‘I thought I was the only one’: the misrecognition of LGBT youth in contemporary Vietnam

Paul Horton

Department of Gender Studies, Lund University, Lund, Sweden

Published online: 03 Jul 2014.

To cite this article: Paul Horton (2014) ‘I thought I was the only one’: the misrecognition of LGBT youth in contemporary Vietnam, Culture, Health & Sexuality: An International Journal for Research, Intervention and Care, 16:8, 960-973, DOI: 10.1080/13691058.2014.924556

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2014.924556
‘I thought I was the only one’: the misrecognition of LGBT youth in contemporary Vietnam

Paul Horton*

Department of Gender Studies, Lund University, Lund, Sweden

(Received 5 October 2013; accepted 11 May 2014)

While recent LGBT rights demonstrations and discussions about same-sex marriage have thrust the issue of homosexuality into the spotlight, it was not long ago that the issue of homosexuality was notable by its absence in Vietnam. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with young gay, lesbian and bisexual people in Vietnam’s capital city Hanoi, this paper considers the increasing visibility of homosexuality through the theoretical lens of recognition, and illustrates the heterosexist misrecognition that LGBT young people have been subjected to in legislation, the media, their families, and through the education system. Drawing on the narratives of LGBT young people, the paper highlights the potentially negative impact such misrecognition may have on psychological and social wellbeing.

Keywords: LGBT; sexuality; Vietnam; urban youth; suicide

Introduction

I went around the neighbourhood and stopped at a few pharmacies to buy about four or five sleeping pills at each store because if you buy a lot at any one store they will suspect that you are going to commit suicide. After I collected about 100 pills I went home, took a shower, talked on the phone with some friends and then ate an ice cream, because I was thinking that they might not have ice cream in heaven. After I had eaten the ice cream, I went to bed, got under the blanket and took all the sleeping pills. Then I gradually began to fall asleep and it was very scary. I began to regret my decision. At the moment when I was half here and half there, I started to feel like I really wanted to live. My mind was still conscious but I couldn’t move my arms or legs. All I wanted to do was scream and get someone to come and save me, but I couldn’t. That was the scariest moment of my life.

This is how 22-year-old Quan explained his attempted suicide to me during an interview I conducted with him one afternoon in a café in Hanoi’s old quarter. Thankfully for Quan, his sister, who had been scheduled to visit him the following day, decided to visit him a day early. She arrived not long after Quan had lost consciousness, saw the empty pill packets on his bedside table and took him to seek medical help. At the time of his attempted suicide, Quan was in his final year of high school. Quan explained that his decision to commit suicide stemmed from a sense of being totally alone in the world; of being gay in an overwhelmingly heteronormative context where other forms of sexuality are silenced or treated as a form of social disease. What is more, Quan told me that 90% of his non-heterosexual friends had attempted suicide at least once, and that a number of them had done so when they were as young as 15 or 16 years of age.

Quan’s story vividly illustrates the importance of recognition for psychological wellbeing. Recognition plays a central role in the process of identity formation, as it is
through the recognition afforded by significant others that individuals are able to develop a coherent sense of social self (Honneth 2001, 2004; Taylor 1994). As Fraser (1995, 1997, 2001) points out, recognition is also a matter of social justice, as it is through the conferral of recognition that an individual’s status as full member of society is affirmed. Just as recognition may be conferred, it may also be withheld through either nonrecognition or misrecognition. Nonrecognition occurs when a person or a particular collectivity (e.g., LGBT), is rendered socially invisible (Honneth 2001, 2004; Taylor 1994). They do not exist in a social sense and are thus not referred to or considered as recognisable social actors. This does not mean that being socially visible is always positive. Rather a person or collectivity may also be cognised negatively and thus subjected to misrecognition. Such negative cognisance involves more than a mere lack of respect, but can also ‘inflict a grievous wound’ (Taylor 1994, 26), and may be implicated in the development of existential anxiety and suicidal ideation. As Fraser emphasises, nonrecognition and misrecognition are not merely issues of individual or interpersonal psychology but rather stem from the institutionalisation of values that ‘constitute some actors as inferior, excluded, wholly other or simply invisible’ (Fraser 2001, 24).

