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**ARTICLE**

# Normative Boundaries Limiting Accessibility to Social Work for Queer People with a Refugee Background

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## Abstract

This article discusses the accessibility of social work from the viewpoints of queer people with a refugee background in Finland. It analyzes how intersecting norms create boundaries that limit accessibility to social work. Earlier research on social work with queer populations is scarce, especially in the Nordic context. This article aims to fill this gap. The data consist of qualitative interviews with queer people with a refugee background and with social workers carried out in Finland in 2019–2020 and are analyzed with thematic analysis. The theoretical approach follows critical social work research, queer studies, and decolonizing studies. The results suggest that accessibility to social work in reception centers and immigrant social services is shaped by heteronormativity and white normative neoliberalism. The normative boundaries become visible as silences, stereotypes, queer blindfolding, a sense of rush, a sense of distance, and a sense of alienation. The results suggest that anti-oppressive practice is crucial in providing accessible social work to queer people with a refugee background. This calls for structural changes in social work education and neoliberal social work institutions.

## Keywords

accessibility; boundaries; heteronormativity; neoliberalism; queer; refugees; social work; white normativity

## 1. Introduction

Jamal, a queer research participant with a refugee background, explained their experiences with a social worker in the following way:

Jamal: I never felt when I was living in the reception center that a social worker exists....The way how they were working, the way how they were behaving, they closed the bridge to communicate together. And they didn't let me feel safe to be open with them about my feelings, about my life.

Social work with people with a refugee background is a vivid research area, but the specific questions about social work with queer people with a refugee background require more scientific attention. My goal with this article is to understand what social work looks like from the perspectives of people applying for asylum in Finland because of their non-normative sexuality and gender. Thus, the research question is: How do the normative boundaries of social work shape social work accessibility for queer people with a refugee background in Finland? The article focuses on one empirical section of my doctoral monograph, published in Finnish in 2024, and aims to strengthen its theoretical discussion.

In this article, I use the word queer to describe sexuality or gender that differs from the norms of heterosexuality and/or cisgenderism (meaning that the gender corresponds with the sex assigned at birth). Sometimes I write about non-normative sexuality or gender to refer to the same. By using the word queer, I do not aim to define anyone's identity. I am aware that "queer" is an English word, with a history in US activism and academia. Despite its shortcomings, queer is a word that aims to oppose Western categorizations and focus on norms instead of identities (see Akin, 2017; Ali, 2023, p. 27). With the words "refugee background," I refer to anyone who has applied for asylum or refugee status in their recent past. By using those words, I have tried to avoid often artificial categorizations of residence status but, at the same time, bring out the experiences of seeking refuge (see Baltra-Ulloa, 2016; Schröder, 2023). With social work, I mainly mean professional social work conducted by a licensed social worker, although the service-user participants also occasionally referred to social counselors as social workers.

Research on social work with queer people with a refugee background is limited but growing. Research has outlined the service needs of queer people with a refugee background in the US and Canada (Heller, 2009; Mulé, 2022), possibilities of anti-oppressive practice with queer refugees in Canada (Lee & Brotman, 2013), questions related to accommodating queer asylum seekers in Serbia (Badali, 2019), and taking faith into account in social work with queer Muslim asylum seekers in the US (Kahn, 2015). The literature review by Lee et al. (2021) outlines what research in other fields has to offer for social work. In Finland, there is a gap in social work research on queer people with a refugee background, as well as social work research with queer populations in general, which this research seeks to fill.

In the following sections, I highlight existing research on the social work service needs of queer people with a refugee background. I then move on to discuss the concepts of normativity, boundaries, and accessibility, paying special attention to heteronormativity, white normativity, and neoliberalism. Subsequently, I present my methods and research participants. In the empirical section of the article, I first report how heteronormative boundaries shape the accessibility of social work, and then move on to report how white normative, neoliberal boundaries do so.

## 2. Social Work With Queer People With a Refugee Background

Queer people with a refugee background might have specific social work service needs that need to be considered in the service provision. The specific service needs include access to peer support groups,

securing safety in housing, support in the asylum process, and psychosocial support. For many, peer support groups for queer people with a refugee background act as places of safety, community, belonging, and identity work (Akin, 2017; Ali, 2023; Pullen & Franklin, 2024; Wimark, 2021). Safe spaces to feel belonging and share experiences are important for many minorities and help them to cope with minority stress caused by discrimination and negative attitudes (Meyer, 1995).

One of the key factors creating social work service needs for queer asylum seekers is the risk of mental, physical, and sexual violence in reception centers or private accommodations (e.g., Danisi et al., 2021, pp. 331–387; Wimark, 2021). The violence can also be honor-related, which makes it particularly wide reaching (Czimbalmos & Rask, 2022, pp. 42–44, 76). It is crucial that social workers recognize the risks of discrimination and violence and support their service users in finding secure accommodation (Badali, 2019). When providing psychosocial support, it is important to understand that many queer people have experienced violence, abandonment, and abuse already in their childhood families, home countries, or during their journey to seek asylum (Alessi et al., 2016; Bhagat, 2023; Lee et al., 2021; Wimark, 2021). This highlights the importance of trauma-informed and anti-oppressive practice while working with queer people with a refugee background (Alessi et al., 2016; Czimbalmos & Rask, 2022).

