Depressive Symptoms of Homophobic Bullying Victims among LGB Adolescents in the Chinese Mainland: A Case Study Analysis

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Abstract: In recent years, depression has become more common among younger age groups in the Chinese Mainland. However, only a small amount of study has examined the prevalence of depression among lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) adolescents, and little is known about how prejudice events such as homophobic bullying may impact this group's rates of depression. Therefore, the present study aimed to identify the prevalence of depressive symptoms following experiences of bullying victimization among LGB adolescents. A case study analysis was performed using secondary sources from online surveys conducted by Common Language, Beijing LGBT Center, and international literature in sociology, psychology, and public health. The study demonstrated that victims of homophobic bullying frequently encounter issues with depressive symptoms. The psychological well-being of victims is greatly affected by challenges including an absence of social support, internalized homophobia, perceived discrimination, and hostile school climates. The resilience framework can offer insights on how to improve their mental health by using effective strategies for coping and intervention programs to address the issue.

Keywords: homophobic bullying, resilience, internalized homophobia, depressive symptoms, LGB

1. Introduction

Bullying occurs when a person is targeted by others' negative actions frequently and over a period of time [1]. It is a ubiquitous and global problem affecting the mental health of adolescents worldwide and has drawn the attention of researchers [2]. Researchers have revealed a prevalence of bullying victimization across the world, 30.5% of adolescents have been bully victimized "on one or more days" [2]. Bullying can have both short- and long-lasting impacts. Bullying victims may experience detrimental impacts on their academic achievement, self-esteem, and sense of connection at school [3].

Sexual minorities are more likely to be bullied and victimized in comparison to heterosexuals. More than 8 in 10 LGBTQ students in the United States reported experiencing harassment or violence in school settings, which are based on their characteristics, namely their sexual orientation, gender expression, or gender identity, according to a 2019 survey [4]. Homophobic bullying is the term used to refer to the specific phenomenon of bullying targeting LGB students. In the context of education,

homophobic bullying is a form of gender-specific bullying that is motivated by a person's actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. Thus, it is a type of gender-based violence that occurs in schools. Researchers agreed that homophobic bullying roots in sociocultural norms, such as prevailing patriarchy, and heterosexual and cisgender hegemony on the whole [5].

Several surveys have revealed the widespread phenomenon of homophobic bullying in the Chinese Mainland. A nationwide survey demonstrates a high prevalence of discrimination against LGBT people in China, with nearly 40% of students reporting having experienced discrimination and violence within schools. Furthermore, among all forms, verbal bullying is the most common type, with most students reporting being verbally attacked and being judged because of their appearance, and way of speaking and mannerism [6]. Compared to heterosexual youths, sexual minority students are more inclined to be bullied by siblings and peers, in accordance with another research that analyzed a nationally representative sample of adolescents who identified as sexual minorities. As a result of bullying victimization, nearly 25% of the respondents are in a state of depression afterward [7].

Depression is a mental health condition that bullying victims may frequently encounter. Homophobic bullying has been linked in substantial studies to depressive symptoms [8,9]. A nationwide study showed that more than 80% of LGBTQ youths who have experienced physical violence and bullying in the school reported subsequent mental health problems. What's more, persistent psychological damage, the development of mental illness, and suicidal ideation appeared to be the most characteristic and severe negative effects [10].

Despite the vast amount of studies that have identified the prevalence of depressive symptoms following experiences of homophobic bullying, Additionally, there doesn't seem to be ample discussion of the underlying connection between homophobic bullying and depressive symptoms, particularly among LGB teenagers. In addition to this, previous studies have looked at the negative consequences of homophobic bullying on mental health, but little is known about the function of resilience in safeguarding victims from those adverse effects. To examine the association between homophobic bullying and depression symptoms among LGB adolescents, the study utilized the minority stress and resilience framework and explored the moderating effects of resilience resources at different levels. The obtained information from this study would help highlight the role of resilience and interventions in preventing homophobic bullying and its negative consequences on the mental health of LGB adolescents.

