A review of research on bullying and mental health of LGBTQ students in China

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Abstract. LGBTQ people have been suffering from school bullying and have higher mental health risks. In recent years, scholars around the world have focused on the phenomenon of school bullying and subsequent effects on LGBTQ people. This paper composes relevant studies by Chinese scholars and summarizes the unique psychological effects of school bullying exposure on LGBTQ students in the Chinese cultural context. The study found that gender stereotypes and heteronormative hegemonic concepts in traditional Chinese gender culture, filial culture in family culture, and the imperfection of sexuality education can negatively affect school bullying of LGBTQ students in schools, which in turn affects the psychological health of LGBTQ students. Chinese educators need to improve the system and practice of sex and gender education.

1 INTRODUCTION

All children and adolescents are at threat of bullying in schools, but sexual and gender minorities (LGBTQ) are more at risk of discrimination, violence and bullying in schools than non-sexual minorities.

Sexual and gender minorities (LGBTQ) are groups whose gender identity, sexual orientation, or sexual behavior is different from the majority of society. Sexual and gender minorities have been exposed to a variety of pressures from the social environment for a long time and are not only more likely to be involved in school bullying, but also have higher mental health risks, and the psychological and behavioral effects can last for a longer period of time. Victims of school bullying may experience a range of negative consequences, including anxiety, depression[1], decreased self-esteem, and increased risk of substance abuse and suicidal ideation[2]. Numerous studies around the world have demonstrated that sexual and gender minorities have higher rates of bullying victimization and higher risk of suicide[3-6].

Social culture is an important influential factor in school bullying. In China's unique socio-cultural environment, school bullying has its own unique impact on the mental health of sexual minorities. This paper will discuss the impact of school bullying on the mental health of sexual minorities in China, taking into account the researches of Chinese scholars.

2 THE SITUATION OF SCHOOL BULLYING AMONG SEXUAL MINORITIES IN CHINA

2.1 The situation of school bullying among sexual minorities in China

Multiple studies confirm that sexual minorities experience school bullying more frequently than non-sexual minorities[7]. Henderson summarized the patterns of school bullying experienced by sexual minorities and found six common bullying experiences: verbal harassment, gender warnings, physical violence, sexual harassment, social exclusion, and perceived sexual offenders and violators[8].

A study of sexual minority students in China found that among school bullying as a result of sexual orientation and gender identity, 40.9% had been given unpleasant nicknames; about 34.6% had suffered verbal harm such as humiliation and name-calling; 21.9% had suffered isolation from others; and about 6.0% had suffered physical harm and threats[7].

Differences in bullying experiences were also demonstrated within LGBTQ. Among these, homophobic bullying refers to violence that arises from irrational fears about sexual desire between people of the same sex and the existence of sexuality, while transphobic bullying refers to violence that arises from irrational fears about those whose gender identity or gender behavior does not match their biological sex and gender role expectations[9]. In groups where the assigned gender was male, both gay men and transgender or non-binary genders showed higher levels of depressive...
symptoms, with bullying being the main reason for this increased risk[10]. Research has also confirmed that both male students and transgender students experience more school bullying than female students [6], and that gay and bisexual students are at higher risk of bullying victimization and perpetrating bullying compared to heterosexual students [7,11].

2.2 Effect on mental health

Sexual minority students involved in school bullying develop more internalized psychological problems, at-risk behavioral problems, long-term personal development problems, interpersonal problems, and may also affect the incidence of mental disorders and personality disorders.

2.2.1 Internalizing Psychological Issues and Risky Behaviors

Sexual minority students involved in school bullying have more negative emotions, lower subjective feelings of well-being, and are more likely to have emotional problems such as developing anxiety, depression, loneliness[6] and mental health problems such as low self-esteem and anorexia[12].

Not only that, school bullying is associated with risk behaviors such as substance abuse, non-suicidal self-injury[13], violence, and delinquency[10].

2.2.2 Interpersonal relationships and personal development

In terms of interpersonal relationships, sexual minority students who experience school bullying are more likely to experience feelings of helplessness and lose trust in others [6].

