

# The Formation of the Resilience of Sexual Minorities: The Critical Role of the Family

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**Abstract.** Sexual minorities in China suffer from severe stigma, with more than half of Chinese sexual minorities believing that their families discriminate against them. However, research on family and sexual minorities is extremely limited in China. This study focuses on how families increase the stigma and resilience of sexual minorities. Given the high degree of invisibility of sexual minorities in China and the subjective nature of resilience, Case analysis will be used as the method of this study. Based on long-term follow-up, two representative respondents will describe the stigma they have suffered because of their sexual orientation, whether their families support them, and how their families have affected their stigma and resilience. After that, further conclusions are drawn through case reduction and analysis. This study will fill the gap in Chinese academic circles related to family and sexual minorities and open a new field of research on stigmatization and family interaction in China.

**Keywords:** sexual minorities; family; stigma; resilience.

## 1. Introduction

The social welfare and human rights of sexual minorities in China are constantly violated. Homosexuality was removed from mental disorders in the Classification and Diagnostic Criteria of Mental Disorders in China-Third-Edition in 2001[1]. However, the textbook Mental Health Education for College Students (2013 edition) published by Jinan University Press classifies homosexuality as a sexual psychological disorder: it can be considered that homosexuality is a disorder in sex or the inversion of sex objects, and sexual minorities are still often associated with perverted and illegal behaviors such as pedophilia and incest by the public[2]. What's worse, in the General Rules for Content Review of Online Audiovisual Programs issued by the China Network Audiovisual Program Service Association in 2017, it is written that the performance and display of abnormal sexual relations, sexual behavior, such as incest, homosexuality, sexual perversion, sexual assault, sexual abuse, and sexual violence should be cut, deleted and broadcast. If the problem is serious, the whole program shall not be broadcast[3]. The consequent problems are that the culture of sexual minorities does not exist in mainstream society, which has already been ignored, and the discrimination and stigma towards them have not decreased at all despite they have already been justified in the medical field for years. In such circumstances, the mental health of sexual minorities is a serious problem in Chinese society right now.

According to the Report on the Living Conditions of Sexual Minorities in China, the incidence of discrimination toward sexual minorities in Chinese families is as high as 56.1 percent, which makes the family the biggest discriminatory factor[4]. However, research on the relationship between family and sexual minorities in China is extremely limited. In traditional Chinese values, the family is very private, and blaming parents or elders is seen as immoral and ungrateful, which has a high possibility attributed to the few types of research on the relationship between family and sexual minorities. However, as the values of the 90s generation and 00s generation become more and more self-focused, the research on sexual minorities in the aspect of family is highly feasible. Therefore, this research focuses on the critical role of the family in shaping the resilience of sexual minorities.

Based on long-term field observation of sexual minorities, through the process tracking method of case study, typical research samples are selected for depth interviews—when facing the same pressure caused by sexual orientations, sample 1's family harmed him, meanwhile, Sample 2's family gave

him support and enhanced his resilience. Then, through case restoration and the final analysis, how families shape stigma and how families shape resilience to resist stigma.

## 2. Theoretic review

At present, there is no shortage of western studies on family and sexual minorities in academia. Stigma is discrimination against an identifiable group of people, a place, or a nation[5]. Resilience is the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences[6]. When a youth discloses their sexual or gender identity to a parent during adolescence, it can be a particularly unique experience due to their age and position within the family[7]. LGB teens experience better health outcomes when their parents positively support their sexual orientation [8]. On the contrary, family rejection is strongly associated with mental health problems and suicidality, substance use, and sexual risk[9]; when lesbians or gay men, who encounter a lack of support within their family network, become parents, they may lose some of their connections within the lesbian and gay community[10].

However, the reasons why Chinese family discriminates against sexual minorities are completely different from those in western countries. The main reason for family discrimination against homosexuals in western countries is a religious belief. Besides, for a long time, homosexuality was considered to be highly associated with AIDS. Instead, in China, the reasons are completely different.

