Silencing Queerness – Community and Family Relationships with Young Ethnic Queers in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

The contribution that family and community make to the lives of ethnic young people is well documented. However, the support that queer ethnic young people receive from family and community is compromised by homophobic attitudes and behaviours influenced by misinformation, religious beliefs, and cultural practices. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the absence of research on young ethnic queers suggests that little is known about how this group fares in a close and culturally bound ethnic community within a predominantly white society. This in-depth qualitative study of 43 queer ethnic young people examined how community attitudes and behaviours towards queerness impacted their family and community relationships. Gossip, rumours, silence, stigma, and respectability politics resulted in gender silencing and monitoring, rejection, and self-exclusion. These behaviours exacerbated feelings of cultural alienation in a society where ethnic peoples are already racialized and minoritized, and where the lack of support systems compound an unsafe environment for queer ethnic young people. Homonegative attitudes within ethnic communities require education and interventions at the interpersonal as well as communal level. Families need professional support to address their shame towards children's queerness and to consider the impact of prioritizing the politics of respectability over the wellbeing of their child.

Keywords: community, ethnic, queer, young people, family, relationships

Introduction

Community can be seen as a group of people drawn from the same clan, village or place of origin (Munshi, 2016). Encompassing the ways in which communities are formed in the diaspora, community can be considered social interaction, process, or imagined reality (High & Walsh, 1999). This takes into consideration the changes that occur within communities, and shows how imagined reality or communal beliefs are upheld as truth (Harari, 2015). Communities operate as micro-level societies governed by common sets of norms, rules, and values, and at times develop their own institutions to collectively achieve the goal of cultural

preservation and social connectivity. Community is a place of solace in a society where ethnic peoples are racialized and minoritized. Sobonfu Somé defines community as the spirit and guiding light of the tribe where people come together to fulfil a specific purpose, to help others fulfil their purpose, and to take care of one another (Somé, 1997). The ethnic[i] community in Aotearoa[ii] New Zealand is not "a cocoon" but an interacting subsystem within a much more complex system (Nakhid, 2016, p. 94). The "well-being of the individual influences and is influenced by the well-being of the community", and the significance of 'community' in ethnic communities cannot be overstated (Chile & Simpson, 2004, p. 321).

For members of minoritized groups, the family becomes a mirror of the community replete with traditions and customs. Family plays a key role in ethnic communities and is a focal point of ethnic identity (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). The importance of a supportive family for the well-being of the ethnic minority individual has been well studied (Mistry et al., 2002; Stuart & Jose, 2014; Taylor & Roberts, 1995). Due to the impact of racism and marginalization, many ethnic queers opt to remain within communities and families as these mitigate the effects of racial oppression (Greene, 2000). Research with Black lesbian couples in the United States revealed that family rituals created a sense of belonging in an oppressive society (Glass, 2014). There is, however, a tension between families of origin as normalizing influences in the lives of LGBTQ+ persons and the pressure that they put on children to conform to heteronormative practices such as being married, raising children, and entering into heterosexual marriages (Bertone & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2014).

This paper looks at literature on the contribution of community in the lives of LGBTQ+ young people, family acceptance of children's queer identity, the influence of culture on young people's identity, and the impact of respectability politics on family responses to their child's queer identity and disclosure. This is discussed in the context of a research study with young ethnic queers in Aotearoa on community and family responses and relationships to their queerness.

'Community' in ethnic communities

Religious, ethnic or immigrant minority groups raised in minority families and neighborhoods become acculturated into the dominant culture either through the media or school (Lim & Pham, 2016; Rothblum, 2014). In contrast, LGBTQ+ individuals are raised in heterosexual families and must proactively search for their community. Although the internet has made this

easier, searching for a queer community means knowing where to look, what to look for, or presenting as visibly queer in order to be identifiable to these communities.

There has been growing acceptance and inclusion of LGBTQ+ communities though there remain a greater degree of negativity towards transgender persons (Lewis et al., 2017). Increasing segments of society have begun to accept LGBTQ+ individuals both online and offline (Cheah & Singaravelu, 2017). This is seen in the emergence of LGBTQ+ individuals on social media platforms whose genders and sexualities are acknowledged by their supporters and followers, and as more LGBTQ+ people integrate into economic and political life. The Global LGBT Acceptance Index (GAI) uses survey data on public beliefs regarding LGBT people and policies to produce a single country level score for acceptance. Acceptance, as measured by the GAI, is a country's average societal and public attitude, and public beliefs about LGBT people and rights. An examination of 174 countries from 1981 to 2017 showed a 75% increase in acceptance - 131 countries showed increased acceptance; 16 countries showed a decline; and 27 countries experienced no change in acceptance (Flores, 2019).

Researchers have emphasized the role and contribution of individual and community level resilience factors to the positive mental health of LGBTQ+ young people (Shilo et al., 2015). Other community level factors, for example, friends' support, connectedness with LGBTQ+ communities, and a steady partner were found as protective factors against poor mental health. The cultural connections that young ethnic queers have with their communities are respectively compromised by the queerphobic attitudes of the community and devalued by the racism of the wider society. Gays and lesbians in ethnic minority communities face disapproval and rejection due to this queerphobia (Abdi & Van Gilder, 2016; Morales, 1989). Social institutions such as education, religion, and the media contribute to the beliefs and perceptions about LGBTQ+ people (Flores, 2019). In some ethnic communities and cultural settings, anti-LGBTQ+ stigma and beliefs that LGBTQ+ people are sick, cursed or afflicted can lead to their exclusion from full participation in society and influence how people view laws and policies related to them.

