

Title: Heteronormativity Prevails: A Study of Sexuality in Norwegian Social Work Bachelor Programs

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Abstract

This article reviews how sexuality is addressed in the curricula of Norwegian social work bachelor programs. The purpose of the review was to examine whether heteronormativity was problematized in social work curricula. A keyword search revealed that sexuality was addressed in only 0.08% of curriculum materials in the 2013–2014 academic year (90 pages). Among the 6 articles identified that addressed sexuality, a thematic analysis showed that, 5 problematized heteronormative assumptions, whereas 1 focused solely on problematic aspects of being gay and lesbian. The finding that heteronormativity was addressed in less than 0.08% of course content indicates that heteronormativity prevails. This study concludes that heteronormative discourses dominate the curricula of Norwegian social work bachelor's programs. Suggestions for reorienting course content to address sexuality as a hierarchical construction producing otherness are presented.

Despite the ambition in social work to prevent sexuality-based discrimination and marginalization (IFSW, 2012), few social phenomena are addressed as infrequently as the power asymmetry between heterosexuality and nonheterosexuality.

When sexuality is addressed in social work, it usually concerns lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals but rarely heterosexuality (Hicks, 2008). The rationale for addressing minority sexuality is the belief that social work involves working “with those who are disadvantaged in society” (Fish, 2012, p. 15). Nonetheless, the closet of nonheterosexualities is a direct reflection of heterosexuality being taken for granted. However, addressing sexuality by focusing on the ‘disadvantaged’ locates sexuality with a minority of the population. Such an approach illustrates a core aspect of the heteronormative discourse; when minority issues are discussed, problematic issues are highlighted, leaving heteronormativity unchallenged and strengthening the hegemony of heterosexuality.

A sexual minority focus has nevertheless served to acknowledge sexual differences and enabled political progress, such as the removal of discriminatory regulations (McPhail, 2004; Sedgwick, 2008). Furthermore, because of a lack of knowledge about homosexuals, which this study also illustrates, scholarship on this is needed. However, as sexual-identity-based categories are products of a knowledge regime aimed at controlling sexuality (Foucault, 1978), in this article, I argue that research should address heteronormativity and sexual power asymmetries rather than focus on the problems of sexual minorities. Accordingly, problems with accepting nonheterosexual feelings (Giertsen & Anderssen, 2007), the higher risk of suicide and suicide attempts among nonheterosexuals (Anderssen & Malterud, 2013; Hellesund, 2007), and homophobic bullying in schools (Slaatten, Hetland, & Anderssen, 2015) should be interpreted as effects of heteronormativity rather than as problems that primarily affect gays and lesbians. Hence, I argue that sexuality should be recognized as a

knowledge regime because such an approach may enhance understanding of the power differentials and mechanisms causing marginalization.

The article is based on a study that explored the extent to which sexuality is addressed explicitly in Norwegian social work bachelor programs, as well as how this topic is addressed. The purpose of the study was to examine how heteronormativity is represented. The main objective of this article is to reflect on how knowledge regimes may exacerbate marginalization and to suggest ways to reorient the course content toward sexuality as a hierarchical construction producing otherness.

Conceptual and theoretical context

The social construction of sexuality

Constructionist perspectives of sexuality can be traced back to the late 1960s, when Mary McIntosh's (1968) essay on the homosexual role appeared (Vance, 1989). In this landmark article, McIntosh argues that there is no universally fixed homosexual, just historically fixed categories. It is no overstatement to say that both lesbian and gay studies, as well as queer theory, grew out of this paper (Plummer, 2013). In psychological and sociological sexuality research from the 1970s, sexual identities were a major area of study. In the first phase of sexual identity studies, the symbolic interactionism perspective of the development of homosexual identity as a process in relation to significant others within a society that stigmatized same-sex sexuality was common (Gagnon & Simon, 1973; Plummer, 1975; Ponce, 1978).

In the late 1980s, as part of the postmodern turn in the humanities and social sciences, queer theoretical thinking became prominent in sexuality research. Queer theory criticized previous psychological and sociological research for conceiving sexuality within a fixed-identity frame and for viewing sexuality as an issue of interest only to the gay and lesbian

minority (Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 2008). However, feminist sociologists and scholars had previously criticized the knowledge regime of sexuality before queer theory arose as a school of thought (Plummer, 1981; Rich, 1980; Wittig, 1981). A queer theoretical approach clearly reoriented previous approaches toward critical explorations of social constructions of sexuality, including the role of language, and focused on heterosexuality and taken-for-granted understandings of gender and sexuality (Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 2008).