Transgender, non-binary, and intersex people are particularly vulnerable in the context of seeking refuge. There is little research specifically on transgender people with a refugee background, and in research on queer refugees, transgender refugees are usually a small minority (Camminga, 2019; Lee et al., 2021). One of the major challenges that transgender asylum seekers face is the barrier to accessing gender-affirming care. In Finland, gender-affirming care is not usually regarded as an acute and necessary medical treatment that asylum seekers have the right to (Czimbalmos & Rask, 2022, p. 45). Reception centers often have gendered bedrooms or bathrooms, which expose transgender asylum seekers to transphobic violence. The right to self-determination and safety should always guide the provision of housing for transgender, non-binary, and intersex asylum seekers (Camminga, 2019, p. 10).

Additionally, social workers in reception centers hold a crucial role in providing information about the rights of queer asylum seekers and finding a lawyer with expertise on queer asylum cases (Heller, 2009; Lee & Brotman, 2013). Granting asylum because of persecution based on non-normative sexuality or gender is based on the UN Refugee Convention from 1951, where belonging to a particular social group has been listed as a ground for asylum (Danisi et al., 2021, pp. 8–11). The EU asylum system places numerous barriers for queer asylum seekers to have their needs for international protection recognized, such as pressuring them to express their non-normative sexuality or gender in Western terms and to be openly "out of the closet" (see Akin, 2017; Bhagat, 2023; Schröder, 2023). Lunau and Schröder (2025) see this as a form of colonial surveillance of sexual and gender binaries. Structurally, social workers should advocate for more decolonial, inclusive, and just asylum policies (Lee et al., 2021).

## 3. Normativity, Boundaries, and Accessibility

I approach social work accessibility through the concept of normative boundaries. I understand norms as characteristics or actions classified as normal and thus separated from those classified as abnormal (Foucault, 1975/1977). Foucault's (1975/1977) notion of normalizing power describes the techniques of control used to evaluate and categorize people in relation to norms. Norms are often used as a tool for restriction and violence, although they also contain the possibility for change and resistance (Butler, 1993).

This article draws from critical, queer, and decolonial theories, all of which critically examine oppressive norms and try to dismantle them. Queer theory is particularly focused on heteronormativity, which refers to a social structure in which heterosexuality is considered more natural and legitimate than other forms of sexuality (Argüello, 2021). Heteronormativity also limits gender because it contains the assumption of two binary gender categories that are oriented toward each other (Butler, 1990). One ideology that strongly influenced the normative control of non-heterosexual behavior in Europe and its colonies was the development of eugenics in the 19th century (Lunau & Schröder, 2025; Somerville, 2000, pp. 25–29). In Finland, eugenics strongly affected the medicalization, criminalization, and social stigma of homosexuality (Hagman, 2014, p. 1). Homosexuality was removed from the Finnish disease classification in 1981, but heteronormativity continues to structure Nordic societies in a form of benevolent homotolerance that fails to address the inequalities affecting the lives of queer populations (Røthing & Svendsen, 2010).

In decolonial theory, the focus is on the critique of coloniality and whiteness. Whiteness does not directly refer to being white or light-skinned but more broadly to the ways of thinking, knowing, and doing that naturalize white epistemologies and practices (Tascón, 2020; Ward, 2008). By using the term white normativity, I want to pay particular attention to whiteness as the standard by which "normal" people, ideas, and practices are measured (Ward, 2008). Whiteness and coloniality have shaped the foundations of the modern social work profession that, according to Tascón (2020), was born white. Social work draws from Eurocentric knowledge production and practice where colonial beliefs, structures, and policies promote white worldviews as universal (Udah et al., 2025). This white epistemology in the broader social work culture "trickles down" into social work institutions as white normative social work culture (Yassine, 2020; see also Ward, 2008).

Eurocentric, white normative values, such as individualism, rationality, objectivity, and universality, became the cornerstones of the rising professionalism in social work in the 19th century (Clarke & Yellow Bird, 2020, pp. 2, 34; Mathebane & Sekudu, 2018; Tascón, 2020). The same values are promoted by neoliberalism—a political project launched in the 1980s that aims to reformulate the state through the logic of marketization (Herz & Lalander, 2018). Neoliberalism has increased professional surveillance, performance measures, and overwhelming caseload volume in social work, further reinforcing the white normative social work culture of individualism, universality, and inflexibility (Cosgrove & Pyles, 2023). Neoliberal social work can be seen as a continuum of the white social work history, coalescing into a storm that Cosgrove and Pyles (2023) call "white, neoliberal social work."

Norms and normativity are linked to boundaries. I understand boundaries as metaphorical dividing lines drawn between what is considered normal and what is not (Anzaldúa, 1987). According to Anzaldúa (1987), borders are intended to push undesirable things to the margins. The boundaries that influence social work practice, such as heteronormativity, push queer people and their service needs to the margins of social work by rendering queer people invisible and reducing their trust in social work (Argüello, 2021). Thus, the normative boundaries are linked to the accessibility of social work, which refers to the extent to which people can access social work and have their service needs met (Vanjusov, 2022, p. 64, 71). Vanjusov (2022, p. 70) has divided accessibility to services into five dimensions that I loosely follow in my analysis: institutional, informational, economic, physical, and experiential.

## 4. Methodology

This research draws on 23 qualitative interviews with queer people with a refugee background and with social workers conducted in the years 2019–2020 as part of my doctoral research project. What is notable in the timing of the interviews is that the narratives of the participants largely focused on years following 2015, when social work in reception centers and immigrant social services was overloaded because of the rapid increase in the number of service users. The interviews were also conducted before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, after which the number of queer refugees from Ukraine and Russia increased. Thus, the interviews are conducted in a particular social moment, but much of their content can be thought of as still relevant to today's social work.

