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## Heterosexism in school: the counselling experience of Chinese tongzhi students in Hong Kong

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The study is part of a larger project involving a phenomenological inquiry into the lived experiences of tongzhi students in Hong Kong public schools. The research question of this article focuses on the counselling experiences of nine Chinese lesbian, gay, bisexual and questioning/queer (LGBQ) students aged 14–18 in Hong Kong Chinese secondary schools. We conducted qualitative data analyses via a software package for data coding and data reduction. Four themes emerged: Feeling fearful: judging my sexuality; Feeling disengaged: omitting my sexuality; Feeling alienated: pathologising my sexuality; Feeling supported: making an effort to understand my sexuality. The findings from the present study inform the development of school counselling within Chinese societies by generating recommendations about counsellors' professional codes of ethics, counsellor training and practice.

**Keywords:** heterosexism; LGBQ/Tongzhi students; Chinese; school counselling

### Introduction

'No Child Left Behind' (有教無類) is the education principle of the Chinese traditional scholar Confucius. It means that every student in school should be treated equally. However, the truth is far from this ideal in Hong Kong secondary schools. In a government-run survey on public attitudes toward homosexuality, 41% of the 2040 respondents considered non-heterosexual individuals as 'psychologically abnormal', and tongzhi<sup>1</sup> or lesbian, gay, bisexual, and questioning/queer (LGBQ)<sup>2</sup> students were perceived as receiving the highest rate of discrimination in secondary schools (Hong Kong SAR Government, 2006). Previous studies have indicated that LGBQ students often encounter heterosexist prejudice in schools that may contribute to various mental health risks for these students (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002). The term 'heterosexism', defined as an assumption that heterosexuality is the only legitimate type of sexuality, was introduced by Herek (1996) to conceptualise hostility and prejudice against LGBQ individuals. School counsellors, who are trained to respect diversity, are in the best position to support LGBQ students to navigate heterosexism (Pollock, 2006; Stone, 2003).

Despite the potential involvement of LGBQ students in school counselling services, very few empirical studies focus on LGBQ students' experiences with school counselling, especially from the students' perspective. A literature search, using the

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ProQuest Social Science Database, for articles published in English between 1990 and 2012 revealed articles discussing school counselling concerns for LGBQ students around the world: the United States (e.g. Varjas et al., 2006), the United Kingdom (e.g. Ellis & High, 2004), Australia (Michaelson, 2008) and South Africa (Butler, Alpaslan, Strumpet, & Asbury, 2003). Among these publications, most were non-empirical studies that identified the needs of LGBQ students and called for school counsellors to respond to them (e.g. Black & Underwood, 1998; Cooley, 1998; DePaul, Walsh, & Dam, 2009; McFarland & Dupuis, 2001). Only a few empirical articles were found which related to the experience of school counselling from the LGBQ student perspective, and these were obtained from journals related to LGBQ education and LGBQ counselling (e.g. Butler et al., 2003; Rutter & Leech, 2006; Varjas et al., 2006). These empirical studies suggested that LGBQ students were unable to get support from their school counsellors; instead, they often encountered heterosexist biases when interacting with school counsellors. For instance, in a qualitative study conducted in the United States with LGBQ students, informants found that their school counsellors often used heterosexist language in counselling practice (Rutter & Leech, 2006). Despite rising international concern over the school counselling needs of LGBQ students, the prevailing heterosexism in the school systems of Hong Kong Chinese society has virtually silenced discussion regarding this issue (Kwok, 2011).

### **Rationale of the study**

At present, knowledge about the school counselling experiences of Chinese tongzhi students remains sparse. The purpose of this study was to generate knowledge about sexual diversity and school counselling within a Chinese context, where school counselling education has undergone new development in the last decade (Leuwerke & Shi, 2010). The existing body of knowledge generated from Euro-American societies may limit the school counsellor's ability to understand Chinese sexuality through a culturally sensitive lens (Poon, 2004). For example, the emphasis of 'Xiao' (孝, meaning filial piety) in Chinese Confucianism makes the risk of coming out for tongzhi students a greater threat than it is for Euro-Americans (Hahm & Adkins, 2009). The study described here is part of a larger project involving a phenomenological inquiry into the lived experiences of tongzhi students in Hong Kong public schools. The research question focused on here is the experiences that tongzhi students have had with school counselling services in secondary schools. The findings from the present study may inform the development of school counselling within Chinese societies by generating recommendations about professional codes of ethics, training and practice.

