

Self-Stigma and Coping Strategies of Sexual Minority Female Youth

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Abstract. According to incomplete statistics from the Chinese Academy of Sciences in 2014, nearly 70 million people in China are sexual minorities. Among them, female sexual minorities, which account for a large proportion of the population, suffer from neglect and self-stigma because of the unequal treatment of women in traditional social culture, leading to negative well-being and health state. Starting from the causes of self-stigmatization, this study explores the feasible solutions to enhance resilience and prevent self-stigmatization of female sexual minorities in China and provides suggestions for female sexual minorities to establish their own organizations to help each other to provide them with source of confidence, social resources and social support. We hope that they are able live a better life through this research suggestions under the current special policies of the Chinese state.

Keywords: LGBT; sexual minorities; women's rights; self-stigma.

1. Introduction

As the social atmosphere in China becomes more and more open, more and more sexual minorities realize the correctness of their sexual orientation,[1] identify and choose to disclose their sexual orientation in social life. But as the members of the minority group, coming out often mean they face tremendous cultural pressures, leading to different well-being outcomes. For mental health, they might experience depression, anxiety, and mood disorders; for physical health, they might experience Cardiovascular health. Moreover, some of them might take risky behaviors like smoking or otherwise have a poor diet.

According to previous research, in China, the prevalence rate of depressive symptoms in junior high school students is 16.2%, and that in senior high school students is 22.1%. The foreign epidemiological survey also shows that nearly 20% of teenagers will experience a depressive episode before the age of 18.

Previous research done by China Public Health in 2021 shows that 56.9% of teenage lesbians in China reported depressive symptoms, significantly higher than 36.94% of the Chinese woman. Compared to the results of relevant studies in other countries, Chinese lesbians also have a high level of depression. For example, a study in Chicago, USA found that women who self-reported depression in lesbians was 25.1%.

Besides, according to another research, the average score of social support of Chinese teenage lesbians was 58.25 points, slightly lower than the average score of Chinese gay man's understanding of social support, which is 60.45 points. In a word, the research data shows that the depression rate for Chinese lesbians is higher than in western countries, and lesbians have a higher depression rate than gay men. [1]

However, current research focuses more on gay men and less on female sexual minorities. Besides, the existing researches about teenagers in China focus on homosexuality (gay and lesbian) but seldom takes another sexual minority group into account. Besides, the previous researches are about social stigma, structural stigma, and so on, but no research has been done to come up with the effect of self-stigmatization.

Based on the author's long-term participatory observation of sexual minority female youth and a series of in-depth interviews, this study is carried out. In the first part of this study, we will analyze the manifestations and causes of self-stigma of female sexual minority youth, including the interpretation of self-stigma and the specialist of sexual minority females. Besides, we will identify

some specific performances of self-stigma, and point out that the three sequence stages are being afraid of their minority group, being self-abasement, and eventually leading to violent actions toward themselves or even towards society. In the second part, we will analyze the harm of this self-stigma. Last but not least, we will finally discuss how to solve the problem of the self-stigma of female sexual minority youth.

This research hopes to provide direction for improving the psychological status of sexual minority female youth. It ought to raise the government's attention to LGBT groups, and probably more opportunity will be given to the legal certainty of their existence and activities through the law, accompanied by more educators realizing the importance to offer them psychological support, as well as parents, pay more attention on their children's mental health.

2. Self-stigma and its causes

Self-stigma, aka internalized stigma, refers to the application of negative social meanings of stigma to one's self-concept. As being a member of a stigmatized group, teenagers are exposed to excess stress compared to the majority, leading to poorer health compared to the majority. Including the event-based experiences of discrimination, such as being fired by companies after "coming out", micro-aggression such as their friends acting as if they are afraid of them, expectations of rejection such as expecting classmates will not want to play with them if they know they are lesbian or bisexual. There are all socially generated but later result in internally perpetuated self-devaluation and can persist even in the absence of direct perpetration of stigma.[2]

Chinese women with minor sexual identity, who are more delicate and care more about the evaluation of the outside world, are suffering from mental sensitivity and social stress, leading to more serious self-stigmatization. Moreover, young people have not established their status or even gained economic freedom in society, and have to rely on their parents' resources. Therefore, many women are even more afraid of being excluded from their families because of their sexual orientation. As a result, they have more mental health problems than other sexual minority groups.

2.1 Social exclusion and discrimination

In contemporary society, the acceptance of sexual minorities is increasing among the younger generation, especially young women. Due to the development of the Internet and the spreading of the foreign culture industry, some literature and film work depicting homosexual love has gradually entered the public's sight, and the topic of sexual minorities on the domestic Internet is also increasing heat. But for most people in society, especially middle-aged and elderly people and those living in underdeveloped areas, sexual minorities are still a special, strange, and even pathological existence. Besides, the excessive attention, concern, and enthusiasm about sexual minorities from those who are supportive of them may also let sexual minorities themselves feel that they are different from normal people or treated differently. Worse, some people will make fun of those who behave with their physiological gender routine performance of different people. For example, in China, the public will use "butch" to describe women who dressed up or act utterly, and this kind of insulting word causes irreversible psychological damage to female sexual minorities who have neuter or masculine characteristics.

