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The primary observation in constituting of gender
through the ‘coming out’ practice in Thai queer students

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บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยเรื่อง ‘การสังเกตเบื้องต้นในประสบการณ์การปฏิบัติการ ‘การเปิดเผยตัวตน’ ของนักศึกษาไทยกลุ่มเกย์ มีวัตถุประสงค์ในการศึกษาเบื้องต้นถึง การสร้างเพศสภาพผ่านการปฏิบัติการ ‘การเปิดเผยตัวตน’ ของนักศึกษาไทยกลุ่มเกย์ และการศึกษาความรู้ที่เกิดจากประสบการณ์ในการเปิดเผยตัวตนของนักศึกษาไทย ทั้งนี้ใช้การเก็บข้อมูลแบบวิธีเจาะจง โดยเก็บข้อมูลจากกลุ่มตัวอย่างในกลุ่มนักศึกษาระดับอุดมศึกษาในประเทศไทย โดยการใช้วิธีการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึก ผลการวิจัยแสดงให้เห็นถึงความหมายและประสบการณ์ที่หลากหลายของนักศึกษา ผลการวิจัยถูกวิเคราะห์โดยวิธีการวิเคราะห์เนื้อหาและเขียนอภิปรายเชิงบรรยาย

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Abstract

This study aims to study the primary observation in constituting of gender through the ‘coming out’ practice in Thai queer students and deepen existing knowledge about the experiences of coming out of Thai queer students. The data is collected within the discourse of Thai University. Furthermore, the in-depth interview is employed to be the method for gathering data from queer students in Thai university by using purposive sampling. Lastly, the finding is shown the individual meaning and a variety of experiences according to the individual world of the students in terms of coming out. It is contented and analyzed into narrative description.

Keywords: Coming out, Queer student, Gender

Introduction

Coming out is the concept which comes from the term “coming out of the closet”. Coming out is not a mere moment action, it is a perpetually process which the individual realizes that s/he has got the sexual desire to the same sex. Then, coming out is the process through

which gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered individuals come to terms with their sexual orientations. The coming out concept is very personal and it happens in different ways of individuals. With the different perspective, the term ‘coming out’ is fluid and we can define ‘coming out’ differently. According to the context of coming out in heteronormative societies, coming out is typically viewed as the action of individuals on the margins of society whose lives, lifestyles, or personal characteristics are subject to social disapprobation (Chirrey, 2003). A significant step in self-actualization for many lesbians and gay men is the process of disclosure or ‘coming out’ (Rivers, I., & Taulke-Johnson, R., 2002).

Coming out, becoming aware one’s sexual orientation or gender identity and beginning to disclose it to others. A person may be selectively “out” in some situations or certain people without generally disclosing his or her sexual orientation or gender identity. “Coming out” is a process that takes place over time, in some cases over many years (Bochenek, M., & Brown, A. W, 2001). Not only, coming out is used to refer to various themes such as accepting the gay label for the self, telling others about one’s homosexuality and entering into a gay lesbian community (Ridge, D., & Ziebland, 2012, p. 732) but also, coming out as homosexual is often viewed in terms of additional developmental tasks for young people to complete.

It is within the higher education context that many students begin to explore and/or disclose their sexual identities, positioning college and university environments with potentially high levels of influence on this process (Vaccaro, 2006). One reason students come out at university is a perception that higher education offers students the opportunity to explore issues such as their sexuality free from judgment and family influences (Rivers, I., & Taulke-Johnson, R., 2002). Higher Education is a significant space where queer students are able to ‘be themselves’ and constitute gendered subjectivities because they have some chances to away from the childhood

contexts of school and family. To support, higher education is a strongly modernist system of organization that contains LGBT/queer people (Ren, 2010, p.132). Higher (and further) education also offers social permission to be openly sexual (Epstein, D., O’Flynn, S., & Telford, D, 2003, p. 127).