2. Current Situation of Depressive Symptoms in the LGB Population

Overall, numerous research indicates a strong and positive association between homophobic bullying and depressive symptoms in LGB adolescents. For instance, prior studies have revealed that bullying at school among homosexual adolescents was negatively linked with self-esteem and social support and positively associated with depression and suicidal thoughts. Likewise, school bullying among bisexual adolescents was significantly and positively associated with suicidal thoughts, and negatively associated with self-esteem [8,9].

The elevated risk of depressive symptoms among LGB adolescents across the nation has been verified empirically through various research. In a recent nationwide survey, Wei and Liu discovered that around 85% of Chinese LGBTQ youngsters were at a high risk of mental health issues [9]. Another study investigated the impacts of homophobic bullying on sexual minority students and found that those who had experienced bullying or witnessed an incident of school bullying presented higher rates of negative emotions and risk behaviors [11]. The study found that unfriendly school environments, suspicion of sexual orientation, and lack of support related to bullying exposure led to more severe negative emotions and riskier behaviors among sexual minority students. In the past year, of the 2077 sexual minority students surveyed, 477 (22.96%) had a decline in grades, 270 (13%) had

missed classes, 72 (3.46%) had transferred, 72 (3.46%) had withdrawn from school, 163 (7.85%) self-harmed themselves, 181 (8.71%) attempted suicide, and 318 (15.32%) engaged in physically or verbally aggressive behavior toward others because of their sexual minority status.

A national survey conducted by the Beijing LGBT Center in 2014 found a prominent disparity in mental health between LGBT individuals and the majority group in China [12]. The proportion of people with depressive tendencies and at high risk of depression was considerably higher in the LGBT group than in the national sample, both in the adolescent group and in the adult group. The study also found differences in depression risk within the LGBT community, with those who had uncertain sexual orientation, those who did not identify with their sexual orientation, those who had not yet come out, and those who wait for employment having a higher risk of depression. The study also found a distinct correlation between self-efficacy and depression, with LGBT adolescents having significantly lower self-efficacy than their adult counterparts.

In addition, recent research has found a relatively high prevalence of depression and significant disparities across different ethnic groups among lesbians in China. Findings confirmed that 56.1% of lesbians in China had depressive symptoms, and the Chinese lesbian population was at a higher level of depressive symptoms severity compared to the United States and Australia [13]. The study suggested that low social acceptance, widespread discrimination, constraints on traditional marriage concepts, and the lack of legalization of same-sex marriage may contribute to this disparity. The study also found that lesbians of other ethnic groups were more likely to report depressive symptoms compared to Han Chinese, possibly due to traditional marriage values in a religious context.

3. Analysis of the Problems

3.1. Introduction to the Minority Stress Theory

Minority stress is a concept that individuals from stigmatized groups may suffer excessive stress in their lives. Meyer proposed a distal-proximal distinction in his minority stress model [14]. He categorized distal stressors as objective events and conditions. On the other hand, proximal stress processes are subjective since they depend on the person's appraisal and are thus correlated with self-identity. People may experience excessive stressors, such as prejudice events and internalized homophobia when they perceive they adhere to a stigmatized and devalued minority.

3.2. Homophobic Bullying as a Minority Stress

According to the minority stress theory, individuals who adhere to a stigmatized group are more prone to experience stress. The minority stress model proposes that stigma, discrimination, and prejudice foster a hostile, stressful social context that increases the risk of mental illness for sexual minorities. As a form of gender-based violence, homophobic bullying can act as an excess minority stressor for LGB adolescents. As a type of distal stressor, homophobic bullying can exacerbate sexual minorities' resistance to their identity, prompting an identity crisis. Homophobic bullying could co-occur with internalized stigma when LGB individuals internalize these awful experiences. The current study sought to examine the stigmatization of LGB adolescents along with viewpoints on how they react to stigma-related stress. The present study was based on the minority stress theory while taking into account the considerable LGB adolescent population who are particularly vulnerable to bullying.

3.2.1. Perceived Discrimination

Given the fact that homophobic bullying primarily targets LGB youth because of their sexual orientation, gender expression, or gender identity, they are often perceived as discrimination against sexual minority students [15].

