

## Exploring the Supervision Experiences of LGBTQ+ Social Workers in Taiwan

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### Abstract

*This study adopts an ecological systems perspective to explore the multifaceted experiences of LGBTQ+ social workers under workplace supervision. It examines how gender identity, workplace culture, social environment, and time influence their professional growth. The findings underscore the importance of supervisors' gender sensitivity in fostering psychological safety and professional development for LGBTQ+ social workers. While the implementation of gender-friendly policies can improve workplace conditions, their effectiveness is often constrained by institutional culture. Additionally, gender identity emerges as both a strength and a challenge in supervisory relationships, with client acceptance significantly impacting professional identity and competency. As Taiwan progresses in addressing diverse gender issues, LGBTQ+ social workers are learning to balance their identities with professional roles. This study fills a gap in research on the workplace experiences of LGBTQ+ social workers and provides practical recommendations for improving gender-friendly policies, enhancing supervisory practices, and fostering inclusive workplace cultures.*

**Keywords:** LGBTQ+ Social Workers; Supervision; Ecological Systems Perspective; Gender Identity; Gender Sensitivity

### Introduction

Since 2003, Taiwan has celebrated over 20 years of LGBTQ+ Pride parades. In 2019, Taiwan became the first country in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage through Act for Implementation of J.Y. Interpretation No. 748. This milestone highlights Taiwan's significant progress and dedication to advancing LGBTQ+ rights, establishing its leadership in gender equality issues. Such progress not only reflects legal protections but also challenges gender oppression and stereotypes, fostering a new social atmosphere of acceptance and inclusivity for diverse gender identities.

Despite growing awareness of gender issues, challenges for LGBTQ+ individuals in the workplace persist. Issues such as microaggressions, stereotypes, and implicit exclusion make coming out and expressing one's identity a stressful choice for LGBTQ+ employees, both globally and in Taiwan. According to a U.S. study, 48% of LGBTQ+ workers choose to conceal their sexual orientation at work, believing it to be a potential obstacle (Hewlett & Sumberg, 2011). Another study revealed that 80% of 13 gay male educators worldwide considered coming out at work to be dangerous (Mizzi, 2015). Furthermore, Mizzi et al. (2021) found that LGBTQ international educators faced concerns about coming out, with their strategies influenced by varying societal, cultural, legal, and personal workplace experiences. Many relied on strong job performance to counteract homophobia or transphobia in the workplace, while those with less experience often concealed their sexual orientation or gender identity as a primary means of self-protection. Similar trends are observed in Taiwan's workplaces. A 2023 survey on LGBTQ+ workplace conditions in Taiwan revealed that 68% of LGBTQ+ individuals do not feel comfortable coming out at work, 40% fear it would impact workplace relationships, and 33% worry it might hinder career advancement. Additionally, 50% believe there is a lack of gender-friendly policies or expressions in their workplaces. The willingness to come out is also influenced by job positions, with only 28.9% willing to disclose their sexual orientation to direct supervisors, and 13% unwilling to come out at all (Taiwan Tongzhi Hotline Association & Taiwan Equality Campaign, 2023).

Although social work, as a helping profession, is often perceived as LGBTQ+ friendly, what are the workplace experiences of LGBTQ+ social workers on the ground? In reality, helping professions demand a significant amount of emotional labor, which is highly gendered (Cottingham, 2017). Historically, social workers in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, and Taiwan have been predominantly women (National Association of Social Workers, 2020b; Social Work England, 2023; Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2022).

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However, McPhail (2004) pointed out early on that social work is more accurately described as a female-dominated yet male-led profession, a dynamic that remains unchanged today. While women significantly outnumber men in social work, they do not necessarily hold dominant positions. Ray (2019) highlighted that much social work occurs within highly gendered bureaucratic organizations, characterized by institutionalized hegemonic masculinity and power structures. Consequently, male social workers who exhibit non-traditional gender traits, such as those perceived as more feminine, may face discrimination and rejection from supervisors. Similarly, individuals of diverse gender identities often experience heightened stress in these environments. Hicks (2015) further emphasized that within the field of social work, the struggles of LGBTQ+ individuals are frequently overlooked and compounded by institutional oppression.

