

## Recognizing the Dual Identities of LGBT Asian-Americans

### Description:

Many Asian-Americans who identify as LGBT are afraid to come out to their families due to the risk of being alienated or worse. Also, LGBT Asian-Americans are often faced with dilemmas facing their sexuality, ethnicity, and the core Asian values inherent in their households.



Paul Nguyen, a gay man who has come out to his family, stands at the Northgate Transit Center on July 29. (Photo by Vivian Luu/NWAW)

### Keywords:

LGBT, Sexuality, Values, Coming Out

### Key Points:

- Asian-American people that identify as LGBT often face more cultural and social stress, and may mask their homosexual behaviors to avoid rejection, alienation or prejudice (8 Asians).
- Oftentimes these people must choose which identity will take precedence, ethnic or sexual (Out Front).
- LGBT Asian-Americans often face what is termed a “double-prejudice” regarding their ethnic and sexual identities, respectively (*Observer*).

**Brief:**

The category of LGBT Asian-Americans has recently started to emerge as a cultural phenomenon. It has been realized that Asian-Americans often face additional stresses when coming out or living as LGBT; usually, the core Asian values prevalent in their families and their homes cause them to mask homosexual behavior. Also, these people may be faced with rejection from their families, even being disowned by their conservative parents. Others prefer to hide their sexuality in order to preserve their families' communities and relationships with others (8 Asians). Also, there is much stigmatization from the greater Asian population regarding homosexuality. These additional stresses prevent many Asian-Americans from coming out as gay, and cause much pain for those who do.



Asian American Gay and Lesbian Group march for the 3<sup>rd</sup> consecutive year in the Chinese New Year Parade in Manhattan. (Photo by Demotix)

Asian-Americans also face hardships when it comes to almost having two identities; their sexual identity, and their ethnic identity. One man says that “for many in the Asian American gay community there’s the notion of balancing two lives, and the life you have with your family, where you are closeted, and the life you live based on your sexual identity” (8 Asians). Also, the idea that Asian-Americans face what is known as a “double-prejudice” has become evident. In fact, the *Observer* states, “in the Asian community, where family always comes first and men are valued for being able to father children, homosexuality is still a sin, and in many Asian countries such as China and Malaysia is illegal.” This shows that there are certain conservative values that are exceedingly evident in the Asian household, ones that cause LGBT Asian-Americans to think twice before coming out to their families and friends. Along with that, it is argued that “coming

out is likely associated with failure. For a culture that is built on a foundation of tradition and high expectations – failure is a shared fear across all Asian ethnicities” (Out Front). “It’s a double whammy to be gay and Asian,” says Marquez, 41, who fled to Canada from the Philippines in 1978 so he could lead a gay life. “Growing up was painful for me because I was always different.”

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 Asian gay and lesbian adolescents.

The process of homosexual identify formation among Asian 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.

Asian American 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 Asian American women and both heterosexual and homosexual Asian American men had a higher prevalence of tobacco, binge drinking, marijuana and other drugs.

The reasons? The Asian American women who were gay were less likely to adhere to traditional family-oriented gender roles, were unable or unwilling 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.

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