A study of societal receptivity towards LGBT people in Malaysia revealed that participants held different views about the LGBT community ranging from 'accepting' to 'rejecting' for a range of reasons including religion, gender roles, norms, cultural practices, and values of ethnic groups (Jerome et al., 2021). LGBTQ+ individuals found it difficult to identify as such in countries where non-normative genders and sexualities are subject to legal and social condemnation. Stringent approaches to LGBTQ+ persons through various laws and regulations have had adverse consequences on LGBTQ+ lives, livelihood and sense of self, and their

feelings of attachment to society. Engaging with those sectors of society that hold hostile views about LGBTQ+ people can help them gain a better understanding of the realities affecting the lives of queer community members (Jerome et al., 2021).

Family, queer wellbeing, and disclosure

Family support is a strong predictor of wellbeing and a protective factor against mental distress in LGBTQ+ youth (Roberts & Christens, 2021). LGBTQ+ people typically come out to friends before they come out to their family of origin (Shilo et al., 2015) and, in Western societal structures, disclosing one's queer orientation is considered an important step in sexual identity development. Including families is said to be integral to the process of disclosure (Goodrich & Ginicola, 2017). However, disclosing sexual orientation to family can also provoke feelings of anxiety and threats to personal wellbeing (D'Augelli et al., 1998; Eaton & Rios, 2017). While some studies on family acceptance appear to focus on coming out as a catalyst for family change (Pullen Sansfaçon et al., 2020), research has shown that many parent-child relationships stayed the same or improved after disclosure (Kuhar, 2007; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003). There is little research that explores why parents react the way they do and much of the research on parental reactions are based on queer youth's recollection of their parents' responses (D'Augelli, 2006). Recent studies have focused on positive themes such as personal development, success, and positive experiences associated with sexual minority youth and their families. In research by Gonzalez et al. (2013), parents saw disclosure as a turning point and experienced improved closeness, personal growth, or positive emotions. Goodrich (2009) focused on parents whose child's disclosure led to the successful integration of the child's identity.

Young people who choose not to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity have their own reasons for doing so such as protecting themselves from violence, verbal harassment or other negative consequences related to that disclosure (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002). Watson's (2014) study showed that participants navigated the family closet in that the degree to which they disclosed their sexual orientation and revealed family secrets was constructed in two ways – one, withholding it from family members, or two, keeping it within the family but from outsiders (Joos & Broad, 2007). For Black lesbian couples, being part of an extended family meant making decisions about how to integrate sexuality and the identity of their partner at family gatherings and rituals. Lesbians might decide to attend these

gatherings without their partner, or may be asked, or choose not to show any overt, physical attraction or affection towards them. Studies show that acceptance of an LGBTQ+ family member's chosen partner and friends by family is key to supportive family relationships (Bertone & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2014). However, the narrative that a supportive family environment is conditional upon mutual disclosure and open communication has come under scrutiny (Bertone & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2014).

Parental reactions are important to the health outcomes of sexual minority youth and there appear to be clear health benefits for adolescents whose parents are accepting of their queerness including higher self-esteem and less substance abuse (Ryan et al., 2010; Saewyc, 2011). Studies show that it is not uncommon for parents to report feeling sad, expressing denial, regret, guilt, shame, or concern for the queer child's well-being (Robinson et., 1989). Some parents have urged their children to leave home to find a more supportive community and to escape the homophobia of small communities (Shilo et al., 2015).

Transphobia from family members and the lack of social support systems put transgender youth at major risk of homelessness (Weber et al., 2004). When family expectations appear to be violated, this can result in familial rejection leading to social alienation, low self-esteem, and psychological distress (Baiocco et al., 2015; Díaz et al., 2001). Bisexual women and men of Asian origin in Australia said that they and their families had to deal with the ways in which they expressed their gender and sexual nonconformity when visiting family of origin[iii] in Asia (Watson, 2014). This led to them leading different lives in their home country compared to the lives they led in the country of their family of origin.

Cultural institutions as sites of support and condemnation

Cultural and religious spaces are often sites of belonging for ethnic minorities who hold different cultural and religious constructs from Western dominant societies (Beckett et al., 2014). Migrant families often retain their relationships with religious associations and institutions as a means of cultural survival, linguistic connection, and social networking. Mosques are sites of community institutions, and research reveals that children or grandchildren of established migrant Muslim communities often seek to recapture elements of their religious heritage which their elders had put to one side as they sought to establish themselves in their new homeland (Moghissi, 2010; Rayside, 2011). Muslim LGBTQ+ people may have difficulty in developing a sense of self that does not contravene Islamic beliefs and

practices relating to gender and sexuality (Shanon Shah, 2018; Zainuddin & Mahdy, 2017). The desire to hold onto social norms brought with them from their countries of origin is common to many migrant communities who increasingly see themselves as the subject of prejudice, and who may wish to maintain solidarity with a community.

African Americans have historically used religious beliefs to mediate the effects of racism, oppression, and injustice (Harvey & Stone Fish, 2015; Walker & Longmire-Avital, 2013). The Black church is a foundational institution in many African American communities; enslaved Africans used the church as a meeting ground where they merged their different religious beliefs and built it into a collective group identity (Fountain, 2010). African Americans draw on their spirituality to affirm their humanity and advocate for social equality (Krause, 2004). A shared community drawn from spirituality help African American women cope with the combined effects of racism and sexism and maintain health and wellbeing in the face of oppression (Mitchell et al., 2006). African American students also used the church to escape from stress during their transition to college (Donahoo & Caffey, 2010).