### **Literature review**

#### ***Heterosexism and its impact on the school experience of LGBQ students***

Herek (1996, p. 101) defined heterosexism as 'an ideological system that denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any non-heterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community'. Herek posited that heterosexism exists on two levels: cultural and psychological. First, cultural heterosexism, like institutional racism, is promoted through societal institutions, such as schools. The school policies and practices,

including counselling services, reinforce heterosexist attitudes, values and behaviours (Harper, 2004). LGBQ students are impacted by cultural heterosexism in two ways – they may be invisible or subject to social discrimination. Psychological heterosexism, on the other hand, is the individual manifestation of cultural heterosexism, and is reflected in an individual person's prejudiced feelings and behaviours towards LGBQ individuals, such as verbal heterosexist language and violent acts (Herek, 1996).

Previous empirical studies have recognised that LGBQ students face barriers at school, due to heterosexism (e.g. Buston & Hart, 2001; Butler et al., 2003; Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009; Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). For example, in a survey completed in the United States by students aged 13 to 21, 84.6% of the respondents claimed to have been verbally harassed by individuals in schools as a result of their sexual orientation (Kosciw et al., 2010). In a South African qualitative study of 18 LGBQ students' school experiences, the informants remarked that LGBQ issues were invisible and denied in the school counselling practices (Butler et al., 2003).

Feminist theory (Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, & Meyer, 2008) and the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003) can be used to highlight the social political forces influencing LGBQ people's lives, and to conceptualise the potential impact of heterosexism on tongzhi students. Feminist theory suggests that LGBQ individuals' personal difficulties are linked to 'the political, cultural, social, and economic climate' in which they live, and these difficulties can be 'conceptualized as reactions to oppression' (Szymanski et al., 2008, p. 513). Szymanski and colleagues (2008) state that heterosexism causes psychosocial risks to LGBQ individuals through discrimination. The minority stress model states that prejudice can produce stressful social environments for LGBQ individuals (Meyer, 2003). The model demonstrates that experiences of prejudice and internalised heterosexist messages adversely affect the mental health of LGBQ individuals (Meyer, 2003). Consistent with the minority stress model, empirical studies have shown that heterosexism is related to mental health risk (Szymanski, 2005) for LGBQ individuals who internalise negative heterosexist messages. In a quantitative study with 9188 secondary school students, Bontempo and D'Augelli (2002) found that sexual minority status and high levels of school heterosexist harassment were associated with higher levels of health risk behaviours. Negative heterosexist experiences in schools may contribute to various mental health risks for LGBQ students, including declining school performance (Kosciw et al., 2010; Murdock & Bolch, 2005), sexual health risk (Blake et al., 2001; Russell, 2005), substance abuse risk (Hegna & Rossow, 2006; Rivers & Noret, 2008), mental health vulnerabilities (Espelage, Aragon, Birkett, & Koenig, 2008; Rivers, 2004) and suicide risk (Hatzenbuehler, 2011).

### ***School counsellor roles to support LGBQ students***

In addressing the mental health risks associated with school heterosexism (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002), school counsellors have professional and ethical obligations to support LGBQ students. For instance, in the United States, the Ethical Standards for School Counselors of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2010) asserted that school counsellors are trained to be 'advocates, leaders, collaborators and consultants who create opportunities for equity in access and success' for all students, including LGBTQ students (p. 1). These standards posit that school counselling programmes should 'advocate for and affirm students' from diverse

sexual orientations (ASCA, 2010, p. 1). In addition, counselling scholars have proposed that counsellors have obligations to ameliorate the negative social forces of heterosexism through social justice advocacy (Kashubeck-West, Szymanski, & Meyer, 2008; Rogers & O'Bryon, 2008).

Despite the articulated ethical and professional obligations, some school counsellors have been perceived as not having adequate knowledge to work with LGBQ students (Savage, Prout, & Chard, 2004; Varjas et al., 2006). Savage and colleagues (2004) found that 85% of 288 school counsellors had no training in LGBQ issues. Inadequate training for helping professionals contributes to possible heterosexist bias against LGBQ individuals, which hinders a practitioner's ability to provide effective services to LGBQ individuals (Swank & Raiz, 2007).