In most cases, the bully intentionally hurts an LGB individual physically or emotionally. Among all forms of bullying, verbal bullying is a typical one that affects the victim in an emotional way. The bully often uses derogatory language to tease LGB students, insinuating that their sexuality is perverted, inferior, or abnormal. For many LGB students, verbal bullying can be perpetrated through everyday discrimination against them, including getting nicknames, being verbally threatened, or being reminded to watch their words or deeds [16]. For instance, the Chinese term "Niangniangqiang" and "Niangpao" are often used to describe males who display feminine or delicate characteristics, behaviors, or mannerisms that are deemed to be atypical of masculine gender norms. Therefore, these labels—as well as any other derogatory terms that related to a person's perceived gender identity or sexual orientation — would have negative implications, feed harmful gender stereotypes, and reinforce discrimination against people who do not conform to traditional gender roles.

These bullying victimization experiences create an overall hostile school climate in which LGB youths feel unsafe, exclusive, and marginalized physically and psychologically. Furthermore, homophobic bullying is a form of discrimination that denies them equal rights by stigmatizing, excluding, and oppressing LGB individuals. This discrimination can extend to the educational realm, as it may prevent LGB adolescents from accessing education on equal terms and limit their opportunities. According to the survey, 5.4% of students were asked by their teachers to meet with their parents, 2.3% of students were subjected to physical violence, 2.3% were advised to transfer, retire, or expelled, and 1.4% were denied participation in group activities and student clubs as a result [16].

The effects of school bullying are far-reaching and negative, often leading to mental and physical health problems for the victim. Consequently, these negative perceptions with regard to LGB people may trigger stress-related responses and a decreased sense of well-being, which can have a harmful impact on mental health outcomes including an increase in depressive and anxious symptoms.

3.2.2. Internalized Homophobia

George Weinberg conceptualized homophobia as the acceptance of negative evaluations of homosexual individuals and homosexuality [17]. Homophobia is a kind of attitude that is based on irrational fears arising from the non-conformity of LGB individuals with their assigned gender or gender roles [15]. When LGB adolescents internalize these negative attitudes, along with prevailing heterosexism, they may direct them inward towards themselves, resulting in internalized homophobia.

While younger generations in China have generally become more accepting of LGB people, positive portrayals of LGB individuals in the media can have a positive impact on changing attitudes. Nevertheless, traditional cultural values like collectivism and filial piety continue to shape attitudes toward homosexuality. Moreover, finding support and acceptance from family, friends, and society remains difficult for Chinese gay men [18]. Additionally, it was until 2001, the promulgation of CCMD-3 removed homosexuality and bisexuality from the mental disorders categories, before which homosexuality and bisexuality retained an official pathologizing position. Due to the pathologized state of homosexuality in China, these individuals often face internalized homophobia and self-criticism [19]. As a result, culturally-sensitive counseling approaches, such as person-centered and Gestalt therapy, need to be developed to provide a non-judgmental therapeutic environment and help address these challenges. This approach can aid in overcoming internalized negativity and promote self-acceptance among Chinese gay men.

Mental health practitioners and researchers generally associated internalized homophobia with adverse impacts on physical and psychological well-being [20]. A recent review discovered that internalized homophobia is positively associated with depression and that it statistically contributes to depression [21]. Furthermore, theories of minority stress shed light on the study of internalized homophobia and mental health. Homophobic bullying is closely related to internalized homophobia. Internalized homophobia and bullying were seen as separate minority stressors in the minority stress model. Meyer depicted them as overlapping and interdependent [14]. Together, they are likely to exacerbate the negative mental health outcomes for LGB individuals.

3.3. Lack of Social Support and Protective School Climates

3.3.1. Lack of Social Support

When faced with discrimination and prejudice, sexual minorities usually lack the understanding and support of society as a whole, making them more likely to become targets of bullying at school. There are several reasons for the hardships of obtaining social support for LGB adolescents:

First, LGB adolescents may face challenges in accessing social support, even when speaking out about their experiences of bullying victimization. This is because their stigmatized minority status can result in marginalization and isolation from their peers. LGB adolescents may be afraid to speak out due to the fear of being judged, blamed, or rejected by their peers. As a result, they may conceal their experiences and hesitate to talk about their feelings [11].

