Why Is It So Hard to Talk About Same-Sex Experience? A Case Study of Veiled Silence in a Research Relationship through Reflexive and Autoethnographic Lens

Thi Gammon iD
King's College London, UK

Abstract: Research into intimate details of human life can be challenging for the parties involved. This article is a case study of a research situation in which I, as an interviewer, failed to elicit information from a male Vietnamese interviewee who evaded discussing specific details of his romantic life. I argue that this situation—the man's avoidance of sharing details of his feelings toward people of the same sex and my discomfort in facing his avoidance—reveals a culture of silence regarding same-sex experiences in Vietnam. The study utilizes autoethnographic anecdotes of my experience of growing up in such a culture and observing similar evasive attitudes. It also adopts a reflexive approach that delves into segments of my second research encounter with the interviewee as well as my internal struggles, including feelings of anxiety and guilt about probing into an informant's romantic life. It seeks to enrich Lisa A. Mazzei's concept of "veiled silence," which describes the deliberate non-engagement with taboo topics by linking it with the idea of a "culture of silence," or a disempowering social environment, and discussing these concepts in the context of Vietnam. It also contributes to the literature on LGBTQ+ matters in Vietnam and qualitative research methods by recommending greater attention to silence in research encounters, which can offer unexpected insights for studies into sensitive issues.

Thi Gammon holds a Ph.D. in Media Studies from the Victoria University of Wellington. She is a Research Associate at King's College London's Department of Culture, Media, and Creative Industries. Her work has been published in multiple journals, including *Journal of Psychosocial Studies*, *Studies in Gender and Sexuality*, *Asian Studies Review*, *Sexuality & Culture*, *NORMA: International Journal for Masculinity Studies*, and *Feminist Media Studies*. Gammon's work focuses on contemporary Vietnamese society and culture.

email address: thi.gammon@kcl.ac.uk

In the summer of 2019, I conducted interviews for my doctoral project on Vietnamese audience reception of soft masculinities, that is, the romanticized and aestheticized representations of male characters in romantic South Korean television dramas (known as K-dramas, now a globally recognizable television genre), often manifested in gentle and effeminate men (Gammon 2021a; 2021b; 2022). For this project, I traveled back to Vietnam, my home country, and recruited Vietnamese participants of any gender orientation who watched K-dramas and were willing to meet me twice[1] for interviews. My purpose was to ask these participants about their viewing experiences, for example, how they perceived soft masculinities and romantic relations in K-dramas, especially regarding gendered identification and desires. Initially, I recruited people through a post on my social media page, a Facebook ad funded by my university—the Victoria University of Wellington's research grant, and a recruitment ad, which a few friends posted for me at the cafés they owned. I only recruited people I was not friends with and had never met to minimize bias. While I had no difficulty finding female applicants, I struggled to find male ones, possibly because of the stigma linked to romantic K-dramas as a female-oriented genre (Ainslie 2017; Gammon 2021a). I therefore resorted to snowball sampling—asking friends and acquaintances if they knew any men who might fit the criteria and be interested in participating in my project.

A long-time friend of mine then introduced me to Lam (pseudonym), a middle-class man in his mid-twenties, who was working for a broadcasting company. According to my friend, Lam watched a lot of South Korean television and cinema. Without me asking, my friend told me that Lam was gay with the intention of providing me with an important detail about the person. The "revelation" of my friend, whom I trust due to our long-time friendship, resulted in a biased assumption in my mind—that Lam might be gay, and I did not even consider the other possibility that he might be bisexual. With that in mind, I had hoped that the man would come out to me and possibly share about his same-sex experience, as three other participants who identified as gay or bisexual did in their encounters with me. The reason why the others came out was because of my questions about their romantic experiences, which were outlined as part of my research in the Information Sheet sent to every participant. The relevant section of the document reads:

> I will ask you questions about (1) yourself and your background (education, lifestyles, hobbies, etc.), (2) how you view Korean television dramas and what you feel about male characters in those dramas, (3) your life experiences that involve men, including social, romantic, and family relationships, and what you feel about "masculinity." [Gammon 2021a:219]

However, contrary to my inappropriate expectation, Lam was evasive about gendered experiences, even though he attended two interviews, demonstrated friendly manners, and shared details about

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[1] Following Hollway and Jefferson's (2000) psychoanalytically inspired free association model, I adopted a "double interview" method, which means most participants were interviewed twice on separate occasions. The first interview should afford a preliminary reading, with attention to contradictions, inconsistencies, evasions, and nuances of emotional tone in narratives, while the second further investigates information provided during the first. The time gap between interviews (at least two weeks) is for me to reflect on the first encounter, read through a draft transcript to get to know an informant better, and *immerse* myself in my thoughts and feelings about the informant (Whitehouse-Hart 2014). It also enabled informants to reflect on the research topic and thus possibly produced richer data in the second interview. Each interview lasted approximately two hours.

