Disclosing Bisexuality as a Chinese Daughter: An Autoethnography

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Abstract

This autoethnography explores the experience of the author, a bisexual Chinese woman, navigating a conversation about her same-sex relationship with her mother, in the context of Chinese family culture. Rooted in Confucian values, Chinese culture emphasizes traditional family roles of women and legitimizes heteronormativity, adding a burden to those who do not conform to those norms. The paper examines communication strategies adopted in the author's coming-out narrative within the mother-daughter relationship under the Co-cultural Communication Theory framework. This article seeks to contribute to the discourse of East Asian and Chinese queer studies by analyzing personal experiences.

Keywords

bisexuality, Chinese, queer, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, Co-cultural Communication Theory

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Introduction

Growing up in a traditional Chinese household, I was instilled with a strong sense of cultural values. My parents enrolled me in "Sunday schools" from fourth to sixth grade to learn Confucian teachings. While I appreciated learning about ancient Chinese literature, my parents anticipated my commitment to invaluable Chinese traditions. They envisioned me as an obedient daughter, then an obedient wife. However, this vision began to unravel in seventh grade when my mother discovered my secret relationship with my then-boyfriend. The latter expectation was shattered when I disclosed my current inclination toward homosexuality in my junior year of college. I brought up the subject with my mother on the dark sidewalk when we were going back home in our hometown, a small underdeveloped city. It was 10 PM. I knew I couldn't risk mentioning such a shocking topic at home where we live with our grandparents who have cardiovascular disease, but I have been waiting to say it. I noted down the coming-out conversation that night as much as I remembered to remind myself of the attitude of my closest family member and trace its evolution. In this essay, I will examine segments of verbal conversation with my mother about my sexuality, analyze my assumptions about Chinese cultural values, and identify my communication strategies through the lens of Co-cultural Communication Theory (Orbe, 1998). The selected text is categorized by two themes: defending my sexuality, and seeking the balance between kinship and my unaccepted sexuality. These two themes lead to three major co-cultural communication orientations: aggressive accommodation, assertive assimilation, and nonassertive separation.

Aggressive Accommodation

Mom: "It [homosexuality] is illegal and unnatural. Human beings will go extinct."

> Me: (Look up statistics from the internet) "Same-sex marriage is legalized in 34 countries and regions all over the world. Plus, same-sex marriage not being legalized doesn't mean homosexuality breaches the law. Even straight couples in China today are not getting married or having children. By your logic, human beings can go extinct even without gay people — the marriage rate and birth rate in China are so low due to economic downturn and a lack of social welfare. Besides, lesbians can have children through various means, including adoption."

My mother posed a classic question about homosexuality, questioning the perceived lack of morality deviating from the mission of reproduction. Homosexuality was declassified as a mental disorder by the Chinese Psychiatric Association in 2001 (Gittings, 2001), a year before my birth. However, I came to realize that my mother grew up during the period when same-sex relationships were outlawed, between 1949 to the 1990s (Bie & Tang, 2016). In denying homosexuality, I infer that she endorsed the legal and so-called natural practice of heterosexual marriage and the traditional roles of wife and mother.

The co-cultural communication model is constructed on the standpoint theory, to describe the "interactions among underrepresented and dominant group members" (Orbe, 1998). The framework is particularly useful for studying "what" and "how" in the coming out discourse, according to Bie and Tang (2016).

To address my mother's biases regarding same-sex relationships, I engaged in a debate by presenting facts, employing logic, and redirecting blame. The aggressive accommodation approach, as outlined by Orbe (1998), seeks to promote change within dominant structures with a genuine desire to collaborate with members of the dominant group. This involves the practices of confrontation and seeking advantages, also occasionally incorporating the assertive

accommodation approach to avoid a separatist perception (Orbe, 1998). While the government

reinforces the stigma of homosexuality through strict censorship of diversity discourse in mass

media (Engebretsen, 2014), I categorized the administration as the dominant group, along with

heterosexual couples. Through blame-shifting, my aim was to confront her by transferring the

significant burden of sustaining the population to the dominant group. I brought up adoption and

the increasing number of countries legalizing same-sex marriage to counter her assertion of

"unnatural." Simultaneously, I sought to educate her on current policies regarding

homosexuality. Notably, the Chinese adoption policy permits single women to adopt children,

offering an alternative for homosexual couples to fulfill filial norms without adhering to

heterosexual marriage, thus aligning with the expectations of the dominant group. My response

addressed my mother's question with refutation while expressing a desire to meet traditional

expectations.

Assertive Assimilation

Me: "I've talked to some friends, and even straight Chinese girls at my school don't like

their male peers. Why do you insist that I like men?"

Mom: "Because it's normal."

Me: "I didn't live in a vacuum, I've still been getting in touch with men. My standards

are high, and I haven't found anyone I like… Meanwhile, I was attracted by a girl."