Furthermore, many young people delay coming out until they are in college and are more emancipated from the family’s panopticon (Morrish, L. & O’Mara, K, 2011, p. 986). For a good many of them, going to the university is the pivotal moment in their coming out story, which may have spent years drafting—rehearsing—an end to silence (Epstein, D., O’Flynn, S., & Telford, D, 2003, p. 121). Lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students often “come out” take their first step out in university. New undergraduates continue their lifelong engagement with the institutions of heterosexuality but in this context they do as (relatively) new adults. Many queer students see university as a safe space to come out to themselves and to others, a space where they can discover their sexualities and gendered subjectivities. Moreover, the university is the site where these tensions are relaxed in a context which supports the institutions of compulsory heterosexuality and often, even if in advertently, punishes those who do not conform. Within formal education systems universities are sites where heterosexuality enters the realm of the expected. Universities and colleges are often the setting in which students disclose their sexuality to others and subsequently, endure various positive and negative consequences (Evans, N.J. & D’Augelli, A.R., 1996). Hence, the gendered subjectivities of the students are produced and reproduced in the site of the university. In addition, the concept of ‘subjectivity’ offers the possibility of understanding the contradictory nature of human beings. Different discourse such as gender provide for a range of subjectivities for us to take up, allowing individuals to be positioned or to position themselves in a variety of ways (Weedon, 1997).

According to Weedon's concept, it is definitely useful in investigating and describing the position of gendered subjectivities. The ways that individual make sense of understand the world which may be very different for individual. However, student's subjectivity is constituted and policed through hegemonic discourse constituted in dominant social institution such as the discourse of university. So, coming out is the formation of student's subjectivities, through the practice of 'coming out', they become visible and no longer silent.

As was previously concepts stated, coming out transgress and challenge the dominant gender boundaries. Within the socialization process, individuals (students) comprehend their experiences contradict to the heterosexual norm. Not only this study is the review list return of coming out concept but it aims to explore the primary observation in constituting of gender through the 'coming out' practice in Thai queer students.

Objectives

1. To study the primary observation in constituting of gender through the 'coming out' practice in Thai queer students
2. To deepen existing knowledge about the experiences of coming out of Thai queer students.

Theoretical underpinning

Coming out

In order to gain the details of the primary observation in constituting of gender through the 'coming out' practice in Thai queer students, this study takes for granted Evan's conceptual framework to investigate the primary observation in constituting of gender through the 'coming out' practice in Thai queer students. Coming out experience is not a one-time event but rather a process that must be renegotiated with each person to

whom one chooses to disclose. Certainly disclosing to one’s faculty and classmates, people who play a significant role in one’s academic success, can be a difficult and anxiety-provoking experience (Evans, 2000, p. 84). However, the practice naming, ‘coming out’ is central to the formation of gendered subjectivities. Also, it is a practice by which the authoritative voice of the speaker positions him or herself as a particular sexual or gendered subject.

Subjectivity

Subjectivity allows us for an understanding of queer students self-definition of themselves from within, their role as queer students in university or personal experience. As a consequence, subjectivity is not a semi-fixed essence but constantly achieved through relations with others which are themselves who make possible to discourse.

Weedon (1997) states that ‘subjectivity’ refers to an individual’s conscious and unconscious thoughts, sense of self and understanding of one’s relation to the world. On the other hand, the subjective experience could not be objectively measured by others. Queer student’s experiences somewhat have got some similar part but not exactly the same perceptions. However, the concept of subjectivity is different from the concept of identity, as it shifts our attention away from thinking of individuals as rational, unified, and universal beings and towards focusing on how everyday experiences are often shifting and sometime fragmented.

Thai context in regards to Thai queer students

For decades Thailand’s traditional sexual norms and values have powerfully and strongly dictated and controlled the sexual behavior of the Thai people (Yamarat, 2009). Interestingly, even lesbian relationships still conform to Thailand’s traditional sexual norms, for example, on one level, tom and dee relationships seems to follow heterosexual guidelines of the male family breadwinner and female housewife (Thongthiraj, 1994).

