
An Update to “Among the Missing: Lesbian and Gay Content in Social Work Journals”

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The needs of lesbians and gay men appear to be minimally represented in social work literature. This study applied content analysis to four major social work journals published between 1998 and 2012, and it served to update the work of Van Voorhis and Wagner that examined content in the same four journals between 1988 and 1997. Of the 2,335 articles published in *Child Welfare*, *Families in Society*, *Social Service Review*, and *Social Work* during the 15-year period, 55 met the criteria for inclusion. Results reflect a significant decrease in the quantity of articles when compared with the previous report, with the largest decrease noticed in articles that addressed HIV/AIDS. The need to expand the type and amount of content related to this population continues.

KEY WORDS: *gay men; heterosexism; homosexuality; lesbians; social work*

Lesbians and gay men look to professional social workers to meet a wide array of needs. Social workers practicing in all settings are likely to encounter lesbians and gay men who are seeking services to meet their needs and the needs of their families. Shifts in society's perceptions are creating changes that greatly impact this population; for example, their increased access to social institutions such as marriage may result in their increased requests for services such as couples counseling, adoption support, and family counseling. As the largest provider of social services in the United States, practicing social workers need to remain informed and social work education should adequately prepare new professionals. Van Voorhis and Wagner (2002) provided a report on the amount and type of content related to lesbians and gay men within four major journals of social work during a 10-year period (1988 to 1997). The report served as a reminder from the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) and NASW on the importance of understanding issues for this population.

The expectations from these professional national organizations continue. CSWE's (2008) educational policy and accreditation standard and the NASW (2008) code of ethics mandate that social workers have knowledge of the potential impact that sexual orientation has on identity development. They inform the profession of the high likelihood that these individuals will experience

combinations of oppression, marginalization, and alienation and remind the profession of its ethical obligation to address these factors. However, numerous studies indicate that some social work students maintain heterosexist attitudes. This is evident in social work journals and in reports from the classroom (Brownlee et al., 2005; Logie, Bridge, & Bridge, 2007; Newman, Dannenfeler, & Benishek, 2002; Rutledge, Siebert, Siebert, & Chonody, 2012; Swank, 2007; Van Voorhis & Wagner, 2002).

Research continues to report on the lifelong financial, social, and emotional impacts of discrimination and oppression for lesbians and gay men. For example, Wight, LeBlanc, and Badgett (2013) found a significant correlation between legal marriage and psychological well-being for same-sex and opposite-sex couples. Yet, on the societal level, laws and cultural influences continue to promote heterosexist attitudes and discrimination toward lesbians and gay men. Prominent examples on the national level include the recently repealed Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA, 1996) and Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT). Implemented in 1993, DADT led to the discharge of 14,000 lesbian and gay service members at a cost of more than \$556 million before its repeal in 2010 (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2011). DOMA defined marriage as a union between one man and one woman, resulting in a 1996 national law that denied same-sex couples access to the financial and civil benefits that are provided to opposite-sex couples.

A large step toward equality, the repeal of DOMA by the U.S. Supreme Court in July 2013 allows the federal government to recognize same-sex marriage in the 13 states where it is legal. However, same-sex marriage is not legal in 37 states, denying equal access to the majority of same-sex couples and family members headed by same-sex couples.

The impact of stigma is noticed throughout the phases of life. A study (Hatzenbuehler, 2011) of 32,000 students in 11th grade revealed that lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths were five times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers and suicide was the third leading cause of death among youths ages 15 to 24 years. Cochran, Sullivan, and Mays (2003) reported a high incidence of mental health disorders among lesbians and gay men. Pope et al. (2004) reported on the history of the mental health profession's oppression of lesbians and gay men, a group that uses mental health services at a rate higher than the general population. The need for affirming and informed services will continue for decades. Recent activity suggests there is high potential for change within institutions that oftentimes serve as the oppressor.

Though the United States lags behind some nations in legal and civil rights for individuals who identify as a sexual minority, events such as the repeal of DOMA suggest that this trend may be changing. President Obama (The White House, 2013) was the first president to use the word "gay" in his second inaugural address, calling for equal rights for our "gay brothers and sisters." In general, public support is growing (Johnson, 2013). Still there are barriers that limit access to social institutions for lesbians and gay men. The social work profession can play a significant role in addressing those barriers through providing, and preparing students to provide, inclusive practices.

