

## Navigating Graduate School in Psychology as a Sexual and/or Gender Minority (LGBTQ+) Student

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Why are we writing a chapter in the *Portable Mentor* for sexual and gender minority (SGM) graduate students in psychology? Recent data from Gallup indicates that the number of individuals openly identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) in the US is rising and that the largest increases are happening among individuals between the ages of 18 and 36 (Newport, 2018). As our community becomes increasingly visible – particularly among young adults – the field of psychology needs to talk more directly about how to provide mentorship for sexual and gender minority trainees to meet their unique needs. We intentionally use the term “sexual and gender minority” as a broad umbrella term to be inclusive of the wide range of identities and lived experiences of individuals within the LGBTQ community.

Why is the fact that you are a member of the SGM community relevant to your graduate experience? There are many universal graduate student experiences (e.g., professional skill development, research milestones) that you will face alongside your cisgender and heterosexual peers. However, as an SGM graduate student, you will need to navigate unique circumstances related to your identity. Due to both the successes and challenges we have had, we recognize how important it is for SGM graduate students in psychology to have access to identity-specific mentorship. Given that it can be hard to find an SGM-identifying mentor in your field – which can be further complicated if your SGM identities are invisible – we hope this chapter will serve as a supplemental mentor to guide you through personal and professional issues unique to SGM students.

Although this chapter is first and foremost written for the benefit of SGM students, we hope it can be helpful for allies at any level of training in psychology to learn more about the unique considerations for SGM students. For example, the information here may be beneficial for peer allies seeking guidance on how to support SGM colleagues, or for faculty mentors to learn how to effectively mentor SGM students.

We have structured this chapter chronologically to follow your trajectory through the early stages of a career in psychology, as we know that professional considerations related to an SGM identity will evolve as you advance through your

Table 8.1 *Resources for SGM graduate students in psychology*

Resource	Website	Description
APA Proud and Prepared	<a href="http://www.apa.org/apags/resources/lgbt-guide">www.apa.org/apags/resources/lgbt-guide</a>	A guide for LGBT students navigating graduate training
APA Resources for Graduate Students of LGBT Psychology	<a href="http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/graduate-students">www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/graduate-students</a>	Funding opportunities, research resources, guides, etc.
APAGS-CLGBTC Climate Guide	<a href="http://www.apa.org/apags/resources/clgbt-climate-guide.pdf">www.apa.org/apags/resources/clgbt-climate-guide.pdf</a>	Guide for evaluating the inclusivity of graduate programs
A Guide for Supporting Trans and Gender Diverse Students	<a href="http://www.apa.org/apags/governance/subcommittees/supporting-diverse-students.pdf">www.apa.org/apags/governance/subcommittees/supporting-diverse-students.pdf</a>	APAGS resource for supporting trans and gender diverse students in graduate school
Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals	<a href="http://www.LGBTcampus.org">www.LGBTcampus.org</a>	Provides a map of campus LGBT centers with at least one paid employee. <i>Note:</i> Other community (non-campus affiliated) centers and/or unfunded campus groups may exist but are not listed here
Transgender Law & Policy Institute	<a href="http://www.transgenderlaw.org/">www.transgenderlaw.org/</a>	A list of colleges and universities with LGBT protections
Guidelines for Psychological Practice With Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People	<a href="http://www.apa.org/practice/guidelines/transgender.pdf">www.apa.org/practice/guidelines/transgender.pdf</a>	Guidelines for culturally competent, gender-affirmative psychological care for gender diverse clients

training. Specifically, we will discuss common concerns and opportunities experienced by SGM students before, during, and after graduate school.

This chapter is informed by our experiences as queer, cisgender women who navigated personal and professional issues in graduate school related to our identities and research interests in SGM populations. We recognize that we cannot speak for the lived experiences of all individuals within the SGM community; thus, this chapter is not intended to be a comprehensive guide for all SGM graduate students. There are several other published resources available for SGM graduate students in psychology, which we hope you will explore in addition to this chapter (see Table 8.1), including a resource from the American Psychological Association of Graduate Students (APAGS; “Proud and Prepared”) that highlights voices and experiences from a range of SGM students. Ultimately, we hope that this chapter can support you as you seek out personalized mentorship and as you navigate your own professional development as an SGM psychologist.

## 1. Before Graduate School: The Application and Interview Process

So, you have decided to pursue a graduate degree in psychology – great! The process of applying to and interviewing with potential graduate programs carries both

opportunities and challenges related to your identity as an SGM individual. We will provide recommendations specific to SGM applicants that may help you through the process of identifying and narrowing your list of prospective mentors and programs. Similarly, this section will guide you through unique considerations relevant to the application and interview process that will help you to succeed as a prospective SGM graduate student.

### **1.1 Personal Considerations**

There are a number of factors about your personal journey as an SGM individual that may influence how you navigate this stage of your professional career in psychology. At a fundamental level, it is important to self-reflect: To what extent are you “out” or open about your identities? How comfortable are you discussing your identities with others? How relevant or central are your personal identities to your professional identity? How important is it to you to share these aspects of your identities within your professional spheres? To what extent do your personal identities overlap with your professional interests? The answers to these questions will shape how you approach various aspects of graduate school training and your career in psychology.

It is important to emphasize the autonomy and control you have in deciding how, if at all, your personal identities intersect with your professional development. Whether and to what extent you choose to incorporate your SGM identities into your professional life is ultimately a question related to your values. Regardless of whether you choose to be “out” and vocal about your identities, or whether you prefer to maintain privacy and not discuss your identities in professional settings, your choice is valid. We recognize that not all sexual and gender minority students wish to be visible. Your comfort level with visibility may vary relative to other people, and may even change over time during the course of your graduate training.

### **1.2 Identifying a Research Mentor**

One important lesson we learned in graduate school is that *mentorship* is one factor that helps already exceptional students to develop successful careers in psychology. There is no doubt that most, if not all, students enter graduate school with the inherent capacity to succeed. And yet, the ability to identify and utilize good mentorship can make a world of difference within a field that relies heavily on professional connections and learning from others’ experience.

