The Formation of the Generational Difference in Social Cognition of Homosexuality: A Case Study of Mainland China

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Abstract. In mainland China, approximately 70 million LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people are existing in society. In a predominantly heterosexual Chinese society, homosexual people are often treated with discrimination and prejudice. The perception of homosexuality also varies greatly by different age groups. These differences are generated by multiple social factors. This paper first uses semi-structured interviews to summarize the differences in perceptions of homosexuality among people of different age groups (young generation, middle-aged generation, old generation) from two perspectives (substantive identity and outward expression). Next, the paper analyzes the reasons for these differences in three major aspects: history, culture, and politics. Finally, this paper also looks into the future direction of homosexuality perceptions in China and offers practical advice and expectations from different aspects. The paper is hoped to promote greater acceptance and tolerance of homosexuals in Chinese society and practical measures taken by governments to create a homosexual-friendly society.

Keywords: homosexuality; generational difference; social cognition; substantive identification.

1. Introduction

Homosexuality refers to the sexual tendency and behavior of people of the same sex [1]. In the mid-1980s, Chinese researchers began to conduct related research on homosexuality, and the research fields involved medicine, literature, sociology, pedagogy, education, psychology, and other disciplines. Domestic researchers have made some progress in the causes of homosexuality, the public's attitude toward homosexuality, the mental health of homosexuals, and the counseling and treatment of homosexuals. The homosexual community is much smaller than the straight community. Therefore, in a society dominated by heterosexuals, whether the homosexual community can seek the life they expect depends to a considerable extent on the public's attitude towards them. Therefore, it is especially important to deeply understand "the public attitude towards homosexuality in China" and "factors influencing and changing the attitude towards homosexuality". At 3%-5% of the population, approximately 70 million LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) people exist in China. In a social environment where heterosexuality is the dominant norm, homosexuals are subject to social and cultural stigma, prejudice, and discrimination because of their different orientations. Studies show that homosexuals today have more physical, mental, and behavioral problems and their survival is not optimistic: the key factor contributing to the poor survival of homosexuals is the pressure they experience related to social prejudice.

Despite the progress of the same-sex affirmative action movement, social and public stigma, prejudice, and discrimination against homosexuals still exist. This is especially serious in China, which has a strong traditional culture in which men and women should get married to reproduce [2]. While the gay and lesbian minorities' affirmative action movements in Western countries have been a momentous success, the word "gay" and "lesbian" are still taboo to the Chinese public. As the topic of sexual minorities becomes more and more open in China, the mental health of sexual minorities has aroused social concern and great discussion. Compared with the general population, sexual minorities are subject to stigma, prejudice, discrimination, and other pressures. Tajfel and Turner's theory [3] of social identity indicates the inner psychological mechanism of intergroup behavior, and homosexual self-identity is one of the hallmarks of a true homosexual. The establishment of homosexual identity is not only determined by the individual self-identification of homosexuals but

more importantly, it is determined by the social identification and the identification of others. Therefore, it is of great significance to study the views of people of different generations on homosexuality today for the formation of our cognition.

The cultivation of homosexual culture is restricted by institutional conditions. In the context of the transformation of Chinese society from tradition to modernity, the homosexual community is still in the stage of cultural deficiency. Specific historical and realistic factors cause generational differences in the public's perception of the homosexual community, and these differences further affect the existence of different identity patterns in the homosexual community of different generations. This paper concludes the understanding and attitude towards homosexual people of three generations in China through interviews and elaborates on the factors of the cognitive differences between them from historical, cultural, and political aspects.

2. Generational Difference in Social Cognition of Homosexuality

Indications in today's Chinese society suggest that the perceptions of homosexuality vary greatly across different age groups. Through interviews and summaries of Chinese adults between the age of 18 and 60, differences in perceptions of homosexuality were found to be reflected in two main dimensions, substantive identification, and external expression. From youth to middle age to old age, substantive identity declines gradually, while external expressions also decline gradually. Substantive identity and outward expression are consistent with each other for youth and older adults, while substantive identity and external expression [4] are reversed for middle-aged adults, as the following chart clearly illustrates.