### *School counsellors in Hong Kong*

Hong Kong school counselling services were first initiated by the government, and positions in 500 secondary schools have been taken up by teachers (Hui, 2002) who receive additional in-service counselling training provided by the government. School counsellors' attitudes to sexuality have been influenced both by traditional Chinese Confucian values, and also Western religious values (Chan, 2005; Ng & Ma, 2001). First, same-sex affection is usually considered unacceptable in Chinese families as it violates the Confucian values of 'Xiao' (孝, filial piety), which emphasises continuation of the family name through procreation (Wang, Bih, & Brennan, 2009; Wu & Kwok, 2012). Second, with British colonial rule for over 100 years before 1997, came ingrained cultural values and Christian teachings, which still exert considerable influence on education policy in Hong Kong (Ng & Ma, 2001). Fifty-two per cent of public secondary schools in Hong Kong are Christian affiliated (Hong Kong Education Bureau, 2011). Some Christian groups have argued that homosexuality is 'sinful ... and should not be considered from the perspective of human rights' (Chan, 2005, p. 76).

In Hong Kong, the Council on Professional Conduct in Education was set up in 1994 to 'draft operational criteria defining the conduct expected of an educator', resulting in the Code of the Education Profession of Hong Kong (Hong Kong Council on Professional Conduct in Education, 2011, p. 1). In section 2.2.11 of the code (p. 1), it is stipulated that school professionals in Hong Kong 'shall not discriminate against any student on the basis of race, color, religious belief, creed, sex, family background, or any form of handicap'. Sexual orientation has not been included in section 2.2.11, meaning that there are no ethical guidelines or mandated training programmes addressing possible homophobia among school counsellors.

### **Methodology**

This study is grounded in a qualitative constructivist research paradigm using a phenomenological strategy to understand the experience of Chinese tongzhi students in secondary schools (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). The constructivist researcher acknowledges multiple interpretations of reality and alternative interpretations of data in this study (Creswell, 2007). Among various qualitative research strategies, such as oral history, narrative approach, case studies and ethnographic study, the phenomenological model is able to explore the lived experience of tongzhi students through their own lens. The goal of phenomenological research is to

examine phenomena through the lived perspectives of those who experience the phenomenon personally (Creswell, 2007). We aimed to answer the research question: What are the experiences of tongzhi students in school counselling services in Hong Kong?

### ***Researchers' background***

The first author is a self-identified Hong Kong Chinese, heterosexual, female ally. The data for this study were collected while she was a doctoral candidate. Her social work training was framed in a culturally sensitive and anti-discriminatory practice model. She is currently teaching a sexual diversity course at a university, working collaboratively with tongzhi communities to provide counsellors with culturally sensitive training about sexual diversity. Her interest in this topic stemmed from a concern to improve tongzhi counselling services in Hong Kong. The second author identifies as a Western European, heterosexual male. He is conducting extensive research in transgender lived experiences in Asia, advocating policy change towards transgender and tongzhi equal opportunities. The third author identifies as a Chinese, heterosexual male. He is interested in extending inclusive education to tongzhi students. The second and third authors were the first author's thesis advisers.

### ***Informants' background and recruitment***

The study described here is part of a larger project involving a phenomenological inquiry into the lived experiences of tongzhi students in secondary schools and universities in Hong Kong. In the larger project, 57 tongzhi/LGBQ students, aged 14 to 24 years, attending public universities and secondary schools, and who were either self-referred or referred by others, participated in interviews. This article focuses on the experiences that tongzhi students have had with school counselling services in secondary schools, based on the transcripts of nine tongzhi students aged between 14 and 18, attending Form 3 to Form 6. The research was conducted between the years of 2008 and 2011 using convenience sampling. Having obtained ethical clearance from the university, the study proceeded to locate secondary school and university informants by advertising in various universities, schools, tongzhi internet forums, tongzhi support groups and community youth centres. The criteria for selecting the research informants were: (1) currently experiencing school life in public secondary schools, and at the same time with same-sex attraction/behaviours/experiences, and/or self-identified as LGBQ; (2) have encountered school counselling services in secondary school, and (3) comfortable to express inner feelings, and spontaneously interested in their experience (Polkinghorne, 1989). There were nine participants meeting the above criteria, eight male and one female. Some self-identified as gay (n = 5), lesbian (n = 1) or bisexual (n = 1), and the remaining participants self-identified as 'questioning their sexuality' (n = 2).

