

Understanding the process of homosexual identity formation among Asian and Pacific Islander youth

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Young American-raised Asian and Pacific Islanders (API), who are in the sexual minority, face psychological and social stresses in dealing with their families' values and ancestral cultures that significantly impact the development of their ethnic and sexual identities.

API teens and young adults identified as [gay](#), lesbian, bisexual, and transgender face a different set of challenges than their western or Caucasian peers, which can lead to rejection from their families who emigrated to the U.S. and a stigmatization by the larger Asian community.

In a new study, Hyeouk Chris Hahm, Assistant Professor at the BU School of Social Work has developed a new intellectual framework for the development of positive ethnic/sexual identities among API gays and lesbian adolescents.

The process of homosexual identify formation among API youth, where the role of family life, personal sacrifice for family tranquility and generational clashes are central social stresses, is in addition to the external factors as racism, sexism and acculturation, that many Asian Americans face. This combination of ethnic and gender differences has led the BU researchers to develop a new model of identity formation for this group which also serves to increase understanding of the diversity of the "new gay teenager."

Their study is based on Hahm's earlier study, about 1,000 Asian American [adolescents](#) and young adults (18 to 27 years old), who said they were attracted to the same sex. This group struggled to both fit in with the prevailing American culture and also establish an authentic sexual identity that they knew was different from the norms of mainstream U.S. and their parents culture (primarily from China, Japan and Korea).

"For instance, in South Korea, where male children have obligations to marry and create a traditional notion of family, homosexuality is considered a deviant behavior that brings family dishonor and shame," the study states, noting that this cultural barrier leaves this sexual minority with multiple oppressions and a sense of fear and inability to accept their sexual identity.

API women who are gay also face an Asian culture that requires them to stick to family values, marry men and have children or place shame on their families, neighbors and community. Researchers found that many Asian cultural norms render women invisible and silent. Thus these women compared to heterosexual API women and both heterosexual and homosexual API men had a higher prevalence of tobacco, binge drinking, marijuana and other drugs.

The reasons? The API women who were gay were less likely to adhere to traditional family-oriented gender roles, were unable or willing to gain or receive emotional support from their families and were likely to compete with men for masculine privileges so they could escape sexist oppression.

Often, the result for both young men and women is to mask homosexual behaviors and avoid alienating their family and parents' communities. In their relationships with others, they often have to decide which identity will take precedence: an ethnic or sexual identity.

"In the Western gay and lesbian community, 'coming out,' is final revelation that you are homosexual while for API in America of Korean descent, there is 'coming home,' where you want to integrate culturally and be both an American and Korean," said Professor Hahm. "This is not staying closeted but rather alluding to your sexuality to a family member, who may not challenge it, as long as the status quo within the family is maintained."

Over time, many manage the conflicts that arise from choosing one over the other and enter into a homosexual identity with many negative stereotypes and assumptions related to their ethnic identity. Still others sublimate their sexual identify and appear asexual until they are able to synthesize an identity that incorporates both ethnicity and sexuality.

The researchers developed an API sexual minority model that simultaneously explores sexual development and cultural identity development in four stages: initiation, primacy, conflict and identity synthesis. These are combined with the four strategies of acculturation - the process by which foreign-born individuals and their families learn to adopt the language, values, beliefs and behaviors of their new cultural environments. Those strategies are assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization. Together they set API sexual minorities apart from Western gays and [lesbian](#) community.

This study by Hahm and Chris Adkins, an HIV/AIDS clinical social worker,, entitled "A Model of Asian and Pacific Islander Sexual Minority Acculturation," was published by the *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 6:155-173, 2009.

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