School bullying also affects the development of sexual minority individuals' personal cognition, which is detrimental to the formation of their values [9], the formation of a sound personality, and the development of a healthy psychological profile [14]. School bullying may affect the incidence of psychiatric disorders in early adulthood, depression, panic disorder, generalized anxiety disorder [15], and even affectionless personality disorder.

3. THE UNIQUE INFLUENCES OF SCHOOL BULLYING ON LGBTQ MENTAL HEALTH IN CHINA

Ching conducted a study on Asian American sexual minorities and proposed the model of intersectional stress and trauma, that focused on the rejection of sexual minorities by the ethnic heritage culture and social norms of Asians, which became one of the most significant stressors for Asian sexual minorities [16].

In China, some unique factors are at work in the school bullying process that have a particular impact on the mental health of sexual minorities.

3.1. Traditional Gender Cultural Concepts

3.1.1 Gender stereotypes and the promotion of a binary gender ethos

China is still in a patriarchal model that remains predominantly "heterosexual"[17]. The traditional cultural promotion of binary gender temperament [18] and the shaping of gender stereotypes are important reasons why sexual minorities are more vulnerable to prejudice, discrimination, and violence.

Studies have found that students who identify more strongly with gender stereotypes are more likely to engage in gender-related bullying behaviors [19]. This sense of anxiety and uneasiness stemming from gender hegemony is more likely to translate into aggression and a homophobic atmosphere when individuals contrary to gender stereotypical messages are present in the group during a critical period of gender conscious development [20-21]. Some students will isolate and harm those heteronormative groups to ensure the legitimacy and authority of their own gender roles and maintain gender stereotypes [22].

In essence, behind this gender binary norm is the expression of gender inequality [23]. The level of gender equality in China also affects LGBTQ students. The lower the level of gender equality, the more homophobic bullying and sexual harassment.

3.1.2 Family culture

Traditional Chinese cultural views on filial piety, marriage and procreation also greatly influence people's views and attitudes towards sexual minorities. The expectations and demands of patriarchal families for the inheritance of children are a major source of pressure for LGBTQ in China [24]. In this view, sexual and gender minorities are seen as "unfilial", which makes them more vulnerable to discrimination and attacks from peers, teachers, and significant others, making it harder for them to get support from school bullying, and increasing the stress on their mental health[25].

3.2 The imperfection of sex education

3.2.1 Sex education and gender concepts in schools

China has long lacked clear curriculum standards for sex education in schools, and the practice of sex education is insufficient [20]. Teachers' lack of knowledge on sexuality and gender issues [xxii] and lack of a gender perspective on bullying [9] are important reasons for LGBTQ people in school bullying in China. Studies have shown that a gender-equal school atmosphere effectively reduces the risk of bullying and mental health stress for LGBTQ students [9].

Teachers' perceptions of gender and bullying play an important role. The correct identification and intervention of school bullying by teachers is an important factor to
effectively reduce the incidence of gender-based school bullying. A study in China suggests that gender-based bullying cannot be eliminated because schools and educators fail to recognize that gender equality and gender diversity are the root causes[23].

3.2.2 Sexual attitudes in family and society

In traditional Chinese families, the topic of sex is always guarded and avoided. Parents' conservatism and avoidance of sex and gender education, on the one hand, makes the environment unacceptable to the diversity of sexual minority students, thus exacerbating the risk of bullying. On the other hand, it makes it harder for LGBTQ students to get family support in times of distress, which makes them more prone to mental health problems and high-risk behaviors.

4 CONCLUSION

Influenced by traditional culture and social environment, LGBTQ is a more vulnerable and marginalized group in Chinese campuses. The negative impact of bullying on the mental health of LGBT students is more common and more severe. Specifically, the traditional gender concepts in society and the imperfection of sex and gender education are unique reasons that lead to school bullying and increased mental health risks for LGBT students in China.

Such a phenomenon needs more attention and focus from Chinese researchers and education experts. In schools, proper education about sex and gender bullying in schools needs to be provided. In the home, parents need to reflect on conservative ideas about sex education and learn to be tolerant and accepting. For the education sector, it is necessary to put in place sound bullying defense and intervention mechanisms in schools. These measures can alleviate gender stereotypes, reduce discrimination, reduce the risk of bullying, and alleviate interpersonal stress and mental health stress for LGBTQ students.

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Here are some examples:


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