Martin et al.'s (2009) study looked specifically at factors related to how social work education programs prepare students to work with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) population. Program directors and faculty from 157 CSWE-accredited social work programs responded. Results indicate that all programs address LGBT issues in their curricula in some manner. However, 41 percent of faculty and 53 percent of program directors rated the question "How well do you train students to provide competent services to people who identify as LGBT?" as only slightly well or not well at all. Among other things, the researchers

recommended that social work education integrate culturally competent practices into all of the five core social work curriculum areas (that is, human behavior in the social environment, policy, practice, research, and field).

As Van Voorhis and Wagner (2002) suggested and Berger (1990) posited, social work education and practice look to professional journals to inform the content of materials used in the classroom and practice approaches with clients. As social work is the largest professional provider of social services in the United States, one could expect to find significant content in its four major journals. Consistent with the values of the profession, social work educators, researchers, and practitioners should continually look to journals for reminders of populations in need and for direction on how to best serve them. This article will examine the content related to lesbians and gay men in the four major journals of social work for the 15-year period between 1998 and 2012.

METHOD

Consistent with the work of Van Voorhis and Wagner (2002), we selected the same four journals for review: *Social Work*, *Child Welfare*, *Social Service Review*, and *Families in Society*. Van Voorhis and Wagner chose these journals because they were well established, had a national audience, followed current trends, and were viewed as the major journals of the profession. They applied the content analysis process with relevant articles published between 1988 and 1997. For this update, the unit of analysis was the article, and articles published from 1998 through 2012 were screened for inclusion and content analysis was applied. Mirroring the previous work (Van Voorhis & Wagner, 2002), articles were included if they addressed "sexual orientation, homosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexuality, coming out, HIV/AIDS and homosexuality, or homosexual people with AIDS" (p. 347). Short publications such as editorials, book reviews, and letters were not included.

Information presented in the Van Voorhis and Wagner (2002) article was used as a training guide for the coding process. Following the work of Van Voorhis and Wagner and the content analysis process described by Whitley (2012), we developed a coding worksheet. Using the journal publisher's Web site, with access provided by university affiliation, we reviewed journals to identify articles for

inclusion. Articles were first identified by title and abstract and then full text if needed to determine inclusion. In some instances, the review of print copies was required. This review resulted in 59 articles being identified for possible inclusion; 54 clearly met inclusion criteria and five articles were in question. The five were reviewed during a consultation between the two reviewers, resulting in the inclusion of one additional article. The final number of articles that met inclusion was 55.

In an effort to remain consistent with the previous content analysis, we again used the information in the Van Voorhis and Wagner (2002) article to guide the process, define the terms, and cross-train each other. Two reviewers independently coded each article and recorded their responses on the article review and coding sheet (see Appendix). The two reviewers were in 100 percent agreement on the primary content area (HIV/AIDS or all other gay and lesbian content).

To remain consistent with the 2002 study, we coded for only one focus area (practitioner, client, or macro) and one subfocus area. Initially, this proved challenging. Starting with only limited information as a guide from the previous article, the reviewers had to consult with each other during the coding process to more clearly define the selection process of only one focus area and one subfocus area. After consulting, the reviewers' completed coded results were in 98 percent agreement in the combined focus and subfocus areas. After all articles were coded, the reviewers met to examine inconsistencies and agree on final codes.

Articles coded as "practitioner" addressed knowledge needed by workers to serve lesbians and gay men; information regarding practitioners' attitudes toward this population and subfocus areas included knowledge and attitudes, conceptual or descriptive, support for workers, and ethical issues. Articles coded as "client" addressed interventions such as coming out or coping with gay identity, and subfocus areas included groups, partners and families, sexual identity and disclosure, youths, and other. Articles with a "macro" focus addressed areas such as policy or national trends and were not coded in subfocus areas.

FINDINGS

This review of the four journals identified 55 articles that met the inclusion criteria over 15 years compared to 77 articles that met the inclusion

criteria in the previous review that covered a 10-year period. With a total of 2,335 articles published in the four journals, the content related to lesbians and gay men equaled 2.4 percent of the total content. This is a decrease from the 3.9 percent of total content reported in 2002. The current review found that the 55 articles were almost equally distributed between three of the four journals. *Child Welfare* contained 19 articles, *Families in Society* had 18, *Social Work* had 17, and *Social Service Review* contained only one article. In 2002, 90 percent of the articles for inclusion were from two journals, *Social Work* and *Families in Society*.

Of the 19 articles in *Child Welfare*, 15 were published in a 2006 special issue related to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youths (LGBTQ), resulting in 2006 having the most publications. When excluding the special issue, there was an average of 2.7 articles per year, with a high of six in 2002 and a low of zero in 2012. When excluding the special issue and looking at the data in five-year increments, we found a significant decrease in the 2008 to 2012 period (Figure 1). In 2009, 2010, and 2011, there was only one article published each year, and none was published in 2012.

