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Experiences of Coming Out in Japan: Negotiating “Perceived Homophobia”

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Heteronormative society requires non-heterosexuals to come out in order to be recognized. Coming out is often the most challenging experience for non-heterosexuals and heteronormativity and homophobia are two powerful obstacles that they have to deal with. This paper considers how non-heterosexuals come out to themselves and to heterosexual others under the effect of Japanese cultural norms. Interviews with 24 non-heterosexuals and their experiences revealed that they have to deal with not only heteronormativity and homophobia like non-heterosexuals in the Western culture, but also “perceived homophobia,” which is created by the expectation of “respectable Japanese selves.” Thus, coming out in Japan requires a continuous process of negotiation with cultural norms embedded in a society. The paper raises questions about the necessity of considering cultural differences in coming out and explains how non-heterosexuals negotiate with themselves and others in order to live “happily” in Japan’s strongly conformist culture. This paper provides a better understanding of sexual minority issues in the Japanese context.

Keywords: Non-heterosexuals, coming out, Japanese cultural norms, heteronormativity, homophobia, perceived homophobia

OPPRESSION AGAINST NON-HETEROSEXUALITY

In a heteronormative society, people are socialized to believe that heterosexuality is the only acceptable sexuality. This reinforces homophobia,¹ “the dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals” (Weinberg, 1972, p. 4). In this circumstance, heteronormativity and homophobia are linked sources of constraint that can inhibit non-heterosexuals’ acceptance

of their own sexuality and coming out (Altman, 1993; Eaklor, 2008).

These two sources of oppression are also seen in Japan. The book, *Kamingu Auto Retazu* [Coming Out Letters], illustrated coming out experiences among parents and children, and students and teachers. People introduced in this book said they believed family members and teachers would not accept them, or they were afraid of disappointing their family members and teachers (RYOJI & Sunagawa, 2007). As

previous studies have pointed out, coming out is not a one-time event (Kazama & Kawaguchi, 2010; Sanbe, 2012), rather it is a continuous process of negotiation.

This paper explores how Japanese cultural norms influence coming out experiences, as well as how non-heterosexuals living in Japan negotiate heteronormative situations. The first part of the paper reviews previous research on coming out in the West and raises questions based on the introduction of characteristics of Japanese selves and their interactions. Then, after explaining the research methods used, respondents' experiences of coming out to themselves and heterosexual others are examined to illustrate the limited applicability of Western theories. Looking closely at their experiences and the Japanese context leads to the discussion of "perceived homophobia" as a factor oppressing non-heterosexuals in Japan. Finally, the paper summarizes its findings, discusses some research limitations, and presents ideas for future research.

COMING OUT TO SELF AND OTHERS

Coming out has two prominent dimensions: coming out to self and others. Coming out to self means consciously constructing non-heterosexual identity. Theories of homosexual identity formation have been developed in the West in the field of psychoanalysis but they are underdeveloped in Japan. Cass (1979) elaborated a six-stage model of homosexual identity formation (see Table 1²). Individuals go through these stages in order to fully identify themselves as homosexual. Other theorists (Coleman, 1982; Plummer, 1975; Troiden, 1989) also emphasized interactions with other non-heterosexuals or communities as important paths to accepting non-heterosexuality.

Coming out is often discussed along with identity formation. Coleman (1982) proposed five stages of coming out in the Western

and psychoanalytical contexts (See Table 1). Coleman's definition of coming out depended more on disclosure to self and other non-heterosexuals than to society or heterosexuals. Although the purpose of Coleman's model was different, and he called these stages "the coming out process," it overlapped with Cass's stages that neglected coming out to heterosexual others. Thus, each model ends with the establishment of being fully comfortable with non-heterosexual identity (Cass, 1979) that allows long-term relationships with non-heterosexuals (Coleman, 1982) in which non-heterosexual identity is a way of life. Coming out to yourself and interacting with non-heterosexuals are obviously important. However, these theories assume that an individual constructs a stable self that is unchangeable. Moreover, these theories overemphasize coming out to non-heterosexual others as the key to becoming fully comfortable with their sexuality, but not heterosexual others which supposedly would create interactive conflicts because heteronormativity and homophobia are more shared. Hence, turning this around to look at in a more sociological way needs to be incorporated, asking how individuals negotiate identity with themselves and heterosexual others through interactions within their social settings. This is why it is necessary to be careful about who is included in the category of "others" to whom non-heterosexuals come out. According to Horie (2006), there are three dimensions of coming out: 1) to yourself, 2) to someone close, and 3) to unspecified others. Although these categories simply reflect to whom people come out in situations that call for different kinds of social interaction, the effect of culturally embedded homophobia in each category also need to be taken into account. Thus, in this paper, coming out is organized as 1) to yourself, 2) to people of little or no homophobia (sexual minority communities and people one can trust), and 3) to heterosexuals with homophobia or heteronormative prejudices. How does Japanese cultural norms influence non-

Table 1. Comparison between Cass and Coleman's Models

Cass	Coleman
	1 st Stage "Pre-Coming Out" Realization of difference from others without identifying as homosexual or heterosexual
1 st Stage "Identity Confusion" - Doubt own sexuality as homosexual without knowing what it means to be a homosexual that confuses them and feel alienated = "potentially" homosexual - Seeking information, rejecting attractions to people of the same-sex that might resolve their confusion and alienation	2 nd Stage "Coming Out" - Acknowledge homosexuality as the difference. - Two ways to accept their homosexuality: 1) Gaining acceptance from numbers of persons 2) Seeking acceptance from other homosexuals
2 nd Stage "Identity Comparison" - Concern about both how they perceive themselves and how others perceive homosexual behavior → isolation - Pretend to be heterosexual to reduce feelings of isolation - Extreme isolation motivates them to contact others	
3 rd Stage "Identity Tolerance" Perceive their sexuality as homosexuals; thus, they are more aware of how others see them → Isolation → Seek interaction with other homosexuals or "homosexual subcultures" to reduce isolated feelings	3 rd Stage "Exploration" Exploring, testing or experimenting with their new sexuality to gain a positive self-image
4 th Stage "Identity Acceptance" - Frequent interaction with other homosexuals helps to normalize homosexuality and fosters acceptance of homosexual self-image - Choosing where to portray a homosexual self-image to avoid risks	
5 th Stage "Identity Pride" Less concern about how others see them, provides "the freedom to choose disclosure as a strategy for coping"	4 th Stage "First Relationships" Extend the interaction with other homosexuals that makes them desire a relationship
6 th Stage "Identity Synthesis" Homosexual identity infuses all aspects of identity; there is one consistent self across social contexts	5 th Stage "Integration" Comfortable with their sexuality so that they start seeking a long-term relationship

heterosexual coming out in these three kinds of social interaction?