Since the 1990s, research and theoretical studies based on queer theory have been undertaken in sociology, psychology, and pedagogy. In social work, it was not until the mid-1990s that academic papers addressed sexuality. However, most of these articles focused solely on lesbian and gay sexualities (Hicks, 2008). Most analyses of sexuality from a critical perspective (employing feminist, poststructural, and queer theories) have been conducted in social work since the mid-2000s (such as: Hicks, 2008; Hicks & Watson, 2003; Jeyasingham, 2008; McPhail, 2004; Morton, Jeyasingham, & Hicks, 2013; O'Brien, 1999). However, social work theory and research today seldom engages with queer theory, not even in texts discussing lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues (Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016).

From a social work perspective, I concur with Hicks (2008): we need to investigate how social work produces sexual subjects. In this article, I address the construction of sexuality in the curricula of social work programs in Norway by asking whether and how the cultural implicitness that surrounds heterosexuality is problematized. This question has both theoretical and practical implications, because it may shed light on how the social work profession is implicated in power dynamics that are considered to be dangerous in human welfare: stigmatization, discrimination, and marginalization.

Heteronormativity

The most important argument for addressing sexuality in social work was stated by O'Brien (1999); i.e., social work is already deeply implicated in the construction of power relations in sexuality. Social work theories, education, practice, and the profession perpetuate heterosexual hegemony, as is evident in their failure to address sexuality (Dunk, 2007; Giertsen, 2016; Hicks, 2008; Morton et al., 2013; Sperling, 2010). If sexuality is addressed in social work, then teaching, research, and practice tend to focus on minority experiences and particularly on negative experiences (Morton et al., 2013). When sexuality is understood as other than negative, such knowledge is discounted (Jeyasingham 2008; O'Brien, 1999).

Heteronormativity, a core concept of queer theory, is a useful concept when examining marginalization processes concerning sexuality. In this article, heteronormativity is defined as “the institutions, structures of understanding, and practical orientations that make heterosexuality seem not only coherent—that is, organized as a sexuality—but also privileged” (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 548). Core features of a heteronormative discourse are a cultural bias in favor of opposite-sex relationships, a silence on (hetero-)sexuality, which maintains that heterosexuality is hegemonic, and by implication, the othering of nonheterosexualities as abnormal and unwanted (Hudak & Giammattei, 2010; Røthing, 2008). Within this binary understanding of sexuality, sexual minorities are understood to be not merely victims of power but to be produced by power and an intrinsic part of how societies organize themselves (Beasley, 2005).

Foucault (1978), whose work is central to queer theory, claimed that society produces different forms of knowledge, often in the form of various sciences, to understand and discuss sexuality. Foucault claimed that rather than liberating sexuality, these discursive formations construct and control sexuality. An important aspect of Foucault's research is on the production of the homosexual: “We must not forget that the psychological, psychiatric,

medical category of homosexuality was constituted from the moment it was characterized—Westphal’s famous article of 1870 on ‘contrary sexual sensations’ can stand as its date of birth” (Foucault, 1978, p. 43). By demonstrating that ‘homosexuals’ did not exist until the 1800s, Foucault shows that social identities result from the way in which knowledge is organized (Namaste, 1996). Logically, it follows that ‘heterosexuals’ did not exist prior to the 1800s.

Queer theorists argue that a focus on gays and lesbians, and in particular on the social work version in which nonheterosexuality is problematic for those who identify as gay and lesbian, reproduces heterosexuality as the normal and preferred sexual orientation. By implication, this concomitantly reproduces nonheterosexuality as an abnormal and not preferred sexual orientation. In this way, the power asymmetry between heterosexuality and nonheterosexuality, in spite of—or even because of—the intention to do good for sexual minorities is perpetuated.

I wish to make one additional point in this introductory section, concerning whether sexuality can be studied separately from gender. In queer theory, there is no agreement on this question. Sedgwick (2008) argues that sexuality and gender should be analyzed separately, whereas Butler (1990) insists on an analytical connection between gender and sexuality. It is true that the concepts of homo- and heterosexuality could not exist without the concept of gender; however, many other dimensions of sexual choice have no such definitional connection with gender. In this study, I follow Sedgwick and make an analytical distinction between sexuality and gender. Even though I see gender and sexuality as empirically related, the focus of this study is on sexuality.