Secondly, faculty may not understand or accept LGB adolescents' identities, which makes it difficult for them to provide social support. Understanding and acceptance from teachers can help boost LGB youths' self-esteem and cultivate a safe and inclusive classroom environment for them. However, in the Chinese Mainland, most teachers have ambiguous attitudes toward sexual minority students. According to statistics, 64.7% of LGBT minors believe that their middle school teachers have ambiguous attitudes toward LGBT people, and only 1.5% of students believe that their teachers are fully accepting of LGBT people. 19.4% of respondents had heard teachers make public "homophobic" comments. As a result, students may worry about being rejected by teachers who have opposing opinions on their gender identity or sexual orientation. They might be afraid to ask teachers for assistance because of this fear. Furthermore, because most teachers cannot openly advocate or provide resources to LGB adolescents, this lack of support can exacerbate feelings of isolation and loneliness for LGB adolescents [16].

Thirdly, LGB adolescents encounter difficulties in accessing community support, which can offer a crucial sense of connection and belonging, especially when they experience exclusion within school settings. However, the relative invisibility of LGB individuals and groups in Chinese society hinders LGB adolescents in the Chinese Mainland from accessing resources and support from their communities. This issue is particularly pronounced for those who come from conservative or traditional communities where LGB identities are stigmatized or marginalized. Moreover, urban-rural differences further exacerbate the situation, with rural and remote areas facing a lack of formal organizations or support networks. While online communities or LGB-focused NGOs do exist, they may not be easily accessible or visible to this population.

3.3.2. Less Protective School Climates

School is an important social context that contributes to adolescents' development and physical and mental health outcomes. LGBTQ adolescents were less likely to commit suicide and had fewer depressive symptoms in schools with more positive school climates, according to research by Ancheta, Bruzzese, and Hughes [22]. In turn, a hostile or less protective school climate for sexual minority students may reinforce unequal gender norms and stereotypes and provide a breeding ground for

gender-based violence, which leads to more depressive symptoms. Legislation can influence school climates in terms of anti-bullying laws and inclusive policies, which help promote school safety. Currently, in mainland China, inadequate legislation impacts school climates in several ways:

First, anti-bullying laws for LGB adolescents are inadequate and even absent in the Chinese Mainland. To prevent and eliminate homophobic bullying and other forms of discrimination, legislation is the most direct and root cause tool. Although the current Law on the Protection of Minors has incorporated "prevention and control of bullying in schools" into the national legislation, the definition of bullying and discrimination against sexual minority students remains vague in this law. Bullying and any forms of discrimination related to a person's sexuality, expression of gender, or gender identity are not specifically addressed in current laws. The absence of specific laws on sexual minorities may lead to misunderstandings and confusion among school authorities about homophobic bullying in practice and can prevent them from identifying and dealing with homophobic bullying more effectively and giving students a warning.

Second, most schools in China lack inclusive policies and regulations that promote diversity and inclusiveness for sexual minorities. By tackling the core motives behind homophobic bullying, inclusive policies can enable LGB adolescents to receive open, visible support and assistance. However, the current status quo implies that few institutions include and assist students who identify as sexual minorities, and statistically, a very small number of schools report solely having such policies, which to some extent also contributes to the prevalence of homophobic bullying across China [9,16].

Overall, to reduce homophobic bullying and create more protective school climates, it is important to improve legislative protections through LGB-related anti-bullying laws and inclusive school policies.

4. Suggestions for Overcoming the Negative Effects of Homophobic Bullying

4.1. Resilience Resources at the Individual Level

The literature normally agrees that bullying puts victims at higher risk of negative outcomes for their mental health and exposes sexual minority students to discrimination life events. Not all of them, though, will go through such mental health issues. Individuals can use effective coping strategies and function well. Numerous research on resilience has shown a variety of resilience characteristics at the individual level that benefits mental health:

First, hope and optimism. Hope and optimism refer to the ability to handle stress by keeping an eye on the future, envisioning a better life, and resolutely pursuing aspirations. This kind of resilience resource allows LGB individuals to keep optimisitic and persevere despite encountering minority stressors, which are associated with negative mental health effects such as depressive symptoms [23].

Secondly, emotional openness. One's ability to embrace and process emotions are defined as emotional openness. Suppressing emotions in response to prejudice events such as homophobic bullying may lead to greater distress and depressive symptoms. Emotional openness can buffer these negative mental health effects by processing and reframing negative experiences in a positive light [23].

