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บทคัดย่อ

บทความชิ้นนี้เป็นการศึกษาสำรวจว่าสตรีวัยกลางคนเปิดเผยอัตลักษณ์ทางเพศอย่างไร โดยแสวงหาหลักฐานเชิงประจักษ์ในการสำรวจการสถาปนาอัตวิสัยทางเพศของผู้หญิงวัยกลางคน บทความแสดงให้เห็นอัตวิสัยของผู้หญิงวัยกลางคนเหล่านี้ ตามนัยของการท้าทายความคิดแบบที่เชื่อเฉพาะเพศสภาพตามเพศกำเนิด (heteronormativity) จากปฏิบัติการเปิดเผยอัตลักษณ์ทางเพศภายใต้แนวคิดสตรีนิยมหลังโครงสร้างนิยม อัตวิสัยไม่คงที่หรือเป็นหนึ่งเดียว ดังนั้น การสถาปนาตัวตนและสร้างแนวแนวปฏิบัติที่ต้องการเพื่อข้ามพรมแดนของ heteronormativity และแสดงอัตลักษณ์ทางเพศต่อสาธารณะ

คำสำคัญ: สตรีนิยมหลังโครงสร้างนิยม, สตรีวัยกลางคน, การเปิดเผยอัตลักษณ์ทางเพศ

**Women Crossing the Boundaries:
An Exploration the Coming out of
the Closet of Midlife Women**

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Abstract

This study explores how midlife women crossing boundaries by coming out of the closet. It is concerned with providing empirical evidence of exploring in midlife women's constitution of their sexual subjectivities. It reveals the subjectivity of these women in terms of challenging the heteronormativity in relation to the practice of 'coming out of the closet'. With the lens of a feminist post-structuralism, the subjectivity is not fixed nor unified. Accordingly, they constitute themselves and produce the desired practice to cross the boundary of heteronormativity and represent their sexualities to public arena.

Keywords: Feminist post-structuralism, Midlife woman, Coming out

Introduction

Sexuality is an intimate part of the personal world. Compulsory heterosexuality is defined as the dominant norm for sexual orientation. To take for granted, the different form of sexual orientation against the norm is considered as a deviant act. Heterosexuality is persistently accepted to be the ideas of sex categories, to be a man is to be a heterosexual man, to be a woman was to be a heterosexual woman. This can clearly conclude that the interaction in the society is filtered and seen via the lens of a heteronormative gaze. The heterosexual discursive practice plays vital roles in the society. The discourse of 'heterosexuality' is dominated the pattern of sexual relationship between man-woman. It is embedded into traditional context which is so called 'compulsory heterosexuality'. Compulsory heterosexuality is a famous concept by Adrienne Rich (Rich, 2003) in the 1980s, is the enormous, hegemonic, support the belief which everyone is assumed and positioned to be heterosexual. Heterosexuality is positioned as the cornerstone of the sex/gender system in which two sexes and two genders exist. Heterosexual norms, relationships, histories and meaning-making are, therefore, naturalized, supported, and enforced through hegemonic discursive practices and structures in everyday life (Leap, 2007). Also, compulsory heterosexuality which is focuses on essentialist concept determined the sexuality is a biological state determined by nature.

Biological sex is biologically determined, sexuality is altered in accordance to preference, and gender is a behavioral mode of being (Butler, 2011).

Indeed, compulsory heterosexuality is supported by strong patriarchal system but could be available in many perspectives: via advertising, mass media, pop culture, and general cultural norms. For instances, the premise which the man and woman would get married because it is the standard norm of society. Thus, every family nurtures the children to be heterosexual. Religion and secular perception presume that everyone in the world is heterosexual or treat heterosexuality as a norm. While norms are reiterated, taught, and learned in a myriad of places (everywhere, in fact), schools stand out as a sort of concentrated norm constructing space (Reimers, 2007). Society romanticizes and embeds the heterosexual relationship via pop culture through many kinds of mass media. Consequently, anyone who diverts from heterosexuality is seen as a threat to the established hierarchy of gender. Compulsory heterosexuality always imposes a penalty on those who do not conform to heterosexuality. Then, homosexuality is labeled taboo and, also, criminalized, while pressure is on person to form heterosexual relationships and bonds. The demand to enforce man-woman relationships as a social norm recommends that

heterosexuality may be less an innate response and more of a social conditioning.

