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The attitudes of Vietnamese social work practitioners toward sexual minorities

Introduction

In many parts of the world, the worth and dignity of sexual minorities are routinely undermined, if not outrightly denied (Henrickson, 2018). As part of a profession that espouses human dignity and worth as core values, social workers are expected to engender diversity and inclusion, and challenge the disadvantage, discrimination and oppression of sexual minorities (Charnley & Langley, 2007; Henrickson, 2018; Hicks, 2008). The exclusion and oppression of sexual minorities is enabled by discriminatory views and attitudes embedded in society and culture. And so social workers would need to critically interrogate such discriminatory views and attitudes wherever they are found. However, the insidious influence of society and culture means that relationships and practices within social work itself can harbor such views and attitudes. It is therefore vital for social workers to be vigilant of their own thoughts and actions, and guard against harboring the very prejudicial views and oppressive practices they are meant to interrogate and challenge in their practice (Henrickson, 2018). Understanding the attitudes of social workers toward those who identify as lesbian or gay is thus crucial in informing critical practice with these population groups.

Over the last few decades, a sizeable number of studies have been undertaken on the attitudes of social work professionals toward individuals who identify as lesbian or gay. Some social workers have been reported as holding negative attitudes toward sexual minorities (Decrescenzo, 1984; Wisniewski & Toomey, 1987). However, there are indications that these attitudes become more positive over time (Berkman & Zinberg, 1997; Crisp, 2005; Green, 2005; Krieglstein, 2004; Martinez et al., 2011; Ramirez, 2012). These studies have, regrettably, been mainly limited to Western contexts and thus offer little on social work practitioners'

attitude with people who identify as lesbian or gay in non-Western cultures and countries. Studies exploring social workers' attitudes toward sexual minorities in other parts of the world, especially in Asia, are exceedingly rare.

With the view of addressing this gap in literature, this paper reports findings of a study which sought to investigate Vietnamese social work practitioners' attitudes towards individuals who identify as lesbian or gay. The findings reported in this paper are part of a larger study on Vietnamese social work practitioners' attitudes toward, for lack of a better term, 'sexual minorities' and their perceptions of practice with these populations. The term 'sexual minorities', while seen by some as having discriminatory and exclusionary potential, is widely used in the literature to refer to a broad range of people including those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual and asexual or any sexual identity that do not conform to heteronormative standards (see, for example, Math & Seshadri, 2013, p.4 and Samsalon, 2013). For the purpose of manageability, this study focused on attitudes toward individuals who identify as lesbian or gay even though the interest was attitudes toward sexual minorities more broadly. This was not, in any way, meant to discount concern for the lived realities of bisexual, pansexual, asexual, transgender and intersex people. The focus on lesbian women and gay men as proxies of sexual minorities had more to do with limitations in current research methodology and the culturally bound conceptual grasp of the research participants. Furthermore, while the authors are cognizant of the potentially offensive connotations surrounding the word 'homosexuals', the word is used as the English translation of the Vietnamese term *người đồng tính* where it occurs in quotations from participants to ensure the fidelity of translations in the absence of a better alternative.

Vietnamese sexual minorities account for approximately 3% of the total national population (ISEE, 2012). Vietnamese public intolerance toward those who identify as lesbian or gay is well documented. Up until recently, same-sex relationships were portrayed in

Vietnamese state media as a 'social evil' (Blanc, 2005; Horton, 2014, p. 963). A national study of men who self-identified as gay revealed that the participants had experienced verbal abuse (45%), being forced into heterosexual marriage (28%), physical abuse by family members (11%) and being dismissed from work (6%) because of their sexual orientation (Luong & Pham, 2015). Lesbian women have reported experiencing harassment, disrespectful treatment from health care providers, being forced into heterosexual marriages or even being subjected to so-called 'corrective rape' (ISEE, 2012; Nguyen & Le, 2014). In a study with Vietnamese youth, a vast majority of the participants indicated that homosexuality was unacceptable and expressed unwillingness to establish friendships with anyone who identified as a sexual minority (Nguyen & Blum, 2014). In the World Values Survey, Vietnamese participants reported a high level of prejudice toward sexual minorities (Manalastas et al., 2017).