Thirdly, mastery. This is a psychological coping resource that refers to the feeling of the extent to which one perceives being in control of life chances and ongoing situations. As a personality factor, mastery can help LGB adolescents suffering from depression and loneliness enhance their sense of self-worth and get a sense of control over their lives.

4.2. Improve Accessibility to Social Support

Currently, researchers and practitioners have identified several types of social support that are beneficial for LGB adolescents who experienced homophobic bullying and suffer from its negative effects on mental health: (1) Emotional support, such as expressions of caring, empathy, understanding, and encouragement from others can be a protective factor against negative mental health outcomes; (2) Tangible support including financial assistance, academic support, and legal resources are particularly important for those who go through hardship after bullying experience; (3) Informational support, such as advice from professionals including psychological counselor is a practical method to release distress, loneliness and other depressive symptoms. Depression is a mental health problem that warrants accurate diagnosis and treatment, particularly among victims of homophobic bullying. Therefore, psychological counseling for depression is needed to provide both informational support and stress management; (4) Esteem support such as receiving messages that convey appraisal and feedback is beneficial to promote one's sense of value. When stressors arise, esteem support can be effective to promote LGB adolescents' self-esteem, and enable them to move over their negative experiences.

4.3. Promote Legislation and Inclusive Policies Related to Homophobic Bullying

Firstly, promoting legislation related to homophobic bullying could be effective in eliminating LGB-related discrimination, harassment, and violence. Some Western countries have implemented pertinent legislation and have made progress. This can be exemplified by the U.S. and the U.K. In the U.S., each state has its anti-bullying laws or policies. Among all, enumeration is probably an effective policy concerning the elimination of LGB-related discrimination. Enumeration can be referred to a specific listing of traits or characteristics of students: namely, "race, disability, religion, sex or gender, national origin, sexual orientation, ancestry/ethnicity, and gender identity or expression" [24]. Such explicit listing clarifies the nature and contents of bullying targeting individuals or groups with certain characteristics. Similarly, it is against the law to discriminate against a person based on his or her sex, gender reassignment, and sexual orientation in the U.K anti-discrimination laws [25]. In the U.K., the above-mentioned types of discrimination are called "protected characteristics", which means people with these characteristics are being protected at the legislative level.

Secondly, enacting inclusive policies in schools might be feasible in reducing the high prevalence of homophobic bullying and developing an overall safe, inclusive, and supportive school climate. Practices such as building Gay-Straight Alliances, and incorporating LGB-related and sex education curricula into the lessons are common approaches to enhancing inclusiveness and diversity at school.

In summary, it is of great referential significance to China's legislature and policymakers that, a protective school climate for LGB adolescents roots in the promotion of legislation and inclusive policies related to homophobic bullying.

5. Conclusion

According to the results of the current study, bullying victimization experiences are linked to more severe depressive symptoms among LGB adolescents. Findings indicate that homophobic bullying is a kind of minority stress that can be perceived as discrimination against LGB individuals' minority identities and that can also result in internalizing problems like internalized homophobia. These negative stress responses may result in a decreased sense of well-being and an increase in depressive symptoms. The study also discovered that, on a societal level, the absence of social support and safe educational settings are significant contributors to the predominance of depression symptoms among the target population. The study found that because LGB youngsters belong to a stigmatized minority,

they suffer more difficulties than their heterosexual peers. Such obstacles prevent them from receiving social support.

As a result, the current study uses the resilience framework to focus on the mental health and well-being of LGB adolescents to address the issue. The three main components of resilience resources in this study are resilience resources at the individual level, assessability to social support, legal safeguards, and supportive school climates.

The current study looks at the relationship between homophobic bullying and depressive symptoms in LGB adolescents. By investigating how stressors like homophobic bullying and internalized homophobia affect mental health outcomes, this research extends beyond earlier studies on minority stress. The study's results will also be helpful to clinical psychologists and educators in their attempts to comprehend the target population and improve current support systems.

The intergroup differences, ethnic disparities, and urban-rural differences in the data need to be clarified and examined due to the small amount of data included in this study. Future research on the relationship between homophobic bullying and depression can improve the operationalization of the relevant factors mentioned above and look more closely at how homophobic bullying affects the psychological underlying causes of depression.

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