his childhood, studies, and work. At one point in the second interview, Lam acknowledged having felt attracted to certain men but did not elaborate. Because of my confusion and concern over the authenticity of the data collected with Lam at the time, I excluded such data from my doctoral thesis but have kept thinking about my research encounters with him from time to time. Exploring part of such shelved dataset, this article examines a research situation—the moments in our second interview during which Lam's evasion was evident and my discomfort as a researcher as I encountered the situation. Using a reflexive approach that probes into my emotional experience and autoethnographic vignettes, I discuss the double meaning behind the situation—why it might be difficult for Lam to be more open about his feelings toward men and why I found it challenging to probe questions about that aspect of his life. While I discuss the dialogues we had and offer some interpretation of Lam's attitude, I prioritize examining my emotional difficulty rather than the difficulty Lam might have. Overanalyzing his evasion runs the risk of imposing my assumptions on his self-presentation, while I have authority over my thoughts and feelings.

Seeking to make sense of such an *unsuccessful* research relationship, this article utilizes the concept of "veiled silence," a situation in which research participants speak, but their speech deviates from the question(s) being posed because they do not know how to directly address the issue in question (Mazzei 2003; 2007). The article argues that this silence, evident in the participant's response and mildly challenged by the researcher through vague questions, signals the culture of silence and ambiguity regarding same-sex experiences in Vietnam, which stifles open discussions of same-sex

desires and practices. Joining Lisa A. Mazzei's call for greater attention to silences as "silent speech" and "absent presence" (Mazzei 2007), the article argues for the insights that can be gathered from such attention, in this case, the latent meanings of our shared difficulty in discussing same-sex desires and practices, and brings to the fore the broader problem of social evasion regarding such matters. The following section offers background information about the broader research project and the situation in question.

Contextual Background

My doctoral research, which focuses on gendered experiences and adopts the Free Association Narrative Interview method characterized by the solicitation of free talk and psychosocial attention to individual case studies involving biographical details (Hollway and Jefferson 2000; Whitehouse-Hart 2014; Gammon 2021a), requires probing into the intimate realm and involves intrusive questions. As such, it went through a rigorous ethical application procedure before being approved to take place.[2] Questions about romantic relationships are important because the method is about connecting lived and viewing experiences. For example, my research finds that a married woman watched romantic K-dramas to vicariously live out the passion lacking in her heterosexual marriage (Gammon 2022) and reveals a link between a straight man's losing interest in escapist romantic K-dramas and his disillusionment with romantic love (Gammon 2021b). My encounters with most participants proved satisfactory as they gave detailed responses about their gendered experiences and views of romantic Korean dramas, and some resulted in heartfelt, intimate stories.

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[2] The ethics application ID number for the project is 0000026887.

It is salient to note that while before we met, I hoped that Lam would come out, I did not think it was absolutely necessary for him to explicitly do so by labeling his sexual identity. My commitment to queer theory, which challenges the idea of an inherent and fixed gender and argues that such an idea is a construction produced through reiterated enactments of gender in everyday life (Butler 2006), taught me to keep an open mind. I am receptive to the idea that some people may not identify as members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and others, also known as the LGBTQ+ community, even though they engage in queer sexual practices, and I am cognizant of non-binary identifications. Following Judith Butler (2006), who refutes a monolithic gender status for both heterosexuality and homosexuality, I assumed that people who identify as heterosexual could still have queer experiences, and queer-identified cis-gender people could also hold romantic emotions toward members of the opposite sex. In such an approach, queer theory problematizes the dichotomy of man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, feminine/masculine (Li 2018) and "honor[s] the complexity of human agency" and "the instability of identity" (Valocchi 2005:768). With that in mind, I did not ask participants to explicitly state their sexual orientation but encouraged them to share their romantic experiences where they were comfortable.

Thus, what made me confused and anxious was not simply the fact that Lam did not come out by labeling his sexual identity, suppose he is not straight, but that he acknowledged same-sex attractions briefly, only to deflect from that altogether. And even though he presented himself as a straight man, he was avoidant of most questions about romantic relationships. In revealing my hope, I did not claim it was an appropriate feeling—I simply shared what I honestly felt at the time. To me, then, the explicit

labeling of sexual orientation was not essential, but a willingness to open up is important for authentic, reliable data, especially because the interview approach is grounded in the connection between biographical details and viewing experiences, as well as the discussion of gender relations and gender views. Lam's evasiveness thus caused me anxiety during and after the two interviews. Such (non-clinical) anxiety is linked to my ethical concerns as a researcher (that I may offend or upset him), concern about the authenticity of the data collected from Lam, and fear of failure. After the first interview, I wondered if I should meet him again for a second encounter. When I finally made up my mind to contact him again, I was determined that, while I would not pressure him into coming out due to ethical concerns and the possibility that my friend's assumption might be wrong, I would ask him explicitly if he had feelings for men, and if he could share with me some details of his experience with men. I figured that it might be inappropriate to ask him upfront about his sexual identity, but it would be okay to simply ask those questions, as the ambiguity would render it safe. When we finally met for the second time, before I started my questioning, I reassured Lam of my principle to keep participants' identities anonymous. I was also careful in progressing, sometimes resorting to indirect questioning. However, the result I got was still ambiguous responses, which I will present in detail later in this article.

