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The Relative Importance of Parent-Child Dynamics and Minority Stress on the Psychological Adjustment of LGBs in China

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#### Abstract

This cross-sectional study examined how minority stress (i.e., internalized homonegativity, selfconcealment, & rejection sensitivity) and positive parent-child relationship dynamics (i.e., respect for parents & perceived parental support for sexual orientation) were associated with the psychological adjustment of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals in China. Based on survey responses from 277 self-identified Chinese LGB young adults, results from structural equation modeling showed that minority stress was not a significant predictor of psychological maladjustment whereas respect for parents and perceived parental support for sexual orientation were associated with positive psychological adjustment. Tests of gender differences partially confirmed whether Confucian traditions may burden sexual minority men more than women. Gender differences were found in the correlations between minority stress and each measure of positive parent-child relationship dynamics. However, the associations between independent variables and psychological maladjustment were not different between men and women in the sample. Our results suggest that culture-specific variables, such as parent-child factors within the context of China, may be especially important when working with LGB individuals in research and clinical practice.

*Keywords*: sexual minority stress, Chinese LGB mental health, internalized homophobia, self-concealment, rejection sensitivity, parental support for sexual orientation, respect for parents

# **Statement of Public Significance**

The findings revealed that parent-child relationship factors may be more important for the well-being of lesbian, gay, and bisexual young adults in China than the stress of being part of a socially stigmatized group. These findings raise awareness of the importance of cultural factors in counseling sexual minority youth.

The Relative Importance of Parent-Child Dynamics and Minority Stress on the Psychological Adjustment of LGBs in China

There is growing recognition among scholars of gender diversity and sexuality that mental health disparities between sexual minority individuals (i.e., lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals; LGB) and heterosexuals can be explained by the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003, Hatzenbuehler, 2009). This study questioned whether this model can be generalized to individuals living within cultural contexts that primarily emphasize family connectedness over one's sexual identity. Since most studies of minority stress have used samples recruited in Western nations within which the centrality of the self has been found to be of primary importance (Oyserman, Koon, & Kemmelmeier, 2002), the main objective of the current study was to test the relevance of the minority stress perspective for explaining variations in psychological adjustment of sexual minority individuals in China. Since China is a cultural context that prioritizes the needs of the family over the needs of the individual, the relative influence of family factors was also examined as well as gender differences.

# **The Minority Stress Model**

Our focus in the present study is exclusively on the internal coping mechanisms of sexual minority individuals to adapt to heteronormative societies, hereafter referred to simply as "minority stress," which are used to adapt to heteronormative social contexts. Two minority stressors are often examined in relation to mental health outcomes: internalized homonegativity and self-concealment. Internalized homonegativity is the internalization of prejudice against and fear of sexual minority individuals, and self-concealment is the nondisclosure of one's sexual minority status to others. Both coping mechanisms may help one to feel a sense of belonging in mainstream social interactions but can create internal conflict and mental health problems for

individuals with same-sex desires (Herek, Gillis, & Cogan, 2009; Lehavot & Simoni, 2011; Leleux-Labarge, Hatton, Goodnight, & Masuda, 2015). In addition to internalized homonegativity and self-concealment, it is widely noted within the minority stress model that LGB individuals can also approach social relationships with heightened expectations of rejection (i.e., rejection sensitivity). Although individuals high in rejection sensitivity may effectively avoid discrimination in social interactions, they might experience emotional dysregulation and develop unhealthy interpersonal relationships (Pachankis & Goldfried, 2006; Pachankis, Rendina, Restar, Ventuneac, Grov, & Parsons. (2015).

As of this writing, only one study has tested the minority stress model in a non-Western country (Dunn, Gonzalez, Costa, Nardi, & Iantaffi, 2014) and a few studies have examined different types of minority stressors among Asian Americans (Chen & Tryon, 2012; Sandil, Robinson, Brewster, Wong, & Geiger, 2015; Syzmanski & Sung, 2010). It was found in Dunn et al. (2014) that self-concealment did not predict levels of depression, leading the authors to suggest that overt identification as a sexual minority individual may not be central to one's well-being as the minority stress model would have proposed (Dunn et al., 2014). Instead, cultural contexts with higher levels of perceived intolerance against individuals with same-sex desires and a strong family orientation may necessitate different coping strategies (Chung & Szymanski, 2006; Sung, Szymanski, & Henrichs-Beck, 2015).

