

**Violence in the “double closet”:
Female same-sex intimate partner violence and minority stress in China**

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Abstract

Intimate partner violence (IPV) has been identified as a public health issue among both heterosexual and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) populations. While attention has often been paid to IPV among heterosexual couples, there is limited research on the causes of and interventions for IPV confronting same-sex couples, especially those in non-Euro-American contexts. This article highlights the “double closet” nature of same-sex IPV, and, in particular, the triply marginalized position of lesbian victims of IPV due to their gender, sexuality, and experiences of violence in China. Extending ongoing discussions about minority stress faced by sexual minority people, it reveals how the daily stressors associated with identity concealment, coupled with relational selfhood and heteronormative institutional constraints, complicate lesbian relationships and violence in China. Focusing on the family-centered context provides an important window into the ways in which the perceived need to stay in the closet (hide one’s sexual identity) and rejection from the family of origin and the state influence lesbians’ experiences of IPV and inhibit many of them from disclosing violence. This article builds a dialogue between discussions of the closet and existing literature on IPV. It concludes by drawing attention to the need to break the silence around IPV and build alliances for developing culturally sensitive interventions aimed at addressing IPV.

Keywords: Coming out; intimate partner violence; lesbian; minority stress; relational self

Introduction

Research has shown the continued relevance of the closet in the lives of lesbians and other sexual minority people (Alonzo & Buttitta, 2019; Ellis, 2015; Kitzinger, 2005). However, less attention has been paid to the cultural meaning of the closet, particularly in the context of intimate partner violence (IPV). Informed by Celia Kitzinger’s trailblazing work *The Social Construction of Lesbianism* (1987), this article adopts a social constructionist approach to discussing IPV experienced by lesbians in relation to a complex set of familial, socio-cultural, and political conditions in China. As Kitzinger (2005) argues, heterosexuality is often taken for granted in daily interactions, rendering identity management, including when, where, why, how, and to whom one talks about the gay identity, part of sexual minority people’s everyday life. In what ways does the closet fuel and/or perpetuate IPV and permeate people’s relationships with their partners, families, and others? How can research on the closet and coming out inform studies about IPV, and vice versa?

With a focus on Chinese lesbians, this article discusses how gender, sexuality, and other cultural and structural factors intersect in the experience of female same-sex IPV in a (heterosexual) family-centered context, where same-sex relationships are stigmatized and coming out remains challenging (Kong, 2019; Lo, 2020, 2022). Western research has shown that same-sex IPV occurs at a rate that is comparable or even higher than heterosexual IPV (Decker et al., 2018; Rollè et al. 2018, 2019). Nevertheless, sexual minority victims of IPV encountered 70% greater odds of depression and 60% greater odds of anxiety than their heterosexual counterparts (Miller & Irvin, 2017). To date, compared with research on IPV among heterosexual populations, there remain a limited number of studies about the causes of and interventions for same-sex IPV (Santonico et al., 2021), especially in cultures where there is a lack of societal and institutional support for same-sex couples (Ayhan Balik & Bilgin, 2021). The minority stress theory proposes that sexual minority people experience unique and chronic stressors related to their minority status (Meyer, 2003). These stressors

typically include experiences of discrimination, internalized homophobia, expectations of rejection, and identity concealment (Meyer, 2003). Nevertheless, the associations between minority stress and IPV are not subject to full agreement across studies in different contexts (Longobardi & Badenes-Ribera, 2017). Considering the fact that lesbian identities and relationships are constructed within a specific time, place, and culture and given political meaning (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 2004) and that lesbians (as lesbians and as women) constitute a diverse group affected by heteronormativity in different contexts (Kitzinger, 2005), it is important to understand how IPV takes place in lesbian relationships within specific cultural spaces. Previous studies on Chinese lesbians suggest that this group of sexual minority women is doubly disadvantaged by gender inequality and heterosexual norms (Kam, 2013; Lo, 2020; Lo et al., 2022). Meanwhile, Chinese lesbians have generally received much less academic and public attention than gay men (Kong, 2016; Lo et al., 2022). In particular, little is known about the experiences and needs of lesbian victims of IPV, who, as I further argue, are triply marginalized due to their gender, sexuality, and experiences of violence.

The “double closet” and minority stress experienced by Chinese lesbians suffering from IPV

Studies suggest that the identity politics surrounding LGBTQ movements in the West, which are centered on visibility, life beyond the closet, and activism, are not echoed by many sexual minority people in China (Engebretsen et al., 2015; Lo, 2022). Notably, Western research indicates that coming out to significant others is generally considered an important milestone and an expression of authenticity and pride, yet many sexual minority people, including those in democratic Western societies, still struggle to do so due to the persistence of heterosexual norms (Alonzo & Buttitta, 2019; van Bergen et al., 2021). Scholars in Asian sexuality/queer studies have flagged the limitation of the liberal “out and proud” model of coming out, which is featured in Western literature, for understanding sexual identities and sexual disclosure in non-Western contexts (Kong, 2019; Lo, 2020). Openly disclosing one’s sexual identity is deemed too confrontational by many Chinese lesbians and gay men (Kong, 2019; Lo, 2020). Building on this line of inquiry, I argue that it is important to attend to the “double closet” experienced by Chinese lesbians, who bear the psychological cost associated with a stigmatized social identity and taboo on IPV.