The first step in applying to graduate school in psychology is deciding what you are interested in studying, including which broad area of psychology (e.g., social, developmental, clinical) and a general sense of a specific topic within that field. This is important because one of the primary components of the application process is identifying a compatible research mentor, given the field generally operates on a mentor model. If you have the ability to relocate, you may be considering programs across a wide geographic area. The process of developing a list and narrowing down potential programs and mentors can quickly become overwhelming!

You will want to identify a primary research mentor who can provide mentorship on your research interests, and with whom you also feel comfortable on a personal level. Evaluate for yourself what you are looking for in a mentor (e.g., area of expertise, their personal identities). For instance, some prospective SGM students may wish to work with a mentor who openly identifies as an SGM professional – although it may be difficult to find a mentor who shares both your research interests and SGM identities. Regardless of how your prospective mentor identifies, it is important that they seem able to effectively guide you toward resources to navigate professional issues as an SGM individual. Consider how important it is to you that your primary *research* mentor is involved in this aspect of your career development, as you can also seek out additional mentorship outside of this relationship.

### **1.2.1 Students with SGM Research/Clinical Interests**

Some SGM students also have research or clinical interest in working with SGM populations. However, particularly in the small field of SGM psychology, it can be difficult to find a mentor that studies exactly what you are interested in. Therefore, you may find yourself in a position of having to compromise on some aspects of your research interests in the service of finding a good research mentor fit. The question is, do you prioritize working with a mentor who has expertise with SGM communities, or do you prioritize expertise in the specific phenomenon you wish to study? There are pros and cons to either approach that warrant consideration if you are not able to find a mentor whose interests perfectly align with yours.

**Mentors with Content Expertise.** If you want to study SGM populations, there are implications of prioritizing working with a mentor who *only* has expertise in your desired content area. The extent to which challenges arise in this mentoring scenario may depend on the specific content area and how relevant it is to the population. For example, if you wanted to study depression and/or suicide in SGM populations, you may be able to find a mentor who has expertise in depression or suicide but who has not studied it in SGM populations.

If you select a mentor without knowledge of working with SGM populations, some mentors may be willing to delve into the research area with you. However, your mentor may rely on you to provide the expertise on SGM-specific topics. In this scenario, consider how comfortable and capable you are of providing expertise on SGM issues from a research standpoint. A note of caution when evaluating your own competencies: Generally speaking, it is not uncommon for individuals early in their training to overestimate their knowledge or abilities. It can be particularly challenging when we have a lived experience to recognize that our viewpoint is not representative of the diverse range of SGM experiences, nor does it necessarily equate to knowledge of the empirical literature on the broader population. It is important that you accurately and objectively assess your competencies, and to identify when you need further guidance and support, whether you have to seek it independently or with assistance. Ideally, your mentor could help facilitate consultation and collaboration with colleagues who have expertise working with SGM populations.

You may encounter challenges related to data collection when working with a mentor who does not usually study SGM populations. Typically, engaging in research with new populations, especially under-represented minorities such as SGM communities, requires collaborating with a network of community agencies and partners (e.g., community advisory boards). If there is no existing infrastructure within your lab to establish community partnerships, it may slow down your productivity and could even interfere with your ability to complete program milestones (e.g., collecting a dissertation sample). If you have the option to analyze pre-existing samples or data sets, it is possible that your variables of interest may not have been collected comprehensively or there may not be a large enough sample size of the particular group you are hoping to study. These challenges are not insurmountable, but you should think carefully about how they may impact your training experiences before committing to joining a lab.

**Mentors with SGM Expertise.** If you prioritize finding a potential mentor who has expertise working with SGM populations, but they focus on a different content area from what you hope to study long term, you can benefit from learning about the unique concerns that impact SGM communities. Many faculty members will indicate they are open to incorporating students' interests into their work, and it is very likely that their interest is genuine, yet the feasibility of doing so is variable. This could be a unique opportunity for you to begin developing your own research program early in your training, which could place you in the role of a valued junior colleague to your mentor. On the flip side, adding a new arm to your mentor's research program may be difficult to implement, especially if their existing areas of interest are already well-developed (and/or funded). Again, a note of caution to not overestimate your abilities to manage large responsibilities independently.

### 1.3 The Application

It is understandable that as an SGM individual, you may have concerns about disclosing your SGM identities in your applications to graduate programs, whether related to fear of discrimination or uncertainty about how to navigate identity disclosures in a professional manner. Graduate programs will vary in what demographic information they collect on their application. Regardless of what information graduate programs proactively ask for, you will also have the opportunity to consider identity disclosure in your cover letters or essays.

As a person with lived experience with a minority identity, it makes sense that you may have concerns about discrimination. However, given the current socio-political climate of the field, having your application rejected on the basis of sexual or gender minority status would be an unlikely outcome (and generally illegal!). It is more likely that a program would value the unique perspective you may bring to the program or department. Some individuals opt to share elements of their SGM identity when it is professionally relevant in their application materials (e.g., "As an SGM researcher, I valued your program's stated commitment to diversity").

Gender minority students may face several specific concerns when it comes to navigating personal identity disclosures in the application process. Students whose name differs from their legal name, or whose gender differs from their legally recognized sex, may quickly encounter situations that necessitate identity disclosure when applying to graduate school or other training positions if those applications involve a formal background check. It may be helpful for you to plan ahead for these situations so that you can decide how to navigate it in a way that feels right for you. For example, you could choose to proactively reach out to human resources to have a direct conversation about any discrepancies that may arise on personnel paperwork. Be sure to familiarize yourself with the institution's non-discrimination policies so that you know your rights.