THE EFFECT OF CONFORMIST JAPANESE CULTURAL NORMS

In this section, construction of self and interaction in Japan will be illustrated to see how interaction norms affected coming out experiences in the context of Japan.

Lebra (2004) stated that the task of the "Japanese self is to focus on the multiplicity and

shifting of self within the social context," (p. 38) a complex contrast to the self in European sociological models. One aspect of the manifold Japanese self is the "front (*omote*) zone," which "combines propriety and distance" (p. 42). The front zone operates in Japan in conjunction with the "interior (*uchi*) zone" where the self's behavior is based on "intimacy accompanied by familiarity" (p. 66). In the front zone, the interaction with other selves is in "hierarchical asymmetry," meaning that one's behavior is perceived as polite. An example of politeness is "*kizukai* (alertness and caring attention to other's

needs or feelings)” in response to expectations from others to behave in ways that will make them feel good. *Kizukai* requires “*enryo* (self-imposed restraint)” to avoid causing people to feel “*meiwaku* (trouble, burden, inconvenience, annoyance, displeasure, discomfort)” (Lebra, 2004, pp. 43-44).

Caring about others’ feelings requires one to judge what “appropriate behavior” is in each setting. Studies of identity formation in Japanese children emphasize how public education about Japanese cultural norms prescribes appropriate behavior for each setting, which simultaneously suppresses “inappropriate” private emotions that might disturb the situation (Peak, 1989). Cousins’s study (1989) of the influence of cultural meaning systems on the selves of Japanese and American college students’ self-perceptions affirmed the Japanese self as being comparatively situational. These examples summarize the common understanding that while individualism is emphasized in Western society, it is absent in Japan because Japanese behavior is heavily dependent on group situational settings where conformity is emphasized.

The characteristics of Japanese selves show that their interaction is premised on interdependence. It has been shown that the construction of the Western self is likely to be more by “independent construal”: individuals are responsible for the social environment, which is determined by the “internal attributes of the self” (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 226). Hence, an independent self is more likely to “express self” and “be direct” about what it thinks, while the interdependent self is more likely to “occupy the proper place” and “be indirect,” trying to read other people’s minds (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, p. 230). For interdependent selves, conformity with others in a group is very important. Nonconformity would cause exclusion, which is equal to losing the purpose of existence in the Japanese context.

These cultural interaction differences suggest that the experiences of non-heterosexuals living in Japan would vary from the West. Thus, the question posed in this paper is whether these Western models are sufficient to explain how non-heterosexuals can become fully comfortable with their sexuality and still live “happily” in Japan’s strongly conformist culture. What particular problems are associated with coming out in Japan and how are they negotiated?

METHODS

The total sample consists of 24 non-heterosexuals, 22 of whom participated in face-to-face, in-depth interviews and two were interviewed through e-mails. There were four group interviews of two to three people per group. Nine people participated in group interviews. Reasons for conducting group interviews included respondents’ convenience, being a couple, and being hesitant to attend the interview alone. The Appendix summarizes respondents’ backgrounds. Respondents were gathered in three ways. First, a pilot study was conducted in 2009. Three bloggers who identified themselves as members of sexual minorities in Japan were contacted and interviewed, one by email. Second, using introductions from acquaintances in sexual minority communities, a snowball sample of seven people was gathered. Finally, the remaining respondents were recruited at events and meetings in the sexual minority community.

Face-to-face interviews, e-mail interviews, and group interviews require different techniques and have both advantages and disadvantages. Both face-to-face interviews and group interviews were semi-structured interviews that allowed the interviewer to observe participants’ facial expression and tone of voice as well as ask them extra questions and for more details. Face-to-face interviews, allowed the interviewer to probe their inner feelings, values, and perspectives that

cannot be found just by observation (Bryman, 2008; Konno, 2009). Group interviews gave the interviewer an opportunity to observe discussions of the interview questions, which allowed participants to elaborate ideas more fully (Bryman, 2008; Yoshizumi, 2009). However, some participants did not want to talk about their inner feelings in front of several people, which is typical of Japanese care for others' feelings. Unlike face-to-face interviews and group interviews, e-mail interviews were structured interviews. This gave participants more time to think how to answer the questioner, however, it also introduced the difficulty of grasping how they felt from their written words (Bryman, 2008). In sum, however, differences in interview methods did not produce major apparent differences in the results of this study.

Informants ranged in age from 20 to 47. Twenty percent were students and about 40% of them were office workers. Almost 60% had graduated from a four-year university while about 12% of them had two-year-college or technical-school degrees. One person had a doctorate, two were in master's programs, and three were undergraduates. Sixty-three percent of the participants were in a relationship with a same-sex partner when interviewed. More than half of the interviews took place in the Kansai area, which includes Osaka, Kyoto, and Kobe. Most of the remainder were in the Kanto area including metropolitan Tokyo. The face-to-face interviews and group interviews ranged from 30 minutes to a little more than an hour.

Before the interviews, written consent was obtained from participants for interviews and for tape recording. Twenty-one out of 22 people agreed to be tape-recorded and these conversations were transcribed and analyzed afterwards. Interviews included questions about sexuality, academic background, occupation, age, and hometown, but the bulk of the discussion concerned participants' experiences and feelings about realizing their sexuality and coming

out. The same questionnaire was used for all participants regardless of how the interviews were conducted.

All participants are identified by pseudonyms, except one person who asked me to use his real name. These pseudonyms are family names in order to avoid using first names which are generally gendered, and also because there was a person who identified as MTX (X represents uncategorized sexual identity, neither male nor female or gender-neutral).