Theoretical and Methodological Approaches

Seeking to make sense of an *unsuccessful* research relationship with the same participant formed through two interviews, this article utilizes the concept of "veiled silence," a situation in which re-

search participants do speak, but their speech deviates from the question(s) being posed, because they do not know how to directly address the issue in question (Mazzei 2003; 2007). Veiled silence is often accompanied by "avoidance, denial, deflection, reframing, and intellectualizing" (Mazzei 2003:363). My attention to Lam's veiled silence is to heed Mazzei's (2003:358) call to treat silence as part of the whole phenomenon that is the interview content because "we as researchers need to be carefully attentive to what is not spoken, not discussed, not answered, for in those absences is where the very fat and rich information is yet to be known and understood." Calling for a "problematic of silence," Mazzei (2007:46) proposes a deconstructive approach through attention to qualitative data likely to be "left out, excluded, and literally silenced."

Building on Mazzei's idea, Tracy Morison and Catriona Macleod (2014:696) explain how "talk about unrelated or peripheral topics can be theorized as 'noise' that serves to 'veil' silence on a topic." Extending Morison and Macleod (2004)'s argument that veiled silence masks people's inability to discuss a topic, I contend that continuous silence regarding an issue, in this case, same-sex experience (whether of emotional or sexual nature) in Vietnamese culture, reveals a societal discomfort with the topic and suggests a long way toward freedom in queer expressions and practices. Lam's veiled silence and my anxiety, stemming from my fear of offending him, will be explained through a link to this culture of ambiguity and silence surrounding same-sex feelings and dating practices. While contemporary Vietnamese society seems to have become more accepting of LGBTQ+ issues on the surface, it continues to stigmatize them through both straight and queer people's unwillingness to confront these issues in everyday life.

This article connects "veiled silence" with "culture of silence," a concept used by various scholars in discussing the oppression of marginalized groups. The term "culture of silence" is not coined by a particular scholar but is widely used to indicate the lack of communication regarding sensitive issues such as corporate misconduct (Verhezen 2010), disability (Yoshida and Shanouda 2015), HIV/AIDS (Grünkemeier 2013), women's sexual lives (Nkealah 2009), and poverty (Boone, Roets, and Roose 2019) out of fear and discomfort caused by an oppressive environment. A culture of silence is often sustained by the lack of dialogues concerning issues of inequalities perpetuated by both a dominant group that holds greater power and a marginalized group that internalizes their oppression through continuous compliance (Freire 1970; Boone et al. 2019). The most influential theorist who has used this term is educational philosopher Paulo Freire (1970:47), who argues that in a culture of silence, "the oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom." By connecting Mazzei's "veiled silence" with the "culture of silence," this article does not focus on deliberate, explicit attempts to silence marginalized voices using formal sanctions or explicit bullying but rather on the fact that the local culture is not enabling enough to allow for complete freedom of expressions concerning same-sex desires and practices, rendering discussions of these matters uncomfortable and challenging. Veiled silence is thus a symptom of a culture of silence or the lack of a supportive environment. In her 2007 book on silence in qualitative research, Mazzei mentions the "culture of silence" a few times but does not make clear its connection with "veiled silence."

In an attempt to paint a fuller picture of the local heteronormative culture the present literature has yet to adequately address, I use autoethnographic vi-

gnettes, or personal anecdotes, to reveal how I, a heterosexual woman, have experienced the culture of silence regarding same-sex desires and practices in Vietnam. Autoethnography utilizes academics' personal experiences to reveal the social and cultural context of an issue, thus "connecting the personal to the cultural' (Ellis and Bochner 2000:39). Although autoethnographic data are provided by researchers, these involve critical reflections on society to enhance an understanding of society through the lens of self (Chang 2008).

I also adopt a reflexive approach that delves into my internal struggles, including feelings of anxiety and guilt about probing an informant's romantic life. A reflexive approach, as Mats Alvesson and Kaj Sköldberg (2017:5-6) describe, "turns attention 'inwards' towards the person of the researcher, the relevant research community, society as a whole, intellectual and cultural traditions, and the central importance, as well as the problematic nature of language and narrative (the form of presentation) in the research context." Through reflections on my experience of discomfort, I respond to the call for a queer approach, which "conceptualizes discomfort as a productive tool for challenging the status quo and inciting social change" and promises methodological and analytical insights (Connell 2018:131). James McDonald (2016) terms this combination of reflexivity and queer approach "queer reflexivity," acknowledging their common objective of challenging taken-for-granted notions. Reflexivity disrupts the entrenched idea that good research must be *objective* by demonstrating how such objectivity is impossible in social research. Reflexivity makes the research process, such as the decisions researchers make while collecting and analyzing data and the relationship between researchers and participants,

transparent so that readers can explore the authentic context of research (McDonald 2016).