The Norwegian context

In 1981, Norway was the first country in the world to enact an anti-discrimination law that included sexual orientation. In 1993, it was the second country to enact a law on same-

sex registered partnerships, which was replaced by a gender-neutral marriage law in 2008. Despite equality before the law, research shows that young Norwegians find it difficult to imagine themselves living a nonheterosexual life, and suicide is still considered to be a reasonable response to a future as a nonheterosexual person (Hellesund, 2007; Røthing & Svendsen, 2010). A recent Norwegian survey on attitudes toward LGB people is consistent with these findings. A substantial proportion of people, particularly men, had negative reactions to various statements: 39% agreed that sex between men was simply wrong, 22% agreed that sex between women was simply wrong, and 24% agreed that gays were repulsive (Anderssen & Malterud, 2013).

Roseneil, Crowhurst, Hellesund, Santos, and Stoilova (2013) suggest that the welfare regime plays a role in the construction of sexuality. In Norway, there is a strong emphasis on equality as a core cultural value reflected in the Norwegian welfare model. As Roseneil et al. (2013, p. 184) suggested, legal equality in Norway concerning sexual orientation could be understood as an expression of “having instituted equality as a firm principle of governance.” This observation raises the question of how power asymmetries between heterosexuality and nonheterosexuality are addressed in Norwegian social work education.

Previous research

Two studies, both in the USA, have explored sexuality in social work education from a national perspective. Martin et al. (2009) conducted a study intended to encompass all social work education through a national survey, including the social work curriculum. Their study (Martin et al., 2009, p. 10) showed that “only 14% of the [program] directors reported that their programs offered a course that focuses specifically on LGBT issues. ... only 54% reported material on identity development among LGBT youth ... and 41% on best practices with LGBT youth.” However, as is typical, the study was restricted to LGBT issues. Another study used a survey of social work faculty to explore how sexuality was addressed in teaching

on master's programs in social work (McKay, 2015). The findings revealed that 82% of respondents agreed that sexuality education was important, but only 1.3% of faculties offered a sexuality-related course. Just like the study of Martin et al. (2009), this study did not assess the number of sexuality issues covered in social work curricula. However, both studies indicate that sexuality is only addressed to a relatively small extent in social work education in the USA, although (unlike in Norway), sexual orientation is included in accreditation standards (Council on Social Work Education, 2015). To the best of my knowledge, no previous studies have examined how sexuality is addressed in the curricula of Norwegian social work bachelor programs.

Aim of the study

The present work explores how and to what extent sexuality is addressed in the curricula of Norwegian social work bachelor programs. The purpose of the study was to examine whether heteronormativity was problematized in social work curricula.

Methods

The sample

The study considered the curricula of Norwegian social work bachelor programs in the 2013–2014 academic year. The educational institutions offering a Bachelor's degree in Social Work (BSW) program are listed in Appendix 1. The BSW program at the Arctic University of Norway (UiT) was removed from the sample because I am a staff member at the UiT.¹

Keyword search

To explore the extent to which full-time BSW programs addressed sexuality, a keyword search of their reading lists was first conducted. These were easily accessible because they were published on the Internet. The keyword searches were conducted manually

because the reading lists were not stored in any database. Sexuality can be addressed under a number of headings; therefore, I searched for various key words, including: ‘discrimination,’ ‘marginalization,’ ‘vulnerable groups,’ ‘gender,’ ‘sexuality,’ ‘homo-,’ ‘hetero-,’ ‘lesbian,’ ‘sexual orientation/preference,’ ‘queer,’ ‘minority,’ ‘majority,’ ‘diversity,’ ‘oppression,’ ‘normality,’ ‘intersectionality,’ ‘love,’ ‘intimacy,’ ‘family,’ and ‘pair.’ The curriculum materials found in these key word searches were explored by searching the indexes, chapter headings, and article titles, paragraphs, and sentences for content addressing sexuality. Next, I explored the often-used (at least at three educational institutions) foundational textbooks on social work, sociology, social anthropology, social policy, and psychology. The foundational textbooks covering the subjects of law, public administration, philosophy of science, and research methods were examined via the reading lists.

