

Factors Shaping Self-Identity Development among Chinese Homosexuals: A Phenomenological Inquiry

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Abstract: As a significant subgroup within sexual minorities, homosexuals have garnered extensive attention across various social research domains. Given the pressures of the current social environment, there exists a considerable number of self-discordant homosexual individuals. To explore the self-discordant among homosexuals and enhance their mental health, this study primarily investigates the factors influencing self-identity among homosexuals in China. The study used semi-structured one-on-one interviews to conduct the research with 13 recruited homosexual participants. The research found that nine major factors will influence homosexual self-identity: personality, social support, coping styles, meaning in life, internalized homophobia, educational level, sense of control, love experiences, and patriarchal societal pressures. The self-identity status of the homosexual population in China is influenced by numerous factors. Targeted counseling strategies can be employed when dealing with clients from this group in psychological counseling settings. Furthermore, this research lays the necessary theoretical groundwork for constructing a model of homosexual self-identity, aiming to provide a basis for clinical psychological counseling in related fields.

1. Introduction

Homosexuality refers to the sexual orientation of the same sex, only for the same sex of the individual love and sexual desire, with the same sex of the individual as the sexual orientation and behavior object. Homosexuality is not only a kind of sexual orientation and behavior, but also a kind of sexual identity and behavior norm or role ^[1]. According to Professor Li Yinhe's calculation, the gay population in China accounts for 3%-4% of the total population in the country, about 36 million to 48 million people ^[2]. Although there is more and more popular science about sexual minority knowledge in the world ^[3], China is also actively carrying out popular science education on sexual diversity knowledge, and carrying out relevant knowledge learning in children, primary and secondary education ^[4]. However, there are still numerous stigma situations of homosexuality. Some studies have found that the public's understanding of the lesbian community commonly has gender stereotyping, that is, women who do not meet gender stereotyping will be considered as gay ^[5]. In a variety of social media, there is also an impression of homosexuality in negative words such as

"abnormal", "AIDS", "effeminate man". In the media reports, there is a bias against the gay community, preferring to focus on disputes, pornography, crime and alternative propaganda ^[6]. In the face of such social pressures, the level of mental health of the gay community is prone to problems, and leads to difficulties in self-identity.

Homosexual self-identity refers to the homosexual individuals accepting their own sexual orientation and identity, acknowledge their own sexual orientation, integrate it into their self-concept, and attribute themselves to the homosexual group ^[7], forming the unity of self-concept and self-experience. However, in the face of various external pressures, such as stigma, family pressure, social discrimination and other factors, it is easy to cause self-acceptance difficulties for the homosexual group. Some studies have found that social and cultural pressure will lead to the impact of gay self-identity, the more in the strong discrimination, the traditional concept of fertility in the social model, the more difficult gay self-identity ^[8]. Some studies have shown that internalized homophobia is significantly positively correlated with depression and significantly negatively correlated with self-esteem ^[9]. The worse the self-identity of homosexuals, the more likely they are to have mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety. On the contrary, with the deepening of self-identity, the level of individual mental health also gradually shows a positive trend ^[11]. In conclusion, the relationship between gay self-identity and mental health is particularly close, and exploring and improving the self-identity of gay people can help improve their mental health level.

Cass, a famous foreign scholar, has studied the self-identity of homosexuals and proposed a six-stage model of self-identity of homosexuals, which starts from the initial stage of uncertainty and confusion of self-orientation and gradually transitions to the final stage of self-identity integration ^[12]. In China, there are few studies on the self-identity of the homosexual group, and most of them start from the perspectives of the causes, treatment and prevention of sexual orientation. Numerous foreign studies have confirmed that the reversal treatment of sexual orientation is ineffective or even harmful ^[13]. The latest research on the causes of homosexuality carried out by Durham University in the United Kingdom shows that the acquired growth environment will not lead to the shift of sexual orientation ^[14]. Moreover, domestic research on homosexuality focuses more on the gay group, while there is a lack of research on the lesbian group. Therefore, based on the existing domestic and foreign relevant literature, this study adopts qualitative research methods to explore the self-identity of the gay and lesbian group, and tries to explore the factors affecting the self-identity of the gay and lesbian groups from different levels, such as internal and external factors, and to provide empirical research support for clinical psychological counseling in related fields.