Through this case study, I argue that examining the researcher's background and personal experience helps expose the broader meaning of this awkward situation—that the heteronormative culture we grew up in affected both me and the informant in how we co-produced the data. Laying bare my feelings incurs risks as it makes my reputation as a researcher vulnerable and open to judgment (Custer 2014), but I deem it necessary for the insights it offers. Before the main discussion, I review the literature on societal engagement with LGBTQ+ issues across cultures and in Vietnam. While I do not argue for the participant's sexual orientation as a gay person because of what my friend said, I find the need to engage with the scholarship concerning the international and local LGBTQ+ movements and the coming out rhetoric to help explain why it is hard for men, regardless of whatever sexual orientation they identify with, to be open about same-sex desires and practices (whether they are of a sexual nature or not).

The (In-)Visibility of LGBTQ+ Issues across Cultures and in Vietnam

In many cultures, everyday discussions of same-sex experiences remain taboo. With the rise of the LGBTQ+ movement worldwide, there have been changes to varied extents. Moves to legalize same-sex marriages in Western countries over the past 10-15 years have allowed more people to open up about their non-heterosexual lives. Such progress, however, does not mean queer people can feel safe discussing their private lives in all circumstances. In most situations, they need to *read the room* and the people they encounter to decide whether or not

to come out (Gusmano 2008; Adams 2010; Orne 2011; Bosson, Weaver, and Prewitt-Freilino 2012).

With the LGBTQ+ movement comes the paradox of coming out. The coming out imperative, while seen as empowering for many, has been criticized as putting pressure on people who "can't afford the risks of sexuality disclosure" (Connell 2018:126). Those more willing to disclose their gender identity also face the dilemma of where and when to come out and face disapproval both when they do and when they do not (Adams 2010; Orne 2011). Tony Adams (2010:246) shares his struggles of being a gay man working in education: "I risk being awkward, selfish, and politically motivated for coming out too soon, and feel guilty, shameful, and dishonest for coming out too late or not at all." This dilemma explains why many gay people remain secretive about their sexual identity (Adams 2010; Bosson et al. 2012; Collins and Callahan 2012).

Brian Horton (2018) reveals that Indian activists may be expressive about their sexuality in public spaces away from home but keep silent in the family and home community out of a desire to avoid conflict and protect their family from censure. Lucetta Yip Lo Kam (2012), who documents Chinese lesbians' everyday struggle to reconcile their same-sex desire and dating practices with the local dominant rhetoric of family harmony and compulsory marriage, argues that silence can be a form of symbolic violence and that such violence takes away queer people's will to speak. Such silence, disguised as quiet *tolerance* marked by a lack of extreme reactions toward same-sex practices, keeps those engaging in such practices in the shadows. I would argue that Vietnam has shown the same phenomenon of silence as symbolic violence regarding LGBTQ+ issues.

In Vietnam, under the influence of Westernization as a result of the 1986 *Đổi Mới* (reform) policy, marked by the transition from a command economy to a "socialist-oriented market economy" that has fostered Vietnam's integration into global networks (Werner and Bélanger 2002; Hayton 2010) and a more relaxed, flexible social life (Nguyen 2007; Martin 2013), the LGBTQ+ movement has made visible progress since the 2010s (Gammon 2021a). Such progress is manifested by the more appearances and discussions of LGBTQ+ members and issues in the public sphere, including local mainstream media, during the past decade (Ives 2018; Gammon 2021a). Multiple Vietnamese celebrities have come out as gay or transsexual and enjoy continued support from audiences, mostly the younger groups. Compared to many other Asian countries, Vietnam has even been regarded as more open-minded in this matter (Ives 2018; Gammon 2021a). Although same-sex marriage has not been legally recognized, it is neither banned nor condemned by state officials, and same-sex weddings have taken place and appeared in the news (Nguyen 2016; Horton 2019; Human Rights Watch 2020). In 2014, the government legalized sex-affirmation operations. In 2022, the Ministry of Health sent an official letter to health care services requesting equal treatment toward LGBTQ+ people, asking these services not to treat homosexuality, bisexuality, and transsexuality as medical conditions requiring treatment (Thư Viện Pháp Luật n.d.). This gesture was considered a progressive milestone by the LGBTQ+ community as it helped remove a deep-rooted stigma against homosexuality that views it as a disease—a view long perpetuated until the recent LGBTQ+ movement (Horton 2014; Tran 2014; Trần 2016). Meanwhile, Vietnamese youth began consuming Japanese and Chinese "boys love" fiction and celebrating same-sex romance (Nguyễn and Nguyễn 2018; Trịnh and

Nguyễn 2020). Many urban middle-class millennials have started to enjoy the benefits of the LGBTQ+ movement—they have some freedom in their private lives, such as having same-sex relationships and disclosing such relationships to peers (although they are less likely to discuss it with families) (Trần 2016). These benefits, however, are often not enjoyed by queer people living in rural areas due to limited local understandings of LGBTQ+ issues (Ha 2020).