# "Same-Gender Love" in China

Many believe that China may have the largest LGB community in the world (Zhang & Chu, 2005) and what is referred to as "same-gender love" in Chinese is not new to Chinese society (Zheng, 2015). Yet, the LGB community in China has remained largely invisible until very recently. Same-sex behaviors were decriminalized in 1997, the Chinese Classification and

Diagnostic Criteria of Mental Disorders removed 'homosexuality' from the list of mental disorders in 2001, and individuals who have undergone sex reassignment could change their sex on official identity documents and passports in 2008. Despite these positive developments, only heterosexual couples have the right to marry and social media posts about their intimate lives are subject to censorship by the state (Li & Zhang, 2017).

A variety of methods have been used to understand the lives of sexual minority individuals in China and all have pointed to the conflict between their same-sex desires and their traditional family values as a primary challenge in their lives (Hu, Wang, & Wu, 2013; Lin, Button, Su, & Chen, 2016; UN Development Program, 2016; Zheng, 2015; Zhou, 2000). Chinese society remains to be strongly Confucian and socially conservative despite a long history of communist rule and recent economic developments (Deutsch, 2006; Wang & Hsueh, 2000). Confucianism can be summarized as a philosophy of ethical living that emphasizes the importance of the parent-child relationship. Children must cultivate their relationship with parents throughout life by maintaining a strong respect for parental authority and by fulfilling their parents' wishes. A traditional emphasis on patrilineal descent also gives sons priority within the family and greater obligations to continue the family line (Shek, 2006). Thus, individuals with same-sex desires can feel a great deal of guilt because they feel that they are not able to fulfill their filial duties (i.e., getting married to an opposite-sex partner and having biological children, Chow & Cheng, 2010; Shek, 2006).

Despite the importance of the family as a developmental context for youth, there exists surprisingly little research on the potential influences of positive family relationship quality on the psychological adjustment of LGB youth and young adults in general. As is intuitively obvious, positive family relationships can prevent mental health issues. For example, youth with

low levels of perceived family support have been found to be consistently higher in psychological distress across time relative to youth with high levels of perceived family support (McConnell, Birkett, & Mustanski, 2016). However, LGB young adults typically report lower levels of perceived support from parents than their heterosexual counterparts, which in turn, has been found to explain mental health disparities between the two groups (Needham & Austin, 2010). Research based on LGB samples has also indicated that parental support towards their child's sexual orientation may be more important to psychological adjustment compared to general social support (Feinstein, Wadsworth, Davila, & Goldfried, 2014). Given that Confucian family values would be an indicator of positive family functioning in China, we decided to use one's respect for parents in addition to their perceived support from parents towards their sexual minority status to assess the potential impact of family factors on the psychological adjustment among LGBs in China.

### **The Present Study**

The present study uses structural equation modeling (SEM) to predict psychological maladjustment of Chinese LGB young adults. We used a positive and negative measure (i.e., life satisfaction and depression) as well as one that would tap into social isolation, or loneliness to indicate *psychological maladjustment*. Our main objectives were (1) to test the potential influence of *minority stressors* (internalized homonegativity, self-concealment, and rejection sensitivity) on psychological maladjustment and (2) to examine whether positive family dynamics, specifically within the Chinese context, one's feelings of *respect for parents* and *perceived parental support for sexual orientation*, prevents psychological maladjustment. It was hypothesized that *minority stressors* would not be a significant predictor of psychological maladjustment relative to measures tapping into a strong parent-child bond because identification

as a sexual minority was not expected to be as central to one's wellbeing compared to family connectedness (Chung & Szymanski, 2006; Sung et al., 2015). Feelings of *respect for parents* and *perceived parental support for sexual orientation* were expected to be negatively associated with psychological maladjustment (Chow & Cheng, 2010; Shek, 2006). (3) Gender differences were also tested due to the traditional emphasis on patrilineal descent within families in China (Shek, 2006). It was expected that minority stress would be more detrimental and family dynamics more beneficial for sexual minority men than for sexual minority women.

