THE EFFECTS OF SELF-CONSTRUAL AND THE LIVING ENVIRONMENT ON INTERNALIZED HOMOPHOBIA AMONG CHINESE GAY MEN

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ABSTRACT

Background and Objective
Internalized homophobia is common among gay men. Gay men who live in high-tolerance social environments tend to have less internalized homophobia than gay men who live in low-tolerance environments. The interaction between the living environment and self-construal influences gay men’s internalized homophobia.

Material and Methods
This study examined the association between self-construal and homophobia according to the living environment using a sample of gay men (N=521) aged 14–43 years. The data were collected between January and August 2017 using an online questionnaire that included an internalized homophobia scale, self-construal items, and demographic characteristics. The two-way ANOVA analyses revealed that the self-construal type was differentially associated with internalized homophobia depending on the living environment of the study participants.
Results
Living in a high-tolerance area while having an independent self-construal was associated with lower internalized homophobia scores than living in a low-tolerance area. In contrast, alternating between independent and dependent self-construals was associated with higher internalized homophobia scores.

Conclusion
Mental health services for participants with conflicted self-construals are emerging. Self-acceptance and compassion-focused practices should be explored as a way to help gay men adjust their conflicted self-construals.

Key Words: self-construal, homophobia, cross-cultural, homosexuality

Previous studies have demonstrated that emotions and psychosocial well-being are codetermined by the dynamic relationship between people’s self-construals and their social, political, and cultural surroundings. Chinese society is a relational society that values harmony with one’s social relationships and surroundings. “Self-construal” in a relational society refers to how one perceives himself or herself within the context of relationships with others. Markus and Kitayama claim that Western people are more individual-oriented and more focused on their personal desires, motives, and ambitions, while Eastern people are more socially oriented and tend to fulfill social and collective expectations, goals, and requirements.

Previous research has also shown that the well-being of Chinese people is more socially oriented, while the well-being of Americans is more individually oriented. Individuals from socially oriented cultures are more prone to be concerned with the opinions of others, strong conformity to others, and social norms. Chan (2017) and Ren (2018) claim that homosexual individuals in Chinese cultures describe feelings of guilt and shame about being a homosexual individual because of thoughts of how other people think or judge them and their family. Ren identified that homosexual individuals who tend to be more concerned about “others” opinions tend to conform to heteronormative traditions, such as entering a heterosexual marriage, implying that “other”-oriented homosexual individuals experience higher internalized homophobia than homosexual individuals who are not “other”-oriented.

Some research claims that different types of self-construals have different impacts on health and psychological well-being. Cross, Gore, and Morris claim that the well-being of individuals with high relational self-construals is significantly better than the well-being of those with low relational self-construals. Herek’s research claims that collectivism is associated with higher perceived levels of public stigma and behaviors, such as HIV-protective practices and seeking social support among same-sex-oriented persons. Convergent findings imply that self-construal has an impact on people’s identities and psychosocial well-being, such as their body image, psychological distress, and even perceived inclusion in or exclusion from a group. However, few of these findings have implications for integrating self-construal into research investigating homophobia among individuals of a same-sex sexual orientation. In a socially oriented and heterosexual-dominated society that widely endorses stigmatizing attitudes toward people with a same-sex sexual orientation, gay men who are more socially oriented may internalize these negative attitudes and believe that they should be stigmatized or discriminated against.
Internalized homophobia is a pivotal experience representing the most significant obstacle to positive gay identity and healthy functioning.\textsuperscript{18,19} Few studies have examined the relationship between gay men's self-construals and their internalized experience of homophobia. Some studies report that the different attitudes toward people of a homosexual orientation in high-tolerance and low-tolerance nations shape the differences in self-identity, internalized homophobia, and psychosocial well-being of these people.\textsuperscript{20,21} The globalization process has made it possible for many Chinese people with a same-sex sexual orientation to immigrate to high-tolerance environments. This study examines the complex interaction between an individual's cultural self-construal and the social context to which he or she is exposed. This research examines the association among self-construal, internalized homophobia, and psychosocial well-being among gay men based on their living environments.

\section*{METHODS}

\subsection*{Sample and Setting}

The data were collected through an anonymous, Internet-based survey platform between January and August 2017 from 521 participants aged 14–43 years. The researchers posted a description of the study's objectives and benefits, a confidentiality guarantee, the consent form, and contact information. Individuals who self-identified as gay men were recruited for this research and were provided informed consent material, including the topics of the survey and their rights as potential participants. To protect their confidentiality, they agreed via a typed response to participate in the research rather than typing their names on the online consent form. The online questionnaire was posted on different lesbian gay bisexual transgender (LGBT) social platforms. The average time to complete the questionnaire was approximately 6 minutes. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Department of Clinical Psychology, Southwest China Hospital. The participants in this study were gay men who were Chinese citizens (N=521). Ninety-nine respondents had lived in North America for more than 2 years, and 422 respondents were currently living in China. The other baseline characteristics of the cohort are presented in Table 1.