Heterosexual norms, not biological instinct have such a powerful influence on gender behavior. Normative heterosexuality is, thus dependent upon the reproduction of binary gender identifications (male-masculinity), (female-femininity). Man and woman are trapped with the dominant discourse of ‘heterosexuality’. Dominant discourses are socially and culturally produced, constitute power by constructing objects in particular way, and play a critical role in the interpretation of meaning (Francis, 2000). To exemplify, Hawkes (1996) states that these discourses have been historically shaped by fields such as religion, medicine, law, media and academic disciplines. Also, Allen (2003) points out that dominant discourse derives considerable power from their entrenchment within discursive fields such as the legal system, religion and the family.

Accordingly, the woman who do not follow the dominant pattern of heterosexuality would be somewhat catch the subject position and have their own subjectivity. The aim of post-structuralist feminism is to disrupt the status quo and traditional power structures by critiquing taken for granted assumptions and establishing contexts whereby individuals can draw up other vocabularies to produce new meanings and practices (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000). This paper seeks

the discursive production of subjectivities in Thai midlife woman concern on their sexual selves. It deems that discourses offer particular way of seeing the world and being in the world. This study is taken feminist post-structuralism for granted to be a critical lens to perceive the significance of individual sexuality in terms of rewrite the meaning of one's own subjectivity.

Objective

1. To analyze the significance of 'coming out' in relation to midlife woman.

2. To explain how midlife women crossing the boundaries to be woman loves woman in terms of individual subjectivity and how midlife woman concern on their sexual selves regarding see and be in the world.

Literature reviews

Feminist post-structuralism is used philosophically at the way in which marginal people are treated in the world and attempts to break down barriers by identifying how society influences to individual and how the marginal people make sense to themselves. The following studies describe the implementations and advantages from feminist post-structuralism.

Firstly, Barrett (2005) points out that feminist post-structuralism disrupts countless notions many of us have been “raised” with, conceptualizing what feminist post-structuralism might mean for understanding and enacting environmental education research and practice can be difficult. This paper articulates understandings and assumptions of post-structuralism and explores how it has enabled me to come to know in a way that the researcher would not otherwise. She claims that feminist post-structural research necessarily produces better knowledge, but that it produces different knowledge than that undertaken by positivist, interpretivist or critical approaches. Linking theoretical discussion to on the ground examples, she examines notions of subjectivity, agency and the constitutive nature of discourse. She then discusses what feminist about this work is particularly and finally, closes with a brief discussion of how these notions have prompted a shift in the kinds of questions.

On the other hand, Aston et al. (2012) present a discussion of the application of a feminist poststructuralist-based theoretical framework as an innovative approach towards understanding and managing the complex health issue of obesity. Obesity is often viewed as a lifestyle choice for which the individual is blamed. This individualistic, dichotomous and behavioral perspective only allows for a narrow understanding of obesity and may even lead to misperceptions, stereotypes and marginalization of clients experiencing

obesity. Feminist post-structuralism can provide a critical lens to understand the social construction of obesity and the broader environmental and cultural contexts of this health issue. The concepts of discourse analysis and power relations are explored and discussed in a clear manner so that nurses can easily apply this framework to their practice as they observe, question, analyze, critique and assess the care experienced by clients who are obese. The concepts of personal and social beliefs, values and stereotypes are also discussed and examples of how to apply them in practice are provided.

In this sense, there is no absolute truth in relation to the subjective experiences of the individual in many researches and so on, which is waiting to be demonstrated. There is no absolute truth about the way we will be, as researcher, I will illustrate this study in terms of the lives and experiences of 'midlife woman' who have crossed the boundaries by coming out practice.

Theoretical underpinning: Feminist Post-structuralism

A feminist post-structuralism lens is valuable because it offers a framework for discovering and sensitivity challenging oppressive discourse which could be informed the individual subjectivity. A feminist post-structural perspective incorporates gender issues into a post-structural framework (Arslanian-Engoren, 2002; Weedon, 1997)

and provides a critical standpoint from which to view and analyze the significance of individual sexuality. Weedon (1997) describes the feminist concern with post-structural theory as a way to conceptualize multiple subject positions with varied discourses, a way to give voice to constructed meaning and rewrite personal experiences.

Thus, feminist post-structural assumptions claim that there is a subjectivity formed by gender that is socially, historically and politically based, that power and knowledge are mutually generative, that knowledge is developed in historical, social, and political contexts and is fallible, and that while power is exercised in relation to resistance (Foucault, 1990/1976). Furthermore, feminist post-structuralism, goals of scholarship would include developing understandings or theories that are historically, socially, and culturally specific and that are explicitly related to changing oppressive gender relations. Rather than “discovering” reality, “revealing” truth, or “uncovering” the facts, feminist post-structuralism would, instead, be concerned with disrupting and displacing dominant (oppressive) knowledge (Gavey, 1989).