The issue of homosexuality in Vietnam provides a good example of the institutionalisation of such values. As I will highlight, the hegemony of heterosexuality in the Vietnamese context has meant that non-normative forms of sexuality have either been silenced or portrayed as pathological, and rather than being recognised as full members of society, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people have either been rendered socially invisible or misrecognised and subjected to a form of social subordination (Fraser 1995, 1997, 2001). In this paper I will illustrate how LGBT people have been misrecognised in legislation, by the mainstream media, by their own families, and by the education system, and the negative impact such heterosexist misrecognition may have on the psychological wellbeing of LGBT youth.

**Method**

The paper draws on data collected during a three-month ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Hanoi between February and May 2012. The fieldwork consisted of participant observations and group and individual interviews with lesbian, gay and bisexual people, and people working in organisations dealing with issues pertaining to LGBT rights. The findings presented here derive more specifically from 10 semi-structured interviews conducted with young people between the ages of 20 and 25, who self-identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual. All of the informants volunteered to be interviewed after being contacted via a club or organisation with which they were involved. Two gay men were interviewed at a local club for men who have sex with men, while one gay man, six lesbian women and one bisexual woman volunteered for interviews after being contacted through a local organisation dealing with LGBT rights and were interviewed at a variety of locations in Hanoi. Seven of the interviewees were from Hanoi, while one was from the countryside and two others were from a city south of Hanoi but had moved to Hanoi to study at university. Nine of the informants were university students, while one had recently left university to work in an organisation.

Ethical guidelines were followed and all of the interviewees were informed about the focus of the research and were told that any information they gave would be treated confidentially and would remain anonymous. All interviewees have been provided with a pseudonym for this purpose and the locations of the interviews and the names of places and people mentioned during the interviews have not been disclosed. Interviewees were
told that they could opt out of answering any questions they were not comfortable with and that they were free to stop the interview at any time. In a number of interviews I offered to stop the interview when it became apparent that the interviewee was getting upset, as I not only wanted to ensure that I avoided causing harm but also wanted to remind the interviewee that they were free to limit the amount of information they chose to disclose (Hollway and Jefferson 2000; Hydén 2008). On each occasion, the interviewee insisted on continuing and expressed a desire to share their experiences.

While there are Vietnamese terms to refer to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, as well as a vast array of derogatory terms, local variants of the English LGBT terms lesbian (les), gay (gay), bisexual (bi) and transgender (trans), are most commonly used in the Vietnamese LGBT community (cong dong LGBT) and by those advocating LGBT rights (Blanc 2005; Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment (iSEE) 2011; Khuat, Le, and Nguyen 2009; Newton 2012; Ngo et al. 2009). While the umbrella acronym LGBT has been criticised for not adequately reflecting the full diversity of sexualities, it is increasingly used as shorthand for non-normative sexualities in the Vietnamese context, as evidenced in current discussions about same-sex marriage (iSEE 2012; Newton 2012). The acronym LGBT is used here in line with local linguistic practice in order to directly locate the experiences of my informants within these current discussions.

The heteronormative context

While today there is considerable discussion surrounding LGBT rights and the potential legalisation of same-sex marriage in Vietnam (Saner 2013; Nichols 2013; iSEE 2012; Viet Pride 2013), it was not so long ago that the issue of homosexuality was notable by its absence. Indeed, prior to a wedding celebration organised by two gay men in Ho Chi Minh City in 1997 and the attempted marriage registration of a young lesbian couple in the southern province of Vinh Long the following year, there was little discussion of homosexuality in Vietnam (Khuat, Le, and Nguyen 2009; Luu and Bartsch 2011; Pastoetter 2004). The hegemony of heterosexuality in the Vietnamese context ensured that other forms of sexuality were not recognised and thus rendered largely socially invisible. This argument was supported by one informant, 25-year-old Chi, who explained in her interview:

Before 2000 people had no idea what homosexuality was. For people who were homosexual, they were born, they grew up, and they just thought ‘oh no, I don’t want to get married to a man’. But they did not come out and of course no one did anything against them. But after the wedding in Vinh Long, when two girls went up to the authorities and said, ‘we want to register to get married’, then the authorities started to pay attention to how to adjust the Marriage and Family Law to account for homosexuals.