\subsection*{Assessments and Measurement}

\subsection*{Sociodemographic Characteristics}

The sociodemographic questions sought information regarding age, sex, education, occupation, income, and ethnicity.

\subsection*{Chinese Internalized Homophobia Scale.}

We used the Chinese Internalized Homophobia Scale to assess the participants' experience of internalized homophobia. This scale is valid and reliable and reflects the following three components of internalized homophobia: internalized heteronormativity (the reliability of this subscale is 0.71), family-oriented identity (the reliability of this subscale is 0.70), and socially oriented identity (the reliability of this subscale is 0.77). Internalized heteronormativity is the belief that homosexuality is abnormal. Socially oriented identity involves the way other people think about an individual or his or her family. Family-oriented identity refers to the ideology of filial piety, family first, carrying on the family line, social expectation to marry, raising children with the aim of guarding them from troubles subsequently in life, and conformity to heteronormative traditions. The items are rated from 1 (totally disagree) to 5 (totally agree). The reliability of the whole scale is 0.85.

\subsection*{Social Construals.}

One variable tested was the perceived sense of connection with a significant other or the extent to which one's choices and behaviors are influenced by others. Each subject rated himself from 0 (completely not influenced...
by significant others) to 10 (completely influenced by significant others). The question was as follows: What is the extent to which your behaviors, choices, and ways of doing things are influenced by others? You can rate yourself from 0 (completely not influenced by significant others) to 10 (completely influenced by significant others).

**Individual Construals.** Another variable tested was the perceived sense of independence, that is, the extent to which an individual makes decisions based on his choices. Each subject rated himself from 0 (decisions completely not based on own choice) to 10 (decisions completely based on own choice). The question was as follows: What is the extent to which your behavior, choices, and ways of doing things are determined by your personal willingness? You can rate yourself from 0 (completely not based on personal willingness) to 10 (completely based on personal willingness).

**Statistical Methods and Analysis**

The questionnaire data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). A two-by-three analysis of variance was performed using the self-construal type (more independent, equally independent and interdependent, and more interdependent) as the first factor and the living environment (living in China and living in high-tolerance countries, i.e., the United States [95 participants] and Canada [4 participants]) as the second factor. The researchers used the social construal score to deduce the individuals’ construals. If the score was below negative one, the researchers defined the respondent as more independent or self-reliant, that is, he makes decisions based on his own choices. The researchers defined the group whose deduced score was higher than one as having more interdependent self-construals. The researchers defined the group whose deduced score was between negative one and positive one having

<table>
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<th>TABLE 1 Demographic data</th>
<th>US N</th>
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<th>China N</th>
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The effects of self-construal and the living environment

equally interdependent and independent self-construals. Then, the effects of the living environment, self-construal type, and self-construal type by living environment (interaction) term variables were analyzed. A p-value less than 0.05 was interpreted as significant.

RESULTS

Comparison of Internalized Homophobia by Living Environment and Self-Construal Type

Of the 521 gay men who were approached, there was no significant difference in age between the sojourners group and the Chinese group. The age of the respondents from the Chinese group ranged from 15 to 43 years, with a mean of 26.55 and a standard deviation of 5.19. The age of the respondents from the sojourners group ranged from 14 to 42 years, with a mean of 27.7 and a standard deviation of 4.36. The data met the basic assumptions of independent-groups factorial ANOVA. Homogeneity tests were conducted to test the equality of variances (Levene’s test) (p=0.48, equal variance is assumed). In addition to the tests of the main effects and interaction effects, post hoc tests were used to compare the mean internalized homophobia scores of the participants by crossing the living environment with the self-construal type to determine whether there were differences in the perceptions of homophobia.

To determine whether self-construal was related to the impact of the living environment on the internalized homophobia scores, two-by-three analyses of variances of the self-construal type by living environment were performed, allowing for interactions (Table 2). The two-way ANOVA results indicated a significant interaction effect [F (2,515)=5.46, p=0.005, $\eta^2_p=0.02$] between the self-construal type and living environment [F (1,515)=13.82, p<0.001, $\eta^2_p=0.03$].

There were also main effects of the self-construal type [F (2,515)=11.20, p<0.001, $\eta^2_p=0.04$] and nationality [F (1,515)=13.82, p<0.001, $\eta^2_p=0.03$].
The gay men who lived in China (M=34.67, SD=0.34) experienced significantly more internalized homophobia than the gay men who lived in North America [(M=31.84, SD=0.68), p<0.001].

The gay men who had equally independent and interdependent self-construals experienced higher homophobia (M=35.25, SD=0.51) than those who had independent self-construals (M=31.87, SD=0.52), p<0.001. There were no significant differences between the gay men who exhibited equally independent and interdependent self-construals (M=35.25, SD=0.51) and those who exhibited interdependent self-construals (M=32.64, SD=0.88), and there were no significant differences between the gay men who exhibited independent self-construals (M=31.87, SD=0.52) and those who exhibited interdependent self-construals (M=32.64, SD=0.88).

Among all living environments and self-construal combinations, there was no significant difference between the participants living in China with equally independent and interdependent self-construals (M=35.15, SD=0.44) and those living in high-tolerance environments with equally independent and interdependent self-construals (M=35.36, SD=0.93).