RESULTS

Here, respondents' narratives of to whom, how, and what they negotiate will be introduced in order to see the effect of cultural norms on non-heterosexuals' experiences in Japanese context. In the following sections, some respondents' narratives are cited in the past tense and others' are in the present tense, according to when they confronted the issue. Those who talk in the present tense felt that they were in the situation when interviews were conducted.

Overcoming Internalized Homophobia and Accepting Social Exclusion

Ten out of the 24 respondents experienced denial and rejection of themselves and their sexuality. Murase (personal communication, August 8, 2010), a lesbian woman, said it was hard to accept attraction toward other women because she "was scared of being different from others and the majority." Due to heteronormativity, non-heterosexuals became confused when they discovered their sexuality because they believed heterosexuality was the only correct sexuality. Their confusion was also intensified by negative attitudes toward non-heterosexuals, by homophobia. As Fuse (personal communication, June 31, 2010), a lesbian woman, believed that "being lesbian

meant mentally ill” and Matsumoto (personal communication, July 31, 2010), a lesbian woman, also thought it was “disgusting.” This implied that they were aware that being non-heterosexual was a behavior that society did not approve of. Therefore, they tried to deny their feelings toward people of the same-sex and suppressed their true desire. Yaguchi (personal communication, August 3, 2010), a lesbian woman, clearly said that she could not hold hands with her girlfriend or be open about her sexuality in public because she was worried about what others might think of their relationship. She also stated that she did not want to be seen as a lesbian. Fuse, Matsumoto, and Yaguchi’s narratives implied that they internalized negative images of non-heterosexuality, a kind of internalized homophobia. When individuals internalized homophobia, they felt that they would always be a target of homophobia. Additionally, they could not accept the fact that they were different from others as Murase explained, “I thought I would be left out by other girls.” She had dated men in order to belong to girlfriend groups. Murase, Fuse, Sawada (personal communication, June 27, 2010), a lesbian woman, Iwatani (personal communication, June 26, 2010), a lesbian woman, and Yaguchi also had experiences in dating people of opposite sex. They saw “hope,” as Yaguchi put it, in experiencing men, because it made them believe they could “go back to normal” (Murase).

From respondents’ narratives, it was clear that their fear of accepting their own sexuality was created by what Japanese are likely to prioritize: being a part of the majority. Belonging to a majority group and achieving conformity were highly important because the majority is “normal” for Japanese regardless of what the objective truth might be. In the US, non-heterosexuality is treated as a “sinful” behavior and prohibited by the canon law. Americans would fear religious sanction. However, in Japan, where it is conformity rather than religion that

matters, non-heterosexuals in this study were not only afraid of being a non-heterosexuals, who are stigmatized, taboo, and “disgusting” (Matsumoto), but also were afraid of being different from others. This led to exclusion from groups they belonged to as a result of being a non-heterosexual. Since Japanese respondents knew that non-heterosexuality was not accepted in society, embracing homosexuality meant exclusion, which is the same as losing the purpose of existence in Japanese contexts. This is what they feared.

There was variation in how long people denied their feelings, however, there came a time when respondents had to acknowledge their sexuality because their desires toward people of the same-sex became too strong or because they experienced loneliness due to inability to disclose the issue to anyone. Before the feelings toward people of the same-sex got too strong, they suppressed individual desire. This implied that they performed “*enryo* (self-imposed restraint)” to achieve conformity, which ironically resulted in self-denial and caused isolation and loneliness. Respondents reported trying to overcome self-rejection by 1) searching for information about sexuality and interacting with other non-heterosexuals or sexual minority groups, and 2) by seeking acceptance from friends and family.

Six out of 10 respondents overcame the fear of accepting their sexuality by the first strategy. Matsumoto felt she “lost all hope” about being a non-heterosexual, but then she read a helpful book written by a person identified as a lesbian. Matsumoto also used an Internet bulletin board to consult with other non-heterosexuals about her struggles. She realized that “there are respectable lesbians in real life,” which dispelled the negative images about them. Subsequently, she started going to sexual minority community events, including a pride parade that helped her accept her own sexuality. Higuchi (personal communication, July 30, 2010), a bisexual man, and Fuse both used the Internet to look for the

community. They searched the words, lesbian or gay “very nervously.” Fuse said that her struggles to accept her sexuality diminished after she made friends via the Internet. She used a bulletin board to make friends in the non-heterosexual community and later she actually met them. “Everyone was so kind and accepted me and that was most helpful. After that I could start thinking there is nothing wrong with being a lesbian.” Consequently she felt better and was eventually able to accept herself. Higuchi was struggling to accept his sexuality when interviewed. However, he was able to start accepting himself after making contact with the community as he put it, “I couldn’t know myself and couldn’t have made friends with whom I could talk about sexuality openly if I didn’t go there.” This self-acceptance also encouraged him to come out to more people. These stories show how sexual minority communities in Japan help people who have difficulties accepting their sexuality, as scholars elsewhere have also shown (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Plummer, 1975; Troiden, 1989). These communities treat coming out as a good thing, which suggests that they are organized differently from majority Japanese groups, which value *enryo* and hierarchy. In this respect, LGBT³ communities stand outside of Japan’s oppressive mainstream social order.

Four other respondents overcame fear of accepting their sexuality through the second strategy, acceptance by heterosexual others. Those respondents, except Sawada, came out to heterosexual friends that helped them to become comfortable with their sexuality. For example, Sunagawa (personal communication, July 22, 2010), a gay male activist, had justified his feelings toward other boys as friendship because he had acknowledged heterosexuality as a normal sexual behavior. However, there was a point where he had to acknowledge his sexuality because his feelings toward other men got so overwhelming that he could not deny them

anymore. At the same time, he began disclosing to his male friends. He said, “Continuing to have a conversation with my friend about my love on the phone made me settle down and feel comfortable with my sexuality.”

Sawada had a rather different experience. Sawada was outed to her brother by a person she dated. At that time, one of Sawada’s brothers also told her that he was gay and that their other brothers already knew this. Sawada was relieved to find a person with whom she could share experiences. Moreover, the feeling of guilt toward her parents started to wane and she believed, “It’s OK to be who I am now.” The case of Sawada may be unusual. However, being accepted by others first was another way that respondents overcame sexual self-denial.