#### Methods

The study sample included survey responses from 277 self-identified cisgender LGB young adults who were born and raised in mainland China (46% were women) between 18 and 33 years old (M = 22.39, SD = 3.35). We provided an option for participants to indicate their gender identity as transgender, but none identified as such. The sample was geographically diverse: 108 (39%) were from the East; 55 (20%) were from the North; 71 (26%) were from the South; 38 (14%) were from the West. A majority were pursuing an undergraduate degree at the time of survey (n = 163; 58.8%) whereas 78 (28.1%) were not in college and 35 (12.6%) had already completed their undergraduate degree. Relatedly, a majority of participants indicated that they were financially dependent on their parents (n = 187, 67.5%) and living with them (n = 174,62.8%). Most participants identified as gay/lesbian (n = 212; 76.5%) and the remaining identified as bisexual (n = 63; 22.7%). We also found that disclosure to parents about one's sexual orientation was low for the whole sample (M = 3.08, SD = 1.71; 1 = This person definitely doesnot know about your sexual orientation status, 7 = This person definitely knows about your sexual orientation status, and it is openly talked about; Mohr & Fassinger, 2000). There was wide variation in same-sex relationship experiences. Some individuals indicated never having a

same-sex relationship at the time of survey (n = 67; 24.1%) whereas some indicated they had 3 to 5 (n = 60; 21.6%). Less than 10% of the sample had more than 5 same-sex relationship experiences (n = 24; 8.6%). There were no significant gender differences on any of the above sample characteristics.

Participants were recruited through email and online messaging lists of organizations serving LGBT community in China in 2016. Participants were entered into a raffle to win one of twenty gift cards (approximately US\$15 each). Survey measures were translated and backtranslated by two bicultural and bilingual research assistants. First, each of them translated half of the measures from English to Chinese independently. Then, they exchanged the translated Chinese parts with each other and independently back-translated them into English. Upon finishing, they went through and discussed all the issues and concerns they had during the whole translation process with the first author (i.e., better wording in Chinese; more precise Chinese characters reflecting both the Chinese cultural context and the original English meaning). For example, the word "straight" indicating a heterosexual orientation has many ways of translation into Chinese. We decided to translate it into "Yi-Xing-Lian" (i.e., heterosexual) considering that some Chinese LGBs might not be familiar with the direct translation of the word "straight." All materials were finally agreed upon by three of them. Considering that most measures used in this study were never used in the Chinese context, the first author conducted interviews with three staff members at organizations serving the needs of LGBT individuals in China, asking them to provide feedback and comments for the survey. The survey was approved by members of the research team before distribution. All procedures were approved by the institutional review board of the first author.

#### **Measures**

**Demographic controls**. Participants were asked to indicate their gender (1 = man; 2 = woman; 3 = other, specify) and educational level (1 = less than college degree, 2 = college degree, 3 = graduate degree).

**Minority stress.** Three measures were used to indicate the *minority stress* latent variable. A 3-item internalized homophobia (IH) subscale and a 3-item self-concealment (SC) subscale, both from the LGB Identity Scale, were used (1 = Strongly disagree; 6 = Strongly agree; Mohr & Kendra, 2011). In addition, an adapted version of the validated Gay-Related Rejection Sensitivity (RS) Scale was used (Pachankis, Goldfried, & Ramrattan, 2008). Participants were asked to imagine themselves in six situations and for each situation, one question assessed how concerned they were (1 = Very unconcerned, 6 = Very concerned) and another question asked how likely they thought the situation happened because of their sexual orientation (1 = Very unlikely, 6 = Very likely). A sample situation is "Two of your old-fashioned aunts don't come talk to you even though they see you". Following the procedure used by previous researchers (Pachankis et al., 2008), responses to the two questions for each situation were first multiplied, and the products were then averaged across six situations to indicate RS. All three measures were found to be reliable in this sample (  $\alpha = .71$  for IH, .76 for SC, and .77 for RS) and were positively correlated with each other (rs ranged from .26 between SC and RS and .50 between IH and SC).

