

Playing it straight: A Phenomenological Study of Filipino Homosexual Adolescents who are "Closeted" at Home but are "Out" at School

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Abstract

Though humans are born with a specific sex, their gender preference does not always coincide with the expected gender role dictated upon by the society. This has always been the case for adolescent homosexuals, who apart from their personal struggle to accept their true gender identity, must also face the arduous task of making their peers, families, and friends understand them for who they are. For this reason, some have decided to "come out" at school but remain "closeted" at home. Thus, this research is an exploratory attempt meant to psychologically explain the lived experiences of Filipino adolescent homosexuals who chose to selectively disclose their gender identity. Results were directed towards explaining the reasons, struggles and difficulties of the participants. Psychological implications toward family-child dynamics, identity formation, and coping were also discussed

Keywords: Homosexuality, Psychology, Coming out, Closeted homosexuals, Gender Preference

Introduction

Adolescence is a very challenging phase in every person's life. The adolescents' transition process of figuring out who they are as "no-longer-children, but-not-yet-adults" is a constant struggle.

Developmental tasks such as thinking about a career, fitting into a peer group, developing social skills, coping with increasing independence, and dealing with emerging sexuality (Morrow, 2004) are needed to be mastered during adolescence in order for a person to lead a productive, psychologically healthy life (Radkowsky & Siegel, 1997).

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However, the most important of these developmental tasks is the emergence of one's sense of identity (Erikson, 1950). Identity, in psychological parlance, is "a subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image" (Erikson, 1970, p. 18). This means that for humans, consistency of the view of the self as a similar person across different circumstances and situations is important, most especially to see one's environment as relatively controllable and presenting with similar expectations (Hill et al., 2013)

In Erikson's theory of Psychosocial Development, the process of identity formation is a developmental struggle for adolescents ages 12 to 18 to create a stable identity or to suffer with role confusion. In this stage, people seek for their selves as well as for the answer to the concept of "Who am I". Adolescents who are properly reinforced through personal exploration will emerge from this stage with a strong sense of self-control and independence (Nunley & Snarey, 1998). On the other hand, uncertainty of one's beliefs and desires will lead to role confusion. Adolescents who remain in this phase will develop a weak sense of self, characterized by insecurity and confusion about themselves and the future.

Adolescence is also a time for exploration of one's sexuality. In fact, other developmental psychological theories account sexual identity as a normative task of adolescence or early adults (McCarter, 2003). Particularly, it is where people become aware of their sexual orientation as well as homosexual feelings (Dempsey, 1994; Bidwell, 1988)

However, Identity formation can be especially difficult for homosexual adolescents. According to Radkowsky & Siegel (1997), like all youth, homosexual adolescents must achieve the tasks of their age group. It is unfortunate however that accomplishment of these tasks can be complicated by personal and social conflicts. Inner struggles for homosexual adolescents can include emotional distress, denial, and difficulty to develop self-acceptance (Morrow, 2004). Social issues, on the other hand, include disapproval and rejection from families and friends, violence, and harassment (Morrow, 2004).

Moreover, the psychosocial nature of Filipino people to be socially interdependent makes social desirability for homosexual adolescents more challenging and at times, detrimental.

In the study of Markus and Kitayama (1991), Asian cultures have an interdependent construal of the self, with social acceptance as the core to having greater self identification and psychological well-being. In fact, numerous psychological studies confirms this assertion by stating, through their findings, that having positive family support and supportive school relationships can facilitate positive identity development for adolescent individuals (Cass, 1979, 1984a; Hershberger & D'Augelli, 1995; Proctor & Groze, 1994; Tharinger & Wells, 2000 as cited in Morrow, 2004). Lack of social support, on the other hand, can contribute to internalized homophobia and a negative self-concept, which can hinder the development of a positive identity.