### 4.1. Participants

Eleven of the participants arrived in Finland from African or West Asian countries in the 2010s and applied for asylum based on their non-normative sexuality or gender. They all had met a social worker in reception centers or immigrant social services, or both. Most of them referred to themselves as homosexual, gay, LGBT, or a sexual minority, and two of them identified as transgender or expressed gender nonconformity. The recruitment of nine participants happened through two NGOs in southern Finland offering peer support activities for queer people with a refugee or migrant background. For the participants to remain anonymous, I have not named the NGOs. The recruitment of two participants happened through my personal contacts.

Twelve of the participants were social workers who had work experience either in reception centers or immigrant social services, which is a special social office for people who receive international protection in Finland. Among the participants' work experiences, the two different work environments were represented by more or less the same number of people. I recruited nine of the social worker participants by contacting two cities in southern Finland and asking the city administration to circulate the call for social workers in the relevant services. Three social workers I reached independently by publishing a call in a closed Facebook group for social workers. Most participants were licensed social workers, and all of them had the right to temporarily work as a social worker. Around half of the participants had 7–18 years of work experience as a social worker, while the other half had 1–5 years of work experience.

### 4.2. Interviews and Analysis

Interviews with the service users were individual, semi-structured thematic interviews. I loosely followed an interview framework that contained questions about their experiences with social work services in Finland, bringing out non-normative sexuality or gender with the social worker, and experiences with the asylum process. Sometimes I also drew references to interviews with social workers to create dialogue between the two datasets and asked the service user questions like: "Do you agree or disagree?" and "What would you like to say to the social workers?" On average, the interview with each service user lasted less than two hours. To secure the privacy of the service user participants, I transcribed their interviews myself. In the interpreted interviews, I transcribed the speech of the interpreter without having access to the original speech, which may have affected the analysis. I respected the participants' preferences about the interpreter and the place of the interview to create a safe atmosphere. Seven of the interviews were conducted with an interpreter who interpreted the responses either into Finnish or English, and four were conducted in English. The interpreters were either professional, workers in the NGOs, or, in one case, a friend of the participant.

In most cases, the interpreter was already familiar with the participant and could even make the interview situation more relaxed.

Interviews with the social workers were semi-structured thematic interviews. Most of them were conducted individually, but one was conducted in a pair. I followed an interview framework containing questions about the presence of sexual or gender minorities in their work, such as: "How visible is the theme of belonging to a sexual or gender minority among your clients?" I also asked, for example, about the work content with sexual or gender minority service users and their views about the life situations or service needs of queer service users. On average, the interviews with each social worker lasted around 1.5 hours. For transcribing, I used a private transcription service (Tutkimustie). The interviews were conducted in Finnish and I have translated the Finnish quotes into English for this article.

I analyzed all the interviews by following the six steps of thematic analysis: (a) familiarizing myself with the data, (b) generalizing initial codes, (c) searching for themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) producing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I started the analysis inductively, examining how both the service users and social workers have experienced social work services and interactions, and by generalizing initial codes in ATLAS.ti (version 9.1.7.0 for Windows; phases 1 and 2). I coded interviews from both datasets alternately, so that the same codes and themes ran throughout all of the data. I continued arranging the potential themes and subthemes in a Word document (phase 3). Once the process proceeded, I noticed an emphasis on social work accessibility and different boundaries limiting it. After that, the boundaries of accessibility became a central focus in the research and guided the revision and final definition of the themes (phases 4 and 5). I also used theoretical concepts such as heteronormativity, white normativity, and neoliberalism when defining and naming the themes and producing the report (phases 5 and 6). The themes are distributed relatively evenly across the two groups of participants, except for the subtheme "stereotypes," which was mostly drawn from the social worker interviews. The themes and subthemes are demonstrated in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Themes and subthemes formulated via thematic analysis.

| Focus of the article | Themes | Subthemes |
|---|---|---|
| Normative boundaries limiting accessibility to social work | Heteronormative boundaries | Silences |
| | | Stereotypes |
| | | Queer blindfolding |
| | White normative, neoliberal boundaries | Sense of rush |
| | | Sense of distance |
| | | Sense of alienation |

### 4.3. Ethical Aspects

The research was conducted with people in vulnerable positions and deals with potentially sensitive topics, which places particular emphasis on research ethics. I have paid special attention to the ethical principles of informed consent, minimizing the risk of harm, and protecting the anonymity and confidentiality of all research participants, but especially those with a refugee background (see Clark-Kazak, 2017). I have made sure the information about the research is accessible by organizing interpreted informational sessions about the research and translating the information sheets and consent forms into several languages. To minimize

the risk of harm in the interview situations, I tried to build trust beforehand by working as a volunteer in one NGO before and after the interviews. Data security is linked to minimizing the risk of harm when leaking information could form a safety risk for the participants (Clark-Kazak, 2017), as was the case with the service user participants. I paid extra attention to data security and anonymity by carefully protecting the data and anonymizing any personal information in the publications. I have used pseudonyms for all the participants, and to secure anonymity, I mixed the pseudonyms so that the same pseudonym does not always refer to the same participant.

