Priawan: Indonesian male transgenders

Priawan: Transgender pria Indonesia

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Abstract

There have been cases of male transgender in Indonesia, yet there is a small study about them. Why do some biological females claim their identities as male transgender? How do they think of themselves as male transgender? The researcher study their life history and how they see themselves as male transgender. We have a total of six research subjects who acknowledged themselves as male transgender. This research used the in-depth interview for gathering data within six months. The results found that they became transgender based on their desire rather than coercion from others. Some of them were comfortable in coming out to their family, but most were considering how the society would judge them, and how they might bring shame to the family. Three research subjects were not able to show their true identity as transgender, because of several considerations, such as the fear of being ostracized by the society and the fear to be eliminated from their family. They took the gender role according to what would be accepted by the current environment. We conclude that the existence of transgender, who is biologically females to become males are very reluctant to open their sexual identity because of this reason.

Keywords: transgender; social construction; constructivism; identity; interaction

Abstrak

Ada banyak kasus transgender laki-laki di Indonesia, tetapi hanya ada sedikit studi tentang mereka. Mengapa beberapa wanita secara biologis mengklaim identitas mereka sebagai transgender pria? Bagaimana mereka menganggap diri mereka sebagai transgender pria? Kami mempelajari sejarah hidup mereka dan bagaimana mereka melihat diri mereka sebagai transgender laki-laki. Kami memiliki total enam subjek penelitian yang mengakui diri mereka sebagai transgender laki-laki. Kami menggunakan wawancara mendalam untuk mengumpulkan data, dalam waktu enam bulan. Hasilnya menemukan bahwa mereka menjadi transgender berdasarkan keinginan mereka sendiri daripada paksaan dari orang lain. Beberapa dari mereka merasa nyaman untuk keluar ke keluarga mereka, tetapi kebanyakan mempertimbangkan bagaimana masyarakat akan menghakimi mereka, dan bagaimana mereka mungkin membuat malu keluarga. Ada tiga subjek penelitian yang tidak dapat menunjukkan identitas mereka yang sebenarnya sebagai transgender, karena beberapa pertimbangan, seperti ketakutan dikucilkan oleh masyarakat dan ketakutan untuk dihilangkan dari keluarga mereka. Mereka mengambil peran gender sesuai dengan apa yang akan diterima oleh lingkungan saat ini. Kami menyimpulkan bahwa keberadaan waria yang secara biologis perempuan untuk menjadi laki-laki sangat enggan untuk membuka identitas seksual mereka karena alasan ini.

Kata kunci: transgender; konstruksi sosial; konstruktivisme; identitas; interaksi

Introduction

Human beings cannot develop in accordance with their human dignity without living in a social environment (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman 2006). Every individual has a rational nature that is responsible for the intellectual and social behaviour. Some elements exist in society, such as norms, social institutions, as well as the realization of every individual (Ihromi 1999). Not all of these elements proceed as desired by the community. Problems concerning values and moral terms

sometimes are related to sexual behaviour. Homosexuality is one of the behaviours that sometimes become a concern in society because they are not being understood well (Soekanto 2007). It is because the number is not as many as the other sexual orientation—the heterosexuals—that outnumbered the homosexuality so that it is most of the times considered as usual, because most people are heterosexuals (Kartono 2007).

In the society, there are gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender (Meyer et al. 2007); although the appearing number is not as significant as the reality, because many of them are afraid to admit their sexual orientations and their genders (Faulkner and Hecht 2011). Some people think that gay and transgender are the same (Moran, and Sharpe 2004), but, there are some differences (Fassinger and Arseneau 2007) that are quite visible when they are observed strictly. Gays are men interested sexually to other men (Oetomo 2003). It is different from transgender (Makadon & Harvey 2008). Transgender think that they are souls trapped in the body of the opposite sex (Becking et al. 2007). The research conducted in male transgender—well known as *priawan* in Indonesia. Those are individuals who think they are men trapped in the body of females (Zita 1992, Daniluk 1999).

