

“Coming out” Thai students in the discourse of higher education

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explain coming out of Thai students in the discourse of higher education. Thus, prior research and literature reviews are discussed and argued critically to extend the knowledges of “coming out”. The in-depth interview is employed to be the method for gathering data from Thai university students in the discourse of higher education by using purposive sampling. Lastly, the finding is contented and analyzed into narrative description.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Discourse constructs persistently our social reality. Our reality is made up power relationship to discourse. St. Pierre (2000) states that once a discourse becomes “normal” and “natural”, it is difficult to think and act outside it. Within the rules of a discourse, it makes sense to say only certain things. Discourse is a way of speaking, writing, thinking, feeling, or acting that incorporates particular idea as ‘truth’. Discourse provides a framework for how we think. It also carries the messages about power and seeks to establish a set of hidden rules about who has power and who does not, or who is right/normal or who is wrong/abnormal (Blaise, 2005, p.16). Other statements and other ways of thinking remain unintelligible, outside the realm of possibility. Interestingly, in Thailand, 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 (Boonmongkon & Thaweessit, 2009). In reality, (Medley, 2005) describes that higher education institutions are microcosms of the larger society, which continues to struggle with bias, mistrust, misunderstanding, and intolerance of individuals who do not fit the norm.

However, Joy et.al. (2021) state that the socio-politico-cultural context of sexual orientation often influences the attitudes, beliefs, and values produced in a given society. Also, Thaweessit (2004) points those sexual subjectivities were trapped within a larger and more powerful discourse of heterosexuality, their decisions to choose homosexuality were largely political. Zhao et.al. (2021) point out that college students are one of the important social groups. During the university period, it is just during the transition period from sexual exploration to sexual maturity. There are many homosexuals in university group life. As a result, heterosexuality has become the standard of Thai society by taking curriculum for granted to produce knowledge that heterosexual discourse is normal and natural in society and authorizing “heterosexuality as a norm” which is so called “heteronormativity”. The heterosexual discourse implicates privileged power for heterosexual not for homosexual people. The students who engage in the homosexual behaviors, which against standard norm of the society, are consequently acknowledge as an abnormal in the mainstream heterosexual discourse.

Accordingly, the student, who decides to come out in the university keeps challenging the standard norm of Thai standard society which mentions only two genders (male-female). Although coming out is widely perceived to be a decisive event in the lives of non-heterosexual people, we still know very little about the discursive consequences of this process (Motschenbacher, 2021). Graham (2020) points out that there is little research about queer students' specific experiences with social support and education. In addition, (Dabra, S., & Prasad, P. 2021) states that education plays an important role in nation-building. Homosexuality is considered a taboo and social stigma. Topics related to sexual identity, same-sex marriages, and giving equal rights to LGBT are still out of the discussion in the public domain. In spite of recognition that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer+ (LGBQ+) young adults face challenges associated with their sexual identities, research on inequality in education has only recently begun examining their academic experiences and outcomes in college (Beattie et al., 2021).

Besides Van Matrea (2020) concludes that gender expression, the external facing representation of gender regardless of biological sex characteristics or internal self-conceptualization might also play an important role in a student's college experience. Also, the knowledge base on meeting basic needs, specifically regarding LGBT students in higher education, is inadequate (ibid, 2020, p.6). This study will close the gap of the research regarding "coming out and discourse in higher education arena which still lack of in Thai context. It points out the discourse of "coming out" in terms of Thai students in the discourse of Higher Education.

2. RELATED LITERATURE

This section is a variety of research in relation to queer people which I will group them critically. The first group "homosexuality & abnormality" is mainly employed positivism paradigm regarding psychological perspective considers mental and emotional concern as the principal of the research. Most of these studies regarding psychological perspective would lead the readers think about the deviant and abnormal of queers, unacceptable in society, negative reaction from parents.

The second group "normality & visibility" is mainly employed the perspectives of post structuralism, feminist- post structuralism, and queer theory to (queer) queer people in terms of "coming out". The studies in the second group emphasis "coming out" as an action which could make queer people be visible in the society.

2.1 Homosexuality & Abnormality

Within this concept, coming out is employed in terms of psychological way. The research that existed always used the concept of "abnormality" or "problem" of homosexuals as the way to define the topic of the study. To exemplify, Armesto & Weisman (2001) mention the factors that contribute to parental rejection of gay and lesbian youth. River & Taulke-Johnson (2002) report on a study of the experiences of 12 undergraduates living in halls of residence and the challenges they have faced integrating into the university culture because of their sexual orientation. According to both studies, lesbian and gay students are assumed by their sexuality that they are not normal. The concept of "queer youths must have problems" would be taking for granted in terms of psychology perspective.