To estimate the number of pages of content, the following rules were applied. (a) If sexuality was addressed sporadically (e.g., listed as one of many relevant diversity issues but not explored further), the page was not included. (b) If sexuality was addressed throughout a text, all pages (in the article, chapter, or book) were included. (c) If sexuality was addressed in one part of a text (article, chapter, or book) and followed up in explorations of other issues, all pages were included. These strategies were chosen to capture sexuality addressed with some theoretical substance and to establish a generous estimate. In this way, the number of pages on sexuality was not underestimated with respect to the findings of previous research on sexuality in social work.

As one aim of this study was to estimate the degree to which sexuality is addressed explicitly in social work curricula, it presupposes an estimate of the collective scope of the social work bachelor program curricula covered by this study. The curricula were estimated to include 116,886 pages over the 11 social work bachelor programs that were analyzed.²

Thematic analysis

To examine closely how sexuality was addressed, I identified how it was thematized in terms of whether it reproduced or problematized heteronormativity. Thematic analysis is “a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 6). A latent approach was chosen, focusing on “underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations—and ideologies” and going beyond the manifest/semantic content of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 13). Two themes expressing the latent content were initially defined: ‘reproducing heteronormativity’ (texts with a primary focus on problematic aspects of nonnormative sexuality, and with little or no emphasis on the significance of heteronormative structures), and ‘problematizing heteronormativity’ (texts that include a discussion of the consequences of a cultural bias in favor of opposite-sex relationships). When reporting the results, I present quotations to illustrate how sexuality is thematized, followed by an analysis of how the quotations epitomize the themes.

A comment on the methodology

A survey and/or interviews would have provided data on sexuality in bachelor programs that could not have been obtained by exploring reading lists and textbooks; e.g., if teachers or guest lecturers had addressed sexuality, or if additional course material addressing sexuality had been provided. Nevertheless, an investigation of reading lists and foundation textbooks was chosen for the following reasons. The queer theoretical approach required that the texts should be explored in greater detail than is required when considering sexuality from the hegemonic perspective in social work, such as addressing issues relevant to gays and lesbians. In addition, as sexuality is an underresearched area, it is likely that few would respond to a survey, and if interviews were used, the informants would probably not know in any detail which curriculum materials addressed sexuality. I considered my own knowledge about sexuality theory and social work literature to be valuable, so the chosen methodology

was acceptably reliable. Nevertheless, curricula that address sexuality may have been overlooked.

Results

Curriculum materials addressing sexuality

The results of the keyword searches (presented in Table 1) showed that sexuality was addressed explicitly in 0.08% of curriculum readings (90 pages) in six bachelor programs. Five bachelor programs did not address sexuality. Of these 90 pages, 45 relate to a 15-page article on attitudes in a psychology textbook (Ohnstad, 2010) used for three programs. Eleven foundation textbooks (in sociology, psychology, anthropology, social policy, and social work) were used by at least three programs. The only textbook that addressed sexuality was one by Ekeland et al. (2010).

Quantitatively, the study shows that sexuality was seldom problematized, which confirms previous social work research.

How is sexuality addressed?

Of the six texts that address sexuality, five problematize heteronormativity (Hellesund, 2006; Øfsti, 2010; Ohnstad, 2006, 2010; Øverås, 2010). I argue that one article (Pedersen & Vollebæk, 2006) reproduces heteronormativity because the authors stress a need for more knowledge on nonheterosexuals, as Øverås (2010) also does, but they also place little emphasis on the significance of heteronormative structures. I first analyze the texts that problematize heteronormativity.

Ohnstad (2010) addresses attitudes. One example in the text is about a woman who explores the possibility of becoming a man, as she finds the label of lesbian problematic. When becoming a man, according to the example in the article, she can relate to a woman as a partner, within a heteronormative script. In this way, Ohnstad (2010) problematizes

heteronormative discourses and challenges the readers' heteronormative attitudes. Ohnstad's approach to attitudes in the article is clearly influenced by queer theory, not least in the extensive use of queer theory's most central concept, heteronormativity:

When the rules of heteronormativity are broken, people will react emotionally, intellectually, and behaviorally, either in relation to groups or themes, or in other ways. Heteronormativity directs most of our thoughts, actions, and feelings in relation to normality, human nature, organization of family, love, and sexuality (p. 235).

Table 1. Results of key word searches of reading lists and foundational textbooks.

