Social work and LGBTQ people: A narrative review of institutional tensions, theoretical shifts and inclusive practice

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Abstract

Over the past five decades, the relationship between social work and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people has undergone a profound epistemological transformation involving how sexual and gender diversity has been conceptualized, evaluated, and governed within welfare institutions. While the depathologization of non-heterosexual and gender-diverse identities marked a crucial normative turning point, the literature consistently shows that these discursive shifts have not been fully translated into inclusive institutional practices, leaving unresolved tensions between affirmation and regulation.

This article presents a non-systematic narrative review of international literature on social work and social services in relation to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer people, covering publications from 1970 to 2024. Rather than assessing the effectiveness of specific interventions, the review aims to reconstruct key conceptual trajectories, recurring theoretical tensions, and psychosocial processes

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through which social work contributes to the institutional construction of identities, relationships, and life courses of sexual and gender minorities.
The thematic synthesis identifies four interconnected areas. First, it traces the shift from pathologizing models to affirmative frameworks, highlighting the persistence of evaluative and classificatory practices that continue to condition access to services. Second, it examines social work education as a site of professional socialization characterized by fragmented curricular integration of sexual and gender diversity and by ethical tensions between personal beliefs and professional responsibilities. Third, the review analyzes social services as organizational contexts shaped by heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions, in which exclusion often operates through routine practices and institutional silence rather than explicit discrimination. Finally, minority stress theory, intersectionality, and life course perspectives are integrated to show how repeated exposure to non-affirmative institutional environments generates cumulative effects on psychological well-being and identity management.
Overall, the article argues that social work should be understood not only as a helping profession, but as a psychosocial regulatory device in which sexual and gender citizenship is negotiated. The review concludes by calling for structural and pedagogical transformations capable of aligning professional ethical commitments with everyday institutional practices.

Keywords: social work; LGBTQ people; heteronormativity; minority stress; institutional inclusion

Introduction

Over the past five decades, the relationship between social work and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people has undergone a profound transformation. Early social work literature largely reflected dominant medicalized and pathologizing frameworks, positioning non-heterosexual identities as forms of deviance, maladjustment, or clinical concern (Abramowitz, 1971; Berger, 1982; Fish, 2006). The formal declassification of homosexuality as a mental disorder in 1973 marked a critical epistemic shift, gradually reorienting social work toward principles of social justice, anti-discrimination, and human rights (Cain, 1991; Crisp, 2006; Mulè, 2006). Despite this normative realignment, the literature consistently demonstrates that LGBTQ people continue to experience systemic exclusion, service inequities, and ambivalent professional responses within social services across welfare, health, education, and care settings (Berger, 1984; Ward, 2010; Hafford-Letchfield & Dunk-West, 2018).

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Social work occupies a distinctive position in this landscape. As a profession explicitly committed to challenging oppression and promoting social inclusion, it is uniquely positioned to respond to the needs of sexual and gender minorities. At the same time, social work institutions and practices often mirror the heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions embedded within the broader social order (Fish & Karban, 2015; Nothdurfter & Nagy, 2016; Giertsen, 2019). This dual role – simultaneously protective and regulatory – emerges as a recurring tension throughout the literature, raising critical questions about the extent to which social services function as sites of affirmation or mechanisms of exclusion for LGBTQ individuals and communities.

Across historical periods and national contexts, several persistent patterns can be identified. Research from the 1970s onward documents limited professional preparedness, uneven integration of LGBTQ content within social work education, and the enduring influence of personal beliefs – particularly religious and moral frameworks – on practitioner attitudes (Abramowitz, 1971; Swank & Raiz, 2007; Ramirez, 2012; Okrey Anderson & McGuire, 2019). While overtly pathologizing discourses have largely been disavowed, more subtle forms of heterosexism, cisgenderism, and institutional silence continue to shape service encounters, often rendering LGBTQ identities invisible or problematized (Fish, 2008; Ward, 2010; Austin et al., 2019).

Concurrently, the literature reflects significant conceptual and theoretical developments. Anti-oppressive practice, minority stress theory, life course perspectives, and queer theory have each contributed to reframing LGBTQ experiences as products of structural inequality rather than individual dysfunction (Cain, 1991; McPhail, 2004; Alessi, 2014; Hafford-Letchfield & Dunk-West, 2018). These frameworks have expanded understandings of identity as fluid, relational, and context-dependent, while also highlighting how stigma, concealment, and "passing" operate as adaptive strategies within hostile environments (Berger & Kelly, 1986; Cain, 1991; Trotter et al., 2009). Nevertheless, tensions remain between identity-based models and more destabilizing queer critiques, particularly within social work education and practice settings that continue to privilege fixed categories and normative life trajectories.

Empirical research further underscores that LGBTQ experiences with social services are profoundly shaped by intersectional positions related to age, race, class, gender identity, disability, and geography. LGBTQ youth and older adults emerge as particularly scrutinized populations, facing elevated risks of family rejection, homelessness, institutional neglect, and social isolation (Morrow, 2004; Durso & Gates, 2012; Ward et al., 2008).

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Transgender and gender non-conforming individuals, especially those who are racialized or economically marginalized, encounter distinct and intensified barriers to accessing safe and competent services, including misgendering, exclusion from gender-segregated facilities, and diagnostic gatekeeping practices (Seelman, 2015; Kattari et al., 2016; Shelton et al., 2023).

