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Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Adults' Recollections of Others' Reactions to Their Early Gender Non-Conformity

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Abstract

Globally, gender non-conforming (GNC) behaviors are identified as one of the earliest precursors of non-heterosexual identity. The role of reactions by key persons such as parents, teachers and peers to such behaviors may be important for sexual identity development. In Sri Lanka, there are currently no scholarly data on lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) adults' recollections of their early experiences, particularly those involving how others reacted to their early GNC and gender atypical behaviors. By collecting narratives, this exploratory research paper addresses this gap by examining how 26 LGB adults recalled the manner in which their parents, teachers, and peers responded to their gender-atypical and gender non-conforming behaviors during childhood and adolescence. A participant-focused thematic analysis highlighted the following themes in participants' recollections: permissiveness of adults towards childhood gender non-conformity for both boys and girls; a shift in adults' attitudes during adolescence to be more regulatory; and differences between male and female participants in their recollections of peers' reactions to their GNC behaviors by their peers. These findings suggest the nuances of recollections about growing up as GNC children and adolescents, and the impact these experiences had on later acceptance of a non-heterosexual identity. Future research could begin by observing actual gender nonconformity and gender atypical behaviors in children and adolescence.

Keywords: Adult, Bisexual, Childhood gender non-conforming behaviors, Gay, Lesbian.

Introduction

Recently, the visibility and social engagement of sexually and gender diverse persons have exponentially increased in urban and peri-urban locales and virtual spaces in Sri Lanka. Many thrive and contribute meaningfully to economic, social and community endeavors across both public and private settings. Queer activism, be it formal organizational advocacy or drama, theatre and other creative means, has had an unparalleled effect on the visibility, and inclusion of non-heterosexual persons in recent years. Increased public support and collaboration with state sector such as public health specialists and public sector stakeholders has also increased momentum of advocacy to destigmatize and decriminalize same sex sexual practices. Yet, heterosexist and patriarchal gender and sexual norms pervade conservative Sri Lankan culture, creating ambiguities in the enforcement of laws, political support, religious and cultural practices, sanctions and expectations. Erroneous and often outdated beliefs about homosexuality are ubiquitous and inconsistently critiqued. Gay men's lives, for example, are inextricably entwined in the HIV/AIDS discourse in Sri Lanka, as members of the 'key population' identified as a high-risk group associated with the transmission of the virus. Gay men are also perceived as dangerous due to the erroneous stereotype that 'homosexuality' involves pedophilic tendencies. Insidious stereotypes such as these portray male same sex activity negatively, compounding existing social inequalities. Due to such stereotypes, non-heterosexual persons prefer to remain hidden away from public scrutiny, and often struggle to access basic services such as healthcare, education, and legal recourse, available to heterosexuals. Such vulnerabilities are particularly prominent with the intersection of class and economic status. Further, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and questioning/ queer (LGBTIQ+) community is also not a homogenous entity, with significant intra-community differences. In context of such myriad issues, what it means to identify as non-heterosexual, and how non-heterosexuals navigate daily life in Sri Lanka, and how they construct their identity are insufficiently explored.

Currently, available information on the lives of non-heterosexual persons in Sri Lanka is scant at best. Scholarly literature on lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) persons' identity development in Sri Lanka is scarce. Apart from a thesis exploring lesbians' masculine identities from childhood to adulthood (Kuru Utumpala, 2013), no other scholarly inquiry on LGB identity development is currently available. Existing information is largely limited to claims-making reports advocating destigmatizing and decriminalizing efforts within a human rights framework. The public health discourse addressing HIV/AIDS prevention is another avenue within which visibility of one part of the queer community, notably gay men, MSM (Men having Sex with Men), and trans men are disproportionately highlighted.