Despite such progress, the local heteronormative culture (Warner 1991), which perpetuates the ideal of the heterosexual family and reproduction (see: Horton 2019; Gammon 2021a), still marginalizes the LGBTQ+ group and makes it hard for queer people to openly embrace their sexual identity and same-sex dating practices. Under the influence of Confucian-inflected teachings of complementary gender roles, men and women have been subject to the regulation of hegemonic gender ideals. Men are traditionally expected to continue the patrilineal line, be "head of the household," and act as their family's breadwinners (Soucy 1999; Rydstrøm and Drummond 2004; Tran 2004; Nguyen and Simkin 2017). Women are, by contrast, expected to serve as the primary caregivers (Luong 2003; Drummond 2004) and "keepers of morality" (Nguyen and Harris 2009) in the family. In this culture, every man and woman is expected to marry a member of the opposite sex and have children; otherwise, they risk being seen as abnormal and disapproved by their families and living community (Soucy 1999; La 2012).

Societal expectations demand that local gay people "keep a low profile" and confine same-sex intimacy to the private arena (Nguyen 2019:548). A man looking and acting conspicuously gay in Vietnam often suffers from homophobic harassment (Horton 2014; Human Rights Watch 2020). While discussions of LGBTQ+ matters have become more common, the majority of gay people tend to be misrecognised or remain invisible in everyday life; some live publicly as straight men and even get married to a woman (Horton 2019). Many gay men call themselves shadows (*bóng*), which metaphorically captures how they keep their queer identity a secret and thus remain socially invisible and misrecognized as straight (Horton 2019; Tsedendemberel 2021). When queer people do come out, they tend to do so to a few people. Gay men, in particular, often seek to display a "healthy" lifestyle to prove themselves "normal" and be socially accepted (Trần 2016). This echoes Kam's observation of how people engaging in same-sex experiences in China are under pressure to build a reputation of "a socially respectable person," that is, "an economically productive member of society" and "positive representation" (Kam 2012:90) before they can live their non-heterosexual lives publicly.

Autoethnographic Anecdotes: My Experience with Queer People in Vietnam

As a middle-class heterosexual Vietnamese woman who lived in urban Vietnam for nearly thirty years before immigrating to the West, I find it relevant to discuss my previous experience of ambiguity and silence in LGBTQ+ matters in everyday contexts, which helps explain my discomfort in encounters with Lam. In what follows, I tell a few mini-stories to illustrate my point.

One of my earliest friends, whom I have known since I was in high school, is not a straight man. However, I only learned that after about fifteen years of our acquaintance. When we met in our teens, the man spoke of his high school ex-girlfriend. Therefore, I always assumed that he was heterosexual. One

time, in an intimate moment in which we confided about personal issues, I asked, "Have you ever dated a man," and he told me he had. It turns out that all the people my friend had been dating within the ten years until that moment were men. I felt surprised, not by the fact that he had had same-sex experience, but that he had never told me before that moment, even though we had been good friends all those years. We did not regularly meet but shared personal stories and emotions with each other, even intimate feelings. He talked to me about his romantic relationships multiple times but used feminine nicknames to refer to his partners (whom I never met). I did not ask him why he had never told me, but I supposed that he was not comfortable enough to tell me, or he might assume I already knew.

Another anecdote is about another friend I hung out with a group of friends. He never said he was gay, but all of us (heterosexual men and women) assumed that he was, probably because he is a *sensitive*, well-read guy and seems to have never dated a woman. Even though we occasionally met (before I emigrated to the West) and talked about many issues in life, we never really discussed his sexuality together. At times, someone in the group would tease him about dating another man, and we, including himself, would laugh over it. We never went beyond those jokes.

When it comes to *learning* about others' same-sex experiences, most people seem to figure that out through the so-called "gaydar," that is, the ability to read others' sexual orientation from observing cues in their looks and behaviors (Rule and Alaei 2016); people assume rather than ask anyone upfront. Most of my friends who engage in same-sex experiences never told me straight away that they were not straight. Some would only reveal their sexual orientation after months or years of knowing each other. Only one man came out to me early on while asking me, "Are you okay with this matter," before going into the details, as if afraid to make me uncomfortable. My experience has taught me that while it is now more acceptable for more people to reveal their queer sexuality and talk about LGBTQ+ issues in the urban context, it remains a sensitive issue for most. I have also rarely seen queer people's expressions of affection on the streets, even though public displays of intimate behaviors such as kissing and cuddling have become increasingly more accepted in urban spaces (Charton and Boudreau 2017).