In discussing the heteronormative climate of Vietnam, Le and Yu (2019) noted how negative attitudes towards sexual minorities align with the so-called '*Tam giáo*', often interpreted as Three Religions or Three Teachings, consisting of Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism. These are among the most pervasive ideological and philosophical influences in Vietnamese culture (Le & Yu, 2019). At the heart of Confucianism is the notion of social order, the value of traditional family and filial piety which, when put together, make it incumbent on children to live up to their parents' expectations, preserve the family's reputation and extend the family bloodline through procreation (Nguyen, 2016). Taoist philosophy emphasises harmony between human beings, between human beings and nature, and especially between the Yin (feminine)-Yang (masculine) forces, the latter often interpreted as signifying the salience of heterosexual/male-female relationships (Le & Yu, 2019; Nguyen, 2016). The notion of karma (that is, consequences of actions from a previous life that can affect the next life) in Buddhism provides generous space to rationalise and justify the suffering of sexual minorities as a cosmic consequence of transgressions in a previous life (Nguyen, 2016; Le & Yu, 2021).

These ideological and philosophical influences lend themselves to the framing of same sex behaviours as improper and socially unacceptable. This is a distinct feature of Vietnamese society which sets it apart from the predominantly Western contexts of most of the studies that have been done in this area.

Living in a society permeated by these ideological and philosophical influences, Vietnamese sexual minorities tend to remain closeted for fear of upsetting their families or being the target of hostility (ISEE, 2012; UNDP & USAID, 2014). Sexual minorities in Vietnam routinely experience discrimination and violence in a range of social settings including at home, in school and their workplace (Luong & Pham, 2015; UNDP & USAID, 2014). This puts them at high risk of stress, depression, anxiety and low self-esteem (Luong & Pham, 2015). And although Vietnamese sexual minorities may need social work supports in grappling with these challenges, research has indicated that the access rate to such services has been relatively low (Luong & Pham, 2015; Nguyen & Le, 2014). It has been suggested that the attitudes of social work practitioners are one of the main reasons for this low rate of access (Nguyen & Le, 2014).

The concern over the quality of the practice that social workers provide for sexual minority clients is particularly relevant in a country like Vietnam where social work remains a nascent profession (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2017). It was not until the early 2000s when social work was officially introduced as a formal position in the national social welfare system (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2017; Tran, 2016). The first national undergraduate social work curriculum was only instituted in 2004 (Tran, 2016). It is instructive to note that the Vietnamese state has had a central role in the formation of social work as a profession in the country (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2017). A national project for the development of the social work profession in Vietnam was created with the issuance of Decree 32/2010/QĐ-TTg in 2010 (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2017; Tran, 2016). This project, widely known in Vietnam as Project 32,

paved the way for the creation of the legal framework for practice, the establishment of numerous so-called 'social work centres', broader public awareness about the profession and a marked increase in the number of social work practitioners across the nation (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2017; Tran, 2016). Despite the marked progress in the development of the profession, there are quite a number of challenges such as the shortage of a skilled labour force and the limited resources to support the expansion of services (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2017; Tran, 2016). At the time this current study was conducted, there was still no licensure system and no national professional association. For these reasons, this study targeted those who were regarded as social work practitioners as opposed to what might be expected in other parts of the world such as those who hold licenses to practice social work in countries like the US and the Philippines or those with a national association at the very least like Australia and Singapore.

Methodology

The study adopted a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design consisting of two phases (Creswell & Clark, 2018). This design was operationalised through the collection of quantitative data via a survey followed by the collection of qualitative data via semi-structured interviews. The quantitative phase aimed at obtaining an overview of practitioners' attitudes with sexual minorities while qualitative phase was carried out to gain a more in-depth understanding of these attitudes.

Quantitative data collection

Quantitative data on Vietnamese social work practitioners' attitudes toward sexual minorities was collected using a paper-based survey. Permission was sought and granted from 14 social centres and social welfare departments in Hanoi, Vietnam for the recruitment of social work practitioners in their employ as participants in the study. Participant information sheets along with paper questionnaires were distributed to potential participants as part of the

participant recruitment package. Those who wished to participate in the study were informed that they could return the filled-up questionnaires via a locked box to be placed within the premises of their organisations. The filling up and submission of the completed questionnaire was taken as an indication of voluntary consent to participate in the survey. The data collection for quantitative phase was undertaken in a two-month period (June to August) in 2018.

