

# Section 377 and Well-Being: Minority Stress in Indian Sexual Minorities under Homophobic Legislation

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## Abstract

Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code is a law which effectively criminalizes homosexuality in India. Similar to California's Proposition 8, which banned same-sex marriage, Section 377 may be considered a source of minority stress under the minority stress model, which states that sexual minority individuals, because of their minority status, are more vulnerable to and have a higher prevalence of mental illness than those who are not sexual minorities (Meyer, 2003). In response to a dearth of cross-cultural empirical literature on this subject, this study first examined differences in sense of belonging and depression symptoms by sexual identity in an Indian sample (N=214). Next, a theoretical causal model in which perceived impact of Section 377 increases depressive symptoms of sexual minorities by increasing concealment stress, leading to a diminished sense of belonging, was tested.

Analyses revealed a significant difference between straight and sexual minority participants in terms of sense of belonging and depression symptoms. Path analysis did not indicate a good fit of the data to the original hypothesized model but exploratory post hoc analyses found a good fit of the data to a revised model. The present study therefore highlights a pressing need for more inclusive legislation as well as increased mental health and social support for sexual minorities in India.

## Previous Research

Minority stress is the additional stress that individuals face as a result of their status as a minority; the minority stress model states that sexual minority individuals are more vulnerable to and have a higher prevalence of mental illness because of their minority status (Meyer, 2003).

Research conducted in the United States highlights the adverse links between anti-Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Queer (LGBQ) legislation and mental health of sexual minorities, including psychological distress, alienation, and internalized homophobia (Rostosky & Riggle, 2016; Levitt et al., 2009).

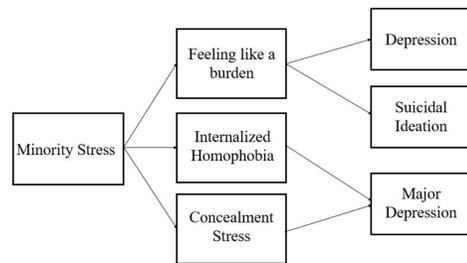


Figure 1. Impact of minority stress (Baams, Grossman, & Russel, 2015; Bruce, Harper, & Bauermeister, 2015; Mimiaga et al., 2015; Mimiaga et al., 2013)

## Methods

**Participants:** 214 Indians (65% sexual minority, 51% women, Mean Age= 23.32)

**Procedure:** Respondents to an online survey recruited through social media and LGBQ advocacy organizations

- Measures:**
- Demographic Information: Age, Gender, Sexual Identity
  - Perceived impact of Section 377 (following brief text Section 377 and priming questions)
  - Sense of Belonging Instrument (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995)
  - Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale – Revised (CESD-R, n.d.)
  - Concealment Stress (Bruce, Harper, Bauermeister, 2015; **sexual minorities only**)

## Hypotheses

### Well-being and Sexual Identity

1. Sense of belonging will vary by sexual identity.
2. Depression symptoms will vary by sexual identity.

### Path Analysis for Sexual Minorities

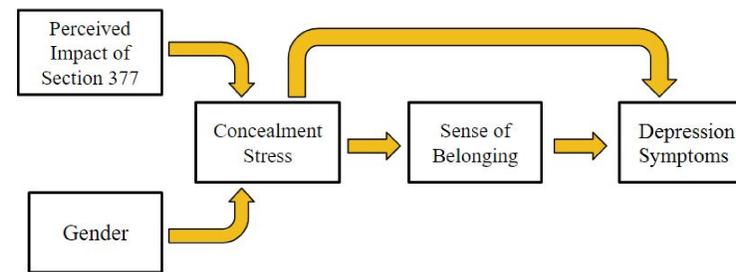


Figure 2. Proposed path model for perceived impact of Section 377, and gender on concealment stress, sense of belonging, and depression symptoms

## Results

Figure 3. Bar graph for Hypothesis 1: Sense of belonging varies significantly by sexual identity. Note. N=214, \*\* = p<.001

