

Chapter 8

‘I Thought I’d Kill Myself When I Grew Up’: Queer Childhood Narratives in Kazakhstan

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Abstract

Recent years have seen the development of new approaches to the study of gender and sexuality in childhood, with attention given to socio-historical, cultural and political contexts. This chapter aims to contribute towards a limited field of research on queer childhood and youth in Central Asia by considering how narratives of queer childhood in Kazakhstan are culturally produced. This chapter draws on the material from in-depth interviews of 11 queer people living in Kazakhstan, focussing on their narratives of childhood. The study exposes the effect of silence about non-heteronormative identities in Kazakhstan on queer children. Narratives of bullying and managing school violence are explored along with narratives of queer childhood within the families of origin. Lastly, the chapter foregrounds instances of agency and resilience, considering how queer children manage to steer themselves away from being an ‘impossible subject’ and contest dominant societal attitudes and discourses.

Keywords: Queer childhood; Kazakhstan; LGBTQ+; traditional values; suicide; agency

Introduction

On 27th October 2021, Sergey Kim, an eighth grade student at the Nazarbayev Intellectual School (NIS) in Almaty, died by suicide ([KazTag, 2021](#)). The story

The Emerald Handbook of Childhood and Youth in Asian Societies, 177–196

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doi:[10.1108/978-1-80382-283-920231012](https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-80382-283-920231012)

soon gained momentum in the media as Sergey, according to some accounts, had worn a skirt on the day before to a themed school event, which resulted in the disapproval of a teacher who took the student to the school psychologist and called their parents (Danilin, 2021; Gluchova, 2021). The day after Sergey took their life by jumping out of their family's 11th floor apartment, fellow students of other NIS from across Almaty came to school wearing skirts and held a protest under the slogan 'Clothes have no gender' (Danilin, 2021). While it is impossible to know what exactly happened to Sergey and whether their actions in wearing a skirt and transgressing gender norms had anything to do with their gender identity, this instance taps into numerous untold suicide cases of queer¹ youth in Kazakhstan. It also tells a story of the resistance and agency of young people in Kazakhstan who protested the perceived injustice following Sergey's suicide.

For over 30 years, literature and research in policy, psychology, sociology and other fields, predominantly from Global North, have documented that non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender younger persons are at greater risk of suicide (Bailey et al., 2014; Bostwick et al., 2014; Cover, 2016). In Kazakhstan, which scores high in rates of suicide in adults (Varnik, 2012), amongst children aged between 15 and 19, suicide was identified as the leading cause of mortality, one of the highest adolescent suicide rates in the world (UNICEF, 2020). Existing research on queer youth suicidality suggests that the risk of suicide ideation and attempts can be two to six times higher than that of non-queer youth due to factors such as bullying, forms of shame, marginalisation and exclusion (for example, Zhao et al., 2010). While no research to date looks at suicides amongst queer youths in Kazakhstan, existing evidence on suicidality in queer adults in the country (Seksenbayev, 2018) indicates that the rates are staggering. Assuming the link between queerness and suicidality is not unproblematic, and it bears risk to create a fixation on the woundedness of queer young people, leaving little space for 'alternative youth voices that might express complex strengths, pleasures and curiosities' (Driver, 2008, p. 4). Queer youth suicidality, therefore, needs to be thought about within socio-cultural, environmental and institutional contexts, where queer youth suicide becomes thinkable (Cover, 2016).

This chapter aims to consider what it is like to be young and queer in Kazakhstan, providing some means of understanding how the vulnerabilities and difficulties of queer youths are culturally produced. Furthermore, this chapter intends to bring the agency of queer youths to the foreground; hence not treating queer children and young people as purely and permanently endangered and victimised but instead considering nuanced ways in which they negotiate the multi-layered contours of their everyday lives.

This chapter is based on in-depth interviews of 11 people who identify as queer and live in Kazakhstan, conducted in November 2017 as a part of a Doctorate in

¹I use 'queer' in this chapter to denote children and young people who identify in ways that exceed the boundaries of heteronormative and/or cis-normative gender and/or sexual categories.