Queer youth raised in culturally religious traditions and who want to use religious beliefs to cope with the oppression of queerphobia may find it difficult when religious traditions hold negative views around similar-sex sexual behavior. The extended networks to which ethnic queers belong such as the neighborhoods, churches, and local community organizations might also reject their young queer members. Religious beliefs may provide queers with resilience, but this is countered by the feelings of homonegativity that many of them face from those same beliefs and might add to the internalized homonegativity they experience (Cyrus, 2017). Parents in dominant Catholic societies have had to reflect on their queer child's experience within the dominant heterosexual discourse of the Catholic Church (Bertone & Franchi, 2014). Some parents sought out open-minded priests, friends and family members, or framed love as a basic tenet of Christianity regardless of gender, or stated a direct relationship with God so as to separate religion from the perceived bigotry of the church (Bertone & Franchi, 2014).

The intersection of religion and sexuality, and the role of organized religion in how different sexual orientations are being framed are factors that uphold social hostility against the queer community (Bertone & Franchi, 2014). The church was seen to have a strong influence on African Americans' decision not to disclose their sexual identity (Trahan & Goodrich, 2015).

In a study of African American lesbians in a large metropolitan city in the southeastern region of the United States, it was shown that Christian based homophobia was transmitted through conversations with older heterosexual African American woman (Miller & Stack, 2014). This

may be because older African American women believe that they possess the social capital to monitor and police the sexuality of younger women, a belief which may stem, not from a place of cruelty but as an act of care (Miller & Parker, 2009). African American girls often rely on learning from their elders, and thus learn that they must value their gender and ethnic identity in the midst of societal sexism and racism (Miller & Stack, 2014).

Within the realm of identity politics, people of faith from ethnic communities might see queerness as foreign to their cultures and traditions and use these perceptions to condemn homosexuality. However, as queer visibility expands in their communities, they may begin to rethink their position on gender and sexual diversity.

Respectability politics – Using gossip, stigma, and silence to deny queerness

Respectability politics is the process whereby privileged members of marginalized groups comply with dominant social norms (Dazey, 2021). Queer family members sometimes face strong societal and parental disapproval, and families who do not support their child's queer identity may dismiss, change, impede or neglect it. Ethnic queers may find that their identities do not fit with the socially acceptable heteronormative identities of their communities (McDonough, 2007). Disclosure of one's sexual orientation and gender identity can lead to reactions ranging from mild acceptance to tolerance to being stigmatized or rejected by the community. Social attitudes about LGBTQ+ people strongly influence the level of acceptance of LGBTQ+ people by employers, family members, teachers, religious leaders, and society in general (Flores, 2019). Negative perceptions and beliefs about LGBTQ+ people can become a reason or cause for violence and discrimination perpetuated against them.

Queer Muslims have faced antagonistic responses to their queerness, and pressured to get married and to maintain the family honor (Minwalla et al., 2005). Similarly, some queer South Asian women have been coerced into heterosexual marriages as unmarried daughters are seen to threaten the status of the family (Bacchus, 2017; Thaker, 2006). Disclosing queerness can lead to ostracization from the family. Queer South Asian women who were unwilling to sacrifice either parental ties or lesbian relationships often performed queerness in culturally conducive ways such as rejecting identity labels, presenting as feminine, or engaging in clandestine lesbian relationships, while at the same time conforming to familial expectations of heterosexuality (Patel, 2019). For Asian American families, educational achievement was

emphasized over social interactions and was used to divert attention away from the sexual orientation of children (Ocampo & Soodjinda, 2016).

The stigma and discrimination experienced by LGBTQ+ youth have been linked to a range of health disparities (Parker et al., 2018). Although attention is given to implementing policies that reduce and mitigate the effects of stigma and discrimination in schools, LGBTQ+ young people still experience this in the home and community (Payne & Smith, 2010). Within families, discrimination is shown in parental behaviors such as rejection, bullying, and gender policing. Gossip and rumors are genres of communication (Hook et al., 2011) that become a vehicle for reinforcing ideologies around cultural and religious values and against queer identities and practices.

Petronio (2010) says there is a complex process of privacy regulation in personal relationships. Similar-sex couples have been known to regulate private information during their interactions with family members (Lannutti, 2014). These interactions create a culture of privacy among family members that result in a privacy boundary rule around the sharing of news of a couples' same sex relationship or a silencing of their queerness. Švab and Kuhar (2014), and Glass (2014) investigated families' silences and communication privacy management in relation to the 'coming out' of their children and showed that, in certain situations, secret keeping became a central form of family communicative practice. Poulos (2009) has questioned the necessity of disclosure and argued that there may be times when it is better to withhold or avoid revealing some knowledge or secrets. This strategy of silence had some measure of minimizing grief and pain. At times, children chose to be silent, to silence any discussions, or to adopt a "don't ask don't tell" about their sexuality in order to protect their families from communal and internal shame (Miller & Stack, 2014).

Ethnic communities in Aotearoa

There are approximately 839,000 (16.8%) persons identified as ethnic (not including Continental Europeans) living in Aotearoa in 2021 (MEC[iv], 2021). Those classified by New Zealand Statistics as Asian[v] (719,000 – 85.6%) represent the largest ethnic population followed by African (65,000 – 7%), Middle Eastern (29,000 – 3%) and Latin American (26,000 - 3%) (New Zealand Statistics). The population of Aotearoa is approximately 5 million. The population of ethnic residents born overseas is 641,000 (76%), while those born in Aotearoa is 186,000 (22%). Those who have lived here for two years or less number approximately 119,000

(14%) while those who have lived in Aotearoa for 20 years or more number 102,000 (12%). Ethnic people that claim to have no religion are approximately 272,500 (32.5%). Hinduism is the religion for 121,000 (14.4%), Catholicism (106,000 – 12.6%), Christianity (64,000 – 7.6%), and Islam (58,000 – 7%) (MEC, 2021).