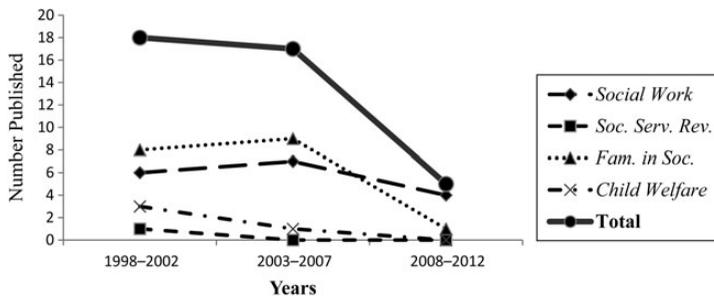
Themes in the Content

As reflected in Table 1, the majority of articles published during this 15-year period had a client focus. Although the number of articles in each focus area decreased significantly, the percentages in each area were similar to what Van Voorhis and Wagner reported in 2002. Our study revealed that 56 percent of articles had a client focus, nearly matching the 58 percent in the 2002 report. Our study further revealed that 35 percent of articles had a practitioner focus, compared with 36 percent in 2002. Finally, 9 percent had a macro focus, compared with 5 percent in 2002.

HIV/AIDS. During the current 15-year review period, only five of the 55 articles focused on HIV/AIDS compared to 51 of the 77 articles in the previous review. *Child Welfare* published one article related to HIV/AIDS in 1998. No articles were published between 2010 and 2012 with an HIV/AIDS focus related to lesbians or gay men.

Four of the articles about HIV/AIDS had a focus on clients; three of those were about specific groups, and one had a subfocus on youths. The articles with a group subfocus each reviewed a different population, including HIV prevention and care in

Figure 1: Number of Articles on Lesbian and Gay Topics, by Journal in Five-Year Increments



Note: Fam. in Soc. = Families in Society; Soc. Serv. Rev. = Social Service Review.

Alaskan natives; African Americans with AIDS and religious-related stigma, and harm-reduction activities of gay men. The article with a subfocus on youths reported on three programs serving youths with HIV/AIDS. Three articles were about prevention and care, and one article directly addressed the issue of stigma. Finally, one article had a practitioner focus directed at providing support for workers, specifically guidance on delivering HIV prevention to the elderly population including gay men.

Focus on Practitioners. As shown in Table 2, 20 articles focused on practitioner-related topics and most addressed support for workers. In addition to the subfocus areas identified in Table 2, other themes were identified in the literature. Eight articles across subfocus areas addressed culturally competent practice approaches with LGBT youths, and 12 articles addressed issues related to foster care or adoption.

Focus on Client Services. Of the 55 articles, 31 had a client services focus. As reflected in Table 2, almost half of those in the “all other lesbian/gay content” category had a subfocus area concerned with partners and families. Most of the articles in this area addressed the struggles that lesbians and

gay men experience with in-laws, stepfamilies, and parents and, more specifically, with parents or families who identify strongly with religious teachings that are negative toward lesbians and gay men.

Publications about youths included studies about safety and the rights of youths who identify as lesbian and gay. Articles about youths tended to reference the entire LGBTQ population and addressed the risk of suicide. There was also a theme in content that addressed stigma and oppression related to minority sexual orientation. For example, Miller (2007) reported on a study about the experiences of African American gay men, religion-sanctioned homophobia, and HIV phobia sometimes found in predominately black Christian churches.

Terminology

The introduction to the special issue of *Child Welfare (Terminology and Acronyms, 2006)* that focused on lesbian and gay issues provided definitions for the terms related to sexual minorities. This introduction also addressed the many terms and acronyms used to reference individuals by sexual orientation and gender identity. Articles that focused primarily on sexual orientation oftentimes referred to LG (lesbian, gay) or LGB (lesbian, gay, bisexual). Some articles also

Table 1: Number of Articles about Lesbian and Gay Topics, by Primary Focus Area, 1998–2012

Focus	HIV/AIDS Articles	All Other Lesbian/Gay Content Articles	Aggregate	% of Total
Practitioner	1	18	19	34.55
Client	4	27	31	56.36
Macro	0	5	5	9.09
Total	5	50	55	100.00

Table 2: Number of Articles on Lesbian and Gay Topics, by Subfocus Area, 1998–2012

