Homonegativity in Southeast Asia: Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam

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Abstract How are sexual minorities like lesbians, gay men, and their sexualities viewed in the different societies of Southeast Asia? Previous studies have been limited by the reliance on data from university students and other non-representative samples, with little comparability across countries in the region. This research brief addresses this gap by comparing attitudes toward lesbians and gay men and about lesbian and gay sexualities in six Southeast Asian countries using nationally representative survey data. Combined data from the World Values Survey (total n = 9,182 respondents from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam) indicated that many Southeast Asians reject lesbians or gay men as neighbors, with the most homonegative attitudes to be found in Indonesia (66%) and Malaysia (59%), compared to

relatively less rejecting nations like Thailand (40%), Singapore (32%), Vietnam (29%), and the Philippines (28%). Same-sex sexuality was least acceptable, based on a moral justifiability measure, among Indonesians, followed by Vietnamese and Malaysians. Singaporeans, Thais, and Filipinos were the least rejecting of lesbian and gay sexual orientations in the region. We also explored a number of established correlates of homonegative attitudes in each country, including gender, age, educational attainment, and religiosity.

The system of negative attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors toward lesbians, gay men, and same-sex sexualities is called homonegativity (McDermott & Blair, 2012). Homonegativity, also sometimes called homophobia, heterosexism, or anti-gay prejudice, forms part of the larger climate of social stigma faced by sexual and gender minorities in many parts of the world (Herek & McLemore, 2013; Lottes & Grollman, 2010; Stulhofer & Rimac, 2009). This research brief contributes to this area of inquiry in the Asia Pacific context by presenting a cross-country comparison of attitudes toward lesbians, gay men, and lesbian/gay sexualities in six Southeast Asian countries using nationally representative data.

Homonegativity: Contexts and Correlates

Despite the existence of indigenous gender and sexual diversity traditions in various Southeast Asian societies (Wieringa, 2010), as well as the scientific recognition by scientific professionals in Asia that being lesbian and gay are normal variants of human sexuality (e.g., Hong Kong Psychological Society, 2012; Psychological Association of the Philippines, 2011; Rao & Jacob, 2012), stigma against lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) populations persist. Globally, LGBT people and other gender and sexual minorities experience criminalization, systemic violence, discrimination in employment and health care, lack of legal recognition concerning their families and partnerships, and restricted freedoms of expression, association, and peaceful assembly (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2012).

In Southeast Asia, same-sex sexual acts are criminalized under the law in Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei Darussalam, as well as in South Sumatra and the Aceh province in Indonesia (Carroll, 2016).

Violence in the form of hate crimes (UNDP & USAID, 2014b) and bullying of children and youth perceived to be LGBT have been documented (UNESCO, 2015). There is only one country in the region that protects its citizens from workplace discrimination on the basis of gender identity or sexual orientation through a national law: Thailand, as of 2015. Despite the often remarked cultural valuation of kinship, family ties, and marriage, nowhere in Southeast Asia are same-sex partnerships legally recognized, and joint adoption by lesbian and gay couples remains a legal impossibility (Sanders, 2013, 2015). And although gender reassignment surgery is available in countries like Thailand, transgender citizens cannot change their legal markers in official documents and remain vulnerable to violence, harassment, and discrimination (UNDP & USAID, 2014c).

One component of the social ecology faced by sexual and gender minorities is public opinion toward them and their sexualities (Herek, 2004, 2007; Herek & McLemore, 2013). These social attitudes may range from affirmation and acceptance (homopositivity) to disapproval, denial, and denigration (homonegativity). Such public opinion provides important basic descriptive information about how LGBT citizens are viewed and accepted (or rejected) at a particular point in a society's history. Public opinion has been used as a core component in popular metrics that measure a country's level of friendliness to LGBT people, such as the Gay Happiness Index (Lemke, Tornow, & PlanetRomeo.com, 2015). Other studies have shown that public opinion, particularly low levels of homonegative social attitudes, is a key predictor for the eventual legalization of same-sex marriage in a country (Badgett, 2009). The perception of homonegative public opinion also plays a role at the individual level, particularly in the adjustment and well-being of sexual minority individuals, who are said to have to negotiate

identity development processes in such social contexts (Motoyama, 2015).