To the best of our knowledge, there is no empirical psychological research about how lesbian, gay and bisexual persons construct and articulate their own identities in Sri Lanka. Particularly absent from the literature is how

LGB persons recall the reactions of others towards their early gender atypical and gender non-conforming (GNC) behaviors. Adults and peers are important influences on youth in childhood and adolescence. Parents and teachers are considered primary scaffolding agents of identity development in children and adolescents (Schachter & Ventura, 2008). Particularly important are scaffolding agents who do not impose a specific set of social attitudes or norms, but instead actively mediate between cultural and social expectations and the perceived needs of the child/adolescent (Schachter & Marshall, 2010). Further, peers are considered to take center-stage in adolescence (Tarrant, 2002), as adolescents engage in comparisons of themselves with their peers (Hill et al., 2007). Feedback from peers, especially in adolescence, shape much of adolescents' experiential reality.

The present study addressed the following question: How do LGB adults in Colombo narrate the story of their recollections of how others reacted to their early gender expression? The corresponding objective was to gather life-story accounts of LGB persons' recollections of parents, teachers, and peers' reactions towards their gender non-conforming (GNC) and gender-atypical behaviors in childhood and adolescence. Academically, we hope to begin to fill the gap in knowledge about how LGB people recall the reactions of others in their support network to their GNC and gender atypical behaviors during the childhood and adolescence. Practically, such information will add to the understanding of factors that influence identity development of LGB persons in Sri Lanka and point to avenues of future social scientific exploration.

Literature Review

Gender is considered a social construct involving feelings, behaviors, and attitudes that are conventionally associated with sex assigned at birth (male or female) within a given culture. Gender is highly variable across sociocultural contexts and time periods and involves such aspects as a person's gender expression, gendered role and status, and gender identity. Gender expression is the "way in which a person acts to communicate gender within a given culture, for example, in terms of their clothing, communication patterns and interests. A person's gender expression may or may not be consistent with socially prescribed gender roles and may or may not reflect his or her gender identity" (American Psychological Association, 2015). Gender typed behaviors are the ways that children learn to behave in accordance with the sex they were assigned at birth; it is considered one of the earliest predictors of sexual orientation (Li, Kung & Hines, 2017). Behavior that is compatible with cultural expectations for men or women is referred to as 'gender-normative'; behaviors that are viewed as incompatible with these expectations are referred to 'gender non-conforming' (GNC) (American Psychological Association, 2015). In some cultural settings, gender non-conformity is considered a marker of a gay or lesbian orientation and is linked to anti-gay prejudice and discrimination.

Contemporary theories of sex and gender propose several possible ways in which the constructs are entwined. While some theorists assert sex and gender are related though not connected constructs (Chivers & Bailey, 2000; Roselli, 2018), others suggest a strong conflation of the two (Francis and

Kjaran, 2020). Most research on childhood GNC was carried out in Western high-income contexts; we need to be cautious in assuming that the same patterns would appear elsewhere. Retrospective studies of gay men identified childhood memories of more gender non-conforming behaviors compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Zucker et al., 2006). Subsequent studies have linked childhood GNC to adolescent gender variance, which later predicted adult same-sex or bisexual sexual orientations (Drummond et al., 2008; Wallien & Cohen-Kettenis, 2008). Others such as Rieger et al (2008) found that non-heterosexual adult men and women recalled more childhood GNC behaviors than heterosexual adults. Furthermore, an association between adolescent GNC and adult sexual orientation has also been established (Udry & Chantala, 2016). Other studies have explored gendered behavior exclusively in childhood to understand the link to adult sexual orientation (Steensma et al., 2013; Li, Kung & Hines, 2017). Most recently, it was not until Kahn and Halpern's (2019) longitudinal prospective study that gender-typed behavior was established to change within and between sexual orientation categories and from adolescence to emerging adulthood to early adulthood. These findings from the West offer considerable indication that childhood GNC is a robust early indicator of adult sexual orientation.