#### **1.4 Interviewing**

Congratulations! You've identified mentors to apply to, and have now been invited to attend interviews at some wonderful programs. Remember, interviews are just as much an opportunity for you to interview the graduate program as it is a chance for them to get to know you. You may have the opportunity to interview in person or may be offered interviews via phone or video conferencing. There are pros and cons to each interview format when it comes to eliciting information relevant to the program's climate for SGM students. Here, we will offer a few thoughts on what you may want to consider at this stage.

#### **1.5 Identifying an Inclusive Environment**

Finding a supportive and inclusive environment for graduate school is crucial for your well-being as a graduate student. The overarching culture and recognition of diversity within a department can make a big difference in your day-to-day activities in graduate school. It will likely impact how you feel in the classroom, conducting your research, and interacting with colleagues and students.

The weight of a non-inclusive environment can be very heavy to carry with you every day for four to six years, depending on the length of your program. The empirical literature on the health and well-being of SGM individuals indicates that minority stress experiences – proximal and distal stressors such as internalized stigma, expectations of rejection, discrimination, harassment – have a significant negative impact on physical and mental health (Meyer, 2003). An inclusive culture within your graduate program fosters growth, as you will likely be more fully engaged in your training when you do not have to worry about acceptance. Moreover, an inclusive environment allows you to dedicate more of your emotional, mental, and physical resources to focus on the essential academic tasks at hand.

As you evaluate potential programs, there are several things you can look for to identify an inclusive environment before you ever step foot on campus. Look at the department website – is there a statement about inclusivity? Do they mention a departmental and/or program-specific diversity committee? When you receive

email correspondence from faculty, staff, or students in the program, do they include their pronouns in their email signature? Another great source of information is the program handbook, which is often publicly available on the program's website. Read about the program's training on diversity and multiculturalism. Some programs may offer stand-alone courses, whereas others may build in a multiculturalism training sequence that spans across graduate training years. Are these training experiences optional or required? These descriptions may give you a sense of the program's commitment to incorporating multicultural training into students' coursework.

It may be helpful to examine the university's non-discrimination policies prior to your interview, in case you have any questions. The United States Supreme Court ruled in June 2020 that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits firing of employees on the basis of their sexual orientation or gender identity (*Bostock v. Clayton County*, 2020). Nevertheless, it is important that you know your rights as an SGM *student*, and potentially employee (e.g., teaching assistantships), at any institution you are considering for your graduate education.

### **1.5.1 Practical Considerations**

Bathroom access is an essential, but perhaps uncomfortable, topic to address. For some SGM students, bathrooms may not feel like a safe space. As you prepare to go on in-person interviews, or at the beginning of the interview day, it may be helpful to find out where the closest gender non-specific or single-occupancy bathroom is located by asking the program coordinator or a current graduate student in the program. While this question is most directly relevant to your experience during the interview day – the day will be stressful enough without having to worry about where you can relieve yourself – it is also going to be relevant on a daily basis when you start your graduate program. What would you do if the department does not have a bathroom that feels safe and affirming to you in their building? You may be able to manage for a single interview day, but remember that your graduate training will span several years.

As you gather information, you may want to investigate beyond your department's specific building to learn what the broader campus community offers in terms of gender non-specific or single-occupancy restrooms. As a graduate student, you may find yourself moving around campus throughout the day (e.g., serving as a TA, attending seminars), which could offer opportunities to find safe restrooms even if one is not located in your building. If you are not interviewing in person (e.g., telephone or video-based conferencing), it will be important for you to identify someone to whom you feel comfortable asking these questions so you can make a fully informed decision.

Another practical consideration for in-person interviews is navigating housing accommodations if offered, given programs sometimes attempt to match prospective and graduate students by gender. If you think this will be a concern for you, consider reaching out to the program coordinator in advance to learn about your options and advocate for your needs.

### 1.5.2 During the Interview

Interviews are your chance to obtain information about a program that may be difficult to find in any published medium (e.g., handbooks, websites). Thus, conversations during interviews may offer unique opportunities to ask about the program's climate on diversity and inclusion, as well as to get a sense of your personal fit with potential mentors and student colleagues.

Speaking with members of the department community and physically being in the department's space (for in-person interviews) offers you a wealth of information about the inclusivity of the environment for SGM students. As you are walking around the psychology building, notice the visibility of inclusive messages (e.g., posters, pride flags, "Safe Zone" training signs). When you are talking with students or faculty in the program, pay attention to their verbal and non-verbal responses when you discuss topics related to inclusion and diversity (if you choose to bring up those topics!). Do they seem comfortable, or do you notice a tendency to minimize or over-generalize concerns related to diversity and inclusion? Importantly, gather data from multiple people and across interactions (e.g., staff, students, faculty) to see the *patterns* in responses that might be indicative of the program's culture, rather than focusing on isolated interactions.

We have included a list of sample questions that you could consider asking while interviewing (Table 8.2). Keep in mind that during interviews, faculty and graduate students in the program *cannot* ask you questions that may relate to employment discrimination (e.g., national origin, disability status, sexual orientation, gender identity; Parent et al., 2015). Despite these guidelines, you may still encounter individuals who ask inappropriate personal questions on interviews; depending on the setting, there may be avenues for reporting this type of misconduct.

Although representatives of the graduate program cannot ask you about the topics above, *you* are not prohibited from bringing up personal topics if you feel it would be helpful to discuss. Be mindful of your rationale for disclosing personal information on interviews, as the context and tone can impact how you are perceived by the interviewer. For instance, you may want to disclose your personal identities so you can learn about the job market in the community for your same-sex spouse. This type of question would be professionally relevant as it communicates your realistic interest in moving to the area.

In contrast, saying, "My partner really doesn't want to move here given all the conservative religious people in this town – I don't know if we could live around those kinds of people," would likely *not* be received well. This type of statement communicates a low level of interest in the program as well as personal biases, both of which are likely to hurt your chance of receiving an admission offer from the program. Instead, the same concern could still be expressed in a more professional manner, such as, "I understand there is a prominent religious community in this area. How accepting is this community with regard to diversity?"



