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We Pretend Like Sexuality Doesn't Exist: Managing Homophobia in Gaysian America

Despite the well documented cases of homophobia experienced by gay Asian men in Asian communities, there is currently little research examining how members of this group manage the stigmatized statuses of homosexuality. In this article, we examine stigma management strategies used by gay Asian men to deal with homophobia and explore how members of this group engage in both individual stigma management strategies as well as collective stigma management strategies with their family and friends in order to maintain family harmony. Finally, we also explore ways that members of this group attempt to redefine homosexuality in an effort to de-stigmatize what it means to be gay and Asian.

Keywords: gay Asian, stigma, homophobia, sexuality

Recent studies on gay Asian men have found that members of this group experience high levels of both racism in the gay community and homophobia in their ethnic communities. For example, a survey of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered Asian and Pacific Islander (API) men and women in New York found that 82% of respondents had personally experienced racism in the gay community and 76% experienced homophobia. Although the survey did not separate whether the experiences of homophobia were specifically in their API communities or in the larger society, 96% of the respondents reported that homophobia was a problem in API communities (Dang & Hu, 2005). In examining gay racial stigma targeted towards gay Asian men, Han (2007) argued that the source of this stigma may be the perceived femininity of Asian men compared to White men. That is, gay Asian men are stigmatized because they are perceived to lack masculine traits that have come to be defined in the gay community as desirable in potential sexual partners.

Responding to these findings, several scholars have explored the ways that gay Asian men manage the stigma of race in the larger gay community. In a study of gay Asian men

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who utilize gay online dating sites, Poon and Ho (2008) found that gay Asian men negotiate the stigma of race by attributing the racism that they encountered to the ignorance of some gay White men rather than to their own perceived physical shortcomings. The authors also found that gay Asian men actively challenge and resist negative stereotypes imposed on them by gay White men by redefining what these stereotypes imply, particularly the stereotype about Asian men having effeminate bodies compared to White men. In a study on gay Asian drag queens in Seattle, Han (2009) found that gay Asian men use the effeminate stereotypes about Asian men to trade the stigmatized status of "Asian," which they perceive as lowering their social status in the gay community, for the stigmatized status of "drag queens," which allows them to gain social currency. According to the author, the stigmatized status of "Asian" does not provide gay Asian men with any hidden advantages in their interactions with gay White men. More importantly, discrimination by gay White men based on race leads to gay Asian men feeling isolated from the larger gay community. While being a drag queen is also a stigmatized status in the gay community, it offered gay Asian men who are successful in winning various drag competitions with high levels of public notoriety and social prestige which they used to gain access to both social circles and to leadership positions in non-profit organizations targeting members of the gay community. Instead of trying to fight the stereotype that Asian men are more feminine, and thus less desirable compared to gay White men, gay Asian drag queens use the stereotype of the feminine Asian man to give them an advantage in drag pageants where "realness," the ability to pass as a "real" woman, is one of the criteria for winning. A more recent study found that gay Asian men use a number of different strategies to manage racism in the gay community including distancing themselves from other gay Asian men and attempting to affiliate with gay White men, promoting racial visibility, and increasing racial identification (Han, Proctor, & Choi, forthcoming). Despite their findings, none of the studies noted above included a discussion about the ways that gay Asian men might manage the stigma of homosexuality in their ethnic communities.

Efforts to examine how gay Asian men mange homophobia has garnered less attention than the ways that they manage racism. While several scholars have discussed homophobia in Asian communities (Chan, 1989; Homma & Saewyc, 2007; Nemoto et al., 2003; Ohnishi, Ibrahim, & Grzegorek, 2006; Poon, 2008; Wong, Chng, & Lo, 1998), these discussions focused on levels of homophobia that gay Asian men encountered rather than on the ways that members of this group manage the stigma associated with their sexuality. A reason for this may be due to the fact that most published personal accounts written by gay Asian men focus more on the impact of racism on their lives than on homophobia (Murray, 2008; Poon, 2006), which may be interpreted as homophobia being of less concern to gay Asian men than racism, despite their frequent experiences of both. Consequently, there have been few studies that have examined the ways that gay Asian men respond to homophobia within their ethnic communities and no studies exploring how gay Asian men specifically manage homophobia. Given this absence in the literature, there is a critical need to examine the impact of homophobia on the lives of gay Asian men. This isn't to imply that the topic has received no attention. In fact, one study conducted by Wilson and Yoshikawa (2004) addressed how gay Asian men responded to social discrimination having to do with both their race and sexuality. Their discussion was largely framed around how responding to acts of discrimination through such actions as confronting the discriminator, attributing

the discrimination to themselves, attempting to alter themselves to "fit in" with the discriminators, or avoid situations that might lead to discrimination, may impact risky sexual behaviors rather than a systematic exploration into the way that gay Asian men manage the stigma of homosexuality.

