

Assessing Students' Attitudes towards Lesbians and Gay Men in China

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Abstract

At present, the number of homosexuals in China has become a social group that cannot be neglected. The data were collected from 37 colleges and universities in Zhejiang Province in China, 1007 high school students and college students took part in the survey. 10% of the students indicated that they were gay or had tendency of being gay. The article summed up students' perception of the formation of homosexuality and students' attitudes towards homosexuals in China. Female students are more tolerable and supportive than male students towards homosexuals.

Keywords — *homosexuality, gay, lesbians, students' attitudes, sexuality.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, with the development of Internet technology and the openness of people's mind, people gradually understand the community of homosexuals. With the public awareness of homosexuality, homosexuality is not a disease, but a sexual orientation, it is one of social phenomenon. The study of homosexuality gradually increased in China, but still in relatively small amount, the empirical research of homosexuality is scarce (Chen, 2008; Li, 2008). This empirical research tried to understand how students', especially college students', attitudes towards homosexuality.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The origin of homosexuality has been systematic study in many disciplines during the previous century in the West. In the social science literature, two general models concerning

homosexuality have emerged -- the essentialist model and the constructionist model (Gottschalk, 2003).

Essentialist theories of causation account for the birth of a core homosexual self either (1) by biological predisposition or (2) by development from familial childhood experiences. These essentialists categories are same as the biogenic theories and the environmental or psychodynamic theories. The essentialist theory of sexual development is that it is controlled by hormonal signals (or the absence of such signals) and that, once the signal is given, it affects a wide range of development conditions, from the genitals to the brain (Gandelman, 1992; Ellis and Ames, 1987). Since sexual orientation is just one of a number of traits that normally separate females from males, it is very likely that all or most of the sex-specific traits are activated (or turned off) by a single hormonal mechanism, which sometimes is partially activated in males producing homosexuality. Other traits (including personality ones) in which females differ from males presumably are partially activated by the same signal that produces homosexuality.

There has been extensive research into the genetics of personality (see, e.g., Eaves et al., 1989; Rowe, 1994). Consistently the models that give the best fit involve an additive genetic variance, along with nonfamilial environmental effects and sometimes familial effects (Dawood et al., 2000). Sexual orientation can be viewed as another important aspect of personality.

Constructionist model of the causes of homosexuality suggested that male homosexuality is primarily a chosen sexual preference and a chosen social role. Risman and Schwartz concluded that

"evidence that homosexuality is a social construction is far more powerful than the evidence for a widespread organic predisposition toward homosexual desire" (Risman and Schwartz, 1988). In Robertson's words, "Many people, including some homosexuals, believe that gays and lesbians are simply 'born that way.' But since we know that even heterosexuals are not 'born that way,' this explanation seems unlikely Homosexuality, like any other sexual behavior ranging from oral sex to sadomasochism to the pursuit of brunettes, is learned" (1987: 243).

In China, there are a few studies about homosexuality (Li, 1988, Liu & Zhang, 2004). Li (1988) found that homosexuals are bound by Confucianism and ethics. Hence, homosexuals are not publicly accepted in Chinese society. In China, there were 36 to 48 million conservative estimate of homosexuals. Comparing with the national population, this group is relatively small but absolute large number (Li, 1988).

In 2004, Liu and colleagues conducted a case study of homosexuals' loneliness and helplessness in universities. People around homosexuals did not understand their painful feeling and pressure, which caused trouble in their life and learning (Liu and Zhang, 2004).

In 2005, An analyzed that Chinese people were deeply influenced by traditional culture and ideas, many people thought that homosexuals were a pathological phenomenon. Homosexuality is often stigmatized and discriminated against in society, and homosexuals fell into an ethical dilemma. At the same time, homosexual sex led to the increase in the proportion of AIDS, family and children problems to a certain extent have brought hidden and unstable factors to the community, hence community and authorities have paid attention to college students' psychological development and high schools started to have sexual and ethical education (An, 2005).

Zhang (2010) found that college students and male college students had a tendency of discrimination on homosexuality, mainly in the homosexual attribution. In the external attribution,

engineering college students thought that restricting the opposite sex was the main reason for the formation of homosexuality. Zhao (2016) studied college students' gay concept and its influencing factors. He found that female, liberal arts students, students of the city, all their attention to homosexuality was higher than their counterpart. He believed that the modern college students' sex education, scientific understanding of homosexuality was a reflection of the progress of the times.