Identity Formation: The Case of Adolescent Homosexuals

One of the foundational theories of gay and lesbian identity development was developed by Cass (1979). Cass described a process of six stages of gay and lesbian identity development as stated below:

1. Identity Confusion: "Could I be gay?" This stage begins with the person's first awareness of gay or lesbian thoughts, feelings, and attractions. The person typically feels confused and experiences turmoil.
2. Identity Comparison: "Maybe this does apply to me." In this stage, the person accepts the possibility of being gay or lesbian and examines the wider implications of that tentative commitment. Self-alienation becomes isolation.
3. Identity Tolerance: "I'm not the only one." The person acknowledges that he or she is likely gay or lesbian and seeks out other gay and lesbian people to combat feelings of isolation.
4. Identity Acceptance: "I will be okay." The person attaches a positive connotation to his or her gay or lesbian identity and accepts rather than tolerates it. There is continuing and increased contact with the gay and lesbian culture.
5. Identity Pride: "I've got to let people know who I am!" The person divides the world into heterosexuals and homosexuals, and is immersed in gay and lesbian culture while minimizing contact with heterosexuals.
6. Identity Synthesis: "This is who I am." The person integrates his or her sexual identity with all other aspects of self, and sexual orientation becomes only one aspect of self rather than the entire identity.

Hence, using this theoretical paradigm, this research would attempt to make an exploratory inquiry meant to understand, from a psychological lens, the lived experiences of Filipino adolescent homosexuals who preferred to stay "closeted" at home but is "out" at school. Particularly, the objectives of the research would be (1) to identify, using the participants lived experiences, the reasons for Filipino homosexual adolescents to act "straight" towards their family, (2) their reasons for deciding to "come out" at school; and (3) To explicate the difficulties of concealing their true identity towards their family.

Methods

Research Design

The study was qualitative in nature since it seeks real life examples to understand the phenomena of interest from the participant's standpoint. In this research, phenomenological approach had been used. Pure phenomenological research seeks essentially to describe rather than explain, and to start from a perspective free from hypotheses or preconceptions (Husserl, 1970). Phenomenological methods are particularly effective at bringing to the fore the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives, and therefore at challenging structural or normative assumptions. This was done to know how the experiences of the chosen participants exhibit a unique perspective or viewpoint regarding the topic.

Participants

Due to the sensitivity of the research, five (5) participants were purposively selected to be the research participants. Also, through snow balling techniques, other participants of the same nature/condition were selected. The inclusion criteria for the selection of the participants must be: (a) a self-confessed homosexual; (b) considers himself/herself as "closeted" at home and "out" at school; (c) at least 14 years of age.

The researchers only interviewed participants who self-identified themselves as homosexuals who are closeted at home but are "out" at school. Initially, the plan was to use a standardized test (Klein) to determine the sexual orientation of the participants.

However, since the research design is Phenomenology, which talks about the lived-experiences of the participants, the researchers decided to rely on more ecologically valid measurement of the participant's sexual orientation, their self-confession. Data gathering was done by first approaching participants who are believed and are referred to be adolescent homosexuals who are "closeted" at home but are "out" at school. Also, as part of their initiative to ensure that the study conforms to the highest ethical standards of psychological research, the participants were initially informed of the nature and goals of the research. The researchers informed them that their participation would allow the researchers to expound on this experience and it will help to understand, from a psychological lens, the possible implications and interventions in this condition. The researchers presented to them a consent form that, if signed, would confirm their voluntary participation in the research. Part of the form also narrates that the transcriptions of the interview and most especially their identities would be kept confidential and that the participants are free to back out of the study at any time they feel the need to do so. In data management, the researchers ensured the confidentiality of the information gathered.

Research Instrument

An in-depth interview guide was used to uncover the participants' experiences. The researchers had one-on-one interviews with the participants and all conversations were recorded. The interview questions were semi-structured, validated by three experts, and were complemented by possible probing questions that will be used if deemed necessary. Some examples of the interview questions include: (a) Why do you tend to act "straight" at home? (b) Why are you "out" in school? Why do you tend to be gay/lesbian in school? (c) What do you feel whenever you try to hide your sexuality to your family?. The researchers transcribed the entire recorded interview and thematically analyzed each conversation. To ensure the validity of the results, member checking was solicited from the participants themselves.