It seems that the attempted marriage registration set in motion the wheels of the judiciary and led to the Marriage and Family Law being amended to explicitly forbid same-sex marriage (Khuat, Le, and Nguyen 2009; National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam 1986, 2000). Prior to the 2000 Marriage and Family Law, homosexuality had not been incorporated into any of the civil, penal or familial laws of Vietnam (Colby, Cao, and Doussantousse 2004; Khuat, Le, and Nguyen 2009; Newton 2012). By amending the Marriage and Family Law to explicitly forbid same-sex marriage, the National Assembly institutionalised a heterosexist cultural norm and denied parity of participation to non-heterosexuals (Fraser 2001). While this was the first time homosexuality was explicitly included in a law, this does not mean that homosexuality was considered acceptable prior to 2000.
Indeed, in the early 1990s, there was growing government concern about the social effects of the process of renovation (đoĭ môĭ), which was introduced by the Vietnamese government in 1986 as a means of maintaining socialism while opening the country up to the market-oriented economy (Hayton 2010; Ngo et al. 2007; Rydstrom 2003; SarDesai 2005). The Vietnamese government established the Steering Committee on Elimination of Social Evils, and in 1995 initiated a campaign against ‘social evils’ (te nan xa hoi) and ‘poisonous culture’ (van hoa doc hai), which were perceived to be the result of increasing Western influence (Horton and Rydstrom 2011; Hong, Van Anh, and Ogden 2004; Koh 2001). Social evils were said to pose a threat to Vietnam’s otherwise ‘beautiful traditions and customs’, and participation in social evils was believed to demonstrate polluted morality (Nguyen-vo 2008, 45). The label social evil has since been used to categorise a vast array of social practices, including sex work, drug use, gambling, and homosexuality, and has been used as a flexible tool for governing the populace (Colby, Cao, and Doussantousse 2004; Horton and Rydstrom 2011; Koh 2001; Newton 2012; Nguyen-vo 2008; Vijeyarasa 2010).

The first reported case of HIV in Vietnam in 1990 caused concern about HIV and AIDS, and in 2000 HIV programmes began focusing on men who have sex with men as a high-risk group (Ha and Fisher 2011; Hong, Van Anh, and Ogden 2004; Van Tuan 2010). In doing so, they inadvertently contributed to developing views of homosexuality as a form of social disease to be countered (Blanc 2005; Colby, Cao, and Doussantousse 2004; Khuat, Le, and Nguyen 2009). More recently, increasing international focus has been placed on Vietnam’s stance on homosexuality and discussions of homosexuality have shifted from one of sexual health to one of sexual rights. A number of organisations have begun focusing on LGBT rights and a number of high profile events have been arranged, including the Pride demonstrations that took place in 2012 and 2013 (Agence France-Presse 2013; Saner 2013; Nichols 2013). The Ministry of Justice and the National Assembly recently opened up for discussion of the Marriage and Family Law and on 12 November 2013, the government issued Decree 110/2013/ND-CP, which decriminalises same-sex wedding ceremonies and cohabitation and is seen to be a potential first step towards reform of the Marriage and Family Law (Nichols 2013; VietNamNet 2013).