In the professional group of LGBTQ+ social workers, they not only serve as professional practitioners but also face internal and external pressures related to their gender identity. These dual roles require them to constantly balance professional performance and identity security in their interactions with colleagues, supervisors, and clients. O'Connor (2024) highlighted that for workers from minority backgrounds, team dynamics and supervisory relationships are critical factors in navigating challenging work environments. Based on this, the workplace experiences of LGBTQ+ social workers, particularly the challenges and support within their supervisory relationships, form the core focus of this study.

### *Research Gap and Objectives*

NASW (2023) defines professional supervision as the relationship between supervisors and supervisees, emphasizing its role in fostering the emotional well-being, competencies, behaviors, and ethical practices of supervisees. Supervision serves educational, supportive, and administrative functions, allowing supervisees to apply theories, knowledge, skills, abilities, and ethics in practical settings. The execution of these supervisory functions plays a critical role in shaping the professional development of social workers under supervision.

Current literature on supervision in social work primarily focuses on topics such as the supervision process, job competence, supervisory power, and professional services. However, there is a noticeable lack of research on how LGBTQ+ identities influence social workers' workplace experiences, particularly the challenges and support encountered during the supervision process. This study aims to address this gap by focusing on the supervision experiences of frontline LGBTQ+ social workers, seeking to answer the following questions:

- (1) What are the supervision experiences of LGBTQ+ social workers?
- (2) What challenges and support do they encounter during the supervision process?
- (3) How do significant others, workplace culture, and the broader social environment influence these experiences?

### *Theoretical Framework: Application of the Ecological Systems Perspective*

The workplace experiences of LGBTQ+ social workers are shaped by a combination of personal factors, such as gender identity and family background, as well as broader influences like workplace culture and societal environment. To explore these experiences comprehensively, this study adopts the ecological systems perspective as its theoretical framework. Bronfenbrenner (1979) developed this theory to focus on human development, emphasizing the dynamic interactions between individuals and their surroundings. These interactions evolve with environmental changes, leading to continuous adaptation and development. The ecological systems theory suggests that individual behavior and experiences are influenced by multiple layers of environment, ranging from direct relationships to broader cultural and societal contexts. In this study, the framework is applied across four distinct levels:

- (1) **Microsystem:** This level examines the direct interactions LGBTQ+ social workers have with their supervisors and colleagues. It also considers how their decision to disclose their identity affects these relationships.
- (2) **Mesosystem:** Here, the focus shifts to the interplay between different microsystems, such as how interactions with clients influence relationships with supervisors, and the impact these dynamics have on LGBTQ+ social workers' mental health and job performance.
- (3) **Exosystem and Macrosystem:** This level looks at the role of organizational structures and workplace culture in supporting or restricting LGBTQ+ social workers. It also examines societal attitudes and policies, particularly the progress of LGBTQ+ rights in Taiwan, and how these developments shape workplace

environments.

- (4) **Chronosystem:** Building on Bronfenbrenner's (1986) later expansion of the theory, this level incorporates the dimension of time. In the context of this study, it highlights how LGBTQ+ workplace experiences evolve over time, reflecting changes in societal acceptance of gender equality and its influence on professional settings.

### *Significance of the Study*

This study holds significant value for both theoretical and practical applications. On a theoretical level, it integrates the identity experiences of LGBTQ+ social workers with their professional development, contributing a gender perspective to the field of social work research. Practically, the findings provide supervisors with actionable recommendations on how to better support LGBTQ+ social workers, while also assisting organizations in enhancing gender-friendly policies to foster a more inclusive workplace culture.