Table 8.2 *Sample questions for SGM students to ask on interviews for graduate school*

	Sample questions
To ask a potential mentor or other faculty members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● What resources are available to support students of minority statuses?</li> <li>● How does your lab typically assess sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression in your research?</li> <li>● (<i>Research with SGM populations</i>) I am excited about your research on Topic A, and I am especially interested in how SGM individuals are impacted by it. Do you routinely collect data on participants' sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression?</li> <li>● How does the department acknowledge and address issues related to multiculturalism and diversity? (Within classes, research, clinical-settings, student well-being)</li> <li>● Are there training opportunities specifically related to sexual and gender diversity?</li> <li>● Are there other researchers in the department that study topics related to SGM communities who may be open to collaboration?</li> </ul>
To ask graduate students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● How are multiculturalism and diversity incorporated in the training curriculum?</li> <li>● How do you and/or other students in the program feel about the quality of multiculturalism training?</li> <li>● (<i>If comfortable disclosing your identities</i>) What diversity and inclusion and/or LGBTQ+ specific student groups exist on campus? In the community?</li> <li>● (<i>If applicable</i>) What are the options for gender non-specific or single-occupancy restrooms on campus?</li> <li>● How does program faculty solicit graduate student feedback? What student-initiated changes have been made since you entered the program?</li> <li>● (<i>Clinical/counseling</i>) What populations are served in the various practicum sites you train in? Have you been able to obtain clinical experience with underserved populations? What are your experiences with SGM clients?</li> <li>● What do students in the program do for fun outside of graduate school or the department?</li> </ul>

*Note:* If you feel comfortable disclosing your identity statuses, you may want to tailor your questions more specifically.

### 1.5.3 Assessing the Broader University and Community Culture

One aspect to consider about the broader university is whether there is a sexual and gender diversity center or student-run organization on campus. If so, do they provide programming for graduate/professional students? We recommend searching online and, if you feel comfortable, asking faculty or current graduate students about these

offerings. An active campus sexual and gender diversity program is a great way to find and build community after starting graduate school.

Universities exist within a broader community that has a culture of its own. Similar to how you assessed the department culture, keep an eye out for indicators of the community's culture during the interview process. If you have the luxury of staying over the night before or after in-person interviews, try to take a walk or ride around town. If you are able to visit a local establishment, notice how their bathrooms are labeled. What types of events are advertised on community bulletin boards? It is also helpful to ask current graduate students about their experiences in the community.

Regardless of your ability to explore the area in person, you may want to investigate local offerings with regard to community centers, non-profit organizations, or utilize social media to explore social events and activities geared toward SGM young adults or professionals. Many graduate students center their social network within the program or department, yet it may still be helpful to know what else is available. If you identify with a religious denomination, you may want to explore the religious institutions in the area surrounding campus to determine if there is a spiritual community that espouses inclusivity.

## **2. During Graduate School: Navigating Life as an SGM Graduate Student**

You've made it! You successfully entered a graduate program in your chosen area of psychology, hopefully with a research mentor that provides a good fit for your interests and needs. Ideally, you enrolled in a graduate program that provides an inclusive environment for SGM students, although you may still recognize areas for potential improvement. So, now what? In this section, we discuss considerations for SGM students as you navigate your day-to-day life in graduate school.

For some SGM students, especially if you moved to a new city and are developing new social circles, starting graduate school in psychology may offer a wonderful opportunity to introduce yourself as you wish. Particularly for transgender and non-binary students, whether you have been using your affirmed name and pronouns for a long time or you are at the beginning stages of transitioning, starting graduate school affords you the opportunity to present yourself however you wish to be recognized in professional spheres.

### **2.1 Personal Support and Self-Care**

We intentionally discuss personal support and self-care at the beginning of the section on life as a graduate student as we strongly believe that prioritizing your own well-being is the key to success in graduate school. In addition to professional mentorship from your primary advisor, it is crucial that you also seek out social support. This advice applies to all graduate students, but is particularly relevant for SGM students who may face additional stressors as a function of being a member of a minority group(s). Find peers who can support you both personally and professionally either within or outside of your graduate program. This may mean seeking out opportunities

for social connection or support outside of your program (e.g., joining community sports teams, interest groups, volunteer programs, SGM-specific cultural centers). Similarly, self-care is an essential component of professional development during graduate school, although this is not always addressed directly during training. Be proactive in exploring methods of self-care to determine what works best for you during this stage of your career, and be sure to set personal boundaries to develop a work–life balance. In the event you need additional mental health support, seek out options for individual therapy that may be available for graduate students. We have also included a brief list of SGM-specific mental health resources (Table 8.3).

## 2.2 Navigating Relationships

If you have not already, you may come to learn that the answer to most questions in the field of psychology is, “It depends.” That will be entirely true for this next section as the way in which you navigate relationships will depend on your interpersonal style and preferences. We will present some of the situations and choice points you may navigate during your graduate training, but how you manage the situations is a very personal choice that varies across settings.

### 2.2.1 Primary Research Mentor

An offer of admission is an invitation from the faculty member to join their lab as a junior collaborator and they accept responsibility to be your professional mentor.

