

## IS QUEER SOCIAL WORK POSSIBLE?

### Queer Sosyal Hizmet Mümkün mü?

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#### ABSTRACT

Historically, it is possible to observe gender differences within the heteronormative order, and non-acceptance of sexualities other than heterosexuality. The queer theory, which states that sexualities, sexual orientations and gender identities are based on a socially produced systematic structure, opposed the idea of looking and behaving normally and pointed out that concepts and definitions should be questioned. It is possible to say that queer theory deals with social inequalities in many different dimensions, and is closely related to the social work profession and the mission of the discipline to ensure social justice. In this article, queer theory will be explained and it will be discussed whether there is a queer social work.

**Key Words:** Queer, Queer theory, Social work, Queer social work

#### ÖZET

Tarihsel olarak heteronormatif düzen içerisinde cinsiyetler arası farklılıklar, heteroseksüellik dışındaki cinselliklerin kabul görmemesi gibi durumları gözlemlemek mümkündür. Cinsellikler, cinsel yönelimler ve cinsiyet kimliklerinin toplumsal olarak üretilen sistematik bir yapıya dayandığını ifade eden queer teori, 'normal görünme ve davranma' fikrine karşı çıkarak, kavramların, tanımlamaların sorgulanması gerektiğine dikkat çekmiştir. Queer teorisinin birçok farklı boyutta sosyal eşitsizlikleri ele alması, sosyal hizmet mesleği ve disiplinin sosyal adaleti sağlama yönündeki misyonu ile yakından ilişkili olduğunu söylemek mümkündür. Bu makalede queer teori açıklanarak, queer bir sosyal hizmetin var olup olmayacağı tartışılacaktır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Queer, Queer teori, Sosyal hizmet, Queer sosyal hizmet

#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Gender difference, which is associated with the physical, emotional and hormonal differences of men and women, is one of the dualities of the heterosexual world. These distinctions are considered natural for many people and women and men are assigned social roles through these distinctions. At this point, the concept of gender points out that the differences based on bilateral oppositions between men and women are not natural or innate, but stem from a socially produced and established structure. However, not only femininity and masculinity norms are mentioned in the concept of gender, but also the concepts of sexual orientation and gender identity are emphasized.

Since gender seems to be inadequate in explaining certain situations, queer theory has come into play and has become a theory that gathers all gender identities and sexual orientations under its umbrella. However, although queer theory is identified with the feminist movement and LGBTI+'s, it does not only refer to these issues, but also questions all discrimination and elements considered normal. In this article, the concept of queer does not refer to an identity or sexual practice, but it reflects the viewpoint of all sexualities and genders.

#### 2. QUEER THEORY

In the late 1980s, the word queer was used to insult homosexuals in strange, disgusting, bad, suspicious terms. In the 1990s, this term became the name of the movement that was developed by the ones who opposed the sexist classifications intentionally and strategically, and which went beyond the identities imposed by heteronormativity towards the struggle for equal claims (Riggs, 2017; Yardımcı and Güçlü, 2013). Queer argues that gender cannot be shaped and fixed in a single context by questioning the concepts of me and the other within society, which adopts heterosexuality as the norm, and tries to reverse and reverse the heterosexual view that extends from changing social conditions to law, economy, art and similar fields (Şah, 2016). The concept of queer develops queer theory with these inquiries.

Queer theory is nourished by second and third wave feminism, especially Judith Butler's (2014) questioning the extent to which gender is natural, and is based on Michel Foucault's (2014) History of Sexuality. Queer theory suggests that the identity of individuals is not fixed or deterministic, especially in terms of gender, gender identity, sexual orientation and / or sexuality (Sullivan, 2003). Queer theory criticizes and problematizes existing theories, methods and applications of identity. While heteronormativity assumes that the relations of heterosexuality, dual masculine and feminine genders are safe and continuous, queer theory produces a discourse that obscures heteronormative assumptions and privileges. It also offers ways of thinking and speaking about identity in the fight against homophobia, bifobia and transphobia. However, the theory questions whether race, ethnicity or class are fluid by presenting an area of use beyond gender and sexuality. As Butler (2014) pointed out, queer, which is a fluid and traveling concept that should not be fixed, does not need a certain definition.

