

Positive Influences on Quality of Life and Self Esteem in Non-Heterosexual Individuals

Dr. Jayesh Ghodke¹, Ms. Moha Walavalkar^{2*}, Mrs. Akanksha Gupta³

ABSTRACT

The LGBTQ Community is a community which has people who show sexual and gender orientations different from the social norm and are present all over the world. Quality of Life (QoL) is how an individual perceives their life in the cultural context and their beliefs, considering their goals, expectations, standards and concerns. Self-esteem is the individual's perception of their own self-worth. Individuals from the LGBTQ community have been subjected to lower QoL and self-esteem compared to other individuals, mostly due to social ostracization and homophobia that they face. However, some protective factors have also been observed and this paper is a review of the same. Understanding these factors can help create more awareness and programs for the betterment of the community.

Keywords: *LGBTQ, Homosexuals, Quality of life, Self-esteem, Protective Factors*

The LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and others) community is a highly marginalised community existing throughout the world which consist of people who have different sexual and gender identities keeping in mind the societal normative heterosexual identification. Therefore, in order to understand the implications of being included in this community, it is important that we first understand the terms that differentiate them from other individuals.

“Sex is either of the two main categories (male and female) into which humans and many other living things are divided on the basis of their reproductive functions.” (Oxford Dictionary, 2016). Sex is the biological makeup of the person which greatly decides the physical and reproductive features of the human body. Societal constructs have divided sex into two main areas – male and female, depending on their reproductive functioning. Occasionally, people who do not fit into this binary system have a hard time being accepted into society. For example, there are people who show internal organs of a stereotypical female but do not contain any clear genitalia. Such individuals are called intersex. Thus, sex of a person is a spectrum and a person and if a person does not feel that they show

¹Consultant Psychiatrist, Dr. R. N, Cooper Municipal General Hospital, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

²M.Sc. Psychology (Clinical Psychology), Amity University, Mumbai, Maharashtra India

³Clinical Psychologist, Dept. of Psychiatry, Dr. R.N. Cooper Municipal General Hospital, Mumbai, Maharashtra, India

*Corresponding Author

Received: October 19, 2022; Revision Received: December 05, 2022; Accepted: December 12, 2022

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characteristics that belong to the stereotypical sex binary, they can always identify themselves as biologically intersex.

Understanding the gender of a person is a complex concept. While sex is the biological framework of the person, gender can be understood as the identity the person chooses to give themselves. Gender is the state of being a man, woman, both or neither, somewhere in between or maybe feeling something else altogether. But one thing every individual must understand that no one has the right to decide the gender of the person but the *individual themselves*. Nothing about the person's physical attributes can determine their gender. It is determined by self-perception and self-concept. There is no concept of a right or wrong gender and what gender a person assigns to themselves is an undebatable truth. Transgenders are those whose gender differs from what was assigned to them at birth. Celebrity Elliot Page is a prime example. He is a trans male i.e., he was born as a female but changed his gender to male. Gender fluid individuals are those who do not identify with a single gender at one time. This does not necessarily mean that they switch between gender binaries, but can feel that they fall anywhere on the spectrum based on their functioning on that particular day. Non-Binary gendered individuals are those who believe they do not fit the criteria for the binary gender norm. They might feel like they are neither a man or woman but some other gender altogether.

Sexual and romantic identities talk about the preference an individual has when it comes to being attracted to another individual. This also includes not feeling any form of attraction altogether. It includes the intensity of the romantic feelings, intensity of fluctuation, preferred genders and the conditions under which they experience this attraction. There are multiple kinds of attractions. Single gender attraction is the case where an individual is attracted to only one gender, for example, lesbian, gay or straight individuals. Lesbians are females attracted to females while gays are men attracted to men. Multiple gender attraction is the case where an individual is attracted to two or more genders. Pansexuality is an umbrella term which means having sexual feelings for multiple genders. This includes bisexuals. Bisexuals generally have attraction only towards the gender binary. People who do not feel any form of attraction are called asexual. There are numerous more such terminologies which need to be understood where a person belongs to in this community.

Thus, it is highly important to understand the distinction between these three terms. A person's *sex* could be female, *gender* could be female, but if she likes another woman then her *sexual identity* is a lesbian and that puts her under the LGBTQ umbrella. Another example is an individual who is a trans male is attracted towards both binary genders. This makes the sex of the person a female, gender is male and sexual identity will be bisexual.