Psychotherapy at the University of Edinburgh (Levitanus, 2020).² The study looked at the everyday lives of queer people in Kazakhstan with questions focussing on daily experiences within contexts that were relevant to and determined by each participant, including but not limited to home, school, university, online dating scene and workplace. The interviews lasted between one and two hours and were recorded and transcribed.³ Each participant gave informed consent in the pre-interview meeting and the study was approved by the University of Edinburgh Ethics committee. Interviews took place in Almaty, Astana and Karaganda.

Out of the 11 participants, 3 identified as cisgender gay men, 3 as bisexual women, 1 as a lesbian, 1 as a pansexual, 2 as transgender women and 1 as a transgender man. While interviews were conducted in three cities, participants in this study were born and grew up across different regions of Kazakhstan. Identifying characteristics such as their place of origin and profession were not noted in order to protect participants' confidentiality, unless they were deemed important by the participants themselves. While this study did not focus specifically on participants' childhood experiences, all participants recalled aspects of their early experiences when asked to talk about their everyday lives. This is, therefore, a retrospective study based on queer participants' narratives and recollections of their childhood experiences (Russell et al., 2011).

Foucauldian-informed narrative analysis (Tamboukou, 2013) was employed to examine the childhood narratives of queer people in the light of specific power structures and discourses around gender and sexuality in Kazakhstan. A Foucauldian approach views individual narratives as discursively constructed as well as challenging and producing the reality of the subject. As pointed out by Maria Tamboukou (2015),

Stories should not be conceived only as discursive effects but also as recorded processes wherein the self as the author/teller of his/her story transgresses power boundaries and limitations (...). It is this very process of storied actions, revealing the 'birth' of the political subject, that the political in narrative research is about (p. 43).

From this perspective, narratives of queer childhood are both vehicles through which power and discourses are circulated, while at the same time offering spaces and tools for those discourses to be grappled with and resisted.

²Parts of this chapter have been published in a doctoral thesis submitted to the University of Edinburgh (Levitanus, 2020) and other chapters (Levitanus, 2022a, 2023).

³I used the pragmatic approach to transcription (Evers, 2011), omitting the micro-linguistic and structural features of participants' narratives and instead focused on the emerging narratives and their relationship with wider societal discourses on gender and sexuality in Kazakhstan. Within this chapter, '(...)' signifies omitted fragments of the transcript and '(.)' signifies a brief pause.

Childhood Studies in Kazakhstan

In this chapter, I conceptualise childhood as a socially and historically bound construct. As Chris [Jenks \(2005\)](#) points out,

Childhood (...) makes reference to a social status delineated by boundaries that vary through time and from society to society (...)
Childhood then always relates to a particular cultural setting (p. 7).

In Kazakhstan, the place and experience of the child cannot be understood without its historical context. Before the nineteenth century, literature on childhood in Kazakhstan was severely limited; while Russian historians and ethnographers, such as [Nikolay Rychkov \(1772\)](#), [Yakov Gaverdovskyi \(2007\)](#) and Count Konstantin Pahlen (1964), studied Central Asian territory, their research gives limited information on children's lives. Contemporary historians of Kazakhstan give some insight into the lives and traditions of children's upbringing in Kazakhstan before the twentieth century ([Masanov et al., 2007](#); [Mustafina, 1992](#); [Stasevich, 2008](#)); however, further research is needed. On the contrary, the Soviet project of childhood has been the focus of many studies. Seminal work by Lisa [Kirschenbaum \(2001\)](#) offers an in-depth analysis of child upbringing and kindergartens in Soviet Union. [Catriona Kelly \(2007\)](#) looks at the Soviet childhood project, drawing on the official information, children's literature, films, theatre and interviews. It is worth pointing out that with few exceptions (for example, [Kaşıkçı, 2020](#)), existing research on Soviet childhood predominantly focusses on the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic and not specifically on the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic. Post-independence childhood research in Kazakhstan is also scarce. The sociology of childhood does not exist in Kazakhstan as a separate discipline ([Umbertaliev et al., 2016](#)). The study of childhood in post-independence Kazakhstan is dominated by ethnographers, who, to a large extent, focus on childhood rituals and folkloristic customs ([Konovalov & Shakhanova, 1998](#); [Kul'sarieva, 2017](#)). One example of an ethnographic study examining the upbringing of children in Kazakhstan comes from [Cynthia Werner \(2004\)](#), who describes the cultural construction of gender. [Werner \(2004\)](#) emphasises that transition to adulthood for Kazakhs is interconnected with heterosexual marriage. Furthermore, [Werner \(2004\)](#) writes that while adulthood is granted to a Kazakh person upon marriage, it is sealed by having children. While such studies give an insight into aspects of children's experiences, the ethnographic studies in the region are predominantly concerned with the aspects of 'becoming' Kazakh children, giving little attention to children's voices and first-hand experiences. Such focus bears a risk of ethnic particularism and pays little attention to the complicated fabric and various intersectional identities of children in Kazakhstan.