However, not only research bases on psychological perspective which would mention deeply to highlight that being queer is abnormal but in terms of positivism, these studies illustrate and make sense of the research by employing the digits and statistical figures to show the results of the problems. For instances, Gortmaker & Brown (2006) find differences between out and closeted lesbian and gay students in their perceptions of the campus climate and experiences on a Midwestern college campus. Out and closeted students reported differences in the need to hide their identity, perceived unfair treatment, perceptions of an anti-LG campus. In addition, Corrigan et al., (2010) study self-stigma which can undermine self-esteem and self-efficacy of people with serious mental illness. Coming out may be one way of handling self-stigma and it was expected that coming out would mediate the effects of self-stigma on quality of life. Thus, the psychological perspective research persistently produces the truth as if coming out is dramatize scenes of every queer people in the world.

Thus, in terms of psychological perspective, the concept of "coming out" is employed as a part of identity development of LGB individuals, allow them to develop an authentic and stable sense of self (Ragins, 2004). To exemplify, Lasala (2000) states that 'coming out' is considered psychologically healthy for lesbians and gay men to come out to live outside of the closet. In addition, McLean (2007) studied the discourses about gay, lesbian, and bisexual identity, and in the models of sexual identity development that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s, coming out is marked as one of the crucial steps in developing a healthy sexual identity. In these discourses, coming out is positioned as 'good' as it enables the healthy development of sexual identity, while non-disclosure is positioned

as 'bad'. As such, there is a disclosure imperative attached to living as gay, lesbian or bisexual. Thus, these studies presume that identity is stable and fix after coming out. However, the mentioned points of Mclean seem to contrast with my point which according to Silin (1997) that identity categories are fluid and social constructed that make statements of definition and location always problematic.

Regarding to review in this section, "coming out" is mentioned in the concept of "healthy scene" for queer people. Even more, it is also the benefit action which confirms queer identity. By way of contrast, these reviews leave out the possible scenes which may happen, such as, there are many queer people who are perfectly healthy without coming out scene and in vice versa, there are many queer people who are either overtly or subtly suffered from coming out. I would claim from these reviews that not only psychological lens could figure out deeply to experience of individual and take the results of the studies for granted to create the knowledge of "how to coming out" to the society. Particularly, the experience of individuals is far from homogeneous, what an event means to an individual depends on the ways of interpreting the world (Weedon, 1997). Consequently, psychological concepts have taken huge power for granted to construct the knowledge for society regarding coming out.

In order to illustrate "coming out" clearly regarding literature reviews via psychological perspective lens, I employ the concept of "discourse, as defined by Foucault to reveal the concept which psychological studies are veiling. I refer to ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledge and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern (Ibid, p.108). From this point, I would claim that psychological studies constitute knowledge and make sense "coming out" concept by referring with the statistical figures in tandem with quantitative research practice, to produce the discourse of coming out in psychological way.

To consolidate my points, queer people regarding psychological concept would be employed the concept of "coming out" in their lives. Importantly, psychological concepts in those research tend to drag queer people in the light of "abnormality" by producing and reproducing this kind of research endlessly, no matter the scholars intend to produce it or not. On the other hand, these studies conduct to figure out and solve the problems of queer people, at the same time, they give rise to the category "homosexual" and locate homosexual into the wrong side of binary opposition (heterosexual-homosexual). As a result, psychological concept has illustrated in studies as if homosexual has sexual orientation and must come out, but heterosexual is in privilege side and does not do anything regarding the sexual orientation.

Next section of the literature reviews focuses on the radical challenge of psychological perspective. The psychological perspective has made our understanding of "coming out" as an essential biological concept of queer people. On the other hand, the literature review is concerned sexuality of people as a social construction within sexuality discourse. In the foreground, I draw in order to illustrate and discuss that "queer people "coming out" not only for psychological purpose but the purpose may vary according to individual and discourses which are around them.

2.2 Normality & Visibility

Motschenbacher (2019) points out that normativity-that is, the notion that certain social practices are perceived as desirable and/or normal-affects the discursive construction of sexuality across cultures and as a consequence is a fundamental concept in language and sexuality studies. With the concept of post structuralism, feminist- post structuralism, and queer theory, they give rise to homosexual to become normal and visible. Burst of studies bring about new perspective of "coming out". Renn (2010) pointed that ongoing, post-positivist explorations of transgender student experiences provide valuable evidence for the ongoing visibility and normalcy agenda; and a few scholars employ postmodern and queer perspectives to provide theoretical depth to the study of gender identity, genderism, and higher education. Additionally, researchers were no longer only positivist scientists but also individuals who mirrored the broad fabric of theoretical work that had come to enrich the field of the educational theory (Tierney & Dille, 1998). Therefore, my purpose to studies "coming out" concept is to explore the action of coming out which stand in opposition in psychological concepts by investigating individual. However, most of the studies are qualitative research regarding post-structuralism, feminism, and queer theory.