Table 8.3 *Mental health resources for SGM individuals*

Resource	Website and phone number	Description
Fenway Health	<a href="http://fenwayhealth.org/care/wellness-resources/help-lines/">http://fenwayhealth.org/care/wellness-resources/help-lines/</a> 888-340-4528 for ages 25+ 800-399-PEER for ages 25 and under	SGM-focused health center helpline and peer listening line
LGBT National Hotline	<a href="http://www.glbthotline.org/national-hotline.html">www.glbthotline.org/national-hotline.html</a> 888-843-4564	Anonymous and confidential hotline for SGM individuals to discuss SGM-related and other issues
Trans Lifeline	<a href="http://www.translifeline.org/">www.translifeline.org/</a> (877)-565-8860	Trans Lifeline is a trans-led organization that connects trans people to the community, support, and resources they need to survive and thrive Spanish-speaking extension available
The Trevor Project	<a href="http://www.thetrevorproject.org/get-help-now/">www.thetrevorproject.org/get-help-now/</a> (866)-488-7386	Phone, chat, and texting support for SGM individuals up to age 25 in crisis

By accepting their offer, your relationship will develop based on this mutual interest and agreement. The mentoring relationship offers a unique opportunity to form a close relationship with someone invested in you who chose to support you; mentors often have an intrinsic and extrinsic desire for you to succeed. For some SGM students, this may be in contrast to previous experiences within your family or community of origin. We encourage you to explore and take advantage of this unique setting where someone understands and supports your specific career interests and can support you as a flourishing early-stage professional. Although mentor changes can and do occur on occasion, you are working to develop a *professional partnership* that you cultivate with this person for the next several years and will hopefully last throughout your career.

Now that you have entered graduate school, you and your mentor have the opportunity to learn more about each other beyond what you shared in essays and a brief interview. Most mentors will check in with their students about how they are adjusting to the transition to graduate school, with coursework, and potentially with their move to a new area. This may invite a natural and more appropriate opportunity to disclose more personal information than you initially shared during the interview process (if you so choose). Some people prefer to be more reserved with sharing personal information initially and may disclose more as trust is built in the relationship. Occasionally, discussing aspects of a trainee's personal life may help the mentor provide better overall support for the student's well-being. Like any relationship, your comfort level with your mentor will hopefully grow over time as you begin to learn each other's interpersonal and professional styles.

Often in an effort to learn more about you and connect, some eager research mentors may unintentionally ask you questions that feel inappropriately personal. Remember that you are not obligated to share information about your personal life but can if you feel comfortable doing so. Your relationship with your mentor may feel like a personal relationship, but the framework still exists in a professional setting. It is okay to keep your professional relationships professional.

Faculty members and mentors will remain important to your career before, during, and after graduate school. We cannot understate the importance of interpersonal relationships as a method of enhancing, or potentially impeding, your career trajectory via evaluations of your performance, letters of recommendation, and their willingness to provide networking opportunities and professional connections within the field, including job prospects and publishing opportunities.

### **2.2.2 Other Faculty Members**

It is unrealistic to expect that one mentor can meet all of your needs in graduate school. Many graduate students in psychology develop mentorship relationships with other faculty in the department. Beyond classroom instruction, mentorship

relationships with faculty can develop via individual meetings for office hours, research collaboration, or general professional mentorship. Explore and take advantage of opportunities to work with faculty who you admire and who seem invested in fostering student growth. This will help build and round out your professional network.

By developing a broad network of faculty mentors, you will have more support as you navigate challenges during graduate school. In particular, if you were to face discrimination as an SGM graduate student in psychology, you can rely on these faculty mentors for support and consultation. Most programs have specific guidelines, often included in the department handbook, that outline the steps of who to contact to address an instance of discrimination or harassment. These procedures often instruct students to begin by addressing the topic directly with the individual, if possible, and/or speaking with your mentor, then working up the chain of command within the department before filing a formal grievance or complaint with the university at large.

### **2.2.3 Seeking SGM-Specific Mentorship**

Some SGM trainees find it useful to find a mentor who can provide guidance on professional development related to their SGM identity. If you choose to do so, you can learn from professionals in the field who have navigated similar challenges and can connect you to relevant resources or networks of other individuals. The reality is that most psychology departments have a small group of faculty members. Given that only 4.5 percent of the US adult population identifies as SGM (Newport, 2018), the odds of having one or more queer-identifying (and out) faculty are low. You will most likely need to use creativity to find SGM mentors to help you navigate concerns of presenting your identities in the academic world. For instance, you may be able to identify SGM faculty in other departments at your home institution.

For SGM mentorship specifically within the field of psychology, you may also consider curating a network of psychologists outside of your university. Throughout the interview process for graduate school, you may identify faculty members with whom you felt comfortable but the overall fit of the program for your graduate training was not optimal. Consider that you can maintain connections with anyone you meet along your journey and continue to network with them as you enter graduate school at another institution if they are open to it. From personal experience, most SGM faculty members are willing and eager to provide mentorship to other SGM individuals. Several professional organizations now have specialty groups for members who identify as SGM or for psychologists studying or working with individuals in SGM communities (Table 8.4). You can form individual connections, utilize professional listservs, and access relevant resources by joining these specialized organizations.

Table 8.4 *Professional groups and networking for SGM graduate students in psychology*

Resource	Website	Description
APA Committee on Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity	<a href="http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/committee/index">www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/committee/index</a>	APA-wide committee
APA Society for the Psychological Study of LGBT Issues (Division 44)	<a href="http://www.apadivision44.org/">www.apadivision44.org/</a>	APA division for research on SGM issues
APAGS Committee on Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity	<a href="http://www.apa.org/apags/governance/subcommittees/csogd">www.apa.org/apags/governance/subcommittees/csogd</a>	Graduate student committee
APA LGBT Graduate Student Mentoring Program	<a href="http://www.apa.org/apags/governance/subcommittees/clgbtc-mentoring-program">www.apa.org/apags/governance/subcommittees/clgbtc-mentoring-program</a>	Mentoring program for LGBTQ+ students (year-long commitment)
APAGS Individual Peer Support	<a href="http://www.apa.org/apags/governance/subcommittees/lgbt-peer-support">www.apa.org/apags/governance/subcommittees/lgbt-peer-support</a>	Individual peer support program coordinated by APAGS Committee on Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity
ABCT Sexual and Gender Minority SIG	<a href="http://www.abctsgmsig.com/">www.abctsgmsig.com/</a>	Clinically focused special interest group

#### 2.2.4 Peer Colleagues

Being part of a small psychology graduate program is a unique gift. Training alongside a small group of peers often results in quickly establishing close bonds. Because fellow graduate students often include peers of similar ages and life stages, you are likely to develop friendships with these colleagues as many graduate students spend time socializing together outside of the department. A unique aspect of these peer relationships is that these colleagues will also become professionals in the field after graduation with whom you may continue to interact (e.g., at conferences, collaborations, networking opportunities). Consider if the potential for these to be career-long connections may alter how you choose to interact socially or professionally.