While one would argue that gender, in general, is a sensitive topic of discussion, and dating and marital status count as personal issues, which many may not want to discuss, I would contend that same-sex experience is much more sensitive. During everyday conversations, questions such as *anh/chị lập gia đình chưa* (Have you got married? [presumably to a member of the opposite sex] or *anh có vợ chưa/chị có chồng chưa* [Do you have a wife/husband] are not supposed to be offensive questions, even though they can be considered intrusive. In a collectivist, communist society like Vietnam, people tend to have greater tolerance for others' scrutiny compared to more individualistic cultures such as those in Europe (Sharbaugh 2013). Until recent discourses about privacy due to growing individualism under Western influence (Gammon 2021a), inquiry into marital status remains the most common question people ask one another. Those questions appear in books teaching Vietnamese for beginners, manifesting how marriage (understood as heterosexual marriage between cis-gender people by default) is a recurring topic of conversation in local culture. However, asking a cis-gender person whether they have feelings for or have dated a same-sex person is to go against

the norm and risk exposing a secret they might not want to share. In my entire life, I recall only asking a few people about this possibility, and I only did so after having been friends with them for a while and feeling that we were close enough to ask.

As I reflect on local culture, I realize that when assumptions of heterosexuality keep being made and not go challenged, for example, by open dialogues regarding queer practices, the hegemonic discourse of heteronormativity will be perpetuated. While I do not argue that my anecdotes represent the truth for other Vietnamese people (who may experience more openness regarding this matter because of various reasons), I assert its congruence with the findings of multiple studies regarding LGBTQ+ issues in Vietnam, as presented in the previous section.

The Research Situation, My Anxiety, and Ethical Concerns

When we met in 2019, Lam was a single man in his mid-20s, while I was a woman in my early 30s. Lam worked for a broadcasting company and shared that he had an interest in history. Lam said he liked watching movies and TV shows of various genres. He showed a tendency to intellectualize as he talked. For example, when asked about romantic dramas, he said he enjoyed how the love stories were told in a particular professional context, such as a couple working in a broadcasting company or a publishing house, which reveals the intricacies of those working environments. He added that he liked to observe scenarios rather than characters. Lam framed his media consumption as a learning process, a tendency seen as typical of middle-class audiences (Seiter 1990; Skeggs, Thumim, and Wood 2008; Gammon 2021b). However, Lam did offer some personal details. He shared that he was a child born

out of wedlock and grew up without a father. He confided that he was single-handedly raised by his mother.

Lam presented himself as a heterosexual man but remained evasive about the details of his romantic life throughout our two encounters. In response to my questions about relationships, Lam gave generic, vague answers. For example, he said he did not like dating a possessive person. He said, "I wouldn't like it when a wife says, 'You have to do this, you have to do that.' Mutual trust is necessary." His referring to "a wife" indicates the self-presentation of a heterosexual man. When I inquired who exactly he was referring to, he said he only gave a general example. The following dialogue (which was originally in Vietnamese and translated into English here) reveals his evasiveness more clearly. It happened during the second interview after I had gathered the courage to finally ask him a straightforward question.

> **Me:** Have you ever had feelings for men? [*Em đã bao giờ rung động với đàn ông chưa*]
> **Lam:** Feelings in what way? [*Rung động là như thế nào*]
> **Me:** I don't know, just generally.
> **Lam:** Maybe, because… Because some men, not just actors on screen… Some men are so beautiful that both girls and boys find attractive.
> **Me:** Yes, that's true. I think so, too.
> **Lam:** Like... they are so beautiful that even I find attractive, not just girls. Or there are girls that even girls find attractive, not just boys. But, for me to have feelings, there's only one type.
> **Me:** What's that?
> **Lam:** The manly [he used the English word "manly"] type. How can I say? It's not easy to describe. For example, in this context, you're likely to be drawn to this type, but when you're in a different mood, you're drawn to another type.

Me: You mean in real life?

Lam: Yes.

Me: I have found, from my conversations with a few people, that people now are quite comfortable with that… They do not make a distinction [between heterosexual or queer feelings]. So I'm a little bit curious. Do you have any special experience?

Lam: What kind of experience?

Me: I don't know, a romantic experience, for instance.

Lam: Actually, it's up to each person to see if something's special.

Me: Something you find meaningful?

Lam: [Pauses] Special. Perhaps every relationship is special, and it's hard to choose one that can be called "special." Because it's up to the individuals. So, it's hard to categorize relationships. [Pauses] It's difficult.

The dialogue shows my effort to be reassuring with affirmative expressions such as, "that's true," "I think so, too," and "people now are quite comfortable with that" (hinting at same-sex romantic experience). Here, Lam shared that he could have feelings for certain men and, in fact, a particular type of man, but he tempered this "revelation" with a vague "maybe." Note the irony in his statement: "they are so beautiful that even I find attractive, not just girls." While acknowledging that men can find other men attractive *too*, he ironically evoked a heteronormative stereotype that men are supposed to be only into women, lest a few exceptions. He attributed these exceptions to certain men's overwhelming physical beauty or charisma that exceeds heterosexual logic. His way of responding was evasive. The question is explicitly about romantic feelings (*rung động*), but the way he framed his answer is within a sense of admiration. Furthermore, when I asked, "Do you have any special experience?" (translated from *Em có trải nghiệm gì đặc biệt không*?) which is a yes or no question, he deflected. His refusal to an-

swer this question drove the conversation to a dead end.