The research is rooted in critical, queer, and decolonial methodologies, which increases the importance of research ethics by calling for reflexive, responsible, anti-oppressive, and participatory ways of doing research (Brown & Strega, 2005; Smith, 2012). Conducting the research as a queer, non-binary, white Finnish social worker with social work experience with refugees and on migration activism, but without migrating myself affected my reasons for choosing this topic and the research process itself in various ways. I was able to share my experiences about queerness and heteronormativity with the service user participants, but my lack of experience with refugeeness or racism might have affected how comfortable they felt describing these experiences. Interview situations with social workers were less personal on both sides, but experiences about working as a social worker with refugees formed a common ground. For ethical reasons, I aimed to stay open and reciprocal about the research process, also after the interviews. I organized two interpreted update events about the research process for service user participants. I also sent the interview quotes for all participants to check and comment on before publishing them and translated the quotes to the language of the participant if necessary.

## 5. Findings

When analyzing normative boundaries in social work practice with queer people with a refugee background, two different themes stood out: heteronormative boundaries and white normative, neoliberal boundaries. These normative boundaries created practices that shaped the accessibility to social work for many of the interviewed service users. Above all, they made it more difficult for them to raise service needs related to non-normative sexuality or gender and, thus, to have their needs met.

### 5.1. Heteronormative Boundaries

Heteronormativity was particularly reflected in silences, stereotypes, and queer blindfolding, each of which I will discuss below more deeply.

#### 5.1.1. Silences

Speaking about non-normative sexuality or gender felt difficult for both social workers and service users. If social work interactions and information materials only reflect the lives of heterosexual and cisgender people, it requires extra effort to disclose non-normative sexuality or gender. One central place of heteronormative silence was the informational session about social work provided for new asylum seekers in reception centers. Both social workers and service users expressed that the informational sessions were usually built in a heteronormative way and seldom had any information about queer rights or communities in Finland. Many queer service users emphasized how meaningful it would have been if the

social workers had discussed queer rights. This would have made them feel that social work was there for them. This reflects informational inaccessibility, which can also lead to experiential inaccessibility (Vanjusov, 2022, p. 152). In the next quote, service user participant Wisam describes the multifaceted effects of gaining enough information:

> Wisam: That you talk about gay rights....For example, you give papers that have information about rights, obligations, gay organizations, organizations in general....That's very important, more than you can imagine. It gives people the courage to mention this when applying for asylum, and it also affects integration. It also affects the psychological side, if you talk about these things. (Interpretation to Finnish)

One of the key issues that created silences was that, according to the interviews, it was seldom that the social worker touched upon the possibility of being queer. Several social workers raised their concern that, if they had brought up the possibility of queerness in the appointment, it would have reinforced the stigma of queerness. This reflects the heteronormative homotolerance characteristic in Nordic societies, where passive ideas of homotolerance prevail instead of active forms of disrupting the heteronormativity (Røthing & Svendsen, 2010). Social worker Taneli's description of their well-meaning strategy of silence when meeting with a queer person with a refugee background mirrored many other social workers' descriptions as well:

> Taneli: My tactic is that I don't bring it up myself. I kind of show that I am interested in you as a person, and it doesn't matter to me. Kind of trying to create the atmosphere that you can talk about anything here. And I appreciate the other person as they are.

Consequently, bringing up non-normative sexuality or gender and possible service needs related to that was left to the service user's responsibility. However, disclosing their non-normative sexuality or gender to the social worker did not feel like an option for several service user participants. For many, it felt like a jump to the unknown (see Røthing & Svendsen, 2010)—they did not know whether the social worker would be supportive or discriminatory. Minority stress makes many queer people prepare themselves mentally for encountering discrimination (Argüello, 2021; Meyer, 1995), and some of the participants had previous experiences of homo/transphobic discrimination by authorities. This affected their preconception of social work and limited the experiential accessibility of the service (Vanjusov, 2022, p. 181). As follows, Florent describes how they were forced to take the risk of disclosing their non-normative sexuality to the social worker even though it was frightening:

> Florent: [Disclosing my sexuality] was frightening, it was not easy. It was the first time, and I could not anticipate how [the social worker] would take it. Of course it was scary, but I didn't have any other choice. So I talked to them and threw myself on it. And thank God I stretched out to them and told my story, and they took it in a great way. (Interpretation to Finnish)

Navigating the continuous "closet" and being cautious about where to come out and to whom is an everyday reality for many queer people with a refugee background (Schröder, 2023). If queer people with a refugee background do not feel like disclosing their sexuality or gender to the social worker is safe enough, it often renders some of their service needs invisible as well. For many service user participants, the idea of a social worker opening the discussion on queer topics would have been a sign that they care—something that the bare

silence did not convey. However, many participants also highlighted that non-normative sexuality or gender must be touched upon very sensitively. One participant expressed that it must be mutual—social workers could also reveal something about themselves. Another participant encouraged social workers to use examples, stories, and metaphors to offer some hints that the service users could grab.

A few social workers described their strategies to bring up non-normative sexuality or gender in conversation in a sensitive manner. Social worker Anna-Maija describes their habits of letting the service user know that they are aware of their queerness without creating pressure to talk about it. This way, they help to break the heteronormative boundary while allowing the service user to stay discreet, as the following quote demonstrates:

> Anna-Maija: Often the clients want you to take it up [sexuality or gender] because it matters so much in the asylum process. In that case, there is no problem. But then again, some people want to be very quiet about it. Sometimes, if I notice it is a very sensitive issue for someone, I don't feel appropriate to poke at it as a stranger. Not in the beginning, or maybe never. Then…[pause, 7 seconds] For some clients, I just say, "Did I understand right, that you moved here because you are gay?" [laughter] Then they know that I know, and maybe you don't need to speak more about it. I just ask if they are interested in participating in a [peer support group] or not.