Studies in Western contexts have also examined parental reactions to children's gender non-conformity. The literature yields mixed findings, although, broadly speaking, the findings have remained unchanged since the 1980's (Green, 2008). Parents, especially fathers, appear to have displayed different reactions to their sons' and daughters' gender nonconformity. For instance, fathers tended to react to their sons' feminine behaviors with less tolerance than they show toward their daughters' masculine behaviors; the presumed reason was that childhood gender non-conformity in boys was a precursor of adult male 'homosexuality' (Carr, 2007; Green, 1987 as cited in Green 2008). This intolerance was especially pronounced in fathers with conventional mindsets (Spivey, Huebner, Diamond, 2017). Fathers also engaged in compensatory strategies by encouraging stereotypically 'masculine tasks' to counter their sons' GNC instead of reacting negatively to their sons' GNC (Kane, 2006). Most studies carried out in Western contexts, however, appears to indicate more lenience towards young girls who behave in less stereotypical ways than to young boys' GNC.

In the West, negative reactions to GNC of adolescents in schools are widely documented. GNC adolescents often experience school as a particularly unforgiving climate. Typical developmental concerns are often aggravated by school-based peer victimization. In fact, homophobia, social prejudice, and verbal and physical harassment related to sexual orientation and gender identity/expression (SOGIE) are common daily challenges for boys and girls (Kosciw et al., 2018). Peers, teachers, and school administrators are most responsible for such treatment (Baams, 2018; Timmins, Rimes, & Rahman, 2020). Scholars note that identifying openly as LGB "is a moderate and consistent risk factor for victimization at school" (Kosciw et al., 2018). Furthermore, gay adolescent boys report more discrimination and violence than lesbian girls (Dunn & Szymanski, 2018). School settings in

the South Asian region, particularly in India, Sri Lanka, and Nepal appear to similarly be hostile towards students of non-normative sexual and gender presentations (Tiwari, 2020).

Scholarly literature in South Asia that explores parental reactions to LGB young children, however, is scarce at best. Renade (2018) analyzed the recollections of LGB adults' growing up in urban India. While parents had initially encouraged GNC in boys (wearing dresses, make-up, and cooking) and girls (wearing shirts, climbing trees, riding bikes) in childhood, such behaviors were condemned in adolescence. One of the key highlights of this study was how the reactions of adults and peers towards LGB persons' gender expressions in childhood signaled a sense of subjective difference. In Sri Lanka, the only currently available study (Kuru Utumpala, 2013) reported butch lesbians' childhood recollections of riding bicycles, climbing trees, playing cricket, being 'naughty', and of either wanting to be a boy or having been like a boy, while simultaneously hating playing with dolls and wearing dresses. However, initial parental permissiveness toward these behaviors reduced after puberty. No study in Sri Lanka has explored the parental reactions to boys' GNC.

It is important not to consider these findings in a vacuum. A cross-gendered self-presentation does not always indicate a non-heterosexual identity. Many individuals who identify as heterosexual presented themselves in a variety of gender atypical ways. There are many instances in which children who behave according to conventional gender norms identified themselves as experiencing same-sex desire as adults, while some who do not conform to gender norms identified as heterosexual (Green, 2008). Furthermore, gender nonconformity in girls is not linked to a sexual identity or sexual orientation (Schope & Eliason, 2004) as many heterosexual women also reported a tomboy identity as girls. Gender expressions and sexual preferences are fluid and can vary with time. Nevertheless, Western studies indicate that adults and peers tend to view early GNC as indicative of a later homosexual orientation or same-sex sexual preference. Although this was not its main purpose, the present study sheds some light on this question.

Materials and Methods

Methods

This exploratory study used a narrative research design. My decision to use narratives hinged on their versatility; they enable researchers to explore a variety of topics that are impervious to quantitative research methods (Carpentieri et al., 2016). Consequently, McAdams's (2008) Life Story Interview was adapted to a semi-structured in-depth interview protocol to collect the life stories of 26 men and women.