Particularly, queer theory becomes a key to opening doors to theoretical advances across higher education research. The juxtaposition of queer theory with non-queer higher education contexts casts new light on existing questions and problems, and indeed makes scholars question what is or might be a question to investigate. There is much to be learned from studies that use queer theory and studies that theorize on the nature of gender identity

and sexuality as constructed in-and constructing-higher education organizations and the experiences of people in them (Renn, 2010, p.137).

3. METHOD

Post-structuralism rests on an assumption that no one can stand outside the traditional or discourses of their time (Grant & Giddings, 2002). Accordingly, the researcher has been experienced in the discourse which will be conducted this research. In other words, in analyzing the texts, the researcher understands the subject and herself, as the effects of discourses (Ibid, p.22). For Post-structuralism, subjectivity is neither unified nor fixed. The assumption that subjectivity is constructed implied that it is not innate, not genetically determined but socially produced. Consequently, subjectivity is produced in a whole range of desire practices (Weedon, 1997).

Moreover, discourse is a way of speaking, writing, thinking, feeling, or acting that incorporates ideas as “truths”. Discourses provide a framework for how we think. They also carry messages about power and seek to establish a set of hidden rules about who has power or who does not and who is right/normal or who is wrong/abnormal. This study is drawn on phenomenological study of gender and sexuality within the discourse of Thai higher education. This study will gather the data by in-depth interview. Then, data will be collected and analyzed for find the results to serve the objective of the research, and also do a content analysis for the occurrence of certain terms or phrases to establish the dominance of a particular ways of speaking about the world in any given text (Grant & Giddings, 2002). To support, Mathet (2020) stated that his research entitled ‘Roles of Discourses and the Meanings of the Same-sex Marriage Communicated in the News of Mass Media in Thailand’ reflects the study of meaning construction and power through discursive practice. Furthermore, coming out which is a powerful way for individuals to disclose, constitute, and perform membership in stigmatized identity categories. The practice has now spread far beyond its LGBTQ origins (Cloud,2017).

Accordingly, this study employs the qualitative study which is not performed in order to derive a sample representative of a larger population to find the results in terms of discourse and dig the answer regarding to ‘coming out in Thai higher education discourse. Moreover, the sample is purposively selected to serve a particular purpose, Then, the use of the term 'purposive sampling' in qualitative study used 'when the researcher keen to learn investigate in particular cases without generalizing to all every case. The selection of the sampling units in purposive sampling is subjective since the researcher relies on his or her experience and judgment (Guarte, J. & Barrios, E. B. 2006).

3.1 Samples

This study surveys gay, katheoy, tom and dee university students, only focuses on undergraduate students in the discursive practice of Thai higher education. The samples are consisted of eight university students, who self-identified as gay, katheoy, tom and dee exploring, and/or questioning, who experienced attraction to the same sex in the discourse of Thai higher education. Data is gathered from Thai university students through purposive sampling technique. The participants are carefully chosen to represent a variety of experiences in terms of years of coming out experience. The researcher categorizes the students as followings:

- (1) Gay students,
- (2) Katheoy (Lady Boy) students,
- (3) Tomboy students
- (4) Dee (a girl student who is a tom’s partner) students.

| Study setting | Data collection method | Number of students |
|---------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| University 1 | In-depth interview | 2 |
| University 2 | | 2 |
| University 3 | | 2 |
| University 4 | | 2 |

3.2 Data Collection /Tool

In-depth interviews are widely used in qualitative research as a method to find out what is on a person’s mind. Information is obtained through a structured conversation between an interviewer and an interviewee (Patton M.Q., 2002).

3.3 Data Analysis

All the in-depth interview data is collected in Thai and translated into English by the author, a native Thai speaker. Fieldwork is conducted over a six-month period in 2021. In analyzing the texts, the researcher understands her/his subjects, and her/himself, as the effects of discourses (Grant & Giddings, 2002, p.22).

4. RESULT

The students explain that “their teachers never mention to homosexuality or gender which against the norm. However, the students think that their teachers might not feel comfortable to talk to the sex issues and do not feel gender or sexuality are important factor regarding study in classrooms. Most of them avoid raising this issue in class. In addition, when some teachers have talked about sex or gender in classroom, they have mentioned to man-woman only with biological concept only. They never focus on gender and sexuality diversity at all. So, mentioning the sexuality would not separate us but silence does.