**Perceived parental support for sexual orientation.** Two measures were used to indicate perceived parental support for sexual orientation. A 4-item scale (Mohr & Fassinger, 2003) was completed in reference to one's mother and another 4 items were completed in

reference to one's father (1 = Strongly disagree, 6 = Strongly agree;). The scale has been demonstrated to be valid among LGB individuals (Mohr & Fassinger, 2003) and pilot interviews with LGB volunteers in China confirmed that items tapped into perceptions of parental support for one's sexual orientation. A sample item is "I fear that my mother/father will never accept my sexual orientation." The alpha was .82 for perceived maternal support and .85 for perceived paternal support.

Respect for parents. A 3-item revised short form of the Respect for Parents Measure was used to assess youth's endorsement of parental authority (RPM; 1 = *Strongly disagree*, 6 = *Strongly agree*; Boutakidis, Chao, & Rodríguez, 2011). A sample item is "I try to be obedient to my parents." The measure has been found to be valid with use in ethnic minority samples in the US (Boutakidis et al., 2011) and the alpha was .69 in this sample. A latent construct was indexed by the three items.

**Psychological maladjustment**. Three measures were used to indicate the latent construct of *maladjustment*: 7 items of the depression subscale from the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (0 = Did not apply to me at all, 3 = Applied to me very much, or most of the time; Szabó, 2010), an 8-item revised short form of the UCLA Loneliness Scale (UCLA; 1 = Never, 4 = Often; Russell, Peplau, and Cutrona, 1980), and 5 items tapping into participants' life satisfaction (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; 1 = Strongly disagree, 6 = Strongly agree). These measures were selected for their validity across a wide variety of studies (Pavot & Diener, 1993; Peplau & Cutrona, 1980; Russell, 1996; Szabó, 2010) and were found to be reliable in this sample (alphas = .91 for depression, .82 for UCLA, and .84 for SWLS).

#### Results

### **Preliminary Analyses**

Prior to conducting structural equation modeling (SEM), we screened our data for missing values and assessed the normality of each of our variables. We found very little missing data both at the scale and individual levels. Four measures had no missing data (self-concealment, or SC, internalized homonegativity, or IH, loneliness, and depression) and two measures had two missing values each (perceived paternal support for sexual orientation and rejection sensitivity, or RS). At the individual level, 97.84% of the sample had complete data (n = 272) and only 2.16% had incomplete data (n = 6). Due to the small number of missing data, we used mean replacement to assess modification and fit indices when necessary. We also deleted one case because scales for both perceived maternal and paternal support for sexual orientation as well as the scale for respect for parents was not completed. Furthermore, none of the variables had skewness or kurtosis levels over 1.5 and all variables had normal boxplots. Thus, no variables were transformed for SEM analyses. Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations of main variables are shown in Table 1

# **Model Testing**

We used SEM with maximum likelihood estimation using AMOS 24.0 software and selected three fit indices to supplement the Chi-Square test (see Figure 1). We used the comparative fit index (CFI; .90 or greater), the root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA; .08 or less), and the standardized root mean square residual (SRMR; .08 or less) to assess model fit to the data (Hu & Bentler, 1999). To test for gender differences, we compared a model with constrained paths to a model with unconstrained paths with the chi-square difference

test. A significant change in chi-square given the change in degrees of freedom would indicate the existence of gender differences in the model.