A recent paper by Choi and her colleagues (2011) examined strategies utilized by gay men of color to manage the stigma of race and sexuality. Using focus group data of 50 gay men of color, the authors identified a number of different ways that gay men of color managed social stigma. Among the strategies used to manage the stigma of homosexuality that the authors identified was concealment of their sexuality, disassociation from social settings, dismissing the stigmatization, drawing strength from external sources, and direct confrontation. However, their study examined larger patterns found among all gay men of color rather than focus specifically on gay Asian men.

In this paper, we attempt to contribute to the existing literature on the ways that gay Asian men manage the stigma associated with homosexuality within Asian communities by examining various ways that they minimize the potentially negative impact of homophobia through active stigma management. Expanding on previous studies that explored homophobia within Asian communities, we not only examine how gay Asian men respond to social discrimination but also address how they attempt to make their stigmatized status less salient. In addition, we address how gay Asian men actively attempt to redefine what it means to be gay and Asian in an attempt to change their status from a stigmatized one to a non-stigmatized one.

MANAGING STIGMA

According to Erving Goffman (1963, p. 3), stigma is an "attribute that is deeply discrediting" that prevents stigmatized individuals from full participation and acceptance in social life. But rather than originating from an attribute or a fixed characteristic that a person possesses, stigma is the result of particular kinds of social relationship between those who are stigmatized and those who have the power to stigmatize others. That is, members of subordinated groups are only stigmatized because the attributes or characteristics that they possess, or are alleged to possess, are perceived by members of the dominant groups as being somehow lacking or undesirable. Despite the widespread belief that stigma is the result of larger social processes that define entire groups of people as being stigmatized based on stereotypical characteristics that every member of the group is thought to possess, stigma management strategies have largely been theorized to operate on the personal level rather than on a social level. For example, in examining the existing literature on stigma management, Siegel and her colleagues (1998) point out that the majority of earlier works following the publication of Goffman's seminal book has tended to focus on the individual defensive strategies used by stigmatized group in an attempt to minimize their stigmatized statuses during personal interactions with members of non-stigmatized groups.

At the same time, Siegel and her colleagues (1998) also point out that more recent works have attempted to examine how stigmatized individuals are more than passive recipients of stigma who try to hide the stigmatized characteristics from others but also active participants who try to redefine the meaning of those characteristics that lead to their stigmatized statuses in order to de-stigmatize their statuses entirely. Examining the stigma felt by volun-

tarily childless parents, Park (2002) points out that childless parents not only manage the stigma of voluntary childlessness through various strategies aimed at minimizing the stigma but also make an active effort to redefine what it means to be married and childless by using proactive strategies that assert the social contributions of remaining childless. In this way, they change the status of being a childless couple from a stigmatized status to a positive status. Likewise, Thompson and his colleagues (2003) found that topless dancers attempt to embrace their roles as topless dancers in an effort mitigate the emotional impact of their stigmatized occupation on themselves as well as to redefine what it means to be a topless dancers in order to present it as a non-stigmatized occupation. These findings suggest that stigma management involves not only individual-level strategies aimed at minimizing the discomfort experienced by the stigmatized person or minimizing the stigma during interactions with members of non-stigmatized groups, but also an active attempt to redefine the meaning of the characteristic that leads to their being stigmatized.

In examining the experiences of gay Asian men, we find that members of this group also utilize a variety of strategies used by other stigmatized groups to manage the stigmatize category of homosexuality within the Asian community. While these stigma management strategies include individual strategies such passing as straight, which allows them to avoid potential discriminatory treatment from others, we also find that gay Asian men actively engage in strategies that attempt to redefine what it means to be both gay and Asian. Doing so, they not only mitigate the psychological costs associated with various stigma management strategies that focus on deception and denial, but also change their own self-conception, thus improving their own self-esteem.

<h2 style="text-align:center">METHODS</h2>

The data for this article come from 55 in-depth interviews with self-identified gay, bisexual, and queer Asian American men from San Diego and Seattle. Among the participants, 25% were Chinese, 33% Filipino, 15% Vietnamese, 20% multiracial, and 7% other Asian ethnicities. The mean age of these men was 23 and the mean number of years of schooling completed was 14. Among the men, 64% were foreign born. Among the immigrant men, the mean years of U.S. residence was 12 years. These participants were recruited using snowball sampling methods utilizing referrals from various non-profit organizations in the gay and Asian communities.