2. Research methods

The subjects of this study were homosexuals. The inclusion criteria were: (1) at least 18 years old; (2) Homosexual orientation; (3) willing to share the process of self-identity. Finally, a total of 13 participants were recruited through gay public welfare organizations, including 7 gay men and 6 lesbians. After the interview, according to the interview data, the related factors of gay self-identity mentioned by the respondents were analyzed by text.

3. Research results

Through the arrangement and analysis of interview data, it was found that the core factors affecting the self-identity of homosexuality were: personality, social support, internalized homophobia, meaning in life, coping style, sense of control, education level, love experience and patriarchal pressure.

3.1 Personality factors

Through the sorting and analysis of the interview data, it was found that some personality traits of the respondents would have an influential impact on self-identity, including 7 males (58.33%) and 5 females (41.67%). For example, respondent 1 said, "Since I was a child, I have felt that I am unique and especially superior, so I think even if I am gay, I think it is an honorable thing", "I am a relatively small person, I think I am happy", "I never pretend to be myself in front of others, I think I am happy", These independent characters all play an important role in self-identity.

3.2 Social support

The interview content showed that most of the respondents thought that social support was highly valuable to them, and 12 respondents (92.31%) thought that social support played an essential role in the process of self-identity or coming out. For example, respondent 5 said that "if there is a friendly environment, people who have friends to support and understand them, participate in offline activities, and have their own gay social circle are more likely to self-identify", "I know that people with poor self-identification have some common characteristics: people around them are either unaware of or supportive of homosexuality"; respondent 12 claimed that "the acceptance, non-rejection and non-disgust of my friends will have a certain impact on my self-identity".

3.3 Internalize homophobia

Ten patients (76.92%) said that when they first realized their sexual orientation, they would feel bad about themselves, think they were sick, and even have a strong feeling of hate for themselves. This experience also affected their self-identity, including 5 males and 5 females, accounting for 50%. For example, respondent 3 claimed, "At that time, I felt that I was not straight, I felt something was wrong, I felt that I was bad, and I was different from the people around me. What should I do? "; respondent 4 claimed, "At that time, I didn't recognize myself because I felt different from everyone else. In the face of group pressure, people easily give in to group pressure, and they will doubt whether there is something wrong with me." These thoughts tend to weaken identity.

3.4 Meaning in life

The results of the interview showed that 11 cases (84.62%) of thinking and experiencing the meaning of life were also of great significance to the self-identity of homosexuals. In the interview, respondents indicated that when they were troubled by the issue of sexual orientation, it would lead them to think about their own life, how to live in the future, and what kind of life they want to live. Respondent 12 said that "they would think about what they should do in the future to make their life meaningful and what they want, which would also have an impact on their self-identity"; interviewee 6 said, "And gradually, after experiencing numerous things, I will find that my life is only for a few decades. If I can't do what I love to do, what's the point of living? There is no point in living if you are miserable. It is better to do something you like to do."

3.5 Coping Style

Twelve respondents (92.31%) would adopt different coping styles to solve their sexual orientation confusion, which would affect their self-identity. For example, respondent 3 said, "When I was in junior high school, I had a computer at home, so I would occasionally search some articles on this topic on the Internet, and then I would do some tests (scale tests), whether you were gay or not, that

was it, and I would keep doing that test"; respondent 8 said, "When I realized my sexual orientation, I felt curious and went to look up some materials by myself. My identification with myself was a point of view that I had sorted out personally based on books and information."

3.6 Sense of control

Eight respondents (61.54%) believed that self-identity would be easier to achieve if they were in control of their own lives. For example, respondent 3 said, "I think no matter what your sexual orientation, as long as you have strong external strength, which means that you are rich in material things and still live at the top of the pyramid, no one will care too much about this matter. So now I always feel that I have money and can live, but my thinking is more sure of my identity "; respondent 5 said, "If I am a person with sufficient social resources, and my financial advantages are obvious, I am not so dependent on others' opinions, and I am not dependent on others, on the contrary, I can treat others, in such a position, I think my self-identity will be more relaxed."

