirmative, trauma-informed, and feminist approaches when providing counseling services to LGBTQIA+ clientele is beneficial. An affirmative approach is strength-based, non-pathological, and promotes acceptance to serve the best LGBTQIA+ clientele (McKinney et al., 2020). In implementing an affirmative approach, counselors may better aid in supporting clients through milestones and self-identity in an affirming manner (McKinney et al., 2020). Additionally, an affirmative approach requires counselors to reflect on their possible heteronormative privilege and biases so that they may learn, grow, and work towards being seen as affirming and accepting by clients within this population (Ginicola et al., 2017). Using an integrative approach of the three approaches discussed may lead to an affirming, trauma-informed, and empowering counseling relationship with LGBTQIA+ clientele. Secondly, using a trauma-informed approach alongside an affirmative approach may help LGBTQIA+ clients recognize and take care



of the potential impacts of trauma on one's thoughts, feelings, behavior, health, and well-being (Levenson et al., 2021). In addition to integrating counseling approaches that are affirmative and trauma-informed, this project suggests the added integration of a feminist approach. Using a feminist approach, the counselor validates, highlights the client's strengths, and promotes resiliency among LGBTQIA+ individuals (Negy & McKinney, 2006). Another vital aspect of a feminist approach is that it encourages the focus and awareness of societal considerations. For example, this approach in use among this population allows counselors to examine the roles of power, the gender binary, how these considerations may affect clients, and the various intersections of oppression (Goldberg et al., 2011, pp. 377-378; LaMantia et al., 2015, p. 138).

Additionally, this project highlighted how counselors might strive towards being affirming. Several suggestions in striving towards affirmative care were discussed, such as being knowledgeable about the ACA's *Code of Ethics* (2014), statements from ACA's SAIGE *competencies*, *The Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies Model*, creating a safe and inclusive counseling setting, the need for affirming and well-informed language, and being an active aspiring ally and advocate for LGBTQIA+ clients and their civil rights.

Further considerations mentioned to consider applying in striving towards being an affirmative counselor were also stated. The additional considerations suggested in creating affirmative and beneficial care for LGBTQIA+ clientele are to employ a liberation psychology perspective, take relevant continuing education (CE) credits, endorse counselor advocacy practices in and outside the counseling setting, and be well-informed about LGBTQIA+ resources.

With counselors utilizing an integrative counseling approach that is affirmative, trauma-informed, and feminist, counselors may be better able to support and provide better care for LGBTQIA+ clientele. In addition, to applying an integrative approach, it has been shown to be beneficial when counselors also engage in guidelines for counseling ethics and competencies, are advocates and allies for their clients, keep in mind a liberation psychology perspective, education (CE) credits, and looking into LGBTQIA+ resources. When counselors apply these approaches and considerations, doing so aids counselors in striving towards being affirmative counselors, which may lead to providing the finest level of counseling care for LGBTQIA+ clientele.

## Appendix

### Resource List

- **InReach:** This is a resource for all LGBTQIA+ individuals, including asylum seekers, refugees, undocumented, homeless, and those needing community and safe resources. InReach has an online LGBTQIA+ resource database called AsylumConnect. <https://inreach.org/tag/lgbt-asylum/>
- **Human Rights Campaign (HRC):** This organization strives to end discrimination against LGBTQ+ people and advocate for communities to get to fundamental fairness and equality for all individuals within the LGBTQIA+ community. In addition to their advocacy work, the HRC has a database for resources on various subjects. <https://www.hrc.org/resources>
- **GLBT National Resource Center database and Helpline:** The resource database locator allows individuals to search for local and national LGBTQIA+ resources. This same organization also has a helpline for LGBTQIA+ individuals to call for support. <https://www.glbtneame.org> / <https://www.lgbthotline.org>
- **International Gay & Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC):** This is an international organization that promotes, advocates, and supports the rights of LGBTQIA+ individuals across the globe. This organization strives to end discrimination, stop violence, promote inclusion, share resources, support movements, and uphold human rights. <https://outrightinternational.org>
- **It Gets Better:** Provides coping skills and resources to communicate to LGBTQ+ youth that it gets better. Offers a "Get Help" page to find LGBTQ+ youth support services in your community. [www.itgetsbetter.org](http://www.itgetsbetter.org)