Survey measurement

Attitudes toward sexual minorities was assessed using a translated version of Attitude Toward Lesbian and Gay Men (ATLG) scale. The ATLG is a widely used scale developed by Herek (1994). The scale consists of 20 different statements, 10 about gay men (Attitude Toward Gay – ATG subscale) and 10 about lesbian women (Attitude Toward Lesbian – ATL subscale) to which respondents indicate their levels of agreement or disagreement (Herek, 1994). Evidence has shown that Asian respondents, particularly those from cultures influenced by Confucian philosophy and Buddhism, tend to avoid extreme responses compared with their Western counterpart and are thus more likely to choose the middle point or neutral option on Likert type scales (Harzing et al., 2012; Lee et al., 2002). In view of this, some scholars favour the use of forced choice scales instead of odd-point scales in social attitude research with Asian samples to minimise socially desirable responses (Kwok et al., 2013). To avoid midpoint tendency among the targeted sample, the ATLG scale was administered using a 6-point response scale with 1 indicating strong disagreement and 6 indicating strong agreement. The total ATLG score could range from 20 to 120 and ATL and ATG scores could range from 10 to 60. Higher scores indicate more negative or unfavourable attitudes toward sexual minorities. For the current study, the ATLG, the ATL and ATG all demonstrated excellent internal reliability ($\alpha_{ATLG} = .95$; $\alpha_{ATL} = .91$; $\alpha_{ATG} = .91$).

The survey instrument was translated into Vietnamese following a back-translation technique for cross-cultural research (Jones et al., 2001). The English version of the

questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese by the researcher who is bilingual in English and Vietnamese. The translated version was then blindly translated back into English by two independent Vietnamese social work researchers who were proficient in English and had never seen the original questionnaire. A comparison was made and changes were introduced as needed to correct any mistranslation and to ensure consistency.

Survey participants

Questionnaires were distributed to 433 social work practitioners. Of these, 305 practitioners returned their questionnaires which yielded a response rate of 70.4%. Considering the aim of the current study which sought to investigate the attitudes and perceptions of practice among heterosexual practitioners, responses from those who identified as a sexual minority (n = 2) were excluded from the analysis. In addition, 11 cases were removed due to excessive missing data. A final sample of 292 returned valid questionnaires were included in the quantitative data analysis. The demographic information of the survey participants is summarised in Table 1.

Overall, there were more female (65.4%) than male participants (34.6%) in the survey. The age of the participants ranged from 23 to 53, with the mean age of 33 (SD = 6.83). All participants self-identified as heterosexual. More than two-thirds of the survey respondents (69.5%) were married. Nearly half of the respondents (43.4%) reported having over 3 to 10 years in the profession, more than one-quarter (27.4%) reported having 1-3 years of experience, 18.5% had over 10 years of experience and 10.6% had less than one year of social work experience. In terms of practice field, the largest proportion of participants worked in what is locally known as social protection [settings that provide social assistance, support services and institutional care to vulnerable populations] (22.6%), followed by child welfare (20.9%), hospital social work (15.4%), aged care (14.0%), mental health (12.3%), disability (5.1%), family violence (4.8%), and other settings (3.4%) such as gender equality, human trafficking,

and social work with women. Notably, four participants (1.4%) reported that their practice field was social work with sexual minorities.

Qualitative data collection

Following the survey, semi-structured interviews were undertaken to gain a more in-depth understanding of the Vietnamese social work practitioners' attitudes toward sexual minorities. The data collection for the qualitative phase was undertaken over a one-month period (September) in 2018. Interview participants were drawn from the survey. Survey participants who wanted to volunteer to participate in the interviews were given the option of doing so in the final page of their returned questionnaires. A total of 26 survey participants expressed interest in taking part in the qualitative phase of the study. From this pool of volunteers, six participants with the highest ATLG scores (most negative attitude scores) and six participants with the lowest ATLG scores (most positive attitude scores) were recruited. The interviews were done face-to-face and audio recorded. All interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, the participants' native language, to ensure that they could freely and comfortably express their thoughts and opinions. Interviews were initiated only when the participants fully understood the nature of the research and signed consent forms. Interview participants were informed that they had the right to terminate the interview at any time without any consequences. Participants were also informed that they can withdraw and have their interview data excluded from the study by contacting the researcher within one week after the interview. Interviews lasted approximately one to three hours each.