Focus and Subfocus	HIV/AIDS Articles	All Other Lesbian/Gay Content Articles
Practitioner		
Studies of knowledge and attitudes	0	3
Conceptual or descriptive	0	4
Support for worker	1	6
Ethical issues	0	5
Client services		
Groups	3	1
Partners and families	0	12
Sexual identify and disclosure	0	3
Youths	1	7
Other	0	4

addressed individuals who identified as transgender (T) and or who were questioning (Q) sexual orientation or gender identity. The introduction suggested that the most universally accepted acronym by the Child Welfare League of America at the time was LGBTQ. Sometimes an additional Q was added to include people who identify as queer, making it LGBTQQ. As the introduction explained, although some may view the word “queer” as derogatory, others see it as a term that is inclusive of the entire LGBTQQ community.

Terminology and grouping of the population continues to vary in professional publication and social use. Within the professional and civil rights communities, issues about who to include and how to best include them remains a topic of debate. Considering these differences in the literature, our review also looked at the primary term that each of the 55 journal articles used to describe the population. There is variance of the order in which the terms are sequenced. For example, 23 articles addressed both lesbians and gay men; 18 of those articles arranged the terminology as “gay men and lesbians” and five used “lesbians and gay men.” Eleven articles focused on only gay men, and three articles focused only on lesbians. Three articles specified LGB, four GLBT, and 10 LGBTQ. Other terms used to describe the population or portions of the population included homosexual, queer, sexual identity, sexual minority, gender expression, gender variant youth, and gender atypical youth.

DISCUSSION

This study aimed to analyze the content related to lesbians and gay men in the four major journals of social work for the 15-year period between 1998 and 2012. Overall there was a significant reduction in content compared to the 10-year period of review between 1988 and 1997. Although the quantity of publications has decreased, there are areas where the profession has made noticeable efforts to address issues relevant to people who identify as lesbian and gay and areas where improvement is needed.

Results suggest that authors writing about youths who identify as LGBTQQ are aware that suicide and attempts at suicide are a significant issue, and efforts are being made to communicate this important information to the social work profession. A study identified in this review (Walls, Freedenthal, & Wisneski, 2008) reported that professional social workers must have knowledge of the many warning signs of suicide, such as reports of familial rejection and indicators of homelessness (for example, staying with friends, not going home, and so forth).

Content suggests that social work is aware of the importance of information related to serving LGBTQ youths, foster parents, and adoptive parents. Of the 55 articles that were published during the current period of review, 12 addressed the topic of adoption in some manner by either addressing the special needs of the LGBTQ youths or the issues related to the needs of LG adoptive parents. An additional 15 articles also addressed the needs of LGBTQ youths in foster care or issues of LG foster parents. Conversely, few articles addressed the issue of societal stigma and heterosexism. As Van Voorhis and Wagner (2002) suggested, addressing issues at the macro level may mitigate long-term negative impacts on matters such as homelessness for future generations of LGBTQ youths. Findings reveal other needs of this population as well.

There is a significant lack of literature related to issues that impact people who identify as lesbian and gay on the macro level. Our findings were consistent with Van Voorhis and Wagner (2002). Social work focuses on issues related to lesbians and gay men at the individual level. As Fineran (2002) posited, a strong focus on the client level may serve to perpetuate victim-blaming and in turn emphasize that people who identify as lesbian and gay should assimilate to look and behave like the heterosexual majority. The compounded risk in leaving the

larger societal issue unaddressed is that this emphasis on assimilation supports heterosexual superiority and the expectation that all people should be heterosexual (Fish, 2008).

The amount of information related to HIV/AIDS, the needs of people who are diagnosed with HIV/AIDS, or prevention efforts is small. Only five articles were identified in the literature during this period; however, people with HIV/AIDS continue to be marginalized and gay men continue to be disproportionately affected by the disease. As noted by Miller (2007), minority ethnic and racial populations of gay men are oftentimes more disproportionately impacted than gay men in general. Yet, no articles related to HIV/AIDS have been published in these four primary journals of social work since 2009.

There are limitations to this study. As Van Voorhis and Wagner (2002) reported, the reasons for the limited literature cannot be explained by results of this content analysis. Limitations may be related to fewer articles about this population being submitted for publication or higher rejection rates for manuscripts regarding this population. Confirmation of those reasons would require access to information from journals that are typically restricted by privacy policies, such as manuscripts that have been rejected and reviewers' responses. The lack of research funding for specific topics and the stigma of publishing information related to this population may also be factors that impact the quantity of content (LaSala, Jenkins, Wheeler, & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2008), which cannot be determined by this analysis.