The interview protocol: The interview elicited recollections of childhood and family, adolescence, school, and peers, current life experiences and envisions of the future. Interview prompts and follow up questions explored key negative and positive experiences in these segments as well as specific instances of successful coping.

Inclusion criteria: Self-identifying LGB adults over 18 years, fluent in English and/or Sinhala, of any ethnicity, willing to volunteer for an approximately 90-minute audio recorded interview.

Sampling strategy: Snowball recruitment with attention to variation across demographic indicators was used to recruit 26 men and women. Each participant acted as a 'referrer' for other potential participants in their social networks.

Materials

English and Sinhala versions of the interview protocol, a study introduction sheet, a preliminary screening script to evaluate eligibility for the study, consent and confidentiality forms, and a demographic questionnaire were used in this study.

Pilot study: This was conducted to assess the feasibility of the research design, to pre-test the interview protocol, and to provide a better understanding of the potential limitations.

Ethical clearance: Granted by the Ethics Review Committee of the Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Colombo. Written and verbal informed consent was obtained from every participant. Due to the sensitivity of the data and to protect the privacy of the participants, all audio recordings and interview transcripts were made by myself and were stored on two separate passwords protected and encrypted drives. The data were accessible only to me and the primary research supervisor.

Data analysis

It was followed a participant-focused analysis to extract shared meaning or "repeating ideas" (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015, p.2) from the transcripts. These repeated ideas were identified by succinct phrases resembling thematic codes.

Reflexivity: Reflexivity is a form of self-appraisal within the research process in which the researcher turns the "researcher lens back onto oneself [the researcher] to recognize and take responsibility for one's own situatedness within the research and the effect that it may have on the setting and people being studied, questions being asked, data being collected and its interpretation" (Berger, 2015, p. 2). A reflexive diary was maintained throughout the process of the research to continuously reflect on my own heteronormative standpoint as well as my own experiences conducting the research.

Results and Discussion

Many of the participants, particularly the men, had lived in semi-urban or rural environments during childhood, and later migrated to Colombo either with their families of origin or alone. Most of the women had lived continuously in Colombo since their childhood. The men conversed primarily in Sinhalese while the women conversed primarily in English. This distinction is arguably a reflection of social class. For many of the men and women, living in Colombo represented an opportunity to gain freedom from restrictive home environments. All the participants had completed their Ordinary Level examination and a great majority of them had also completed their Advanced Level examinations. All but two participants who were studying abroad were based in Colombo at the point of data collection. In what follows, participants are identified by pseudonyms.

Reactions of adults and peers to participants' GNC from childhood to adolescence

Many participants recalled that in childhood, adults were far more lenient towards their gender non-conformity than peers generally were. However, by adolescence, many participants recollected less tolerance by adults, although peers' reactions, especially to young boys, continued to be overwhelmingly negative. Fathers were generally recollected as having been less involved in the lives of the participants than mothers, and sometimes, grandparents. Gender differences in participants played a defining and pronounced role in the way peers reacted to participants' gender non-conformity especially in adolescence. Peer-related bullying for transgressing gendered expectations was recalled more often by the men than the women. According to the men and women, this feedback strongly shaped how they came to see themselves from childhood to adolescence through adulthood.

The men recollected more positive and sometimes ambivalent responses from the adults, in which their parents had neither openly encouraged nor explicitly discouraged their GNC behaviors in childhood. Particularly mothers, aunts and grandmothers had reportedly regarded GNC by boys as typical childhood play and valued what they regarded as creative talents. For instance, *Randil*, a self-identifying gay man in his mid-twenties recalled how wearing sarees and playing dress up were seen as:

> "*Actually my mother and aunts used to make fun of me because I would wear a sari and stand on the road. I had weird characteristics like that and they'd reminisce about them, having a good laugh. But no one really thought it was odd or that it would go this way. They brushed it off as normal for children."*