Their fear of accepting their sexuality was partly created by the need conform. Before respondents realized their non-heterosexuality, they lived in heteronormative situations and never questioned them. After the realization of their sexuality, they had to negotiate with heterosexual cultural norms. However, these two strategies helped non-heterosexuals see that not everyone was homophobic, and that their fears were mostly imagined. Thus, with these strategies they started becoming more comfortable and accepting of their sexuality and constructed non-heterosexual identities. Their experiences resemble Cass’s and Coleman’s stages, in which people feel conflicted about accepting their own sexuality. However, it was also obvious that behaving “appropriately” so as to maintain interdependent relationships and to conform are prioritized in Japanese contexts, thus, accepting non-heterosexuality meant accepting some degree of social exclusion. Because of these dominant cultural values, becoming fully comfortable with their sexuality is not the end of coming out, rather it is the beginning of “being out,” of having to continually negotiate a non-heterosexual identity.

Concerns about Burdening or Causing Trouble (*meiwaku*) to Others

Even after one has overcome internalized homophobia and accepted a non-heterosexual identity, coming out to heterosexual others was another powerful source of stress for non-heterosexuals. Among my respondents, those who used two strategies for accepting their own sexuality realized there are people who respect non-heterosexuality. However, they still pretended to be heterosexual until they came out to other heterosexuals, who they feared might be homophobic. Thus, coming out here refers to coming out to people who are not members of sexual minorities. Coming out to heterosexuals, or in heteronormative situations, involves the risk of possible backlash, while coming out to sexual minority communities is a strategy for self-acceptance.

Asked how they felt before coming out, 17 respondents said they experienced fear. Asked why they were scared, Toba (personal communication, July 16, 2010), a pansexual woman, looked at her past and said, "I was worried about changing the relationships I had with people I came out to." Kawabata (personal communication, June 26, 2010), a lesbian woman, explained what she specifically feared: "I'm worried that people will look at me with prejudice, that people might feel I'm gross or disgusting, or that my female friends would reject going to a public bath⁴ with me." Koyanagi (personal communication, June 26, 2010), a lesbian woman, also said, "I hesitate to come out to female friends because they may misunderstand and think I'm attracted to them." Yaguchi stated that she did not want others to see her as "strange" or "deviant" and these feelings reinforced her fear of coming out.

From their narratives, the source of fear was primarily concern about relationship issues. They are aware of possible risks or negative consequences because they believed

that people they had fear of coming out to must be homophobic, which would damage their relationships. This belief is understandable especially for non-heterosexuals who experienced difficult struggles with their own acceptance of non-heterosexuality.

While respondents feared coming out, they at times expressed guilt about hiding an essential part of their identity or lying to their friends and family. These feelings got bigger as they became more comfortable personally with their sexuality. Also, the closer the relationship, the more desire for being understood and guilt of telling lies increased. Many of my respondents said that coming out was a way for them to be relieved and to stop lying to people they love, honesty which, for them, was "egoistic." Iwatani (personal communication, June 26, 2010), a lesbian woman, clearly said, "I think coming out is 'ego (egoistic)'... because I can openly talk about myself to the people to whom I've already come out. Also, I don't have to pretend to be a heterosexual because people know me as a lesbian." Asked how such behavior is egoistic, she answered, "It's egoistic because it's my desire that I want people to know about me." Asked, "Is it also egoistic for heterosexuals to tell their friends about their boyfriend or girlfriend?" She answered, "Heterosexuality is considered to be normal in this society. Of course there are people who know about homosexuality, but many have biases against homosexuality. If we think about it, it's hard to come out; however, at the same time, I want them to understand. This is like I'm forcing them to understand." The last statement specifically shows the dilemma they confront, and also reminds that Japanese selves are characteristically expected to care for and show concern about others' feelings.

Applying Lebra's argument (2004) on the "front (*omote*) zone" of the self in which people are expected to behave according to social conventions appropriate to their social roles,

disclosing “private” or “personal” issues could be perceived as “*meiwaku*,” something that causes trouble or is a burden for others. Since Japanese society is likely to be composed of an interdependent selves, in which the individual “occupies one’s proper place” (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), the “proper place” is defined by heteronormative roles in which individuals are expected to be heterosexual. Disclosing non-heterosexuality is a violation of the Japanese injunction to be attentive to the needs of others and not to burden them with one’s own personal issues; thus, non-heterosexuals practice self-restraint, “*enryo*” and refrain from making others listen to their personal issues. Also, coming out to close friends or family members can be egoistic because it may unconsciously threaten family and friendship bonds, which is a violation of the interior (*uchi*) zone of the Japanese self (Lebra, 2004). They are afraid of losing the relationships and breaking ties with friends and family. This is why coming out is perceived as egoistic by some respondents. Thus, even if one has constructed non-heterosexual identity, coming out to heterosexual others appears to be confrontational in contexts where conflict is not supposed to be expressed.

However, this does not seem to be the case for American selves because expression of one’s feelings freely is more acceptable in that society (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Once people in the US accept their own sexuality, they are likely to adopt non-heterosexuality as a way of life regardless of consequences for relationships. This was what Cass (1979) and Coleman (1982) assumed to be the hallmark of individualism. Hence, in the Western context, coming out may be perceived as a strategy for establishing non-heterosexual identity, which makes sexual minorities visible in a heteronormative society so they can live as they want. On the other hand, people in the Japanese context may perceive coming out as only an optional tool for individuals seeking to negotiate among

heterosexuals and non-heterosexuals in order to coexist in heteronormative settings.

Sexuality is a Private Issue

Besides the fear of causing trouble for others, many of my respondents agreed a major reason for not coming out to larger society was because it was “meaningless,” (Matsumoto, Miyake, Shimizu, and Ueda) or “does not have any advantages” (Iwatani and Miyake). They felt that coming out to certain people was meaningless because their sexuality was a private issue that was not part of those relationships. The workplace is one example of this. For example, Matsumoto explained, “I don’t come out at my workplace because no one expects me to be a lesbian, but they expect me to be an independent worker.” Miyake (personal communication, July 31, 2010), a lesbian woman explained, “I don’t plan to come out at my workplace because I don’t see any advantages of coming out there.” As revealed in their narratives, they “chose” individual worker as the expected primary identity.