### ***Data collection: phenomenological interviews***

Ethical approval was obtained to ensure the research participants' safety, confidentiality and informed consent. Parental consent was waived for the informants under the age of 18. Interviews were conducted by the first author, at her office or other locations ensuring privacy and confidentiality. Each interview lasted approximately

two hours. The first author disclosed that this study was for her doctoral dissertation, and that she was hoping to gather information about tongzhi adolescents in order to inform policy change and to improve counselling practices related to sexual diversity. The participants were informed about the research process and the researcher's background before the start of the interview. All informants were provided with opportunities to raise questions about the research procedures and the researcher's background, including her sexuality, her training and her ally position.

The interview process was interactive and collaborative, although there was a semi-structured interview guide. Interviews were centred on the informants, who directed the focus. Open-ended questions were asked to follow the pace of the informants, such as 'Please share with me as much detail as possible about your experience in exploring your sexuality in schools'. For those informants who might feel uncomfortable responding to open questions, the researcher took the lead and used semi-structured questions to reduce their anxiety. Specific semi-structured questions that related to the tongzhi students' experiences with counselling included the following: 'Share with us some of the desirable or undesirable incidents/practice examples related to your interaction with school counselling members or programmes', and 'Thinking of some of the stereotypes about tongzhi issues that appear in newspapers, has a school counsellor ever expressed any stereotypical beliefs about you?' In order to address the imbalance of power that often occurs in interviews with tongzhi individuals, when necessary the researcher volunteered to share personal experiences in relation to her sexuality, her experiences with tongzhi individuals and her position as a heterosexual ally. The researcher's affirmative feedback and sharing of personal experience usually helped to reduce informants' anxieties and feelings of being marginalised, in order to establish trust and a safe atmosphere for in-depth sharing.

### ***Data analysis***

The analytic tools and steps employed in this study were consistent with the steps of phenomenological study recommended in the literature (e.g., Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989). The data analysis process first involved the researcher putting aside any personal bias (bracketing). At the second step, the interview transcripts were read in order to get a general impression of the tongzhi students' experiences with school counselling. At the third stage, a thematic analysis of the transcripts was carried out. Analysis of the data included identifying and extracting recurrent themes within the interview transcripts related to school counselling, to gain an understanding of the participants' desirable and undesirable experiences with their school counselling services. Inter-rater reliability was 90%, determined by two research colleagues independently coding two randomly selected transcriptions. The coding process was facilitated through NVivo, a qualitative software program. Finally, the researcher moved back and forth between the lists of themes to make sure all themes were reflected from the narratives of informants (Polkinghorne, 1989).

Strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of this research were: obtaining the rich descriptions of informants' responses; persistent observation in the tongzhi communities; the use of peer debriefing; informant checks; and researchers' reflections (Morrow, 2005). In addition, the first author's prolonged engagement with tongzhi communities ensured the credibility of the research. She had already been involved with tongzhi communities prior to the collection of data, which also helped the initial engagement with the informants.

## **Results**

The tongzhi students shared both undesirable and desirable school counselling experiences in informants' narratives. Three themes were categorised as 'undesirable experiences', on the basis of comments that they chose to withdraw from school counselling services, and descriptive words such as 'fearful', 'shame' and 'unhelpful'. One theme was identified as desirable counselling experiences, on the basis of their comments that their counsellors were 'supportive' and 'helpful'. In the sections that follow, we use selected participant quotes to illustrate the themes.

### *Undesirable counselling experiences*

#### *Feeling fearful: judging my sexuality*

The tongzhi students reported hearing school counsellors make overt judgements about non-heterosexual sexual orientation in counselling programmes. Kai Ming quoted an event he attended:

I attended a counselling programme about self-development. The counselling teacher said to all programme participants that 'homosexuality is sinful and male homosexual anal intercourse causes Aids infections'. He opposed the Domestic Violence Ordinance to protect the rights of gay couples ... I was very fearful, I just couldn't sleep well ... those 'sinful' voices disturbed me for quite a while. (Kai Ming, male, 16, self-identified as gay, Form 3 student)