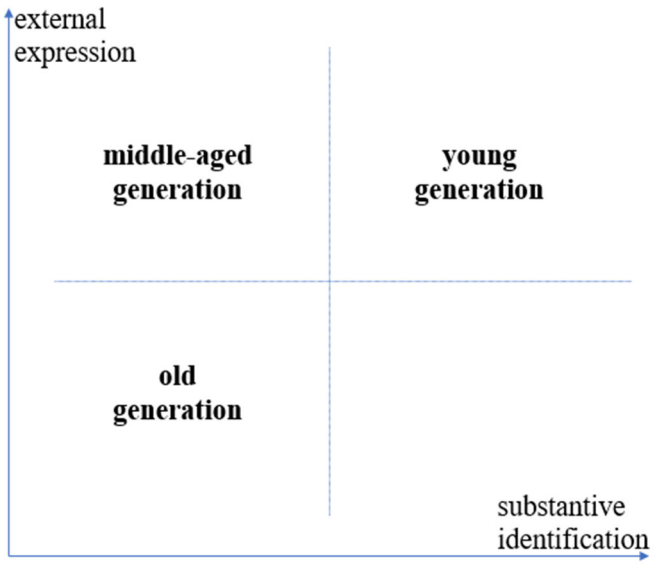


Fig. 1 External expression and substantive identification of different ages (Photo credit: Original)

2.1 Performance of the Young Generation

Young people (18 to 30 years old) have a very good sense of substantive identification and external expression of homosexuality. Young people generally believe that in the current pluralistic society, homosexuality should be considered as one of the normal human sexual orientations, just like heterosexuality, and should not be treated with prejudice, discrimination, or even violence. Besides, young people believe that homosexuality should be protected by legal rights.

"I have some homosexual friends around me, gays and lesbians as well, and I feel comfortable and chill to have a good time with them, and I don't consider that they are different or discriminate against them just because of their sexual orientation."(a 21-year-old university student in Shanghai, China)

"As far as I understand, nowadays, European and American countries are very tolerant of homosexuality, and even homosexual marriage is legal in many areas. I think we should learn from

the West in this regard so that society can be more tolerant and give homosexuals legal rights to live harmoniously with us heterosexual people." (a 29-year-old office worker in Guangzhou, China)

2.2 Performance of Middle-aged Generation

For middle-aged adults (31 to 45 years old), their substantive identification with homosexuality is the opposite of their external expression. They had lower substantive identification and better outward expression, which was reflected in different ways. When it comes to their personal views, they said that homosexuality is acceptable and is a choice of sexual orientation that should not be scorned or blamed and that they are tolerant. However, when it comes to personal interests, such as the workplace or children, middle-aged people generally said that they do not want to contact homosexuals. They believe that homosexuals reduce productivity or increase disagreements and friction between colleagues, and firmly object to their children's choice of homosexual sexual orientation.

"I think homosexuality should be tolerated, it's just another sexual orientation. Now that we also have a growing gay and lesbian community and homosexual movements in our society, I think the future of homosexuality is bright."(a 39-nine-year-old teacher in Beijing, China)

"I think homosexuality should be tolerated by society, but I hate to meet homosexuals in the workplace because I think our way of thinking is different。This will lead to a lot of unnecessary conflicts and low productivity as well."(a 42-year-old manager in Shanghai, China)

"If my son told me he was gay or even brought his boyfriend home to meet me, I think I might have a heart attack immediately. I would think there must have been something wrong with my upbringing of him that caused him to develop such a mental illness."(a 45-year-old housewife in Zhejiang, China)

2.3 Performance of Old Generation

For older adults (46 to 60 years old), their substantive identification with homosexuality and their external expression is relatively low. They generally believe that homosexuality is not a sexual orientation, but a psychological or physical illness. They expressed that they do not accept or understand the people around them who choose homosexual orientation. And they believe that many homosexuals in society nowadays are trying to pursue trends or escape from reality. In addition, they feel that homosexuality can be converted to heterosexuality through external intervention and correction.