Interview guide

An interview guide was developed to facilitate the interviews. The guide included questions about the participants' background information and their attitudes toward sexual minorities. While the interview guide already contained the core questions, probing questions

were developed and used in the course of the interviews to explore points that needed further explanation and elaboration, including emergent data from the survey.

Interview participants

Of the 12 interview participants, nine were females and three were males. Five participants were single (never married) and seven were married at the time when the interviews were conducted. The interview participants' ages ranged from 23 to 40, with a mean age of 32 (SD = 5.70). The most experienced participant had been practicing for 16 years and the least experienced had been practicing for one year. The mean years of practice was 7.25 years (SD = 4.84).

Four participants identified their practice field as child welfare and two as hospital social work. Two participants indicated that their practice field was social work with sexual minorities. The rest of interview participants worked in other fields such as mental health, disability, family violence, and social protection. Seven interviewees worked in non-government organisations (private sector) while five were in government agencies (public sector). All the interviewees are referred to here by pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

Data analysis

Survey data were encoded and analysed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences software (SPSS version 25). Univariate analysis was employed to provide descriptive information on the sample, the participants' attitudes toward sexual minorities and their perception of practice with these populations. Reliability analysis was run to report the Cronbach's coefficient alphas of the ATLG.

The audio recordings of interviews were transcribed, then imported into NVivo (version 12) and analysed following a thematic technique (Braun et al., 2019). Initial codes were generated utilising both inductive and deductive approaches (Braun et al., 2019).

Redundant or overlapping codes were checked and collapsed while similar codes were collated into potential themes. The themes were then reviewed and refined to make sure all codes within themes were relevant and themes were adequate to reflect the data. Finally, the themes were defined and labelled for analysis.

The findings

Overall, participants' scores on the ATLG scale reflect a relatively positive attitude toward sexual minorities. The mean ATLG score was 54.97 (*SD* = 14.66). The mean ATL score of 25.65 (*SD* = 7.20) was slightly lower than the mean ATG score of 29.33 (*SD* = 8.15). All these mean scores are within the range of positive attitudes toward individuals who identify as lesbian or gay.

Further review of quantitative results show that a little over 66% (*n* = 193) of the participants received ATLG scores under 60, 29.5% (*n* = 86) had ATLG scores ranging from 61 to 79 and only 4.5% (*n* = 13) of the participants had ATLG scores of 80 or over, with a highest reported score of 95. These results suggest that while the majority of participants held predominantly positive attitudes toward sexual minorities, there were a number of social work practitioners in the sample who held markedly negative attitudes.

Table 2 shows the frequency counts and corresponding percentages for responses of all 20 items in ATLG scale along with item means and standard deviations. Using the theoretical midpoint for the even response scale suggested by Kwok et al. (2013), the value of 3.5 for 6-point Likert responses was employed as a reference. A higher mean score indicated a negative attitude toward people who identified as lesbian (ATL subscale) or gay (ATG subscale). All except one item had a mean that fell below 3.5. The two items with the lowest mean scores were 'A woman's homosexuality should not be a cause for job discrimination in any situation' (*M* = 2.23, *SD* = 0.74 after reverse coding) and 'Lesbians are sick' (*M* = 2.36, *SD* = 0.87). Both

items were in ATL subscale. The only item that had a mean over 3.5 was from the ATG subscale: 'I would not be too upset if I learned that my son were a homosexual' (M = 3.80, SD = 1.29 after reverse coding). This item elicited the most negative response, with more than half of participants (55.8%) disagreeing with it to some extent (that is, indicating either *strongly disagree, disagree*, or *slightly disagree*).

Data from the semi-structured interviews with 12 participants offered a more in-depth understanding of participants' attitudes toward sexual minorities. It is worth noting that no participant with a markedly negative attitude volunteered for the interviews. And so while the sampling design for the interviews called for the selection of six participants with the most negative attitude scores in addition to six participants with the most positive attitude scores, the interview sample consisted of six participants with ATLG scores ranging from 22 to 45 and six participants with scores ranging from 48 to 73. In other words, the interview participants had what could be considered moderate to positive attitudes based on the ATLG scale. Nonetheless, the interview data helps shed light on the findings from the survey.