Approximately 155,750 (18.5%) of Aotearoa's ethnic population from the four official ethnic groupings (African, Asian, Latin American, and Middle Eastern) are between 12-24 years of age, with an estimated 15,575 (10%) representing ethnic queer young people (MEC, 2021). The relatively new and young ethnic community suggests that cultural traditions, religions, languages, and values hold a prominent place in the lives of ethnic community members and a strong influence on the construction of identity of ethnic young people. Families in the community may be unable or unwilling to facilitate access to supportive communities for their queer children. This diminishes access and possibilities for the young people (McDonough, 2007). Given the impact of community attitudes and influence on family social connections and integration, the well-being of young ethnic queers and the relationships that they have with community, family, and intimate partners are very much determined by these attitudes and behaviors. The absence of research on young ethnic queers in Aotearoa implies that little is known of how this group fares in a tightly knit and culturally bound ethnic community within a predominantly white society. This study is an attempt to provide some essential knowledge in this area.

Methodology

This research study focused on young ethnic queers (18 to 35 years). The generally accepted age range of "youth" or "young people adopted by the Ministry of Youth Development and referenced in the Youth Development Strategy Aotearoa[vi]is 12 to 24 years. This study involved young people from 18 years of age as parental consent was not required to participate in the research. Persons up to 35 years were also invited to participate to provide perspectives of young adults with experiences of 'coming out' that might be beneficial to young ethnic queers. Invitations were sent through social media, personal contacts, and networks. Confidential, in-depth interviews were carried out with 43 participants on their relationships with family and community. Participants completed a consent form prior to the interview. The interviews varied in length from one to four hours depending on the venue and the conversations that took place. Participants opted to be interviewed at coffee shops, restaurants, pubs/bars or wherever they

were comfortable. Alcohol was not an influence in any of the interviews that took place in bars. Potential participants had received a participant information sheet before the interview and had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.

Initially, it appeared difficult to generate enthusiasm for the study. Through our close-knit networks, although everyone expressed a desire for the study to proceed as they themselves commented on the absence of any literature or research on ethnic queers in Aotearoa, there appeared to be a reticence on their part to be involved. As the researchers wondered whether to proceed with the study, several people with whom we had initially spoken asked about the research and inquired as to when they could be interviewed. Many had already informed other ethnic queers who were waiting to be contacted. The interviews turned out to be informative, engaged, passionate and, at times, extended conversations. The different ethnicities of the researchers, as well as their involvement with a range of communities were of benefit in reaching a diverse group of ethnicities, genders, and sexual orientations. The very small community of openly queer ethnic young people, in addition to the unique mix of heritages, prohibits disclosing the ethnicity/ ethnic heritage of the participants or even the community organization to which they are associated as they would be too easily identified. We can say that there were participants from the main Aotearoa ethnic classifications of Asian, Middle Eastern, African, Latin American and Caribbean.

The researchers ensured that interviews were conducted in a manner that would avoid any discomfort or embarrassment for the participants. Participants were advised that they could refrain from answering any questions and could provide as little or as much information as they chose irrespective of the questions that were being asked. Participants were also advised that they could stop the interview at any time without being questioned. Pseudonyms were used for all the participants.

All but three of the interviews were confidentially transcribed by a transcriber. One of the researchers transcribed the remaining three interviews. The qualitative data were analyzed thematically and coded both manually and with NVivo. The main themes emanated from the focus of the interview questions and were useful in coding the data. Sub-themes helped to highlight the responses of the participants and to emphasize those areas of most concern to them. All coding remained true to the context and content of the data provided by the participants.

Researchers consulted with rainbow and ethnic community organizations to ensure that relevant communities were involved and that the language and approach were respectful

of queer communities. Consultation took place with RainbowYouth, Human Rights Commission, Shakti Youth, the NZ Aids Foundation, and the Ministry of Social Development (Settling In division) who provided feedback on terminology, rationale, and aim of the research. Ethics approval for the study was granted by Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee in 2019.

The data for this article are drawn from a larger study of young ethnic queers on their understandings and experiences of relationships with family, community, and intimate partner. The researchers were careful to avoid attributing comments to a specific group to avoid the possibility of stereotypes developing around, or the directing of resources to, a certain group or community. The paper does not seek to make generalizations, but to highlight the issues faced by young ethnic queers as a unique population in Aotearoa. Experiences appeared to be common to the many diverse groups interviewed.

The data for this paper focus on the relationships that young ethnic queers in Aotearoa have with community and family. The questions which guided the semi-structured interviews were:

1. How would you define family/ community relationships?
2. How does your family (and extended) or ethnic community respond to issues of sexuality and gender diversity?
3. How does your family (and extended)/ siblings/ ethnic community respond to your sexuality and/or gender diversity?
4. What are your understandings of what constitutes an unsafe family (and extended) or community relationship?
5. What is your knowledge or experiences of unsafe family (and extended) / community relationships?
6. How do you think family (and extended) / ethnic communities perceive an unsafe family/ community relationship?
7. What do you think are the effects of family (and extended) / ethnic community (non) acceptance on sexuality and gender diversity?
8. What are the effects of family (and extended)/ ethnic community (non) acceptance on your expressions of sexuality and/or gender diversity?

Not all the questions needed to be asked as participants indirectly answered them when responding to other questions.

Findings

The findings present young ethnic queers' understanding of community and family relationships, what they expect from these relationships, and how they experience these relationships. Participants wanted to be in communities where their culture and identity were appreciated and valued. At times, these communities had to be separate due to values and beliefs that did not align with one another. For many of the participants, what they expected from a community or family could not be found in their ethnic community or their birth or given family. In some cases, young ethnic queers went in search of community where they would be welcomed or created families where they would be embraced. In reviewing the data, it became clear that while family were the participants' main sources of support, relationships, cultural traditions, and identity, the family's behaviours towards young ethnic queers were strongly determined by their own desire for approval and acceptance by their ethnic community. Thus, the focus of the findings is on the community, as it is they that provide a sense of belonging and home for ethnic peoples which, in turn, have influenced the way in which families have responded to their queer members in an effort to maintain that sense of belonging. The key themes presented from the data on young ethnic queers' relationships with community and family are:

Community – 'fucking buzzword' or authentic sites of belonging and relationships; Policing queerness through gossip and rumours; For the sake of….respectability politics; Silencing - out of sight and out of voice.