Accordingly, the difference in social roles and status between men and women is not a consequence of biology, but rather the meaning that society has placed on being male or female. Both male and female identities are socially constructed as a product of male– designed social indoctrination and bias (Butler, 1990; De Beauvoir, 1984). Although, sex education is not prohibited in Thai schools but the information about sex being taught is very limited. For examples, in Thailand, the first national policy on sexuality education in schools was announced in 1938, but sex education was not taught in schools until 1978. When sexuality education was firstly added to the curriculum, it was taught in only those schools that were receptive and that were ready to integrate sexuality education with other subjects, e.g., health education and sociology. This school-based sexuality course was called “Life and Family Studies” instead of “Sexuality Education,” (Thaweessit, S., & Boonmongkon, P, 2009, p. 5) and its content consisted of issues related to the reproductive system and personal hygiene (Panjapong,C., Kanjanawong, S. and Naviroj, J., 1981).

Besides, in almost all sexuality education curricula, only two genders are acknowledged– males and females. Issues of gender and sexual diversity and fluidity and homosexuality are not mentioned, even in lessons supposedly designed to help students understand and learn about their sex or sexual preference. Most lessons limit students to the concept that there are only two genders and one type of sexuality (heterosexuality) and that being a transgender or homosexual person is an abnormality (Thaweessit, S., & Boonmongkon, P). Consequently, the person who intends to do the action which could against the norm of the society as queer people, they might need the ‘coming out’ practice to represent their sexuality to public. As a result, heteronormativity has become the standard of Thai society. In some sexuality education curricula, such issues are not taught or even mentioned, presumably in light of the attitude that transgendered people are such a

minority of Thai people (Ibid:50).

Key assumptions in relation to definitions of terms

“Coming out” refers to a figure of speech for woman loves woman students in Thai university disclosure of their sexual orientation and/or gender and sexuality.

“Experiences” refer to an event or a series of events regarding coming out of woman loves woman students participated in /or lived through within the period of studying in the university.

“Thai queer students” refer to the students who have got the sexuality in regards to woman loves woman and studied in Thai university. This study is used the term ‘queer’ according to ‘queer’ represents the new concept of gender of the people who got the gender and sexuality against the heterosexuality norms.

“Subjectivity” refers to knowledge about oneself, one’s own experience, and the relation to the world.

“Gender” refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women.

The Study

The purpose of this study is to study the primary observation in constituting of gender through the ‘coming out’ practice in Thai queer students. Data is gathered by in-depth interview and analyzed in content analysis. Over a 6 month period, four Thai queer students in Thai university are interviewed with the purposive sampling technique. Interviews are conducted in university area, each approximately 2 hours and a half in duration. With the participants’ consent, all 4 interviews are recorded, transcribed, and translated into English by researcher. The following cases are some of my in-depth findings.

Findings

The way to coming out and constituting gender

Rasmussen (2004) states that students and teachers in diverse educational settings may benefit from engaging the varied moral, political, and pedagogical issues that influence the production of coming out discourses. For instances, Bridgewater (1997) advocates “coming out as a prime method for reducing negative attitudes and acts of prejudice against sexual identity minorities while increasing the wellbeing of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals” (p. 65). Nevertheless, the dominance of coming out discourses in lesbian and gay politics, within and outside educational settings, belies the idea that coming out is not necessarily an option, or a desired objective, of all people who are non-heterosexual identified (Ibid;147). In tandem with, the concept of subjectivity offers the possibility of understanding the contradictory nature of human being. Different discourses, such as gender, provide for a range of subjectivities for us to take up, allowing individuals to be positioned or position themselves in a variety of ways (Blaise, 2005). The findings in relation to objective one are as followings:

“I am a tom-boy. I have got the same sex attraction since I was 10. From the scratch, my mom couldn’t really not accept it and somewhat expect that I would be changed to heterosexual person. I actually come out by cross-dressing and I dress in tomboy style in everyday life. In vice versa, I haven’t come out 100% as a man. I haven’t act like a man, I have my own style to be myself and come out. So, being a ‘tomboy’ is being myself. My friend is kind of like me (laughing). That’s my coming out”.

Tim: 24 years

“I am a woman that I come out by answering the people who ask me that “do you have boyfriend? Then, I frankly answer to everyone that ‘I have a girlfriend not boyfriend’. That’s the way I come out. Moreover, I dress and have my hairstyle like a man.”