"I don't think I've ever heard of homosexuality before, but only in recent years. Isn't it just a mental illness? Amazingly, some people shamelessly say that it's a legitimate sexual orientation. I think it's absurd."(a 49-yer-old security guard in Jiangsu, China)

"Nowadays, many people say they are so-called homosexual, supposedly to pursue the trend of the times and make people think they are cool. If my kids or friends were gay or lesbian, I'm pretty sure I could straighten them out to be heterosexual by talking to them."(a 58-year-old retired doctor in Fujian, China)

3. Sociological Factors

3.1 Historic Factor

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, while confiscating bureaucratic capital, democratic reform was carried out in all state-owned and private enterprises, resulting in a fundamental change in the political status of workers and a great improvement in their working conditions and incomes, which greatly aroused the enthusiasm of the working class and liberated the productive forces.

In 1992, China once again embarked on the path of promoting productivity through reform and opening up. The 14th National Congress of the Communist Party of China established the reform goal of establishing a socialist market economic system [5]. Subsequently, China began to reform state-owned enterprises with the goal of establishing a modern property right system and cultivating

qualified micro-market players. Gradually productivity has developed. Mechanization is getting higher so the demand for the labor force is decreasing. The need for people to exist to breed more labor force is gradually reduced.

When a person breaks away from the feudal relations of production which rely on the superstition of blood relations to maintain reproduction and enters the modern social production and division of labor, that is, into the modern relations of production, he/she is very clear that marriage and family, reproduction and blood relations have disappeared in the necessity of maintaining the reproduction of production relations. Therefore, the ethical necessity of heterosexual monogamous marriage and procreation is also denied. He/she no longer regarded marriage and family as destiny, but integrated his/her love and desire, retrospectively recognized his/her sexual orientation, and threw himself/herself into the embrace of civil society [6].

3.2 Cultural Factor

For Chinese people, the emotional way of thinking makes people pay more attention to the expression of emotions in interpersonal communication, and often act according to the depth of feelings. Therefore, in Chinese, there are often words such as "righteousness" and "emotional" to praise a person's moral character. The "Zhong Yong" (Chinese medievalism) further encouragement of the excellence of Chinese civilization. However, this way of life also makes people easily neglect the defense of their rights, leading them to be submissive and afraid to speak up, which may cause indifference to social injustice, resulting in Chinese gays and lesbians suffering too much in silence from society's strange eyes and pressure, thus turning their emotional focus more to their private love, while ignoring the rights and love of the whole homosexual group.

However, since China's reform and opening up in 1978, diverse cultures and ideas from other countries have been introduced, colliding and intermingling with traditional Chinese culture. Films and literary works about homosexuality have given Chinese people a more visual and better understanding of this sexual minority group and have given Chinese homosexuals the courage to express themselves and integrate into the whole society.

3.3 Political Factor

On one hand, the development of the cognition and rationality of homosexuality in China is closely related to China's family planning policy. In 1955, based on the judgment that China's population was growing too fast, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China issued the Instruction on Population Control, proposing appropriate birth control. 1957, Mao Zedong proposed at the Supreme State Council that "mankind should control itself and grow in a planned manner. 1979, the National Conference on Family Planning was held, and the one-child policy officially began [7]. In 2015, the Fifth Plenary Session of the 18th CPC Central Committee decided to "adhere to the basic state policy of family planning, improve the population development strategy, and fully implement the policy of allowing a couple to have two children. ". Thus, China's 35-year-old "one-child policy" has ended. Although the family planning policy still exists, it has changed from a mandatory population control policy to a policy of encouragement. Thus, childbirth has gradually changed from an important part of satisfying China’s socialist construction to a modernized and free right. When the governmental level of procreation returns to the individual level, there is more room for the existence of homosexuality as a sexual orientation, and its justification is gradually strengthened.

On the other hand, although the Chinese government has never made an official statement on homosexuality at the policy level, and the propaganda level has deliberately avoided gay themes, the change in the government's role (from big government-small society to small government-big society) has affected the public's dependence on the government in different periods. The public gradually realized the limitations of the government, and the desire and action of independent thinking and exploration also increased.