Queer theory is a term for feminist and LGBTI+ studies as well as a framework for understanding personal experiences of gender identity and sexual orientation. In parallel with this, it states that identities are not destiny and that identities cannot determine who we are, how we see the world, and that identities are formed to achieve certain goals. In this sense, queer theorists have drawn attention to how and why people resist in normative as well as what is considered normative. For example, just after a baby is born, do people often have a "Boy or girl?" is to assume that there are only two possibilities for gender. Children are surrounded by blue or pink clothes in accordance with their assigned gender; it is very likely that it will encounter normative expectations as it should play with toys such as cars, trucks, dolls. These sexed structures; they are not necessarily the same in all historical ages or in all cultures in the world, but they have been created historically and culturally. At this point, queer theory opposes the dual thinking structures (femininity/masculinity), such as gender, and the qualitative discourses of being like men or women brought by such thinking structures. It insists that identities are built, and thus discusses the possibility that identities are built for other forms and purposes.

Queer is not a construction of identity, but rather provides a norm-free framework by deconstructing all identity construction (Hicks and Watson, 2003). Queer has the power to create enlightenment in the sexual realm and to create a conceptual, systematic, progressive, emancipatory social change, while not having a limited effect. The most important thought that queer theory tries to present is the rejection of all the labels coming from power, and questioning all the concepts defined by gender norms. This questioning means not only the heteronormative state, but the questioning of everything that causes all kinds of exclusion.

According to queer theory, there is no natural/compulsory condition that underlies gender and forms of sexuality (Hammack, Mayers and Windell, 2013). On the contrary, they are socially meaningful phenomena. In traditional approaches, it is assumed that gender is basically a biological phenomenon and then cultural/social meanings and roles are assumed. Queer theory opposes assigned gender and gender dichotomy and emphasizes that there is no natural gender (or natural body) that underlies gender, and that we should ask questions about what has not been questioned before.

Queer theory mainly questions how the normative about sex and sexuality is regulated. Feminism has become a critical and transformative methodology by entering many fields such as border politics, psychology, immigration, nationalism, especially LGBTI+ policies. Even though queer theory is shaped by the effects of feminist and LGBTI+ movement, it provides a framework for every individual who is exposed to discrimination and othering due to their characteristics such as language, ethnicity, race and class.

Before making a connection between the queer theoretical framework and social work practice, it is important to consider the criticisms of queer theory (Green, 2002; Edwards, 1998; McPhail, 2004; Weeks, 2003; Miller, Donner and Fraser, 2004). The first criticism concerns the lack of empirical-based research from queer studies. Since the origins of queer theory are in disciplines such as cultural studies and literary theory, the central focus is on text analysis. The second point of criticism focuses on the restructuring of phenomena such as queer, sexual orientation and gender identity and potentially ignores the importance of orientations and identities. The LGBTI+ movement has created social identities such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, trans, intersex, sexual orientations and gender identities together with historical and cultural discourses, and has achieved significant gains against institutional and social injustice with the collective communities formed by these orientations and identities. The discourse, which can be described as the anti-identity stance in queer theory, ignores the historical importance of LGBTI+ communities in providing

change in order to destroy social recognition and heteronormativity. However, the feminist and LGBTI+ movements have progressed on a common ground and have achieved many successes in gender and sexuality based issues with the power of social action. The third point of criticism focuses on the personal importance of sexual identities. These categories of identity remain personal for individuals in terms of understanding their own sexual differences and creating a sense of belonging to a wider non-heterosexual community. Queer theory's questioning and deconstruction of identities means ignoring sexual concepts and definitions that retain personal importance for individuals.

### 3. QUEER SOCIAL WORK

Queer blurs the boundaries between identity categories and challenges clear ideas about sexual identity. Queer theory offers a critical perspective on the questioning of all sexuality and identities and what is unknown, rather than accepting heterosexual, gay, bisexual and trans identities that have so far been accepted. Such a perspective makes sexual subjectivity open to discussion by re-questioning the sexes, sexual orientations, gender identities and sexual practices of people of all different beings. Queer theory has the potential to facilitate inclusive discussions around sexuality in social work and to provide information on a wide range of sexual differences beyond limited LGBTI+ identity categories.