Not only psychologically, but also socially, sexual minorities are ostracized. Female sexual minorities are required to conceal their sexual orientation on campus, in the workplace, and in society, in order to prevent people around them from being looked down on, or being stopped from better grades or promotions.[3]

2.2 Socio-cultural intolerance

In contemporary Chinese society, the status of men and women is unequal. For example, some colleges will offer preferential admission or lower grade admission to men. Besides, some companies choose not to hire women because they think that paying women for their maternity holiday is a waste

of money. Many women have reported being asked about their relationship status during the interview, such as whether they have a boyfriend, and if they are married, they are asked if they have any plans to have children. This inequality of women goes back a long way. Since the theories of Confucius spread throughout the country, Chinese women, who have been degraded by the dominant culture and patriarchal society, are traditionally expected to take care of the home, have children and follow all instructions from male family members. The inability of sexual minority women to bear children violates the requirements of traditional culture for women and cannot meet the desire of men to continue their offspring, which will naturally be rejected by the public.

2.3 The weakness of resilience

According to the theoretical framework of resilience in lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals, social support, emotional openness and future orientation (hope and optimism) can contribute to psychological health, lowering reactivity to prejudice, thus providing resilience.[4]

For social support, hardly can sexual minority females in China nowadays, due to the lack of support and recognition of sexual minorities by national policies and laws, gain any rights or help from the government or nation institutions. Any information about sexual minorities is blocked on the Internet, marches are not allowed, and it is difficult for women of the same sexual orientation to form groups to help each other. Therefore, Chinese women, who lack social support, have a greater need for emotional openness. However, because they are not good at expressing their emotions, they do not want to be open about their sexuality, or as they fear social pressure if they do, women in sexual minorities often choose to suppress their emotions. Besides, as sexual minorities are not accepted by the mainstream culture of the country and society, same-sex couples who cannot get married cannot see the future of their relationship with each other.

3. The impact of self-stigma

If the female sexual minority in China, due to the discussed factors, are indeed at risk for excess social stress, the negative regard from others will lead to negative self-regard. The basic tenet of social evaluation theory is that human beings learn about themselves by comparing themselves with others, so as they are receiving low evaluation by others, it is important to understand this outcome.[5]

3.1 Homophobia

Meyer and Dean defined internalized homophobia as “the gay person’s direction of negative social attitudes toward the self, leading to a devaluation of the self and resultant internal conflicts and poor self-regard”.[6]

In receiving long-term external negative evaluations on the sexual minorities, such as they have a character flaws, their sex life chaos - conditions, such as sexual minority female youth gradually believe that the outside of their stereotypes, felt that other people have such problems, so will avoid the relationship with other sexual minority women, resulting in oneself also become a member of the homophobic. When they found that others are lesbian or bisexual females, they may want to stay far away from them, and avoid making friends with them. And when others ask about their sexual identity, they will feel disgusted.

3.2 Low self-esteem

Self-esteem is defined as “how we value ourselves”; it affects our trust and relationships in every part of life. In contrast, low self-esteem refers to a reflection of central negative views about self and it is important for sexual minority women.[8]

Under the influence of the long-term external negative evaluation of sexual minorities, female sexual minorities will have a sense of inferiority toward their sexual orientation. They feel they are lagging behind the rest of society (men and bisexual women) in terms of appearance, personality, and

ability. For example, lesbians like other women since they have been hurt by men in relationships or because they are not liked by men because of their personality and appearance.

3.3 Self-abandonment

When self-stigma is severe enough, female sexual minorities may engage in some extreme behavior. The first is that they become what others call themselves, accept what others say are the shortcomings of sexual minorities, and begin to hate society, retaliate against society, and commit violent acts such as vandalism or murder. The second is that they can't accept or tolerate the external evaluation of them, and they can't properly vent their emotions, so they start to hurt themselves, such as self-harm or suicide.