In Indonesia, no one has examined the experience of female individuals who have chosen as the male gender. Many theoretical and empirical studies on transgender focus on transsexuals, they study gender identities that conflict with their sex category (Benjamin 1966, Bolin 1988, Devor 1997, Kando 1973, Raymond 1994). In the 2000s, many gay students who were active in on-campus organizations had changed from "Gay" organizations to "Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender" groups (Bullough 2002). For example, The Stonewall Center, as a human resource centre consisting of gays, lesbians, bisexuals, in universities in the United States America added the word "transgender" in 1995 (Blasius & Phelan 1997). Meanwhile, in the USA the acceptance of new students or the field of junior high school and senior high school admissions staff students look for solutions to gender mismatches related to their policies in their education world (Brink 2002, Shapiro 2002). Therefore, the education system must take the best steps about this (Nadal & Griffin 2015). This research adds to the literature that can be accessed by the education system in their efforts to understand transgender issues.

Transgender people in Indonesia are very diverse, and there are complex phenomena. One of them is a male transgender person. There have been cases of male transgender in Indonesia, yet there is a small study about them. Their behaviour is different from cisgender females. They do not want to be addressed as a female. The term *priawan* was introduced by Koentjoro, a psychology professor from Gadjahmada University in 2004. *Priawan* is used to describe someone who is biologically female, but who considers himself as a man. However, he does not use hormonal substances to alter his biologically female body. Apart from the redefinition of *priawan* as contemporary scientific developments, their existence does not just emerge. Referring to the ethnographic history and literature in this country, the general public entirely knows their existence. Spread from Sulawesi to Sumatra, they are known by descriptive terms such as *calalai* in the Bugis community; Srikandi character in the Javanese wayang tradition; Sentul-Kantil; tomboy and girlfriend in West Sumatra (the 1980s); tomboy and *istri* in West Kalimantan.

In this regard, *calalai* is an example in illustrating *priawan* gender expression. *Calalai*, also known as *Balaki*, refers to people who are born women but take the role of men, in Bugis society. Unlike transgender people who make the transition, *calalai* only dress and present themselves in a masculine male fashion. Interestingly, if in general public rejects the presence of LGBT, *calalai* actually gets recognition in the culture of the Bugis community. Unlike *calalai*, tomboy in West Sumatra tend to face the Minangkabau ideology that requires heterosexual marriage. In the matrilineal culture in this area, a girl plays the role of successor to the family line. Automatically, unmarried women will threaten the integrity and status of family lineage. It often ends in forced marriages. According to Evelyn Blackwood (2009), the continued pressure to marry and threats to forced marriages show how a person's body in this culture determines their gender (Blackwood 2009).

The two examples show that each community has a different degree of acceptance to a third gender. It depends on the traditions that grow in each region. We would like to know how the *priawans*

see themselves, living in a community where the society does not fully accept them. Based on the description discussed above, we want to find out the life of biologically female individuals who claim their identity as Indonesian male transgender or *priawan*. How do they see themselves as a *priawan* or male transgender? The term male transgender in Indonesia is known as *priawan*, and in this paper, we often prefer to use that term.

Research Method

This research is a study of a phenomenon of biologically female individuals who identified themselves as transgender, and in Indonesia, it is often referred to as *priawan*. We use the data collection method through in-depth interviews, in accordance with the purpose of this study, namely to obtain data about the life experiences of research subjects as *priawan*. This research revealed personal stories and their interpretations (Ekins & King 2001) about the transgender life of biological females but are comfortable to be considered as the male gender. We try to understand the phenomenon from the lens of social science (Moustakas 1994:13). This research seeks to "capture the reality of the subject" (Lancy 1993:9). We believe that this is the most appropriate method for understanding transgender life, especially as there is very little understanding of *priawan* in Indonesia.