#### 2.2.5 Lab Members

Within most research labs you will interact with a range of other lab members, potentially including other graduate students, undergraduate research assistants, post-baccalaureate research assistants, and postdoctoral fellows. Working closely with other lab members on mutual projects offers the opportunity to develop meaningful professional and/or personal relationships. You may find that you develop friendships with lab members outside of work. It is possible that, as an SGM student, it may be more complicated for you to navigate the gray space between the personal and the professional. Be proactive in thinking through how you wish to navigate disclosures about your personal life so that you can maintain the type of professional presence that you hope to develop.

As a graduate student, you may take the lead on research projects within the lab or may be acting in a supervisory role for others. You may even have the wonderful opportunity to serve as an unofficial mentor to more junior students (e.g., graduate students earlier in their training, undergraduate students). Being an SGM graduate student also places you in a unique position to serve as a mentor and role model to more junior SGM students. In the same way that it may have been difficult for you as an SGM graduate student to find a faculty mentor, more junior SGM students may also be seeking guidance from another SGM person with lived experience in the field of psychology. Keep in mind as you are developing relationships with lab members and potential mentees that hierarchies and power dynamics exist even within research labs, which may impact the appropriateness of social relationships.

When interacting with research participants (e.g., undergraduate students, community members), we recommend following the same professional guidelines as outlined above with regard to disclosing aspects of your personal identities. In experimental psychology, even if your research is completely unrelated to your identities, personal characteristics may become relevant factors as studies commonly consider experimenter-level factors. Therefore, you may find yourself in a situation where you are expected to disclose some aspects of your identity (e.g., gender identity). For non-binary and transgender students, this may be a time to lean on those trusted relationships you have been working hard to establish to navigate this situation (for specific guidance on empowering non-binary trainees, see Matsuno et al., 2020).

### **2.2.6 Undergraduate Students and Teaching**

The relationships you develop with undergraduate students you teach in the context of being a TA (e.g., grading assignments, leading lab sections), guest lecturer, or graduate instructor (i.e., teaching courses) may be different from the relationships you have with undergraduate students in your lab. As a graduate instructor, you have unique opportunities to shape the learning experiences of undergraduate students. Although you may have access to previous materials for syllabi, slides, and classroom activities when creating your own course, you also have opportunities to customize the content. For instance, you may choose to promote equity by including a diversity statement in your syllabus and highlighting research from scholars in underrepresented minorities. Oftentimes, the culture around diversity and inclusion in a graduate program may differ substantially from that of the undergraduate population. If you choose to include an emphasis on diversity and inclusion in your courses, you may be offering undergraduate students their first exposure to these topics and ideas. This is a wonderful opportunity, but may also raise challenges if students react negatively. When contemplating how to include potentially thought-provoking or controversial material (e.g., topics related to SGM communities), you may want to seek consultation from faculty or teaching mentors.

Some instructors with SGM identities may fear judgment or scrutiny from their students related to their own identities or their choice to incorporate diversity-related material into their course. As an SGM graduate student, this is another

important topic to seek out mentorship from trusted faculty. During the early stages of your teaching career, it may be helpful to develop your own evaluations to seek feedback from your students to understand their perceptions of your course material and the emotional safety of your classroom. Collecting informal feedback forms throughout the year may help your students feel heard and respected, and can help you tailor course content for the next time you teach it.

### **2.2.7 Clinical Settings**

For SGM graduate students in clinical, counseling, or school psychology, you will have the opportunity to work with a diverse range of clientele. Graduate training programs approach self-disclosure (e.g., of identities or values) differently, yet, as always, you are in control of how much personal information you share. When considering self-disclosures, it is often advisable to discuss the purpose or rationale for sharing personal information with your clinical supervisor(s) in advance. Clinical supervisors typically provide safe spaces to discuss navigating your own identities as they relate to clinical work, as well as broader conversations about diversity and inclusion. These conversations can help you feel more prepared and comfortable when SGM-related topics arise in clinical interactions.

In the event that you find yourself uncomfortable in the context of your supervisory relationship (e.g., experiencing microaggressions against you or a client), you may want to reach out to another supervisor or training director to seek guidance about how to approach the difficult topic with your clinical supervisor. Learning to work with a variety of supervisors may itself be a growth opportunity, which often requires seeking external support along the way.

There is legal precedent that trainees may not refuse to provide clinical services to clients based on their belief systems (Wise et al., 2015), which is great for our field's commitment to anti-discrimination policies and inclusion! However, this means that as an SGM trainee you may also encounter clients who hold views or values that oppose your own (e.g., discriminatory beliefs). First and foremost, it is important to prioritize your physical safety by clearly communicating potential concerns with your clinical supervisors. With regard to providing client care, we must similarly separate our beliefs and value systems from our clinical practice. It may be difficult to respond effectively when faced with discriminatory comments! This is another area in which consulting with your supervisor can help you manage your internal emotional reactions and external responses to facilitate appropriate and effective client care.

Conversely, you may also find yourself working with SGM clients, which offers an opportunity to provide an affirming environment for the client. It would not be uncommon, however, for these clients to be affiliated with local SGM-related communities that you may also be embedded in. In these circumstances, it would be wise to consult with your clinical supervisor(s) with regard to upholding APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (2017) related to multiple relationships and conflicts of interest. You may be able to navigate these overlaps if they do not interfere with objectivity, or occasionally clients may be reassigned as needed.