Educational Institution (Full Names in Appendix 1)	Authors and Publication Year	Subject or Course	Number of Pages
DiaSos	Pedersen and Vollebæk (2006)	Interdisciplinary course: marginalization and anti-discriminatory social work	3
HiL	Ohnstad (2010)	Psychology	15
HiOA	Ohnstad (2010)	First semester introductory course	15
	Ohnstad (2006)	Interdisciplinary course: professional interaction/diversity	9
HiSF	Øfsti (2010)	Social work	17
	Hellesund (2006)	Social work	12
HiST	Ohnstad (2010)	Psychology	15
HiV	Øverås (2010)	Social anthropology	4
			Total: 90

The article is 15 pages long and is used at three educational institutions. Thus, it constitutes 45 of the 90 pages found in this study that address sexuality.

Ohnstad's (2006) article about navigating in an unknown territory is also based on queer theory. She criticizes gay and lesbian identity theory for placing identity within a developmental psychology theoretical frame. Instead of understanding gay and lesbian

identity as a straightforward process resulting in self-understanding as gay or lesbian, and finally coming out, she proposes that individuals navigate in an often-unknown landscape: “An alternative way to understand this would be to regard the movements as navigation between various discourses in society. She tries out various discourses to find her own configuration” (Ohnstad, 2006, p. 68).

Hellesund’s (2006) article is also based on queer theory. She describes suicide attempts by homosexuals as an effect of a hierarchical binary understanding of sexuality, whereby homosexuality is deemed to be abnormal. When the suicide rate of homosexuals is higher than that of heterosexuals, Hellesund relates this to the modern hegemonic discourse of sexuality, in which homosexuals are constructed as the other and abnormal. Hence, Hellesund (2006, p. 79) concludes: “The burden of the weight that homosexuality attributes to ‘the self’ for some can be heavy to bear. And the burden of ‘the difference of homosexuality’ is a matter of culture, not psychology.”

Øfsti (2010) elaborates on intimacy and marriage from a historical perspective, and ends by arguing that queer theory perspectives are fruitful for explaining experiences that lie between heterosexuality and homosexuality: “Categories define people in an either/or manner, while the task of research is to reveal diverse practices rather than to develop unambiguous categories, so a queer analytical perspective on our time would shed light on such experiences” (Øfsti, 2010, p. 65).

Øverås (2010) elaborates on theoretical ideas that are central to both queer theory and a problem-focused approach to nonheterosexuality. Øverås discusses heteronormativity and demonstrates how therapists themselves reproduce heteronormativity. Nevertheless, she concludes her article by stating the classical modernist version of sexuality—i.e., there is a need for more knowledge on nonheterosexuality: “It should be a goal to increase openness around the topic of nonheterosexuality among professionals who provide help so that young

people have the opportunity to discuss sexual identity with an adult in an unprejudiced way” (Øverås, 2010, p. 47).

Unlike previous texts, Pedersen and Vollebæk (2006) address minority sexuality in a mainly problem-orientated way. They elaborate on the challenges that gays, lesbians, and bisexuals encounter, and suggest that homosexuality is a subject to reflect on without suggesting that heterosexuality or heteronormativity should also be thought through. Their opening sentence sets the tone for the focus on sexuality in this text: “Research shows that the living conditions for lesbian women and gay men are poorer with regard to alcohol, mental problems and suicide” (Pedersen & Vollebæk, 2006, p. 255). Although heterosexuality as a taken-for-granted norm is addressed, the text overall is gay focused and problem focused. This text illustrates a core aspect of the heteronormative discourse: when minority issues are discussed, problematic issues are highlighted, leaving heteronormativity unchallenged, hence strengthening the hegemony of heterosexuality.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to assess the degree to which sexuality was addressed explicitly in undergraduate social work curricula and to explore how this topic is addressed. The keyword search showed that sexuality was addressed in only 0.08% (90 pages) of curriculum materials in the 2013–2014 academic year. Five of the 11 programs had no identifiable content at all. The thematic analysis showed that five of the six texts addressing sexuality problematized heteronormative assumptions, whereas one text took a typically modernist approach, focusing on problematic aspects of being gay or lesbian. The fact that heteronormativity was addressed in less than 0.08% of course content illustrates that heterosexuality is taken for granted. Below, I first comment on the articles that address sexuality, then discuss why heteronormativity seems to go unnoticed in social work bachelor curricula in Norway.