This study began from 2016 to 2019. The researchers adjusted the schedule of meetings with the research subjects — the research conducted in Surabaya, Yogyakarta and Jakarta. We mostly used the malls at those cities mentioned, as the location of our interview. The researchers asked D. Oetomo as the founder of the GAYa NUSANTARA to help to approach our research subjects. It is a foundation, a pioneer of gay organization in Indonesia that is open and proud of their identity and does not question sexual diversity, gender and sexuality and other backgrounds. This non-profit organization established on August 1, 1987, to strive for LGBTIQ's rights.

We used purposive sampling, and interviewed subjects who already experienced "coming out" as *priawan*. After contacting the research subjects, they sent emails to us, and based on our criteria needed, we chose individuals to be interviewed. For face-to-face interviews, we arrange the time, and met directly in a public place. We sent the consent form and interviewed them only after they agreed. At the beginning of our research, ten subjects agreed to be interviewed. However, along the way, only six research subjects decided to stay as research subjects, the other four for some reasons decided to withdraw. Interviews last from one hour 15 minutes to two and a half hours.

At the beginning of each interview, we explain the purpose of the interview. We explained to the participants that there was a topic we wanted to cover, and we also encouraged them to discuss other topics that they considered suitable. Most of the interview process went very well; meanwhile, there were several research subjects whom we needed to take more time to be approached. Usually, the research subjects discussed many topic areas in the interview process, and their answers determined the next topic to be discussed.

The themes we propose in our interviews were transgender identity, sexual attribution, and sexuality. We invited our research subjects to participate based on those criteria. They have shown strong abilities to express themselves in the conducted interviews. They also demonstrated their ability to articulate and understand their experiences, for themselves and us. We realized that to get access to small and secret communities like these would be a challenge; therefore first we used online media and contacted them via email, and through social media such as Instagram and Facebook.

We started this study, assuming that most of the data cannot be quantified. Here we do not intend to test the theory; instead, we explore data inductively and allow data to "speak for itself" (Wolcott 1994:13). We intended to describe, analyse, and interpret data (Rossman & Rallis 1998:10, Wolcott 1994), instead of measuring. We began to focus on the description, and we discussed the general question "What happened here?" (Wolcott 1994) before turning to analysis and interpretation. In short, we identify the main themes underlying the data. Finally, we interpret the broader meaning offered by our analyses in terms of how people experience and present transgender identities.

Results and Discussion

Based on our interview, the six research subjects join some organizations related to their sexualities that are related to the advocate of LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) in Indonesia. They joined some organizations such as Gaya Nusantara, Transman Indonesia, Ardhanary Institute, and *Priawan* Indonesia. The participants aged 20 to 41 years old, identified themselves as Javanese, Chinese, mixed, or "other". The social-economic status was middle class, upper-middle-class, and lower middle class; their occupation status varies--students, private employees, consultants, entrepreneurs, and small business owners. The research subjects have proper education levels. Most of them were at the college level; some of them graduated from some postgraduate programs. The religions were mostly Christian, and a few were Muslims, and one of them was others. They identified their sexual orientation as lesbian.

Theory of social construction cannot be separated from the statement conveyed by Berger and Luckmann. The theory of social construction is the theoretical and systematic study of sociology as a science. In the academic record, Berger and Luckmann's thinking seems relatively intact in their book entitled "The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge". Publication of this book received tremendous response from various parties, especially social scientists, because at that time the scientific thinking, including the social sciences, is dominated by positivistic studies. Berger and Luckmann believe that reality is the result of creative human creation through the power of social construction toward the social world around them, the reality is socially constructed.

Berger & Luckmann (1990) connect between subjective and objective through the concept of dialectics, known as externalization-objectivation-internalization. The first is externalization the adjustment to the socio-cultural world as an individual product; society is a human product. The second is objectivation social interaction in the world of intersubjective which is institutionalized or experiencing institutionalization; society is an objective reality. The third is social organizations in which the individual belonged.

Social construction contains objective and subjective dimensions. Two things stand in seeing the reality of the media role in the objective dimension; they are institutionalization and legitimacy. If the institutionalization and legitimization are objective dimensions of reality, then the internalization is its subjective dimension. Berger's analysis said that an individual is born with a predisposition toward sociality, and he became a member of society. The starting point of this process is internalization, which is a direct understanding or interpretation of the actual events as an expression of meaning. Self-awareness in individuals during the internalization marks the process of socialization.