Community – 'fucking buzzword' or authentic sites of belonging and relationships

Community was emphasized by the participants as a shared place where commonly held beliefs were attributed to cultural and religious belief systems that informed interactions and relationships. For many participants, community was about acceptance. It was where differences were embraced, and support and belonging were provided, sometimes in the same way as a family:

Phie: *I know there's like different communities within community. But for me, I like to view community as where people are embraced for their differences. It's non-judgmental…people are encouraged to be powerful and you just don't judge people. People can be how they want to be, they can like who they want to like, or dress how they wanna dress or identify how they wanna identify.*

Pier: *I can't differentiate family from community other than sometimes community could be bigger than family, but even then I don't think I can differentiate those two terms. …Sometimes I think community as more political and family is spiritual even though I don't know if there is a difference between those two.*

Community was about taking responsibility for the welfare of others no matter in which community you found yourself:

Franc: *I think (*community*) is like a relationship where you feel like you have a stake in the wellbeing of all of those people. So at the university, feeling like I've got a sense of community with the university makes me want to advocate for students and makes me want to uplift everyone's sense of wellbeing. And that's the same with the queer community in Auckland, mostly like POC (*people of colour*) people. I feel like I have a stake in it and that kind of translates into some kind of need for social change.*

The frequent use of the word community had lost its significance for some of the participants who did not feel a sense of community if people were segregated, or where there was an absence of common understanding. Marga had noticed this with the queer community:

Marga: *I've been talking about this so much recently, because I feel like communities have become this huge fucking buzzword that everybody uses. But I feel like we don't 'community' the way that I think about it. I feel like it doesn't really exist. Because I feel like for me, it's something where there's a whole bunch of people when you're brought together by a common goal or understanding. And I don't feel like there is a (*united*) queer community here. Community to me is kind of like being together and working together to change it for everybody else. But I don't really feel like we're there yet.*

Participants were aware of the different communities to which they and their families belonged. The constraints placed on Anee by their membership in a religious institution shaped not only their parents' attitudes but their own, and compromised their association with family and community. This was common for many of the participants who drew their sense of community from sites of worship and social events, many of which rejected queer identity:

> Anee: *I grew up in a household where my parents are both university professors. My family, they're not particularly violent. However, there is this hostility - they are very hostile to the idea of me not being this (*straight person*). We're also very much strictly born-again Christians. So, my parents, aside from their teaching jobs, during Sundays my dad, he leads the congregation… . He's the leader of elders and my mom, she leads the women ministry. I was also active at that time. I was leading the youth ministry... the prayer ministry, the Bible ministry and other church ministries. I was very, very homophobic at that time.*

Policing queerness through gossip and rumours

Gossip and rumors were used by the community to reinforce queerness as a Western ideology that sought to corrupt its cultural and religious values. For many ethnic migrant communities, gender and sexuality was viewed against the backdrop of homosexuality as a symptom of westernization and the moral decadence of Western society. Through gossip and rumors, heteronormativity was normalized as natural, and queer ethnic young people were positioned as outsiders. Participants said that the fear of gossip and rumors forced their self-exclusion from community as their sexual and gender identity became a barrier to their participation in the community:

> Giho: *It's exhausting, and again it's the disconnect, that's such a big thing. I feel out of place in my community. Sometimes I can't engage well, for example, with the (*nationality*) community at university. I just don't want other people finding out about my sexuality just because I know that it's going to travel across the grapevine and people make judgments.*

For Dia and Giho, gossip and rumors made people feel unsafe and detached from their community, and left them with a sense that they did not belong:

> Dia: *We can say it comes from like our collective culture but I also think in immigrant communities, the communities are more tight and rely on each other more. So gossip and rumours can be quite damaging coz you don't obviously have another community to go into. And it seems like the parents who are most accepting are the ones that don't actually care about the community or like don't have a lot of tight connections with communities.*

> Giho: (There was) j*ust large disconnect from my more conservative family members. I just really don't know how to deal with it, where I stand, what they think of me.*

Gabe's pain could be felt as they recalled when gossip and rumours resulted in their queerness being disclosed without their consent and their being excluded from social events:

> Gabe: *The (*ethnicity*) international students in my hall … once gathered together for a hot pot meal. It was in my flat and I didn't get invited at all. They spent the whole night laughing in the kitchen. When I squeezed in to cook my dinner, everyone just pretended to look at their phone and acted like they didn't see me. Suddenly, this one girl said they have really funny cross-dressing videos to watch. (*I knew) *they intended to say it about me and to laugh at me.*

Participants had experienced bullying and an invasion of privacy through being outed by innuendos and gossip. Gabe had faced verbal abuse and threats of violence following the disclosure of their sexuality and gender identity:

> Gabe: …*she used to be my tutor in (*country*), and we had a really close, supportive friendship. After I came out to her, she couldn't accept it and was being judgmental all the time. She once dragged me out with a group of her friends who I didn't know. She told those strangers about me, called me mentally ill, how I am a deviance and how I am a bad person who needs to be rescued. All of them regarded me like there was something wrong with me. They started bullying me and kept sending voice messages in a group chat saying how I need to be fixed and that I grew up in a bad family.*

