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Brief Article
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A discussion on research methods for LGBTQ+ minors:
Interviews with support group facilitators

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Abstract: The psychological challenges faced by LGBTQ+ minors in Japan are significant and require urgent research regarding appropriate psychological support. This study explores the risks and benefits of including LGBTQ+ minors as research participants through qualitative descriptive analyses of interviews with five LGBTQ+ support group facilitators and accordingly elucidates appropriate research procedures. These findings largely align with those of previous studies, however, two unique insights have emerged. First, risks associated with research participation need to be addressed, such as ensuring the physical and psychological safety of minors during their travel to and from the research venue. Second, the importance of the researchers' credibility was highlighted, as LGBTQ+ minors may be reluctant to participate in research unless it is widely recognized and endorsed. These findings suggest that cultural factors unique to Japan and the methodological differences may have influenced the results of this study, underscoring the need for tailored research procedures in this context.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, minors, research methods, support groups

Introduction

The psychological challenges faced by LGBTQ+ minors in Japan are significant, and relevant studies are urgently needed. However, ethical considerations require careful attention (Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences, CIOMS, 2016, pp.67-68). Mustanski (2011) proposed key approaches researchers should consider when conducting studies involving LGBTQ+ minors (p.677). Tanaka (2022) noted that although Mustanski's procedures have been applied and found useful, the risks and benefits vary depending on the recruitment methods, indicating that risk-benefit evaluations should be tailored to specific research contexts (p.766).

The study by Mustanski et al. (2017) on LGBTQ+ minors in HIV research employed a method for the risk-benefit evaluation of participant recruitment approaches, thus offering valuable insights in this regard (Mustanski et al., 2017, pp.112-113). They directly asked LGBTQ+ minors about the risks and benefits of their participation. This study identified novel approaches, including not seeking parental permission and explaining direct benefits into the consent process (Mustanski et al., 2017, pp.114-118).

Assessing the risks and benefits of research involving LGBTQ+ minors in support groups is essential for clinical psychology in Japan. Although LGBTQ+ minors seek safe spaces, LGBTQ+ and ally communities in public education exist abroad but not in Japan (Toguchi & Kasai, 2016, p.73). However, voluntary organizations and non-profits offer various support group activities for LGBTQ+ youth (24zzz, 2021), fostering community formation, which the education system lacks.

Research on support groups for LGBTQ+ minors remains challenging due to the above differences from international practices; the absence of an HIV-related focus, as in Mustanski et al. (2017); and the lack of domestic studies (Nye et al., 2023, pp.7-17). The gap between domestic and global research makes risk prediction difficult, even though this study aims to explore them. Preliminary studies of adults close to LGBTQ+ minors, such as group facilitators, are required to estimate their risks and benefits. This approach may eventually enable clinical psychology research on LGBTQ+ minors in Japanese support groups aligned with global practices.

This study explores the risks and benefits of including LGBTQ+ minors as research participants by conducting interviews with support group facilitators and, thereby, considering unique research procedures.

Methods

Five support group facilitators were recruited using snowball sampling (Table 1). Semi-structured interviews lasting 60 minutes were conducted between March and May 2023. The participants were asked the following four questions, adapted from Mustanski et al. (2017) (pp.112-113): (1) What do you think are the benefits of involving LGBTQ+ minors in research on support groups? (2) What do you think are the risks of involving LGBTQ+ minors in such research? (3) What impact do you think obtaining parental permission would have on conducting research involving LGBTQ+ minors? (4) What considerations do you think are necessary when researching LGBTQ+ minors? Additional follow-up questions were asked as needed.

A qualitative descriptive analysis followed Mustanski et al. (2017). First, the interview transcripts were coded according to the three main codes (Table 2). Subsequently, open coding was used to identify themes within the root codes. The first author conducted these two initial steps. Finally, the coding's validity and reliability were assessed by a second author and further verified by a qualified clinical psychologist.

