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The Invisible Discrimination on LGBTQIA+ in the Context of Heterosexual Hegemony

Despite a giant step moving forward on LGBTQIA+ rights in the past few decades, prejudices towards LGBTQIA+ individuals still have been deeply entrenched in people's mindset. Heterosexual hegemony is a dominant ideology that is universally recognized by people who identify themselves as the same gender as their birth assigned one and are sexually and romantically attracted by the opposite sex, based on the idea that heterosexuality is the normal sexual orientation and the cisgender is the default gender identity. It not only has exerted institutionalized prejudice on LGBTQIA+ individuals in the social affairs but also produced unnoticeable and unspeakable discrimination that they frequently perceive in their daily life. In this setting, LGBTQIA+ would be assumed by limited experience and knowledge heterosexual people have with other LGBTQIA+ individuals, and bothered by stereotypes in daily circumstances. This research is aimed at shedding light on the self-perceived discrimination that LGBTQIA+ individuals receive from heterosexual people who do not think themselves have done anything offended, exploring the gap of perception between heterosexual groups and other sexual orientation groups in the context of heterosexual hegemony.

This research employed the combination of interviews and surveys to explore the nuanced discrimination faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals due to heterosexual hegemony. The survey mainly collected the attitude and self-perception of heterosexual groups in 20-30 in terms of their interaction with LGBTQIA+. Forty-eight responses were received and three fourths of them were heterosexual, which is useful for observation and analysis. Most of them have 2-5 LGBTQIA+ friends which make up a relatively small portion in their friends circle, among them

only few make efforts to know LGBTQIA+ community better and their knowledge mainly comes from social media.

Even though nearly half of the samples in the survey consider themselves as “Ally”, an address that refers to people who support, educate themselves about, and advocate for the LGBTQIA+ community, their responses did not seem to align with their alleged attitudes. Most of the respondents claimed that they do not take identity and sexual orientation into consideration when making friends, but some would still show nuanced revulsion if they had close friends coming out in front of them. For example, there is a response from a heterosexual man claiming that “I wouldn’t mind it unless they are hitting on me” when it comes to the attitude of friends coming out in front of them, which potentially suggests in their phrasing that their gay friends might fall in love with him because gay is sexually and romantically attracted to men and he would be included. For the same question, another heterosexual male respondent said that “I wouldn’t mind if my female friends do so, however, I’m gonna escape if it is my male friend”, implying the similar worries and might have inclination to have homophobia even though he did not put it as straightforward as the former man.

In the research that was conducted by a group of scholars in China four years ago, researchers found that there are deviations between the heterosexual participants’ self-reported acceptance and LBGT participants’ reports of self-perceived discrimination, indicating that they have different standards of being well treated (Wang). Therefore, I finished interviews that explore the perception of LGBTQIA+ themselves when they encounter “the stuck moment” in the context of heterosexual hegemony to make their voices heard and raise the awareness of higher levels of respect and equality. Four people with different sexual orientations accepted the interview, sharing their own experience of being stuck in their conversation when they interact

with heterosexual people and in the context of heterosexual hegemony. Four principles were concluded for heterosexual people if they authentically want to show respect and friendliness when communicating or getting along with LGBTQIA+.

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Not everyone enjoys talking about the opposite sex

Fountain: 22 years old; Female; Lesbian; Chinese University of Hong Kong

Although Fountain does not care about the identity and sexual orientation when she makes friends, it is undeniable that there are differences between the ways she acts in front of her heterosexual friends and LGBTQIA+ friends. Compared to gays, lesbians are more unlikely to be seen because intimacy between women were so normalized and commonly seen that the serious committed relationship of lesbians would be reduced into friendship. Given the less attention, less consideration would lead to the concealing of their true self in order to fit in the friend circle which is dominated by heterosexuals. Sophie Wilkin confessed in her anecdote that she gets embarrassed in front of her straight friends from time to time since she has to do extra preparation to pretend to be one of them and answer their same old questions about lesbians every time. Like Wilkin, Fountain has to conceal the part of real self from her heterosexual friends when hanging out with them.

She said, “I mean, of course I love all my friends the same and my straight friends never judge me for loving girls so I feel comfortable in front of them. But I do selectively pose my attitudes towards men and I’m inclined to keep my mouth shut when they bring up topics about men. I don’t hold my authentic feelings when talking to lesbian friends” In efforts of trying to join in their discussion, she would pretend that she is interested in those male celebrities, and listen to their crush on men they repeatedly fall in love with or the complaints about those men.

“It doesn’t mean I don’t care about them. I do want to hear their stories and worries. But they seem to talk about male too much. And I just think that the only way to get out of their trouble is to stay away from men and toxic relationships.”

