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How do Sexual Identity, and Coming Out Affect Stress, Depression, and Suicidal Ideation and Attempts Among Men Who Have Sex With Men in South Korea?

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Abstract

Objectives: This study investigated the status of sexual identity, perceived stigma, stress, depression, and suicidal ideation and attempts. It also examined how sexual identity and “coming out” affect stress, depression, and suicidal ideation and attempts.

Methods: Suicidal ideation, psychological health status, and health-related behaviors were assessed using the Internet to maximize the confidentiality of the participants, men who have sex with men (MSM). The data were collected from a total of 873 MSM aged between 19 years and 59 years in 2014.

Results: Only 20.9% of the MSM had come out (18.0% voluntarily and 2.9% by others). The prevalences of perceived stress and depression among MSM were 46.7% and 42.7%, respectively, compared with 20.1% and 7.4% among general men. Approximately 32% of the MSM reported any suicidal ideation, and 3.3% had attempted suicide in the past year. The likelihood of suicidal ideation was significantly associated with being age 30–39 years [odds ratio (OR) = 1.8], high school or less (OR = 1.6), having been outed (OR = 5.2), feeling stressed (OR = 1.8), and feeling depressed (OR = 12.4) after sociodemographic factors and other perceptions were controlled for.

Conclusion: The present study provides evidence that MSM are at an elevated risk for suicidal ideation and attempts with high stress and depression. Some risk factors were specific to being gay or bisexual in a hostile environment.

1. Introduction

Many studies have found that suicidal ideation and attempts among lesbians, gay men, and bisexual persons

are higher than among heterosexual individuals (or general populations) [1–4]. In addition, these groups have comparatively higher levels of stress and depression. This may be linked to heterocentric cultures and

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homophobia; Asian cultures, including South Korea's, have higher stigma related to homophobia. Because South Korean tradition places intense value on lineage, marriage, and children, these expectations are considered normal and thus contribute to stigma, even among the unmarried and divorced as well as homosexuals [5].

Recently, suicide has become a serious public health problem in South Korea [6]. According to a report by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [7], Korea had the highest suicide rate with nearly 30 deaths per 100,000 population. However, homosexuals are more likely to commit suicide than the general population because homosexuality is widely stigmatized in Korea. It is impossible to know the exact suicide rate of homosexuals, because sexuality and gender minorities are often hidden and even unknown. Homosexuals do not come out for fear of being rejected by family and friends or discrimination in employment, promotion, housing, and other basic rights [5,8]. The rate of coming out in Korea is only 13.5%, lower than that of other countries [5]. Many studies that have examined determinants of suicidality that are specific to MSM have focused on both developmental life transitions (e.g., adopting sexual identity or "coming out") and social and cultural stressors (e.g., perceived stigmatization, antigay hostility). Homosexuals have higher rates of all-cause mortality, and those who live in areas with a higher degree of social stigma towards homosexuality tend to commit suicide at earlier ages [9].

According to Meyer [10], this high prevalence of poor mental health problems and risky behaviors in homosexuals can be explained and understood in terms of minority stress. The stigma, prejudice, and discrimination create a hostile and stressful social environment that causes stress, depression, substance use, and suicidal behavior among minority individuals. They are likely to be subject to such conflicts because the dominant culture, social structures, and norms do not typically reflect those of the minority group. Studies on homosexuals focus on perceived stigma and sexual identity, which affect gay-related stress such as coming out as homosexual. The mechanisms that underlie the associations between sexual identity and stress have been explored in a number of studies with mediation models that affect negative mental health problems such as stress, depression, and suicidal ideation.

Suicide follows several steps: suicidal ideation, plans, and attempts, and suicidal ideation is believed to precede the onset of the plans and attempts. Thus, it has been considered one of the strong predictors of future suicide [11,12]. Preventing suicide requires interventions that prevent the progression of thought to suicide attempt [13,14]. Early identification of suicidal ideation is important for preventing suicide. Many studies have identified characteristics of people who have suicidal ideation; risky behaviors, substance use,

and poor mental health have been considered risk factors of suicidal ideation [15–17].

Men who have sex with men (MSM) have been highlighted as a high-risk group for poor mental health including stress, depression, and suicidal ideation and attempts. However, basic research on mental health, including suicidal behavior in this group in Korea, is both rare in quantity and deficient in quality, particularly with respect to sampling. Because homosexuality is also regarded as difficult and uncomfortable to discuss, research in this group is in a relatively underdeveloped state in Korea [5]. A number of factors combine to put MSM populations at increased risk.

Therefore, the aims of this study were: (1) to identify the status of sexual identity, coming out, perceived stigma, and poor mental health problems among MSM in South Korea; (2) to identify the differences in poor mental health problems between MSM and the general male population; and (3) how do sexual identity and coming-out affect stress, depression, and suicidal ideation and attempts among MSM in South Korea.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Sample and data collection

In South Korea, homosexuality is heavily stigmatized, which makes it difficult to contact, much less survey, the homosexual subpopulation. Many homosexuals or bisexuals come out to very few people, if any, thus leading to an almost nonexistent gay community in which identities are frequently kept hidden. One of the few ways to approach the gay community is through the anonymity of Internet clubs and membership-driven websites. A self-report, cross-sectional correlational study was undertaken. The recruitment procedures were based upon approaches that had been utilized successfully in previous research [5]. One such website (<http://www.ivancity.com>) for homosexuals was chosen for recruiting a survey sample. The eligibility criteria for this study were MSM aged 20–59 years who reported ever having had insertive or receptive anal intercourse with another man. The website has a membership list with general information. Dormant accounts (inactive for 6 months), redundant users, those outside of the specified age range, and those with typographical errors in their account ID information were removed. A stratified random sample of 5,000 was ultimately selected. The target sample size was 1,000, but low response rates were expected, so 5,000 participants were included in the initial mailing. The sample population was then stratified by age into four categories: 20–29 years, 30–39 years, 40–49 years, and 50–59 years. Within the age ranges of 20–29 years and 30–39 years, the desired number of individuals was achieved. Additional reminder messages were sent to those within the 40–49 and 50–59 age ranges. A total of 873 MSM completed

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