4. Future of Homosexual Perception

In the short term, the cognitive differences of homosexuality in recent decades will remain and be difficult to eradicate, as the generational differences in Chinese society are still significant. But today's China is increasingly emphasizing respect for the diversity of human civilization, insisting on promoting the civilizational concepts of equality, mutual appreciation, dialogue, and tolerance, transcending civilizational barriers with civilizational exchanges, jointly building an open and inclusive world, and solidifying the humanistic foundation for building a community of human destiny together. It is believed that this will also open a broader channel for the future of homosexuality in China. In general, the generational differences in the perception of homosexuality in China will gradually fade, converge, and behave in a friendly and tolerant manner.

As for the issue of human rights protection for homosexual groups, which have been straying from the margins of society, China should pay more attention to them and protect their basic human rights such as freedom and equality.

First, the right to human dignity is an important human right. At present, China's laws are relatively lacking or even blank on homosexuality, and due to the lack of awareness, homosexuality is not well handled, and homosexual groups are not protected accordingly and are discriminated against or even violently attacked. Therefore, whether the activities of homosexual groups can be carried out openly or not is an important reflection of whether the right to the human dignity of homosexuals is protected by social security.

Secondly, the right to privacy refers to the private life of all citizens, which should be protected by law from infringement of the right to personality, and the personal privacy of homosexuals should be clarified. In the current Chinese mainstream culture, homosexuals inevitably become the topic of gossip, especially in this era of the developed Internet, news is spread very quickly, so the protection of the right to privacy for homosexuals is also particularly important [8].

Thirdly, although the same-sex affirmative action movement and the legalization of same-sex marriage have been promoted globally, the reality of China is based on its national conditions. China has not yet made any provisions for same-sex marriage at the legal level, influenced by traditional concepts and social pressure, many Chinese homosexuals choose to conceal their homosexual orientation and enter heterosexual marriage. The homosexual identity in a heterosexual marriage causes the breakup of the marriage. When this happens, a lack of relevant laws makes it impossible to protect the rights of the injured party in the marriage and causes economic and psychological harm. Therefore, promoting the legalization of same-sex marriage can, to a certain extent, reduce the probability of homosexual groups not living in heterosexual marriages and manifest the value of human rights and freedom [9].

Meanwhile, although homosexuality is still not a mainstream cultural component of Chinese society, the homosexual community has always been of great concern to society. Society should strengthen the correct guidance for the homosexual community, and homosexuals should establish their social groups for mutual help and assistance [10], which on the one hand can provide advice and suggestions for their members, and on the other hand, can help homosexuals to fight for active power and defend their rights in society.

5. Conclusion

In contrast to previous studies on perceptions of homosexuality in China, which mostly used survey data from a specific age group or region, this study utilized semi-structured interviews to collect perceptions of homosexuality from different age groups nationwide and to summarize the differences, at a micro level. From the interviews, this study found that the perceptions of homosexuality in each age group can be roughly divided into two different dimensions (external expression and substantive identification). Therefore, this study summarizes the differences and changes in the perceptions of homosexuality in these two dimensions in different age groups. From young people to middle age to old age, substantive identity declines gradually, while external

expressions also decline gradually. Substantive identity and outward expression are consistent with each other for youth and older adults, while substantive identity and external expression are reversed for middle-aged adults, and remain low and high relatively.

This difference in perceptions of homosexuality between generations is due to various social factors. This study analyzes the causes of this generational difference in terms of historical, cultural, and political factors, respectively, at a macro level. From a historical perspective, this study illustrates the connection between homosexual perception and the development of productivity in modern China in the context of reform and opening-up policies. From a cultural perspective, this study describes the changing perceptions of homosexuality in the context of traditional Chinese medievalism and the increased cultural tolerance of modern China. From a political perspective, this study analyzes the progress of homosexual perception by summarizing the changes in China's family planning policies. This study makes predictions about China's generational difference in homosexual perceptions and suggests future policies and social activities promote a more friendly social environment for Chinese homosexual residents.

This study is hoped to promote relevant policies made by local governments to protect the legal rights, privacy, and humanity of Chinese homosexual people. Furthermore, it is hoped that this study will contribute to the improvement of positive perceptions and cognition of homosexuality in China.

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