Identifying yourself with the LGBTQ community has often played an important role in the development of self-esteem in the individual. According to Rosenberg, it refers to the individual's overall positive image of themselves. Sedikides and Gress (2003) stated that self-esteem refers to "individual's perception or subjective appraisal of one's own self-worth, one's feelings of self-respect and self-confidence and the extent to which the individual holds positive or negative views about self." It is related to an individual's personal beliefs about his skills, social relationships and abilities. A study conducted was on bisexual women and the probability of them disclosing their identity based on their female friendships and the outcomes of the same on their mental health. There was higher self-esteem in women who had disclosed themselves. The findings indicated that encouraging disclosure towards one's female friends can actually serve to deepen the friendship and be

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personally healing to one's self-esteem and life satisfaction (Nina Parekh, 2020). Development of self-image, an important process in identifying yourself with the LGBTQ community is also important in development of this self-esteem. The process of disclosure often allows the person to accept themselves for who they are and thus this boosts their self-esteem. (Sanders, Livingston and Cochran).

Quality of life (QOL) is defined by the World Health Organisation as an individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns. (WHO, 2008). It aims to capture the well-being of the individual keeping in mind all the positive and negative aspects present at that point of time in the person's life. QoL includes personal and mental health, relationships, education, work environment, wealth and social status, a sense of security and autonomy. A study done in India in 2018 showed that about 44.4% Lesbians, 65% of the gays, 39% of bisexuals and 74.1% of transgenders perceived a low level of QOL mostly due to pervasive stigma and discrimination (Ghosh, 2018). However, the study also indicated a good number of individuals which had a good quality of life which indicates that there are some protective factors which can better the situation of these individuals.

LGBTQ rights have been a long-standing issue in the country for quite a few years, but lately has been evolving rapidly. The first trademark change was decriminalising Sec 377 of IPC which indicated that individuals practicing homosexuality could no longer be considered as committing a crime. Article 15 of the Constitution prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. The Transgender Protection Act was adopted in 2019 which gave many benefits to transgenders in India including protection against discrimination and housing, educational and career opportunities. Transgender people in India are now allowed to change their legal gender after sex reassignment surgery since the legislation was passed in 2019, and have a constitutional right to register themselves under a third gender. In 2022, National Medical Commission banned the practice of Conversion Therapy, a therapy which was given to homosexuals with a view to change their homosexuality into heterosexuality. It was observed that conversion therapy can lead to depression, anxiety, seizures, drug use and suicidal tendencies for the individuals involved.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A study conducted in 2021 emphasised on various factors that could improve the quality of life of LGBTQ individuals. Parental acceptance and affirmation, connectedness and belonging to the family, understanding from the parents and advocacy of their rights were all associated with better wellbeing in the community. Social support from peers, especially close friendships with gender and sexual minority peers, romantic relationships and supportive friendships with other groups as well showed that wellbeing increased in these individuals. Sexual minority relationships helped to deal with sexuality stress and other problems while cross sexual orientation friendships increased potential for accepting common points, breaking down negative stereotypes and increasing awareness and sensitivity of others to their perspectives. Having positive relationships with mental health providers within education, health care and counselling services showed that establishing connectedness, belonging and support led to better acceptance which increased their wellbeing as well. Acceptance from cultural and religious communities played an important role in the wellbeing as well. This included co-curricular and extracurricular activities which would include same gender partners for events, and other such provisions which would be sensitive towards these individual's needs. Legal aspects such as universal access and

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inclusion in all affairs of life, advocacy activism and representation visibility also increased the quality of life of the individuals.

Researches done by the CDC has shown that positive attitudes towards protection, increased peer group acceptance, safer sex, alliances with similar individuals, disclosing their identity and being accepted after the same has contributed to positive quality of life and self-esteem in individuals (CDC, 2019).

A study done among sexual minority men showed that resilience in fact played an important role in mitigating the stress that the individuals had to face due to their sexuality. Both white men and men of colour faced similar kinds of LGBTQ stigma, it was noted that the men of colour showed higher resilience and that contributed to the overall quality of life. They had the capability to deal with the stress in a better way (McConnell et. al., 2018).