### 5.1.2. Stereotypes

Stereotypes about what a queer person looks like created another heteronormative boundary in social work practice. Most often, the stereotypes were constructed around the concept of vulnerability, especially in social work carried out in reception centers. Because of limited time resources, particularly in years 2015–2016, the idea of vulnerability affected social workers' decisions on who to invite for an appointment, as social worker Ida describes:

> Ida: A social worker cannot meet all [newly arrived asylum seekers]. So I meet the vulnerable ones, including sexual and gender minorities and families. That is the division.

Consequently, being classified as "vulnerable" enhanced the chances for asylum seekers to build contact with their social workers and have their service needs met. The importance of the category of "vulnerable" is linked to the EU directive laying down standards for the reception of applicants for international protection (Council of the European Union, 2024), where certain groups are categorized as likely having special reception needs. This requires reception center professionals to identify asylum seekers who may have special reception needs, including sexual and gender minorities. Several interviewed social workers described their various strategies to recognize asylum seekers who were potentially queer. Among them was social worker Ida:

> Ida: Nobody has like a stamp on their forehead [laughter] about belonging to a sexual or gender minority. Of course, sometimes a certain kind of habitus or something else makes you think that this could be, and on that basis, I meet them. Maybe also some kind of sensitivity or such in body language tells you that this would be good to meet. It is a message that there is some trauma package or something.

Characteristics that were mentioned by other social workers, implying potential queerness, comprised certain kinds of hand gestures, the number of rings, or a soft handshake. Other hints mentioned were conversion to Christianity, a bad relationship with parents, the wish to have a female interpreter, and studying to become a barber.

As a social worker, it is crucial to remain sensitive to the body language, emotions, and appearance of service users because they can carry important information about possible service needs. However, social workers' strategies to recognize potentially queer service users seem to rely on a stereotypical image of a gay male asylum seeker who is feminine-presenting, soft, vulnerable, and in need of protection (see Akin, 2019). This image is in line with the dominant Western expectation of queer refugees expressing their non-normative sexuality or gender publicly, which makes them more likely to be deemed "credible" by the asylum authorities (Bhagat, 2023; Schröder, 2023). As the stereotypical image narrows the possibilities of international protection for queer people with a refugee background, it also narrows their possibilities to have their service needs met by a social worker. This applies, for example, to masculine-presenting gay men as well as lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and intersex people. Heteronormativity narrows social workers' perceptions of queer people, who are not regarded as a diverse group as cis-heterosexual people. This might be influenced by the general and othering way of addressing queer populations in social work education and research that does not sufficiently recognize the within-group diversity (Mehrotra et al., 2023).

### 5.1.3. Queer Blindfolding

In reception centers, social workers regarded queer people as vulnerable once they fit the stereotype, but in immigrant social services, social workers tended to embrace queer blindfolding (Smith & Shin, 2014), which is a well-intended approach that emphasizes that queer people are just like everybody else. Most of the interviewed social workers highlighted that it is the responsibility of the service user to talk about issues related to their non-normative sexuality or gender if they want to. They emphasized that queerness is a personal matter and not appropriate to ask about. Even in situations where social workers were aware of the non-normative sexuality or gender of the service user, some workers were waiting for the service user to bring it up in conversation. The view presented in the next quote by social worker Helena was shared by several colleagues:

> Helena: There might have been a mention [of the client's queerness] in the papers from UNHCR [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees] or Migri [the Finnish Immigration Service], but it is a bit so that these are private issues....I don't think we have the possibilities to start....Some issues, like this one, are private issues so you cannot, I will not start like....Especially if there is a risk to start, I don't want to start a destructive conversation.

Even though most of the interviewed social workers thought that asking about the service user's non-normative sexuality or gender was not appropriate, many of them reflected on it. They saw advantages when the issue came up, such as possibilities to guide the service user to peer support activities or support them in the asylum process (Lee & Brotman, 2013; Mulé, 2022). Some of them started to reflect on whether they should more often initiate discussions about the possibility of queerness. They also pondered how they could create an environment where the service user could more easily bring up issues related to sexuality or gender. These practices included creating a confidential atmosphere, having enough time, and bringing an open and anti-oppressive approach, as the next quote demonstrates:

Taneli: To not bring it up first yourself so that the other wouldn't feel like it, for me would be an issue I want to know more about or pry into. Kind of creating the atmosphere that, for me, it is not a characteristic that defines this person. Because probably, I assume, also for them it is one characteristic among others that they can choose to either speak about or not.

Although social workers expressed efforts to create safer spaces, both quotes reveal a mindset that sexualities and genders outside cis-heteronormativity are something private and sensitive that the social worker should not pry into. Like Taneli, many social workers highlighted their own acceptance and view that queerness is "one characteristic among others" that should not require any special attention. However sensitive and homotolerant (Røthing & Svendsen, 2010) this mindset is, it reflects an individualistic approach. Seeing non-normative sexuality or gender only as a personal characteristic often leads to the conclusion that they belong merely to the private sphere instead of the social sphere and, thus, should not be the focus in social work practice (Argüello, 2021).

However, non-normative sexuality and gender—like normative ones—are essentially social issues. Focusing only on the personal dimension of queerness means ignoring the social and structural dimensions, which is in line with the individualistic approach of neoliberal social work (Smith & Shin, 2014). Queer blindfolding renders the non-normative sexuality or gender of the service user—as well as of the social worker—as an invisible curiosity that does not have a place in social work practice (Argüello, 2021). It creates institutional inaccessibility in social work because it limits the ways social work meets the individual service needs of queer service users (see Vanjusov, 2022, p. 111).