Applying Mazzei's (2007) conceptualization of veiled silence, if Lam's later answers are veiled responses, then my question, "Do you have any special experience," in the dialogue above, is a veiled question. The question does not directly mention but alludes to queer dating practices because it follows the earlier question, "Have you ever had feelings for men?" While "Have you ever had feelings for men?" is an attempt to confront his evasiveness until that moment, "Do you have any special experience?" shows a tactic to temper the confrontation while sustaining the inquiry, signaling my fear of pressurizing and offending the man. By "special experience," I alluded to non-normative dating practices but framed them in a positive tone (that this experience is non-normative but valuable) to advance the inquiry in a safe manner. Afterward, in an attempt to save this line of talk, I related back to his "type."

Me: You said you like manly men. What do you mean by that?

Lam: Manly means… manly… manly… like [long pause] very manly.

Me: But there are many types. Any example…?

Lam: Perhaps a well-experienced person [*người từng trải*]. Not necessarily clearly manifested in his face because I'm quite into looks. [**Me:** Is that so?] When it comes to romantic feelings (*trong chuyện tình cảm*), I am quite concerned with looks. I mean, my impression of them, not a dating relationship (*cảm nhận về họ chứ không phải yêu đương gì*). For example, if I find this girl pretty, lovely, then, I become more excited when talking to her. So manly men that make me have feelings for are those… Perhaps I can cite a specific example for you to visualize. It's the actor Song Seung

Hoon [referring to his role as a gangster in the Korean television series *East of Eden*].

Again, Lam was evasive. He explicitly said he cared about looks when it comes to romantic feelings (*trong chuyện tình cảm*), but then corrected himself, saying that he meant his impression of people rather than a dating relationship. Then, he gave an example of how he would become more interested in talking to a girl if she was attractive before referring back to my question about the "manly type." This time, he gave the example of an actor and his traditionally masculine role in a Korean television series rather than a person he met in real life.

It is important to emphasize that Lam was quite articulate during our two interviews. He went about his familial problems or a few issues at work, but he became vague and paused a lot when faced with questions about romantic feelings and relationships. It is also worth noting, however, that while Lam became evasive in response to my questions, he did not appear upset at all. He remained open in his discussion of other issues. At the end of the second interview, we parted ways amicably—I thanked Lam sincerely for his time, and he said he had enjoyed our meetings.

After my encounters with Lam, I felt that the interviews failed. I was unable to make the participant open up, even though he selectively revealed other personal details, such as his growing up without a father. This failure was difficult for me to accept because I had thought of myself as a non-judgmental researcher who fully supports the LGBTQ+ community. And I did, multiple times, remind participants, including Lam, that I was there to listen. Although my attempt was not successful, I still felt guilty for asking Lam the question about same-sex

feelings. I kept asking myself—as a researcher, how far should we push for information while trying to be respectful of a participant's privacy and personal choice?

In my encounters with Lam, he did not show palpable discomfort either through words or uneasy facial expressions. While a few participants have told me that they did not want to talk much about certain issues, Lam never explicitly did that. Apart from questions about romantic relationships, Lam was open to other sensitive topics, such as his distant relationship with his absent biological father. Yet, how he kept evading certain gender-related questions suggested he was not willing to engage with them. I thought it was unethical to pressure him for answers in this case, and, indeed I stopped. Despite my commitment to remain respectful, I could not help but feel helpless and frustrated. His assumed lack of trust left me unsettled. A few years after the encounters, I still, at times, think of Lam and wonder why he was evasive. The lingering feeling of unease regarding this case stems from a sense of *unfinished business* I had with Lam. I had expected an intimate story that never came. I acknowledge, however, that such an expectation was not appropriate and may come across as entitlement.

Discussion

My encounters with Lam were not my only experience of discomfort stemming from a participant's evasiveness. Within the same project, I had uncomfortable meetings with a heterosexual man who refused to talk about his family (see: Gammon 2021b). However, the discomfort I felt with Lam was different because of my feeling that Lam was concealing information about his sexuality and gendered

experiences, a suspicion partly raised from the fact that he only gave superficial answers to questions regarding romantic feelings and relationships and a trusted friend's "information." My friend's "revelation," whether true or not, contaminated my impression of Lam from the start. That is an unexpected risk associated with snowballing recruitment. While I was conscious that questions about intimate relationships can feel intrusive for everyone, I know that it is *more* intrusive for people who deviate from normative gender practices—heterosexual relationships in Vietnamese culture. They can even offend people. As stated earlier, asking straight people about romantic experiences can be a bit intrusive, but it, from my experience, does not offend.