### **2.2.8 Social Media**

All graduate students and many other young professionals face the challenge of how much personal information to share publicly via social media. As an SGM student, your decision about what to share about your identities on social media stems from your values. Most importantly, we want you to be in control and aware of *who* is able to access *what* information about you in a way that is consistent with your personal comfort level. For example, if you are out to your friends, but do not feel comfortable being out to your professional colleagues, think carefully about your privacy settings. When in doubt, err on the side of caution, particularly related to potentially explicit content. This applies to photos, videos, descriptive posts about your day or life, political statements, relationship status and tags, and comments in a group or on friends' pages. Colleagues, students, clients, prospective employers may all search for you on social media platforms or potentially be in similar networks or groups. Meanwhile, some forms of social media are becoming increasingly important as a professional platform to share your work so consider the intersection between your personal and professional social media presence.

Graduate school often overlaps with important life stages, such as engaging in romantic or sexual partnerships (casual and long-term) or even building a family. This can be a wonderful time in your life to be pursuing these aspects of personal development! As with broader considerations about social media, be cautious and intentional when it comes to utilizing virtual dating platforms (e.g., apps, websites, dating services). Think about how you can protect your privacy if there are aspects of your personal life you are not comfortable sharing with your professional colleagues. For example, although maintaining an active profile on a popular dating app may be fully consistent with your values and in alignment with you and your partner's open relationship agreement, consider how you would handle a situation in which an undergraduate in your lab stumbled across your profile and rumors began to spread. You may be perfectly capable of navigating complicated circumstances such as this example with grace and professionalism, but a bit of advance thought and planning may help you avoid them altogether.

## **2.9 SGM Identity-Specific Considerations**

### **2.9.1 Affirmed Name**

When you begin publishing (if that is part of your career aspirations), your name will be the way others in the field recognize your work, which can pose challenges for students navigating name changes during graduate school. Some SGM students may feel comfortable using their affirmed name from the outset. On the other hand, if you end up changing your name after you have started publishing, know that many others have done so before you and that it is not a problem from a professional perspective. Some transgender researchers have changed their name but kept their initials consistent, beginning with only initials for publication

purposes. One option if your publication record reflects different names is to include your former initials as a second line on your CV under your current name or as a note in the publications section. This can help rectify confusion, but, of course, may prominently highlight your gender history.

### **2.9.2 Tokenism**

Although there are certainly some stressful aspects of being an openly SGM graduate student in a psychology department, there are also many wonderful opportunities. First, people in your program may look to you for information or resources on topics related to SGM identities – oftentimes with positive intentions! Faculty and peers may be able to recognize their own biases and gaps in knowledge and may genuinely be interested in learning. This means that you may have ample opportunities to educate others on issues related to SGM communities, should you be interested in doing so.

On the other hand, some people may be afraid or hesitant to ask questions about SGM topics due to fears of “messing up.” This is especially true in social circles or professional settings where people have an awareness of the impact of their words (i.e., psychologists!). This concern can lead to silence from members of the majority groups, who may intentionally or unintentionally rely on minority individuals to provide education for others. Whether or not others recognize your important perspective as a member of an SGM minority group, you are under no obligation to carry the burden of educating others.

Regardless of your decision to engage in these conversations, be as prepared as you can be to be put on the spot. If you receive an unwelcome question in a class or lab meeting, it can be helpful to take a pause before responding. If you wish, you can take these opportunities to share your experience and/or expertise on the subject, and use the situation as a teaching opportunity to note how that person could more effectively approach the topic in the future. If you decide you do not feel comfortable answering, you could offer a gentle redirection, “You know, I am not actually familiar with the literature on that topic. Does anyone else know the answer to that question?” Alternatively, you could be direct, “I don’t feel comfortable answering that question or speaking on behalf of a large and diverse community.” Be patient with yourself as you learn how to professionally navigate these situations in a way that feels authentic to you. You will likely have numerous occasions to practice and refine your preferred response style.

### **2.9.3 Advocacy to Address Concerns**

As someone with one or more minority identities, you are likely very aware of how systems of power and privilege impact your life. Understanding the systems of power and privilege at play in graduate school will benefit you as an individual who will be navigating those systems. Your experience in the microcosm of a psychology department might be different in some ways but will likely still broadly reflect society at large. In the best-case scenarios, we can hope the psychology faculty consists of introspective individuals who are keenly aware of their role in

the department, personal status and privileges, and consider the impact of their behavior on others, regardless of intention. The reality is that psychologists are humans too. Being surrounded by psychologists, unfortunately, does not mean everyone you encounter has overcome their personal biases, nor will you be free from systemic injustices.

It is certainly reasonable to expect that within professional settings such as a graduate program in psychology, you will not witness or experience acts of overt discrimination against SGM individuals. However, it may be more common to notice nuanced microaggressions – subtle moments that assert or defend cisgender and/or heterosexual values as normative, or unintentionally express an internalized stigma or implicit bias against SGM identities. This may present as discrete oversights or exclusions (e.g., forms noting only binary gender choices or “other,” describing family structures using exclusively heterosexual models), or through assumptions about your personal life made in informal interactions. Most often, advocacy efforts can occur in these micro-moments amidst everyday interactions. Although it takes a substantial amount of courage, challenge authorities and peers when you witness microaggressions. Even in your position as a graduate student, faculty may appreciate you drawing attention to issues of diversity and inclusion, given that you are uniquely suited to do so. For students with intersecting minority identities, such as SGM students of color, there may be further barriers to being vocal; however, diplomacy may assist in getting the message across in an effective manner. If or when you find yourself navigating these types of challenging situations, it is critical that you seek out others who can support you in advocating for yourself or further advocate on your behalf. Learning how to be assertive and advocate for yourself and your values may feel difficult or intimidating at the beginning of your graduate training, but will likely get easier with practice.