Misrecognition in the media

The increasing focus on homosexuality has led to increasing discussion of homosexuality and LGBT people. However, rather than being recognised, LGBT people have instead often been subjected to misrecognition through the depiction of heterosexuality as normative and the homophobic devaluation of homosexuality as a sexual deviation, a social evil, or a social disease (Colby, Cao, and Doussantousse 2004; Endres 2011; Khuat, Le, and Nguyen 2009). This homophobic devaluation has been reinforced and exacerbated through the circulation of negative depictions of homosexuals in the media. In a review of Vietnamese media representations of homosexuality in the years 2004, 2006 and 2008, for example, the Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment (iSEE) and the Academy of Journalism and Communication found that 41% of newspaper articles depicted homosexuals negatively, and many of the articles referred to homosexuality as a disease to be cured (iSEE 2011). While the prevalence of negative portrayals decreased during those years, they still contributed to a particularly negative discourse surrounding homosexuality, which can be summed up in the following way:

In summary, the discourse about homosexuality in Vietnam has a short history that is characterised by the coexistence of moral judgement and clinical descriptions. In this discourse, so far, homosexuality has been portrayed as something abnormal, a disease, a deviation, even a disability of physical and mental health. At the same time, homosexuality is
thought of as an acquired lifestyle characterised by words such as ‘sickness’, ‘wickedness’ or ‘peer pressure’. (Khuat, Le, and Nguyen 2009, 292)

The power of the media to exacerbate and perpetuate negative perceptions of homosexuality was highlighted in a number of the interviews I conducted. Twenty-two-year-old Quynh, for example, pointed to the power of journalists to influence societal views of homosexuality when she told me: ‘I think journalists have invisible power to change people’s minds. It’s very bad. It is so dangerous for us.’ In the same interview, Quynh elaborated about the links between negative representations of homosexuality in newspaper articles and the negative attitudes of members of her family and told me that she found it necessary to challenge negative portrayals of homosexuality for this reason:

Yeah, every time I read these kinds of articles I have to explain to my family that it is not true. I have to explain that the truth behind every article is different and that we have to choose the right thing or the right article to read.

Another informant, 22-year-old Hien, elaborated about the recent suicide of one of her closest friends. The suicide was one of a number of student suicides that occurred that year and was widely reported in the media. Hien explained that there were plenty of rumours surrounding the suicide but that she believed her friend had committed suicide after struggling to come to terms with her sexuality for a number of years. Indeed, Hien told me that her friend had spent a considerable amount of time looking for information about homosexuality, only to come to the conclusion that it was not considered acceptable in Vietnamese society. Hien explained that prior to her friend’s suicide, neither she nor her friend had known any other lesbians and had not been aware that there were groups for lesbian women in Hanoi. Hien herself had not been aware until a few months after the suicide of her friend when she attended the screening of a documentary about the lives of lesbians in Vietnam. Hien told me that this kind of awareness could have saved her friend’s life:

After watching the film, I realised that there’s actually the existence of a group around my life so I thought why not join them? There are many people who fight quietly for the existence of the group, so why don’t I join them? If my friend had known about this group before, it would not have ended so badly.

As Hien highlights, this documentary had an important impact on her knowledge about her own sexuality and about the existence of the lesbian community in Hanoi. A number of other informants pointed to the importance of the Internet and a number of films, including the US film Saving Face (d. Alice Wu, 2004) and the Vietnamese film Lost in Paradise (d. Ngoc Dang Vu, 2011), for their increased awareness about their own sexuality. Quynh, for example, explained that after seeing the film Saving Face on cable television, she then went to an Internet café to search for information about homosexuality. This reflects findings about the importance of the Internet to young people’s sexuality education in contemporary Vietnam, in contrast to that provided in official educational discourses of ‘reproduction, contraception and disease prevention’ (Ngo, Ross, and Ratliff 2008, 211; see also Martin 2010).