Kai Ming continued to explain that his sleep difficulties persisted until he joined a tongzhi support group, where he was assured by other group members that sexual attractions and sexual practices could be expressed diversely. Another informant, Tom, shared an incident in a counselling session in school:

I enjoy having sex with men, but emotionally I am attached to girls ... I felt 'bin-taai' (變態, abnormal) about myself ... I walked to the counselling room door several times with hesitation. Finally I entered. The counsellor was patient. However, she seemed to have a problem with my choice of anal sex with different sex partners. She asked me to stop talking because she did not feel comfortable to continue the session. I was hanging there with hurt, shame, and intense fear ... (Tom, male, 18, self-identified as 'questioning my sexuality', Form 6 student)

Tom opted not to see this school counsellor again. He thought she should have to handle her own discomfort and receive training to understand tongzhi culture in Hong Kong. Tom was later referred by his health nurse to join a sexual health programme where he felt accepted by a health counsellor who was familiar with tongzhi culture, and could listen to his experiences without judgement. Tom felt assured when the health counsellor told him that there were other young people who shared similar stories, and he could explore his sexuality at his own pace.

The tongzhi students told about their experience with school counsellors judging their sexuality with overt heterosexist language. This was reflected in stereotyped attitudes, labelling language or in misinformation regarding non-heterosexual sexual orientations. The students felt fearful and stressful during their encounters with the school counselling services.

*Feeling disengaged: omitting my sexuality*

Some school counsellors presupposed that all students were heterosexual, such that tongzhi students' non-heterosexuality was invisible, and omitted from counselling programme activities. Jo shared the following incident:

We had a developmental needs survey done by the school last year, by the guidance and counselling team ... They asked questions related to sexual behaviours, dating relationships and marriage. They did not include homosexuality or bisexuality as a choice of answers throughout the survey; my experience was not relevant. (Jo, male, 18, self-identified as gay, Form 6 student)

In some counselling team programmes, such as in sex education seminars, tongzhi students felt that they were disengaged due to complete omission of the topic of same-sex sexual practices. Matthew had the following comments:

The sex education programme ... is focusing on the heterosexual ... how to prevent STD, AIDS, etc ... but without practical information on condom use, especially among same-sex partners ... That wasn't helping my knowledge of sex education ... (Matthew, male, 16, self-identified as bisexual, Form 4 student)

*Feeling alienated: pathologising my sexuality*

Several participants described interactions with school counsellors who explicitly associated their sexuality with mental disorders. Nancy described a 'kissing photo' incident:

My class teacher found a 'kissing photo' with my girlfriend from my mobile phone. She referred me to the counselling team. The counsellor informed my mum. The counsellor said to my mum and me that homosexuality is abnormal, that I needed to change through psychological treatments (sexual orientation change therapy). (Nancy, 15, female, self-identified as lesbian, Form 3 student)

Nancy was fearful, she refused to join the sexual orientation change therapy and she finally withdrew from school. Her mother sought assistance from a family social worker through a social service centre who told her mother that homosexuality had been deleted from the list of mental disorders for many years. Both Nancy and her mother felt relieved to hear this information. The family social worker helped Nancy to find another school, where she adjusted well. Wing Man, another student told a story with a similar theme:

My mother thought that I am 'bin-taai' (變態, abnormal) by dating boys. She was supported by the school social worker [one of the school counselling team members], who explained to my mum that there were organisations that can 'cure' homosexuality with sexual orientation change therapy ... I refused to go after going to their seminar one time with my mum ... I started to act 'straight' by myself. (Wing Man, male, 18, self-identified as gay, Form 6 student)

Wing Man went on to tell about a series of changes he made:

I started to smoke. Then, I deliberately wore clothes with high exposure, and I learnt to be 'bad' ... and to make myself more masculine and to act it well ...

Wing Man's determination to act straight reflected that he had internalised his mother's and his school social worker's ideas about his sexuality, which pushed him to further isolation:

Frankly speaking, I did not like myself after all the changes . . . My grades went down. I was depressed.

During Wing Man's street wandering, he found a support group advertisement for LGBQ youth, where he was connected to other LGBQ students of his own age who shared similar stories. He said: 'I felt a kind of intimacy seeing people like me. They told me not to take myself as an odd one out or to feel cold-shouldered. They said I should live better'. Wing Man had become actively involved in this group, and acted as an online peer counsellor for a health prevention project.