Despite growing recognition of these issues, the literature repeatedly points to gaps between professional ethical commitments and everyday practice. LGBTQ content within social work curricula remains inconsistent, often dependent on individual faculty interest, and disproportionately focused on risk, pathology, or crisis rather than resilience, pleasure, and relational diversity (Johnston & Stewart, 2013; Dodd & Tolman, 2017; Gates et al., 2023). Moreover, LGBTQ students and practitioners themselves frequently report experiences of marginalization within educational and field placement environments, highlighting the need to consider not only LGBTQ people as service users, but also as professionals within the discipline (Craig et al., 2017; Austin et al., 2019).

Against this backdrop, the present article offers a narrative, non-systematic review of literature addressing social work and social services with LGBTQ people and communities. This review contributes to social sciences literature by conceptualizing social work as a key institutional site where sexual and gender citizenship is negotiated, regulated, and contested. Drawing on sources spanning several decades and using targeted search strings, this review does not aim to provide exhaustive coverage. Rather, its purpose is to synthesize recurring themes, theoretical tensions, and empirical patterns that cut across historical periods and methodological traditions. By integrating insights from disparate bodies of scholarship, this review seeks to illuminate how social work continues to negotiate the boundaries between affirmation and regulation, inclusion and exclusion, and professional ideals and institutional realities in its engagement with LGBTQ populations. Existing scholarship has generated important advances in understanding LGBTQ+ experiences within social work. However, these contributions have largely developed along parallel rather than integrated trajectories. Clinical research has primarily examined minority stress, identity development, and psychological well-being; educational research has focused on professional training and curricula; whereas policy-oriented studies have explored legal recognition, anti-discrimination frameworks, and sexual citizenship. Comparatively less attention has been devoted to understanding how these dimensions interact within social work institutions as interconnected components of the same psychosocial process. Addressing this gap, the present review adopts an

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interdisciplinary perspective that integrates psychological, educational, and institutional approaches in order to examine how organisational contexts shape both professional practice and the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ service users.

This review is guided by three interrelated analytical concerns: first, how LGBTQ identities and experiences have been framed within social work scholarship and practice over time; second, how social services operate as institutional spaces where inclusion and regulation coexist in tension; and third, how education, policy, and organizational arrangements shape the persistence or disruption of heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions.

Methods

Design

This narrative, non-systematic review was selected for epistemological and analytical reasons. The relationship between social work and LGBTQ people is characterized by long-term historical stratification, conceptual heterogeneity, and shifting institutional paradigms that cannot be adequately captured through aggregative or effect-size-oriented review designs.

Rather than assessing the prevalence or effectiveness of specific interventions, the aim of this review is to reconstruct conceptual trajectories, identify recurring institutional tensions, and critically interpret how social work knowledge has negotiated sexuality and gender diversity across different historical periods and socio-political contexts.

Narrative review methodology is particularly suited to examining fields in which theoretical frameworks, professional discourses, and normative assumptions evolve unevenly over time and across national settings. In this sense, the review prioritizes analytical depth, interpretive coherence, and historical sensitivity over exhaustiveness or formal comparability. Accordingly, the literature search was designed as a purposive and concept-driven strategy aimed at identifying publications capable of illuminating the historical evolution, institutional tensions, and theoretical developments characterizing the relationship between social work and LGBTQ people, rather than producing an exhaustive mapping of all available studies. Search procedures were therefore used to support interpretive breadth and transparency, without implying the methodological assumptions of a systematic review.

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Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted between January and May 2024, with the final update performed on 7 May 2024. Because terminology relating to sexual and gender diversity has changed substantially over the past five decades, the search strategy was intentionally broad and iterative. Initial searches combined terms related to social work (e.g., *social work*, *social services*, *social care*) with terms referring to sexual and gender minorities that reflected different historical periods (e.g., *homosexual*, *gay*, *lesbian*, *bisexual*, *transgender*, *queer*, *sexual minorities*, *gender minorities*, *LGBT*, *LGBTQ*). Additional combinations such as *social work education*, *LGBTQ youth*, *gender diversity*, and *affirmative practice* were also explored whenever they emerged as conceptually relevant during the review process. This iterative approach was intended to maximise conceptual coverage across different historical phases rather than retrieve an exhaustive corpus of publications.

Data Sources

Searches were conducted primarily in Google Scholar and Scopus. Google Scholar was selected because of its broad interdisciplinary coverage and its ability to retrieve older publications, books, and book chapters that have played a foundational role in the development of social work scholarship. Scopus was included to ensure access to peer-reviewed and indexed literature across the social sciences and psychology. However, the search yielded only duplicates of the articles found on Google Scholar.

Academia.edu was consulted as a supplementary repository for locating publications already identified through database searches or reference lists, particularly historical materials not easily accessible elsewhere. NILDE was used exclusively as a document delivery service to retrieve full texts of publications previously identified through the search process and was not considered a bibliographic database.

Time Frame

The review covers literature published between 1970 and 2024. The starting point was selected to capture scholarship emerging in the period immediately preceding and following the depathologization of homosexuality in 1973, a pivotal historical shift for both mental health disciplines and social work. This temporal span allows for the analysis of

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long-term epistemological and institutional transformations within the profession.

Inclusion Criteria

The following inclusion criteria were applied:

1. Publications explicitly addressing social work or social services.
2. Studies focusing specifically on LGBTQ people, or on one or more subgroups within this umbrella (e.g., lesbian women, gay men, bisexual people, transgender women, transgender men, queer individuals).
3. Works examining conceptual, empirical, educational, institutional, or policy-related dimensions of the relationship between social work/social services and LGBTQ populations.