Interestingly, Letts (1987) points out that feminist post-structuralism acknowledges the sense of one’s subjectivity as shifting, multiple, and sometimes contradictory. Anyway, translating this

theoretical stance into the lives and bodies of people proves quite challenging. Feminist post-structuralism discourse views the struggle over identity within the subject as inseparable from the struggle over the meaning of identities and subject positions within the culture at large. Instead of framing the slipperiness of identity as a problem to be solved or an obstacle to be avoided, feminist post-structuralists regard the ability to fix the identities and to be known through them in any definitive way as a powerful means through which we can 'denaturalize' ourselves and embrace change (Allan et al., 2009).

A feminist post-structural analysis is interested in exploring how discourse and power relation have shaped and normalized perceptions and truths in relation to Thai midlife woman. Within feminist post-structuralism a multiple of definitions of things, way of lives, concept and perspectives are acceptable. However, with this research, it will support many pathways by concentrating to the texts of others and to explore, interpret and explain individual subjectivity within feminist post-structuralism framework. This paper seeks a plurality of meanings of 'coming out of the closet' of midlife woman who lives against the heterosexual norm of society.

In terms of language and discourse, feminist post-structuralism subjectivity is neither unified or nor fixed. The assumption that subjectivity is constructed which it implies that it is not innate, not genetically determined but socially produced. As the facet of

language, feminist post-structuralism asserts that all meanings and knowledges are constituted through language and language is the key to create meaning of individual. Language is also the way we know what we know. Importantly, if language is the site where meaningful experience is constituted, the language also determines how we perceive possibility of change. (Weedon, 1997). As the facet of discourse, it is the way of speaking, writing, thinking, feeling, acting that incorporates particular idea as 'truth'. Consequently, discourse provides a framework for how midlife woman think about coming out of the closet and crossing the boundaries in terms of individual.

With the framework of feminist post-structuralism, it is useful for exploring unequal power relations and disrupting the dominant discourse. Thus, deconstruction is never ending process and meaning is shifting and determine always by context forces and specific situation which act upon it. Meaning of words are permanently in flux. Word meaning continually escape their boundaries as the meaning is negotiated and renegotiated from time to time.

The definition of terms

Coming out of the closet refers to the process of a non-heterosexual person midlife women accepting their sexuality and beginning to tell others.

Midlife woman refers a Thai woman with aged 40-59 who is Thai nationality who is available and be able to participate in the study

The Study

The purpose of this study is to analyze the significance of 'coming out' in relation to midlife woman and explain how midlife women crossing the boundaries to be woman loves woman in terms of individual subjectivity and how midlife woman concern on their sexual selves regarding see and be in the world by coming out practice and the way they cross boundaries. This study is drawn on ethnographic study of midlife woman and conducted in Bangkok. Data is gathered by semi-structured and in-depth interview and analyzed in content analysis. Three Thai midlife women are interviewed with the purposive and snowball sampling technique. Interviews are conducted each approximately 2 hours in duration. With the participants' consent, all 3 interviews are recorded, transcribed, and translated into English by researcher. The following cases are some of the content analysis.

Findings

The background and coming out context.

Win is a lecturer in public university who has lived in strong heteronormative context. Win has been struggled for many years because Win acknowledges that she is a lesbian since the age of 25. With the context in traditional workplace, coming out of the closet is very tough for her. It takes almost two decades to come out of her closet.

(Win (44 years), **Interview**)

Nut works in big IT company in the middle management. Nut realizes that home is where she feels comfortable and express their true inner feeling with no family rejection. Also, her workplace is quite progressive and no discrimination at work. However, it takes long time to express herself to the society.

(Nut (42 years), **Interview**)

Fame is a lesbian that also works in the healthcare professional company and comes from conservative family. She is concerned on coming out at work and the impact on her career. Furthermore, she does not want to keep the important part of her life in silent and hidden from her family.

(Fame (40 years), **Interview**)

Why 'coming out of the closet'?

“To reduce the depression and honest with myself. ‘I could not live my life in the closet anymore. Coming out makes me feel no stress’.”

(Win (44 years), **Interview**)

“I think it’s so important for lesbian people to be as visible as we can be. Also, I want to be accepted as the way I am.”

(Nut (42 years), **Interview**)

“I want to date openly and freely. I have got less worry and more freedom in my life.”

(Fame (40 years), **Interview**)

“Closet is awful place, that’s why I come out at the age of 44. It is allowed me to be myself. I can act freely in the society. Coming out is something that make me released and untied myself from the world of heterosexual people. I can tell the truth about myself to others who I am. It is peace.”

