Psychological Effects of Conservative Families on LGBTQ+ Teenagers in China

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Abstract: With China’s LGBTQ population being the largest in the world, many worry about the cultural and political sentiments toward LGBTQ. Although public opinions on LGBTQ communities are headed toward a more inclusive direction, there has been no real substantial change yet. As a result, the stress of being born into a conservative unaccepting family as a homosexual has become almost a collective narrative within the Chinese LGBTQ communities. This research attempts to inquire into the psychological effect of growing up in a sexually conservative family as an LGBTQ member. By taking a qualitative approach and interviewing six LGBTQ teenagers who claim to live in a conservative family, the researcher shares these rarely public narratives. Most respondents describe the experience as an overwhelmingly difficult and stressful journey.

1 INTRODUCTION

Many studies around the world have proven the relationship between LGBTQ individuals’ psychological well-being and the inclusive level of the environment around them. It is generally accepted that living in a more accepting family, school, or culture is beneficial to an LGBTQ member.

Yet being an LGBTQ in China is not an easy task. Legally, China’s policies towards the LGBTQ population are lacking in refinement yet not blatantly discriminatory. Authorities during the early 2000s attempted to massively destigmatize sexual and gender minorities, such as removing homosexuality’s status as a mental disorder in 2001 and passing legislation in 2002 to legalize transgenderism for people who went the sex reassignment operations. These changes, despite being immature, indicated a general political environment that wished to push for more progressive gender and sexuality policies. However, China’s public opinion on LGBTQ communities did not coincide with this direction.

Since the topic remains a sensitive one, and therefore there are not many studies done in this area. According to the Stakeholder Submission on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Rights in China For the 17th Session of the Universal Periodic Review by the Sexual Rights Initiative, about 41 to 69 million Chinese citizens are identified as LGBT, many of whom face discrimination and do not enjoy their human rights. [1]

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

According to a U.S. study in 2016, sexual minority participants living where same-sex marriage was banned experienced significantly higher levels of internalized homonegativity than sexual minority participants living where same-sex marriage was legal. [2] By the same token, individuals, especially teenagers, would be much better off living in a family environment where their sexual orientation is accepted.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) conducts worldwide studies on LGBTQ status on a regular basis. According to a national survey on Social Attitudes towards Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity and Gender Expression, in China, only around 5% of sexual and gender minorities come out in workplaces, but around 15% come out to their close family members. [3] Coincidentally, 57.6% of respondents to a national survey hold a perspective of “low acceptance” or “complete rejection” toward the idea of their family being a member of the LGBTQ community, which is the lowest amount of acceptance for all other choices by an almost 30% margin. [4] With household discrimination being commonplace for these minorities, the inclination towards opening up with nonaccepting families may result in consequences on LGBTQ teenagers’ psychological development.

A 2017 study titled “LGBT Youth and Family Acceptance” looks into the implications of familial acceptance and rejection for LGBT teens through two cases and relates the cases to existing attachment theories.[5] The research demonstrates the variety of stressors that affect LGBT teens, including from conforming heteronormative groups and families, as well as internalized stressors. Examining attachment theories, parental care plays a major part in every stage of development in a child, with insecure attachments, no matter avoidant or anxious, resulting in harmful negative consequences, which, when brought into the context of sexual minorities with commonly heterosexual parents, conscious or unconscious negativity towards homosexuality persists, resulting in insecure attachments.
While there are a few institutional reports and studies on China’s LGBTQ and the influence of the culture and family around them, most of these studies tend to be quantitative in nature. However, we need details that could only be extracted from qualitative studies to fully understand the pressure and emotional stress they face. So the researcher aims to use a qualitative interview method to study a few LGBTQ teenagers to get an accurate picture of what’s going on in their lives. Since these respondents already identify themselves as LGBTQ members living in a conservative family, the conflicts they faced and the stress they endured will shed light on what things are really like in the lives of this minority population.

3 METHODOLOGY

To proceed with the data collection process, vague terms have to be defined. Conservatism is this topic that strictly refers to the unacceptance or denial of a person’s gender or sexual identity, which may come in various forms. In the context of this topic, conservative families are families that disapprove of the participant’s status as an LGBTQ individual. Teenagers are adolescents ages between 10 and 19, according to WHO. This is the age range commonly associated with changes and development, leaving teenagers normally more emotionally sensitive and vulnerable.

This research is a qualitative study on six LGBTQ teenagers from conservative families in the Eastern China region. Online interviews approximating 30 minutes long were conducted using Tencent Meeting and Wechat Calls. Questions were personalized for each individual and adapted according to answers to previous questions, but generally involved questions surrounding family’s views on LGBTQ issues, personal experience in LGBTQ relationships, how this has affected them psychologically, and other people’s opinions on LGBTQ.