The participants with independent self-construals who lived in high-tolerance environments (M=29.76, SD=0.93) experienced significantly less internalized homophobia than the participants who lived in China. The participants who lived in China with interdependent self-construals experienced significantly more internalized homophobia than those living in high-tolerance environments with interdependent self-construals. The participants with conflicted self-identities experienced similar levels of homophobia regardless of where they lived. The participants who lived in high-tolerance environments with independent or dependent self-construals experienced less homophobia than those with conflicted self-construals.

People with a same-sex sexual orientation face a double-edged challenge to their mental and physical health when they move abroad. Individuals with a same-sex sexual orientation experience a process of adjusting to a new culture, which is stressful. However, they may be able to pursue a lifestyle that offers freedom and tolerance to their homosexual identities. Living and studying abroad provides the possibility of encountering not only the world and new cultures but also one’s cultural identity in a context that may stimulate new questions and new formulations of the self. This study confirms that the more independent people with a same-sex sexual orientation who lived in high-tolerance environments with interdependent self-construals (M=30.40, SD=1.56) and those with independent self-construals who lived in high-tolerance environments (M=29.76, SD=0.93).

DISCUSSION

In this study, the researchers found that the people with individual-oriented self-construals who lived in high-tolerance environments experienced less internalized homophobia than the participants who lived in China. The participants who lived in China with interdependent self-construals experienced significantly more internalized homophobia than those living in high-tolerance environments with interdependent self-construals. The participants with conflicted self-identities experienced similar levels of homophobia regardless of where they lived. The participants who lived in high-tolerance environments with independent or dependent self-construals experienced less homophobia than those with conflicted self-construals.
The effects of self-construal and the living environment

The present research proposes a third dimension of self-construal in those who emphasize both types equally. This research found that people who alternate between both types of self-construals tend to experience more internalized homophobia than those who have either independent or independent self-construals. People with equally independent and interdependent self-construals may be conflicted about their own identity. This research suggests that regardless of where people live (a high-tolerance living environment or China), those with equally independent and interdependent self-construals tend to suffer internalized homophobia, implying that a conflicted self-image or self-identity is more closely related to psychological disturbances, such as homophobia. Previous research has identified that having a positive sexual identity is the most robust predictor of psychological well-being in the LGBT population.

Our research fuels hypotheses regarding self-construal and the living environment and investigates the underlying dynamic mechanisms. This study confirms the self-construal–environment interaction. Individuals with different self-construals respond differently to environmental variations. Individuals with conflicted self-construals tend to experience more internalized homophobia than individuals with other self-construals regardless of where they live. This article discusses opportunities for gay men to nurture their own self-identities and adjust to their social surroundings.

The results of this study have several potential clinical implications. First, current findings raise the possibility that individuals with homophobia may need to deal with their own conflicted identity. The identity conflicts make the gay men hard to adjust themselves to their social surroundings. This may be an intervention target to deal with their identity difficulties. Further research should investigate if the conflicted identity-focused intervention could be
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Second, individuals experience conflict between self-identities and may report increased levels of anxiety and decreased levels of life satisfaction. Therapist and clinicians who work in mental health settings with these clients may want to explore identity conflicts of such individuals and employ self-acceptance or compassion-focused practices as a way to help such individuals adjust their conflicted self-construals.31,32

Third, for those individuals with independent self-construes, it is important to encourage them to live in a gay-friendly cities or community which may help them to live an easy life. As mental health professionals, it is important to advocate the creation of an open and conducive social environment for LGBT populations. Future interventions should also improve homosexual individuals’ sexual identity and empower them to make their own choices rather than be guided by sociocultural stereotypes or other’s attitude toward them.

LIMITATIONS

Our study presents a unique insight into the dynamic relationships among self-construal, internalized homophobia, and psychosocial well-being in gay men in relation with their living environments. However, several potential limitations should be acknowledged. First, the limitation of the scale. The researchers extracted the core concept of self-construal to form the items of the questionnaire measuring self-construal. This study uses only two items to assess self-construal, which may lead to a deficiency in validity. Second, methodological limitations of this study included the cross-sectional design and the Internet-based self-report nature of the data. The cross-sectional design of the study eliminates the possibility for tracking participants over time. Consequently, potential interpretations and findings are limited; that is, a cross-sectional study cannot determine whether increased conflicted identity is a consequence of or a predisposing factor for homophobia. Future longitude study may help us to gain deeper understanding in regard with the phenomena. Further, the limitation is related to the representativeness of the sample. Internet-based surveys may introduce self-selection bias which means this research did not select participants based on a rigorous process to ensure the representativeness of the sample which may limit the generalizability of our findings. Third, the high level of education background of the participants may be overrepresented in the current Internet-based survey. Fourth, the subjective experiences of participants are largely unspoken in terms of the current research method. Qualitative interviews could provide additional information about the process of identity conflict and homophobia. Future research is needed to investigate these findings, including the use of qualitative methods, to identify their subjective experiences involved in the identity conflict and homophobia.

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