First of all, China is a collectivist country, and any behavior of the minority is easy to be regarded as abnormal and eccentric. One of the reasons why discrimination from family is particularly severe in Chinese society is because being a member of a sexual minority disgraces the whole family in traditional view. Secondly, Chinese society as a whole, especially parents of the young, is very conservative about sex. Sex is stigmatized in China, which is considered to be vulgar. Therefore, as a group that cannot be separated from sex, sexual minorities are also stigmatized in Chinese society and families. Third, Chinese families have a stronger sense of reproduction and inheritance. The value that traditional Confucian culture has been promoting for thousands of years that is it is immoral not to have children. In China, where surrogacy is illegal, sexual minorities are seen as immoral in traditional values. Forth, in a traditional and mainstream family relationship in China, the way of communication between family members, especially parents and children, and between the young and the old, is implicit. In Chinese family relationships, the lack of communication awareness is a common phenomenon. This prevents sexual minorities from repairing relationships with parents and other elders, and more often, children choose to hide their sexual orientation directly from their families. In addition, parents play an authoritative role in the family in China, and many sexual minorities, unable to bear the pressure of parents, choose to hide their sexual orientation from society and marry and have children with straight people.

Overall, Chinese society cannot fully refer to existing and mature theoretical systems in stigmatization and resilience of families and sexual minorities on how family plays its part because of the completely different patterns of family structure in Chinese and Western families and the reasons for discrimination against inter-familial sexual minorities. However, based on the characteristics of the family's role in resilience and stigmatization, it can be hypothesized that the family plays a very important role in both stigmatization and resilience of sexual minorities, both reinforcing and resisting stigmatization.

This research focuses on how family affects the stigma of sexual minorities, which can the research on the relationship between stigma towards sexual minorities with family more diverse and create a new research direction in China, to fill up the field of the relationship between stigma toward LGBT and family on the academic vacuum.

### 3. Family and Branding: the restoration of two cases

Due to the high concealment of sexual minorities, a large number of samples are difficult to obtain. Besides, resilience is subjective, requiring a rigorous and scientific system of study to master the intrinsic mechanism, through long-term fieldwork and depth interviews with representative sexual minorities.

S is a bisexual male. He is a 19-year-old college student. He grew up in a single-parent family, living with his mother. His mother, like most Chinese parents, did not talk about sex with her him when he was young so S grew up with a lack of awareness of the existence of homosexuality and bisexuality. For a long time, S only liked girls, until one of his classmates, who is a boy, confessed his love to him when he was 16, and he realized that he liked that classmate too. However, due to the lack of sex education, S felt very confused about his unusual behavior. S did not enjoy this same-sex relationship. Instead, what came to him was fear. S was afraid that he would become an anomaly. What's worse, S' fear came true. He was discriminated against because of his sexual orientation. He didn't choose to come out to his classmates, but they had already guessed that S might be gay or bisexual. Some of his classmates often used extremely insulting words to joke at S behind his back. What made S more frustrating was that one of his closest heterosexual friends thought it was disgusting that S liked a boy.

Under the combined pressure of self-doubt and the stigma from society towards him, S eventually cracked. One day he was crying and complaining to his mother. He told his mother that he liked boys and that he was terrified of being a freak in the crowd. His friends and classmates laughed at him. But he didn't get encouragement from his mother. Instead, her mother simply told him to stop crying and get some rest. S said that it took his mother a long time to believe that he was bisexual. After his mother came to accept S's sexual orientation, S said that he suffered the most during this period. He used to have to face pressure from himself and society, and at that time his closest family member was also giving him a lot of invisible pressure. Even now, his mother often tells S to get married and have children. S said that even though he figured out what sexual minorities were later after he came out to his mother, he was never able to accept his identity proudly. He believes the LGBT label only discriminates against him, and he plans to never reveal his sexuality to anyone again because it could cause huge damage to his relationships. S said that if he had a choice, he would prefer to be an ordinary heterosexual.

R is a 15-year-old gay boy who has just graduated from junior high school. R fits the stereotype of a certain type of homosexuality. He has fashionable clothes and exquisite makeup. R is very proud of his identifies with as a sexual minority. But his parents were very traditional and didn't realize that R was gay until he chose to come out to them. Because of his sexual orientation, R is often teased at school. Once his father insulted the gay community in front of him, and the accumulated conflicts between R and his parents were catalyzed by this incident. From then on, R had a bad relationship with his parents, quarreling from time to time. After that, R's academic performance was greatly affected and he even got into the bad habit of drinking, although he was only a child. R got a boyfriend last year. His boyfriend is very good at taking care of him, and he is also very rich. R even initiated the idea of eloping from his original family and completely relying on his boyfriend's finance in the future. Unfortunately, they broke up several months before R graduated from junior high school, and R had to return to the circumstance where he could only quarrel with his parents. What's worse, R was about to take the graduation exam. In another word, he was experiencing great pressure at that time. Once he quarreled with his parents, R lost control of his emotion and directly spoke out about his homosexuality to his parents. To his surprise, his parents showed him respect after the shock. From that on, R said, he felt relieved and his long-standing animosity toward his parents vanished suddenly. Stress from his breakup and academics were instantly lessened. R and his parents have reconciled for a few months. R says he is no longer drinking and has no desire to fall in love. He just wants to study hard to realize his dream and live the life he wants. He used to get angry at his classmates who made fun of him for his sexual orientation, however, now he doesn't pay attention to them.