Data Analysis

The researchers transcribed the recorded interviews of the participants. The data gathered were analyzed through thematic and content analysis. Common themes were grouped and analyzed in order to provide answers to the research objectives.

After formulating the themes, the researchers conducted a member checking involving the participants to be able to ensure the legitimacy or validity of the interpretation of all collected data. Member checking provides participants to have the opportunity to assess adequacy of data and preliminary results as well as to confirm particular aspects of the data.

Results

Upon analyzing the transcriptions of the interviews with the participants, the following are the results per research objectives:

Reasons of Filipino Homosexual Adolescents to Act "Straight" Towards their Families

One of the causes is the "High Expectations" of the family members, especially of the parents. It is influenced by the belief of the society that a male or a female should be in a relationship with the opposite sex, not with persons having the same sex as theirs. Not following this norm was believed to reflect the person's image and the way his/her parents have brought him/her up.

"May pangalan din kaming talagang hinahawakan so kahihyan sa pamilya namin yung ganon" (lesbian, 19)

"..iniingatan ko yung image namin lalo na ung.. lalo na nung nag-iisa lang ako.. nag-iisang anak lang ako sa family ko" (lesbian, 18)

"Ang taas ng expectation nila na pinag-aral ka na't lahat-lahat, tapos ang mangyayari sa'yo, ganyan lang. Sana hindi ka nalang pinag-aral." (lesbian, 18)

"..ang hirap kasi, ano kasi ako, Papa's girl. Gan'on. Tapos parang, ini-expect n'ya na.. ang dami... 'Yon, ang hirap aminin sa kanya na, "Pa, hindi ako ganito, hindi ako ganito, 'yung ini-expect mo.'" (lesbian, 18)

Another cause is the "Fear of Rejection" from the family members. It is the uncomfortable feeling that their family's treatment might change once they reveal their real identity.

"syempre kailangan babae sa lalaki talaga. So kahit na ganong bagay lang pwede nila akong itakwil bilang anak nila.." (lesbian, 19)

"..alam kong mahirap din ipa-tanggap sa kanya kasi nga, bukod sa hindi n'ya pa matanggap, baka dumating din sa point na kaya n'yang itakwil ako para lang.. Dahil d'on."(lesbian, 18)

"..'yung treatment nga, magbabago 'yun. Baka pwede pa nga dumating sa point na, "Lumayas ka na dito".." (lesbian, 18)

Also, "Feelings of Confusion" is a cause why these adolescents prefer not to disclose to their families. This is because they, themselves, have feelings of uncertainty on what they want in the future - to stay as homosexuals or become heterosexuals.

"...hindi ko rin matanggap ang sarili ko.. kumbaga nalilito ka pa, pero siguro alam ko naman ung gusto ko ngayun pero ung sabihin natin na ung pangmatagalan?"(lesbian,18)

" edi syempre isasakripisyoko talaga yung pagiging ganito ko.. kailangan talaga maging lalaki.. pero ipupush ko parin maging lalaki.. di pa sa ngayon, kasi may tamang.. time..panahon"(gay, 18)

"Feeling ko din eh, kasi eighteen, eighteen lang ako.. super.. May twenty pa. Magbabago 'yung ano eh.. magbabago 'yung isip mo." (lesbian, 18)

Reasons of Filipino Homosexual Adolescents to be "Out" at School

"Peer Attachment" is one clear reason why they prefer to disclose to their friends. It is because of their closeness and familiarity or the open-mindedness to homosexuality of their peers that lead these adolescents to disclose to them.