Global research into public opinion concerning LGBT people point to five factors that are associated with homonegative attitudes: gender, age, education, religion, and intergroup contact (Slootmaeckers & Lievens, 2014). Generally, women have less homonegative, more accepting attitudes than men (Herek, 2002; Lim, 2002). Similar associations have been found with younger individuals compared to older generations, those with higher educational attainment compared to those with less schooling, and people with lower levels of religiosity versus those who are more religious. Generally, young respondents, respondents who are more educated, and those who view religion as less central in their lives are also less homonegative (Slootmaeckers & Lievens, 2014).

Apart from these demographic variables, attention has been paid in the social attitudes literature on intergroup contact as a predictor of lower homonegativity. A large body of research has shown that those who personally know many openly lesbian and gay people, and especially those who interact frequently with sexual minority individuals in contexts that lead to uncertainty reduction and warm affiliative relations, have the least homonegative attitudes (Detenber, Ho, Neo, Malik, & Cenite, 2013; Lewis, 2011; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). This effect has been shown to be independent of the reverse (i.e., that individuals who are LGBT-friendly at the onset will be more likely to seek out interactions with LGBT people) and can be the basis of interventions for prejudice reduction.

Despite the important empirical and theoretical work on homonegative social attitudes and its predictors globally, many of the studies on homonegativity in the Southeast Asian region have had notable limitations. First, many rely on opportunistic samples such as university students (e.g., Bernardo, 2013; Lim, 2002; Ng et al., 2013; Ng, Yee, Subramaniam, Loh, & Madeira, 2015). It is unknown how well these non-representative samples generalize to the general population. Second, though some nationally representative, within-country studies exist (e.g., Manalastas & del Pilar, 2005), none have attempted to use public opinion measures that allow for cross-country comparison within the region.

Thus, we have no systematic evidence for the range of social attitudes toward lesbians and gay men and about same-sex sexualities in Southeast Asia.

This research addresses these two limitations by presenting a secondary analysis of national survey data collected from six Southeast Asian countries using comparable measures. We contribute to this area of empirical research in the Asia Pacific region by presenting a cross-country comparison of social attitudes toward lesbians and gay men and about lesbian and gay sexualities using nationally representative data. Such an analysis provides a more comprehensive, evidence-based snapshot of homonegativity, particularly homonegative public opinion, across the region. The research addresses the question—How do public attitudes about lesbians, gay men, and their sexualities compare across Southeast Asia? Specifically, how homonegative are people in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam? The goals of this analysis are: (1) to describe and compare homonegative public attitudes within the Southeast Asian region using nationally representative data, and (2) to explore correlates of those social attitudes within each of the six countries.

Methods

Datasets

We analyzed the most recent available data from the World Values Survey (WVS), a multi-national interview-based survey that investigates people's beliefs and values concerning a wide range of social issues, including same-sex sexualities. Based on multistage cluster sampling of adults 18 years old and above, nationally representative WVS data for six Southeast Asian countries were used in this analysis: Indonesia ($N = 2,015$), Malaysia ($N = 1,300$), the Philippines ($N = 1,200$), Singapore ($N = 1,972$), Thailand ($N = 1,200$), and Vietnam ($N = 1,495$), with an aggregate total of $N = 9,182$ respondents. Combined, the populations of these six countries represent 88% of the total in ASEAN. Country-level datasets were accessed via the WVS data portal (http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org).

Measures

Homonegativity. Attitudes toward lesbians, gay men, and same-sex sexualities were assessed in the WVS data using two questions. The first was a social exclusion item that asked respondents, "Which do you not want to be your neighbor?". "Homosexuals" was presented in a list of nine social groups that also included foreign workers, drug users, and people of a different religion, among others. Nominating homosexuals as unwanted neighbors was classified as a homonegative response. The second measure was a single-item moral acceptability question that asked respondents, "Do you think being homosexual can always be justified, cannot be justified, or in between?". Responses were assessed using a 10-point scale with anchors of 1 = *never justifiable* to 10 = *always justifiable*. Scores closer to 1 indicate more homonegativity. As for all WVS surveys, items were translated from English into local languages and back-translated to ensure conceptual equivalence.