### 5.2. White Normative, Neoliberal Boundaries

The boundaries for accessibility caused by structural heteronormativity in social work practice intersected with the boundaries caused by white normative neoliberal practice. White normative neoliberalism was particularly reflected in a sense of rush, a sense of distance, and a sense of alienation, all of which have also been identified as features of white normative neoliberal social work practice in earlier research (Cosgrove & Pyles, 2023; Gatwiri, 2020; Lauri, 2018; Udah et al., 2025). When coexisting with heteronormativity, the boundaries become even thicker.

#### 5.2.1. A Sense of Rush

Jamal: Because we were so many people then, so I think the social worker also doesn't have time to meet all of us. So if you want to see the social worker, you have to be lucky.

Accessing social work is often about very concrete issues, such as how to contact a social worker, how often one can have appointments, and how long the appointments are. Several interviewed service users brought up difficulties in making the appointment and the sense of rush during the appointment as the most important things limiting accessibility to social work. The research participants who had good experiences with social work mostly had a long-lasting and close relationship with their social worker. The social worker had invited them for regular appointments, and contacting the social worker had been effortless. However, these experiences were quite rare, possibly due to the time of conducting the interviews (2019–2020). In 2015–2016, the number of asylum seekers in reception centers increased almost tenfold in Finland. New

social workers were recruited, but not in proportion to new service users, which made the caseload grow manifold beyond the recommended number.

The social workers described how the constant rush affected the quality of service and even the issues discussed during an appointment. This is in line with the results of Cosgrove and Pyles (2023), who noted how the culture of busyness in white neoliberal social work presents challenges to being emotionally available for clients. In the next quote, social worker Lotta describes a situation in the immigrant social services of a big city in 2016–2017 when the caseload increased manifold in a short period of time:

> Lotta: The reality was that I met all clients once, and if it seemed so, mostly maybe another time after a month, and, at best, even a third time….So it was like maybe 10, or max 20 clients who I met more than that. The main rule with these 20-plus Iraqi men, of which there were a whole lot at that time, was that we meet once and then wait and see. If you speak English, try to manage, and if not, then maybe we can meet another time. There wasn't any time left for processing any issues or, like, talking.

According to Lotta, the low-quality service fell particularly on the "20-plus Iraqi men." Other service user groups, like women, families, and older people, were prioritized due to the lack of resources. However, young, single men are also overrepresented among queer asylum seekers (Danisi et al., 2021, p. 7). As discussed earlier, not all queer service users with a refugee background end up classified as vulnerable by social workers because of the narrow, stereotypical image of a gay refugee (Akin, 2019). These people risk being ranked last in the order of priority, no matter the service needs they might have.

The lack of adequate resources is a common factor that increases institutional inaccessibility (Vanjusov, 2022, p. 130). Scarce resources forced the interviewed social workers to prioritize not only service user groups but also issues to be dealt with. Many social workers described how they must prioritize issues they assume to be urgent, such as housing, income, or domestic violence. They acknowledged that this created boundaries for the service users to bring up issues that were not part of the regular script, but they felt like they did not have a choice. In the next quote, Wisam describes how a sense of rush during an appointment affects the issues that are possible to bring up as a service user:

> Wisam: When I go there [to meet a social worker], and they start, for example, [to say that] we are in [a] rush and we have only one hour, and here is the translator, and….It's so much, you don't feel, like, you want to talk but you don't have time. And they start to talk, not you. They ask, they just do the work that they have, why they meet you. So you don't feel so comfortable talking about stuff.

Because of heteronormativity, the "stuff" that the service users were not comfortable talking about in a hasty atmosphere could be queer identities and life situations, and it could also be racism. When asking social workers their views about what kinds of challenges or service needs queer people with a refugee background face, only one out of 12 interviewees explicitly mentioned racism. Anna-Maija, the interviewed social worker, highlighted the importance of having enough time to be able to discuss racism with the service users:

> Anna-Maija: In my current work, I have more time….Sometimes a client may come to my room just like, do you have time, and then we talk for an hour about something, just like that, without an appointment.

> And often the things we talk about are experiences of discrimination and racism. The clients bring it up, in many different ways, and sometimes in a way like "was this that" (racism).

The quote demonstrates how the lack of time particularly marginalizes issues that are already marginalized in social work practice because of normative understandings about what is important. Creating trust and providing enough time and peace during the appointments was mentioned by both social workers and queer service users as a key to making it possible to bring up non-normative service needs, but the chronic sense of rush does not allow that (see Cosgrove & Pyles, 2023). The sense of rush is embedded in 21st-century white normative social work. This reflects a neoliberal emphasis on efficiency and standardization, which assumes that service users with a refugee background will adapt to these practices (Herz & Lalander, 2018; Lauri, 2018). Rush and prioritization created particularly thick boundaries when colliding with the structural heteronormativity and white normativity of the social work field.

