

# Coming Out Experiences and Psychological Distress of Chinese Homosexual Men in Hong Kong

Chi-yan Wong, M.S.Sc.,<sup>1</sup> and Catherine So-kum Tang, Ph.D.<sup>1,2</sup>

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This study adopted a cognitive-behavioral conceptual framework based on the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA) in understanding coming out experiences and psychological distress of 187 Chinese gay men. Results showed that participants' coming out experiences were characterized by same-sex sexual fantasy at teenage years, followed by awareness of homosexual tendency, same-sex sexual contact, and then self-identification and disclosure of homosexual orientation in young adulthood. Regarding targets of disclosure, participants tended to disclose their sexual orientation to their gay friends first, followed by heterosexual friends, siblings, parents, and coworkers. This study also supported the extension of the TRA conceptual framework to Chinese societies. Results showed that a low level of psychological distress in Chinese gay men was linked to their coming out experiences, which were in turn related to TRA components of involvement and identification with gay communities and positive attitudes toward coming out. Limitations and implications were also discussed.

**KEY WORDS:** homosexuality; distress; Chinese; Hong Kong.

## INTRODUCTION

The term "coming out" refers to the process of accepting oneself as gay, lesbian, or bisexual and to integrate this sexual orientation into different spheres of one's life (Cass, 1996; D'Augelli & Patterson, 1995; Savin-Williams, 1990). This process thus encompasses two dimensions: self-identification of homosexual orientation and disclosure of this sexual orientation to others (Cass, 1984; Troiden, 1989). At present, far more is known about homosexuality and the coming out process in Western than in Chinese societies. This study adopted a cognitive-behavioral conceptual framework based on the Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA; Ajzen & Madden, 1986) to facilitate the understanding of coming out experiences and psychological distress of Chinese gay men in Hong Kong.

## Coming Out Experiences

Previous research has conceptualized the coming out process as the unfolding of sequential milestones (Cass, 1984; Fassinger & Miller, 1996; Floyd & Stein, 2002; Troiden, 1989). In spite of variations in personal experiences, studies on U.S. gay samples have shown that the coming out process generally begins with one's awareness of same-sex attractions at about 9–11 years of age, followed by first same-sex sexual contact around 13–15 years, first self-labeling of homosexuality between 14 and 16 years, and first disclosure of homosexual orientation between 16 and 18 years (D'Augelli, 2002; D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993; Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Rosario, Meyer-Bahlburg, et al., 1996; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). Gender disparity has also been noted in the sequencing and timing of these milestones. For example, gay men are more likely to experience same-sexual contacts before labeling themselves as having homosexual orientation, whereas lesbians tend to report the reverse sequence (Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Savin-Williams & Diamond, 2000). Lesbians also tend to experience later timing for the coming out process, often late into their adolescence or adulthood (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995).

<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, Hong Kong.

<sup>2</sup>To whom correspondence should be addressed at Department of Psychology, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, N.T., Hong Kong; e-mail: ctang@cuhk.edu.hk.