To date, the vast majority of studies on IPV in China focus on married heterosexual couples, with only very few exceptions (Lin et al., 2020; Luo & Chiu, 2020). Using a nonprobability sample of 428 lesbians, Luo and Chiu (2020) found that 42% of the respondents were victims of IPV, while only 55% of them sought help. Another exception is Lin et al.’s (2020) survey utilizing a nonprobability sample of 225 lesbians in China. It showed that lesbian respondents experienced a higher rate of bidirectional psychological aggression (at 60%) and that of physical violence (at 19.1%) compared to heterosexual women (at 34.6% and 12.2%, respectively). Similarly, the limited literature on IPV among Chinese gay men found that they reported higher rates of IPV than did their heterosexual counterparts. For instance, Yu et al. (2013) found that Chinese gay men were five times more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to experience IPV and that 12% of gay men (n = 418) experienced the threat of being “outed” by their partners.

As shown in previous studies focusing on heterosexual people, IPV is often considered private shame that should be handled within the family and concealed from people outside the family in Chinese society (Chan, 2011). There is also a cultural belief that women have a moral responsibility to maintain marital and family harmony (Jackson, 2019). Notably, the problem of IPV faced by lesbians is further compounded by the social stigma of homosexuality. Coming out as a sexual minority person is considered an act of

bringing shame on the family and a threat to the “face” (prestige) of the family (Kam, 2013; Lo, 2020). In particular, taking the intense pressure for women to marry the opposite sex and have children in China into account (Lo & Chan, 2017), lesbians’ coming out and development of their same-sex relationships can be considered the very antithesis of the heterosexual family model, which is composed of two opposite-sex married parents and their biological child(ren) (Lo, 2020). Consequently, research has shown that many lesbians hide their sexual orientation and keep a low profile (Lo, 2020, 2022). Lo’s (2020) pioneering work on lesbians’ family-building experiences in China also shows that lesbians tend to “take an indirect and non-confrontational route” to family formation through different strategies (p. 637). These strategies include contracting a short-term marriage with a gay man to appear heterosexual and reframing their family-building and/or reproductive plans in ways that would appear more acceptable to their parents without mentioning the taboo subject of homosexuality (Lo, 2020). In short, these previous studies highlight the significance of relational selfhood in Chinese culture, which prioritizes the needs of the family and social respectability over the psychological needs of the individual (Lo, 2022; Qi, 2021). Relational selfhood and the invisibility of lesbian identity may explain why there has been under-reporting of lesbian IPV and limited understanding of its nature. Understanding the above-mentioned relational and familial challenges serves as a key starting point for an in-depth understanding of unique sources of stress confronting Chinese lesbians, which remain underexplored in the study of IPV.

Furthermore, the fact that the state refuses to officially acknowledge the existence of sexual minority people in its establishment of the domestic violence ordinance makes it difficult for lesbians to come to terms with, report, and address IPV. In China, lesbians (and gay men) are not granted the rights to same-sex marriage or civil partnership (Lo, 2022). There is also no legal protection against discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation. In 2015, China announced its first law against domestic violence. While the law explicitly covers IPV “within cohabiting relationships,” it does not specify whether same-sex couples can be protected under this law. In fact, its implementation is almost exclusively confined to married heterosexual couples only (Yang et al., 2019). As shown in a report published by Common Language (2017), one of the few local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) devoted to helping LGBTQ people who suffer from discrimination and violence in China, lesbian (and gay) couples who experience IPV tend not to seek help from the police or through formal legal institutions. Many same-sex couples fear being forced to come out of the closet and exposing themselves to the public spotlight if they bring their IPV case to the court (Common Language, 2017). Also, whether relevant legal authorities will respond to cases about IPV among same-sex couples and prosecute perpetrators of violence is still open to doubt, given that there is currently no precedence.

Taken together, the discussion of the relational, familial, and structural factors has important implications for future research. It is noteworthy that the perceived need to stay in the closet and follow heterosexual expectations and the lack of institutional support may pose double threats to lesbians - not only silencing IPV experienced by some lesbians, but also potentially creating extra stress for them and instigating partner conflicts and even violence. Within the limited literature on lesbian IPV in China, Lin et al.’s (2020) study found that psychological aggression, including the threat of being “outed” by one’s partner, was most commonly reported. Nevertheless, little is known about how relational and familial factors, such as identity concealment and rejection from the family of origin, may trigger couple conflicts and excuses for IPV. In other words, while the existing literature provides important quantitative evidence of the higher incidence of IPV among same-sex couples and attributes it to the heteronormative environment in Chinese society, it fails to test the mechanism through which minority stressors are associated with IPV. To address this gap, it is important

to incorporate cultural considerations into the understanding of same-sex IPV. Further quantitative research is needed to examine the effects of minority stressors, namely those associated with identity concealment and expectations of rejection, on both IPV and help-seeking experiences. Qualitative methodologies, such as in-depth interviews and focus groups, should also be used to develop a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of the lived experiences of lesbian victims of IPV, including their needs and challenges of help-seeking.