Fathers' reactions to young boys' GNC were spoken about less, likely because many fathers were often employed either overseas or in Colombo. In some instances, young boys' girly behavior was seen as a talent or competence, such as when a boy performed well in theatre productions or when his behavior was seen as being a "good obedient boy". In such cases, the behavior was valued and reinforced by parents, teachers and sometimes, even by peers. For instance, *Hasith* a self-identifying bisexual man fondly recalled his childhood in the village and how the adults treated him:

> "*Wherever I went, people would say, 'Look at that young boy, see how neatly he's growing up'. Whether it was school where I was first in class, or Sunday School or the Avurudu Festival, I won prizes. Even on famous stages/in front of audiences, I have dressed as a woman and won prize, but come back home as a boy. No one ever said anything. Absolutely nothing negative…*"

The women recalled that parents, teachers and peers had responded either positively or fairly ambivalently to their early tomboyishness and gender atypical style of dress and behavior in their childhood. Many of the women recalled they had preferred shorts and t-shirts over dresses and skirts, preferred boy playmates over girl playmates, enjoyed climbing trees, playing cricket and football and enjoyed competitive sports. The latter buffered them

against many of the potential social sanctions that otherwise may have operated in their childhood and especially adolescence. In childhood, adult family members were accepting of tomboyish young girls, valued them for going against the grain, and even encouraged such behaviors. For instance, *Yuvani*, a self-identifying lesbian in her mid-twenties recalled

> *"... In my childhood, I was like a tomboy…they [adults] actually wanted me to be like a boy and I was OK with it and really liked it… my grandfather had to cut some trees in the garden because I was all over the place like a monkey. My uncles taught me how to whistle…"*

Many participants recollected that by adolescence, adult permissiveness regarding childhood GNC diminished; this coincided with the onset of puberty. The men recalled that they were often punished for appearing too "girly" or for behaviors that were considered gender transgressions. For instance, Roy, in his late twenties, identifying as gay, recalled how his teacher had dealt with an incident of bullying in his adolescence,

> *"... She said that my mother should teach her son how to live like man, because he is a boy, but his attitude and everything else are like a girl".*

Interestingly, even though adolescent girls received some corrective feedback from parents and teachers regarding their gender-atypical behavior during puberty, being sporty and headstrong were viewed positively by these adults. Often such self-presentations shielded adolescent girls from the punitive adult sanctions that were often recalled by men. In other words, social sanctions on girls' gender atypical behaviors were not as stringent as for the adolescent boys. Moreover, participants said that their mothers had not appeared to relate their daughters' gender-atypical clothing and activities to sexual identity. For instance, *Anisha*, self-identifying bisexual in her mid-twenties fondly recalled how her mother used to say,

> *"... 'Oh, like a boy, noh? Even sitting like a boy'... [But] She never said anything. She has brought me up in a way where I can be very independent.".*

Even teachers were recalled as having been tolerant of the girls' gender presentation in most instances. For instance, *Sithum* recalled her experience soon after she completed her Advanced Level Examination when she was around 19 years and had joined an external class.

> *"After AL/s I was doing an electronics course. The class had 19 boys and myself. I was the only girl. The Sir would jokingly say that there were 19 girls and one boy... Because I used to wear shirt and trousers…*"

Many men recalled that their peers' reactions towards their GNC in childhood and even more so in adolescence were starkly negative. Name-calling — such as "*woman*", "*young girl*", "*ponnaya*" (a derogatory slang word for a homosexual man), "*gaanu kicha*" and "*lady-boy*" —was by far the most common form of bullying in adolescence. Only one participant recalled being 'roughed up' by male peers.