When discussing films and television programmes, a number of informants also highlighted the negative responses of parents when the issue of homosexuality was raised, and in doing so illustrated the extent to which misrecognition may occur in the home. Hien, for example, provided an example of how her mother reacted when a female character in a film came out about her sexuality:

Once when my mother and I watched a film relating to homosexuality together and the girl in the film came out, right away my mother said a really bad word; a really insulting word to the girl. Right then I told myself ‘no way will I tell her the truth’.
Misrecognition within the family

While parental reactions to homosexuality are certainly not helped by negative depictions of homosexuality and homosexuals in the media, such reactions are also influenced by Confucian understandings of gender, sexuality, and the family. In Vietnam, Confucianism provides the organisational and discursive backdrop to which men and women must relate in terms of familial obligation and gendered and sexual relations. The Confucian system of patrilineal ancestor worship organises family members according to age and gender, and descent is traced patrilineally through male members all the way to the origin of the patrilineage (Horton and Rydstrom 2011; Huong 2010; Khuat, Le, and Nguyen 2009; Klingberg-Allvin et al. 2012; Rydstrom 2002). Many parents hope for a son because of the perceived importance of the son to the family lineage. The eldest son has a particularly important role to play in maintaining the connection to the ancestors, and filial obligation dictates that the first duty of married couples is to continue the lineage through the procreation of a son (Goodkind 1995; Liu 2001; Marr 1981; O’Harrow 1995; Rydstrom 2001). The importance of daughters, in contrast, relates to their ability to produce sons and to their role in maintaining the collective face of the family through the demonstration of good morality (Liu 2001; Rydstrom 2003; Schuler et al. 2006).

The behaviour of family members reflects directly onto the face of the family, and in a societal context where homosexuality is still widely perceived negatively, having a non-heterosexual son or daughter may be perceived to reflect negatively on the family as a whole, and particularly on the mother for failing to raise her children well (Schuler et al. 2006). Findings suggest that some parents may react strongly to finding out that their child is gay or lesbian, by locking them in the house or even physically beating them (Center for Creative Initiatives in Health and Population [CCIHP] 2011). While some parents may accept that their child is gay or lesbian, they may still pressure them into hiding their sexuality, and even into getting married, in order to maintain the face of the family. As 20-year-old Thuy, who had come out to her parents, explained:

I’m not sure whether it’s about saving face or whether they have a problem with it, but my parents do really emphasise the issue of face. That’s why they use it as a main reason to advise me not to lead this kind of lifestyle.

Findings from Vietnam suggest that parents rarely discuss the topic of sexuality with their children and that young people in turn are reluctant to talk to their parents about their sexuality (Khuat, Le, and Nguyen 2009; Nguyen 2009; Trinh et al. 2009). This is perhaps not surprising when, as Hien highlighted in the previous section, some parents speak derogatively about homosexuality. Twenty-year-old Viet also illustrated this when he told me that the way his parents talked about homosexuality ensured that he would never tell them about his own sexuality:

Sometimes my parents see a programme on TV talking about homosexuals and my parents make comments that homosexuality is like a disease; that it is like a social disease. I cannot tell my parents after hearing them speak like that.

In an interview study with high school students and parents of high school students in the northern province of Thai Binh, Trinh et al. (2009) found that when parents did talk to their children, the content of those discussions was restricted to the risks of heterosexual activity, including issues of heterosexual morality, unwanted pregnancy, abortion and HIV/AIDS. The discussions were thus highly heteronormative and other forms of sexuality were not discussed at all (Trinh et al. 2009). As Ha and Fisher (2011) have shown, parents tend to think that sex education is the responsibility of schools, while educators in turn often expect parents to provide this information. Young people may therefore receive very little information from either their parents or their teachers.
Misrecognition in education

There has long been a focus on education in Vietnam and the lives of many young people are today framed by the institutional context of schooling (Horton 2012; London 2011; Marr 1981; Pham 1991, 2000; Tran 2002). While population and family life studies were introduced into the Vietnamese school curriculum in the 1980s, the focus was very much on demography and was restricted to students between the ages of 15 and 18 (Trinh et al. 2009; UNESCO 2010; Zaman and Frances 2009). It was not until the mid-1990s in the wake of concern about HIV and in the face of increasing numbers of teenage pregnancies and abortions that a more concerted effort was made to teach students about sexuality. In some urban schools, sexuality education was subsequently incorporated into subjects that were already in the curriculum, such as biology and civics education, or included into extracurricular lessons. However, teaching the topic was largely left up to the discretion of individual teachers, and when sexuality was discussed it was largely restricted to dealing with reproductive health issues and HIV prevention (Ha and Fisher 2011; Khuat, Le, and Nguyen 2009; UNESCO 2010; Zaman and Frances 2009).