Articles were included if they met these criteria. No additional exclusion criteria based on methodology (qualitative, quantitative, theoretical, or mixed methods) were imposed, given the narrative and integrative purpose of the review.

Selection Process

The search process identified 417 records (See Figure 1). Titles and abstracts were screened to assess their relevance to the aims of the review. Publications were excluded when they did not address social work or social services, did not focus on LGBTQ populations, or did not contribute conceptually to the review questions. Following this screening process, 78 publications were retained for in-depth reading and thematic interpretation. Because this review adopted a narrative rather than systematic design, study selection was guided primarily by conceptual relevance and interpretive contribution rather than formal quality appraisal or methodological hierarchy. Given the journal's explicit aim of bridging international scholarship with the Italian research and practice context, a supplementary targeted search was conducted to identify Italian-language scholarship on social work and LGBTQ populations, in view of the relative underrepresentation of this literature within the international databases used for the initial search. This supplementary search identified four additional publications (Di Rosa & Gui, 2021; Monaco, 2023; Rinaldi & Benvenuti, 2023; Rinaldi & Nothdurfter, 2021), which were incorporated into the thematic synthesis, bringing the total number of publications reviewed to 82.

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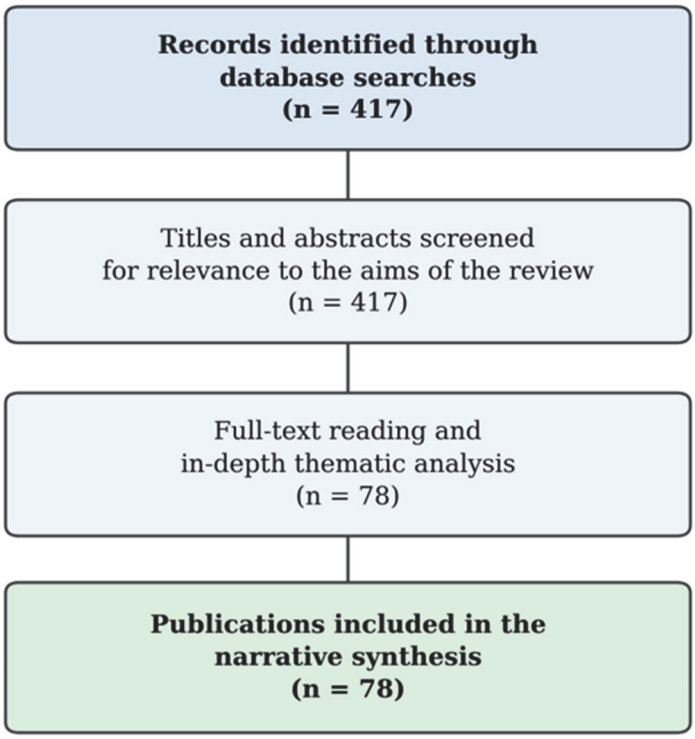


Figure 1 - Flow diagram of the literature identification and selection process

Analytical Approach

The analysis was informed by the principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019), adapted to the interpretive aims of a narrative review. The literature search and thematic analysis were conducted collaboratively by the authors through ongoing discussion and reflexive engagement with the developing interpretation of the data. Rather than quantifying findings across studies, the analysis sought to identify recurring conceptual patterns, theoretical developments, and institutional tensions within the literature. The analytical process involved repeated reading of the selected publications, the identification of preliminary conceptual codes, the grouping of related ideas into broader thematic categories, and the iterative refinement of themes through constant comparison across historical periods, disciplinary traditions, and institutional contexts. Throughout the analysis, attention was paid not only to recurring topics but also to changes in how LGBTQ identities, social

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work practice, and institutional inclusion were conceptualized over time. Theme development was recursive rather than linear, with themes being continuously refined as additional studies were examined and relationships between concepts became more theoretically coherent.

Author Positioning

This review was conducted from a critical psychosocial perspective that conceptualizes social work as both a helping profession and an institutional context involved in the production, regulation, and negotiation of social identities. In line with the principles of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), the authors acknowledge that knowledge generation is inherently interpretive and shaped by their theoretical and disciplinary perspectives rather than reflecting a position of epistemological neutrality. Throughout the analytical process, reflexivity was maintained by critically examining how these assumptions informed the identification, interpretation, and integration of themes across the literature. Accordingly, the findings should be understood as a theoretically informed synthesis that privileges conceptual understanding over exhaustive representation.

Results

From Pathology to Affirmation: Conceptualizing LGBTQ Identities in Social Work

The conceptualization of LGBTQ identities within social work has undergone a significant epistemological transformation over the past five decades. Early literature, particularly from the 1970s and early 1980s, reflects a profession still deeply influenced by medical and psychological models that framed non-heterosexual identities as deviations from normative development (Abramowitz, 1971; Berger, 1982). Within these paradigms, sexuality was frequently approached as a site of dysfunction, secrecy, or maladjustment, and professional interventions often aimed – explicitly or implicitly – at normalization rather than affirmation.

The gradual shift away from pathologization was neither linear nor uncontested. While the removal of homosexuality from diagnostic classifications marked a formal turning point, social work practice continued to reproduce heteronormative assumptions through silence, omission, or conditional acceptance (Fish, 2006; Fish, 2008). Several authors argue that early “tolerance-based” approaches merely replaced

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overt stigma with expectations of discretion, respectability, and conformity to dominant relational norms, particularly privileging monogamous, couple-based models of intimacy (Peterson, 2013; Cain, 1991).