The tongzhi students said they felt unsafe to 'come out' in the school context, not necessarily due to overt homophobic language or acts. Subtle heterosexism ignored their existence, and labelled them in a 'problem' category or, even worse, put them in oppressed and vulnerable situations, which in turn created extra stress and mental health difficulties.

### ***Desirable school counselling practices***

#### *Feeling supported: making an effort to understand my sexuality*

The participants reported the following experiences with their school counsellors, whose efforts to understand tongzhi students' sexuality were appreciated. One participant described a school counsellor who explored knowledge about tongzhi culture through calling an LGBQ support group:

My school counsellor . . . was supportive of my coming out. She did not know about gay culture, but she was willing to learn . . . She contacted a hotline on LGBQ counselling . . . She also invited people familiar with LGBQ issues to organise a workshop for her school team members . . . (Tony, male, 16, self-identified as 'questioning my sexuality', Form 4 student)

The participants also described their counsellors' participation in LGBQ-related activities in order to understand their students' sexuality. For example:

I like to talk with my school counsellor instead of teachers . . . she [school counsellor] was very supportive of me. She's straight. Yet she tried to understand my sexuality . . . I invited her to visit me in a gay support group . . . she even met my boyfriend in the group . . . (Brandon, male, 17, self-identified as gay, Form 5 student)

### **Discussion**

The present study is limited in its ability to examine gender, class, race and disability differences in the school counselling experiences of sexual minority students. Nevertheless, this article has presented results from the first known study of Chinese tongzhi students' school counselling experience. It has provided initial evidence of how a small, diverse group of tongzhi students experienced their school counselling services in Chinese society. The tongzhi students in this study reported three themes relating to undesirable counselling experience with counsellors who made judgements,

who omitted their needs from programmes or activities and who pathologised the tongzhi students' sexual identity or practices. The findings are similar to previous evidence generated from studies with larger numbers of informants. The following discussions tie the themes with existing literature and the social cultural climate of Hong Kong.

First, the results of this study revealed incidents of psychological heterosexism reflected in individual counsellors' overt heterosexist language, which had been conveyed openly to students participating in counselling programmes, including tongzhi students. This finding was in line with studies in North American and some European societies where school counsellors seldom intervened in homophobic incidents or were themselves openly conveying prejudiced messages (e.g. Buston & Hart, 2001; Butler et al., 2003; Ellis & High, 2004; Hunt & Jensen, 2007; Kosciw et al., 2010; Varjas et al., 2006). Second, the tongzhi students' narratives revealed cultural heterosexism manifested at institutional level, such as the omission or invisibility of LGBQ issues in counselling programmes and practice, consistent with previous studies (e.g. Butler et al., 2003; Chesir-Teran & Hughes, 2009; Rutter & Leech, 2006; Varjas et al., 2006). Without school counsellors' active support, the establishment of anti-discriminatory school policy and school-based support programmes would be an alternative source of support for LGBQ students encountering heterosexism (Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2011). Unlike other minority groups in Hong Kong, such as racial minorities, who are protected legally under the Anti-Discrimination Ordinance and other inclusive educational policies in schools (Hue, 2010), Hong Kong has not established an anti-discrimination policy to protect tongzhi students within the school context, including school counselling services. Without the legislation of the Anti-Discrimination Ordinance based on sexual orientation, tongzhi students face extra challenges in schools without support from affirmative school counselling services. Their needs are being silenced and their existence is being denied.

Connecting the result to the social cultural forces in Hong Kong society, local scholars have suggested that counselling professionals share the conservative heterosexist climate of the larger society concerning LGBQ issues, which are prohibited from discussion among school teachers and counsellors due to individual schools' religious backgrounds or opposition from school administrators (Fok, 2005; Kwok, Wu, & Shardlow, in press; Winter & King, 2010). In a random sample survey of public attitudes toward homosexuality, 41% of the 2040 respondents considered gay men and lesbians as 'psychologically abnormal' (Hong Kong SAR Government, 2006). It is possible that the helping professionals, including school counsellors, remain susceptible to heterosexist biases that have been absorbed from prevalent attitudes in mainstream society (Kwok et al., in press). In view of the possible heterosexist bias of some school counsellors, it is important to examine the existing professional codes of ethics in guiding professional practices in schools. This has been addressed in other parts of the world. For example, in the United States the American School Counsellor Association (ASCA) has required counsellors not to discriminate against LGBQ individuals based upon stereotypes, ignorance or hatred (ASCA, 2010). In Hong Kong, however, there are no ethical guidelines relating to sexual orientation discrimination by school counsellors stipulated in the Code of Conduct of the Council on Professional Conduct in Education.