The 2003 Survey Assessment of Vietnamese Youth (SAVY) found that approximately 40% of the young people surveyed were not aware of homosexuality (World Health Organisation [WHO], Ministry of Health, General Statistics Office, and UNICEF 2003). While various organisations have attempted to address the lack of education about sexuality (Viet Nam News, 2012; RutgersWPF 2014; Janrut 2012; The Stewardship Report 2013), there are still ongoing discussions about whether or not sex education will encourage increased sexual activity amongst young people (Bui et al. 2010; Hoang 2009; Khuat 2004; Khuat, Le, and Nguyen 2009; Pastoetter 2004; Quach 2008; Women’s Global Network for Reproductive Rights 2012; Zaman and Frances 2009).

When I asked informants whether they had received any information about homosexuality at school, they explained that they had not received any information and that the topic was largely avoided by teachers at school. Twenty-five-year-old Lan Anh explained that this lack of information made her feel afraid:

I had never been exposed to information about homosexuality. Everything I knew was heterosexual. Heterosexuality. So when I realised that what I felt was different from the majority, I felt afraid.

Quan also told me that he had never received any information about homosexuality at school and that this lack of information was not only scary, but also a key factor behind his decision to commit suicide:

The scariest moment, usually linked with a suicide attempt, is when you cannot make sense of what is going on. The scariest moment in my life was when I believed that it was only me who was like this and there was nobody else.

Quan explained that the lack of information at school contributed to a sense of isolation and a fear that he might be the only one who had feelings for same-sex peers, and that it was this sense of isolation that led him to decide to commit suicide. Quan told me that just knowing that he was not the only gay person in the world would have helped greatly and that this lack of knowledge may also have been a contributing factor behind the attempted suicides of some of his non-heterosexual friends:

It would have helped a lot if I had known other gay men and had known that I was not alone in this world. In the beginning very few gay men know this and my friends have told me that a few of them attempted suicide at the age of 15 or 16.

Thuy told me that while she did not receive any information about homosexuality at school, some of her teachers did sometimes mention homosexuality in class, but that
whenever they did so, they only talked about it in negative ways and referred to it as incorrect and pathological:

My teachers did mention homosexuality but just a little bit because it wasn’t part of the curriculum, but what they said was that homosexuality is not correct; that it is not scientifically correct ... When they talked about love and marriage, they said that homosexuality is pathological and that it shouldn’t exist in our society because it will not help with procreation.

As Thuy highlights, while heteronormativity may inform the official organisational structure within schools, it may also provide an acoustic space within which the heterosexist misrecognition of LGBT young people can reverberate. While heteronormative silencing ensures that non-normative forms of sexuality are excluded from the official curriculum, this does not mean that students do not receive any information. Rather, negative representations of homosexuality in the media and the negative reactions of significant others (e.g., parents) ensure that the information they do receive is overwhelmingly negative.

Findings from a number of studies conducted in Vietnam have suggested that LGBT young people may risk losing their friends if they come out to them (iSEE 2011; Roberts 2007; WHO, Ministry of Health, General Statistics Office, and UNICEF 2003). A survey conducted by the Ho Chi Minh City University of Pedagogy in 2007, for example, found that over one quarter of secondary students surveyed who had a gay or lesbian classmate stopped being friends with them once they became aware of their sexual orientation. Highlighting the social subordination of LGBT people in Vietnam, 34% of those who remained friends responded to the news by trying to console their friends, 35% kept their friend’s sexual orientation a secret, 13% admitted being afraid, and 2% treated their friend with contempt (Roberts 2007).