One important insight that the interviews offered is that the attitudes of the interview participants toward sexual minorities have not always positive or moderate. The majority of interviewees had known about sexual minorities for quite some time, as far back as high school for a few of them. Some admitted that they initially felt fear and/or discomfort toward those who identified as lesbian or gay:

> I first learned about *người đồng tính* [homosexuals] when I heard other people talk about them but I never met them before. When I thought about them [back then] … I felt creeped out and horrified. (P11, male)

> I remembered watching a Thai movie named 'My Husband's Lover' on TV when I was young. The movie was about a man who got married and had children but who turned out to be gay and had relationship with another man. When I saw that movie, I was really horrified … [I]

shuddered and got goose bumps. (P07, female)

I used to dislike homosexuals. When I saw them on TV or newspapers, I did not like them. I remember coming home from school and making jokes like 'You are *pede* [a vernacular term with derogatory connotations commonly used by Vietnamese to refer to sexual minorities]' to my friends. We were teasing each other like that. (P06, male)

Based on the accounts of the participants, their attitudes changed over time from rather negative to somewhat neutral if not positive. Instead of the fear and discomfort that they felt in the past, they became more comfortable with and accepting of sexual minorities. Below are such accounts:

I was only scared when I first found out about homosexuals. Now, after having more information, I feel normal about them. (P11, male)

Maybe when I was a student, I was a bit uncomfortable when talking about them. But now, I feel very normal. No problem at all. (P06, male)

Maybe in the late nineties, I was not comfortable about homosexuals. But, at the moment, I feel normal about them. (P09, female)

I might have thought of homosexuality as a sickness in the past, but not anymore. (P04, female)

The term 'normal' was used by several interview participants in describing their feelings toward sexual minorities. In Vietnamese parlance, the use of the term in this context signifies that the interviewees did not hold any negative feelings toward sexual minorities, such as hatred, anger, disgust or discomfort. Thus, the accounts of interview participants indicate a change from what could be regarded as negative attitudes in their younger years toward more accepting attitudes. The use of the term 'normal' was reflected their view of sexual minorities:

I see them as normal persons. They are just like me; not different at all. I don't avoid or hate them... (P02, female)

I totally respect them. I see them as normal persons, and there is nothing about them to make

> me discriminate against or alienate them. I think homosexuals are actually very brave. They stand up to overcome social stigma to be true to their own selves. (P07, female)

In line with this positive regard for sexual minorities, a number of interview participants argued the need to foster inclusion, including the adoption of laws and policies that support the rights of sexual minorities:

> They have the right to live, to develop, to be happy, to get married and to adopt children. They should not be constrained. They are human, just like us. (P02, female)

> I hope Vietnamese law will recognise them more compared to how much it does now. They are human, they have the right to adopt children and get married. (P07, female)

> When the number of homosexuals increase, there must be a legal pathway for them to rely on … There should be legal rights and regulations for those people. (P08, male)

> Homosexuals are also a part of society, there should be laws regarding their rights … I encourage and support their rights. (P11, male)

In the Vietnamese context where sexual minorities are not recognised in the legal system (Horton, 2014; UNDP & USAID, 2014), these arguments for the enactment of laws to protect sexual minorities' rights signify positive attitudes toward these populations.

While bearing accepting or neutral attitudes toward sexual minorities and being supportive of policies benefiting sexual minorities, a few interview participants did express some degree of ambivalence. 'Not encouraging, but accepting' (P09, female) was a phrase used by one participant that very much reflected the apparent tension felt by some interview participants. Conflicting attitudes were particularly prominent when some interviewees talked about how they would feel if their children came out to them as gay or lesbian.

> Perhaps, if I learned about that [having children come out as gay or lesbian], I would be very upset because I do not like this to happen to my family members. In the long term, I know that I can't compel other people to follow what I want, so I will try to accept it. But I don't know

how long it will take me to accept that situation. I think it would be very difficult for me. (P08, female)

… To be honest, I haven't prepared myself for that. (P09, female)

If this happened to my child, I would feel a bit disconcerted. Because there is no homosexual in my family... But if my child turns out to be homosexual … I would feel fazed … I mean, I don't expect this to happen to my child. (P11, male)

These statements suggest that while practitioners can express accepting attitudes toward homosexuality as it applies to others, they can find the prospect unwelcome if not objectionable when it came to their own family and children. These interview participants went on to explain the reasons underlying their apprehensions as follows:

Firstly, relatives and neighbours may denigrate me and my children if they knew that my children were homosexual. ... People around will look weirdly at my children and not accept them. Secondly, I am worried about how my children could get married and have offspring, and what their life will be when they are not normal like the others. In my mind, I already have plans for them to get married, have children, and do certain jobs. Now, if they couldn't do such things, I don't know how to care for them so that they could have normal lives, just like other people. (P08, female)

Certainly, from a parent's view, everyone wants their children to have a fulfilled life. 'Fulfilled' here means to get married, to have children and have a successful future … (P09, female)

I hope that my child will be like other normal persons … If he were homosexual and loved men, he might have to adopt children later … There would be a problem in maintaining the family bloodline. (P11, male)

The use of the word 'normal' in these instances is meant to distinguish sexual minorities from the rest of the population. It therefore betrays an implicit judgment in what could be thoughtfully or thoughtlessly worded pronouncements. For example, P11 said that he felt

'normal about them' to indicate that he did not harbour any sense of hatred, anger, disgust or discomfort toward sexual minorities and yet he expressed a strong desire for his own children to be 'like other normal persons'. This can be taken to mean that he simply wanted his children not to be gay or lesbian. However, his concern over the maintenance of the family bloodline suggests that there was in fact a 'problem' with being gay or lesbian.

Two distinct concerns were brought up by the interviewees. First, they spoke of the challenges faced by sexual minorities. They worried that their children might suffer from discrimination and stigma to which sexual minorities are subjected. In addition, some participants talked about how homosexuality could get in the way of their dreams for their children of leading a so-called 'normal' life. Beyond their concerns about potential societal prejudice and discrimination their children may face, the conflict and ambivalence that they felt also appeared to stem from their own preconceptions and expectations. They expected their children to get married, bear children and maintain the family bloodline, all of which were seen as irreconcilable with homosexuality.

The concerns of some participants went beyond their own children. Some interview participants expressed reservations about the idea of having sexual minorities serving as teachers in schools. While generally supportive of sexual minorities' right to equal employment opportunities, a few participants questioned the propriety of them teaching certain subjects. Below are two such accounts:

> The important point is the subjects that they teach … For example, it is OK if they teach courses such as math, physics, chemistry, literature, history, geography. But if the courses relate to *life skills or moral education*, I don't think it is appropriate. [emphasis provided] (P08, female)

> From my point of view, if … the subjects are relevant to personality development, such as *civic education or moral education*, which teach the children about culture and behaviour, they shouldn't. If the subjects are literature, math, physics … it is fine, no problem. [emphasis

provided] (P11, male)

The participants apparently had in mind teaching positions at primary or secondary schools given the fact that the subjects they mentioned were compulsory at such educational levels in the Vietnamese national curriculum. These interview participants thought that sexual minorities were an inappropriate choice when it came to particular subjects like civic, moral and life skills education. Understood in this context, it appears that they were concerned about the negative influence sexual minorities might bring to bear on young and impressionable students, not only in terms of sexual orientation and gender expression, but also in terms of morality, general behaviour and citizenship. Their statements evinced, to some extent, their understanding of sexual orientation, along with their hidden preconceptions and prejudices toward sexual minorities.

Discussion

The term '*người bình thường*' (normal person) is colloquially used in Vietnam to distinguish a heterosexual person from a '*người đồng tính*' (homosexual person) (Le & Yu, 2019, p. 446). The view expressed by some of the study participants of sexual minorities as 'normal persons' goes against dominant societal norms in Vietnam where sexual minorities are widely perceived as abnormal (UNDP & USAID, 2014). To say that sexual minorities are 'normal persons' could well be interpreted differently in other cultural contexts but, understood in contemporary Vietnam, the use of the phrase signifies acceptance of and positive regard for sexual minorities. It is instructive to note, however, that a number of the participants referred to sexual minorities using the Vietnamese word '*họ*' [translated to 'they' in English] (P2, P7, P8, P11) – as opposed to 'homosexuals', for example – in referring to sexual minorities in some of their responses. The use of such language, some might argue, reflects a form of emotional distancing with 'they' being 'the Other' who is seen as different and not one of 'us'. This view can quiet easily be transposed to being antithetical to one's

personal identity if not to the social order as a whole (Jensen, 2011). Some might rightly argue that this is reading too much into the language of the participants especially since the word 'they' here is simply the English translation of the Vietnamese word used. However, there is reason to be mindful of this seemingly trivial detail in the context of the overall findings as noted below.