The social product is the process of institutionalization, while individuals are manifesting themselves, the products of human activity are available, both for the producers and others as an element of the together world. General terms such as transgender certainly imply a variety of experiences and understandings of identity, and these stories communicate the diversity and complexity that exists between transgender identities. In addition, they challenge the stereotype that transgender changing from women to men is homogeneous, androgynous, and obsessed with having a penis (Cromwell 1998). The story range shows the complexity that might occur in gender identity.

This paper describes the construction of a transgender person in facing the family and the surrounding community. In the constructivist paradigm that explains the social reality in different forms of mental construction based on the growth or development of the various social experience of individuals, in other words, this paradigm puts the interpretation of the individual in a central position. If it is reviewed ontologically, this paradigm assumes that social reality exists in various forms of mental construction which are based on the social experience of individuals.

For the subject, this has not been the endpoint for their gender process. Many concluded that it might never be satisfied with gender identity. After a long process of self-discovery, including a period when he thought he was going to transition, just like one of our research subjects said:

"I began to understand [that] transgender for me was something that was able to provide me and create a space for living in gender problems."

There are some similarities between the research subjects. For example, each subject has struggled with the acceptance of the body in one way or another, and most initially identified as lesbians. It is apparent in the area of gender expression, presentation, attribution, and their relationship with their own body is the central theme that is used by all research subjects in the explanation of their identity. Some even being tortured by the guilty feeling, because the society taught them that being different as such, is a sin, is against their belief, and against religion.

"...I am so regretful, when I realized that I like women instead of men (for romantic relationship). Even I just realized, just understand that in the world, there is such a thing. I feel sorry, why I am like this (because it is breaking the nature). ... my mindset and my desire are like a man ..." (Interview, Subject #1).

"Glassing yourself" (Cooley 1902) has proven to play an essential role for most research subjects because they rely on the reactions of others as self-reflection. However, gender experience and its relationship to sexual orientation are rare, especially for people identified as transgender. Although there are similarities, the themes that apply between and in the stories presented here sometimes contradict. There are three kinds of constructivism namely radical constructivism; hypothesis realism; and Common constructivism. Individuals then build their knowledge of the reality that is seen based on the structure of pre-existing knowledge, this is what by Berger & Luckmann (1990) called the social construction.

There are inconsistencies in individual stories, as well as among different groupings, and all the different understandings the transgender experience. Some research subjects recognize the challenges in their life stories. For example, T and W each struggle to succeed in becoming men, and are recognized as transgender. E discusses his desire to have a male body and his view that his transgender identity is real and does not require a solution such as operation on several parts of the body. Some research subjects seemed to consider themselves unaffected by gender hegemony, as M did when he explained that he did not think about gender presentation, but about how he presented himself.

Berger & Luckman (1990) said that public institutions are created and maintained or changed through human action and interaction. Although the public and social institutions are objectively evident, in reality, everything built in a subjective definition through interaction processes, objectivity can only happen through the repeated emphasis that is given by others who have the same subjective definition. On the field, the research subjects experience the process of objectivity with the experience they have experienced since childhood, ranging from opposition and obstacles encountered repeatedly until finally, research subjects define themselves as transgender.

The construction process if it is seen from the perspective of the theory of Berger & Luckmann (1990) takes place through social interaction which is dialectic from the three forms of reality which becomes an entry concept, namely subjective reality, symbolic reality and objective reality. It also takes place in a process with three simultaneous moments, namely externalisation, objectification and internalisation. From the three forms of the reality above, the research subjects experience all three. Objective reality: research subjects perform routine actions and behave like the other gender. Research subjects construct themselves as a man because research subjects define themselves as men who are trapped in female bodies. Research subjects acknowledge themselves as men and show their image to the public as men. Berger & Luckmann (1990) find the concept to connect the subjective and objective through the concept of dialectics. It is known as externalization-objectivation-internalization; society is an objective reality.