- The Jim Collins Foundation (JCF): This organization helps individuals receive funding for gender-confirming surgeries for transgender individuals who want these surgeries. <https://jimcollinsfoundation.org>
- Lambda Legal is a national organization that aids in protecting and improving LGBTQIA+ rights in the U.S. by supporting selected legal court cases, promoting public education campaigns, and advocating at local/state/federal levels for LGBTQIA+ individuals. <https://www.lambdalegal.org>
- LGBT National Help Center: This is a resource that provides skilled peer counseling through a general helpline at (888) 843-4564 (Hotline) and a youth talk line at (800) 246-7743. The help center also has a moderated peer chat. There is more information available at <http://www.glnh.org>
- National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI): This is a national grassroots mental health organization that promotes advocacy, education, awareness, and support for those affected by mental health concerns as well as loved ones of those who are impacted by mental health concerns. NAMI also has a resource directory that contains LGBTQIA+ resources. NAMI has a national helpline which can be reached at 800-950-6264, M-F from 10 am-10 pm ET.  
<https://www.nami.org/home>
- National Association of Social Workers (NASW): The NASW has a National Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender & Queer+ Issues (NCLGBTQ+). This committee of the NASW promotes and oversees the level of affirming care within the social work field so that LGBTQI+ clientele may best be

served. <https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Governance/National-Appointments/National-Committees/Committee-on-LGBT-Issues>

- The National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE): The NCTE is an organization that advocates for Transgender individuals through changing policies, promoting further understanding and empathy for transgender people, and working towards social and racial justice in this community.  
<https://transequality.org>
- National Queer and Trans Therapists of Color Network (NQTTCN):  
It is a social justice-oriented organization that aims to transform mental health for queer and trans people of color. [www.nqttn.com](http://www.nqttn.com)
- National Runaway Safe line: This 24/7 confidential crisis line provides support and resources for at-risk teens considering leaving home. Their hotline can be reached at 1-800-786-2929. <https://www.nationalrunawaysafeline.org>
- Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbian & Gays (PFLAG): PFLAG is an organization that supports aspiring allies, family, and friends of those within the LGBTQIA+ community. They have a helpline and chapters that can provide in-person support groups. Their helpline can be reached at (202) 467-8180 / [www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org)
- Trevor Project: Offers a 24/7 hotline for crisis intervention, suicide prevention, and other concerns for youth within the LGBTQIA+ community. They can be reached by either calling 1-866-488-7386 or texting “START” to 678-678. They also have a platform called Trevor Space that allows for safe online forums for

LGBTQIA+ youth. The Trevor Project has more information and resources on its website. <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

- Trans Lifeline: This is an organization that provides crisis intervention and suicide prevention for individuals who have transgender identities. Individuals with a transgender identity run the Trans Lifeline. The hotline is accessible in both English and Spanish at (877) 565-8860 [www.translifeline.org](http://www.translifeline.org)
- Safe Zone Project (SZP): Provides free LGBTQIA+ Safe Zone training for facilitators and trainees. The SZP also has materials on inclusive and acceptable language. <https://thesafezoneproject.com>
- SAGE National LGBT Elder Hotline: A national advocacy and support organization that prioritizes supporting LGBTQIA+ elders. Their website contains an LGBTQIA+ aging resource directory, promotes education, aids in locating affirming agencies, and works towards building and working through issues with which LGBTQIA+ elders may need support. Their hotline number is 877-360-LGBT (5428). <https://www.sageusa.org>
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA): This federal agency provides information, resources, and treatment finder services for substance use and mental health treatment. SAMHSA has collected data from surveys and reports on individuals within the LGBTQIA+ community. The following link contains resources and research data that are helpful and applicable to those within the LGBTQIA+ community. <https://www.samhsa.gov/behavioral-health-equity/lgbt>

- Students and Gender Identity Guide for Schools: The University of Southern California (USC) has created a guide on best supporting and creating safe spaces for LGBTQIA+ students. <https://rossieronline.usc.edu/blog/students-and-gender-identity/>

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