Predictors. We tested associations between homonegative attitudes in the six Southeast Asian countries against four of the five correlates found in the global literature on homonegativity (Slootmaeckers & Lievens, 2014) that were measured in the WVS. These were: (1) gender, (2) age, (3) education, and (4) religiosity. Gender was a binary category of female/male. Age was classified along five categories (18 to 30 years old, 31 to 40, 41 to 50, 51 to 60, and 61 to older). Education was measured as an ordinal variable with three levels: having finished primary school or below, having reached secondary or high school, and university level attainment. Religion was measured as a response to the question "How important is religion in your life?". Intergroup contact, the fifth predictor of homonegativity, is typically assessed by asking respondents how many lesbian or gay friends they have (Lewis, 2011), but it was not measured in the WVS.

Analysis

We conducted cross-tabulation analysis of the six country data and cross-national comparison of descriptives, including confidence intervals set at 95% when appropriate. We also ran country-level logistic regression analyses on the social exclusion measure to determine correlates of homonegative attitudes in the different Southeast Asian countries in the dataset.

Results

Homonegativity: Attitudes toward Lesbians and Gay Men as a Social Group

Comparison of the six countries on the social exclusion measure indicated that the highest homonegative attitudes were found in Indonesia, where 66.1% of respondents, CI [.64, .68], did not want lesbian and gay neighbors, followed by Malaysia, where 58.7% of Malaysians, CI [.56, .61], expressed similar homonegative opinions (see Figure
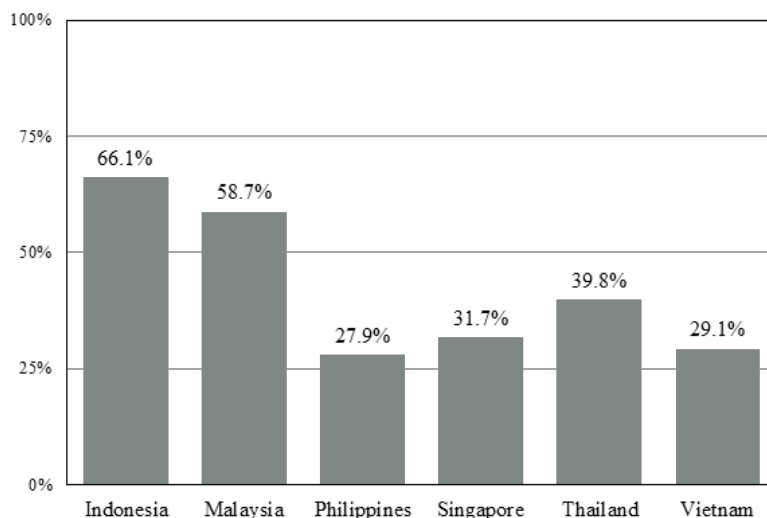

Figure 1. Percentage of respondents in six Southeast Asian countries who reject lesbians and gay men as neighbors.

Table 1

Mean Ratings on Justifiability of Same-Sex Sexualities in Six Southeast Asian countries

	M	SD	95% CI
Indonesia	1.35	1.30	1.29, 1.41
Malaysia	2.37	2.12	2.26, 2.49
Philippines	4.47	3.21	4.29, 4.65
Singapore	3.51	2.33	3.41, 3.61
Thailand	2.85	2.33	2.71, 2.98
Vietnam	1.86	1.67	1.77, 1.95
Region	2.74	1.14	2.71, 2.76

1). In these two countries, levels of homonegativity in the population were higher than 43.1%, which was the unweighted aggregate level for the region, CI [.42, .44]. In contrast, relatively lower levels of homonegativity were found in three other countries: 39.8% in Thailand, CI [.37, .42]; 31.7% in Singapore, CI [.30, .34]; and 29.1% in Vietnam, CI [.29, .31]. Homonegative social exclusion attitudes were lowest in the Philippines, with 27.9% or a little over a quarter of the population, CI [.25, .31], saying they did not want lesbian and gay neighbors. Overall, the data indicate widespread moderate to high levels of homonegativity among people in the Southeast Asian region, where on average, four out of 10 Southeast Asians reject neighbors who are lesbian or gay.