Moreover, this study aligns with Taiwan's broader vision of promoting multiculturalism and gender equality. By exploring the workplace experiences of LGBTQ+ social workers, it aims to offer concrete insights for gender equality education, workplace policy design, and the professional development of social workers. The ultimate goal is to ensure that professionals of all gender identities can fully realize their potential and value in the workplace.

## Methodology

### *Research Design*

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to deeply explore the subjective experiences of LGBTQ+ social workers in the workplace. Specifically, it focuses on their individualized perceptions across microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem levels, with particular attention to their supervision experiences. By understanding the subjective meanings behind these experiences, the researcher aims to analyze the nature and implications of these workplace dynamics.

### *Participants*

A purposive sampling method was employed to recruit participants who met the following criteria: (1) They must work in organizations where the primary clientele is not the LGBTQ+ community; (2) They must be frontline social workers without administrative responsibilities; (3) They must have at least two years of supervisory experience. These criteria ensure the inclusion of diverse workplace settings and supervisory experiences. The descriptions of the three participants are as follows:

**Xiao-Xu** (35 years old, gay male, Master's degree, previously worked as a community worker and child and family social worker): **(1) Work Background:** Seven years of supervision experience under two supervisors, one female and one male. **(2) Coming-Out Experience:** Established his gender identity during university by participating in LGBTQ+ communities. **(3) Supervision Experience:** Xiao-Xu noted that the gender sensitivity of his supervisors significantly influenced his sense of support. The warm and approachable style of his female supervisor made him feel comfortable coming out, while his male supervisor's approach created tension and distance. Over time, Xiao-Xu sought to demonstrate his value through professional performance, gradually earning respect and recognition from his colleagues.

**Xiao-Man** (25 years old, lesbian, Bachelor's degree, elder care social worker): **(1) Work Background:** Two years of supervision experience under one female supervisor. **(2) Coming-Out Experience:** Attempted to test her family's acceptance during elementary school but faced rejection. **(3) Supervision Experience:** Xiao-Man found the conservative culture in elder care institutions compelled her to hide her sexual orientation. However, her supervisor's acceptance of her identity helped her overcome workplace challenges and psychological barriers. This not only solidified her professional identity as a social worker but also strengthened her personal resilience in facing identity-related challenges. Xiao-Man's supervision experience highlights the interplay between professional and personal identity and its profound impact on career development and personal growth.

**Xiao-Chu** (38 years old, lesbian, Bachelor's degree, child and adolescent social worker): **(1) Work Background:** Ten years of supervision experience under three female supervisors. **(2) Coming-Out Experience:** Came out to her mother at age 24, met with silence. **(3) Supervision Experience:** The conservative organizational culture led Xiao-Chu to partially conceal her sexual orientation in the workplace. Fortunately, her supervisors' support and acceptance of her identity deepened her self-recognition and encouraged her professional development. This experience highlighted for Xiao-Chu the interconnectedness of her professional capabilities and personal identity. The support she received from her supervisors played a pivotal role in enhancing her workplace performance and skills.

#### *Research Process*

This study employed semi-structured in-depth interviews, with an interview outline designed to address participants' background information, workplace experiences, coming-out contexts, supervisory experiences, and organizational inclusivity. The structure ensured both systematic and flexible data collection. Each participant engaged in interviews lasting approximately 1.5 to 2 hours. During the interviews, the researcher prioritized building trust to encourage participants to share their authentic experiences freely. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis.

Thematic analysis was applied to the transcribed data. The content was broken down into meaningful units, carefully rewritten and annotated to reconstruct participants' experiential contexts. Overlapping and interrelated meaning units were integrated into coherent narratives and key themes, such as "connections between gender identity and support," "influence of supervisors' gender," and "constraints and benefits of organizational culture."

The study adhered strictly to ethical guidelines. Participants were fully informed of the study's purpose and procedures prior to the interviews, and informed consent was obtained. All data were anonymized and used exclusively for research analysis, ensuring participants' identities remained confidential. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time and request the deletion of their data. The researcher maintained ongoing care for participants' needs and rights, ensuring that no harm occurred during the interviews and that the findings accurately reflected the participants' realities.

