

Youth Workers' Stories on Working with Sexual Minority Youth

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Abstract. This article reports preliminary findings on the strategies of youth workers in Hong Kong working with sexual minority youth using⁺ qualitative interviews. The following themes were identified: 1) Awareness of heterosexism; 2) Individual level empowerment strategies; ii) Agency level empowerment level strategies; iii) Community level empowerment strategies.

Keywords: Heterosexism, Empowerment, Sexual minority youth

1. Sexual minority youth in a heterosexist society

Homosexuality is removed from Chinese Diagnostic Manual of Mental Disorder in 2001, there are still discrimination cases documented from first account narratives of Hong Kong sexual minority individuals on their unfair treatments from social service agencies and helping professionals, such as mental health counselors, school social workers and school counselors etc..(Hong Kong Christian Institute, 2006).

In a society that accepts heterosexual sexual orientation as the only legitimate category (Herek, 1996), non-heterosexual or sexual minority youth are often described as “high risk” youth and receiving attention of social service agencies, especially the attention of social workers from integrated youth service and outreach social service in Hong Kong. An extensive body of literature has been generated in the past 20 years documenting the risks faced by sexual minority youth. Abusive and neglectful backgrounds and victimization of various forms under stigmatized and homophobic social environments have been linked to consistently high rates of suicidality and poor mental health (Hatzenbuehler, 2011), high risk for substance and HIV infection (Hegna & Rossow, 2006).

There are limited empirical studies addressing interventions, especially from practitioners' perspective. Most of the researches in intervention outcomes on sexual minority youth are coming from public health perspectives, such as HIV prevention projects. In Chinese societies, we have not found any single study addressing social work intervention working with sexual minority youth taking perspectives from practitioners' perspective. It is thus important to explore stories of youth workers in finding out what are effective intervention approaches in working with sexual minority young people.

2. Objectives:

The aim of the current study is to add to the existing knowledge base by revealing the experience of youth social workers with sexual minority youth, with special attention paid to the exploration of their perceived effective approaches of social work intervention and the perceived process of becoming an effective youth social workers.

3. Methodology:

To fulfill the above objectives, qualitative research strategies - in-depth interviews (Creswell, 2007) was adopted. These interviews drew from 8 staff from two agencies in Hong Kong serving sexual minority populations. The interviews were semi-structured and, aside from a few opening questions, followed the worker's narratives in an exploratory, conversational manner. Each interview was conducted in 1-2 hours in a confidential and comfortable place. Data were tape-recorded, transcribed and analyzed thematically aided by the NVivo qualitative analysis program, starting by developing basic content themes and moving towards more central themes which emerged as organizing elements in the narratives. Strategies to ensure

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trustworthiness and credibility were carried out, such as persistent observation, the use of peer debriefing, informant checks, and researcher's reflections (Morrow, 2005).

4. Results and Discussion

Youth workers perceived that sexual minority youth encountered heterosexism in Hong Kong social service settings. Individual homophobic acts and the subtle expression of heteronormative assumptions, manifested through agency policies were both identified. There are strategies youth workers employed include personal dimension of empowerment strategies, agency level empowerment strategies, and community level empowerment strategies (Kruger, 2000; Rose, 2000).

Unlike other minority groups in Hong Kong, such as the racial minorities who are protected legally under the Anti-Discrimination Ordinance and other inclusive educational policies in schools, Hong Kong has not established an antidiscrimination policy to protect sexual minorities within the education system. Without the legislation of the Anti-Discrimination Ordinance based on sexual orientation, sexual minority students face extra challenges in the society. Effective empowerment strategies were identified to combat heterosexism in this study.

Youth workers have a role to play in carrying out empowerment in the youth social service setting. It is believed that the findings will inform other youth workers working with sexual minority youth to explore their ways to empowerment.

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