A qualitative case study research method was selected because of the uniqueness of different conservative families’ views on LGBTQ relationships and the complexity behind emotional responses. Using statistical summaries does not fully illustrate the entire picture of the psychological effects conservative families have on LGBTQ teenagers.

The following are the six participants for the experiment. Their names have been abbreviated to their initials to protect their privacy:
1. SL (he/him) bisexual 18
2. WL (he/him) gay 17
3. MY (she/her) lesbian/bisexual 17
4. RB (she/her) lesbian 16
5. HL (they/them) bisexual 17
6. CC (she/her) lesbian 18

Out of the sample, bisexual is the majority, making up 2.5 out of 6 participants. MY is still contemplating between being lesbian or bisexual, counting her as 0.5 for each. The least common group is non-binary, which only HL identified as. SL, WL, MY, and HL have been involved in a romantic relationship. The average age for realizing their queer identity among these participants is around 12.5, with HL being the highest (16) and MY the lowest (5). SL, WL, and MY have been involved in non-heterosexual relationships. Five out of six participants have come out to their parents, with SL being the exception.

The participant’s average family size is around 3.2, and all participants live with their nuclear family only. All participants who came out knew or had inquired about their parents’ perspectives on LGBTQ-related topics prior to coming out. All participants said other members beyond their nuclear family were either indifferent or disdained upon LGBTQ groups, and not being limited to one’s parents solely but perhaps a collective familial environment.

4 FINDINGS

For participants to qualify for this case study, their family has to hold opposing views on the gender identity of the participant. Despite having a similar stance, the specifics and reasoning behind this opposition vary between participants. For SL, his parents were devout Christians who believed that homosexuality was “sinning against god.” For WL, his parents insisted that he start an actual family and have a child to carry on their lineage. For MY, her parents assumed it was just a hormonal issue, attempting to get her to participate in corrective actions like medication. RB’s family thought her identity was against traditional Chinese values and a blind pursuit of western values. HL’s family assumed this identity was simply their child following temporary trends, which they inferred from the gender-neutral fashion and appearance. Some simply have a major distaste towards queer people, associating them with sexually transmitted illnesses and sex-related crimes.

For the participants identifying as bisexual, one of the common themes of being attracted to same-sex relationships is only just an occasional confusion about their sexuality during puberty. In the interview, all bisexual participants who came out (1.5 participants) revealed that the word “phase” was used to describe their sexuality by their family at least once, which indicated that their family views being bisexual as a temporary period. While some other lesbian or gay participants may have also had their parents reflect this sentiment, the focuses were more so emphasized on disappointment towards whom they are, with families of gay/lesbian participants using words expressing discontent learning that their child is homosexual. Considering the popular belief of sexuality as a spectrum, participants’ families are shown to have a less concerned attitude toward bisexual teens who are considered closer to heterosexuality than homosexual teens, reflecting the perception of bisexuality as more reversible into the straight norm.

The following are specific psychological effects expressed by each individual:

4.1 SL

SL is identified as a bisexual male, and he is 18 years old. SL did not come out to his parents as he knew there is a
high possibility his parents would disown him. He is the only one among the respondents who has not come out yet.

When the interviewer inquired whether he felt there were any psychological effects from his parents’ lack of understanding, he initially claimed he didn’t, saying that by keeping his relationships underground, it did not affect his relationship with his parent.

But when later asked about how he felt about keeping it a secret from his parents, he expressed sentiments of annoyance, saying, “I don’t like it when I have to keep things away from them,” which indicated a sense of disconnection.

4.2 WL

WL is a 17-year male identifying himself as homosexual. WL described his coming out to his parents as terrifying. After hearing him come out, his parents argued: “not about whether it was right, but who caused me to be that way.” They were attributing minor events from years ago to be my “awakening” when I really just started liking a guy.

When asked how that made him feel, he expressed that he felt like they never bothered understanding him and he was just an object in their possession that malfunctioned. He added that it did not help when his parents told him that he had to give them grandchildren, which contributed to the idea that, to his parents, he was just an object. Recently, WL has been diagnosed with mild depression, and his issues with his parents were a common topic of discussion with his therapist.

4.3 MY

MY is 17 years old, and she does not know whether she is bisexual or lesbian. MY’s parents have a research background in chemistry. When she came out to her parents, her parents automatically assumed this was a hormonal issue and could be fixed by medication. No psychiatric hospital was willing to diagnose her, as homosexuality has been removed from the list of mental disorders. As a result, her parents sent her to a conversion camp with no official license.

Luckily, the camp was not mentally or physically abusive, but the campers were constantly fed propaganda on the dangers of being gay and the benefits of being straight. When asked about how this has affected her, MY expressed that the camp had led to a lot of confusion regarding her identity as she is deliberating whether she is a lesbian or bisexual. She does feel attracted to a man right now, but she doesn’t know whether it is because she is bisexual or she has internalized the messages in the camp. So she is undergoing a stage of confusion at the moment.