A study done in 2018 by Johns. et. al. identified 27 different protective factors which were divided into 4 main domains. At the individual level, beliefs and perceptions, skills and competencies played an important role. This involved self-esteem, body esteem, positive sense of self, self-efficacy and religiosity in individuals. Skills and competencies involved personal mastery, ability to use social media appropriately for support, problem solving skills and self-advocacy. At the relationship level, family cohesion and parental support are important. Having supportive educators, staff, role models and helpful service providers also provided positive influences. Supportive peers and romantic or sexual relationships were also contributing to the wellbeing. At a community level, school policies, organisational resources and community visibility were important in contributing to the wellbeing of the individual.

Building resilience can include bolstering social supports, connecting the individual to community groups, and helping them engage in activism. In fact, one study found that engaging in LGBTQ-specific coping strategies (such as getting involved in LGBTQ-serving organisations) leads to greater psychosocial adjustment for youth and young adults (Toomey et. al, 2017).

A study done in 2015 also indicated several protective factors for the wellbeing of the LGBTQ community. Support and acceptance from friends, family members, schools, and other institutions has been identified as a crucial factor in decreasing depression in the LGBTQ+ community. In a 2013 study by Mustanski and Liu, they found that parental support of LGBT youth significantly decreased chances of depression and suicidal tendencies. In terms of protective factors, school acceptance plays a major role in lessening depression and suicide within the LGBTQ+ community.

Family cohesion (i.e., strong familial ties) was associated with higher self-esteem, higher sexual self-efficacy, and later age of starting involving in sexual relations transgender youth, but did not show any relation to the number of sexual partners, substance abuse behaviours, incarceration, and prostitution (Stetzer, Ka'opua, & Diaz, 2014).

University of Montana conducted research to determine the effects of concealing or disclosing the sexual identity on self-esteem. Disclosure of sexual identity often carried the risk of increased discrimination and victimisation by the society. This can indirectly affect their self-esteem and lower it considerably. Stress faced by this community was mainly due to the internalised homophobia, expectations of being rejected and concealing their true self.

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It caused considerable distress as integration of their true self with their social self was difficult and often caused a dissonance. Thus, they were forced to conceal themselves and this also resulted in a lowering of self-esteem. There is a constant debate between concealment or disclosure as it inadvertently seemed that the minority was to lose in either case. The research was conducted on 730 sexual minority individuals between the age of 18 and 91. It was observed that even though individuals face greater risk post disclosure of discrimination and victimisation, disclosing their identity appeared to have an overall positive effect on self-esteem, which could have countered the effects of discrimination and victimisation (Sanders, Livingston and Cochran, 2014).

Studies clearly demonstrate the benefit of affirming and protective school environments for LGBT youth mental health. Youth living in states with antibullying laws that include sexual orientation and gender identity report less homophobic victimization and harassment than do students who attend schools in states without these protections (Kosciw et al. 2014).

Multiple studies have shown the advantage of having Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs). GSAs are school-based, student-led clubs open to all youth who support LGBT students and they aim to reduce prejudice and harassment within the school environment (Goodenow et al. 2006). LGBT students in schools with GSAs and often reported feeling safer and were less likely to report depressive symptoms, substance use, and suicidal thoughts and behaviours in comparison with students in schools lacking such resources (Goodenow et al. 2006, Hatzenbuehler et al. 2014, Poteat et al. 2012).

Identity vs role confusion can play a major role in self-esteem levels. A strong sense of self-worth which comes once one has come to terms with his own identity often results in higher esteem levels. Those with higher identity status possess a higher inner self definition as they have explored themselves thoroughly. Thus, they also show higher self-esteem levels. A study was conducted by Ryeng, Kroger and Martinussen, which identified the relationship between identity status and self-esteem in LGBTQ individuals. For a person, to have a strong value of self-esteem, self-worth is necessary. This self-worth come after complete acceptance of your gender roles and identity. For LGBTQ individuals, this acceptance of gender roles will be greatly influenced by societal appreciation and thus disclosure will play an important role in the same. They hypothesised that individuals with a higher and committed identity status would have a greater self-esteem. Though there was no clear evidence to show support to the case, they found that after categorical assessment, higher self-esteem scores were linked with more committed identity statuses.