**Measurement model.** Fit indices based on SEM results indicated that the measurement model was a good fit to the data:  $\chi^2$  (df = 38) = 69.78, p = .001; CFI = .965, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .05. All standardized factor loadings were significant at the p < .001 level and ranged from .44 (for rejection sensitivity, or RS, indicating *minority stress*) to .91 (for perceived paternal support indicating *perceived parental support for sexual orientation*). Tests of gender differences in the measurement model revealed no significant differences between men and women in the sample when paths from each latent construct to manifest measures were constrained:  $\Delta\chi^2$  ( $\Delta$ df = 7) = 13.47, p > .05. However, when correlations among latent variables were also constrained, gender differences were significant:  $\Delta\chi^2$  ( $\Delta$ df = 12) = 22.36, p < .05. Table 2 shows the intercorrelations of the latent variables, which were all in expected directions. However, as can be seen on Table 2, the correlation between *perceived parental support for sexual orientation* and *respect for parents* was modestly significant for men but close to 0 for women.

**Structural model.** As can be seen in Figure 1, we specified the structural model with paths from three latent variables and two controls (gender and educational attainment; not shown in Figure 1) predicting *psychological maladjustment*. Results indicated a good fit of the structural model to the data:  $\chi^2$  (df = 52) = 96.37, p < .001; CFI = .953, RMSEA = .06, SRMR = .05. The model accounted for 34% of the variance in maladjustment. As indicated on Figure 1, the paths from *perceived parental support for sexual orientation* and *respect for parents* were found to be significant and these two latent constructs were negative predictors of *psychological maladjustment*. As expected, *minority stress* was not significantly predictive of *psychological maladjustment*. Gender did not have a significant effect on *psychological maladjustment*, but

educational attainment was a negative predictor of *psychological maladjustment*. These results suggest that higher educational attainment and positive family dynamics, as measured by perceived parental support and LGB individuals' respect for parents, are associated with positive psychological adjustment. Tests of gender differences in the structural model indicated no significant differences between men and women in the sample in the paths to *psychological maladjustment* ( $\Delta \chi^2$  ( $\Delta df = 4$ ) = 6.10, p > .05).

#### **Discussion**

The primary objective of this study was to test the importance of minority stress and the potential impact of family-related factors for understanding psychological maladjustment among LGB individuals within the Chinese context. We also tested gender differences in the relations between our variables between men and women in the sample. We found that measures of the parent-child relationship (i.e., respect for parents and parental support for sexual orientation) were significant and unique predictors of psychological maladjustment whereas minority stressors were not. These findings contribute uniquely to knowledge about the importance of maintaining family relationships among sexual minorities who struggle to live within a heavily traditional and family-oriented society despite undergoing profound economic and social changes. Indeed, as China continues to modernize and Chinese LGB individuals become more visible, future studies should also include measure of harassment and perceived discrimination when investigating their mental health outcomes (Meyer, 2003).

Contrary to our expectations, we did not find significant gender differences in our structural model. However, gender differences in the measurement model, particularly in the correlations between the two family-related latent variables, were found. It is noteworthy to first point out that Confucian social relationships are characterized by mutuality and the fulfillment of

roles and obligations to one another (Park & Chelsa, 2007). Accordingly, perceived support for sexual orientation should be positively related to respect for parents. However, for men, the correlation between the two family factors was negative whereas for women, the correlation between the two family variables was near zero. This would suggest that traditional family relationship contexts can suppress Chinese men but not women, as was expected. Due to the positive correlation we found between minority stress and respect for parents, it would also be reasonable to expect that future studies of minority stress in China would show different results as economic development advances and globalization increases. Consistent with studies conducted in advanced industrial societies (e.g., Feinstein et al., 2014; Mohr & Fassinger, 2003), it would be expected that perceived parental support for sexual orientation would remain important as a positive correlate of mental health whereas respect for parents may not be as significant as it was in this study.