4.4 RB

RB is a 16-year-old lesbian girl. Growing up in a family full of CCP party members, RB’s recent coming out was quickly attributed to the influence of the western world, with her parents regrettting the choice to send her to an international school for education. Her parents gave her long lectures on traditional Chinese values.

Overall, she says she wasn’t affected as much, other than the fact that her parents started constantly judging her foreign teachers, which was annoying for her. But she also knows that in the future, things might continue to worsen.

4.5 HL

HL is 17-year-old and is bisexual. HL’s parents regarded the coming out as a joke and responded very unseriously. HL speculated that it was because non-binary is still a very foreign concept in China, thinking gender neutrality is simply part of a rising trend.

Their parents continued referring to their child as “her,” which is the born biological sex. Even when HL was breaking down over the lack of recognition of the identity, her parents’ response was, “you’re going to get over it.”

According to HL, it was easy to understand why HL’s parents think like this, considering their cultural background. Still, it was very stressful and painful maintaining an ingenuine, superficial relationship with someone whom you used to be closely connected with.

4.6 CC

CC identifies as a lesbian and is 18 years old. For CC, her parents held a lot of stereotypical views against queer people.

Her parents’ stance towards gay people changed very quickly from indifference toward hate during the past few years. When CC came out, her parents’ first reaction was a concern. They were concerned that by associating with the LGBTQ community, CC would be corrupted. Progressively, they became less patient as CC refused to convert back to straight and began slut-shaming her. CC claimed that as she became more disconnected from her parents, this became less of a problem, but she still looks back at “family bonding time” in nostalgia.

According to HL, narratives that used to attack queer people, like transmission of Sexually Transmitted Diseases and expression of promiscuity, have been adopted for the Chinese internet environment and populated around middle to old-age people.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Among the six individuals, five have come out and made their sexual identity open to their parents. This is a relatively high ratio, but considering the fact that this is a qualitative study and these people volunteer to be interviewed, the researcher is not surprised.

Among the five families who have known the real sexuality of their children, all of them are in some stage of denial. Most tried tactics to change their children and believed strongly that their children’s self-claimed sexuality was only temporary and could be changed. Several respondents mentioned that their parents wanted to find out what had influenced their sexuality. This symptom is a typical one when people are in severe grief or denial. With a desperate attempt to change their
children, some parents tried preaching, and one family even attempted institutional help by sending their child to a camp for converting people from gay to straight. One male respondent mentioned the Asian family value of the responsibility to bear offspring for the family lineage.

We see no discrepancies between how sons and daughters are treated differently. Their parents seem to be in the same stage of shock and denial. Probably the most disheartening fact is that no respondents have mentioned an improved relationship or parents gradually accepting their sexuality. In two respondents’ stories, things are becoming worse and worse. The cultural gap, on top of the generation gap, is increasing rather than shrinking. As these teenagers approach their adulthood and get closer to the age of marriage and family, it is to be expected that this conflict could only get worse.

Overall, being raised in unaccepting conditions resulted in net harm to the participant’s mental well-being. The least severe effect was a disconnection in the parent-child relationship. Many described the experience of living with conservative parents as overwhelmingly negative. Parental interruptions caused more confusion and stress, as demonstrated in MY’s case.

6 LIMITATIONS

6.1 Samples

Due to limited time and resources, the researcher was only able to reach six individuals who were willing to serve as respondents.

The location of this case study is limited to the Eastern China region because the researcher’s social media publicity was limited to people of regions near Shanghai. Other online interview volunteer forms were also sent to other more prominent social media forums but gained very little response. As a result, all participants were from either Shanghai, Suzhou, or Nanjing, within the Eastern China region. Maybe LGBTQ populations may suffer from different issues in other parts of China due to regional cultural differences or other lurking variables. It is widely accepted that different regions in China share different cultures.

Though difficult, the research would benefit a great deal from a different perspective from the parents. Telling the stress and pain from the parents’ perspective would also help us understand how the relationship could be mended. An insight into how LGBTQ teenagers could communicate more effectively with their parents and how the community could support LGBTQ parents as we would support these young people would be valuable to everyone.

It is hoped that future studies could reach more respondents. Researchers could also conduct cross-region qualitative interviews and compare how different macro-environment affects the individuals’ psychological well-being.

6.2 Self-reporting

In this case study, a major aspect involves interviewing participants and asking them to reflect on the psychological effect of being raised in the families they are in. These interviews are designed to be effective at acquiring conclusions about how growing up in conservative families affects teenagers psychologically. Still, the nature of discussions makes it so that the study is dependent upon the participant’s introspection, which may cause skewness or impartiality. However, it is essential to know that, similar to modern world therapy processes, a psychological evaluation is unavoidable subjective to some degree, with introspection inevitably needed.

Bibliography

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