Analysis

We conducted line-by-line open coding in order to identify emergent themes as outlined by Strauss and Corbin (1998). We identified several codes including, "instances of homophobia with Asians," "reaction to homophobia," and "influences of homophobia." By examining these narratives, we found two broad categories for managing and negotiating homophobia used by the respondents in our study. These broad areas included strategies that were used to mitigate the discomfort of being gay which included both individual strategies and collective strategies and strategies that were used to change what it means to be gay and Asian. Rather than attempt to calculate a reliability coefficient, we met to discuss the codes and arrive at an agreement regarding our findings so as to have unanimous agree-

ment on the data we were interpreting. Our rationale for doing so was to provide a description of the data, as discussed below, rather than to make inferences from the data.

<div align="center">RESULTS</div>

Passing

As many scholars have noted, one possible method of managing a stigmatized status is through passing, the act of concealing one's stigma. For gay men, concealing their sexuality has long been an effective method of managing the stigma associated with being gay (Cain, 1991). However, in order to be successful at passing, the stigmatized individual must be able to hide the stigmatizing attribute in such a way that it would be invisible to others. The men in our study indicated that they often try to pass as straight when they are with other Asians. For example:

> Usually, when I'm with my extended family, or if I'm at a place where there are a lot of straight Asians, I try not to be too gay … like I won't wear certain things or walk a certain way. Sometimes, I'll even ask one of my girlfriends to go with me to family functions and stuff like that so nobody will ask me why I'm not dating anyone.

The above quote demonstrates that for some gay Asian men, passing as straight involves not behaving in stereotypically feminine ways. First, the informant noted that he tries "not to be too gay." For him, not being too gay included not wearing certain types of clothing and not walking a "certain way," rather than attempting to wear certain type of clothing or attempting to walk a certain way. That is, he doesn't try to act more masculine but rather attempts to act less feminine.

According to the informants, being gay in Asia is often equated with cross-dressing and taking on a stereotypically feminine role. In Asia, where there is a relatively small number of openly gay men, the only men who are gay and visible are those who cross-dress or perform exaggerated feminine gestures. Because of this, femininity is equated with homosexuality. Given the gendered definition of homosexuality among Asian Americans, passing as straight among other Asians simply involved avoiding stereotypically feminine behaviors. While gender theorist have argued that gender is a performance (Butler, 1990), gay Asian men believed that only femininity is performed. Although the above informant stated that he often takes a female accomplice to family functions to give off the illusion of being straight, simply not behaving in stereotypically feminine ways was enough to pass as straight. There was no need to "act tough" or "pretend to like sports," as one man noted. Simply being quite was enough to pass. So in the absence of a feminine gendered performance, heterosexuality was assumed. Because they were not engaging in stereotypically masculine behaviors that they would not normally engage in, the men did not believe that they were actively deceiving others. Instead, simply being quiet allowed the men to hide their sexuality while at the same time allowing them to believe that they were not putting on an "act" in order to "pretend they were straight," as one informant stated.

Covering

The strategy most commonly mentioned by gay Asian men when attempting to manage the stigma associated with their sexuality was to cover it. Covering is different from passing in that it involves the cooperation of others who are aware of the person's stigmatizing attribute. Rather than passing as straight among others who are unaware of their stigmatized attribute, covering involves managing stigma among those who are fully aware of the stigmatized status by minimizing the stigmatizing attribute during social interactions. Much like the proverbial elephant in the room, covering involves everyone knowing, but no one mentioning, the stigmatizing attribute. Because no one talks about it or talks about situations that would lead to confronting it, no attention is brought to it. Thus, in the act of covering, others help gay Asian men hide their sexuality in plain sight. As one informant put it:

> There was a time when my mother used to ask me constantly when I was going to find a girl and settle down. She would even try to fix me up within her friends' daughters. All that stuff stopped after I came out to her. Now, we just don't talk about it. I mean, any of it. Like, for example, she knows I live with my boyfriend, but she talks to me like I live alone. It's like she doesn't acknowledge his existence. She doesn't try to say, "Don't be gay" or anything like that or that being gay is wrong, we just simply ignore it. It's not like she asks when I'm going to settle down with a guy. We pretend like sexuality doesn't exist.