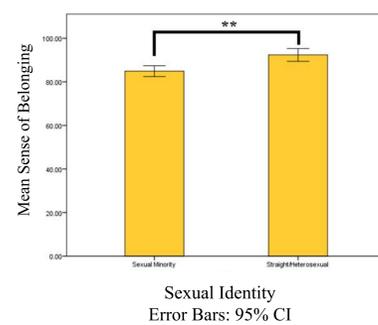


Figure 4. Bar graph for Hypothesis 2: Depression symptoms vary significantly by sexual identity. Note. N=214, \*\* = p<.001

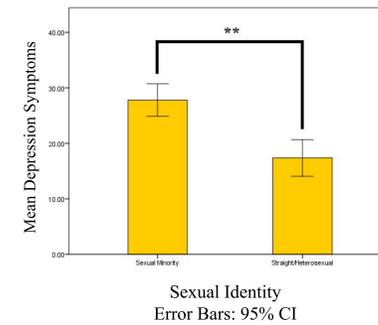
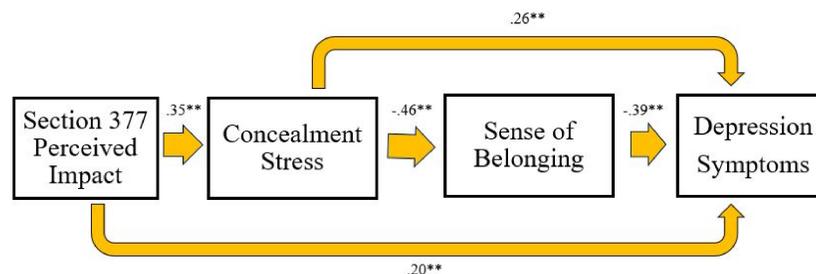


Figure 5. Path analysis of revised model for perceived impact of Section 377 on concealment stress, sense of belonging and depression symptoms. Note. N = 129, \*\* = p<.001



Index	Model
$\chi^2$	.10
$df_M$	1
$p$	.76
RMSEA	.00
$p_{closefit}$	.79
GFI	1.00
CFI	1.00
SRMR	.01

Table 1. Goodness of fit indicators for the revised path model. Note. RMSEA=Root Mean Square Error of Approximation, GFI=Goodness of Fit Index, CFI=Comparative Fit Index, SRMR=Standardized Root Mean Square Residual

## Discussion

### Section 377 and Detriments to Mental Health

- Indian sexual minorities, like American sexual minorities, reported more depression symptoms and a diminished sense of belonging compared to their straight/heterosexual counterparts.
- Data did not fit the hypothesized path model; however, all paths except gender were statistically significant.
- The model was re-estimated without the path from gender and with a direct path between perceived impact and depression symptoms, resulting in a fit of the data. Specifically, the data supported a model in which depression symptoms increase as a direct effect of concealment stress and perceived impact of Section 377 and an indirect effect through a diminished sense of belonging.

In conclusion, results of this study suggest that Section 377 is detrimental to the well-being of Indian sexual minorities. The links between concealment stress, sense of belonging, and depression symptoms highlight the importance of a support system for sexual minorities. The revised path model indicates a pressing need for more inclusive legislation as well as mental health services and resources.

## Directions for Future Research

The present study's sample is comprised of a largely urban population, all of whom are proficient in English and have access to computers and the internet. Sexual minority participants were also recruited through existing support networks, including social media and NGOs. This sample, therefore, may not be wholly representative of India and Indian sexual minorities. Future research could focus recruitment on a wider net of participants.

In the original model, the path from gender to concealment stress was not significant. Future research could explore the possibility that perceived impact, rather than concealment stress, varies as a function of gender.

Future research could also incorporate genderqueer participants into the path model and have an increased focus on gender minorities in addition to sexual minorities.

## Acknowledgements

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