Individual self-awareness during internalization marks the process of socialization. Although RA, NB and EM realize that they are "different", but they are not able to express themselves so that they remain to pretend themselves in front of their family. However, their self-awareness remains deep down, and they keep it for themselves.

"... I am sure that right now I have the special gift I have, I know (the perspective) from both sexes. I mean, I know exactly how it feels to be a girl. I was raised as a woman, so I have been seen as a woman ... But there is another side of me, which is more to... being seen as a male, ... I can relate to men, and I know how to talk to them ..., but for me, it is difficult to come out honestly because it involves my true identity (that I am not comfortable to share with just anyone)". (Interview, Subject #2).

According to Berger & Luckmann (1990), knowledge in question is a social reality, such as concept, public awareness, public discourse, as a result of the social construction, social reality is constructed through a process of externalization, objectivation, and internalization. Further, they said that social construction loaded with interests. The essential thing in the objectivation is the manufacture of significance, namely the making of signs by humans. Berger & Luckmann (1990) stated that a sign could be distinguished from other objectivations because the purpose that is explicit to be used as a cue or index for subjective meaning, then objectivation can also be used as a sign, although it was initially not made for that purpose.

We found that our research subjects have their meaning regarding the transgender, although in the families, communities, and their religions they believe that transgender is considered wrong, weird, and violate the rules of religion. Research subjects remain to be transgender because their conscience believed that they are transgender. Three of the research subjects do not care about what other people said or think about them. For them, the most important thing is the support and blessing of their family, and they can live their life happily. It is in contrast to the other three who still have not shown their true identity. They have not been able to enjoy their life as a transgender person.

Based on the interviews, we found that the family's responses to the research subjects becoming transgender can be broken down into three processes too— internalisation, externalisation, and objectification. Most research subjects experienced a good response from their family. Three research subjects experienced inadequate responses when they revealed that they were transgender for the first time, such as a warning, anger, being slapped, or even being hit. Another research subject had experienced opposition from the family but with the full intention and determination finally was able to convince the family to accept her as a transgender person *priawan*.

Based on our interview, the community's responses to the research subjects becoming transgender can also be broken down into three processes too; the social construction processe—internalisations, externalisation, and objectification. Some research subjects ignored the community responses, and three of them are not comfortable to announce themselves as transgender. The community's responses varied. One research subjects were being underestimated, isolated, being called as a deviant, and violating the religion.

"... the community still cannot accept our existence with open arms. They are negative all the time, like 'why having sex with a girl, how can I get a child', such opinion makes me sometimes cry,... for me it is discrimination". (Interview, Subject #3).

It was different from the other research subjects who ignored what the community thought about them. However, they did not dare to show that they were transgender *priawan* because they considered their family and socio-cultural reasons that cannot accept them as transgender. According to Butler (1990), performativity is a form of action that must be repeated over time and has clear legal consequences. The actions that intended here are physical body movements and styles performed by individuals, including language that repeated repeatedly. Gender is an institutionalized cultural and social identity constitution that produced through performative play and role play. Gender in the subject of this research is not a stable identity, and gender can change. The research subjects here also continue to struggle to negotiate the surrounding norms to produce gender performativity that is more open and without violence.

We found gender fluidity in our research subjects. Some of them feel uncomfortable with their identities as male transgender. It is partly because of the view of some people that women who are

sexually interested in other women are considered abnormal. Some of the research subjects felt comfortable when they were considered as men who were attracted to women. However, some feel comfortable with their appearance as they present themselves as they are. The environment also influences this gender fluidity because it is related to the comfort of the research subjects in their environment.

This research found that the life of the male transgender in this study had diverse backgrounds, and in the end, they chose to come out to family and society depending on how comfortable they felt. Gender fluidity occurs there, as stated by Blummer (1969) that humans act on meaning, and that meaning comes from social interaction with others. Likewise, their lives with their partners have agreed with symbols, as Blummer said further, that there are symbols created and agreed upon by the research subjects and their partners.