Parents also made indirect remarks to potentially let their child know that they disapproved of homosexuality. Although the statements were not made directly to them, participants knew they were meant for them to hear:

> Cole: *There was one time we were watching TV and…the show was about a gay man that was coming out of the closet. My dad was like 'if I had a son and I found out that he's gay, I'm going to hang him upside-down'. I was like 'oh my gosh, I can never tell my dad that I'm gay'. That was in high school, but he's never done anything.*

For the sake of…. respectability politics

Within ethnic communities, respectability politics privileged heterosexuality and adherence to heteronormative ideals. The circular nature of gossip and rumors informed values and reinforced long held beliefs. Communities used the veneer of respectability politics to uphold cultural norms and to be perceived as respectable. The politics of respectability accommodated oppressive structures, behaviors, and attitudes around queerness that served to control and maintain the community's idea of morality. Participants noted the tension that existed between the community's desire to attain the values of Western society yet wanting to maintain their own which were, at times, in contradiction with Western values:

> Garee: *I feel like that is a global thing, like it doesn't matter if you're in New Zealand or America or you're in the UK. If you're of (*ethnicity*) descent, it has been impressed upon you that (*being queer*) is not okay. You don't act on these things, and if you do, you don't do it around family or you don't talk about it. So like coming here (*to New Zealand*), it's why I don't see (*nationality queers*) but I'm not that surprised.*

Ethnic minority communities often claimed that homosexuality was a white people's problem and denied or refused to accept that this 'problem' existed within their own communities. The adoption of certain values as 'our culture' was rooted in respectability politics and rationalized by communities as preserving culture while resisting what they saw as immoral Western values. Participants believed that ethnic communities viewed acceptance by Western society as success, and being queer was a barrier to this:

Malu: *I think a lot of the time parents operate with their fears. I think that's how my mom conceptualizes being a parent… and she can't be herself anymore because she is thinking about her children. She is a single parent that moved to a different country, and she lost her sense of self. So for her to have done all those things, she wants her children to spend a nice, normal stable life. Unfortunately (*to her*), being queer doesn't guarantee you a safe, normal, happy life.*

The experiences of respectability politics, for the participants, included families managing their appearances and monitoring their personal life. The families' policing of gender and views on marriage had caused frustration for some:

Dia: *I feel like there's been things like gender policing and emotional guilt tripping that's happened with my mom. Like if I didn't know better, that could have been quite damaging.*

Riar: *When growing up in the (*country*), they tried to correct my posture, the way I walked or my voice, and being critical.*

Melan: *It makes me feel frustrated, so frustrated when my dad says that (*when am I getting married*). I'm just sad. For example, my friend is getting married and they're having a baby, and they're happy and it's so easy for them. Going over to see them get married and have a baby. I can't have that so it's sad and it's frustrating.*

A common narrative among ethnic communities was that a queer person must have suffered abuse for them to be queer and Manda had herself believed this:

Manda: *When I was in my high school years, I felt like a lot of time that I only liked girls because of what happened with my stepdad. That it's like put me off men all together. So I felt really guilty about that, like oh, I'm not actually even a real queer person. Now, I'm like, that's bullshit. I guess that was the only relationship between my family and my queerness that really bothered me.*

Participants believed that the homophobic attitudes of their families reflected the values of the ethnic communities because families worried about the consequences of a queer child on their social acceptance and status:

> Dia: *I think a lot of the families… or the (*ethnicity*) families that are homophobic, often it's related to fears about what the community would think and how that impacts their reputation and their relationships with people. Coz yeah it (*being queer*) can be seen as shameful, like losing face sort of thing*.

Although Gabe's mother and grandmother had accepted their queer identity, it was the queerphobia, lack of knowledge, and refusal to understand and accept by the extended family that made Gabe fearful:

> Gabe: *I'm just anxious about the future, about my (*extended*) family members and stuff, what they would do to me… . They never know (*that I am trans*). They can't even accept being gay, being trans is too stigma. Like will never, they will exhaust their imagination. They won't dare to think that way. They will think, oh, maybe this is just a tomboy or it's just I behave like a guy or something but they never dared to think trans, they never dare.*

The 'coming out' process for the ethnic queer young person was as much a 'coming out' for parents and families. 'Coming out' for the family was likely to rupture the community networks that they had. These social connections extended to those back in the home country, with participants noting that some families used those 'back home' to justify their lack of acceptance for their queer child. Presenting their 'home' countries or 'countries of origin' as intolerant of queer identity was aimed at reinforcing the belief that queerness was not part of their cultural practices:

> Marga*: I feel like for our parents, moving away from home… it's huge, you know. It's like they have such a close tie to their cultural identity, that it's like they hold on to all parts of it, and they don't think about the ones that are wrong or harmful. It's like a whole kind of protectiveness over the culture, I think. I feel like there's this kind of freezing of cultures thing that happens where they're stuck in like (*country*) 15 years ago, but (*country*) is not even like that anymore.*

> Nata: …*Within my family, what comes to mind is my mom's scapegoating of my (*ethnic*) family back in (*country*), using them as a scapegoat. When I hear her talk about it like that, it feels unsafe... But the feelings that come up, the emotions of distress, makes me want to leave (*home*).*

The comparisons that families made between their queer child and others were subtle hostility and an indirect assertion that being queer did not fulfil the expectations that the family had for them:

> Dia: *For me, it's like (*their*) wanting to have grandchildren you know, yeah like kind of comparing me to other people, like so and so is married blah blah, cousin is like got kids and that kind of stuff.*

The reputation and respectability of families were said to be impacted if the community was aware that there was a queer child in the family. Participants believed that families would be more welcoming and tolerant of their queer children if they did not have to deal with the judgment and shameful gaze of their community:

> Hita: *I guess for me the most annoying thing is that I can't be queer in public cause I'm scared I would run into a family member and I'll have to explain myself. But even if they were to like, you know, catch me on a date with a girl or something like that, I don't think they would harm me or it would be unsafe for me, but it would be uncomfortable.*

Silencing - out of sight and out of voice

Ethnic communities placed significant value on family relationships. For many young ethnic queers, however, families were known to shun, shame, or silence them and they had to fight to hold on to their queer identities. Still, that did not change the importance of family in their lives as they wanted their families' emotional and cultural support. Family had shaped who they were and how they framed the world. Family were the bonds to ancestors as much as they were ancestors. Through family, young ethnic queers had formed connections with their communities:

Pier: *Family can be bloodline, blood links and whakapapa, where your ancestors come from, like between you and your ancestors then you come between that. Family can be your ancestors. Family can be the family you create with your kin, if they share the same values and goals with you. Family is such a big thing to define, family is love. I think maybe that you carry your family with you in the way that you move around the world and the way you see the world. And that's an expression of your family. So it's both a tangible thing, a physical thing like your mother, but it's also intangible and all that exists around you.*

Garee: *I think most people think (*family*) is blood relatives but I think queer people tend to expand that to friendships or a supportive network of other queer or LGBT folks who support and uplift them. The thing is a lot of people don't have support from families but my family is supportive so I would also include my parents and not my extended family per se because I'm not really that close with them, as we grew up in different regions.*

The unwillingness to acknowledge and accept queerness in many ethnic communities and families invalidated the lived experiences of the participants. It silenced queer realities and was a form of control that pushed them 'into the closet', exacerbating exclusion and cultural alienation. Exclusion created an unsafe environment for participants as there was a corresponding lack of support systems in the mainstream community. The silence and the denial made participants feel unaccepted and unable to be themselves:

Pier: *It can be more intense because so much of our intimate relationships are behind closed doors or private, so it goes unnoticed unless it is public. You have a public way you are and the private way you are, even more so being (*ethnicity*) because…I think that (*nationality*) keep things very private to keep face.*

Shar: *I don't feel safe because I don't feel accepted…I don't feel safe to just fully express myself the way that I would with other people. But I think that's a common thing with kids and their parents. Like, are you ever going to be exactly you with your parents?*

For Malu, being unable to talk about their queer identity made them feel worthless "*That silence that surrounds my queerness does sometimes feel really, really shit".* Having to hide or deny

their queerness had made it difficult for participants to discuss intimacy and relationships with family or to seek their advice:

> Hita: *I think they would allow me to be whoever I am as long as I don't talk about things like that (*queerness*). I think it's very much like you can be whoever you want but in family you have to be this way but only this way… . It's hard. I think that's why I avoid seeing too much of the (*nationality*) community. Obviously I love them, I do like hanging out with them, but it's hard to always keep this a secret. I want to talk about my dating life or going out, or who I'm talking to or you know some big things that's happening in my life, and I can't really talk about it with them and that's hard.*

> Tani: *Basically, what went wrong in my previous relationship is that the ball was very one sided and even though (*my parents*) tried to understand it, it was almost too much for them to handle. I couldn't dilute my thoughts and experiences to make it easier for them…I also didn't have anyone else to talk about it with.*

The family's need for social interactions with extended family and community impacted their acceptance of their children's sexuality. 'Saving face' through silencing was motivated by a desire to belong to a community without the fear of being excluded, shamed, and stigmatized. This perpetuated a cycle of silence that bred an environment of self-hate and shame for the participants:

> Melan: *I can't be alternate. I can't be who I want, and probably the expression of my queerness is just reserved because of that experience of having to hide.*

> Riar: *I internalised the shame. I have internalized the guilt because I want to be who I am but I was not allowed. I was dictated by society or family. They are dictating that you can't be what you want or what you like or what you desire.*

Faced with the rejection of their sexual identities, an unwelcoming environment at home, and a lack of support made young ethnic queers leave home, be forced out of home, or remain in unsafe relationships:

Phie: *...(*my mother*) she just told me I was disgusting and that no daughter of hers was a lesbian, and that I wasn't welcome and to get out of her house.*

Yin: ...(Family rejection*) probably made me more reluctant to explore what avenues I had to leave (*a harmful*) relationship ..That extra layer of being queer and a relationship that wasn't safe made things extra complicated to leave an unsafe situation.*

Families were important to the formation of children's ethnic and cultural identities, yet some seemed unable to understand their children's queerness in the context of culture. Participants agreed that family members needed more education about sexual orientations and gender identities:

Max: *I think because of the cultural differences, family is a really important thing amongst different ethnic communities. A lot of it will come down to changing the mind sets of the family, family members, or parents.*

Marga*: I think they just don't know any better. And I think this goes back to what I was saying before, you know, like positive role models, like seeing healthy shit on TV… when the books that you read or when the friends that you hang out with or anything, any kind of external thing, when you're not seeing anything different to what you're learning. I think education is like the answer to everything. Like if anybody ever just sat down with any of these parents, and in a relatable way, I feel it would change lives, it truly would.*

Participants challenged the pervasive dominant discourse of a single cohesive gay community and cautioned against the erasure of the diverse and complex experiences of people of color. Naise reflected on how the different and multiple social positions existed within a dominantly white LGBTQ+ community.