From the late 1980s onward, scholarship increasingly reframed LGBTQ identities through social constructionist, anti-oppressive, and strengths-based perspectives. Identity was no longer conceptualized as a fixed internal trait but as a dynamic process shaped by social context, power relations, and institutional constraints (Reiter, 1989; Cain, 1991). Research on "coming out" and identity management challenged earlier clinical assumptions that disclosure represented a universal marker of psychological health. Instead, concealment and "passing" were reinterpreted as context-sensitive strategies for navigating hostile or unsafe environments (Berger & Kelly, 1986; Cain, 1991; Trotter et al., 2009). This reframing exposed a critical tension between professional ideals of authenticity and the lived realities of LGBTQ individuals embedded in heterosexist institutions.

More recent literature consolidates this shift through the development of explicitly affirmative frameworks, such as Gay Affirmative Practice and LGBTQ-affirmative clinical models grounded in minority stress theory (Crisp, 2006; Crisp & McCave, 2007; Alessi, 2014). These approaches emphasize that distress among LGBTQ clients is not inherent to identity but is produced through chronic exposure to stigma, discrimination, and structural exclusion. At the same time, queer theory-informed critiques problematize even affirmative models when they rely too heavily on fixed identity categories, arguing that social work often fails to interrogate the normative status of heterosexuality and binary gender itself (McPhail, 2004; MacKinnon, 2011).

Across the literature, a persistent ambivalence emerges: while social work increasingly adopts affirming language, practice models often remain anchored to classificatory logics that stabilize identities for assessment, diagnosis, or service eligibility. This tension is particularly evident in work with transgender individuals, where access to care may depend on diagnostic frameworks that simultaneously legitimize and constrain self-determination (Collazo et al., 2013; Kroehle et al., 2020). Thus, the conceptual evolution from pathology to affirmation remains incomplete, revealing an ongoing struggle between emancipatory intentions and regulatory professional practices.

Social Work Education, Professional Attitudes, and Ethical Tensions

A second dominant theme in the literature concerns the role of social

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work education in shaping professional attitudes, ethical reasoning, and practice readiness in relation to LGBTQ populations. Across decades and national contexts, research consistently documents a gap between the profession's stated ethical commitments to inclusion and the uneven integration of LGBTQ-related content within social work curricula (Abramowitz, 1971; Johnston & Stewart, 2013; Gates et al., 2023).

Early studies highlighted limited sexual knowledge among social work students and a reliance on personal moral frameworks when engaging with LGBTQ issues (Abramowitz, 1971). Subsequent quantitative research, often employing attitudinal scales such as the ATLG or IAH, found that while social work students generally report more liberal attitudes than those in other disciplines, significant levels of homophobia and transphobia persist (Wisniewski & Toomey, 1987; Swank & Raiz, 2007; Chonody & Smith, 2013). These attitudes are repeatedly associated with variables such as religiosity, political ideology, and adherence to traditional gender roles, suggesting that professional socialization does not uniformly override pre-existing belief systems (Ramirez, 2012; Rutledge et al., 2012; Atteberry-Ash et al., 2023).

Curricular analyses reveal that LGBTQ content is often fragmented, optional, or dependent on individual faculty expertise rather than systematically embedded within core courses (Fish & Karban, 2015; Giertsen, 2019). When included, such content frequently adopts a deficit-oriented framing, emphasizing risk, pathology, or crisis – particularly HIV/AIDS, mental health distress, and victimization – while neglecting resilience, pleasure, and relational diversity (Dodd & Tolman, 2017; Giertsen, 2019). This problem-saturated discourse may inadvertently reinforce the construction of LGBTQ people as perpetual clients rather than as agents, professionals, or knowledge producers within the field.

Field education emerges as a particularly contested site. Qualitative studies document how LGBTQ students navigate disclosure decisions within agency environments that often presume heterosexuality and cisgender identity (Messinger, 2007; Newman et al., 2008). Many report fear of negative evaluation, professional retaliation, or subtle marginalization, especially in settings lacking explicit non-discrimination policies (Austin et al., 2019; Messinger, 2020). Transgender and gender non-conforming students face additional structural barriers, including misgendering, lack of administrative recognition of chosen names, and gender-segregated facilities that undermine both safety and professional legitimacy (Bowen, 2018; Austin et al., 2019).

A recurring ethical tension in this literature involves the reconciliation of personal religious or moral beliefs with professional obligations to

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provide affirming care. While social work codes of ethics emphasize self-determination and non-discrimination, some students and practitioners articulate conflicts rooted in conservative faith traditions (Hodge, 2005; Barker, 2017; Tan & Kelly, 2020). Debates surrounding "conscience clauses" and referral practices expose unresolved questions about whether refusal to serve LGBTQ clients constitutes ethical accommodation or discriminatory practice. Critics argue that framing such conflicts as individual moral dilemmas obscures the structural power dynamics that position LGBTQ clients as negotiable recipients of care (Dessel & Rodenborg, 2017).

Overall, the literature suggests that social work education functions as both a site of potential transformation and a mechanism of reproduction of normative assumptions. While exposure, contact, and critical pedagogy are associated with more affirming attitudes, these effects are often fragile and contingent upon broader institutional support. The persistence of microaggressions, curricular gaps, and reliance on individual goodwill underscores the limits of attitudinal change in the absence of structural and pedagogical reform.