In recent years there has been some interest in studying childhood in Kazakhstan ([Apakhayev et al., 2017](#); [Hernández-Torrano et al., 2021](#)), although, with some exceptions ([Kulakhmetova, 2017](#)) the focus has predominantly been on education, policy and children's welfare. Research on children and young people's

gender and sexuality is even more limited. In the next section, I will explore some key theories around queer childhood, whilst making links to existing literature and research on children and young people's gender and sexuality in Kazakhstan.

Queer Children and Young People in Kazakhstan

The question of where childhood ends and adulthood begins has been debated and much related to the concepts of 'childhood innocence' (Edelman, 2004; Egan & Hawkes, 2009), which is in turn interconnected with the child's contact with sexuality and physiological sexual maturity. The hegemonic discourse of childhood, therefore, posits that childhood sexuality is non-existent. As Louise Jackson (2006) points out,

The concept of childhood, youth, and adolescence have underpinned the construction of modern sexualities: through their positioning as formative stages in the *growth of sexual and self-awareness* as well as their construction as *periods of susceptibility to sexual danger* (p. 250).

Childhood innocence from this standpoint is supposed to be protected, which in turn leads to pathologisation of the sexual subjectivity of children (Jackson, 2006). Yet, as highlighted by Kathryn Bond Stockton (2009), a paradox emerges: on the one hand, there is a belief that children are void of sexuality, while on the other, children are assumed to be growing up towards heterosexuality.

Debates and anxieties around sexuality education around the world are a clear illustration of the notion that children's innocence is to be guarded (Egan, 2013; Shapiro, 2001; Talburt, 2018). In Kazakhstan, the school curriculum does not include a separate course on sexuality education (Arystanbek, 2021). Some schools deliver a subject named 'valeology', or the science of healthy living, and classes in '*özin özi tanu*', which from Kazakh directly translates as 'knowledge of oneself' (Kettling & Ivanova, 2018, p. 111). However, according to Aizada Arystanbek (2021), valeology and *özin özi tanu* classes do not have a stable place in the curriculum, often face pushback from parents and are significantly underfunded. Karlygash Kabatova (2018) points out that one of the key barriers to sexuality education in Kazakhstan is the culture of *uyat* or shame. 'It is *uyat* for unmarried women to get pregnant, but it is also *uyat* to talk or ask about sex' (Kabatova, 2018, p. 4; original emphasis). Furthermore, according to Kabatova (2018), discussions between children and parents about topics concerning sex are against social norms in Kazakhstan, which creates a barrier for children accessing information about sexuality and sexual health.

Historically and in contemporary times, across different countries, restrictions on sexual rights (mostly within the realm of LGBTQ+ rights) have been interconnected with the idea of the protection of children and insistence that moral and physical development of minors requires prohibiting propagation of information regarding same-sex desire and gender non-conformity (Thoreson, 2015). Indeed,

the child or young adult becomes a site or a vessel of meanings and projections, or as Hannah Dyer (2017) puts it, ‘a locus of anxiety for homophobic culture because on it rests the reproduction of a heteronormative future’ (p. 291).