In this case, she would be forced to engage into the conversations that she finds meaningless and cliché. But her straight friends would think it normal to talk about their male partners and handsome men since they center the heterosexual discourse regardless of other possibilities. “It could be bothered sometimes because I really want to switch the topic but they always shift it back to men.”

Even though Fountain might not get the best social experience with her straight girlfriends, she still enjoys her time with them because she loves them and they love her as well. “I think it’s fine at least they are supportive. And you can’t require them to make you feel 100% comfortable or I would be selfish! My parents would not do so if they know I’m not interested in men. So I’m still grateful that my straight girls do not treat me differently!”

Not everyone has interest in sexual/romantic relationship

Louis, 22 years old; Male; Asexual; Washington University in St. Louis

Everyone in Louis’ family would assume that he would have a girlfriend, get married and have children after finishing his graduate program and going back to China. However, none of them know that he is actually asexual who finds no one sexually attractive and has no sexual desire like others. In the society of people assuming all human beings should pursue love or romance, it worsens the unfavorable situation of asexual people because of the prevalence of compulsory sexuality (Przybyło). Lack of the knowledge of asexuality, people would associate asexuality with potential disability and disorder in terms of reproductivity. And the default

thinking of heterosexuality neglects people who are not interested in their opposite sex and people who do not care about sex at all.

On some occasions, Louis' male straight friends would show him pictures of hot girls and ask his comments. If he shows no interest in them, his friends would simply attribute him to homosexuality. For most heterosexual people, they only have a sense of dichotomy, which limits their imagination that there are people having no sexual desire to neither male nor female. "They hold monotonous and outdated views of sexual orientation. When they are aware that I am not interested in the girls they showed me, they would see me as gay and worry if I would be in love with them just because they are men and homosexuals are into men." In the discourse of heterosexual hegemony, there is a logical fallacy indicating that there is no place for another option besides being sexually attracted either to men or women. "I might find people romantically attracted regardless of their gender, but I don't like to be reduced to gay because it's just not me. And they definitely would judge me by stereotypes and ask offensive questions out of curiosity."

Louis finds it more relaxing being friends with girls because they don't have the homophobia inclination as male do. Yet he could still feel bothered when it comes to straight girls. When he hung out with them, they sometimes would see him as a potential resource for their future boyfriend. If he let them know that he likes them as friends without any intentions that cross the line, girls would immediately walk away. "I treat all my friends the same with sincerity regardless of their genders. I don't know if it's because I've never been in a relationship. I could not figure out their intentions of approaching me. Just because we are the opposite sex, we would eventually be in a relationship?"

He complained that when he gets along well with somebody and wants to know them more as a friend, they would see it as an invitation to start a long-term committed relationship. “People always interpret my language and actions in a sexual manner. They associate the most common caring words and behavior with a means to the exclusive love between us. But, hey, don’t you love your friends in that way? How come expressing care becomes a suggestion of a sexual relationship?” In the mindset of heterosexual hegemony, there is a notion called heteronormativity, which is a hegemonic system of norms, discourses, and practices that constructs heterosexuality as natural and superior to all other expressions of sexuality (Robinson). And behind the heteronormativity lies the notion of allonormativity which assumes all humans experience sexual or romantic attraction. Louis argues that the normative sexuality got him trapped in social experience all the time because he never approaches people like that but other people do. “Sometimes I feel like sexuality is the only thing they are concerned about and in the pursuit of. I feel disappointed because they see everyone as potential sexual resources and want to have a fixed partner as soon as possible instead of actually cultivating the mental bonds in a way that is free of sexuality. Not everything revolves to sex and not everyone wants sex.”

Not everyone feels safe and comfortable in an environment that straights find normal

May: 23 years old; Female; Demisexual/Asexual/Homoromantic; UC davis.

May has been studying abroad for nearly ten years and her thinking has been influenced by American cultures more than Chinese cultures. She understands her sexual orientation at a relatively early age and came out in front of her parents when she was urged to be in a relationship with male. However, it leads to the outburst of the conflicts inside her family and

she spent three years reconciling with them. May seems to be more sensitive and insightful in terms of the accounts of LGBTQIA+ and the heterosexual hegemony due to her domestic and societal experience.

In her Japanese class, May found the development of the textbook follows the normative of heterosexuality. While the textbook is targeted for Japanese learners in the United States, the edition team with Japanese cultural background still retain the privileged ideas of heterosexuality and ignore the embarrassment of students with diverse identities. She talked about her experience in the Japanese class, which made her stuck into the dilemma due to the negligence of the LGBTQIA+ students who would use this material.