Institutional Barriers and the Mechanics of Inclusion and Exclusion

A central and enduring theme across the literature concerns the role of social services as institutional sites where inclusion and exclusion are actively produced. Despite professional ethical commitments to equality, LGBTQ individuals routinely encounter structural barriers that limit access to care, recognition, and protection across welfare, health, housing, education, and justice systems (Fish, 2008; Ward, 2010; Nothdurfter & Nagy, 2016). These barriers are rarely confined to overt discrimination; rather, they are embedded within organizational routines, policies, and taken-for-granted assumptions about gender, sexuality, and family life.

The concept of heteronormativity – and more recently cisnormativity – provides a critical analytic lens for understanding how exclusion operates in everyday practice. Intake forms that assume binary gender, the absence of gender-neutral facilities, and the routine privileging of heterosexual, biologically related family structures collectively signal to LGBTQ service users that their identities are peripheral or unintelligible within service environments (Kitzinger, 2005; Ward et al., 2008; Shelton et al., 2023). In the Italian context, for example, the absence of full legal recognition for same-sex parenthood has been shown to generate specific forms of institutional uncertainty for practitioners assessing family situations, compelling social workers to negotiate ambivalent professional and

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normative positions (Monaco, 2023). Such practices contribute to what several authors describe as "institutional silence," whereby LGBTQ needs are rendered invisible not through hostility but through omission (Fish, 2006; Giertsen, 2019).

Empirical studies consistently demonstrate that these institutional dynamics have material consequences. Transgender and gender non-conforming individuals report disproportionately high rates of service denial, misgendering, and avoidance of care due to anticipated stigma, particularly within domestic violence shelters, healthcare settings, and housing services (Seelman, 2015; Kattari et al., 2016; Nowaskie et al., 2020). Similarly, older LGBTQ adults frequently anticipate discrimination within long-term care facilities, leading many to conceal their identities or delay seeking assistance altogether (Hafford-Letchfield, 2008; Ward, 2010; Arthur, 2015).

Policy-oriented literature highlights a recurring paradox: formal legal advances – such as anti-discrimination statutes or marriage equality – do not automatically translate into inclusive service delivery (Alford & Lee, 2016; Redcay & Luquet, 2020). In many cases, social services remain organized around narrow definitions of kinship and citizenship that fail to recognize "families of choice," same-sex partners, or non-normative caregiving arrangements (Berger & Kelly, 1986; Fish, 2009; European Commission, 2020). As a result, inclusion often depends on individual practitioners' discretion rather than institutional design, reinforcing uneven and unpredictable outcomes.

Critical scholarship further suggests that social services may function as regulatory mechanisms, particularly in contexts where access to resources is contingent upon diagnostic classification or compliance with normative narratives. This is evident in asylum processes, child welfare assessments, and trans-specific healthcare pathways, where service users are required to perform legible and institutionally acceptable versions of LGBTQ identity to be deemed "deserving" of support (Heller, 2009; Dwyer, 2015; Kroehle et al., 2020). Such dynamics expose the limits of inclusion strategies that leave underlying power relations intact.

Minority Stress, Intersectionality, and Socioeconomic Inequalities

The minority stress framework represents one of the most influential theoretical contributions to understanding LGBTQ health and social disparities within the reviewed literature. Across qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies, chronic exposure to stigma, discrimination, and social exclusion is consistently associated with elevated rates of mental

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distress, substance use, suicidality, and economic precarity among LGBTQ populations (Hatzenbuehler, 2010; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2014; Hafford-Letchfield & Dunk-West, 2018).

However, the literature increasingly emphasizes that minority stress is neither uniform nor evenly distributed. Intersectionality has emerged as a critical lens for examining how sexuality and gender identity interact with race, class, age, disability, migration status, and geography to produce differentiated experiences of vulnerability and resilience (Fish & Karban, 2015; Whitfield et al., 2014; Kia et al., 2021). LGBTQ people of color, transgender individuals, and those living in poverty are consistently shown to face compounded forms of marginalization, including higher rates of violence, housing instability, and employment discrimination (Kattari et al., 2016; Whitfield et al., 2019).

A particularly important contribution of recent scholarship is the dismantling of the "myth of gay affluence." Empirical studies document distinct patterns of poverty among LGBTQ youth, older adults, newcomers, and Indigenous populations, challenging assumptions that sexual minority status is associated with economic privilege (Durso & Gates, 2012; Kia et al., 2021). These findings underscore the need for social work to address material deprivation as a structural outcome of exclusion rather than an individual failing.

Within this body of literature, social services are positioned as both potential buffers and contributors to minority stress. Affirming services can mitigate harm by fostering safety, recognition, and social connection, while exclusionary or culturally incompetent services may intensify distress by reproducing stigma at the institutional level (Logie et al., 2015; Shelton et al., 2019). Yet, critics caution that interventions focused solely on individual coping risk depoliticizing distress and diverting attention from the structural determinants of inequality (Shera, 2003; Morton, 2013).

Life Course Perspectives: Youth, Older Adults, and Differential Vulnerabilities

A life course perspective reveals how LGBTQ experiences with social services are shaped by historical context, developmental stage, and cumulative exposure to inclusion or exclusion. Two populations – LGBTQ youth and older adults – receive disproportionate attention in the literature, reflecting both heightened vulnerability and institutional concern.