The law ‘On the Protection of Children from Information Harmful to their Health and Development’ that was attempted to be passed in Kazakhstan in February 2015 (Human Rights Watch, 2015) speaks directly to those anxieties. The draft of laws included a broad ban on the publication or sharing of information relating to LGBT in settings where children might receive or encounter that information (Draft of Laws of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2015), much like the Russian 2013 gay propaganda law. While the literature on the effects of the law on queer children and young people in Russia is limited, existing reports suggest that the propaganda law has been detrimental to queer children and youth (Human Rights Watch, 2018; Voyles & Chilton, 2019). Indeed, research in adults shows that, along with the increase in physical violence motivated by homophobia (Kondakov & Shtorn, 2021), the law has other consequences such as an increase in everyday homophobia and self-censorship in the public sphere, and a deterioration in mental health of the queer community in Russia (Horne & White, 2019; Hylton et al., 2017; Soboleva & Bakhmetjev, 2015). While the propaganda law was not approved in Kazakhstan, there has been a marked increase in the ‘traditional values’ discourse and retraditionalisation practices in recent years (Kudaibergenova, 2019; Levitanus, 2022a).

As pointed out by Craig Calhoun (2007), ‘tradition’ is not only a fixed past, rather it is a political project that is continuously reinvented and reproduced. In Central Asia, traditional values discourses generally represent patriarchal and heterosexual normative behaviour as well as a binary view of gender (for example, Peshkova & Thibault, 2022; Kudaibergenova, 2019). In her study of popular Instagram accounts in Kazakhstan and Russia, Diana Kudaibergenova highlights the role of retraditionalisation in defining and regulating sexual identities and bodily expressions. Kudaibergenova defines retraditionalisation as a set of discourses about culture and nation that ‘seek to establish power over defining what “national tradition” means by rethinking tradition in a more contemporary sense’ (Kudaibergenova, 2019, p. 365). One of the examples of retraditionalising discourses in Kazakhstan is the discourse of shame or *uyat* mentioned earlier, which can be understood as a tool for legitimising the heterosexual normative order and regulating any deviant behaviour (Kudaibergenova, 2019; Levitanus, 2022a). It is important to point out that traditional values’ discourses and retraditionalisation in Kazakhstan are intertwined with the ethno-national interpretation of the ‘nation’, as opposed to more flexible, inclusive, civic views of national discourses (Fedorenko, 2012; Kesici, 2011). When ‘traditional’ gender roles are addressed, reference is often made to what it means to be a Kazakh boy/man or a Kazakh girl/woman, omitting the variability of gender expression, the multicultural population or civil identity.

While examining the historical evolution of the construction of gender and sexuality in Kazakhstan is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is useful to outline some of the contemporary discourses around femininity and masculinity circulating within the country. The official government discourse emphasises the role

of women being primarily concerned with parenting, domestic tasks, family and motherhood, which in turn are seen as a foundation for a successful nation (Nazarbayev, 2012). This discourse is being reproduced in the school context within *valeology* and *özın özi tanu* classes mentioned earlier, where continued emphasis is made on Kazakh national traditions and family values (Arystanbek, 2021). Arystanbek's (2021) study of the official school curriculum and state-issued textbooks on *özın özi tanu* highlights that femininity is being equated to passivity, subordination and sensitivity, while masculinity is associated with decisiveness and strength. Within the textbooks, the emphasis on 'serving the family' is made for both genders, but particularly for women, whose value rests 'on her ability to find a husband and preserve their relationship within the institution of heterosexual monogamy, with biological reproduction being seen as the main goal' (Arystanbek, 2021, p. 24).

Queer childhood within the 'protection of children' and 'traditional values' discourses is an impossibility, and a queer child becomes unthinkable as a subject who troubles the assumption of a heteronormative future. The impossibility of a queer child in Kazakhstan is further reinforced by the absence of queer children's voices and narratives within childhood and youth studies and policy debates. In *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Jose Muñoz (2009) points out that not all children are wanted by society and not every child receives state protection. Indeed, there are structural disparities that, apart from sexuality, race, class and gender, play a role in the 'privileges of childhood' (Nyong, 2011, p. 52). This chapter begins to address this gap in the research by looking at the narratives relating to a queer childhood in Kazakhstan. Within this chapter, various intersections of identities that queer children and adults inhabit are considered, going beyond the heteronormative, binary and ethnocentric view of childhood in Kazakhstan.