## **Results**

### *Microsystem*

The microsystem focuses on direct interactions between participants, their supervisors, colleagues, and clients.

- (1) ***Early Coming-Out Experiences Influence Confidence in Life and Work:*** For instance, Xiao-Man tested the waters with her mother during elementary school but received a negative reaction. This led to feelings of suppression and insecurity about her identity until she found more support during university, which gradually improved her self-acceptance and workplace confidence.
- (2) ***Impact of Colleague Support or Microaggressions:*** Support from colleagues is a vital source of psychological safety, while negative interactions can lead to feelings of isolation. Some participants noted the presence of subtle microaggressions, such as intrusive questions or stereotyping:

*"Some colleagues asked why I was still single, even hinting that it might be related to my gender identity. Those comments made me uncomfortable." (Xiao-Chu)*

*"Some colleagues were very friendly, which made me feel accepted, but others avoided discussing gender issues, making me feel isolated." (Xiao-Man)*

- (3) **Workplace Disclosure Choices Impact Supportive Interactions and Stress:** Choosing not to come out at work can reduce some stress but may also lead to feelings of isolation, particularly for those whose appearance challenges gender stereotypes. Conversely, coming out can bring support but also undue attention:

*"Colleagues who were open-minded offered more support, but in certain meetings, I still felt overly scrutinized." (Xiao-Xu)*

*"Hiding my identity allowed me to focus more on work, but over time, the loneliness became exhausting." (Xiao-Man)*

- (4) **The Supervisor's Acceptance Plays a Crucial Role:** Open discussions about sexual orientation with supervisors help establish effective supervisory relationships. Such relationships boost social workers' confidence and reinforce their identity. For instance, Xiao-Man's supervisor actively shared their experiences with LGBTQ+ communities, fostering a supportive relationship and enhancing Xiao-Man's confidence and identity:

*"She calmly asked about it, which I found amazing... It made me feel I could ask her many things and speak more openly than before." (Xiao-Man)*

- (5) **Gender and Support Characteristics of Supervisors:** The gender of supervisors influences their support style, significantly affecting participants' professional growth

*"My first supervisor was female... It felt like we were on the same side, and that sense of security made me more willing to talk and feel at ease." (Xiao-Xu)*

*"My male supervisor rarely talked about personal matters... He was married with children, and our discussions were mostly professional. I think it might be related to gender." (Xiao-Xu)*

- (6) **Self-Acceptance of Gender Identity Influences Supervisory Relationships and Workplace Performance:** LGBTQ+ social workers' self-acceptance impacts their supervisory relationships and their attitude and performance in the workplace.

*"After accepting my identity, I became clearer about my expectations for supervisors. I hope they understand me, which makes me more open during case discussions." (Xiao-Xu)*

*"I know my supervisor and I differ on sexual orientation issues, but I accept myself as LGBTQ+. That doesn't stop me from expressing my views or performing well at work." (Xiao-Chu)*

When Xiao-Chu embraced her identity, she became more confident and assertive in expressing her ideas and needs, extending this confidence beyond her professional role to interactions with supervisors, colleagues, and management.

- (7) **Client Characteristics Influence LGBTQ+ Social Workers' Identity Expression:** Different levels of acceptance among clients toward gender diversity challenge social workers' decisions to reveal or conceal their identities. For example, Xiao-Man loves working in elder care but finds the traditional views in Taiwan limit openness to LGBTQ+ issues, hindering her ability to fully express her identity. In contrast, Xiao-Chu and Xiao-Xu work with youth exploring their sexual orientation. They believe openly identifying as LGBTQ+ can help adolescents gain self-awareness and reassure them that they are not alone.

### Mesosystem

The mesosystem focuses on the interactions between various microsystems, such as family, colleagues, clients, senior managers, and workplace culture. In this study, the influence of interactions between clients and supervisors, as well as between workplace culture, senior managers, and supervisors, was particularly evident.