Homonegativity: Attitudes Toward Same-Sex Sexualities

In addition to views about lesbian and gay people as a social group, public attitudes in Southeast Asia toward same-sex sexualities in particular followed roughly similar patterns (see Table 1). The most extremely homonegative attitudes were found in Indonesia, where same-sex sexualities were judged as highly unacceptable ($M = 1.35$, $SD = 1.30$) and 87.6% of Indonesians answered at the extreme homonegative end of the scale, considering being gay or lesbian as something that could never be morally justified. Vietnamese ($M = 1.86$, $SD = 1.67$) and Malaysians

($M = 2.37$, $SD = 2.12$) had similar homonegative views, with 63.6% of people in Vietnam and 60.5% in Malaysia indicating that being gay or lesbian as never morally justifiable. Again, the lowest levels of homonegativity was found in the Philippines ($M = 4.47$, $SD = 3.21$), where only 31.1% of Filipinos considered lesbian or gay sexualities as never justifiable, along with Singaporeans ($M = 3.51$, $SD = 2.33$) and Thais ($M = 2.85$, $SD = 2.33$). Mean ratings in these three countries (the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand) were above the unweighted overall mean in the region ($M = 2.74$, $SD = 1.14$), indicating relatively lower levels of homonegativity. Overall, the data again show widespread moderate to high levels of homonegative opinion among people in the Southeast Asian region, where lesbian and gay sexualities are considered never justifiable by three to as much as eight out of 10 Southeast Asians, depending on the country context.

Exploring Predictors of Attitudes Toward Lesbians and Gay Men in Southeast Asia

We explored associations between the four predictors of homonegativity previously identified in the literature and available in the WVS dataset (i.e., gender, age, education, and religiosity) with the social exclusion measure that asked respondents if they would accept or reject lesbian or gay neighbors (a dichotomously scored item). Responses on this item, which taps into public opinion on lesbians and gay

men as a social group in society, were entered into six exploratory, country-level logistic regression analyses.

Overall patterns were mixed, and in some instances, the reverse direction was found, contrary to predictions. Gender was a significant predictor of homonegativity in three out of the six countries. As predicted, women compared to men were less homonegative, in the Philippines, OR = 1.60, 95% CI [1.23, 2.07], $p < .001$. Contrary to what was expected from the literature, however, women in some areas more than men appeared to be more rejecting of lesbian and gay neighbors; this pattern was found in Malaysia, OR = 0.73, 95% CI [0.59, 0.92], $p < .01$, and in Vietnam, OR = 0.75, 95% CI [0.60, 0.94], $p < .01$. Significant gender differences in homonegativity were not found in Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand. Age appeared to be a more consistent predictor of homonegativity in Southeast Asia; in five out of the six countries, older respondents were more rejecting of lesbian and gay neighbors. We found this age effect in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand (all OR's >1.60, all p's < .05). In Vietnam, no significant age differences were found. Education effects were also mixed. Higher education was associated with lower homonegativity, as predicted, in the Philippines (OR = 0.72, 95% CI [0.53, 0.98], $p < .05$) and in Thailand (OR = 0.58, 95% CI [0.42, 0.79], $p < .001$). However the reverse was found in the two most homonegative countries: in Indonesia (OR = 1.35, 95% CI [1.03, 1.79], $p < .05$) and in Malaysia (OR = 1.39, 95% CI [1.01, 1.93], $p < .05$), where respondents, particularly those with secondary education were more rejecting of lesbian and gay neighbors than those with only primary education. Finally, religiosity as measured by endorsement of the importance of religion in life, was strongly associated with homonegativity in Malaysia (OR = 2.24, 95% CI [1.17, 4.29], $p < .01$) and in Thailand (OR = 3.45, 95% CI [2.11, 5.64], $p < .01$). In those two countries but not in the others, respondents who place more value in religion were more likely to reject neighbors who are lesbian or gay.