Lara: 22 years

“I come out by dressing in man student-uniform. I come to class almost every day with this cross dressing uniform. That’s why the people who are in my daily life have realized that I am definitely a woman who loves woman. Furthermore, I have a girlfriend at all time. That’s my coming out”.

Yuan: 23 years

“I firstly come out by telling my close friend that ‘I don’t like a man’. Then, I feel a bit struggle telling my family especially ‘my mom’. However, my mom finally realizes that ‘I like woman’ by some slippery words on the phone call with my girlfriend. Eventually, I confess and tell her my coming out. I feel some guilty but I really couldn’t fix that.”

Kratai: 20 Years

The experience of individual in regards to coming out

Coming out experience has made the gender at the level of the individual and offered an explanation of where those experiences come from, why it is contradictory or incoherent and why and how it can change. It offers a way of understanding the importance of subjective motivation and illusion of full subjectivity necessary for individuals to act into the world (Weedon, p.40). The findings in relation to objective two are as followings:

“My coming out experience is both good and bad. For the good side, my family is definitely accepted my coming out. They really do and also my friends. Every girlfriend likes me the way I am. The way she likes me is ‘we really understand each other’. On the contrary, for the bad side, once the Dad of my girlfriend has said that ‘Tom is woman, how woman could take good care of my daughter?’ I critically realize to my own that ‘my mom is woman as well but she is so tough and very strong woman, every gender should be equal’. Coming out and become a tomboy is not relevant with his perspective at all”.

Tim: 24 years

“The coming out experiences is so painful and beautiful. Firstly, I would like to tell you in regards to the many struggle moments that I have to face. So many people discriminate me just because I am gay. I have been judged by my gender and sexuality. Someone treats me like I am not a normal person or human. Until now, my deep wound about this story is not yet gone. However, the beautiful side is the acceptance from my family, teachers, close friends, they just have accepted the way I am. They all judge me by the way I do and the success that I have achieved. I am happy with the good people that still are all around me.”

Lara: 22 years

“Once I come out, the man who ever likes me is not accepted my gender and sexuality. They do not believe my coming out though. Also, when my coming out perpetually spread out, the women like me more and more. Consequently, I am so confident with my coming out. My gender and sexuality are so obvious and evident.

Sometimes, my coming out has made me forget that ‘I am a woman’.”

Yuan: 23 years

“In my feeling, I do absolutely feel ok with my coming out experience. I am not frustrated or disappointed at all. I have been with my girlfriend four years and a half long. I have felted so pleased. She is a kind of romantic-person, really understands me and takes care of me very well indeed.”

Kratai: 20 Years

Discussions and conclusions

This research is aimed to study the primary observation in constituting of gender through the ‘coming out’ practice in Thai queer students. The findings show the way that individual experience relates directly to gender subjectivities, as Davies (1990) points out that examining an individual’s subjectivities is thus a way of gaining access to constitutive effects of the discursive practices through which we are all constituted as subjects and through which we all live in is made real.

According to the way to coming out and constituting gender, Three queer students come out by cross-dressing. Others students come out by hanging around with their girlfriend and by telling the people all around such as close friend, family also teachers. The findings ensure that ‘coming out’ experience is not a one-time event, but rather a process that must be renegotiated with each person to whom one chooses to disclose as theoretical concept has noted. Significantly, the way they come out is somewhat intertwined but not exactly the same. To clarify, queer student’s experiences somewhat have got some similar part but not exactly the same perceptions. Undoubtedly, the concept of subjectivity allows queer

individual position themselves in a variety of way.

Next, according to the experience of individual in regards to coming out, two queer students feel good and bad with their coming out and gender. Another two students feel good and completely ok with their coming out and gender. In the light of individual of experience finding, it highlights that the subjectivity and behavior of those queer students are the expression of their experiences. Experience is the knowledge from queer students which student's experience is represented. In essence, as Weedon (1997) points out 'the meaning of experience is perhaps the most crucial site of political struggle over the meaning.

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