The four queer texts (Hellesund, 2006; Øfsti, 2010; Ohnstad, 2006; 2010), in contrast to the texts with an anti-discriminatory perspective (Øverås, 2010; Pedersen & Vollebæk, 2006) were written by experts on sexuality who did not graduate from social work programs in Norway (Hellesund (2002), Øfsti (2008), and Ohnstad's (2009) doctoral theses addressed sexuality and heteronormativity). The fact that the articles by sexuality experts address heteronormativity can be understood as a reflection of the relatively strong position of queer theories—and critical perspectives in general—in social science research on sexuality. This contrasts with academic social work in general, and Norwegian academic social work, where sexuality is seldom addressed and mainstream social work texts do not mention queer theory (Giertsen, 2016; Hicks & Jeyasingham, 2016).

As previously outlined, a core feature of heteronormativity is a silence on (hetero-) sexuality. The 'queer counting' in this study, measuring silence on sexuality, reveals that the curricula of Norwegian bachelor social work programs are almost totally dominated by heteronormative discourses. An important point in this article is that the failure to address sexuality illustrates not only how little material there is on nonheterosexuality but also more importantly the apparent absence of content on the implications of heteronormativity. The study shows that Norwegian social work education is (re)producing sexual otherness. Different power logics related to institutional knowledge regimes may help to explain why heteronormativity seems to go unnoticed in social work bachelor curricula in Norway.

A logic based on knowledge/ignorance (Jeyasingham, 2008) seems to be institutionalized in Norwegian social work education concerning heteronormativity. Sedgwick (2008, p. 8) considers a limited focus on sexuality to be "ignorance *of* a knowledge ... these ignorances, far from being pieces of the originary dark, are produced by and correspond to particular knowledges and circulate as part of particular regimes of truth." This type of knowledge regime not only renders sexuality invisible as a social phenomenon but also

upholds the hierarchical binary opposition of heterosexuality versus nonheterosexuality. As Jeyasingham (2008, p. 147) states: “This system of knowledge/ignorance operates to keep certain ways of knowing sexuality out of circulation—not just discourses of queer desire and pleasure but also ways of questioning the significance that is attributed to the difference between ‘heterosexual’ and its others.”

The logic of knowledge/ignorance also has other obvious implications: sexuality may be treated as an unimportant issue/topic. O’Brien (1999) explored the citation indices of journal articles on gays and lesbians in social work journals and found that no other journals cited these articles. She suggests that the sexual knowledge of young people is “constituted as a subordinate form of knowledge” (O’Brien, 1999, p. 146). The results of this study support this claim.

Another aspect of the logic of knowledge/ignorance may relate to how sexuality is understood in social work, as a negative phenomenon related to uncontrolled fertility, abuse, exploitation, and infection (Jeyasingham, 2008). When the social work knowledge regime takes heterosexuality for granted, it prevents social work scholars, social workers, students, and clients from addressing sexuality, leaving nonheterosexuality as an unspoken issue with negative connotations.

A different but related form of logic is that of ‘power/inequality-blindness’. Several studies indicate that equality is a core theoretical principle when Norwegian social workers and social work educators identify problems. Typically, they identify problems and solutions at the individual level but fail to focus on diversity, structural factors, and oppression (Andenæs, 2004; Kriz & Skivenes, 2010; Østby, 2008). This could indicate that avoiding addressing power asymmetries is a general problem in Norwegian social work.

The study shows that social work education in Norway privileges heterosexuality and marginalizes nonheterosexuality. This strongly indicates that the sexual minority model in

social work needs to be supplemented by critical perspectives to produce services that diminish the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy of ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Willis, 2007). In short, the following suggestions, based on a queer perspective, should be central to practical social work. (a) Do not overfocus on gay and lesbian problems. (b) Recognize sexuality as a positive and important part of people's lives and closest relationships. (c) Apply sexuality issues to all, including heterosexual, people. (d) Reflect on the constraints that sexual categories represent, including the heterosexual category. (e) Be open to individual sexual narratives, not least to those who violate categorical notions. (f) Be knowledgeable of how the silencing of sexuality privileges heterosexuality and others nonheterosexuality. (g) Be knowledgeable of how binary oppositions can contribute to the marginalization of nonnormative statuses. (h) Reflect on how one as a person and as a social worker privileges heterosexuality and marginalizes nonheterosexuality. For social work practice to be developed in this direction, it is necessary that curriculum content address sexuality.

Below, I address some implications of this study to problematize the implicit hegemonic heterosexual norm in social work education.