Li and his colleagues have done a corresponding study of Chinese homosexuality. Li (1994) studies the homosexuality status in China. The growth of a man was influenced by three forces; the will of his parents, his fortune, and his own will. And a person who was gay was neither because of the wishes of his parents, nor his own decision, but an occasion. Li and his colleagues supported the constructionist model of homosexuality.

As economic development arises, democracy is also more likely to emerge, leading to even more changes in values (Welzel, Inglehart, and Klügemann 2003; Inglehart and Oyserman 2004). The economic development in Zhejiang Province is advanced in China. Along with improved education and higher income levels, conservative values regarding family, sexuality, and gender roles have become more liberal. Public awareness of LGBT rights and liberties has also risen. The young and better educated are likely to adopt these new values first, eventually leading to a more liberal and tolerant society (Inglehart and Baker 2000). With the development of the Internet, college gay students can easily communicate with other gay through social media, such as Blued, Zank, and broaden the gay community. However, college gay students have lack of knowledge about sex safety, they have less control over sexual desire, which lead them become AIDS communicator. They bring both negative impact to the public, and to their family (Wu et al., 2005).

This research is different from previous study collecting data from one school, instead, 1007 students from 37 high schools, colleges and universities were collected in Zhejiang Province of

the People's Republic of China, the most populous country in the world which has undergone tremendous social change in the past few decades. China has witnessed the rapid economic growth and social transformation in the past 30 years. Students, especially college students, represented a unique demographic group in Chinese context, revealing insightful information about the mechanisms of social and political attitudes. With improved economic and technological environment, people's attitudes towards LGBT would be more liberal and positive.

III. HYPOTHESES AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Because the results of previous studies did not provide a basis for making empirically based predictions about what we should expect to find in our more detailed analyses, we made only the single general prediction that, female students should have more positive attitudes than male students towards homosexuals.

As a point of major theoretical interest, we also asked the data to inform us about students' perception of causation of homosexuality in China. What are students' attitudes towards homosexuals? What are students' opinions about schools' attitudes towards homosexuals?

Finally, we want to explore the tendencies of students' discrimination towards homosexuals. We used several questions to test students' level of discrimination directly and indirectly.

IV. METHOD

A. Participants

The subjects of this study are high school students and college students, age between 17-25 years old, mainly in Zhejiang Province in China. A total of 1007 questionnaires were collected from high schools and college students about their attitudes towards homosexuality.

B. Measure

Students' Attitudes Towards Homosexuality. This questionnaire contains 17 questions. The first 4 questions are about demographic information. 12 multiple questions are about their cognition of homosexuality and their attitudes towards homosexuality. For example, what do you think about the causation of homosexuality? What do you think of homosexual's appearance? The answers varied from different question. The last question is about their opinion on homosexuality.

C. Procedure

Students' Attitudes Towards Homosexuality questionnaires were collected online and offline from 34 high schools, colleges and universities in Zhejiang Province during July-September 2016. 378 questionnaires were collected online and 629 questionnaires were collected offline in different universities in Hangzhou, Shaoxing, Taizhou and Ningbo, all in Zhejiang Province.

V. RESULTS

SPSS 23.0 was used to perform all the analyses. There were 1007 valid questionnaires collected from Students' Attitudes Towards Homosexuality; male students have 520 (51.6%), female students have 487 (48.4%).

According to the distribution of colleges and universities, there were 447 (44.4%) students in the northern region (Hangzhou, Huzhou and Jiaxing areas), 353 (35.1%) students in the eastern region (Ningbo, Zhoushan and Shaoxing areas), 31 (3.1%) in the western region (Quzhou), 87 (8.6%) in the southern region (Lishui, Wenzhou areas), and 89 (8.8%) in the central region (Taizhou, Jinhua areas).

In regards to their sexual orientation, there were 837 heterosexual (83.1%), 47 homosexual (4.7%), 109 bisexual (10.8%), 14 asexual (1.4%). According to the regional distribution and the economic level, the Central, Eastern and Northern regions had higher proportion of homosexuality than other regions. The proportion of gay men was higher than the proportion of lesbians, which has statistical significant

difference ($\chi^2=2714.9$, $p<0.05$). Table 1 summarized the demographic information.