Another narrative was that people believed coming out at work put their employment at risk. Hayakawa (personal communication, July 24, 2010), a bisexual woman, said that coming out “may affect my working conditions” so she would not come out. Workplaces are usually places where “private” issues do not matter. Even if coworkers ask “private” questions, they expect “private” to refer to heterosexual life. Thus, non-heterosexuals either hide their “private” lives or pretend to be heterosexuals at the workplace. Thus, many of my respondents struggled, trapped between how coworkers perceived them as heterosexual and their desire to correct its assumption.

Peoples’ choice not to come out at work differed by gender. Araki, Matsumoto, Miyake, and Wada (personal communication, June 27, 2010), a lesbian woman, and Yaguchi had

similar narratives. Matsumoto, for example, noted how “women are still expected to quit their jobs after marriage. So, if a woman is working in her thirties, other workers start asking, ‘Why isn’t she married yet?’” Thus, career women were “seen as pitiful women or losers” (Matsumoto and Miyake) who could not succeed in getting married and quitting their jobs. Hayakawa said that telling lies at her workplace was “stressful,” but they could be free from these stereotypes and have an easier life by coming out at workplace and being open about themselves. Still, work environments make it difficult for women to do so. Muta (2008) introduced examples of women who found it difficult to speak up about their experiences of sexual harassment at workplace due to “*wa*, the principle of group harmony” (Muta, 2008, p. 57). According to Muta, women, especially in office environments, are expected to be the ones who maintain harmony at work. Thus, complaining of sexual harassment would be understood as non-harmonious behavior in Japan. Likewise, disclosing female non-heterosexuality at work could be treated as troublesome behavior because it threatens the patriarchal and heteronormative working environment. Hence, the distinctive narratives of female respondents about coming out in the workplace were predictable because in Japan’s cultural norms women are expected to put concern for others’ feelings first in order to maintain harmony. While men are less likely to be judged in their careers by their marital status or to face gender inequality, those who work at big companies are still expected to get married. However, this expectation did not play a role in my research since there were few male respondents and they were not working for big companies.

Even though pressure in the workplace could vary by gender, the pressure for marriage from family was present regardless of gender. Taniguchi (personal communication, July 14, 2010), a lesbian woman, who vacillated about

coming out to her family, said, “I was hesitant because I wouldn’t be able to achieve the happiness that my parents expect from me, of marrying a man and having children.” Endo (personal communication, June 26, 2010), a lesbian woman, explained “I want to come out to my mom so she will stop asking me about marriage. But I don’t want my mother to blame herself that her way of raising children was wrong because I’m a lesbian.” Both respondents said the consequences of coming out to their parents might be too upsetting and therefore not worth the risk.

Family was where they belonged and acquired Japanese cultural values. Relationships with family are the interior zone for Japanese. Lebra (2004) compared family relationships in the US and Japan and explained that Americans are more likely to “favor the sexual bond” with the spouse, whereas Japanese prioritize the “kinship bond of parent and child” (p. 69). In this interior zone, an individual presents facets of the self to intimate others results in the nature of intimacy with family members or close friends. Respondents’ families assumed that heterosexual marriage was the only way to pursue happiness. Although coming out to their parents would make their own lives easier, they were socialized to believe that pursuing heterosexual marriage defined happiness. Thus, they prioritized family ties over personal sexual identity and even believed that non-heterosexual relationships can never provide happiness. Coming out to family meant questioning the modality of heteronormative family, something that is said to cause “family collapse” (LaSala, 1998, 2000, 2010; Savin-Williams & Dubé, 1998). They perceived that coming out could damage important relationships, and they feared of being excluded or banished from family. As a result, non-heterosexuals pretended to be a heterosexual children and decided not to come out at home, which represent an “appropriate” behavior in front of their family.

Some respondents said that reason why they decided not to come out to their family members, especially their parents, was because it was “too personal.” For example, Koyanagi said, “You don’t talk with your parents about what you do in bed, right? It’s the same for me. I don’t feel it’s necessary to talk about what I do in bed regardless of which gender I’m sleeping with, so I won’t [come out] to my parents.” Her narrative suggests that people who decided not to come out to their family, especially their parents, used the same logic as people who chose not to come out at work. They treated talking about non-heterosexuality as something “too private” to reveal in those settings. Thus, instead of coming out, they prioritized expected “appropriate” Japanese selves.

The question of whether disclosing one’s sexuality is really a “private” issue should not be neglected. After all, heterosexuals generally assume everyone is heterosexual and heterosexuality is never questioned, while non-heterosexuality is always questioned. Thus, non-heterosexuals in Japan need to deal not only with actual homophobia, such as many non-heterosexuals in the US face, but also with internalized constraints which are the product of socialization to cultural norms.

From respondents’ narratives, it is evident that they were aware of possible risks or perceived negative consequences *after* coming out. They therefore feel fear and were hesitant to come out in some situations. While their perceptions of negative consequences of coming out were produced and reproduced by heteronormativity and homophobia, their determination of whom they would or would not come out to was derived from their perception of how homophobic heterosexual others were. This calculation of which self to display reflects characteristic Japanese concern for adjusting one’s behavior to fit the social definition of the situation (Cousins, 1989; Lebra, 2004; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Peak, 1989).

Caring about Others and Perceived Homophobia

Once respondents prioritized individual desire over concerns about others, they started coming out to people they could trust and who they believed would understand. Coming out here is distinct from seeking acceptance from others, which was discussed in the previous section as a strategy for acceptance of their own sexuality. The motivation for those people mentioned earlier was their overwhelming isolation and confusion about their sexuality. However, motivations for coming out in this section were based on the desire to be understood by close friends or family, after they already had accepted their sexuality to some extent. They prioritized their desire to be understood over the fear of how others might perceive them as they violated “*enryo* (self-imposed restraint)” norms (Lebra, 2004). If they came out to their friends or family here, they have overcome their rejection of sexuality through interacting with non-heterosexual subcultures.