Results

An Unthinkable Child

A 44-year-old participant from Almaty, Gulzada,⁴ describes her difficulty making sense of her experiences while growing up in an *aul* (a village) in southern Kazakhstan. Gulzada could not recognise nor identify her feelings. She struggled to find information on anyone that was 'like her', even in literature, where she often found respite. However, just like the people around her, the characters in books were all heteronormative. She explained this as a consequence of living behind the Iron Curtain. Indeed, during the Soviet period anything concerning non-normative gender and sexuality was heavily censored and silenced (Kon, 1995). References to same sex desire were removed from Soviet publications and translations of foreign literature (Baer, 2013). It was especially difficult to find any literature featuring non-heterosexual desire in the small *aul* where Gulzada grew

⁴Participants' names and other identifiable information were changed or omitted in this chapter, apart from one; Gulzada chose to opt out of anonymisation.

up. She started to hide her uncomfortable and unfitting feelings and thoughts 'deep inside', as she describes it; this was a way for her to survive. Gulzada spoke about one moment in her childhood:

I have one vivid memory from when I was 12 years old and going through puberty, you know you start feeling different from others, well (.) about sexual orientation. I didn't understand what was happening (...) I did not fit in. And I thought that when I reached around 30 years old, maybe I would have to kill myself. Because as a child I thought I did not want this life, the life I saw adults living. Because it was not for me, but I didn't know what was.

Gulzada's narrative highlights her struggle to situate herself within the context of an *aul* in the Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, where gender and sexuality diversity was non-existent. She never shared her feelings with the adults around her as she did not feel she would be understood. Gulzada speaks about her feeling of loneliness and alienation as she tries to make sense of her feelings and emotions whilst growing up. I describe Gulzada's narrative elsewhere (Levitanus, 2023), where I focus on the way the lack of representation of non-heteronormative identity in the Soviet Union affected Gulzada's ability to find the language and symbolise her experiences (Baer, 2013; Rotkirch, 2002; Stella, 2015). As a child, Gulzada finds her future inconceivable within the society where there is no space for her queerness and decides to kill herself. Later in the interview, Gulzada repeated with an uncomfortable laugh, 'Indeed, I thought I'd kill myself when I grew up', but things changed after Gulzada moved to a bigger city. As the collapse of the Soviet Union approached, she was able to find information about other people 'like her', eventually finding the language to talk about her experience and feel a sense of belonging.

While most participants in this study were born after the Soviet Union had collapsed, the experience of not existing in the eyes of others is echoed in other narratives. For example, a Kazakh in his early twenties, who identifies as a cis-gender gay man, spoke about there being no acknowledgement of non-heterosexuality in Kazakh schools. He describes that at his school, it was not a matter of not being accepted, but being gay was not a possibility and was never mentioned. 'There wasn't such a thing as being gay' (Levitanus, 2022a, p. 125). Consistent with existing research on sexuality education in Kazakhstan (Arystanbek, 2021; Kabatova, 2018), the topic of sex and sexuality is a taboo and a subject of shame or *uyat*. While heteronormative sex is already silenced, queer sexuality is off limit (Levitanus, 2022a), especially in school settings. Arystanbek (2021) points out that Kazakhstan's alternative to sex education actively promotes heteronormativity, whilst dismissing young people who in any way deviate from gender norms, especially when it comes to sexual activity. Research from other countries indicates that sexuality education is not sufficient to reduce negative attitudes towards non-heterosexual and non-cisgender people. Indeed, it may contribute towards doing the opposite by reinforcing stigmatisation and

marginalisation of queer youths by representing queer people as deviant (Elia & Eliason, 2010; Shrestha et al., 2020).

Bullying at School

Several participants recounted their experiences of being bullied at school. For example, a cisgender gay man from Astana, in his early twenties, spoke about being bullied for several years. While he was not open about his sexuality, in this participant's words, his classmates 'picked up on some of his mannerisms'.