Consider and respect your own boundaries with regard to the emotional labor of advocacy work. It is important to balance your desire to advocate for changes aligned with your values with the real need to care for yourself and avoid emotional or physical burnout. If you are undertaking advocacy work, assess the status of your personal, emotional, and psychological resources and acknowledge what it might take emotionally and literally (e.g., time, investment) before jumping into a larger initiative. As a graduate student and human, there is no shame in taking moments for self-protection. Consider for yourself: What could I lose by speaking up? What is at risk if I do not speak up? Is now the best time for me to invest my resources? For example, if your master’s thesis is due next week, maybe wait – especially if a faculty member you are hoping to engage in a difficult discussion is on your committee. Is this the best platform for my voice to be heard? Choose your battles wisely but fight fiercely when you do.

#### **2.9.4 Proactively Fostering a More Inclusive Environment**

As a graduate student in a psychology program, you have the ability to foster an inclusive environment through your own actions. At a personal level, you will have to navigate your own personal relationships to develop an affirming environment for

yourself. If you have the desire and drive to do more to benefit others, there are steps you can take to advance the inclusivity of the broader department. As a minority student, there is not an expectation that *you* have to advocate for changes, although you may be in an advantageous position with the lived experience to do so.

If it is consistent with your values and goals to take action, here are a few ways that you can foster further inclusivity within your psychology department and program. First, as a graduate student, you will be part of the recruitment process for incoming students. This gives you a voice in shaping the department's culture of inclusivity as you will be able to advocate for prospective students who may contribute to a diverse scholarly environment. Additionally, you can voice the importance of talking about diversity and inclusion during the recruitment process so prospective students can be fully informed about your department's culture.

Second, critically examine your department or program to evaluate what is missing when it comes to diversity and inclusion. Is there a diversity committee? If no, can you form one? You may have identified areas for improvement in the program when you were going through the interview process or after starting the program. Now that you are an established student, think about how you can act on those areas to improve the climate for yourself and other students.

Third, be bold and speak out when you see a need for change. For instance, if you notice demographic forms that are not inclusive in clinical or research settings, talk with your team about how changes can be made to improve the forms. As you recognize areas for improvement, identify people who can help you make changes. If you are not in a position of power, finding someone within the hierarchy who has more power, or who can help you advocate to those who do have power, to make the change can improve your chance of succeeding. Talking with your peers about diversity and inclusion is a very powerful way to make change, as you have a great deal of influence on one another during the formative growth that happens during graduate school.

### **3. Leaving Graduate School: Early Career Considerations**

We wrote this chapter as we were completing our predoctoral internship in clinical psychology and began our postdoctoral fellowships, so we want to acknowledge that our lived experience of early career considerations for SGM trainees is just beginning! Nevertheless, we hope to leave you with a few thoughts regarding the transition from graduate school into your early career in psychology.

#### **3.1 The Next Stage**

The process of applying for an internship, post-doctoral fellowship, or faculty position carries many of the same considerations that you navigated when you applied to graduate school. As before, you will likely want to evaluate whether your next professional setting will be an inclusive environment. You will likely navigate many similar decision points about whether and how to disclose your own identity

statuses. What is different at this stage is that, due to your substantial growth over the course of your graduate training, you will be more comfortable and confident in your professional identity. You may find that you have further clarified your personal values and that your approach to navigating interactions where your personal and professional identities intersect has evolved. Seek consultation and advice from your trusted mentors and peers as you go through the process of applying, interviewing, and negotiating for your first job so that your compensation and benefits accurately reflect your worth and expertise.

As an early career psychologist in a new setting, continue to keep your advocacy eyes open. What sort of training is available and/or mandated for new staff and faculty regarding issues related to diversity and inclusion? Are you satisfied with the approach taken? Recently, there has been more attention and training in diversity and inclusion for current graduate student trainees; do your senior colleagues have similar exposure to such training (e.g., “Safe Zone”/ally workshops, ongoing discussions)? If you work on a multidisciplinary team, what can you offer as an informed psychologist to advance inclusivity across all team members?

### **3.2 Becoming a Mentor**

Eventually, the day will come when you are on the other side of graduate school. Regardless of your professional path, there will be opportunities for you to step into the role of being a mentor or leader. Entering these roles with lived experience as an SGM professional in the field gives you a unique and valuable perspective on how to support trainees. Undoubtedly, the successes and challenges you faced related to your identities will inform how you mentor students in the future.

As a mentor, there are many steps you can take to support students regardless of their identities. First and foremost, you have the opportunity to create safe and affirming environments in your relationships with your mentees as well as in your lab culture. Communicating respect and inclusivity in your everyday interactions goes a long way in fostering an affirming environment, particularly for SGM students. If you have the opportunity to mentor an SGM student, focus on helping connect your mentee to resources that may be beneficial to their training and professional development. This may mean finding written resources (see Table 8.1) that both you and your mentee can review, or helping to establish professional connections between your mentee and other professionals in the field who can provide additional mentorship (Table 8.4).

Finally, be willing to have direct conversations with your trainee about what they would find helpful. It is important to be mindful of your trainee’s privacy and boundaries around discussing their personal identities. However, if your trainee brings up topics related to their identity as an SGM student, enter the conversation with cultural humility – a genuine professional curiosity, openness to learning, and appreciation for their willingness to share. Following your conversation, you may want to do an independent search for more information based on what your mentee shared rather than relying on them to provide your full education on the topic.

Perhaps you will want to learn more surrounding unfamiliar terminology or an issue you did not realize affected SGM students. Being able to further your learning and return to future conversations can lead to a mutually beneficial mentoring relationship.

#### 4. Closing Thoughts

Reading this chapter was a great place to start, and you are likely well on your way to developing a successful career as an SGM psychologist. There are many paths to success, and only you know what will be right for your career. Your perspective as an SGM psychologist will likely change over time, both due to your developmental stage and broader societal processes. For instance, we witnessed substantial socio-political changes regarding SGM communities in our time in graduate school (e.g., federal recognition of marriage equality). Your professional development as an SGM psychologist will be a dynamic process that will benefit from revisiting the topics in this chapter throughout your early career stages and beyond.

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