From the interview, the university becomes the discursive field which teachers never teach or mention in relation to sex, gender, or sexuality of the queer & student. Silence is not empty for queer students, but it is full of questions for them. Consequently, the university somewhat become the discourse of silence and the queer student keep “coming out” the heteronormativity perpetuates in the life of the student by existing only male-female type. Man-woman king is embedded in Thai higher education as heterosexual norm. Heterosexual people seem to be the only acceptable standard in Thai society. In sum, gender norms tied to presumption of heterosexuality. The finding indicates that “coming out” is product of discourse as well as become discourse itself. Although, university are heteronormalizing spaces, but the way students coming out is to deconstruct heterosexual as not merely the compulsory norm which can tie them with his or her biological sex. To clarify, the student said that “through the process of coming out, they become visible and no longer silent.

From this point,” Coming out transgresses and challenges the dominant gender boundaries. Interestingly, the student foregrounds themselves by “coming out” to challenge heterosexual norms through their everyday practices in the discursive field of university. The students deconstruct the heterosexual discourse by coming out and form their subject positions in the discursive field of the university. Significantly, one queer student reveals that the coming out is the kind of strong intention to do so, I dress and perform like woman because I like it and I can embody and perform femininities in my university. From the findings, I would claim that gender and sexuality are in flux. It completely consolidated with Warner (1993) who is found that “queer struggles aim not just at toleration or equal status but at challenging those institutions and accounts.

5. DISCUSSION

In the views of “Thai queer studies”, Thailand provides a productive site for testing Western-derived understandings of sexuality (Jackson & Sullivan, 1999, p.3). While tolerated in certain contexts, male and female homosexuality remains unacceptable behaviors in Thailand. Jackson (1989; 1995) has described the psychological, interpersonal and social difficulties faced by Thai homosexual and transgendered men and has developed an account of anti-homosexual sanctions in Thailand. These are not based on legal or religious interdictions as in the West, but rather on cultural norms of appropriate and inappropriate masculine or feminine behavior (Ibid, p.4). 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). Although, there are no legal or formal sanctions against homosexuality in Thailand, a wide range of normative cultural sanctions operate to stigmatize Thai homosexual men and women. Sanctions against homosexuality are diffused throughout Thai society rather than being focused in any clearly definable institution or set of homophobic practices as has historically been the case in most western societies (Jackson, 1995). If Thai homosexual “man” or “woman” maintains a public face of conforming to normative patterns of masculinity or femininity, respectively, he or she will largely escape sanctions (Jackson, 1999, p.4).

Also, Anjana, a member of the lesbian group Anjaree, had this to say about how Thai society views lesbian relations: “although Thai people aren’t violent or hostile towards homosexuals in a way that some countries’ societies are, there is another kind of control mechanism at work here that’s just as traumatic for those on the receiving end. (Thai used) society does not see lesbian relationships as legitimate or meaningful. (Interviewed in Otagnonta, 1995, p. 29). At this point, tolerance is the practice which is unacceptable discourse in terms of Thai cultural context. Coming out” as a homosexual in Thailand still brings shame or “loss of face,” without the

compensation of the high value on “being oneself” (Nanda, 2008). To illustrate, (Motschenbacher, 2021) demonstrates that coming out may, on the surface, appear as a transgressive, and therefore, anti-normative speech event. This is because it involves a self-affirmative claiming of an identification that is traditionally considered non-normative.

However, while ‘western’ concepts of homosexual identity are being adopted widely across the globe, they will in turn be reshaped and re-imagined fitting the existing cultural, social and political structures of different societies (Altman, 2000, p.176). Under these tough situations in Thailand, Thai student in higher education level could not follow the “coming out” in term of western concept, they need to reshape themselves to fit the indigenous culture in Thailand because through the process of coming out, they become visible and no longer in silence. Also, it has been concurrent with the results of (Gutierrez 2021) which states that in Taiwan as well, mere visibility would not address the oppressive settings present for LGBTQ+ communities in higher education settings. Interestingly, Thailand seems to be a country which tolerates queers. Unfortunately, “being gay is not a crime scene in Thailand but when it comes to queer issues in Thai society, nobody wants to mention and never discuss regarding this issue but still keeps ‘coming out’ day by day by the way they constitute themselves. Also. It becomes a “nobody asks, nobody tells” issue. In sum, ‘coming out’ is a practice which is quite critical and tough for Thai students in the heterosexual discourse in Thai higher education inevitably.

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