I dread upsetting the participant by assuming he was involved in non-normative gendered practices. If he was not, he might feel offended, as I have encountered some heterosexual men saying that they felt uncomfortable when misrecognized as such, probably because they view queerness as a threat to their masculinity, as research (e.g., Dean 2013) has shown. If he was but chose to present himself as heterosexual, he would possibly still feel offended for several reasons—having someone intruding on his privacy or fear of this information leaking to others, as Catherine Connell (2018) shares from her interview experience. Aside from ethical concerns as a researcher, my anxiety also stems from my experience of growing up in a heteronormative society that privileges heterosexuality by taking it as the default and thus marginalizing queer discourses. That constitutes a culture of silence and ambiguity. With this culture comes a lack of straightforward discussions of LGBTQ+ matters in everyday life. Despite some progressive changes, queer identity and experiences are still stigmatized. Talking about it, asking about it explicitly,

can be offensive. In a heteronormative culture like Vietnam, queerness is understood implicitly rather than explicitly. That was why it was so difficult for me to ask questions, why I felt overwhelming anxiety about asking. The anxiety I felt associated with interviewing Lam may be similar to the discomfort experienced by Eva Cheuk-Yin Li (2018), as she interviewed women with gender-ambiguous looks when they gave ambiguous answers to Li's questions. Like me, Li was very careful in her approach, felt uncomfortable when posing questions, and encountered veiled silence—when a participant "spoke without speaking" (Mazzei 2007:633; Li 2018:54).

Offering a reflexive account of uncomfortable moments during a research interview, this article contributes to the literature concerning the experience of discomfort and challenges in producing authentic data, which have proven common in sensitive research interviews that inquire into intimate details (Connell 2018; Li 2018; Gammon 2021b). Li (2018:55) notes a similar situation of veiled silence in which Chinese participants deflected her questions about people with gender-ambiguous looks by not giving a direct answer, pointing out that such an evasive attitude reveals "complex and uncomfortable realities." Connell (2018) recalls her personal experience of being responded with anger while trying to recruit a gay teacher, as the person was upset about being outed by someone who introduced him to the researcher. In this case, while I was not successful in my attempt to make Lam open up, I argue that cases like that should not be cast aside but instead examined for further reflection due to their rich sociological meanings. Here, it is likely the local culture of silence regarding queer practices that rendered a genuine discussion of queer desires and experiences impossible.

I have met many people who claim that life has become much easier for members of the LGBTQ+ community in Vietnam. The ongoing vibrant activism and the visibility of some gay and trans celebrities give the misleading impression that society is now accepting. While increased awareness has been raised, there are not enough discussions of the culture of silence. I am convinced that more talks can help remove the stigma and taboo associated with same-sex desires and practices. I wish for a changed future in which people no longer feel offended by questions about same-sex experience as the topic is normalized. While I appreciate everyone's right to privacy, I argue that no one should have to feel guilty, embarrassed, or threatened to discuss same-sex feelings and practices. Only so would we enjoy true equality and fully embrace differences when it comes to gender relations.

Concluding Remarks, Limitations, and Implications for Further Research

As I have acknowledged earlier, my speculation that Lam was gay and pre-interview expectation that he might come out were inappropriate and I do not defend them. At my own risk, I reveal that I had human biases despite my role as a researcher. In addition, the risk of snowballing sampling, as this study shows, begs the question of how to prevent unsolicited revelations from a third party. This is one example of the limitations of snowballing recruitment that researchers may need to consider before research.

Heeding Mazzei's call for problematizing silence, I contend that this approach results in insights through its in-depth discussions of the latent meanings of silence attributable to inequalities.

Making silence during research encounters the center of discussion means "breaking down the culture of silence" to "give voice to that which is produced beneath the layers of a hegemonic discourse" (Mazzei 2007:49). This particular case reveals how the culture of silence inhibits open discussions of same-sex experience. Despite the lack of openness in the dialogues between me and the interviewee, the situation can still be analyzed as texts and count as meaningful data. I recommend that studies into sensitive issues such as mine pay attention to datasets showing signs of veiled silence. That said, considering the vagueness, the data need to be handled with care.

Given the fact that my consideration of the possibility of Lam's being non-heterosexual is significantly affected by my friend's "information," I accept the potential criticism that I may have overinterpreted his evasion. I want to re-emphasize that my discussion focuses on his evasiveness and how evasive attitudes like his are symptoms of the local culture of silence; I never intended to indulge inappropriate assumptions about his sexuality (whether he is straight or gay or bisexual). I also focus more on my feelings of anxiety and unease, which I have authority over. My reflections clearly show the impact of the local culture of silence on me. I do not claim to represent the ultimate truth to a situation permeated by vagueness but rather argue that it is worth taking risks to delve into the kind of data often overlooked due to confusion and uncertainty. For future studies into sensitive issues, I do not mean to recommend a more pressurizing attitude for other researchers in case they encounter an informant's evasiveness concerning a risky topic, as that would be unethical, but I call for the courage to delve into silence and vagueness for unforeseen insights.

Thi Gammon

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