Another limitation of this content analysis was identified during the coding process. The researchers were required to consult during the process to determine how to code for articles that addressed more than one content area. Although coders were in 100 percent agreement in primary areas, the process of coding for only one focus and then only one subfocus area, which was sometimes broad and multifaceted, created a challenge that was not identified during the initial training. Detailed descriptions of the coding process are included to facilitate future replication.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of this current content analysis, we conclude that even though the literature addresses some issues of concern, overall publications related to lesbians and gay men remain barely

visible in the four major journals of social work. Of 2,335 published articles, only 55 met inclusion for this review. As the largest human services provider with marginalized populations, social work professionals in practice and social work educators must not be expected to seek out specialized journals and journals of other professions in an attempt to learn about the needs of this population. The gaps in the literature suggest areas where the social work profession can forge new ground. There are many opportunities to advocate on behalf of, conduct research to understand, educate to prepare, and practice to serve not only people who identify as lesbian or gay, but also the larger LGBTQ population. Some of those implications for future scholarship are discussed next.

Strategies on how to serve and advocate on behalf of people who identify as LGBTQ and other marginalized groups should be addressed in social work education, and programs should examine their scholarship to support rather than marginalize this population (Martin et al., 2009). One way to do this is to keep issues related to the population in the social work literature (LaSala et al., 2008). The content serves multiple purposes for scholars, including reminding and reporting on the needs of this population and providing material for integration into curricula and syllabi. For example, an article from *Social Service Review* can be used to demonstrate how to analyze a policy and at the same time educate how a policy that has little impact on the majority group can have a negative impact on people who are Latina and identify as lesbian. In a research class, the instructor may search for an article to demonstrate the importance of ethics. An article from *Social Work* related to conducting research with people who identify as closeted bisexual, African American, and male may serve as an example of how to develop a research design that respects the private identities of participants and minimizes the potential for negative consequences.

It is also important to expand research on the individual and family level. As societal laws change and become more inclusive, people are likely to become more comfortable with openly identifying as LGBTQ and expressing their sexual orientation publicly. This may result in an increased backlash from society and from family members and friends. The needs of legally married same-sex couples and same-sex headed families have been explored only minimally. Research can help social workers better

understand how to support people who identify as LGBTQ and family members and friends who do not identify as lesbian or gay. As a large portion of the population in the United States is aging, research should be conducted to understand the specific needs of people who are aging and identify as LGBTQ.

The combined results of this review and the review conducted by Van Voorhis and Wagner (2002) suggest that during the past 25 years social work has not consistently applied one of the key founding missions of the profession as it relates to LGBTQ populations—to champion the rights of the most vulnerable (NASW, 2008). The focus on the individual is important and should not be lost; however, Van Voorhis and Wagner (2002) argued that macro level work is equally important in addressing the larger societal core of heterosexist attitudes. McPhail (2000) illustrated this as it applies to the issue of hate crime legislation and suggested that social work has the obligation and skills to address this issue at all levels by contributing to professional advocacy, policy analysis skills, and new knowledge based on research. Avery et al. (2007) provided a parallel argument related to same-sex civil unions and partnerships. Social workers must address this issue not only on the client level as it relates to areas such as adoption and health care, but also on the macro level by informing legal and policy-related issues. Again, to do this effectively, social work scholars must keep these and other issues relevant to people who identify as LGBTQ at the forefront of the literature and in the major journals of the profession. Generating special journal editions related to the societal needs of the LGBTQ population is one way to increase the literature about this issue. Special editions should not replace the literature related to this population in the general content, but they can serve to fill gaps in a manner similar to how *Child Welfare* used a special edition in 2006 to communicate the needs of LGBTQ youths. This approach can be applied to other topics as well. For example, the scholarly literature has reminded us that the intersection of religious theology that portrays LGBT people negatively is a primary source of oppression. We also know that positive identification with religion and spirituality can increase resilience. A special edition that calls for research on how to understand and counter the negative impacts of religion on this marginalized population could help to fill this gap.

There is value in reviewing the literature that reflects the scholarly work of a profession. Identifying the gaps in literature such as those that pertain to specific populations, education, or approaches to practices can serve to remind scholars and practitioners of unmet needs. We posit that recent social advances for people who identify as LGBT should not suggest that the needs of this marginalized population have gone away. The needs of this population are growing and changing, and social work scholars and practitioners are well positioned to inform and lead through research, education, advocacy, and direct service. **SW**

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