## 4. The double roles of family in shaping and dispelling stigma

It can be seen from the above cases that family support directly affects the stigmatization and resilience of sexual minorities, and the reasons will be analyzed in detail in the following paper.

### 4.1 How does family stigmatize sexual minorities

First, Chinese children are dependent on their parents mentally. In a collectivist society like China, family, as a collective that everyone has to integrate into, has a very strong influence. Most of the value identification of a person without independent survival ability will come from the family, so children have a strong sense of mental dependence on their parents.

When S in Case 1 suffered from social discrimination against his identity as a sexual minority, his behavior of asking for help from his mother made him suffer from her ignorance. While S was traumatized by his sexual minority identity, S's mother caused him to suffer a second and more severe psychological trauma. As a result, S, who was ignorant of sexual minorities at a young age, directly connected the identity of sexual minorities with his traumatic experience. This label stigmatized him socially, and also made him stigmatized by the ones who are the closest to him. This is one of the important reasons why S stigmatizes herself.

Second, parents are symbols of high power in mainstream family relationships in China. Obedience to parents is considered noble in traditional Chinese values. Therefore, the consequent effect of this traditional value is that Chinese parents can rationalize all their negative behaviors towards their children by moral kidnapping. In other words, parents are the authority in the family relationship. Stigma is the oppression and discrimination of high power against low power. In combination with the case, S's mother chose to treat her son's sexual orientation in silence and violence, which deepened S's psychological trauma and made S think that his identity as a sexual minority group had seriously challenged the authority of family rules. Like most people, S chose to safeguard the authority of the authority, blaming his own unique identity for deeper stigmatization.

### 4.2 How do families build resilience

First, the support of family members who have important emotional support for most people can give a lot of emotional encouragement to sexual minorities. Especially as most of China's sexual minorities believe their parents will not support them. R in the case experienced expectancy stigmatization, believing that his parents would harm him because of his sexual minority status. The expectancy stigma R experienced disappeared when he learned that his parents respected his sexuality.

Second, recognition from high power makes one feel secure. The typical high-power representatives most individuals encounter in their lives are parents, teachers, bosses, and the government in China. Chinese parents are the high-power group most associated with the stigma of sexual minorities, and their support is relatively easy to obtain a considerable sense of security. This sense of security from parents may outweigh the pressure of social stigma, or it may lessen the pressure of stigma in other ways, and that's how the resilience of sexual minorities increases. In this case, R ignored the pressure from his classmates to stigmatize him because of his parents' support, and his resilience was greatly improved.

## 5. Conclusion

Stigma is the derogatory and insulting label of society on individuals or groups. The current defining trend is to turn the concept of stigma from individualization to intergroupization, from cognition to system and institutionalization. When faced with stigma, sexual minorities will have a high risk of feeling pain, anxiety, shame, and other negative emotions, and stigma is also one of the main factors that hinder sexual minorities from achieving social inclusion. The relationship between families and stigma towards sexual minorities has now been studied. However, considering the unique family structure in China, no Chinese scholars have done research in this area at present, and the existing theories do not fully conform to Chinese society. Using the case study, this paper concludes

that the lack of support from the family tends to deepen the stigma of sexual minorities due to the more dependent relationship between children and parents in Chinese family relationships and the fact that Chinese parents are endowed with authority in the family. In the same way, parental support diminishes the expected stigma of sexual minorities' experiences, giving children a sense of security that offsets stigma in other ways. The main problem of this experiment lies in the limited number of interviewees. The experimental conclusion can be supplemented and improved through more case tracing in the future. It is also worth investigating how family and other factors that contribute to both stigmatization and resilience interact.

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