They were mocking me, and they attacked me at times. It began around fifth form [10–12 years] and it continued until seventh or eighth form [14–15 years].

They used words. *Pidoras* ["pederast" or "faggot"] for example, and other words. They told me things like, 'why are you at all in this country, you should live there, where there are people like you'.

Existing research predominantly originating from the Global North demonstrates that for youth who identify as non-heterosexual, transgender or gender diverse, rates of bullying victimisation are several times higher than those of their heterosexual cisgender peers (Eisenberg et al., 2017; Toomey & Russell, 2016). Bullying refers to repeated and deliberate victimisation of a person by one or more other people (Olweus, 2010). A power imbalance between actors and the target of bullying is implicit and makes it difficult for the young person who is being bullied to defend themselves physically, emotionally or relationally (Berry, 2018). Whilst using the concept of bullying, it is crucial to acknowledge that bullying emerges from a complex interplay of factors, such as individual identity, the family, the school system and other aspects of a person's socio-cultural context (for example, Smith & Brain, 2000). The bullying described by participants takes local dimensions of utilising discourses around what it means to be a Kazakh and the culture of shame or *uyat* as tools of regulation, which are often entwined with traditional values discourse that privileges heteronormative gender order.

While homophobic slurs are not uncommon in the bullying of queer youths (for example, Espelage et al., 2018), the question of location is particular; where were the bullies from the narrative of the participant referring to? Another participant who identifies as a homosexual man in his early twenties, also from Astana, recounts an episode where he and his friends were specifically sent to Europe by one of their fellow students at the university and told, 'people like you should not live here'. This narrative of being 'sent away' can be associated with the anti-LGBT discourse around 'Gayropa' (Suchland, 2018) – a reference to Europe as a place where queer rights are affirmed, which is contrasted with traditional and 'purely heterosexual' (Healey, 2001, p. 253) societies, such as Russia, or Kazakhstan in this case. This discourse is being reproduced in the

school bullying recollection of the cisgender gay man (see [Levitanus & Kyslitsyna, forthcoming](#) for more details on the narrative of queer people being ‘sent to Europe’).

For transgender participants in this study, bullying was a much more prominent experience. For example, a transgender woman in her mid-twenties from Almaty spoke about her experience of growing up in a small town in the South of Kazakhstan.

It was tough at school. (...) Some moments were particularly difficult. Even though people in my class were more or less friendly, there were pranks and name-calling. There were groups who would shout and pick at me as well, (...) insults, verbal abuse almost every day.

This participant spoke about trying to dress down and hide at school, yet the abuse was relentless. There is a large body of literature demonstrating the numerous adverse effects of bullying such as mental, behavioural and health problems, including low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, higher rates of absenteeism at school and lower academic performance ([Arseneault et al., 2010](#); [Bayzdakhmanova, 2015](#); [Klomek et al., 2015](#); [Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010](#)). Participants in this study described feeling permanently unsafe, missing school and finding little consolation at home, where they often also had to hide their queer identity (see below). Bullying came from both children and adults as teachers often turned a blind eye to the bullying of queer children. A transgender woman in her early twenties from Astana recalled an episode when one of the teachers saw her being beaten up by other children and interfered, saying, ‘you can do whatever you want; kill each other if you wish, as long as you don’t do it within the school gates’. While the teacher stopped the beating, their comment simply encouraged the children to take the bullying outside school territory.

Queer Childhood in the Family of Origin

Participants who described bullying rarely spoke about their difficult experiences at home, as that would have necessitated ‘coming out’ or revealing their queerness to family members. As cisgender gay man from Astana in his early twenties pointed out, the most explicit conversation about sex in a Kazakh family is often the question ‘when will you get married?’ ([Levitanus, 2022a](#), p. 127). Most participants in this study chose to avoid the topic of their sexuality with their parents when they were younger. Some waited until they had a stable relationship before ‘coming out’ while others never explicitly spoke about their non-heterosexual identity, preferring to adhere to ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ family protocol ([Levitanus, 2022b](#)). Telling parents was often described as one of the most difficult moments. As a participant from Astana who identifies as a cisgender homosexual man in his early twenties recalls,

I was in a terrible state before telling them. I felt sick. I especially worried about telling my father. I explained things to my mother and she sort of let me know that our relationship wouldn't change: 'We love you in the same way as before'. My dad, on the other hand, was very serious and said 'this is bullshit' (...).