The nurturing and protective roles of families are important in improving both mental and physical health of individuals. Studies showed that relationships of LGBTQ individuals with their families were greatly challenged after disclosure of their sexual identities. (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2005; Patterson, 2000; Savin-Williams, 1998a, 1998b; Savin-Williams & Dubé, 1998; Tharinger & Wells, 2000). Rejection reactions from family, teachers, peers, etc often predicted a higher chance of substance use, but there was no relation with a lesser chance of abuse. However, parental rejection was clearly associated with use of drugs, depression, suicide and sexual health risk. In most cases it was also seen that parents became sensitive to their children's needs after the initial shock wore off. This often resulted in improvement in family relations (D'Augelli et al., 2005). It was observed that young adolescents scored higher on self-esteem, social support and general health along with decreased substance abuse, depression, suicidal ideation and overall negative behaviours when they received high levels of family acceptance post disclosure. Sexual risk behaviour

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did not appear to have any clear association with family acceptance. The comments passed by family can have a lasting influence on the LGBTQ individual and affects their emotional and physical states. (Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, Sanchez, 2010).

Scourfield, Roen, and McDermott (2008) looked at resilience in the LGBTQ+ community as a whole and the link between sexual identity and depression and destructive behaviour. They focused on 4 factors that could increase survival. These four factors were: understanding the prevalence of suicide risk in LGBTQ individuals before making policies for their prevention, having ecological levels of prevention, training practitioners who deal with these communities for appropriate levels of understanding of sexual culture and being informed on important matters, and the importance of various responses to adversity. Scourfield, Roen, and McDermott (2008) found that inclusion, and even prioritization of the LGBTQ+ community within suicide-prevention campaigns and when implementing suicide-prevention strategies could influence the community in a positive manner.

RESULTS

About 50-60 abstracts of articles related to the positive factors influencing quality of life in non-heterosexual individuals were researched on after which about 20 relevant researches were scanned in detail. Most of the studies were cross sectional in design. It was observed that most of the research involved individuals answering based on their experience. One limitation could be that the participants could have confabulated the data since it depends on their recall and their willingness to answer truthfully.

Most of the studies are based on understanding the individual's experiences which have been quantified by the researcher. A study in 2021 found out that parental acceptance, affirmation, connectedness, belongingness, social support and establishing various support groups at school and community level significantly impacted the quality of life of individuals. Positive relationships with the sexual minority helped to deal with stressors related to sexual identity while straight friendships helped in establishing commonality which helped in acceptance of the individual and made them feel included in the social setting. The CDC in 2019 conducted researches which showed that positive attitudes towards protection, increased peer group acceptance, safer sex, alliances with similar individuals, disclosing their identity and being accepted after the same has contributed to positive quality of life and self-esteem in individuals. Studies done on minority men in the USA showed that those who had higher resilience often showed a better quality of life in similar settings. Building resilience can include bolstering social supports, connecting the individual to community groups, and helping them engage in activism. Scourfield, Roen, and McDermott (2008) looked at resilience in the LGBTQ+ community as a whole and the link between sexual identity and depression and destructive behaviour. They focused on 4 factors that could increase survival which involved areas such as practitioner competency, more awareness to the requirements of the community and planning interventions suited to their needs. Scourfield, Roen, and McDermott (2008) found that inclusion, and even prioritization of the LGBTQ+ community within suicide-prevention campaigns and when implementing suicide-prevention strategies could influence the community in a positive manner. Johns. et. al. identified 27 different protective factors which they divided into 4 main domains to understand which factors can improve the quality of life. These include individual level, relationship level, community level and skills and competencies. A study done in 2015 also indicated several protective factors for the wellbeing of the LGBTQ community. Support and acceptance from friends, family members, schools, and other institutions is seemingly a crucial factor in decreasing depression in the LGBTQ+