Highlighting the risk of homophobic abuse, a couple of the young people I interviewed suggested that looking ‘obviously gay’ could lead to homophobic abuse. Twenty-one-year-old Chin, for example, told me:

I cannot talk for the other people, but for me, I’m not obviously gay so it means that a lot of people don’t know so they continue to treat me like the other people. But sometimes I can see that if you are obviously gay, the other people might call you bad words and the homophobia is quite strong for those people at school.

Likewise, Viet emphasised that while he himself was not subjected to homophobic abuse, one of his friends was because he was ‘obviously gay’. In explaining what it meant to be ‘obviously gay’, Viet told me that some people are obviously gay because of ‘the way they dress, the way they speak, and the way they behave’. In other words, they are perceived as not doing their gender appropriately according to dominant societal norms.

A recent study conducted by the Centre for Creative Initiatives in Health and Population (CCIHP) found that over 40% of the LGBT young people they surveyed had suffered discrimination and violence in educational institutions. Furthermore, the CCIHP study found that 35% of those who had suffered discrimination and violence stated that they had experienced suicidal ideation and that half of those who had considered committing suicide had actually attempted suicide (Viet Nam News, 2012). This reflects findings from other countries about the links between school bullying and suicidal ideation (Kim, Koh, and Leventhal 2005; Rigby and Slee 1999), as well as findings that LGBT school students are at greatest risk of being subjected to bullying and most likely to experience suicidal ideation as a result (Mishna et al. 2009; Poteat et al. 2013; Stonewall 2012).
Towards recognition

When I asked young people what they thought needed to be done to improve the situation for LGBT people in Vietnam, they suggested changes to the law, to representations in the media, and to perceptions of the family, and called for more education about gender and sexuality. Lan Anh, for example, stressed that changing the Marriage and Family Law would be an important first step towards changing dominant societal attitudes about homosexuality. Chin also emphasised the importance of the law, but argued that changes to the Marriage and Family Law would not be enough and that there also needs to be more specific legislation brought in to protect the rights of LGBT people. Twenty-two-year-old Mai and 23-year-old Linh were less optimistic about the impact changes to the law would have, and rather emphasised that dominant ideas about the importance of heterosexual marriage are at the core of the issue and thus need to be challenged. Likewise, Hien, Quan, and Chin told me that negative representations of homosexuality in the media need to be replaced with more positive ones. Hien said that this would be the best way to change the perceptions of parents who otherwise do not have access to information about homosexuality online. Quan believed that recent films such as Lost in Paradise were a step in the right direction.

A number of my informants also emphasised the importance of education. Thuy, for example, argued that more education is not only important for providing LGBT students with information but is also important for combatting homophobia in schools. As Thuy explained, ‘It would help young gay students and it would also help in the way that heterosexual students would not discriminate and have a negative attitude towards their gay classmates’. While Viet was not optimistic about his ability to change anything, he told me that it is not enough to just introduce education about homosexuality. Rather, he argued that it is important to have a programme of education about sexuality more generally:

For me, I’m just like sand on the beach, so I am quite small in this world, but for myself the first thing is education. We can have a program of education, not only on homosexuality but on sexuality in general, and including homosexuality.

Viet makes an important distinction between merely incorporating homosexuality education into the school curriculum and incorporating sexuality education into the curriculum. Simply incorporating homosexuality as a special topic positions it as ‘other’ and serves to reinforce a homosexual-heterosexual dichotomy. By focusing instead on sexuality, it is possible to discuss various forms of sexuality on a par with one another and thus challenge heteronormativity, heterosexism and homophobia.

Mai also told me that a change in education is important, but emphasised that education about gender equality is also necessary for changing attitudes about homosexuality:

I think a change in education would make a difference. If you can educate children about gender equality, the equality between men and women in the first place, it would become easier for children to accept the difference between heterosexuals and homosexuals.