The participants were informed about the procedures and ethical consideration both orally and in writing; additionally, informed consent was obtained from all participants. This study was conducted with the approval from the Ethics Board of Kyushu Lutheran College.

Results

Nine subcodes for “Risks and Benefits,” four for “Parental Permission,” and ten for “Research Procedures” were identified.

Risks and Benefits

The nine subcodes identified (Table 3) include examples like “Obstacles on the way to the venue” and “Social participation.”

Parental Permission

Four subcodes identified (Table 4) include examples like “Explanation for going out.”

Table 1. Profile of research participants

Research participants	Age	Number of years of facilitating support groups
A	40s	5 years
B	30s	13 years 7 months
C	30s	14 years 5 months
D	20s	6 years
E	30s	7 years

Table 2. Definition of three main codes

Code	Definition
Risks and Benefits	Risks or benefits for research participants throughout the entire research process.
Parental Permission	Risks or benefits associated with the relationship between guardians and research participants.
Research Procedures	Methods to mitigate research risks.

Research Procedures

Ten subcodes identified (Table 5) include examples like "Ensuring safety to and from the venue" and "Researcher's name recognition."

Discussion

This study aimed to explore the risks and benefits of including LGBTQ+ minors as research participants and consider unique procedures through interviews with support group facilitators. These results are largely consistent with those of previous studies (Mustanski, 2011, p.677; Mustanski et al., 2017, pp.115-117; Tanaka, 2022, p.764), ethical guidelines (CIOMS, 2016, pp.65-68), and the effectiveness required in psychotherapy (Karver et al., 2019, pp.97-99; Burlingame et al., 2019, pp.230-232). In Japanese support group research, similar risks and benefits exist for LGBTQ+ minors, and as in previous studies, appropriate research procedures are deemed necessary.

However, this study also yielded unique findings, which can be summarized into the following two points: First, the "Obstacles on the way to the venue" under "Risks and Benefits," "Explanation for going out" under "Parental Permission" and "Ensuring safety to and from the venue" under "Research Procedures" are new considerations. These issues highlight the need to address risks before and after participation, unlike Mustanski et al. (2017), who focused specifically on risks during research and parental permission (pp.114-118). Second, findings on "Social participation" under "Risks and Benefits" and "Researcher's name recognition" under "Research Procedures" suggest that LGBTQ+ minors may only participate in widely recognized research.

Table 3. Risks and Benefits

Code	Summary	Example of interview transcripts
Excessive self-expression	Risk. Research participants may express themselves excessively without considering their future.	"It's a bit scary to express too much of oneself, not because of parents or anything." (E)
Obstacles on the way to the venue	Risk. Bearing time and financial obstacles owing transportation means and costs to the venue.	"I'm also worried about the transportation costs -it might be tough." (C)
Threats posed by participants and researchers	Risk. Participants and researchers might impose their preconceived notions regarding LGBTQ+ minors.	"I might feel like I'm just a subject or material for someone's study." (D)
Insufficient understanding of the study	Risk. Research participants may engage in the study without fully understanding it.	"Minors participate in studies because adults say so, but they might not be able to think it through that far." (A)
Appropriate understanding and support	Benefit. Facilitating appropriate understanding and support for LGBTQ+ minors.	"With more research being done, it feels like we can step into those closed-off." (A)
Information gathering	Benefit. Facilitating positive life changes in life by obtaining information related to LGBTQ+.	"They learned about themselves from older peers. I think this kind of knowledge might help them." (B)
Safe space for self-expression	Benefit. Having a safe space for research participants to express themselves, ensuring careful consideration from an ethical perspective.	"If LGBTQ+ minors could express safely, it would likely lead to positive outcomes." (B)
Encounters and places	Benefit. Having encounters and places wherein individuals who understand each other can gather.	"I didn't really have places, outside of support groups where I could find empathy." (D)
Social participation	Benefit. Positively transforming one's self-awareness by having one's voice contribute to positive societal changes.	"Having the experience that one's thoughts, feelings, or experiences might help improve something in society could be a positive trigger for an individual. In Japanese society, the social participation of not just LGBTQ+ individuals but that of children is extremely underestimated." (C)