There was a pair work of making dialogues asking for reasons with the newly learnt grammar. Since it was a conversation, one should communicate with their neighbors and the instructor would ask a random group to role play the dialogues. The theme of “I want to marry my boyfriend/girlfriend” stuck her in an awkward silence because neither did she want to come out in front of the classmates that she was not familiar with nor said boyfriend even if it was just a role play.

Heterosexual hegemony exerts its restriction on sexual minorities by forcing them to follow the compulsory heterosexual norms. In other words, people who disobey the compulsory heterosexuality would be punished in terms of the loss of power. The institutional enforcement of heteronormativity exerts as a mandatory practice that gives rise to inequality towards LGBTQIA+ individuals and then they would be punished for their defiance of the heterosexual norms(Seidman). If May chose “girlfriend”, she would be automatically alienated because it might not be safe space to speak; if she chose “boyfriend”, she would feel unspeakable because it was not the truth. People with heteronormative mindset might find it hard to imagine her inner

struggle, after all, it was just an in-class role play where lies are allowed. However, it is because the majority have always been included and accepted and they have never been in the underprivileged position in terms of identity and sexual orientation. “I was so afraid that I would be called to do this conversation. I don’t want to say what I don’t want to.” Fortunately, the instructor skipped that question so she did not have to force herself and take on the shame showing up from nowhere.

Not everyone enjoys coming out in public

MC: 25 years old; Male; Gay; National University of Singapore.

MC, who identifies himself as a homosexual man, just graduated from Duke University in the United States last year. He is now working on his phd degree in Singapore and shares his worries about his future in this place. “Though Singapore is a developed country, I like this place because I get homesick and it’s close to my home country so that it is much easier for me to go home than in the United States, people here are still incredibly conservative in comparison to China,” he claims, “Gay communities in China are only active secretly online and our voices have been always excluded from the accounts of the mainstream, however, at least Chinese governments would not say we are illegal. But you would face the accusation of violating the law if you are a gay in Singapore.” Even though he never hides his identity on purpose, he always pretends to be straight in his working place to avoid trouble.

“As for the unnoticeable discrimination in the context heterosexual hegemony,” MC added his answer to the interview questions, “I think straight people don’t understand it could be annoying if you talk about my sexual orientation in public” He said that his straight friends would call him “Sister” to show their intimacy when they hang out together, however, they

would also call him like that in a zone that is full of unfamiliar colleagues which embarrassed him a lot. “Of course they find it normal because they are straight girls and they don’t have to come out. But it is awkward for me because I pretend to be straight in my workplace. No straight man would be called ‘Sister’!”

When he was asked about the reason he came to Singapore from a relatively LGBTQIA+ friendly country, he stated that it was not always the case in the United States and it depends on the political stand of each state. “Of course I love metropolitans in the United States, they are diverse and inclusive. But the expense there is too expensive and I really need money to sustain myself. Because once my gay identity was accidentally exposed to my family, they definitely would cut off their financial support and kick me out of home. So it is really important for me to live in a city with lower prices.” In talking about his future in Singapore, MC stated his worries about housing. “Even though I could get the citizenship of Singapore, I would be unable to get government-subsidized public housing units sold by the HDB (Housing and Development Board). Because they are only open to heterosexual couples.”

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In conclusion, the results of surveys and interviews revealed the fact that heterosexual individuals have marginalized and ignored the LGBTQIA+ community without realizing it. The lack of knowledge and attention on LGBTQIA+ community leads to the unintentional discriminatory practices conducted by heterosexual individuals. Thus, the pivotal means for heterosexual people to eliminate invisible discrimination on LGBTQIA+ individuals is to listen to them carefully, and respect the uniqueness of each person rather than make assumptions based on limited experience from a heteronormative or stereotypical perspective. This research highlights the persistent and subtle forms of discrimination that LGBTQIA+ community face due

to the entrenched heterosexual hegemony from heterosexual people, raising their awareness by four reality cases and four principles to be more inclusive and considerate when meeting with LGBTQIA+ individuals, putting their joint efforts in creating a more friendly space for LGBTQIA+ community.

However, this study has some limitations as well. For example, it only focused the circumstances of LGBTQIA+ community with Chinese cultural background. So the conclusion might specifically apply to the Eastern Asian background since they share the same cultural origins to some extent. It might be unable to generalize the situation of the world. In the future's research of heterosexual hegemony relating to the LGBTQIA+ community, a more diverse range of participants should be incorporated to make their unseen plights visible as well so that we could endeavor to break down the heteronormativity and the compulsory sexuality together. In sum, it still has the value of references in exploring the damage of heterosexual hegemony and what the majority can do for the minority around the world.

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