Ways moving forward: Breaking the silence around violence and building alliances

While IPV within same-sex couples has received increasing attention by scholars and mental health professionals, especially those in the Global North (Decker et al., 2018), understanding same-sex IPV prevalence and associated factors remains challenging due to the silence that has historically existed around violence within the LGBTQ community (Rollè et al. 2018). Such silence can be attributable to the fear that recognizing same-sex IPV may be used to further stigmatize the already marginalized LGBTQ community (Rollè et al. 2018). When it comes to lesbian IPV in particular, there is concern that discussing the phenomenon may increase hostile reactions to feminism and female homosexuality, and at the same time, shift public attention away from women's experiences of abuse that are often perpetrated by men in patriarchal society (Ristock, 2003). Despite these fears, there is growing consensus about the need for more open and safe space where same-sex IPV can be disclosed and addressed (Rollè et al. 2018). More importantly, understanding culture is essential to advancing research on same-sex IPV and providing effective support systems and interventions (Santoniccolo et al., 2021).

This article highlights the continued significance of the closet and its role in shaping Chinese lesbians' experiences of IPV and help-seeking behaviors. As suggested by Land and Kitzinger (2005), heterosexism, which confers privileges on heterosexual people and marginalizes non-heterosexual ones, is “woven into the warp and weft of social interaction — affecting where we go, whom we touch, how we talk, what we say in our everyday lives” (p. 372). While homosexuality per se is not criminalized in China, the family-centered Chinese context brings to the fore the ways in which heterosexism penetrates same-sex relationships and family lives, as evidenced by the multiple roles lesbians may perform, such as the role of a closeted lesbian, a filial daughter who pretends to be straight, and/or a wife in a “contract marriage” with a gay husband (Lo, 2020, 2022; Lo et al., 2022). It is within this context that Chinese lesbians who experience IPV tend to either stay silent, or turn to personal, informal networks, particularly lesbian friends and community members, to handle violence (Luo & Chiu, 2020). In this regard, community-based interventions are of paramount importance. For instance, Common Language has established a “Rainbow Anti-Violence Center,” Asia's first center for combating violence faced by Chinese LGBTQ people. The Center plays a key role in strengthening violence prevention and awareness in the Chinese community. It also offers direct services to LGBTQ victims of violence, including IPV and violence imposed by parents, through partnering with social workers and other organizations in China. It is hoped that social workers can become more sensitized to the unique needs and challenges of LGBTQ people, including their perceived risks of coming out of the closet, rejection from parents, and power dynamics within the couple (Common Language, 2017). Consequently, front-line service providers can be equipped to provide culturally sensitive counseling and guidance for LGBTQ victims of IPV on how to terminate abusive relationships. Despite the fact that local LGBTQ organizations have been spied on or suppressed by the government (Engebretsen et al., 2015), alliances between NGOs and different sectors can be seen as a form of bottom-up resistance against heterosexism, offering opportunities for lesbians and other sexual minority people to understand, disclose, and/or address IPV.

Nevertheless, these community-based interventions are limited in their capacity to implement actual protection for victims of IPV or deterrence measures aimed at perpetrators of violence, given the state's refusal to legally recognize same-sex partnerships. There remains a significant gap in services and interventions for same-sex victims of IPV. In the long run, not only alliances between NGOs and mental health professionals but also those between the state, the family, and civil society are urgently needed in order to protect and empower lesbians and other sexual minority people in China. Specifically, it is important to legally recognize the partnership status of same-sex couples and expand the legislative definition of IPV to cover same-sex relationships. LGBTQ-sensitive training should also be provided for mental health professionals and law enforcement officials to handle IPV outside the heterosexual family model.

Conclusion

To conclude, this article highlights the “double closet” nature of same-sex IPV, and in particular, the triply marginalized position of lesbian victims of IPV due to their gender, sexuality, and experiences of violence in China. It shows that the shame associated with IPV and that with homosexuality – both of which reflect the cultural significance of the “face” (prestige) of the family to one's relational selfhood – makes the prevention of and interventions for same-sex IPV challenging in Chinese society, where lesbian (and gay) couples continue to suffer from the lack of legal and social support. These insights drawn from the discussion of relational, familial, and structural factors can be applied and further developed in Asian and other societies. While a growing body of literature points to the role of minority stress in same-sex IPV (Ayhan Balik & Bilgin, 2021), there is clearly a need to stretch beyond the commonly examined individual and dyadic characteristics to study the sources of stress and support beyond the couple, including those arising from the wider family, LGBTQ communities, and the state. Future research should continue to explore the significance of the closet in the stressors of lesbian lives and identify culturally sensitive ways of facilitating lesbians to seek help in the face of IPV.

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