Implications for social work education

The tendency to avoid addressing sexuality in the Norwegian social work programs indicates that heterosexuality is reproduced as the normal and preferred sexual preference. Concomitantly, nonheterosexualities are constructed as the other. When social work is understood as work “with those who are the disadvantaged in society” (Fish, 2012, p. 15), this resembles functionalist models in sociology where the other represents the problem. Models of culturally competent practice and anti-discriminatory practice (cf. Fish, 2012; Van den Bergh & Crisp, 2004) rest on ideas of awareness and respect for the values, beliefs, and customs of marginalized or at-risk groups. Using such models leads practitioners to believe that if they meet these needs, lesbians and gay men will not be discriminated against and can

be offered equality in line with heterosexuals (Hicks & Watson, 2003). In sexuality studies, this line of thinking has been termed the ethnic identity model of sexuality (cf. Epstein, 1987). This model promotes the idea of lesbians and gay men as a minority culture and forms the basis of a liberal, rights-based rhetoric (Hicks, 2008). Powerful critiques have been made of these models for focusing only on problems, giving easy answers to complex questions, and assuming a minority culture with a set of needs (Morton et al., 2013). When addressing diversity in social work, the curriculum content generally tends to focus on the marginalized and their problems. Based on queer theory, I argue that the primary focus on the marginalized reifies the marginalized position, not least when hegemonic positions are silenced, leaving the subject of sexuality to those specifically interested in minority issues.

I sympathize with Sumara and Davis (1999, p. 191), who argue that “the curriculum has an obligation to interrupt heteronormative thinking—not only to promote social justice, but to broaden possibilities for perceiving, interpreting, and representing experience.” Instead of conceptualizing nonheterosexuality as a deviance, one needs to address the hierarchical organization of diversity (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Hicks, 2014). Below, I suggest how to re-orient social work course content to address sexuality as a hierarchically organized phenomenon.

Basic perspectives in social work need to be problematized. The use of postmodern perspectives in social work is contested, and this opposition is clearly framed by Caputo, Epstein, Stoesz, and Thyer (2015), who stated that postmodernism is “reversing progress in social justice regarding marginalized groups” (p. 638) when “favouring authentic narratives of marginalized people over the truth of established authorities” (p. 639). I support Ploesser and Mecheril (2012, p. 805), who argue that a postmodern/deconstructive approach is not just about recognition of different lifestyles “but also about a reduction of such discriminations, disadvantages and exclusions based on differentiations.”

Hicks and Jeyasingham (2016, p. 14) call for “a genealogy of social work theory concerning sexuality ... if we are to avoid mere description of current sexual categories of persons and their implied social welfare needs.” On this basis, they make an even more profound epistemological critique of social work theory when they argue not merely for adding postmodern perspectives. They state that if social work has been allowed to provide too much theory (an argument often made against postmodern theories in social work), a pressing concern is “to ask which knowledge forms count as social work theory and which do not” This study shows that heteronormativity is barely addressed in Norwegian social work bachelor program curricula, so I support Hicks and Jeyasingham’s (2016, p. 14) claim to ask which knowledge forms should count as social work theory.

Sexuality needs to be understood in positive terms. A related point to that stated above concerns the way that sexuality is understood in academic social work. If sexuality is addressed at all, it is mostly as dangerous, connected to problems such as teen pregnancy and rape, or as a problematic minority status. In contrast, heterosexuality is implicitly understood in a positive light (Jeyasingham, 2008; O’Brien, 1999). When sexuality, and primarily nonheterosexuality, is taught only from a problem perspective, “the healing power of intimacy, building healthy sexual relationships, embracing sexual identities, and the potential joys of ‘everyday sexuality’ are absent” (McKay, 2015, p. 2). This problem-focused approach to sexuality is inadequate for a field of study that stresses the importance of strength-based social work (McKay, 2015). It also prevents social workers and social work educators from dealing with sexuality, unless it is with negative issues. Addressing sexuality positively would enhance the ability of social workers and social work educators to discuss sexuality more easily, and this would encourage clients to address sexuality accordingly.