Research on LGBTQ youth consistently identifies family rejection, school-based victimization, and homelessness as critical risk factors (Morrow, 2004; Mishna et al., 2009; Durso & Gates, 2012). While many

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studies highlight resilience and adaptive coping, the literature emphasizes that schools, child welfare systems, and youth services often function as hostile or inadequately prepared environments (Wilber et al., 2006; Walls, 2008). Social work interventions that prioritize affirmation, family mediation, and structural advocacy are associated with improved outcomes, yet implementation remains uneven.

At the opposite end of the life course, studies of older LGBTQ adults emphasize invisibility, fear of discrimination, and social isolation within aging and healthcare systems (Hash & Netting, 2007; Hafford-Letchfield, 2008; Gendron et al., 2013). Many elders, shaped by earlier periods of criminalization and stigma, remain reluctant to disclose their identities to service providers, particularly in residential care settings. The literature repeatedly documents a preference for LGBTQ-specific or explicitly affirming services, though such options remain limited and unevenly distributed.

Importantly, life course analyses reveal that vulnerabilities accumulate rather than reset. Experiences of concealment, discrimination, and institutional mistrust earlier in life influence later help-seeking behaviors, reinforcing cycles of exclusion (Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2014). This perspective challenges social work to move beyond age-segmented interventions and adopt approaches that recognize the long-term effects of structural stigma.

Discussion

The literature reviewed in this article documents a substantial transformation in how social work engages with LGBTQ people and communities, while simultaneously revealing enduring structural and epistemological tensions. Across historical periods, social work has formally distanced itself from overtly pathologizing frameworks and increasingly embraced rights-based, affirmative, and anti-oppressive approaches (Cain, 1991; Crisp, 2006; Mulè, 2006; Alessi, 2014). However, the evidence synthesized here suggests that this transition remains incomplete, with inclusion often contingent, uneven, and shaped by institutional norms that continue to privilege heterosexuality, cisgender identity, and normative life trajectories (Fish, 2006; Ward, 2010; Nothdurfter & Nagy, 2016). From a broader social sciences perspective, the findings synthesized in this review position social work not merely as a helping profession, but as a key institutional site where sexual and gender citizenship is governed, negotiated, and regulated. This interpretive

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perspective moves beyond describing individual barriers to conceptualising social work as a psychosocial system in which institutional practices, professional interactions, and subjective experiences are mutually constituted.

Through eligibility criteria, assessment practices, educational curricula, and policy implementation, social work contributes to defining which identities, relationships, and life trajectories are recognized as legitimate and deserving of support. In this sense, social services function as both protective and disciplinary institutions, simultaneously offering resources and reproducing normative assumptions about gender, sexuality, family, and citizenship. This dual role underscores the importance of analyzing social work within wider frameworks of governance, welfare state arrangements, and institutional power.

A key tension emerging across the literature concerns the ambivalent role of social work as both an agent of inclusion and a mechanism of regulation. While contemporary professional discourse emphasizes affirmation and self-determination, multiple studies demonstrate how access to services remains mediated through classificatory and normative logics embedded within institutional practice (Peterson, 2013; Kroehle, Shelton, Clark, & Seelman, 2020). This is particularly visible in service contexts where eligibility depends on diagnostic or administrative recognition, such as transgender health care, child welfare, asylum procedures, and long-term care, where LGBTQ individuals are often required to present legible and institutionally acceptable narratives of identity or vulnerability (Heller, 2009; Dwyer, 2015; Seelman, 2015).

The persistence of heteronormativity and cisnormativity emerges as one of the most consistent findings across decades of scholarship. Early work already documented how social services assumed heterosexuality as the default, rendering same-sex relationships and gender variance invisible or unintelligible (Berger, 1982; Berger & Kelly, 1986). More recent studies confirm that these assumptions continue to operate through mundane organizational practices, such as intake forms, gender-segregated facilities, and narrow definitions of family and partnership (Ward et al., 2008; Ward, 2010; Shelton et al., 2023). Importantly, the literature shows that exclusion is rarely the result of explicit hostility; rather, it is produced through silence, omission, and routinized administrative procedures that position LGBTQ identities as peripheral to "standard" service users (Fish, 2006; Fish & Karban, 2015; Giertsen, 2019). Beyond their organisational implications, these institutional practices have profound psychosocial consequences for LGBTQ+ service users. Administrative procedures, heteronormative assumptions, and the absence of visibly inclusive

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environments influence how individuals perceive safety, recognition, and legitimacy within social services. From this perspective, institutional exclusion is translated into subjective experiences that may reinforce expectations of stigma, encourage the concealment of sexual orientation or gender identity, and contribute to minority stress. Thus, disclosure and concealment should not be understood solely as individual coping strategies but also as responses shaped by organisational contexts that either facilitate or constrain authentic engagement with services. This psychosocial perspective helps explain how institutional arrangements become embodied in everyday experiences, ultimately influencing trust in professionals, help-seeking behaviours, and psychological well-being.

These findings raise critical questions about the limits of cultural competence as a dominant professional framework. While cultural competence has contributed to greater visibility of LGBTQ issues, several authors argue that it risks reifying identity categories and framing difference as a technical problem to be managed by individual practitioners (McLaughlin, 2005; Morton, 2013). In contrast, anti-oppressive, structural competence, and queer-informed approaches emphasize the need to interrogate how social work itself participates in the production of normative knowledge about gender, sexuality, and family life (McPhail, 2004; MacKinnon, 2011; Shera, 2003). Within the Italian context, this critical stance has been extended to social work education, with calls to embed anti-oppressive principles explicitly within training for practice with LGBTQAI+ populations (Rinaldi & Benvenuti, 2023), as well as to analyses of how paradoxical service categories – such as those regulating male sex work – expose similar tensions between protection and normative control (Rinaldi & Nothdurfter, 2021). The literature reviewed here suggests that without such reflexive engagement, affirmative rhetoric may coexist with practices that continue to regulate LGBTQ lives.