While this participant received some reassurance from his mother, he was fearful to tell his father. Other participants in this study described the opposite gender dynamic, being more nervous about telling their mother and feeling more supported by their father. The family of the cisgender homosexual man mentioned above hardly raised the topic after the initial conversation. It was particularly important to his parents that he remained quiet about his sexuality. This emphasis on keeping a child's non-normative gender or sexuality invisible can be attributed to the culture of shame or *uyat*, where particular importance is placed on public visibility of norm transgressions (Harris, 2004) and the opinion and views of others. Indeed, this participant explained that his parent's desire to hide his sexuality was related to their fear of disgrace and shame that would befall on the entire family if other people found out about him being non-heterosexual (Levitonus, 2022a).

Attempts to deny and hide their children's non-cisgender gender identity were made by parents of transgender-identifying participants of this study. For example, a transgender woman in her early twenties who lives in Astana described how while her mother used gender-neutral terms and pronouns, such as referring to her as 'my child', she kept refusing to use her name and preferred pronouns. This participant also recounted an episode when her brother tried to forcefully cut her hair at home to make her look more masculine. Arguments often happened around the choices of clothes that participants chose to wear to school.

Even though I tried to protect myself as much as possible, I felt very uncomfortable with my family. (...) Sometimes I would come back from school already exhausted after all the slurs and stuff that people hurled at me, and my family would just add more on top of that.

While it is important to point out that not everyone's family was unsupportive and that some participants recounted positive experiences with their families (see Levitonus, 2020, 2022a), this participant in particular felt that family was not a place of comfort and support.

No one in the family understood me; not grandmothers, not granddads, uncles, aunts. (.) And some family members still don't talk to me. They rejected me, I died in their eyes. They died for me, too. Why would I need contact with such people?

The rejection and lack of support came not only from the immediate family but also from the extended family, for whom this participant ceased to exist once

she was open about being transgender. The importance of the families of origin to queer people's psychological well-being, living conditions and lifestyle choices is generally recognised (Bertone & Pallotta-Chiarolli, 2014; Mayock et al., 2008). Equally, the negative effects of familial rejection and denial to the disclosure of queer identity has been researched and acknowledged (for example, D'Augelli et al., 2005).

Negotiating Queer Childhood

Despite the difficulties encountered at school and at home, participants' narratives highlighted their strategies for overcoming those struggles. As pointed out by Rasmussen et al. (2004), '[t]he complexity of queer youth's subjectivity, agency, sexuality, and cultural practices is flattened by a dominant framing of them in terms of danger and victimization' (p. 7). It is, therefore, essential to examine how queer youth express their agency, whether it be in terms of their sexual desire, identity formation or other domains of their everyday lives. Within the narratives of queer participants of this study, agency was evident in various ways. Some actively choose to hide their sexuality and gender identity, knowing that there might be risks associated with being open. For example, a pansexual man from Almaty in his mid-forties speaks about his experience at college (between 15 and 18 years of age).

It was difficult. There were cute guys there and I looked at them. But, of course, they did not understand what was happening. I knew that it may even be unsafe for me to reveal myself. (...) I understood that and never attracted much attention to myself.

It was safer for this participant to remain unknown to his peers. For transgender participants, hiding was not necessarily an option and they found that having social support was one of the most important sources of protection for them, particularly against bullying at school. For example, a transgender woman in her mid-twenties from Almaty spoke about the importance of her friends.

I had people who protected me. One of my good friends was always by my side. She would even fight for me sometimes.

Similarly, a transgender woman in her early twenties from Astana speaks about the importance of belonging to a social group:

When there was a wave of subcultures in Kazakhstan, I started to identify myself as a punk. I found belonging there, and there were different people in this group I joined. (...) They were also different from others, and there were people who also studied at my school. They were a bit older than me and they, basically, became people who sometimes protected me and helped me out. (...) I had one friend in

that group who early on saw me as a girl and treated me as her girlfriend. That was massively important for me.