Materials related to queer theory are not commonly found in social work literature (Trotter, 2000). Non-heterosexual issues are not at the desired level when analyzing the content analysis of journals that publish publications in terms of basic discipline related to social work (Van Voorhis and Wagner, 2001). This gap in the literature is in complete contradiction with the professional responsibility of the social work profession, which acts as an advocate for social justice, to produce new research to eliminate injustice against non-normative sexuality. Nevertheless, Jane Addams' work with lesbian couples and her support for a women-centered practice has been critical to the creation of progressive social work practice and the development of community practice (Hillock and Mule, 2016).

As homophobia, bifobia, transphobia increase and sexual injustices become more visible all over the world, issues such as sexuality, gender identity, sexual orientation, identity, queer have started to take place within the social work discipline. It is seen that all kinds of injustice experienced in these issues are tried to be solved with models and approaches such as cultural competence, anti-discrimination practice and critical theory which has an important place in the social work profession (Van Den Bergh and Crisp, 2004). It is possible to say that these models and approaches adopt an essentialist philosophical framework related to sexuality independent of social, historical and spatial relational developments as well as queer theory (Hicks, 2005).

Queer theory provides a framework for questioning basic concepts of identity, such as gender and sexuality, for the social work profession and discipline. In addition, queer theory helps social workers understand more complex social issues related to normativity, race, ethnicity, health and talent. Definitions, practices, fancies, desires and attributes of individuals about sexuality may change over time. With social learning, these qualities and situations can be discussed in different dimensions. Although the discipline of social work does not seem to be far from the complexities of human sexuality, it needs to advocate for rights in an environment where sexual minorities are oppressed.

Queer theory develops a focus on sexuality, gender, power relations, and also on the classification of identities. This theoretical approach attempts to understand the historical, political and systematic structures of what is seen as normal or pervert. Thus, it is possible to create a perception about how social service discourses are shaped and to consider the position of sexual differences in social work.

Normative and dominant discourses on gender and sexuality create certain assumptions, sets of language and beliefs, and lead us to put these discourses into behavior. Discourse, our behavior through assumptions affect social power relations, our daily actions and our perceptions (Fook, 2002). These discriminatory discourses, which are dominant in society, transform corporate culture under the influence of power relations (Mills, 2004). Considering the role of the social work profession as a bridge between individuals and resources, the fact that the corporate culture is sexist and discriminatory causes the service provided to be ineffective and efficient, and equality and social justice cannot be achieved.

The elements of queer theory share a common ground with the perspective of critical theory in social work. Critical theory deals with issues of power and social inequality, and its founding philosophy is based on breaking and coercing the status quo (Kincheloe and McLaren, 2003). Critical theory in social work



involves a structural analysis of repression, along with the desired outcome of social change, and a commitment to challenge hegemonic discourses and resolve repressive power relations (Ife, 1999). Critical theory and queer theory share the same common concerns, especially in the presence of dominant forms of thinking and discourse on gender and sexuality. It is possible to say that social workers who want to create social change aim to construct constructed ways of thinking and power relations based on them through the discourse analysis presented by critical theory (Fook, 2002).

The perception of power relations as a problem in a society where dual gender system and heterosexuality is compulsory is a new situation in the social work profession. The application of the basic assumptions of queer theory within the discipline of social work will provide an alternative framework for structuring dominant ways of thinking about sexualities, re-examining all aspects of social life in which heterosexuality is privileged and institutionalized, and rethinking the theories and theories of social work, practicing with sexually diverse groups. (Hughes, 2004).

The structure of queer theory can help to question dominant ideas about all issues related to gender and sexuality in individual case, group and community work in social work. In addition, to avoid assumptions about the sexual behavior and relationships of the client in daily practice in all areas of social work and to look beyond sexual categories and identities; to encourage individuals and groups to tell their own sexual stories; it also provides a framework for questioning the dichotomies of sexuality and gender that arise in the life experiences of clients and, most importantly, to challenge heteronormative values that operate within many welfare and community services.