Lashin recollected how he felt different as an adolescent after hearing how his peers jeered at his girlishness,

> *"Around 15 / 16 years, I started wondering if it was wrong or different. Especially because you hear boys shouting things like "ponnaya", "baduwa", "lolla". When these things happen, there is a slight sadness and anger that I'd feel and wonder why this happened".*

In contrast, most women recalled that their peers often held them in high esteem for behaviors and self-presentations such as being sporty and tomboyish which challenged conventional feminine stereotypes. Some women recalled they had even been considered role models. For instance, *Zari*, a self-identifying lesbian in her late twenties recalled her school years,

> *"...people were fascinated with me because I was like a tomboy and... girls used to come to see... this special-looking smart girl..."*

One of the most salient findings was that both men and women recalled that during childhood, their GNC and gender-atypical behavior was received with a good deal of tolerance or even approval by adults. Few efforts were made to correct or punish such behavior. Particularly, adults had not perceived young boys' preference for girly play (dress-up, wearing make-up), and girls' preferences for "naughty" and tomboyish behavior as signs of later sexual identity. Therefore, such behaviors and self-presentations were either encouraged, as in the case of the girls, or not actively discouraged, as in the case of the boys.

Many participants recalled a shift in adults' reactions, particularly parents, from childhood to adolescence. Positive attention was replaced by sanctions on decorum. Importantly, social sanctions tightened in coincidence with puberty, hence gender non-conforming behaviors were not as tolerated as in childhood. These sanctions were far more prominent in the recollections of the men about their adolescent GNC than in the recollections of the women. In other words, men recalled more pushback towards their adolescent GNC presentations than the women recalled during their adolescence.

The men also recalled unforgiving reactions by their peers towards their GNC. This remained constant from childhood to adolescence. In contrast, the women recalled being valued by their peers for their gender-atypical behaviors and appearance as adolescents, and even for openly flouting feminine presentation. Noteworthy was the clear discrepancy between how parents, teachers, and peers valued gender atypical behaviors in adolescent girls and how they devalued and chastised gender atypical presentations and behaviors in adolescent boys. The one exception seemed to be situations in which a boy's girly behavior was considered as a competency (for instance, playing female roles in stage plays). Although there were exceptions to this trend, in most cases, it seems like girls' gender violations were considered less negatively by adults and peers than the boys. In fact, when the gender violation was perceived as a talent or competency (be it the boys assuming female stage characters, or the girls appearing sporty

and 'less feminine') negative feedback was limited. Arguably, this could be the result of context. Value is often placed on particularly young children to achieve and master skills, especially in competitive school contexts. Such skills are therefore viewed as a competency and not through a gender lens. Furthermore, a strongly patriarchal context in which men's gender transgressions are vilified and viewed far less kindly would consequently value similar behavioral commitments by women, as they involve valued traits of confidence, independence, motivation, and resourcefulness irrespective of gender. From these accounts of experiences, it is evident that others' reactions and responses to the men's and women's gender non-conformity were mediated by participants' gender and age.

In Western theories of child development, adolescence is considered a stepping stone to adulthood, signaling a sexually, emotionally, and physically maturing human. Whether this thinking is shared by Sri Lankans is less clear. In many cultures and communities, 'coming of age' rituals officially mark the transition from childhood to adulthood. Even though broad variations in beliefs, practices and sentiments exist, these rituals collectively declare that the young person is ready to assume the responsibilities of adult life. A large part of these initiations is the social signaling that the young person is sexually mature and ready for courtship and many societies use biological markers such as menarche and spermarche to do so (Ember, Pitek, & Ringen, 2017; Siweya, Sodi, & Douglas,2018). In Sri Lanka too, such rituals bare sociocultural and religious sentiment and are most often associated with the 'coming of age' of girls following menarche. Although similar rituals are not noted for young boys in Sri Lanka, changes in adult perceptions and expectations of boys coincide with sexual maturity when facial and body hair, and the cracking of the voice are seen. One such belief is that 'big boys don't cry anymore', where the older boy is conditioned to become braver, stronger, and emotionally resolute. However, these practices are not uniform and do not appear to be denominational.