**(1) Interaction between Client Feedback and Supervisors' Influence on LGBTQ+ Social Workers:**

Given the importance of service quality, supervisors often discuss with LGBTQ+ social workers how to leverage their identities to enhance professional effectiveness based on the characteristics and interactions of their clients.

In child and adolescent social work, supervisors are more open to discussing struggles and questions related to gender identity. They encourage social workers to enhance their understanding and support for clients by sharing their own experiences and identities.

In elder care social work, supervisors help LGBTQ+ social workers respect the backgrounds and values of older clients. They guide them to find professional yet appropriate ways to express their perspectives and feelings on issues related to gender and sexual orientation. Supervisors also provide emotional support, creating a safe space for social workers to express concerns and gain understanding when facing workplace pressures and challenges.

**(2) Interaction Between Senior Managers and Supervisors' Influence on LGBTQ+ Social Workers:**

The openness of senior managers to LGBTQ+ issues directly impacts the level of supportiveness and inclusivity in the workplace. These dynamics, in turn, affect the supervision experience. Conservative managers may inadvertently create a stressful environment through restrictive or judgmental attitudes. This environment influences participants' willingness to be open during the supervisory process, limits self-expression, and hampers professional development.

*Exosystem and Macrosystem*

The workplace culture, policies, societal norms, and organizational structures have profound impacts on the experiences of LGBTQ+ social workers.

- (1) Impact of Workplace Culture:** The inclusivity of workplace culture directly influences the well-being and job performance of LGBTQ+ social workers. Institutions with conservative Christian backgrounds often create tensions due to inherent biases:

*"Because the organization is rooted in Christian beliefs, part of its doctrine excludes and demeans LGBTQ+ individuals, which significantly affects us." (Xiao-Chu)*

*"If I know someone is a Christian, I just avoid discussing these topics. I feel like I would be labeled..." (Xiao-Xu)*

- (2) Supportive Role of Organizational Policies:** The presence of gender-friendly policies sends a clear signal of support and reduces the likelihood of implicit discrimination:

*"When my organization has clear friendly policies, I feel more confident and secure." (Xiao-Man)*

- (3) Promotion and Variability of Gender-Friendly Policies:** While gender-friendly policies provide psychological support for LGBTQ+ social workers, their implementation varies across organizations:

*"Some organizations truly implement these policies, which makes me feel respected, but others only make superficial statements." (Xiao-Chu)*

- (4) Subtle Impact of Traditional Culture:** Traditional values and low sensitivity to gender issues remain significant challenges:

*"While policies offer protection, some colleagues' behaviors are still influenced by traditional culture." (Xiao-Xu)*

### *Chronosystem*

The chronosystem examines how participants' workplace experiences evolve over time, influenced by identity acceptance, shifts in societal attitudes, and the development of personal coping strategies.

- (1) **Personal Growth and Coping Strategy Development:** Participants' supervisory experiences gradually transitioned from insecurity to confidence as they learned to balance workplace pressures:

*"When I first entered the workplace, I often avoided topics related to my identity, but now I can face them more openly." (Xiao-Man)*

*"In recent years, I've learned to selectively share my identity, which has given me greater autonomy at work." (Xiao-Man)*

- (2) **Impact of Societal Progress:** Increased acceptance of gender diversity in Taiwan has improved participants' workplace environments:

*"Ten years ago, gender identity was still taboo, but now people are more willing to listen and accept." (Xiao-Xu)*

### **Conclusion and Discussion**

This study, framed within Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, provides an in-depth analysis of the multilayered experiences of LGBTQ+ social workers during workplace supervision. The research encompasses four levels: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem, and chronosystem. The main conclusions and discussions of this study are as follows:

#### *The Dual Impact of Gender Identity*

Gender identity serves as both an advantage and a challenge for LGBTQ+ social workers. Those who come out often receive greater trust and support but may also face microaggressions or stereotypes. Conversely, choosing to conceal their identity helps avoid conflict but can lead to isolation and internal stress. As Palmer (2004) stated, everyone desires a life aligned with their inner truth. For LGBTQ+ professionals, the inability to fully embody their authentic selves in a field that values self-awareness highlights a deep divide. Gates (2010) further emphasizes the importance of openness and integrity among LGBTQ+ educators, calling it a valuable return for both educators and students. Similarly, LGBTQ+ social workers must strive to present a consistent and integrated identity in interactions with colleagues, supervisors, and clients.