As Mai points out, the nonrecognition and misrecognition that LGBT students are subjected to is directly related to dominant understandings about the inherent differences between males and females. As long as men and women are perceived as inherently different yet complementary beings, then those who do not do their gender according to dominant gendered norms will be positioned as homosexual and homosexuality will be positioned negatively in opposition to heterosexuality.
Conclusions
The hegemony of heterosexuality in the Vietnamese context has ensured that other forms of sexuality have either been rendered socially invisible or put forward as pathological and socially polluting. Rather than being recognised as full members of society, LGBT people have been misrecognised in legislation, by the media, by family members, and by the formal education system. LGBT people have been subjected to a form of social subordination and denied parity of participation (Fraser 1995, 1997, 2001). As the examples of Quan and Hien’s friend vividly highlight, the potential costs of misrecognition for the psychological wellbeing of LGBT young people are high. As informants in this study have argued, changes are required in the legal system, the media, the family, and the education system.

As Fraser (1995) points out, remedies for misrecognition may take different forms, including affirmative and transformative approaches. An affirmative approach to recognition would involve the positive affirmation of non-normative identities and thus not only let LGBT young people know that they are not alone in the world but also help to challenge heterosexist and homophobic attitudes towards them. A transformative approach to recognition, on the other hand, would involve challenging the homosexual-heterosexual dichotomy that underpins heteronormativity, heterosexism and homophobia, and would thus not only have implications for LGBT people but also for those individuals who do not do their gender according to dominant gendered norms and who may be subjected to homophobic abuse because of it.

Acknowledgements
The research for this paper was generously funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) and kindly supported by the Viet Nam Institute of Educational Sciences (VNIES) in Hanoi. I would like to thank everyone who helped me during my research, including the various organisations who helped me with information and contacts, my project colleagues Helle Rydstrom and Maria Tonini, and my research assistants Phi-Cuong Dao, Nguyen Thanh Tam and Nguyen Thu Hang, whose assistance was invaluable to my research. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers of Culture, Health & Sexuality for their constructive comments on an earlier version of this text. Most importantly, I would like to thank the young people who so generously shared their experiences with me. This paper is for them.

References


Résumé

Alors que les récentes manifestations pour défendre les droits des personnes LGBT et les discussions sur le mariage entre personnes de même sexe ont placé la question de l’homosexualité sous les projecteurs, cette dernière était encore absente des débats au Vietnam il n’y a pas si longtemps. En exploitant des entretiens semi-structurés conduits avec des jeunes gays, lesbiennes et bisexuel(le)s à Hanoï, cet article prend en compte la visibilité croissante de l’homosexualité à travers une optique théorique de reconnaissance, et illustre la méconnaissance hétérosexiste à laquelle les jeunes personnes LGBT ont été confrontées dans la loi, les médias, leurs familles et le système d’éducation. En s’appuyant sur les récits de jeunes personnes LGBT, l’article met en avant l’impact potentiellement négatif qu’une telle méconnaissance pourrait avoir sur leur bien-être psychologique et social.

Resumen

Si bien los debates y las recientes manifestaciones en torno a los derechos de las personas lgbt han arrojado luz sobre el tema de la homosexualidad, hasta hace poco, en Vietnam este tema brillaba por su ausencia. Basándose en entrevistas semiestructuradas realizadas a jóvenes gay, lesbianas y
bisexuales de Hanoi, capital de Vietnam, el presente artículo analiza la creciente visibilidad que ha experimentado la homosexualidad a través de la lente teórica del reconocimiento, ilustrando, además, la desafección heterosexista enfrentada por los jóvenes LGBT en las leyes, en los medios de comunicación, en sus familias y en el sistema educativo. Centrándose en las narrativas de los jóvenes LGBT, el artículo destaca el impacto potencialmente negativo que tal desafección puede tener en su bienestar sicológico y social.