Despite these undesirable counselling experiences, however, positive and desirable experiences described by our informants indicate that there are some school

counsellors offering services that are open to and accepting of tongzhi students. The participants also described certain characteristics that made interactions with school counsellors particularly helpful, including being supportive during their coming out, and actively seeking knowledge on LGBTQ issues. These are consistent with the characteristics identified by Hancock (1995) as important for providing the best counselling services to LGBTQ clients. These school counselling practices identified by our informants can serve as suggestions for improvements to school counselling services for tongzhi students in schools.

### ***Recommendations for school guidance and counselling in Hong Kong***

Informed by both the literature review and the findings from the reported study, recommendations are made regarding policy, professional code of ethics, professional training of school counsellors and school counselling practices.

At the policy level, school-based anti-discrimination policies, based on sexual orientation, should be established. In addition, counselling accreditation bodies (e.g. the Council on Professional Conduct) should develop explicit ethical principles to address potential harm caused by school counsellors for LGBTQ service users in its code of ethics. Furthermore, content about sexual diversity should be incorporated into the mandated counselling training curricula. The study results and this article will be sent to the Hong Kong Education Bureau's Council on Professional Conduct in Education, to advocate for the enactment of anti-discrimination school policy and a professional code of ethics related to sexual diversity.

At the professional training level, it is important for counselling educators to challenge the larger society's oppressive heterosexist values. Counselling educators should include contemporary views on counsellor training in sexual diversity, such as anti-discriminative and social justice perspectives (American Psychological Association [APA], 2009). In addition, in developing their professional value systems and designing and delivering quality counsellor training programmes, counselling educators should be fully aware of cultural and religious impacts on their students and be prepared to create a space for the students to discuss value dilemmas openly in the training process.

At the practice level, as reflected from informants' narrative, it is important for school counsellors in Hong Kong to self-reflect actively on heterosexist biases and pursue an active understanding of LGBTQ knowledge (Sue, 2006). As well as actively focusing on tongzhi students' mental health, school counsellors have an obligation to ameliorate the negative social forces of heterosexism through social justice advocacy at both individual and institutional levels (Kashubeck-West et al., 2008). Individual-level intervention strategies include facilitating tongzhi students' awareness of the negative impact of heterosexism on their lives, and teaching students skills for confronting heterosexist messages in schools. Institutional-level intervention strategies include active involvement in advocacy work to change oppressive school counselling programmes and policies that discriminate against LGBTQ students (Kashubeck-West et al., 2008).

### **Conclusion**

LGBTQ studies concerning school counselling practice have been almost non-existent in Chinese societies, and the few publications on LGBTQ youth experience in general,

have ‘focused on the science and medical fields’ (Sugiyama & Ofuji, 2006, p. 120). The present research study adds to the existing body of work on tongzhi students in East Asian cities, particularly in the Chinese cultural context, by going beyond the science and medical fields to consider the issues from a social cultural perspective. It reveals a compelling need for counsellors to support tongzhi students to navigate heterosexism in schools, and to advocate their equal opportunities within the Hong Kong secondary school system. Through the voices of tongzhi students, the study demonstrates the need for change in policy, the code of ethics for school counsellors, and the training and practice of school counselling professionals with LGBTQ/tongzhi students in advocating discrimination-free school environments for tongzhi students in Hong Kong.

### Notes

1. Within most Hong Kong Chinese gay communities, a cultural identity label – ‘tongzhi’ (同志), meaning ‘comrade’ – is preferred over the formal Western label ‘homosexual’ (同性戀者).
2. We use the acronym LGBTQ here for convenience. Although lesbian/gay/bisexual youth and gender-variant youth are facing social discriminations based on their experience of transgressing gender norms, the authors understand that transgender students face unique challenges from LGBTQ students that require specific attention (e.g. the process of gender transition). This article thus refers to the LGBTQ community only to avoid the assumption that LGBTQ students and transgender students are facing the same issues.

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