(Win (44 years), **Interview**)

“As far as I am concerned, coming out is the way to accept myself at the age of 42, Firstly, I tell my best friend and then my Mom. I have felt so much stronger since then. Coming out has given my life meaning. I feel definitely free and honest to myself. I have never been this delighted in my whole life.”

(Nut (42 years), **Interview**)

“I realized that I am not a straight woman anymore when I am 40. I was attracted to woman at all time. Coming out is enabled me to explore different scene within myself, I have learned a lot by coming out of the closet. If you ask me ‘how I feel by coming out?’. The answer is I don’t have to petrify by being myself anymore.”

(Fame (40 years), **Interview**)

The significance of ‘crossing the boundaries’

“Crossing the boundaries haven’t changed my life instantly. My revelation is not easy and positive because the people who are around me could not accept that I am a woman loves woman. However, I have found something I never experienced before, Crossing the boundaries has enabled me to get the real happiness. Now, I am free and able to be myself.”

(Win (44 years), **Interview**)

“Crossing boundaries is quite tough but it is acceptance of myself. I have crossed it by realizing that I am a woman who loves woman. I know it is against the norm of the society, likewise, I don’t have to keep my crushes on girls anymore. I think I cross the boundaries by telling my family though. It is really painless and no drama at all.”

(Nut (42 years), **Interview**)

“By crossing the boundaries, I can overcome the fear or being judged by others. Accordingly, at the age of 40, I am able to freely find and fall in love with the right one and nothing is better than that. Now, I have crossed that boundaries already. I don’t have to do my relationship behind the closed door anymore.”

(Fame (40 years), **Interview**)

Discussions and Conclusions

From the findings, there is no mutual definition in terms of coming out in each content and topic. Rather than being viewed as a midlife woman who are oppressed and marginalized by heterosexual norms which gender norms tied to the presumption of heterosexuality. The ‘feminist post-structuralism’ theory enables us to see Thai midlife woman and explain the significance of “coming out of the closet”

in terms of individual subjectivity and how midlife woman crossing the boundaries and be in the world.

Interestingly, three women state that coming out is a good practice to allow them to release themselves from hiding place. By crossing the boundaries, the finding reveals that crossing the boundaries is not a quick step and varied depending on individual's view. Also, crossing boundaries is the path to support midlife woman to stand freely in the world.

However, in terms of in depth discussion in regard to language and discourse, three midlife women has taken for granted the way they think and carry those messages and languages as the power to support the coming out of the closet to become visible and no longer silent to live openly in the 21th century Thai society. Then, coming out transgress and challenge the dominant gender and crossing the boundaries.

In terms of social elements, three midlife women have never suffered from the interaction of ethic, race, class, bodily ableness and the construction of subjectivity. However, subjective experience cannot be objectively measured by others. Three midlife women may have similar part of crossing the boundaries but not identical perception. Different discourses provide for a range of subjectivities

for three midlife women to take up and allow them to be positioned in a variety of ways.

In the light of finding, feminist post-structuralism attempts to recognize the importance of standpoints and lens through which midlife woman' coming out's experiences are viewed, and meanings are made. Accordingly, both the meaning of 'midlife woman' and the significances of coming out and crossing the boundaries regarding individual are quite different.

The findings indicate that the midlife woman meaning have no mutual definitions by interpreting and explaining the way to coming out and crossing the boundaries. The midlife woman makes sense of her world in the senses of her own. It might be given in the discursive systems of meaning which depends on the way regarding midlife woman are interpreted the world on the discourses which would be available to them in different situations.

Regarding to the discussion, coming out and crossing the boundaries seems to be healthy scene for midlife women who wants to come out. Furthermore, it is also the benefit action which confirms queer identity. By way of contrast, the finding leaves out the possible scene which may happen, such as, there are many midlife women who are perfectly healthy without coming out scene or crossing any boundaries and in vice versa, there are many midlife women who are either overtly or subtly suffered from coming out. I would claim

from these points that from feminist post-structuralism lens that the narrative of individuals is far from homogeneous, what an event means to an individual depends on the ways of interpreting the world (Weedon, 1997: 75).

Consequently, 'feminist post-structuralism' provides an active, fluid, and midlife woman's individual perspective which has enhanced us to understand how midlife woman make senses of their world and constitute the meaning of 'coming out' by themselves. Lastly, the finding points out that dominant discourse as 'heterosexuality' is not significant for midlife woman to produce the meaning of coming out or the way to cross the boundaries. A feminist post-structuralism offers the pathways to intensify this study in terms of focusing on multiple perspectives and open interpretation and open up the space for midlife woman's voices of the past and present in order to express a plethora of meaning of individual to the world.

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