Discussion

Homonegativity persists in many parts of the world (Carroll, 2016). The Southeast Asian region is no exception. Nationally representative survey data from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam point to widespread moderate to high levels of homonegativity among people in the Southeast Asian region, where on average, four out of 10 Southeast Asians reject neighbors who are lesbian or gay. The most homonegative attitudes were found in Indonesia and Malaysia, compared to relatively less rejecting nations like Thailand, Singapore, Vietnam, and the Philippines. Exploration of associations suggested that traditional predictors of homonegativity such as older age and higher religiosity do operate in some Southeast Asian countries, while other factors like female gender and higher education less robustly so (and in some instances, even reversed). Despite increasing LGBT visibility globally, survey evidence suggests that homonegative attitudes persist in Southeast Asia.

Public opinion is formed and expressed within larger societal contexts, and as a region, the social climate for lesbians and gay men in Southeast Asia also varies (UNDP, 2015; UNESCO, 2015). This variance is seen in laws and state action, for example, criminalization in states with a history of British colonial rule, such as Singapore and Malaysia (but not in the Philippines or Thailand; Sanders, 2009), and anticipatory anti-LGBT mobilization in Malaysia (Bosia & Weiss, 2013; Weiss, 2013). Religious condemnation, for instance, the institutionalized moral exclusion of same-sex sexualities in Islam (in Indonesia) and Roman Catholicism (in the Philippines), but less so within Buddhism (in Vietnam or Thailand), is another example (Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009; UNDP & USAID, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c). Cultural exclusion (e.g., traditional beliefs that being gay or lesbian is incompatible with valued practices like marriage, parenting, and family life, such as in Vietnam; Feng et al., 2012) is yet another. Our findings indicate that apart from these structural and contextual levels of analysis of homonegative social stigma, there is also considerable variance in country-level public opinion towards lesbians and gay men in six countries of Southeast Asia — consistently higher levels of homonegativity in Indonesia and Malaysia, ambivalent attitudes in Vietnam, and relatively less rejecting views in Singapore, Thailand, and especially the Philippines.

The findings appear to provide some evidence for the popular notion that the Philippines and Thailand are indeed some of the most "gay-friendly" countries in Southeast Asia, while Indonesia and Malaysia much less so. Though the data do not allow for direct tests at the aggregate level due to the small number of countries in this Southeast Asian sample ($n = 6$), we speculate that the inter-country differences in public opinion may be partly associated with differences in dominant religion (e.g., Islam versus the others) as argued by European researchers of homonegativity (e.g., Jäckle & Wenzelburger, 2015; van den Akker, van der Ploeg, & Scheepers, 2013), as well as in the varying degrees of visibility of LGBT life and culture in a country, including popular positive representations in media, which represent an indirect form of contact with minority groups such as lesbians and gay men (Schiappa, Gregg, & Hewes, 2005).

As in all secondary analyses of preexisting data, some caveats merit mention. First, though we analyzed nationally representative data from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam, there are other countries in Southeast Asia like Laos, Cambodia, Brunei, Myanmar, as well as East Timor, for which the WVS provides no comparable information. Broadening the analysis will provide a fuller snapshot of homonegativity in the region, especially considering that same-sex relations may be highly proscribed in countries like Brunei (where gay sexuality is criminalized) and East Timor (with its majority Roman Catholic population) but less so in Laos and Cambodia (with their increasingly visible LGBT populations). Second, measurement of homonegativity was limited to single-item measures. These do not permit disaggregation of social attitudes toward lesbians versus toward gay men; likewise, other dimensions of homonegative public opinion, such as pathologization beliefs, support for criminalization, or rejection of same-sex unions remain untapped by the WVS measures (Andersen & Fetner, 2008; Lottes & Grollman, 2010). Finally, other predictors that have been found in the literature, most importantly, intergroup contact, are not measured in the WVS. Given the mixed pattern of associations we found between traditional predictors to homonegativity at the individual level across the six countries, it is likely that other factors are at work and need to be studied further. Future research would do well to include these other variables.

Despite these caveats, we believe that empirical assessment and comparison of public opinion across the Southeast Asian region can provide a barometer of how far we have gone — or need to go — in advancing social acceptance of sexual minorities in this part of the world (Laurent, 2005; van den Akker et al., 2013). This empirical analysis, based on nationally representative data from six Southeast Asian countries, is a small contribution to this line of social science inquiry.

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