Araki (personal communication, June 26, 2010), a queer woman, said “I would be in agony, feeling guilty about telling lies to close friends about myself.” Thus, she came out to her close friends and family. Higuchi had not come out to many people when interviewed, and explained he would only come out to people who he really wanted to know him. Iwatani also decided to come out to her close friends, because she wanted them to understand who she really was. Two respondents (Ozaki and Hayakawa) described the stress of telling lies about an essential part of themselves and they decided to come out in order to rid of these stresses. When Ozaki (personal communication, June 26, 2010), a lesbian woman, decided to come out to her parents, she thought, “Why should I tell lies to people I love? Me being a lesbian is a part of myself. I cannot live my life without their support.” Ozaki’s narrative also showed the reality of vulnerable non-heterosexuals in Japan. As explained by

Sanbe (2014), non-heterosexuals depend highly on their parents' support in order to survive as non-heterosexuals because Japan does not secure any rights for non-heterosexuals.

It should be noted that even in the US, coming out to family members is especially considered risky and many non-heterosexuals face these difficulties (D'Augelli, 2002). There are still parents who react negatively to coming out, they may even kick non-heterosexual children out of the home or become violent toward them. These reactions negatively influence non-heterosexuals' mental health (Hammelman, 1993; Hetrick & Martin, 1987). Hiding an essential part of their non-heterosexual identity from their family members is somewhat stressful for non-heterosexuals in both the US and Japan. However, since non-heterosexuals in Japan "prioritize consanguine family like their parents and siblings," (Sanbe, 2010, p. 48) tensions around revealing non-heterosexuality in front of family members could be more stressful for non-heterosexuals in Japan.

After having come out several times, respondents experienced "positive" and "negative" reactions. Those who experienced positive reactions thought that they were "accepted" (Nakayama, Seto, and Shimizu) and friends and family were "very supportive" (Taniguchi); thus, they felt they became close to people after coming out because they could be completely themselves in front of friends and family (Araki, Kawabata, Matsumoto, and Miyake). Although some respondents chose others who could respect their sexuality, many of them were surprised, and at the same time happy, about unexpected positive reactions. Since their fear of coming out revolved around relational issues, positive reaction helped deflate their fear of coming out.

Yet, some people did experience "negative" reactions. Sunagawa came out to a female friend, but she replied, "I can't accept that (you are gay)." Higuchi came out to his male friend, but

the friend stopped contacting Higuchi after the disclosure. Noguchi (personal communication, July 17, 2010), a gay man, described coming out to his parents. The first sentence his father said was, "You fix it." Murase had a brutal and violent experience with her friend's boyfriend, because he felt that Murase threatened his relationship with his girlfriend. Murase came out to a female friend at her part time job, and the friend told her boyfriend. The boyfriend came to a New Year's party at work and started behaving violently toward Murase, using abusive language such as "You fucking lesbian!" Murase recounted her experience: "I couldn't call the police because I am a homosexual and was afraid of my parents and other workers knowing about my sexuality." Murase's experience in particular exemplified how Japanese allow relationships to define their identity. Additionally, many of my respondents characterized their "negative" experience as being ignored: their friends acted as if their coming out did not happen, making them feel as if their coming out and the issue of sexual minorities were invisible.

The important factor here is how respondents perceived "positive" and "negative" reactions. Their perceptions were based on their relationships to others. "Positive" reactions meant that they could keep current relationships and become closer to those they came out to. On the other hand, being ignored by friends and family, which meant being treated as if their coming out did not happen, were perceived as "negative" reaction because being invisible in a group meant their friendship or relationships were disrupted in Japanese context. In Japan, one feature of Japanese bullying is "to do nothing," which is unlike direct violence. Ignoring one person in a group creates unity among the bullies (Koukami, 2006). Thus, those who perceived that their coming out was treated as if "nothing happened" took it negatively: they felt they were excluded by their friends and family. However, it is also possible that heterosexuals

who “ignored” friends’ coming out might actually have been doing *enryo* because the issue seemed “too personal.” This particularly illustrates that while the topic of (hetero)sexuality is talked about quite often among friends and family, non-heterosexuality is construed as a “private” issue (RYOJI & Sunagawa, 2007). Yet, to be critical, the topic of sexual orientation is a “public” issue. Thus, “ignoring” or even “*enryo*” can be considered to be a form of homophobia. This is especially true in Japan because excluding a person from a group is often a very painful experience for Japanese.

Although it is undeniable that people experienced some negative reactions after coming out and non-heterosexuals are still stigmatized in society, my respondents’ experiences of coming out, especially positive ones, also reveal perceived homophobia as another source of struggle they confront in Japan. Respondents were aware of possible risks or perceived negative consequences *after* coming out. They therefore choose not to come out in some situations. Sunagawa, who now lives openly as a non-heterosexual but could not initially accept his sexuality and had fear of coming out, said, “Those who can’t come out think negative things will happen after coming out. But... I wonder if consequences will turn out to be all negative.” Not only Sunagawa but also other respondents who came out successfully realized that the consequences of coming out turned out to be not as bad as they thought.

“Perceived homophobia” refers to the mindset of non-heterosexual individuals in heteronormative society: they feel that everyone is homophobic or against non-heterosexuality. This is a concept that much of the literature takes for granted. Cass calls it a consistent fear of a “perceived negative reaction” that influences their decision about coming out (Cass, 1979, p. 234). Previous researchers neglected further discussion of this because their interests were the psychological changes and also their goal

was to construct non-heterosexual identity. By the time individuals constructed their identity, it is presumable that they overcame “perceived negative reaction” or perceived homophobia. However, this concept is particularly necessary to look sociologically and explain the Japanese case because Japanese non-heterosexuals need to keep negotiating with perceived homophobia even after they overcame internalized homophobia and accept their own non-heterosexuality.

Mead’s (1967) concept of “the generalized other” helps explain the construction of perceived homophobia. According to him, individuals’ selves are constructed through interactions in which other people’s attitudes are reflected in our behavior. He calls this “the generalized other.” Importantly, the generalized other assumes heteronormativity, which tends to render non-heterosexuals invisible. Non-heterosexuals internalize the generalized other and “perceive” that others will see them as abnormal if their sexuality is unveiled. Non-heterosexuals will decide not to come out based on their perception of generalized homophobia.