For these participants, social support carried several functions: a feeling of belonging, protection and a space where some of them experienced acceptance and recognition for the first time. Indeed, research shows that for queer youth, social support is associated with better mental health and well-being (Snapp et al., 2015; Watson et al., 2019). The narrative of the participant above features her finding her belonging in Kazakhstani punk subculture. The connection between queer and punk has been previously discussed in many studies, predominantly originating from the Global North (for example, Halberstam, 2003; Sharp & Nilan, 2015). Halberstam (2003) points out that punk can be seen as creating its own community through exclusion from and rejection of dominant societal norms. In this way, being queer and punk, ‘one can be simultaneously included and excluded based on non-normative values and beliefs’ (Sharp & Nilan, 2015, p. 455). The transgender woman in her early twenties from Astana continued:

When it was unbearable at home, I spent time with my friends. They were my real family. I found comfort with them.

Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993) uses the concept of the avunculate family that goes beyond biologically imposed family members and speaks to the broader and more fluid definitions of family. This participant illustrates this notion in referring to her friends as her ‘real’ family, where she is able to find safety.⁵ This participant also found sanctuary in her room:

My relief was also in my bedroom. I closed the door, and it was my whole world there. I deliberately decorated my room so that it resembled a scene from my favourite book, *Alice in Wonderland* (...). I painted a Cheshire cat on my wall. I had a magical lamp with twigs. I felt that I could shut myself away from everything. I now understand that it was a very relaxing space; I felt safe in my room.

Despite a lack of support from her family of origin, this participant created spaces and social connections for herself where she could express herself and her gender openly and authentically. As highlighted by Schroeder (2015), who conducted an ethnographic study of queer cultural politics in the Midwestern United States, ‘[f]or queer youth, the bedroom becomes an important space they choose for their own privacy, or are banished to, due to other circumstances’ (p. 796). On the one hand, for this participant the bedroom became a safe space where she could retire to from the outside world. On the other hand, safety seems possible

⁵See (Levitanus, 2022b) for other instances of using avunculate relationships by queer people living in Kazakhstan.

only behind closed doors. [Schroeder \(2015\)](#) compares queer children's bedrooms to the closet, which 'can conceal protectively or trap oppressively' (p. 796), and often does both at the same time.

Conclusion

This chapter contributes towards the growing field of childhood studies in Kazakhstan by looking at narratives of queer childhood. Key narratives, including that of an unthinkable child, bullying at school, being queer within the family of origin and negotiating a queer childhood, have been examined. Within the narrative of an unthinkable child, participants' difficulties in finding self-identification and a means of understanding their experiences have been highlighted. Queer children in Kazakhstan are an 'impossible subject', who are not acknowledged in policy, within families or in schools. This creates and reinforces an environment where queer children and young people have little protection in most settings. The queer people in this study recount multiple experiences of severe bullying and violence at school. They also find little consolation in their families of origin, where non-heteronormative gender and sexuality often remain unnamed and unacknowledged.

Nevertheless, despite the lack of recognition and support from schools and their families, queer people in this study spoke about their ways of steering themselves away from being 'unthinkable subjects' into being possible, real and agentic. Queer narratives reveal ways in which participants negotiated their difficult experiences when they were young and found ways to support themselves by seeking information that might help them to recognise their experiences, choosing to hide or remain unknown, seeking social support (whether blood-related or not) or carving out spaces for themselves where they felt safe. The choice of strategies often depended on the individual circumstances and levels of support of people around them and their families. Often, the size and location of the place of residence of the participant made a palpable difference, with bigger cities offering more opportunities to find community and signification to their experiences. As Marnina [Gonick \(2006\)](#) writes in the chapter on queer girlhood:

They have refused to be rendered invisible or to accept the negative stereotypes thrust upon them. Instead, they have worked to produce positive self-identifications and representations and to create the social conditions that will open up new possibilities for living life as queer people (p. 137).

All in all, along with social struggles, exclusion and the lack of support, the narratives of queer childhood in Kazakhstan reveal stories of agency, resistance and resilience.

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