Confucian cultural norms and values can explain why respect for parents would be a positive influence on one's mental health. However, the developmental status of the current sample might also help explain why respect for parents had unique associations with psychological adjustment despite its positive correlations with minority stress. Most participants were in college and financially dependent on parents. Thus, LGB young adults in this study were highly focused on completing their education as opposed to experimenting with alternative lifestyles. A majority of our participants were also not "out" to their parents. A study of a wider range of adults, from young adulthood to late adulthood, may be important to conduct in order to rigorously test the adaptiveness of respect for parents and mental health. Future studies should directly assess their identities as sexual minority individuals and compare them to traditional values, such as filial piety, in their relations to psychological adjustment.

Due to this study's cross-sectional design, it is important to acknowledge that reverse causation is also possible. In this case, LGB individuals who are less depressed, happier with life, and less lonely may be more likely to elicit parental support for sexual orientation and also have more respect for parents. Despite these limitations, this study contributes uniquely to understanding how important internal coping mechanisms relating to sexual minority status impact mental health among young adults in modern China. Based on our findings, we recommend that mental health professionals consider the importance of familial values when addressing the acute needs of LGB individuals from non-Western cultures. However, our findings also provide evidence that positive parental acceptance and support for one's sexual orientation can be a stronger platform of resilience. Therefore, public education for and awareness from parents and families regarding sexuality diversity may be more necessary in China.

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Table 1

Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations among Main Study Variables

	M(SD)	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Internalized homophobia – IH	2.42 (1.20)	.50***	.30***	.17**	44***	.13*	06	.10
2. Self-concealment – SC	3.37 (1.25)		.26***	.13*	41***	.05	06	.17**
3. Rejection sensitivity – RS	3.68 (0.90)			.06	36***	.17**	08	.21***
4. Respect for parents	4.02 (1.04)				12*	25***	.22***	21***
5. Parental support for sexual orientation	3.60 (1.31)					26***	.22***	21***
6. Depression	1.88 (0.62)						49***	.53***
7. Life satisfaction	3.32 (1.02)							44***
8. Loneliness	2.46 (0.59)							

*Note.* \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001.

 Table 2

 Intercorrelations of the Latent Variables by Gender

	1	2	3	4
1. Minority stress		64***	.22	.23*
2. Parental support for sexual orientation	64***		25*	39***
3. Respect for parents	.31*	01		44***
4. Psychological maladjustment	.10	29*	31*	

*Note.* \*p < .05; \*\*p < .01; \*\*\* p < .001. Men above the diagonal and women below the diagonal.

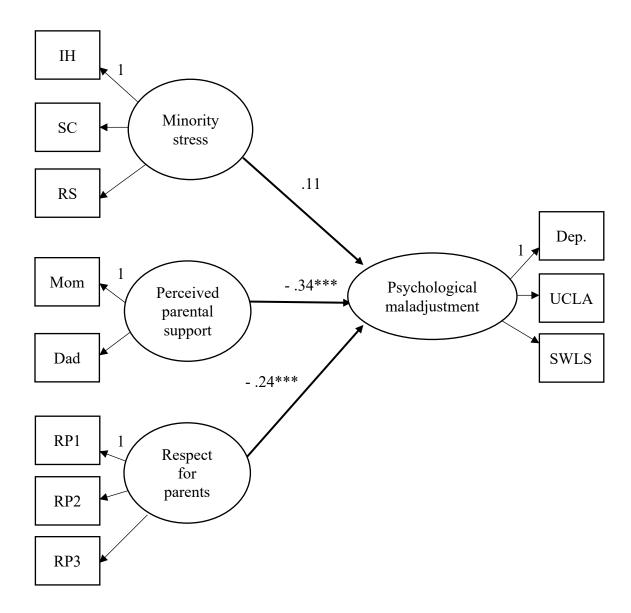


Figure 1. Hypothesized model (N = 277). Coefficients shown are standardized values. The direct paths for gender (-.05) and educational attainment (- .16\*) are not shown in model for diagram simplicity. Note. \*p < .05, \*\*\*p < .001. IH = internalized homonegativity, SC = self-concealment, RS = rejection sensitivity, Mom = perceived maternal support for sexual orientation, Dad = perceived paternal support for sexual orientation, RP1, RP2, RP3 = items from the respect for parents measure.