To clarify, perceived homophobia and internalized homophobia are different. Internalized homophobia is when individuals internalize negative connotations associated with non-heterosexuality. However, perceived homophobia is the anticipation of what others will think of one’s self *before* coming out regardless of the actual result *after* coming out. Thus, even if one overcame internalized homophobia and constructed non-heterosexual identity, it would not mean they could automatically overcome perceived homophobia. Internalized homophobia interconnects with perceived homophobia. Internalized homophobia reinforces perceived homophobia. Perceived homophobia could be present in the US society, however, its effect would be more powerful in Japanese context because prioritizing others’ feelings is more important to Japanese social order than individual identity.

In the West, canon law prescribes heterosexuality and punishes non-heterosexuals. This circumstance causes people to feel fear of being non-heterosexual. There are non-heterosexual Christians in Japan and they also face the same issues (Horie, 2006), yet fear of being non-heterosexual in Japan is probably unrelated to religion. There are few Christian sects or other religions which strictly “prohibit” non-heterosexuality in Japan. Moreover, Christians make up only 1.5% of Japan’s total population (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology, 2014). Therefore, unlike the US where canon law has been shared historically and socially, perceived homophobia could be the major obstruction for non-heterosexuals in Japan. Because Japanese prioritize connectedness with others and value being a part of the majority, being different means being labeled “strange” or “deviant,” and thus, excluded. Since the majority treats heterosexuality as the appropriate behavior, non-heterosexuality is considered “inappropriate” behavior. Following these cultural norms internalizes self-constraint, [*enryo*] and prioritizes what others think over one’s own feelings. This type of self seems to have little self-esteem or self-respect from the perspective of Western selves. However, constraining one’s desires and prioritizing others’ feelings is expected “appropriate” behavior in the conformist Japanese culture. Thus, perceived homophobia is created by the expectation of “respectable-Japanese selves.”

Perceived homophobia plays an important role in people’s decisions to come out and there is a strong reciprocal relationship between the two. In this study, as people came out to more people, their perception of negative consequences decreased. When perceived homophobia dominated their lives, it was more difficult to accept their sexuality and come out to heterosexual others. Only when non-heterosexuals overcame perceived homophobia

and resisted heteronormativity were they able to openly live as non-heterosexuals and establish selves in the Western sense.

Introducing perceived homophobia does not mean we can neglect the fact that there are real consequences of homophobia in Japan. Some of my respondents clearly experienced homophobia, such as physical and psychological violence. However, more importantly, non-heterosexuals living in Japan need to negotiate with perceived homophobia in addition to the heteronormativity and actual homophobia that non-heterosexuals in the US confront. This is why perceived homophobia is another contributing factor in the obstruction for non-heterosexuals in Japanese context.

CONCLUSION

This paper has found that the experiences of non-heterosexuals in Japan show that a culturally specific explanation of the interpersonal, dialogic nature of Japanese sexual identity construction is needed. It is notable that Cass (1979), Coleman (1982) and this paper all treat coming out and interacting with sexual minority communities as a strategy to accept own sexuality. However, previous theories analyzed psychological processes of how individuals established their non-heterosexual self through coming out to other non-heterosexuals, and concluded that constructing a stable identity would automatically bring a “happy” life for individuals. On the one hand, Japanese situational behavioral expectations are indifferent to sexuality. Japanese have to negotiate with strong cultural norms through interactions within social settings even after they overcome internalized homophobia and accept their non-heterosexuality.

This is why coming out is a continuous process of negotiation for non-heterosexuals living in Japan: they need to keep negotiating

with the groups or communities they belong to as well as individuals' perceptions of what others in groups perceive themselves, perceived homophobia. Caring what others perceive is valued in Japan because conformity with others in a group is the very basis of the group. Thus, non-heterosexuals' fear of self-acceptance and coming out to heterosexual others were created by fears of damaging relationships that are the basis of identity that is not related to sexuality. Hence, their determination of whom they would or would not come out to was the product of what they perceived to be the "appropriate behavior" expected of a Japanese self. Therefore, non-heterosexuals living in Japan need to face and adapt to not only heteronormativity and homophobia, but also perceived homophobia.

The additional factor of perceived homophobia raises the question of the effect of heteronormativity in the US and Japanese context. If interdependent selves need to be concerned for conformity, where compulsory heterosexuality is shared, the effect of heteronormativity would exert more power over individuals, preventing non-heterosexuals from being who they really are. This could be a Japanese form of oppression that many non-heterosexuals in Japan take for granted because they have been socialized to prioritize cultural norms over individual identity. Conversely, the individualistic Western self can express itself more freely, so individuals can more easily resist or even boldly ignore heteronormative dominance.

Therefore, becoming fully comfortable with non-heterosexuality is necessary but not sufficient for non-heterosexuals to live in Japan because they cannot always come out even if they are fully comfortable with their sexuality. In other words, constructing a non-heterosexual identity would not automatically bring a "happy" life for non-heterosexuals living in Japan. Furthermore, perceived homophobia may be more powerful than actual homophobia for non-heterosexuals

in Japan because it is a culturally embedded perception of Japanese heteronormative society. This is why the Western model of the coming out process cannot fully explain the coming out experiences of non-heterosexuals living in Japan.

Of course this does not neglect the fact that there are still many non-heterosexuals in Japan who experience actual homophobia and still struggle with accepting themselves and coming out to others. However, even if any rights or security for non-heterosexuals are insured, non-heterosexuals must continually negotiating their non-heterosexuality to make a secure environment for themselves. It is regrettable to have to say that as long as heteronormativity dominates society, a negative relationship between perceived homophobia and non-heterosexuals' struggles will continue. The consequences *after* coming out will remain unknown and individuals may experience actual homophobia. Nevertheless, overcoming perceived homophobia may be achievable with support from community, friends and family.⁶ Continuous negotiation with cultural norms as well as others are the one way for non-heterosexuals to make a comfortable environments in order to live "happily," which in a way, challenges the dominant heteronormative atmosphere.