#### *The Necessity and Challenges of Gender-Friendly Policies*

Gender-friendly policies positively impact LGBTQ+ social workers by enhancing their psychological safety and workplace satisfaction. However, their effectiveness depends on the inclusivity of organizational culture. This study found that some organizations only implement policies superficially, failing to provide practical support. According to Executive Yuan (2023), 53% of LGBTQ+ employees in Taiwan choose to hide or misrepresent their identities at work, underscoring the challenges of cultural adaptation in policy implementation. While Taiwan has made significant progress in gender equality, challenges in grassroots policy enforcement remain, highlighting the need for mechanisms to strengthen policy implementation.

#### *The Crucial Role of Support Systems: Gender Sensitivity*

Colleagues and supervisors form the core of LGBTQ+ social workers' support systems, playing a critical role in their mental well-being and professional growth. Gender-sensitive supervisors significantly enhance supervisees' engagement and commitment. This study found that female supervisors prioritize openness and relationship-building more than male supervisors, consistent with Hindes & Andrews (2011). Supervisors lacking gender sensitivity may inadvertently increase psychological stress among supervisees, reinforcing the need for gender

education in supervisor training to foster an inclusive workplace. Globally, helping professionals are expected to possess cultural competence and gender sensitivity to address diverse client backgrounds (Chang & Crethar, 2020; Ratts et al., 2016; Smith & Shin, 2019). Supervisory functions should include fostering gender sensitivity to better support LGBTQ+ social workers.

### *The Positive Influence of Clients*

While previous studies focus on the attitudes and professionalism required of social workers serving LGBTQ+ clients (National Association of Social Workers, 2020a), this research highlights the reciprocal impact of clients on LGBTQ+ social workers. Clients' respect and acceptance significantly enhance the professional self-worth of LGBTQ+ social workers. High expectations from clients can also drive professional growth, particularly when clients themselves struggle with self-identity. In such cases, LGBTQ+ social workers can draw upon their own experiences to provide empathetic and effective support, showcasing how their identities, while challenging, can also be an asset.

### *The Interaction between LGBTQ+ Social Workers' Growth and Societal Progress*

This study reveals how LGBTQ+ social workers' experiences evolve over time—from initial anxiety to confidence and maturity. They gradually learn to balance their gender identity with their professional roles and leverage support systems to tackle workplace challenges. Concurrently, Taiwan's growing acceptance of diverse gender identities has created a more favorable environment, boosting their resilience and improving workplace dynamics.

Based on the conclusions and discussion, the following recommendations are proposed: For supervisors, it is recommended to participate in training related to gender issues to enhance their understanding of LGBTQ+ identities and strengthen emotional support capabilities. Supervisors should also focus on fostering an inclusive and safe environment during the supervisory process to alleviate psychological stress for LGBTQ+ supervisees. For organizations, ensuring the effective implementation of gender-friendly policies is critical. This involves not only policy formulation but also regular reviews and employee feedback to monitor execution. Additionally, promoting multicultural education within organizations can enhance employees' sensitivity to gender issues, thus fostering a supportive culture. In social work education, it is suggested to incorporate topics on LGBTQ+ self-identity and facilitate peer support for LGBTQ+ social workers.

As an exploratory study, this research acknowledges the limited diversity among participants. Future studies could further investigate the workplace experiences of social workers with diverse gender identities and examine how gender issues unfold in various cultural contexts. Moreover, exploring perspectives from service recipients could offer insights into their views on the identities of LGBTQ+ social workers and the impact these identities have on service outcomes.

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