According to a study that characterizes histories of SITBs among high-risk LGBT youth and examined prospective associations with suicidal behavior, LGBT participants were more likely to have prior psychiatric ED visits and hospitalizations, more frequent past week suicide ideation, and more severe nonsuicidal self-injury (NSSI).[9]

In 2008, a college student in Guangzhou, China suffered six cigarette burns on her arms and self-harmed five times, according to reports. She once got into an argument with another girl in the school cafeteria and was called "a pervert who likes women". The story spread in school and her teacher found her and told her not to disturb the school environment and affect other students. She often called her girlfriend and cried that she felt extremely depressed and wanted to kill herself.[10]

4. How to eliminate self-stigma

Under the current policy background in China, the government and the state are unable to provide legal support and protection for female sexual minority youth. The problems that sexual minorities encounter in real life highlight three needs that need to be met: a higher degree of self-acceptance, a more harmonious relationship, and a more natural way of dealing with sexual issues. These issues can be properly addressed in groups. To provide social support to each other and strengthen their resilience to face social pressure, young female sexual minorities in China can establish their self-organizations. Self-organization is an unofficial non-governmental organization formed spontaneously by the public who will have their activities and values and form their own rules and order. The purpose of this self-organization is not necessarily to face social stigma but mainly based on the same interests, such as esports and anime to organize LGBTQ communication groups. However, since most of the members of this group are sexually minority women, they will unconsciously increase the emotional connection between different activities and the development of the organization. As they establish an emotional attachment and identification with the community, the organization becomes a haven to them, protecting them from stigma and all sorts of things, thus they are more likely to resist self-stigma than those who are not in such organizations.[11]

4.1 Build Confidence

Young female sexual minorities may be ostracized and humiliated in society, but after entering the self-organization, which will establish a new order structure inside the organization, they can find their new positioning and their identity can also be affirmed by others. In self-organization, young women of sexual minorities can stay with people of the same sexual orientation so that they will no longer feel isolated and alienated, or worry about discrimination and unfair treatment if their sexual orientation is discovered by others. Without fear of being ostracized by those around them, and with recognition and acceptance of their sexuality, they can regain their lost confidence. They get a sense of belonging in the self-organization, and they are willing to contribute to the organization, help other young female sexual minorities, find themselves while helping others, and affirm the value and significance of their existence. The existence of self-organization shapes the mental toughness of young female sexual minorities. When they have self-stigma again, they will think of this organization and will not be negative or even depressed because of self-stigma. The self-

stigmatization of LGBT women also stems from their poor response to external interpersonal pressure. They can learn the patterns and social methods of dealing with interpersonal pressure in self-organization and transfer the new coping patterns to social interaction.

4.2 Get Support

Social support is the help that others give to minority women when they are in trouble. First, they can get mental support in the organization. When they are insulted by others, they can get help from other members to fight back together, or other members can comfort them, relieve their psychological pressure, channel negative emotions and thus enhance their resilience. They can set up psychological counselling groups for sexually minority women to provide psychological support for young sexual minority women. Second, self-organization can provide them with material support. For example, when a sexual minority youth encounters employment difficulties due to their sexual orientation, her problem can be solved if one member of the organization is the boss of the company and is willing to provide jobs for other members. Or, if a member of the family has a conflict with her sexual orientation and has been kicked out, other members can invite her to stay in their home.

4.3 Get Resources

Resources are the resources that she can mobilize when she needs to do something, regardless of the difficulties in the spirit and life of her members. Social resources may include many aspects, such as political resources, economic resources, and cultural resources. For example, when a young minority woman wants to run for district party secretary, she needs someone to vote for her. If she is in an organization, other members of the group will vote for her even if she does not solicit votes.

5. Conclusion

From this study, it is clear that in China, due to cultural background, social public exclusion, and female personality factors, young female sexual minorities are prone to self-stigmatization, leading to a series of subsequent adverse effects. To change this situation in the current state system, young women with sexual minorities can establish their self-organization, strengthen resilience through the power of the group and deal with self-stigma.

After this study, female sexual minorities can understand the manifestations of self-stigma, be aware of its harms, and work together to face the difficulties and discrimination they may encounter by establishing self-organizations. Educators will give the young generation who have minority sexual identities psychological support. Schools and LGBT organizations should help students feel supported by others through relevant courses or activities. Social organizations should expand the scope of homosexual individuals' communication through rich social activities, and provide interpersonal communication skills for individuals through courses and lectures. In family education, parents should adopt a democratic education mode, pay attention to communication and guidance, and timely ease the psychological problems of teenagers to relieve their psychological pressure.

However, there is still a lot of room for improvement in this research. The research is based on long-term observation of female sexual minorities, but without data collection and statistics on the psychological status of female sexual minorities, it is not possible to find out the influence of different age groups and family backgrounds on the self-stigmatization of sexual minorities, so it is not possible to provide more detailed solutions. At the same time, due to national policies, the study could not propose legal solutions from the government level, and could not fundamentally propose solutions to change the social status of female sexual minorities.

The social background and psychological status of sexual minority female youth can be investigated comprehensively from the depression scale, anxiety scale, social support level awareness scale, and other scales, and their psychological status can be analyzed to understand their degree of self-stigma. In-depth one-on-one interviews were then conducted with representative participants with both shallow and deep stigmatization to learn about their experiences in life and find ways to

build resilience. In the future, we hope to find more targeted solutions through data collection, and even give some possible suggestions about the state policies.

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