The minority stress framework provides a central explanatory lens for understanding the health and social disparities documented across the literature. Numerous studies link chronic exposure to stigma, discrimination, and victimization to elevated rates of depression, anxiety, substance use, suicidality, and socioeconomic marginalization among LGBTQ populations (Hatzenbuehler, 2010; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2014; Hafford-Letchfield & Dunk-West, 2018). However, the reviewed literature also highlights the limitations of minority stress models when applied without attention to intersectionality. LGBTQ people of color, transgender individuals, youth, older adults, and those living in poverty experience compounded forms of marginalization that cannot be adequately

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captured by single-axis analyses (Whitfield et al., 2014; Whitfield et al., 2019; Kia et al., 2021).

A particularly significant contribution of recent scholarship is the challenge to the enduring "myth of gay affluence." Empirical studies demonstrate that poverty and material insecurity are disproportionately experienced by LGBTQ youth, elders, newcomers, and Indigenous populations, often as a direct result of family rejection, employment discrimination, and exclusion from social benefits (Durso & Gates, 2012; Kia et al., 2021). These findings underscore the importance of understanding economic hardship as a structural outcome of exclusion rather than an individual deficit, reinforcing calls for social work to address material conditions alongside psychosocial support (Shera, 2003; Kia et al., 2021).

A life course perspective further deepens understanding of how institutional exclusion accumulates over time. Research on LGBTQ youth consistently documents heightened exposure to bullying, family rejection, homelessness, and institutional neglect, particularly within schools and child welfare systems that lack inclusive policies and trained personnel (Morrow, 2004; Mishna et al., 2009; Wilber et al., 2006; Walls, 2008). Although resilience is frequently emphasized, the literature cautions against framing survival as evidence of adequate support, noting that many youth navigate "toxic environments" within systems ostensibly designed to protect them (Walls, 2008).

At the other end of the life course, studies of older LGBTQ adults reveal persistent fears of discrimination in healthcare and long-term care settings, often leading to identity concealment or avoidance of services altogether (Hash & Netting, 2007; Hafford-Letchfield, 2008; Ward, 2010). These patterns are strongly shaped by historical contexts of criminalization and pathologization, illustrating how past institutional violence continues to inform present-day help-seeking behaviors (Berger, 1984; Stein et al., 2010; Gendron et al., 2013). Taken together, these findings challenge age-segmented service models and call for approaches that recognize the cumulative effects of structural stigma across the lifespan.

Social work education emerges as a critical yet insufficiently addressed site of intervention. Across multiple national contexts, studies document persistent gaps between professional ethical standards and actual curricular content, with LGBTQ issues often treated as peripheral, optional, or problem-focused (Johnston & Stewart, 2013; Fish & Karban, 2015; Gates et al., 2023). Quantitative research consistently shows that student attitudes are shaped by religiosity, political ideology, and personal contact, suggesting that professional training does not uniformly counteract pre-

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existing biases (Ramirez, 2012; Swank & Raiz, 2007; Atteberry-Ash et al., 2023). Qualitative studies further highlight how LGBTQ students, particularly transgender and gender non-conforming individuals, experience microaggressions, institutional invisibility, and an unequal burden to educate peers and faculty (Messinger, 2007; Austin et al., 2019; Craig et al., 2017).

Finally, the literature reveals enduring ethical tensions surrounding the reconciliation of personal religious beliefs and professional obligations. While some scholars propose accommodation models that emphasize referral or value pluralism, others argue that such approaches risk legitimizing discrimination and obscuring power asymmetries between practitioners and clients (Hodge, 2005; Barker, 2017; Dessel & Rodenborg, 2017). These debates underscore the need for social work to move beyond individual moral reasoning and address the institutional conditions that allow LGBTQ inclusion to remain negotiable. The findings of this review suggest that promoting LGBTQ+ inclusion requires moving beyond the individual attitudes or competencies of practitioners towards a broader organisational perspective. Although professional commitment remains essential, inclusive practice cannot rely solely on individual sensitivity. Instead, it should be embedded within institutional structures through explicit organisational policies, inclusive administrative procedures, data collection systems that acknowledge sexual orientation and gender identity, governance mechanisms, and continuous professional education. Organisational assessment tools and quality indicators may further support the systematic evaluation of inclusiveness within social services. Framing inclusion as a structural characteristic of organisations rather than an individual attribute represents one of the key implications emerging from this review and reflects a shift towards institutional accountability for LGBTQ+ affirmative practice.

Overall, this narrative review demonstrates that while social work has made significant conceptual advances in its engagement with LGBTQ populations, structural and institutional barriers continue to limit the realization of fully inclusive practice. The persistence of heteronormativity, curricular gaps, and regulatory service models suggests that meaningful change requires not only affirming attitudes, but sustained structural, pedagogical, and epistemological transformation within the profession itself.