This study found that the social work practitioners who participated in this research largely held positive attitudes toward sexual minorities which is in line with what has been recently reported in the literature (Crisp, 2005; Green, 2005; Martinez et al., 2011; Ramirez, 2012). It was noted, however, that participants with what could be considered as moderate to positive attitudes were not necessarily devoid of discriminatory and prejudicial thinking. There were nuances hinted in the results of the survey that were only made explicit in the interviews. The accounts obtained through the semi-structured interviews indicated that some of those who had what could be considered moderate to positive attitudes toward sexual minorities still subscribed to certain prejudicial and discriminatory views. While largely accepting of sexual minorities, some participants held prejudices that informed discriminatory preferences around certain concerns, such as when it came to their own children or particular kinds of work involving children.

While not all the participants demonstrated such prejudicial and discriminatory views, the responses of a few interview participants illustrate how such views can co-exist with moderate to positive attitudes toward sexual minorities. It appears that social work practitioners can harbour prejudices relating to sexual orientation while projecting positive and accepting attitudes toward sexual minorities. That leads to the question of how to reconcile these seemingly irreconcilable positions. One that comes to mind is that perhaps there are nuances that the ATLG scale is not able to capture. Having what can be regarded as positive attitudes does not necessarily indicate the total absence of prejudicial and discriminatory views.

Another possibility is that the professional values and outlooks informing the positive attitudes of the social work practitioners were merely layered over more fundamental values and outlooks. The fact that social work practitioners who registered moderate to positive attitudes toward sexual minorities could harbour prejudicial and discriminatory views about these groups is evidence of how deeply entrenched the fundamental assumptions and values informing these views are. These would have to be deeply ingrained to come from practitioners who mindfully spoke of acceptance and non-discrimination as key principles for practice. The contrary assumptions and values effectively overruled what appeared to be well understood and well-rehearsed tenets of professional training. This points to more primordial influences, particularly the dominant ideologies and philosophies in Vietnamese society. As argued by Le and Yu (2019), Confucian, Taoist and Buddhist systems of thinking and ideas resonate with how Vietnamese attitudes toward sexual minorities. The findings of this study suggest that Vietnamese social work practitioners are not immune to these influences. The participants' views toward sexual minorities bear the hallmarks of Confucian and Taoist philosophy in the way they spoke of wanting to see their children have a 'normal' or 'fulfilled' life which relates to heterosexual marriage, the bearing of offspring and the maintenance of the family bloodline. All of these were seen as irreconcilable with non-heterosexuality. These expectations are consistent with deeply ingrained views of family informed by Confucian ideology as well as harmony and balance embodied by Taoist philosophy (Adamczyk & Cheng, 2015; Nguyen, 2016). This extends to the notion of filial piety and how not getting married and having children represents a failure to fulfil one's filial duties (Feng et al., 2012). From this viewpoint, sexual minorities breach social expectations and upset the natural balance, thus represent a potential threat to the social order.

The discriminatory preferences in relation to the notion of having sexual minorities serve as teachers in schools, on the other hand, could very well reflect a particular perception

of homosexuality that saw homosexuality as a product of or, at least, partly influenced by socialisation. Sexual orientation, according to this perspective, is socially constructed and created based on human experiences (Hammack, 2005). Such a conception of homosexuality that sees it as a learned or socially transmitted condition would make the idea of having sexual minorities as teachers of impressionable young children in schools an unwelcome prospect.

This study contributes to the notably scant literature on the attitudes of social workers toward sexual minorities in non-Western settings. To the authors' knowledge, this is the first study focused on Asian social workers' attitudes toward people who identify as lesbian or gay. Of the few previous studies in Asian contexts on this subject matter, a couple (see Leung, 2016 and Teh et al., 2018) focused on practitioners' conceptions of practice as against attitudes. Previous studies that investigated attitudes (see Kwok et al., 2013 and Lim & Johnson, 2001) focused on social work students rather than social work practitioners. The current study adds to the seminal discussions of both Kwok and colleagues (2013) and Lim and Johnson (2001) around the influence of Confucianism on attitudes toward sexual minorities in Confucian societies.