This study could reach individuals who are still struggling with accepting themselves and coming out to others because of their invisibility. However, as the respondents in this study showed by speaking about their fear of accepting sexuality and coming out in the past tense, the experiences of non-heterosexuals who are still invisible and fearful in this study can be surmised. Although the experiences of non-heterosexuals differ by gender, my respondents were mainly female. In future research, gendered perspectives need to be taken into account. Moreover, future studies need to pay attention to class differences because it is likely that people in higher classes may live more independently. In future research,

where people are from and where they live now needs to be included because those who are from or who live in the countryside have less access for the communities that can support them in coming out. Moreover, because my respondents were relatively young, the experiences of older people and couples are neglected. It is expected that as people age, they think about making a family of their own. At that time, it is easily assumed that they again need to negotiate with others surrounding them.

ENDNOTES

¹ Hudson and Ricketts (1980) claimed that homophobia and homonegativism are distinct. They used homonegativism to refer to “the entire domain or catalogue of anti-gay responses,” while they regarded Weinberg’s definition of homophobia is one dimension of homonegativism (p. 358). In this paper, homophobia refers as not only fear for non-heterosexuality but also negative feelings such as disgust, discomfort, aversion, anger, as well as negative behavior such as violence and denial toward non-heterosexuality.

² This table compares Cass and Coleman’s models. Coleman’s model (1982) has a different first stage. As Coleman points out, his second stage is essentially the same as Cass’s first stage. The strategies in the second stage of Coleman’s model can be seen in Cass’s model. As Coleman notes, his third stage is similar to Cass’s third and fourth stages in which people interact with other homosexuals to develop a positive homosexual self-image. Cass’s fifth stage is not seen in Coleman’s model. Instead, Coleman’s fourth stage is independent from Cass’s, in that people extend the interaction with other homosexuals that makes them desire a relationship. This stage is especially important for reaching the final stage of Coleman’s model because the last stage is about being comfortable enough with sexuality to seek a long-term relationship. Yet, the final stages in two models are very much similar, in that individuals fully identify themselves as homosexuals (Cass, 1979) so that they can seek a long term relationship (Coleman, 1982).

³ LGBT stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered/Transsexual. However, this categorization is criticized for not including the full range of diverse sexualities omitting, for example, intersexual and asexual people. Nevertheless, in this paper, LGBT refers inclusively to all the diverse forms of non-

heterosexual sexuality, as well as their organizations and communities.

⁴ Going to public bath is a traditional Japanese habit, and still practiced today. Kawabata was afraid of her female friends would think that she was thinking of them sexually.

⁵ They do not have a real choice because they could come out without problems if friends, workplace and family or even larger society accepted non-heterosexuality.

⁶ There were respondents who realized the importance of being a non-heterosexual self in any situation (Nakayama, Ozaki, Seto, and Sunagawa). Most of them were heavily involved with political activities. It suggests that they stand in a different world with different norms from general people. In reality, there are still few non-heterosexuals who prioritize being themselves rather than what others perceived them to be in Japan. Nonetheless, self-acceptance allowed them to tolerate heteronormativity and encouraged them to treat their sexuality as “normal,” in which they finally became “selves” in the Western concept. In this respect, they overcame perceived homophobia and even challenged heteronormativity. Yet, it also should be noted that just because one can become the Western concept of a “self” does not mean they can fully become “happy” because their rights are not protected at the constitutional level in Japan.

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Appendix: Respondents' backgrounds

Interview Respondent	Sexual Identity	Sexual Orientation	Interviewed Place & Date	Age
Araki	Woman	Queer	Kanto, 6/26/10	34
Endo	Woman	Rezu (Lez)	Kanto, 6/26/10	33
Fuse	Woman	Lesbian	Kansai, 6/31/10	31
Hayakawa	Woman	Dislike Categorization	Kansai, 7/24/10	24
Higuchi	Man	Bi (sexual)	Kansai, 7/30/10	30s
Iwatani	Woman	Lesbian	Kanto, 6/26/10	23
Kawabata	Woman	Lesbian	Kanto, 6/26/10	30
Koyanagi	Woman	Lesbian	Kanto, 6/26/10	29
Matsumoto*	Woman	Douseiaisha (Homosexual)	Kansai, 7/31/10	28
Miyake*	Woman	Lesbian	Kanto, 7/31/10	27
Murase	Woman	Like Another Women	Kansai, 8/8/10	28
Nakayama	Woman	Pansexual	Kansai, 7/17/10	22
Noguchi	Man	Gay	Kansai, 7/18/10	23
Ozaki	Woman	Rezu (Lez)	Kanto, 6/26/10	25
Sawada	Woman	Lesbian	Kanto, 6/27/10	30
Seto	MTX / Okama	Bisexual/Okama	Kansai, 6/30/10	43
Shimizu	Woman	Dislike Categorization	Kansai, 6/30/10	21
Sunagawa	Man	Gay	Kanto, 7/22/10	43
Taniguchi	Woman	Douseiaisha (Homosexual)	Kansai, 7/14/10	20
Toba	Woman	Dislike Categorization	Kansai, 7/16/10	23
Ueda	Woman	Lesbian	Kanto, 6/26/10	27
Wada**	Woman	Lesbian	By E-mail, 6/27/10	47
Yaguchi	Woman	Like Another Women	Kansai, 8/3/10	26
Yokota**	Woman	Bisexual	By E-mail, 6/26/10	30

Note:

* and ** are both couples

Sexual Orientation: Although Sawada identifies herself as a lesbian, she also explained she could be a bisexual in her past experiences. Furthermore, Hayakawa, Murase, Shimizu, Toba, and Yaguchi hesitated to name their sexual orientation. Hayakawa, Shimizu, and Toba explained they do not like categorization. In addition, Murase and Yaguchi also explained they would rather say "I like another woman." However, to make precise arguments, their sexual orientation in the paper is as shown in the Appendix.

Okama: It literally means a pot but usually refers to cross-dressed and effeminate men (McLelland, 2000).

Sunagawa: Hideki Sunagawa is a gay activist, who asked me to use his real name.

Interview Place: The area of prefecture is shown, not prefecture for privacy.