TABLE I
Demographics information of participants

A. What are students’ perception of causation of homosexuality in China?

According to the causation of homosexuality, 94 of them (9.3%) thought that it was due to biological or genetic reason, i.e. Essentialist theories. 215 of them (21.4%) thought that it was due to environmental factors, i.e. Constructionist theories. 32 of them (3.2%) thought that it was due to disease, which was kind of infection. 645 of them (64.1%) thought that it was normal, which was interacted between biological and environmental factors and became homosexual. 21 of them (2.1%) thought that it was due to various reasons. More female students thought that the causation of homosexuality were normal than male students, while more male students thought that it was due to constructionist theories than female students, which was statistical significance($\chi^2=2148.2$, $p<0.05$).

B. What are students’ attitudes towards homosexuals?

Whether they knew any homosexual friends or schoolmates were related with their attitudes towards homosexuals, 275 of them (27.3%) neither had any friends nor schoolmates who were homosexual. 489 of them (48.6%) had fewer than 5 friends or schoolmates who were homosexual. 78 of them (7.7%) had 5 or more friends or schoolmates who were homosexual. 165 of them (16.4%) did not know whether their friends or schoolmates who were homosexual. More female students acknowledged that they knew homosexual friends than male students, and which was statistical significance ($\chi^2=631.5$, $p<0.05$).

Hence, their attitudes towards homosexuals were more positive or neutral. 474 of the students (47.1%) thought that they would be tolerable and support them, this was one of basic values of human

beings. 324 of the them (32.2%) were neutral without any attitude, they went with the flow. 144 of the

| Variables | All Participants (N=1007) | χ^2 P value |
|------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------|
| (Where is your region of school?) | | 1037.7 <0.05 |
| Northern Region | 447 (44.4%) | |
| Eastern Region | 353 (35.1%) | |
| Western Region | 31 (3.1%) | |
| Central Region | 89 (8.8%) | |
| Southern Region | 87 (8.6%) | |
| (What is your level of education?) | | 2738.2 <0.05 |
| High School | 68 (6.8%) | |
| 2 or 3-Year College | 82 (8.1%) | |
| University | 837 (83.1%) | |
| Graduate School | 20 (2%) | |
| (What is your sexual orientation?) | | 2714.9 <0.05 |
| Heterosexual | 837 (83.1%) | |
| Homosexual | 47 (4.7%) | |
| Bisexual | 109 (10.8%) | |
| Asexual | 14 (1.4%) | |

students (14.3%) thought laissez-faire, because it was only a personal way of life, without interference. 38 of them (3.8%) thought to suppress against them, because they were contrary to human relations and traditional ideas. 16 of them (1.6%) were concerned with curiosity because homosexuality was novelty to them. 11 of them (1.1%) had various opinions. Male and female students have more positive or neutral attitudes towards homosexuals, which was statistical significance ($\chi^2=1723.7$, $p<0.05$).

The students’ perception of appearance of homosexuals can test their attitudes towards homosexuals indirectly. 129 of the students (12.8%) thought that they could recognize them by first sight because male did not look like male, female did not

look like female. They were kind of strange. 320 of the students (31.8%) could not recognize homosexuals by their appearance or behavior. 537 of them (53.3%) thought they were like the normal group, without any difference from other people. 21 of them (2.1%) had various reasons. Female students had less hostile of the appearance of homosexuals than male students, which was statistical significance ($\chi^2=992.4$, $p<0.05$). More than 85% of students had neutral or positive attitudes towards homosexuals' appearance.

C. What are students' opinions about schools' attitude towards homosexuals?

According to their opinions about the schools' attitude towards homosexuals, 604 of the students (60%) thought that schools should give appropriate attention and protection to homosexuals. 315 of them (31.3%) thought that schools should not bother them and let them develop naturally. 61 of them (6.1%) thought that schools should criticize them and provide counseling services to them, and bring them back to normal. 10 of them (1%) thought that schools should be against homosexuality and punish the students if found. 17 of them (1.7%) had various reasons. A lot of students, especially female students, thought that schools should have more positive or neutral attitudes towards homosexuals, which was statistical significance ($\chi^2=1988.5$, $p<0.05$).

D. What are the tendencies of students' discrimination towards homosexuals?

According to official statistics, China has 8.7% proportion of homosexuals, 28 of the students (2.8%) felt happy about it. 512 of the students (50.8%) felt normal, without any surprise. 335 of them (33.3%) thought that the proportion would rise. 112 of them (11.1%) were worried about the situation. 20 of them (2%) had various opinions. Female students had more positive or neutral attitudes towards this figure than male students, which was statistical significance ($\chi^2=1492.1$, $p<0.05$).