Implications for practice

A key contribution of the study to knowledge in this field is the recognition that social work practitioners who register moderate to positive attitudes toward sexual minorities can still harbour prejudicial and discriminatory views. This has important implications for social work practice and education. Social workers are meant to influence policy to advance the rights and welfare of disadvantaged populations. The findings suggest that Vietnamese social work practitioners who register positive to moderate attitudes on the ATLG scale do not necessarily have thoroughly inclusive attitudes toward sexual minorities such as when it comes to children, for example. This raises a question over the readiness of such practitioners to initiate needed

policy changes and work towards changing attitudes toward people who identify as lesbian or gay in Vietnamese society. The findings point to the need for relevant intervention in shaping attitudes toward sexual minorities even amongst practitioners who appear to espouse positive to moderate attitudes.

The foregoing discussion underscores the need for social work practitioners to critically question their own heterosexist assumptions, values and beliefs. This is particularly important given that, as noted above, as the presence of what could be regarded as positive attitudes cannot be equated with the total absence of prejudicial and discriminatory views. It also requires social work practitioners to the vigilant so that their own practice does not add to the discrimination, disadvantage, exclusion and oppression of sexual minorities.

Furthermore, the discussion suggests that certain ideologies and philosophies have a preponderant influence on the participants' attitudes toward sexual minorities. The worldviews they embody are reflected in the way participants viewed homosexuality, particularly when it came to 'sensitive' topics related to young children. These worldviews are not unique to the social work practitioners. They resonate with the dominant worldviews in the wider Vietnamese society. This points to the need for intervention at broader levels to challenge these elements of Vietnamese culture. Such intervention is in line with what Rawsthorne (2012, p. 280) referred to as 'cultural change' which 'requires change to the fundamentals of institutions and systems'. In this regard, the protection of the rights and wellbeing of sexual minorities requires a conception of critical practice that extends well beyond one's own practice and one's own organisational context toward broader society as a target for change.

Limitations of the study

Several limitations are worth noting and taking into consideration in appreciating the research results. First, the study was conducted with social work practitioners in a number of

Hanoi-based organisations. The selection of social work organisations was limited to those where permission could be obtained. The use of such a non-probability sample limits its generalisability. The findings thus cannot be generalised to social work practice across Vietnam, more so beyond Vietnam.

Another limitation relates to the sampling design. Due to the voluntary nature of the study, the participants in the survey and interviews were, on the whole, self-selected. Despite the high response rate, it is possible that social work practitioners who responded to the survey may have had a particular disposition, perhaps a more-than-average interest in sexual minority issues. Such self-selection process could have, by default, systematically excluded social work practitioners who held negative attitudes toward sexual minorities and did not wish to subject themselves to a study such as this. This flowed on to the qualitative phase. Such self-selection bias in the interview sample may have limited the data and insights that were gained.

Conclusion

This paper presented findings of Vietnamese social work practitioners' attitudes toward individuals who identify as lesbian or gay. A key finding from this study is that positive attitudes toward sexual minorities, measured through a widely accepted standardised instrument, are not necessarily accompanied by the total absence of prejudicial and discriminatory views. Such views were not, in fact, immediately apparent when the participants spoke of social work and the values they espoused as social work practitioners. Prejudices and discriminatory preferences became more apparent when participants thought about sexual orientation in relation to particular subject matters such as their children and young children in general. In those particular instances, it seemed that the values of acceptance and non-discrimination did not apply. The potent influence of dominant ideologies and philosophies in Vietnamese society point to implications for social work practice particularly in terms of social work's mandate in social transformation.

Ethics

Ethical approval for this project was granted by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of South Australia (Ethics Protocol 201010).

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1.Treat it as a book, which will be referenced as:
Ramirez, M. (2012). *An examination of homophobia and social work practice among a sample of school social workers*. University of Illinois at Chicago.
2.Treat it as a source from website:
Ramirez, M. (2012). *An examination of homophobia and social work practice among a sample of school social workers*. University of Illinois. Retrieved 11 September, 2018, from https://indigo.uic.edu/articles/thesis/An_Examination_of_Homophobia_and_Social_Work_Practice_Among_a_Sample_of_School_Social_Workers/10828052/1
3.Or using the combination as:
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