As the above quote demonstrates, covering is not simply the act of avoiding discussions about homosexuality but all sexuality. Because the inability to meet familial obligations of getting married and having children lead some gay Asian men to feel emotional turmoil, avoiding sexuality removes some of the burden associated with that particular expectation. Covering sexuality is a collective action as it not only involves the gay man hiding his sexuality from others but also involves family members not discussing marriage or children, conversations that would be common in Asian homes with heterosexual sons, so that sexuality does not become a topic of discussion.

In fact, most men who had not officially come out to their parents indicated that they suspected that their parents were aware of their sexuality but simply chose to cover it. The family's lack of discussion about sexuality, including marriage and children, made it easier for gay Asian men to not officially come out of the closet to their parents. If there were no questions about girlfriends or marriage plans, there was no need to confront these issues. For their part, gay Asian men also tended to avoid "officially" coming out to their parents. As one informant noted:

> Coming out is such a selfish thing to do. It serves no real purpose. My mother already knows that I'm gay, I know that I'm gay, so why force her to hear it? Telling her that I'm gay would be like telling her that the sky is blue and expecting her to be surprised.

In fact, some men indicated that "officially" coming out to their family members was not important to them at all. When asked why he did not officially come out to his parents, one informant stated:

> There are a lot of complications. If you do come out, it does not affect you. Asian families tend to be a lot more close to their relatives…. If you did come out and your relatives found out then you would be causing your family to lose face. And that is considered really really bad to cause your family to lose face.

As the above quotes demonstrates, not "officially" coming out was seen by gay Asian men as being a way to avoid bringing shame to the family and maintaining family harmony, even when they assumed that their family members knew about their sexuality. Whereas the western model of homosexuality would have us believe that coming out is important for gay men's mental and emotional well-being, the men in our study did not find coming out to their parents to be important. In fact, some argued the opposite, insisting that coming out would simply lead to family turmoil and would thus lead to worsening of their mental and emotional well-being. When asked if it was important that his parents publicly acknowledged that he was gay, one respondent stated, "Why should it be?"

For the men in our study, the pressure to cover was much greater than the pressure to pass as straight. According to Goffman, there is a "tendency for stigma to spread from the stigmatized individual to his close connections" leading to the stigmatization of those closely associated with the stigmatized individual, which he called "courtesy stigma" (1963:30). The men in our study were intimately aware of the potential for their family members to experience courtesy stigma because of their sexuality. This was in keeping with a recent survey of gay Asian men and women in New York City that found that while 76% of the respondents reported having experienced homophobia, 90% reported that their sexuality would hurt and/or embarrass their family (Dang and Hu, 2005). Highlighting this point, one informant stated:

> It might not hurt you because you don't care what other people think. But it reflects badly upon your family because they are still living within the community. You feel sad and remorseful, but you can't really help it. You feel sad not necessarily for yourself but for the people your sexual orientation affects, like your family. You can probably handle it if someone calls you a fag or queer, but if someone comes up to your mother and says it, it would hurt them. They are not directly involved with your sexual orientation but it hurts her. You feel bad thinking, "I've brought this upon her."

The above statement is in line with prior research on gay Asian men that has shown that members of this group hold more collectivist orientation than gay White men (Mao et al., 2002).

Certainly, non-Asian gay men may also avoid discussing their sexuality with their parents and family members. However, non-disclosure and avoidance among gay White men are normally associated with emotional turmoil. It has been hypothesized that for gay White men, actively discussing their sexuality with their parents may be important for developing a positive sense of self and not doing so may lead to emotional pressures (LaSala, 2000). For gay Asian men, however, avoidance provides a positive sense of self because it allowed them to maintain family harmony and not create family turmoil. According to Markus and Kitayama (1998), Asian identity is marked by the "interdependent" self that incorporates the

social relationships that one shares with significant others into their personal identities rather than the "independent" self where one's sense of self is independent of others. For those with an "interdependent" sense of self, meeting the needs of others and fitting in with the group is personally valued over pursuing individualist goals (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). For parents of gay Asian men, avoiding the discussion about sexuality involved no longer discussing the expected roles of marriage and family. It's not that the family avoided the topic of homosexuality, but rather the family avoided the topic of sexuality all together.

Normalizing

Despite the attempts made by some gay Asian men to pass or cover their stigma, arguing that gay Asian men manage the stigma of sexuality in the Asian community only by attempting to pass as straight or cover their sexuality would be misleading. More often, gay Asian men attempt to normalize what it means to be gay within a largely heterosexual Asian environment. As a stigma management strategy, normalization involves re-educating "normals," people who do not possess the stigmatizing attribute, in an attempt to discredit the stigmatized attribute all together (Elliott et al., 1990).