Differences between countries and cultures may have influenced these results. In Japan, the absence of LGBTQ+ minors' communities in public educational settings (Toguchi & Kasai, 2016), the interview record on "Social Participation" (Table 3) in which Participant C stated, "In Japanese society, the social participation of not just LGBTQ+ individuals but that of children in general is extremely underestimated," and the fact that no research has ever been conducted on LGBTQ+ minors in Japan (Nye et al., 2023, p.7-17), indicating that even academic discussions on this topic have been lacking, support this consideration. However, unlike Mustanski

Table 4. Parental Permission

Code	Summary	Example of interview transcripts
Parental conflict	Risk. Participation in the study and the accompanying self-disclosure can cause conflicts for the parents, which in turn can cause an emotional burden for the research participants.	"Some parents don't want to believe it, so I think it would be quite a shock for them." (E)
Parental intentions	Risk. Parents' intentions might intervene in the research or support group participation, preventing the participant from benefiting appropriately.	"What I've seen that has been concerning is when parents come with their child and end up outing them." (B)
Explanation for going out	Risk. Regardless of parental consent, the necessity of explaining their outing to parents can cause an emotional obstacles or unintended disclosure.	"But if they haven't come out, explaining where they are going is difficult. I've thought about how to adjust this." (A)
Protective functions	Benefit. Parental consent fulfills the protective function in terms of general research ethics.	"If they have come out, parents' understanding can protect the minors." (C)

et al. (2017), this study did not reflect the subjective opinions of LGBTQ+ minors but instead adopted the objective perspectives of group facilitators. Additionally, the influence of the research methodology should also be considered, as this study was based on small-scale interviews.

In conclusion, the research on LGBTQ+ minors in Japanese support groups presents unique risks and benefits, necessitating careful procedures. The findings on the risks that emerge before and after participation offer new perspectives that are relevant for research and support group management. Furthermore, findings underscore the need for public recognition of LGBTQ+ minors' participation, requiring recognized professionals to formalize and document supportive practices. This study suggests two directions for future research. First, given the potential influence of the study's methodology on the findings, further research using alternative approaches is warranted. Second, future studies should incorporate international comparisons to enhance the cross-cultural understanding.

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Table 5. Research Procedures

Code	Summary	Example of interview transcripts
Substitute consent by non-parental figures	Obtaining substitute consent from a third party.	"It feels like another adult who can fairly observe the situation is needed." (C)
Assessment of research participants	Objectively determining, whether it is appropriate for the research participant.	"It feels like we need to have a certain understanding of the child before proceeding." (A)
Support provided by a third party	Providing an independent support system in case the research participants.	"It might be important to provide them with multiple options." (E)
Role-playing for refusal of study participation or questions	Before the study, individually considering and practicing ways to refuse participation or decline answering certain questions.	"Like role-playing -I'll ask a question, and you can practice refusing to answer if it's something you don't want to talk about." (C)
Amicable and long-term relationship between research participants and researchers	Ensuring that before the study begins, an amicable long-term relationship is established.	"It's because there's a relationship that we can respond so smoothly." (E)
Careful explanation of the study	Providing careful explanations that allow the participants to understand the study.	"It's just about conveying the risks to the children and telling them to be careful, I guess." (B)
Leeway before conducting the research	Allowing a certain period to give participants time to consider their involvement.	"It might be better to give them some time." (A)
Group facilitation	Facilitating the support group in a manner that allows participants to have a better experience.	"The staff should be careful and intervene." (E)
Ensuring safety to and from the venue	Ensuring the physical safety of the research participants while traveling to and from the research venue before and after the study.	"Even if it's not a shuttle bus, having someone accompany them could be an effective system." (B)
Researcher's name recognition	The study's researcher or the organizing body should hold a widely recognized and credible position.	"It might help if the organizer seems reliable." (B)

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