3.7 Level of education

According to the interview data, 8 respondents (61.54%) believed that education level would also affect the self-identity of individuals. Respondent 2 said, "The more educated you are, the more rational you will look at your role. If you're a little less educated, you may see yourself not from a rational point of view, but from unreasonable, slightly more traditional, more conservative points of view imposed on you by those around you, and you may have a sense of denial about yourself."

3.8 Love experiences

The interview data showed that the love experiences of homosexuals also had an important impact on their self-identity. The nine respondents generally agreed that being in a relationship with someone of the same sex or opposite sex made them more aware of which gender they really liked, and these love experiences allowed them to clearly identify whether men or women were capable of causing love or sexual intuitions. For example, interviewee 3 said, "As a result, until the freshman year, I had a crush on a male classmate from the former high school, which was really the kind of love. I liked him for one year, but he was straight, so I finally had a little friction with him and wanted to force him to stay with me. Before the sophomore year, I knew completely that I was a gay and began to admit my identity." Some respondents believe that the feelings found in the experience of interaction with the opposite sex are not so strong, which will also cause doubts about their sexual orientation.

3.9 Patriarchal social pressure

Nine respondents (69.23%) reported that the mainstream view of patriarchal society would have an impact on the self-identity of homosexuals. Respondent 10 said that "the ideology of the patriarchal society will have a certain impact on my identity, even when making friends, people always think that only boys can give people a sense of security, but girls can't, and girls can't be with girls"; respondent 5 said that "In a patriarchal society, gay men are much more oppressed than lesbian women", "male supremacy is respected, and men symbolize domination, control and possession. However, gay men violate this point: as a male, they are willing to be dominated and owned, and then they will be regarded as a kind of different. They think that homosexuality devalues male characteristics, and then they will be attacked, rejected and alienated. Under such circumstances, gay men's self-identity will be more difficult".

4. Discuss

Personality factors play a key role in the formation of gay self-identity. Extroverted, confident individuals may be more receptive to their sexual orientation, while introverted, low-self-esteem individuals may face more internal struggles. Some studies have also found that many gay people with a high level of self-identity are more independent^[15], and this independent character can largely help individuals to cross the traditional secular vision and brave to accept themselves. Individuals with confident and open personalities tend to have better social relationships, which promotes social support resources. Some studies have found that the support of friends is an important psychological resource in the process of self-identity of homosexuality^[16]. It is inevitable for individuals to interact with social groups in life. If individuals are willing to expose their identity in the group and can get support from members of the group, their self-identity will also be higher. This kind of social support includes not only the micro-level support, but also the support of the social environment. In the relatively conservative environment of sexual culture and the significant patriarchal social environment, people's sexual orientation different from that of others is more likely to cause homophobia. In this case, homosexuals themselves will unconsciously internalize the view that "homosexuality is bad", resulting in the phenomenon of internalized homophobia, which will also affect their self-identity. The direct cause of internalized homophobia is not only prejudice and discrimination against homosexuality in the social environment, but also may be related to the defense mechanism of individual reverse formation. In order to avoid inner conflicts, homosexuals with internalized homophobia use reverse formation for defense, and have hatred and disgust towards homosexuality. Because they worry that if they show a slightly friendly side to gay sexual orientation, they will also become a real homosexuality^[17]. However, social factors are only external factors. From an internal perspective and behavior perspective, if an individual can cope with sexual orientation in a non-supportive environment by positive ways, such as seeking help, consulting information, and thinking about the meaning of life, it can improve the level of self-identity, which is consistent with previous research. The subjective initiative of homosexual individuals can promote them to find their place in the social group, which helps them to explore their sexual identity^[17].

In conclusion, the formation of homosexual self-identity is a complex process, which is affected by many factors. These factors interact with each other influencing the self-identity of homosexuals. Future research can further explore the differences in the influence of these factors in different cultural and social contexts, and how interventions can be used to promote the formation of positive self-identity among gay people.

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