With the integration of queer theory and social work discipline, their dominant understanding of sexuality, homophobia and heteronormative practices may be questioned and disrupted. Critical inquiries in queer theory and paradigms to achieve social justice can be highly informative for social work practice. The integration and thus expansion of the paradigms of both fields can create a space for the discovery of new voices, experiences through the social work profession.

Queer theory provides a framework for social justice by incorporating facts about feminism and LGBTI+ movements through critical inquiries and paradigms in its structure. At this point, the social work profession and discipline formulate implementation and intervention plans for respecting differences, realizing social justice within the scope of rights advocacy. However, it is seen that social work scholars and students have discriminatory attitudes towards LGBTI+ and the social work department curriculum is insufficient in terms of gender, sexuality, sexual orientation and gender identity. Situations such as the neglect of professional discourse on tolerance and acceptance remain controversial in terms of the social work profession and discipline stays in question (Dentato, Craig, Lloyd, Kelly, Wright and Austin, 2016; Kara, 2018; Papadaki, Plotnikov and Papadaki, 2013). In addition, it is seen that the social work profession acts as a catalyst in the steady progression of queer theory and movement, that lesbian social workers assist in shaping the profession, and that some academicians carry out awareness-raising studies and implement and create programs (Fredriksen-Goldsen, Lindhorst, Kemp ve Walters, 2009; Pelts, 2014; Scherrer, 2013).

Queer theory's defense of oppression and non-discrimination is directly related to the advocacy and social justice missions of social work. Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) and the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), professional organizations of social work, have a strong stance on ethical standards for inclusiveness, respect for diversity and cultural competence. Beyond the discourse of diversity, diversity and deconstruction by social workers, their clients need to consistently support active resistance efforts against heteronormative beliefs and practices. Queer theory helps to challenge and disrupt dominant heteronormative, sexist, racist discourses that ignore the experiences of clients in the planned intervention process in social work. In addition, it should be taken into consideration that it is possible to analyze power relations in social work institutions and organizations, field practices and academic environment, and to make these relations undergo a critical control on the basis of queer theory.

The social workers' critical analysis of power and power dynamics using social action for social change on the basis of queer theory creates an environment in which equality and social justice exist. However, professionals should remember that the provision of sexual justice is critical to achieving social justice.

Queer theory draws attention to how, for what form and for whom gender and sexuality categories are created, and social workers need to question the extent to which these categories can benefit individuals. Skeptical about the promotion of norms, queer theory can help social workers combat the hierarchy of

stigma, shame and value by providing a framework for the existence of different sexual norms or practices, such as respect and confidentiality in the personal sphere.

#### 4. INSTEAD OF RESULTS

Queer theory opposes the idea of appearing and behaving normally, rejecting the normative to exert supremacy and offers a perspective to better understand how to conceptualize and change sexualities. However, it opposes all kinds of labeling related to sex, gender, sexual identities and practices, all kinds of identity and fictional sexuality and many established categorical languages. Queer-based theories challenge and challenge the hegemonic concepts of normality, gender, and sexuality. It also challenges the status quo by criticizing oppressive and discriminatory rhetoric about minority groups.

Critical inquiry advocated by queer theorists can be highly informative to rethink pedagogical practices in social work teaching and knowledge production and to further develop models of critical reflection. At this point, it is necessary to focus on the bi-directional relationship between queer theory and social work, and it should be remembered that queer theory deals with social inequality in multiple dimensions and that social work challenges these inequalities. It is necessary to re-discuss the theoretical framework and the application ground by considering and establishing relations with all kinds of applicants working in order to ensure social justice. It can be said that the existing eclectic theories in social work reduce the adequacy and efficiency of the application by offering too many concepts and definitions, and that queer and post-queer perspectives will strengthen the discipline of social work in terms of criticizing norms, dominant discourses, concepts and definitions.

It is important that both social work academics and social work practitioners know queer theory, expand their ideas about sexuality and sexual differences, conduct research, and train them on gender and sexual behavior, and transfer this to practice and intervention processes.

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