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community. Parental rejection was clearly associated with use of drugs, depression, suicide and sexual health risk. In most cases it was also seen that parents became sensitive to their children's needs after the initial shock wore off. This often resulted in improvement in family relations (D'Augelli et al., 2005). It was observed that young adolescents scored higher on self-esteem, social support and general health along with decreased substance abuse, depression, suicidal ideation and overall negative behaviours when they received high levels of family acceptance post disclosure. Sexual risk behaviour did not appear to have any clear association with family acceptance. The comments passed by family can have a lasting influence on the LGBTQ individual and affects their emotional and physical states. (Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, Sanchez, 2010). University of Montana conducted research to determine disclosure and its relationship with self-esteem. Disclosure of sexual identity often resulted in discrimination and victimisation by the society which indirectly affected their self-esteem and lower it considerably. The research was conducted on 730 sexual minority individuals between the age of 18 and 91. It was observed that even though individuals face greater risk post disclosure of discrimination and victimisation, disclosing their identity appeared to have an overall positive effect on self-esteem, which could have countered the effects of discrimination and victimisation (Sanders, Livingston and Cochran, 2014). Legal aspects also played an important role in ensuring a better quality of life in individuals. Youth living in states with antibullying laws that include sexual orientation and gender identity report less homophobic victimization and harassment than do students who attend schools in states without these protections (Kosciw et al. 2014). Gay straight alliances played an extremely important role in improving the quality of life. These were student communities which encouraged communication between heterosexuals and homosexuals which resulted in better understanding and sensitization for heterosexuals which in return helped create a more accepting environment and better lifestyles for the minority. Individuals who had disclosed their identities also had a better sense of self which indicated a higher sense of inner self definition. They also showed better self-esteem and self-worth which came only after the individual had completely accepted gender roles and identity. The nurturing and protective roles of families are extremely important to decrease mental and physical health risks. Youth with same gender attraction are at a higher risk for compromised physical and mental health especially if they were rejected by family. (Russell & Joyner, 2001).

DISCUSSION

Although known problems of the LGBTQIA+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and others) are well documented in scientific literature in various geographical locations, studies have majorly focused in a single area. The current review compiles together all the scientific data across these geographical locations and reviews it to understand if there are any major discrepancies found between the trends in the data. The prevalence rates showed similar trends across geographical locations and the quality of life and self-esteem were lower in this specific community. With the help of review, it will help to understand the common causes of lead to lower quality of life and self-esteem in the population. It was observed that young adolescents scored higher on self-esteem, social support and general health along with decreased substance abuse, depression, suicidal ideation and overall negative behaviours when they received high levels of family acceptance post disclosure. Sexual risk behaviour did not appear to have any clear association with family acceptance. The comments passed by family can have a lasting influence on the LGBTQ individual and affects their emotional and physical states. The research was conducted on 730 sexual minority individuals between the age of 18 and 91. It was observed that even though individuals face greater risk post disclosure of discrimination

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and victimisation, disclosing their identity appeared to have an overall positive effect on self-esteem, which could have countered the effects of discrimination and victimisation. Overall findings in various review articles suggests that it need to focused on currents issues for social welfare

Future Directions

This paper highlights a lot of areas which can act as protective areas for the LGBTQ community to help them lead a better quality of life. Arranging interventions, programs and awareness in this direction will greatly help the individuals. However, before educating the masses, it is important that mental health professionals are also sensitized to the needs of these individuals. Training programs and certified courses which will guarantee that people working in the field of mental health will be qualified to understand the requirements of this community will not only increase their confidence to seek help but will also ensure that they get the best quality of help they require and their needs are adequately catered to.

Establishing supportive therapy protocols which is focused solely on LGBTQ communities and their families will help improve the quality of help they receive. This study has highlighted the importance of family acceptance for these individuals and therefore family therapy focused specifically on LGBTQ individuals and their families could help improve familial reactions to these individuals disclosing their identity.

This research also talked about several areas such as victimisation, discrimination, ostracization from society and lack of acceptance of LGBTQ individuals when they disclose their identity as several problems, they face which decrease their quality of life. Workshops, awareness programs and various exercises can be conducted to try and reduce these barriers to a good way of life for these individuals. Since the laws have changed to include people from this community and give them basic human rights that they deserve, it is important that their existence is also made known to children from a young age. Not only schools, but colleges, institutions and even workplaces can conduct awareness programs so that such individuals are easily accepted into these environments and do not face victimisation or discrimination. Antibullying laws must also be reinforced strictly to ensure that these individuals are not bullied in school or work settings. Creation of Gay-Straight Alliances can be made mandatory in all institutions. This will help improve inclusivity, sensitivity towards the community individuals and also LGBTQ individuals will find some commonality with heterosexuals. If these implications are all executed appropriately, the quality of life and self-esteem of the individuals from the LGBTQ could improve greatly.

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Acknowledgement

The author appreciates all those who participated in the study and helped to facilitate the research process.

Conflict of Interest

The author declared no conflict of interest.

How to cite this article: Jayesh, G., Moha, W. & Akanksha, G. (2022). Positive Influences on Quality of Life and Self Esteem in Non-Heterosexual Individuals. *International Journal of Indian Psychology*, 10(4), 1263-1272. DIP:18.01.121.20221004, DOI:10.25215/1004.121