Culture plays a role in building and regulating the meaning of sexuality. Buttler said that gender is not something natural, but is an attribute, which is formed through performance. The subject of this study establishes that opinion, that in their environment, performance is carried out continuously with their group that is the gender they choose to be, meanwhile, when they are in their family environment — who cannot necessarily accept their situation, they choose to be the gender they perform as the being they choose to become This is where the gender fluidity occurs. For Judith Butlers gender is a show, not essence.

Most of them choose to cover up the reality about themselves in front of their families. They must continue to try to pretend to live as heterosexuals because when they open themselves, they are intentional and can endanger themselves, as mentioned by Tatchell (1997). As one consequence, many of them are very uncomfortable and feel tremendous anxiety by trying to live as heterosexuals in existing social pressures, just as stated by Kort (2003). Russel & Fish (2016) explains that there are consequences that must be faced by transgender from the community because of the openness and disclosure of their sexual identity. Here are some of the voices of the *Priawans*:

"... I am still not ready to open myself to my family and the people surrounding my family ..." (Interview, Subject #4).

"I am comfortable with my present condition (as a *priawan*),... the important thing is that my family do not know about this condition." (Interview, Subject #5).

"I often bring my friends to the house I rent... All the girls live at that house. ... hahaha .. the most important thing is not to make people around—our neighbours asking questions." (Interview, Subject #6).

They must continue to try to pretend to live as heterosexual because opening up is tantamount to intentionally and can endanger themselves (Tatchell 1997). As one of the consequences, many of them are very uncomfortable and feel extreme anxiety by trying to live as heterosexuals in social pressure (Kort 2003), Phar (1995) explains the consequences that must be faced and accepted by trans individuals men from the community because of their openness and disclosure of sexual identity. These consequences are 1) Loss of work which will also have a substantial economic impact. It is still rare for a company or agency not to question the orientation and sexual identity of its employees and for many companies or agencies, homosexuality (gay/lesbian) is something terrible in business (Kelly 1979), 2) Loss of support, acceptance and love from family, 3) Difficulty adopting children because there is still fear that those who are cared for will be infected with being homosexual (gay/lesbian) and can experience sexual abuse, 4) protection and privileges owned by heterosexuals often cannot be disturbed so that homosexuals (gays/lesbians) only get number two services, and 5) There is almost no safe and comfortable place for verbal and physical harassment and assault on the safety of homosexual individuals.

Here we find a new concept of the reality of male transgender in this study that can enrich the application of the four concepts of the theory of symbolic interaction. In the phenomenon of *priawan*,

the use of language as a symbol of identity is not always in the form of verbal language, because using verbal language can be considered as contesting their norm and culture, so that male transgender person manifests it in a form and behaviour that is typical of their group. The formation of self-concept for this group influences the identity which cannot be separated from public acceptance of the *priawan*.

Conclusion

From the data, we understand better how the *priawan* in our study having social construction about themselves. We conclude that 1) research subjects interpret transgender in the process of social construction through a process, first of all, is internalisation. Transgender *priawan* feel that they are men who trapped in the females' body. Although they look like men, they have tenderness of women, and psychologically maybe like women who have some instincts like other women, 2) process is externalisation. In the surrounding community of the research subjects, transgender *priawan* is defined as a woman who feels "he" is a man, so that many people in his society consider him as a person that is "not normal", deviating from her nature, and violating the religious rules that cause most of the people to look down on them because it considered as a weird human, and 3) process is objectivation, when some research subjects establish and reveal themselves as *priawan*. Although people look down on them, they remain happy and feel comfortable because they can show their true identity. The results found that they became transgender based on their desire rather than coercion from others.

Although some of them were comfortable in coming out to their family, most were considering how the society would judge them, and how they might bring shame to the family. The subjects who were not able to show their true identity as a *priawan* were facing the fear of being ostracized by the society and the fear to be eliminated from their family. They took the gender role according to what would be accepted by the current environment. We conclude that the existence of transgender, who is biologically females to become males are very reluctant to open their sexual identity because of this reason.

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