Naise: *You can find community in different ways in the same way that you can find family. So for a long time it used to really, really hurt me that I didn't feel like I belonged. Until I was like, wait, there are other young black people out there who are*

*outspoken, who are creative. Yes, there's literally a handful of us. But they're there and you find comfort in that. I suppose the other thing about being raised in New Zealand is that not only is it a (*nationality*) community, but you have other people. Minority backgrounds who have also been pushed to fringes. So it's now like, oh, OK, I've got my community of women from India, community of women from Burma, community of women from the Pacific Islands, from women who are tangata whenua*[vii] *who also happen to be either outspoken or creative, but we don't look like queer community. But when we come together and I'm with them, that's when I feel the most like when I'm with my community.*

Discussion

This paper focuses on the impact of community attitudes and behaviours on families' responses to queer family members, and how these responses as well as those of the community impacted relationships with ethnic queers. The community, through the family, becomes a space where identity is socially constructed and is made up of rituals, relationships, and restrictions (Taiye Selassie TEDGlobal, 2015). For many of the young ethnic queers in the study, negotiating gender and sexual diversity within one's cultural or religious community and amidst cultural and religious constructs of family, gender and sexuality took place in the context of homosexuality being seen as a symptom of Westernization and the moral decadence of Western society (Shannahan, 2010). This posited heteronormativity as the moral, cultural and religiously appropriate sexuality (Mayeza, 2021) in ethnic communities. Culture provided meaning to the young ethnic queers, many of whom were living through adversity, and their resilience had been dependent on individual, community, cultural and contextual factors (Ungar et al., 2007). Culture played a significant role in the lives of the young people and many did not want it separated from their queer selves.

For many of the participants, the politics of respectability took precedence over families' acceptance of their queer child and emphasized the power that families gave to their community while simultaneously taking power away from their child. Cultural practices were sources of identity and pride for queer ethnic young people and provided them with a sense of community against the discrimination that came from the wider society. Thus, the rejection and ostracization of young ethnic queers by community and family were particularly difficult as their family relationships and cultural affiliations remained important to them. For some of the

participants, this had led to further isolation and withdrawal from society. Acceptance brings resiliencies and allows families to expand their worldviews (Harvey & Stone Fish, 2015). Ethnic families who decide to accept their queer children could consider integrating queerness into a more expanded version of their family life.

Participants said that their parents reacted in ways they believed would protect their queer children from the stigmatization of their non-heterosexual identities. Stigma and discrimination within families require interventions and education at the individual and interpersonal level as well as at a community and structural policymaking level (McGuffey, 2008). Families who prioritize the politics of respectability over the wellbeing of their child may need assistance to overcome their own shame and face saving towards their children's queerness. Government and local bodies should commit resources to community organizations and communities that work with LGBTQ+ ethnic young people and their families (Parker et al., 2018). Developing strategies to enable ethnic families to access services that will assist them in communicating with LGBTQ+ children, and for understanding information on sexualities and gender is a priority.

Blaming communities and families for not accepting their queer children might further alienate and disengage parents. Although ethnic communities may appear to be less accepting of queerness, framing these communities as homophobic ignores the larger social, political, and economic contexts in which family rejection may take place. Families of queer young people need to figure out what their roles are as parents or siblings of a queer family member, and learn the queer language and culture as well as how to interact with them in ways that are respectful of their queer identity (Tanner & Lyness, 2004). Dealing with other family members and communities who might not support a gender nonconforming child or children in similar sex relationships might be disconcerting and unsettling, and parents and families will need support and skills to manage these interactions and attitudes. Some parents may also need assurance that their child’s gender is not a consequence of their parenting practices or of an abusive childhood (Hill et al., 2010).

Perceptions and beliefs around queer identity were said by participants to be influenced by misinformation, religious values, and culture. These beliefs have harmed young ethnic queers and impacted their psychological health and social and cultural wellbeing. Disclosure of queerness can bring new ways of relating to family, community, and queer members. For ethnic communities, their status as outsiders in the wider society is not that dissimilar to that of ethnic queers within their own communities. Recognizing the harm of discrimination might

enable ethnic communities and families to better address and advocate against other forms of discrimination related to their ethnicity.

Gossip and rumors reinforced narratives and stereotypes and were forms of abuse that resulted in the mutual rejection of queer young people and community. Families, though unwilling and unintended, might be faced with the same disclosure process as their queer family members and, like them, can be impacted in similar ways. They are likely to face gossip and rumors and subsequent rejection by community, particularly if they belong to religious communities. Choosing to support queer family members or maintaining status within the community by rejecting queerness is not always an easy choice for some families to make. Aligning cultural traditions and beliefs to embrace and value the humanity of all their members is, in reality, the essence of community.

Limitations and Future Research

The sample size of 43 ethnic participants is small given the more than 200 different ethnicities from amongst a national population of 5 million. However, participants identified from the four main New Zealand Statistics ethnic classifications of Asian, Middle Eastern, Latin American, and African. The voices of young ethnic queers from rural communities are not present as researchers focused on the main cities of Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland) and Pōneke (Wellington) that are home to 63% of the ethnic population. Admittedly, it would have been difficult to recruit or gain access to queer ethnic young people in rural areas.

An area for further research identified by the study would be to hear from the communities and families themselves how they respond to queer family and community members, and how they perceive their responses impact on the young people and on their relationships with them.

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[i] Ethnic in Aotearoa refers to people that are not Māori or Pacific and, until recently, European (excluding Continental European). The data on young ethnic people in this study exclude Continental Europeans.
[ii] Māori word for New Zealand. Aotearoa is now widely used in society and henceforth will be used throughout this paper.
[iii] Family of origin refers to "heterosexual identifying family members living within a heteronormative socio politico-cultural system" (Bertone & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2014).
[iv] Ministry for Ethnic Communities
[v] Asian New Zealanders are New Zealanders of Asian ancestry. In the New Zealand census, the term refers to a pan-ethnic group that includes diverse populations who have ancestral origins in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia.
[vi] https://www.myd.govt.nz/documents/policy-and-research/policy-document-final.pdf
[vii] Māori word meaning people of the land - indigenous