Within the larger Asian community, the primary method of normalizing their gay status was through stigma reversal. According to Killian (1985), stigma reversal occurs when the stigmatized group is able to impose moral inferiority to the members of a dominant group. In examining Somali immigrants in Toronto, Kusow (2004) demonstrated how they were able to counter the stigma of being "Black" by not only disavowing their own stigma but also by stigmatizing those who stigmatize them. We find that gay Asian men engage in similar tactics by pointing out what they believe are the shortcomings of homophobic Asians. Delving into the history of homosexuality in Asia, gay Asian men denounce homophobia within Asian cultures as a product of western influences. According to one informant:

> There's this misconception that homosexuality is less accepted in Asian cultures than in white cultures. There might be some truth to that now, but what most people don't realize is that historically, homosexuality was much better accepted in Asia than in Europe. For example, the Japanese samurai used to have affairs with young pages and so did the Koreans. Even today, if you look at places like India and Thailand, they are much more open to homosexuality than you might think. So really, it wasn't until they started having contact with western countries that they became so homophobic. So in a lot of ways, if Asian people are more homophobic, it's because they've bought into the western way of thinking.

By conceiving homophobia as a western import to Asian cultures, gay Asian men are able to view themselves as being more true to their cultural heritage than those who have adopted the western view of homosexuality at the expense of the traditional Asian view. By doing so, they stigmatize homophobic Asians for losing their cultural identity and "buying into" western thinking. In this way, it is the homophobic Asians who should be ultimately ashamed.

CONCLUSION

In this article, we examine the stigma management strategies used by gay Asian men to deal with the stigma of homosexuality. By examining this neglected topic, we address a number of gaps in both the stigma literature and the literature on gay Asian men. First, we find that gay Asian men engage in stigma management strategies similar to members of other stigmatized groups. Specifically, they attempt to pass as straight when they are among non-gay Asians. They also attempted to cover their sexuality when around those who are fully aware of their sexuality. Finally, they attempted to normalize their stigmatized status in Asian communities.

For gay Asian men, maintaining family harmony and meeting family obligations was an important goal. However, they saw their sexuality as interfering with family harmony and making them unable to meet the family obligations of getting married and having children in order to pass on the family name. This internal conflict affected them much more than negative attitudes towards homosexuality in the Asian community. For example, while very few men in our study stated that they had a problem being gay, many noted that they felt emotional conflict over not meeting family obligations. In order to manage these internal conflicts, they relied on their family members to avoid talking about topics that might lead to a discussion about sexuality, not only homosexuality, but all sexuality. By not discussing topics that may be relatively routine in Asian homes with heterosexual sons, such as marriage and future generations, gay Asian men's families helped them manage the discomfort they felt at being unable to meet family obligations.

Finally, our paper also explored the ways that members of stigmatized groups attempt to redefine the characteristics that lead to their stigmatization. The men in our study were able to develop a more positive sense of themselves as Asians by redefining homophobia among non-gay Asians as being a "western" influence and not truly a part of Asian beliefs. In this way, they were able to claim their "Asian-ness" as being more "authentic" than non-gay Asians who were homophobic.

By examining the experiences of gay Asian men, our work expands the stigma literature in two ways. First, stigma management can be more than the actions of an individual. Among gay Asian men, collective stigma management is a way that they not only help manage the internalized stigma of homosexuality experienced by their family members but also manage the conflict they personally feel over their perceived inability to meet family expectations. By ignoring sexuality, their families help gay Asian men manage the conflicts and turmoil they feel about their sexuality by removing the pressure to marry, have children, and pass the family name onto the next generation.

As with many qualitative studies, our data should be read with caution and our findings cannot be generalized to all gay Asian men. First, one of the primary limitations is that the key informants were all gay men who were comfortable with their sexuality and all of the participants were relatively open about their sexuality. That is, while they may not have "officially" come out to their families, they all had at least some friends who knew that they were gay and were mostly active in gay circles. Studies with gay Asian men who are not comfortable with their sexual orientation and not out to other people may find different results. Also, it should be noted that Asian Americans in the U.S. are of a number of different ethnic backgrounds, have different cultural experiences, and have different levels of

acculturation which may influence the way they perceive homosexuality. However, our focus was to provide a broad over view of their experiences within an American context, rather than examine ethnic-specific variations. Future research should make attempts to explore the differences that are bound to exist among different Asian ethnic groups. Nonetheless, this article provides a useful map for further exploration into ways multiply marginalized groups may manage stigma in a number of different ways.

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