Sexuality should not be problematized separately. Jeyasingham (2008, p. 149) states that teaching “about heteronormativity should not be limited only to those sections of

the curriculum that examine discrimination and oppression.” Mulé (2006) makes a similar argument, stating that issues of heterosexism should be integrated throughout a course of study or a program. However, this would risk avoidance of the topic of sexuality by teachers who are unsure about it or not interested in addressing it. A separate (minority) sexuality focus has led to the acknowledgment of nonnormative sexualities (Sedgwick, 2008), so such a focus should not be dismissed altogether. However, while this can further strengthen the heterosexual–homosexual opposition (Namaste, 1996), I argue that sexuality needs to be readdressed in social work education, from a nonexistent or minority-focused approach to a universalizing view where sexuality is addressed as an institutionalized phenomenon that produces social hierarchies (cf. Sedgwick, 2008). This requires sexuality to be understood as a constitutive aspect of a wide range of social phenomena, such as gender conceptions, socialization processes, media representations, welfare policies, institutions of family and marriage, and religious beliefs and institutions. As such, sexuality is also a site for power differentials and marginalizing processes. This can allow sexuality to be addressed in various social welfare issues. In brief, I argue that sexuality should be addressed as an aspect of a wide range of societal issues and not as a separate issue.

Heterosexuality must be named and the word used. When the hegemonic norm is silenced, this can strengthen a minoritizing view of sexuality (Sedgwick, 2008). Using the concept of heterosexuality has at least two advantages. First, obviously, heterosexuality is not taken for granted, and second, sexuality can be understood as a diverse phenomenon (Giertsen, 2016). Therefore, I suggest that teachers and students in social work education programs should practice what Hudak and Giammattei (2010, p. 11) describe as “the simple but very powerful act of naming heterosexuality.”

Privileges need to be addressed. Diversity is the basis of power differentials. Failure to address privilege creates an imbalance in content because it silently maintains an

assumption about the hidden center of heterosexual privilege (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; Walls et al., 2009). Abrams and Gibson (2007) state that teaching about privilege is fundamental to explaining oppression and the practitioners' role and responsibilities with a diverse clientele. Another benefit of this is the opportunity for the majority of social work students (heterosexual students) to explore the meaning of their own sexuality and to consider how heteronormativity affects their lives as well as those of minority students. The focus on heterosexuality also removes the burden of consistently explaining or defending their values and experiences of discrimination from sexual minority students.

Sexuality needs to be explicitly problematized in policy documents. Neither sexual power hierarchies, nor sexual diversity, nor sexual orientation are addressed in the Norwegian framework plan for bachelor programs in social work (cf. Utdannings- og forskningsdepartementet, 2005). While oppression and discrimination are core topics in the Norwegian framework plan, this study shows that heteronormativity and sexual diversity need to be addressed explicitly if curricula are to address sexuality. This study strongly indicates that problematizing heteronormativity in curricula should not be solely an academic responsibility of social work educators at each educational institution, as it is in Norway today.

Conclusion

The main conclusion of this study is that heteronormativity is seldom problematized in Norwegian BSW curricula. Heterosexuality is presented as something that barely needs to be mentioned, or positioned in relation to nonheterosexuality. At the same time, the 'other' is produced as an effect of the heterosexual norm—principally as nonexistent.

Social workers in Norway are not being equipped with knowledge on the complexity of sexuality at an individual, relational, cultural, societal, conceptual, or political level. In attempting to prevent marginalization based on sexuality, social workers face considerable

challenges because the curricula of their professional education programs take the heterosexuality norm for granted. This study clearly indicates that more research is needed to problematize taken-for-granted understandings of sexuality in social work.

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Appendix 1

Norwegian educational institutions offering a BSW program

DiaSos = Diakonhjemmet University College

HiB = Bergen University College

HiL = Lillehammer University College

HiOA = Oslo and Akershus University College of Applied Sciences

HiØF = Østfold University College

HiSF = Sogn og Fjordane University College

HiST = Sør-Trøndelag University College

HiV = Volda University College

UiA = University of Agder

UiN = University of Nordland

UiS = University of Stavanger

UiT = UiT The Norwegian Arctic University

¹ A note on the BSW education at the UiT concerning sexuality. Since 2012, there has been an obligatory six-credit course entitled *Diversity and marginalization: Gender, sexuality and social work*. The course was developed by Associate Professor Aud Kirsten Innjord and the author of this article.

² The author calculated this estimate because educational institutions did not provide a more precise estimate of the number of pages, and it did not emerge from the reading lists. Hence, a BSW in Norway is prescribed as 180 credits (three years). Based on what three educational institutions—HiOA, HiSF, and HiST (full names in Appendix 1)—state as the norm for the number of pages, an estimate of 77 pages per credit was used. Because obligatory curricula are usually much smaller for the bachelor's thesis (12 credits) and the field practice (30 credits), the estimate of pages excluded these 42 credits, resulting in 138 credits, which yields an estimated total of 116,886 pages between the 11 social work bachelor programs.