### 5.2.2. A Sense of Distance

The sense of rush was not the only factor the interviewed service users brought up when discussing difficulties in making an appointment with the social worker. Another important issue was the sense of distance to the social worker, especially in reception centers. Most asylum seekers interviewed did not have a direct phone number for their social worker, but they needed to book an appointment at an information desk. Many of them described the interaction at the information desk as unpleasant and insensitive because expressing their service needs related to non-normative sexuality or gender may have outed them in front of other asylum seekers overhearing the discussion and could potentially form a risk for their safety. In the next quote, service user Florent describes a situation at an information desk:

> Researcher: When you booked the very first appointment,...what made you book that appointment with the social worker? (Interpretation)

> Florent: The reason was I was very lonely, and I wanted to enter this [peer support group of the local queer NGO]. But it was extremely difficult. I needed to go to that info desk, which is an open space for all, everyone can hear, and those people there did not understand me at all. They asked a lady from [the same country] to interpret, like "what's his problem?" And there, with the help of the interpreter who was actually a friend, in front of everybody, I needed to explain my problem, that I want to enter [the peer support group]. I don't think it was nice. (Interpretation to Finnish)

Some service users did have a direct phone number for the social worker, and they experienced direct contact with the social worker as a reflection of trust, care, and respect. Correspondingly, not having direct contact information for the social worker but being forced to use the information desk was experienced as dehumanizing. Concealing the social worker's direct phone number from the service users makes the social worker a distant figure—"only a name, not a worker," as service user Jamal expressed in an interview. I interpret the need to protect the direct contact information as an extreme sign of maintaining professional boundaries, a central feature of white normative social work. Gatwiri (2020) highlights that extreme professional boundaries sterilize the authenticity of interactions and minimize the humanity of both the service user and the social worker, as the image of a service user trying to talk to their social worker through an information desk demonstrates.

The distance to the social worker was not always material but could be a sense of a lack of connection. Several interviewed service users described the feeling of inhumanity when the social worker had a ready-made agenda for an appointment and there was no space for the service users to talk about themselves, as Ikram demonstrates:

> Researcher: What do you think, what would be a good kind of social worker for LGBTQ asylum seekers? What should the social worker do?
>
> Ikram: ...I met many social workers, they are very structured on explaining, but they don't give you a human feeling. We need a person who gives you a human feeling, who can guide me in the conversation, and let me speak about myself. Because there are many times the social worker doesn't give you this chance. Her questions and way of talking doesn't give me the chance to open up. I want someone to guide me to tell who I am.

Issues that were experienced as increasing the "human feeling" by the interviewed service users were, for example, having enough time and connection, having the social worker share something personal, meeting sometimes outside of the office, and using metaphors, stories, and music when discussing sensitive issues—features that are more common in social work practice in the Global South (Gatwiri, 2020; Yassine, 2020). The interviewed social workers were also pondering their possibilities to share something personal with their queer service users, such as their own relationship to queerness, but this idea made them uncomfortable, and they wished to find other ways to create trust.

According to Cosgrove and Pyles (2023), the professional boundaries of not showing vulnerability or sharing anything personal are results of the neoliberal structures that force social workers and service users into distanced roles that fail to recognize shared human experiences. The lack of relationality in white normative social work has been criticized by decolonial and indigenous social work scholars, especially when working with people from diverse cultural contexts. For example, integrative healing and Ubuntu have been suggested as alternative, indigenous practices that produce holistic and relational connections that inspire dignity both among social workers and service users (Clarke & Yellow Bird, 2020; Udah et al., 2025).

### 5.2.3. A Sense of Alienation

Insufficient knowledge about who will get access to the service users' personal information was a factor that diminished the sense of belonging in the services. Several interviewed service users explained that they did not know who the social workers were allowed to give their personal information to and what they would document in the client information system. This uncertainty diminished trust for the social worker and created significant boundaries to open up about the service needs related to non-normative sexuality or gender, as service user Noor describes:

> Noor: When I met the social worker, all the people who worked in the reception center in general, it was very difficult for me to share who I am. To share what I feel about my sexuality....I was afraid that things [would go] somewhere. Because I don't want anyone to know anything about [it]. And I was scared. I didn't tell the social worker, I didn't know the system about what they write, what they do, where it goes, you know....I didn't trust the law or anything, because I'm thinking they can put it somewhere and they are gonna show it [the information] like this.

Because of the fear of leaking information, Noor did not tell their social worker about their non-normative sexuality and need for peer support, which led to several lonely years in the reception center. Only after receiving a residence permit, Noor managed to find their way to like-minded friends and communities. Had social work been more accessible from the beginning, Noor could have managed to enter the peer support group earlier. Noor's expression—"I didn't know the system about what they write, what they do, where it goes"—catches the problem with the neoliberal practice of upward accountability. Instead of being accountable for their service users, social workers are guided toward enhanced accountability to senior management by the neoliberal system (Udah et al., 2025).

When asking the interviewed service users what the social worker could have done to ease the fear of leaking information, many participants highlighted the importance of explaining in detail the confidentiality and documentation practices. Sharing information with service users about the practices is an important part of increasing informational accessibility (Vanjusov, 2022, p. 152). This reflects the ongoing change toward more participatory and relational documentation practices that are not, however, easy to implement in the neoliberal social work system marked by the culture of busyness and upward accountability (Cosgrove & Pyles, 2023). When accountability is practiced only upward and not downward to service users and communities, it can create a sense of alienation from the services (see Lauri, 2018; Udah et al., 2025).