In many countries, discrimination against homosexuals has been given some control,

homosexual marriage is also a legitimate act. 208 of the students (20.7%) thought China was far from this day about 0-10 years. 241 of them (23.9%) thought China was far from this day about 11-20 years. 166 of them (16.5%) thought China was far from this day about 21-30 years. 360 of them (35.7%) thought that China was far from this day more than 30 years. 32 of them had various opinions. More than half of the students thought that China was far from this day more than 20 years or above.

If you were a homosexual, 674 of the students (66.9%) would eliminate all difficulties in order to pursue their happiness. 177 of them (17.6%) would force themselves to change their sexual orientation. 60 of them (6%) would choose to live life alone, with loneliness and depression. 15 of them (1.5%) would hate everybody, including his/herself. 81 of them (8%) had various opinions. Male students tended to have more negative feelings than female students if they were homosexuals, which was statistical significance ($\chi^2=2290.8$, $p<0.05$). Still, many of them were brave to pursue their happiness being a homosexual.

In regards to how homosexuals had an impact on their lives, 655 of the students (65%) thought that there was no any interference. 310 of them (30.8%) thought that there was a little bit interference. 42 of them (4.2%) thought that there was a huge interference. Many female students did not think that homosexuals had any impact on their life, and which was statistical significance on gender ($\chi^2=903.3$, $p<0.05$).

According to the percentage of people discriminating against homosexuals, 13 of the students (1.3%) thought all of the people around them discriminating against homosexuals. 325 of them (32.5%) thought many of the people around them discriminating against homosexuals. 254 of them (25.2%) thought half of the people around them discriminating against homosexuals. 357 of them (35.5%) thought a few of them discriminating against homosexuals. 58 of them (5.8%) had various opinions. More female students thought that there were less people discriminating against homosexuals

than male students, which was statistical significance ($\chi^2=715.3, p<0.05$).

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study findings indicate that there are a high proportion of homosexuals (4.67%) or bisexuals students (10.82%), which is higher than the official statistics of 8.7% in China. Additionally, a high proportion of students (56.3%) know friends or schoolmates who are homosexual, which is higher than previous findings (Herek & Capitano, 1996; Herek & Glunt, 1993). Interpersonal contact was more likely to be reported by respondents who were highly educated, politically liberal, young, and female. This finding is persistent with previous findings (Herek & Glunt, 1993). More female students thought that the causation of homosexuality were normal than male students, and it was statistically significance.

Hence, many of the students have positive or neutral attitudes towards homosexuals; among 1007 students, 47.1% of the them supported homosexuals and 60% of them thought that schools should support and protect homosexuals. 32.2% of students had neutral attitude towards homosexuals and 31.3% of them thought that schools should not bother homosexuals. Again, previous research findings indicated that interpersonal contact was strongly associated with positive attitudes towards gay men (Herek & Glunt, 1993).

53.3% of students thought that homosexuals' appearances were normal, and 31.8% of them could not recognize who was a homosexual from his/her appearance. 50.8% of them felt normal when were told that there were 8.7% of homosexuals in China. 2.8% of them even thought glad of this figure. Only 11.1% of them felt worried about this figure. All these figures indicated that students in new era had open minded and were more acceptable to homosexuals than previous studies (Herek, 1984). Female students were more tolerable and had more positive or neutral attitudes towards homosexuals than male students, which was persistent with previous findings in the west (Bradbury et al., 2016;

Herek, 1988; Herek & Glunt, 1993; LaMar & Kite, 1997), but inconsistent with previous findings in China, which did not find any gender differences (Li & Zhang, 2013).

Regarding to homosexual rights and gay marriage enacted in China, many of them felt pessimistic. Over half of the students (52.2%) thought that homosexual rights and gay marriage would be possible in China after 20 years later, and 36% of them thought over 30 years later. Only 20.7% of them thought homosexual rights and gay marriage would be enacted in China within 10 years.

As a generation of new era, many of the students dared to pursue their happiness if they were gay or lesbians. Additionally, many of them didn't feel that homosexuals had any interference in their lives. Students, especially college students, have more positive and tolerable attitudes towards homosexuals. Additionally, female students have more acceptable and supportive attitudes than male students towards homosexuals.

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