I realized that the Western discourse on equality wouldn't sway my mother. Therefore, I shifted

to comply with norms within my dominant social group – straight Chinese girls my age studying

at Pepperdine. In addition, my mother and I concurred on the notion that a woman should rather

be single than pursue a partner who fails to meet her standards. Without explicitly conveying that

I was attracted to an excellent person regardless of her gender, I emphasized my efforts to align

with the norm and once again shifted the blame to heterosexual male peers in the dominant group.

Bie and Tang argue that coming out to parents in the Chinese context is the most challenging scenario compared with coming out to other audiences (2016). Chinese homosexual individuals often adopt an assertive assimilation orientation if they perceive mere tolerance instead of full embracement (2016). Assertive assimilation strives to "downplay co-cultural differences and try to become absorbed into dominant society" (Orbe, 1998). I alluded to a long-existing consensus between my mother and me about how women should keep a high standard when seeking their partner, in order to convince her that my sexuality is desirable. While my mother was concerned about the abnormality of my sexual orientation, I referred to my experience with female peers in the dominant group and focused on our similarities in choosing romantic partners, making an effort to assimilate with a rising norm.

The intergenerational difference in processing topics on sexuality is tightly related to the level of exposure to marginalized groups. Parental panic over rejections stems from parents' struggle to comprehend homosexuality and their limited experience on this subject (Wei, 2023). Presenting homosexuality is unprecedented in my family. I sought to defend my sexuality by highlighting similarities between the co-cultural and dominant groups through the heterosexual perspective, in order to fit in a relatively dominant narrative. While my mother implied my choice of partner failed women's traditional role in reproduction, I attempted to redirect the blame to males who did not meet my expectations, in an effort to change the subject of criticism.

Nonassertive Separation

Me: "I'm just letting you know; if you don't support it, it's okay."

…Mom: "Have you thought about how the family will react?"

Me: "I don't plan to tell them."

Mom: "Have you considered the consequences of society not accepting it? Your family will become the subject of gossip and ridicule."

Me: "It's not like I'm going to walk down the street and announce that I'm a lesbian."

Mom: "Your dad has provided for you for so long."

Me: "He's been hoping for me to get married and have kids soon. I'm only twenty, and I haven't even finished my undergrad degree. I don't plan to tell him; I'll delay it."

The conversation approached its end, as my mother and I were staring at each other outside the neighborhood at midnight and both felt exhausted. The reason for having this conversation in a public place with few people around was to save face for both me and my mother — to avoid exposing it to other family members. I have always perceived my mother and me to be the two most open-minded people in the whole family. If she didn't accept it, facing the rest of the family would be even more challenging.

Engebresten states that in the East Asian context, sexual identity itself is not the problem, but an intimate relationship that "interferes with the ability to perform one's role in the family" is the cause of conflict (2014). Making my sexuality open risks my parents' reputation for raising a deviant daughter and their incapability to correct me. The risk has two layers, my parents' reputation among the extended family and my family's reputation in social relationships. I expected to make both of my parents aware of my sexuality but not to the extended family. When my mother said, "Your dad has provided for you for so long," it was more of a statement than a question that I should obey his expectations out of filial piety: giving back to the family with gratitude, not with humiliation.

I understood that my mother's attitude would not shift overnight, thus altering my preferred communication outcome from accommodation and assimilation to separation. Separation can involve "subtle communicative practices to maintain a separation orientation" depending on situational circumstances (Orbe, 1998). Wei developed the concept of "stretched kinship" to describe the long-distance and long-term separation between young queer people and their families, which often intensifies detachment as queer individuals conceal their sexual orientation (2023). In order to preserve family relationships, I chose to psychologically maintain barriers from my father and other family members in the dominant group. Studying abroad in the United States as an international student and being away from my home country also contributes to physical detachment. While I recognized them as a potential source of pressure, I am aware that my sexuality may subject them to social and moral pressure as well.

In navigating interactions with the dominant group, co-cultural group members often find themselves fulfilling existing expectations while facing unavoidable encounters, as highlighted by Orbe (1998). If I face inevitable occasions with family members of the dominant group, I may pretend by "passing up the opportunity for repair" the heterosexual presumptions, for the purpose of avoiding condemnation and conforming to "normality" (Land & Kitzinger, 2005). The decision of avoidance aims to maintain the balance between my kinship and unaccepted sexuality.

Moving Forward

Through this reflection on my own communication orientations and approaches, it reminds me of the underlying heteronormativity within my narrative. I attempted to convince my mother about the "normativity" of me being attracted to a woman. To achieve that, I continuously negotiate under a heterosexual norm and align myself with that logic to create

seemingly valid arguments. Yet, I forgot that it is a strong repulsive force of heteronormativity that marginalized queerness in the first place. It may never yield productive outcomes since they are contradictory. Though there was significant pushback, and the progress stopped at separation, I believe that there is room for future communication with more friendly approaches. Moreover, I realized the pressure and responsibility that fell on my mother's shoulders, as she carried my secret and came into my closet. Moving forward, I intend to use the model to guide my future coming-out strategies, and compose well-considered communication approaches that can reach higher acceptance. I will also avoid taking acceptance for granted and think through my family's perspective to reach an optimal outcome for both the co-cultural and dominant group — in this case, my family and I.

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