Another factor potentially creating a sense of alienation and lack of trust in social work was the use of interpreters. Several interviewed service users expressed a fear that the interpreter would break confidentiality and leak personal information about their sexuality or gender to the shared ethnic or religious community, which could increase their risk of violence (Wimark, 2021). What dismantles the boundaries created by interpretation is open communication, as was the case with documentation. The interviewed service users had varying preferences about interpretation in terms of face-to-face or online interpretation, as well as the ethnicity, gender, or sexuality of the interpreter. Most of the interviewed social workers were trying to respect the interpretation preferences of the service user, although standardization pressures from the neoliberal system make flexibility when booking the interpreter more difficult (Lauri, 2018). Some social workers deny thinking about who they book as an interpreter, especially if they are not prepared to discuss non-normative sexuality or gender at the appointment, as social worker Lotta, working in immigrant social services, describes:

> Researcher: What kind of role have the interpreters had in these situations? Is interpretation something you have thought about particularly with these clients?
>
> Lotta: If I try to think, I don't remember anything about the presence of an interpreter in any of these [appointments]....Yes, maybe I didn't think, but it can also be that they happened to be English-speaking people. And like, being honest, if I had booked an interpreter, I wouldn't necessarily have thought about it terribly lot at the first appointment. I kind of assume that the first meeting is not focused on talking about sexuality. And I do also trust the interpreters, that they must be able to work with anybody and stay in their role.

In the quote, Lotta explains that if it is assumed that the appointment "is not focused on talking about sexuality," then it does not matter who the interpreter is. However, the interviewed service users described situations where they had made an appointment with a social worker seemingly for another purpose, such

as a school-related issue, but planned to ask a question related to sexuality or gender. Social workers should assume that non-normative sexuality and gender can always come up in appointments, and that is why downward accountability (Udah et al., 2025), also in terms of interpretation preferences, is important with every service user. Interpretation is an important tool to enhance access to social work, but it may bring another layer to the sense of alienation and distance if the service user is not allowed to affect who the interpreter is.

## 6. Discussion

The results show that accessibility to social work for queer people with a refugee background is impeded by heteronormative and white normative, neoliberal boundaries. These boundaries marginalize their service needs, such as the need for safe housing, peer support, and support in the asylum system (see Badali, 2019; Heller, 2009; Wimark, 2021). Heteronormative boundaries were reflected in silences, stereotypes, and queer blindfolding, whereas white normative, neoliberal boundaries were reflected in a sense of rush, of distance, and of alienation.

The inaccessibility that these normative boundaries created was experiential, institutional, and informational (Vanjusov, 2022). It was experiential, because the normative boundaries increased service users' minority stress and distrust that the social worker would treat them with respect. It was institutional, because the normative boundaries made it difficult for social workers to meet queer service users' individual needs. It was also informational because social workers did not always share information that was relevant for queer people, such as queer rights or services, nor did they share enough information about their documentation or interpretation practices. Institutional and informational inaccessibility reinforced the sense of exclusion from services and thus amplified experiential inaccessibility as well.

Heteronormativity, white normativity, and neoliberalism all strengthen each other in social work practice. Neoliberalism boosts the white normative features of social work practice, like the sense of rush, of distance, and of alienation. These features do affect all service users and all practitioners—not only people with a refugee background. However, they are more exclusionary to people who are raised in a culture where collectivity, closeness, relationality, and flexibility are valued (Udah et al., 2025; Yassine, 2020). White normative, neoliberal social work practice has resulted in chronic rush and a need to prioritize service user groups and service needs (Cosgrove & Pyles, 2023). This prioritization reinforces norms about what service needs are at the heart of social work, and further marginalizes service needs that are not, like those related to non-normative sexuality or gender.

White normativity, combined with neoliberalism, is also individualistic, which makes it even more difficult to discuss issues like racism or homo/transphobia with a social worker (Herz & Lalander, 2018; Mathebane & Sekudu, 2018). This leads to ignorance about racialization or non-normative sexuality and gender in Finnish social work practice, as Eliassi (2017) has concluded in the Swedish context. The social workers interviewed justified this ignorance with a benevolent argument that queerness, for example, is "just one characteristic among others" and thus does not need to be discussed in social work. However, this simplified attitude bypasses the structural inequalities that affect the lives of queer people (Argüello, 2021; Smith & Shin, 2014).

To increase accessibility to social work for queer people with a refugee background, it is crucial to strengthen the structural understanding of the effects of heteronormativity and white normative neoliberalism in social work practice. This requires creating a social work culture that acts against the neoliberal pressure and promotes flexibility, connection, and structural understanding (see Cosgrove & Pyles, 2023). Developing social work education to be more anti-oppressive, norm-critical, and queer affirmative is key to reshaping the future of social work accessibility in Finland.

## 7. Conclusion

In this article, I have asked and explored how the normative boundaries of social work shape its accessibility for queer people with a refugee background in Finland. Through interviews with social workers and queer people with a refugee background, I have come to understand that both heteronormativity and white normative neoliberalism undermine the accessibility of social work and marginalize the service needs of queer people with a refugee background. This inaccessibility is experiential, institutional, and informational. Increasing the accessibility of social work requires adopting an anti-oppressive and norm-critical approach and more queer affirmative social work education. More research on social work with queer people with a refugee background, as well as with queer people in general, is needed in the Nordic contexts.

### Conflict of Interests
The author collaborated with two NGOs in southern Finland, offering peer support activities for queer people with a refugee or migrant background. As mentioned in the article, the author has committed to not naming the NGOs for the participants to remain anonymous. Both NGOs helped the author recruit research participants. In one of the NGOs, the author also worked as a volunteer in 2019–2021 and organized informational sessions and update events as part of their peer support activities. Before starting the research process, the author has also been employed by the social welfare office that later distributed the invitation to participate in the research to its current employees.

### Data Availability
Due to the nature of the research, data sharing is not applicable to this article.

### LLMs Disclosure
DeepL Translate was used to translate interview quotes from Finnish to English and to help the author with the early formatting of text in the English language.

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