From this perspective, social work can be understood as part of a broader institutional apparatus through which sexual and gender citizenship is continuously negotiated. Drawing on Agamben's (2009) notion of the apparatus, social work institutions may be viewed as networks of practices,

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norms, administrative procedures, and governance mechanisms that simultaneously enable recognition while regulating access to rights and participation. At the same time, Richardson's (2000) concept of sexual citizenship highlights that inclusion extends beyond formal legal recognition to encompass everyday experiences of belonging, legitimacy, and equal participation within institutions. Bringing these perspectives together reinforces the central argument of this review: achieving genuinely LGBTQ+ affirmative social work requires transforming not only professional attitudes but also the organisational and regulatory structures through which citizenship itself is enacted.

Limitations and future directions

This review adopts a narrative and non-systematic design, which entails several methodological and epistemological limitations that should be acknowledged alongside their analytical implications. Although the literature search was guided by explicit inclusion criteria and a structured selection process, the absence of formal systematic protocols – such as dual independent screening, standardized quality appraisal, or PRISMA-style reporting – limits replicability and may introduce selection bias. The interpretive and thematic focus of the review prioritizes conceptual coherence and historical reconstruction over exhaustiveness or quantitative aggregation, and therefore does not allow for evaluative comparisons of intervention effectiveness or measurable practice outcomes.

The review is also shaped by the structure of the available literature. While this approach allows for in-depth conceptual synthesis, it may reinforce the prominence of well-established authors and Anglophone scholarship, reflecting broader epistemic hierarchies within social sciences knowledge production. Rather than viewing this solely as a limitation of the present review, this pattern should be understood as indicative of structural inequalities in academic visibility, indexing systems, and publishing infrastructures that shape how knowledge on social work and LGBTQ issues is produced, circulated, and legitimized. As a result, certain populations – particularly LGBTQ people in non-Western contexts, Indigenous communities, migrants, and those living in rural or economically marginalized settings – remain underrepresented in the literature reviewed. This pattern also reflects the limited retrievability of Italian-language scholarship through the international databases used for this search. Although a growing body of Italian social work literature addresses gender and sexual diversity – including recent contributions

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explicitly framed as bridging national and international debates (Di Rosa & Gui, 2021) – this scholarship remains largely absent from mainstream bibliographic indexes, and future reviews would benefit from more systematically engaging with it.

These limitations point to several directions for future research. Future research should move beyond documenting barriers to inclusion and focus on developing and evaluating organisational models capable of promoting LGBTQ+ affirmative social work. In particular, future studies should (a) develop and validate instruments for assessing organisational inclusiveness within social services; (b) evaluate the effectiveness of LGBTQ+ affirmative training programmes for professionals; (c) examine the long-term impact of inclusive organisational policies on service users' wellbeing and help-seeking behaviours; and (d) compare how different welfare systems integrate sexual and gender diversity into institutional governance and professional practice.

Conclusion

This narrative review has traced the evolving relationship between social work and LGBTQ people and communities across several decades of scholarship, highlighting both significant conceptual advancements and persistent structural limitations. The literature documents a clear shift away from overtly pathologizing models toward affirmative, rights-based, and anti-oppressive frameworks (Cain, 1991; Crisp, 2006; Alessi, 2014). However, this review demonstrates that such shifts at the level of professional discourse have not consistently translated into inclusive institutional practices or equitable service delivery.

Across historical periods and practice contexts, social work continues to operate within systems structured by heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions that shape who is recognized, protected, and supported by social services (Fish, 2006; Ward, 2010; Nothdurfter & Nagy, 2016). These assumptions are reproduced through routine organizational practices, curricular omissions, and regulatory service models that position LGBTQ identities as marginal, conditional, or administratively inconvenient. As a result, inclusion often depends on individual practitioner discretion rather than being embedded within institutional design (Fish & Karban, 2015; Giertsen, 2019).

The findings synthesized here underscore the importance of moving beyond individualized or attitudinal explanations of exclusion. While professional education and contact-based interventions are associated with

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more affirming attitudes, the literature consistently shows that such changes are fragile in the absence of structural and pedagogical reform (Swank & Raiz, 2007; Johnston & Stewart, 2013; Austin et al., 2019). Similarly, minority stress models provide a powerful framework for understanding LGBTQ disparities, but risk depoliticizing distress when not situated within broader analyses of power, material inequality, and institutional regulation (Shera, 2003; Hafford-Letchfield & Dunk-West, 2018; Kia et al., 2021).

A life course perspective further reveals how experiences of stigma and exclusion accumulate over time, shaping patterns of help-seeking, concealment, and mistrust across youth, adulthood, and older age (Berger, 1984; Durso & Gates, 2012; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2014). These insights challenge segmented service models and highlight the need for social work to address LGBTQ inclusion as a longitudinal and structural concern rather than a series of isolated practice issues.

Taken together, this review suggests that the future of LGBTQ-affirming social work depends less on the further refinement of individual competencies and more on sustained institutional transformation. This includes the integration of LGBTQ issues across core curricula, the redesign of service infrastructures to recognize diverse identities and family forms, and the adoption of reflexive, structurally informed practice frameworks that critically interrogate social work's own role in the production of normative knowledge (McPhail, 2004; MacKinnon, 2011; Morton, 2013). Without such changes, the profession risks reproducing the very exclusions it seeks to challenge.

While this review is narrative and non-systematic, and therefore does not claim exhaustive coverage, it provides a coherent synthesis of recurring themes, tensions, and gaps within the literature. By integrating historical and contemporary perspectives, this article contributes to ongoing scholarly dialogue on how social work can more fully align its ethical commitments with its institutional practices in working with LGBTQ people and communities.

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