I argue that in the case of the men in this study, the gender differentiation in the reactions of others was due to deeply entrenched heterosexualized gender systems and patriarchal norms in Sri Lanka. As Kuru Utumpala (2013) observed, Sri Lankan culture values conventional masculine ideals of machismo and chauvinism, creating what she identified as "normative male masculinity" (p. 3). Such a system may have likely compelled adolescent boys to fit into gendered Sri Lankan norms of masculinity. In contrast, adolescent girls who embraced less feminine traits were not necessarily seen as 'more masculine' or as failing a 'feminine' ideal. Feminine ideals in conventional Sri Lankan culture are embodied in submissiveness and orthodox femininity (Kuru Utumpala, 2013). Instead, the women were seen in their childhood/adolescence as possessing valued traits that arguably had little to do with gender stereotypes. An adolescent girl who wears shorts and a t-shirt and excels in sports is not considered an aberration especially in urban settings like Colombo. By contrast, an adolescent boy preferring the creative arts, and is not engaged in sports is often perceived as unmasculine in many settings in Sri Lanka.

I further contend that socio-cultural, religious, and educational levels of parents may also have contributed towards acceptance of sexual orientation. I am cautious to draw stark distinctions between rural-urban contexts and mindsets, as well as assume that such contexts naturally cultivate more heterosexist bias. However, many of the men lived in semi urban and rural contexts in childhood and adolescence while most of the women had lived in Colombo. Arguably, punitive actions levied at adolescent boys and the general absence of such sanctions for the women could be attributed to the contexts they grew up in, and by effect, demographic markers, and influence of ecological cultural ideas of caregivers. Future research could explore these notions in a more systematic manner.

The recollections of the participants mirror similar trends in South Asia, although some key differences are seen with reference to research from the West. Initial permissiveness to the childhood GNC, particularly in the case of boys, was documented in India (Renade, 2018). Tolerance of girls' gender atypical behaviors was also well documented globally (Renade, 2018; Kuru Uthumpala, 2013; Carr, 2007; Green, 1987 as cited in Green 2008). Similarly, the restrictions of gender non-conformity in adolescence that coincided with the onset of puberty particularly in the case of boys, have been documented previously (Spivey-Rita et al., 2018; Renade, 2018; Kuru Uthumpala, 2013). Furthermore, the experiences related to peers and teachers in school which were recalled by the men and women in this inquiry also mirrored previous studies of pervasive harassment and victimization reported by gender nonconforming adolescents who challenged stereotypical renditions of masculinity and femininity in school (Timmins et al., 2020; Tiwari, 2020; Baams, 2018;).

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Some key insights were gleaned from this inquiry that converge and diverge from previous research. Firstly, gender non-conforming behaviors in childhood may not be perceived by adults as signaling later sexual identity, as they are in the West. According to participants, there were striking differences in others' reactions depending on the participant's age and gender. Notable was parental tolerance of the childhood GNC of boys. Participants reported shifts during puberty, arguably due to changing gender expectations and norms. Positive attention (or the lack of negative attention for being a "girly boy" or a "tomboyish" girl) was replaced by sanctions on decorum. Whether this in regard to behavior, self-presentation, or choice of interests, participants recalled that these sanctions stifled their self-presentations. Overall, the women recalled more positive feedback towards their gender atypical presentations and behaviors from peers than the men did in childhood and adolescence. The reactions that male participants reported towards their early GNC were more negative than the reactions that female participants reported towards the same, by adults and particularly by peers.

Recommendations

These findings can broaden the existing understanding of the experiences LGB adults recall of growing up, particularly with adults and peers. Future research could examine actual gender nonconformity and gender atypical behaviors in children and adolescence, as well as actual attitudes and disciplinary practices of parents and teachers. Not all youngsters who report gender nonconformity and gender atypical behaviors in childhood eventually adopt a LGB identity. What particular reactions from adults and peers impact the manner in which gender non-conforming and gender atypical children process identity-related feedback? By observing GNC in children and adolescence and exploring the identity-related feedback from key support systems, a deeper cultural understanding of the associated factors that impact the co-construction of a sexual identity may be gained.

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