"... kasi mas kilala nya ako kesa sa pagkakakilala ko sa sarili ko... uhmm sobrang maintindihin kasi nya sobrang bait at sweet saka share share kami ng secrets... kaya siya ung una kong pinagsabihan kasi alam kong maiintinhihan nya ako."(gay, 18)

"..ano gusto ko sabihin sa kanila na kasi nga kapag may mga problema or kung ano man yung nangyayre sakin, gusto ko inuupdate sila" (lesbian, 19)

"Buti, ako nga buti ako, thankful ako kasi, 'yung mga kaibigan ko, open-minded.." (lesbian, 18)

Additionally, when homosexual adolescents feel that they are being rejected at home, they tend to have "Feelings of Acceptance" when they disclose to their friends. It is what these homosexuals wanted to feel from their friends to avoid self-alienation and family-rejection.

" kasi para sakin kasi yung mga barkada ko kahit ano naman ako or kahit sino yung maging karelasyon ko or kung ano mang kasarian alam ko naman na tatanggapin nila" (lesbian, 19)

" nung sinabi ko sa kanila, wala akong narinig na pang didiscriminate tas sabe nila okay lang yan blablabla.." (gay, 19)

"..tanggap nila ko, hindi ko kailangang mag-effort.." (lesbian, 18)

Lastly, homosexual adolescents feel that they are "Being True to Themselves" whenever they disclose to their friends at school. It is the positive feeling that they are able to express their suppressed emotions to their peers which they are unable to do at home.

"mas pinili ko yung mga kaibigan ko talaga tas yung ano... yung kaya kong maging totoo yung mga maexpress ko kung sino ba talaga ko"(lesbian, 19)

"alam naman ng iba, lahat ng tao na mahirap magpanggap kailangan ilabas.. kailangan ipakita.. ibulgar.." (gay,18)

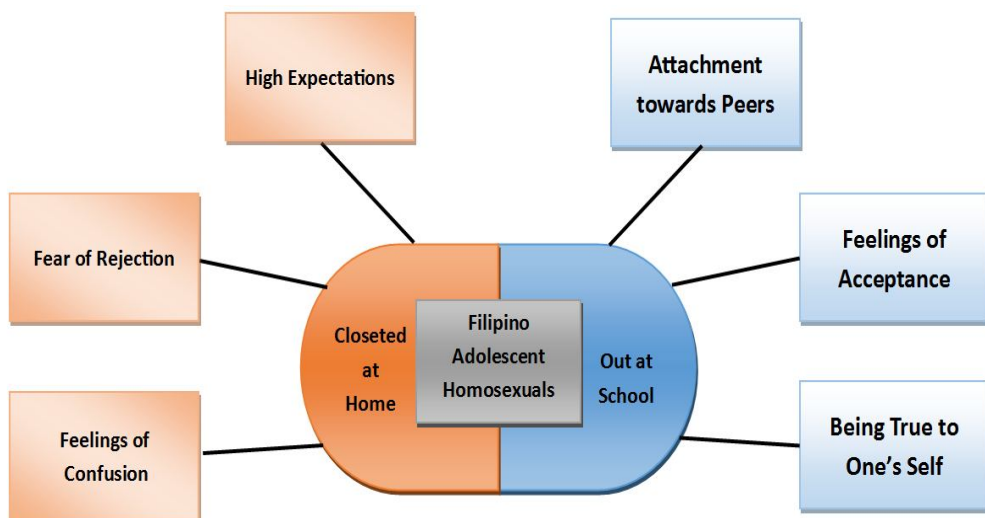


Figure 1: Reasons of Selective Disclosure of Filipino Homosexual Adolescents

Difficulties of Concealing their True Identity towards their Families

Most of the time, family members of these adolescents have “Discrimination towards Homosexuals” that caused them to act straight at home. This is what they fear that they might experience once their families know their real identity.

“..kunyari, nag-aasaran kami, out-of-nowhere, biglang ipapasok ‘yung ganong topic na..“Syempre pumapatol ‘yan sa babae.”.. Lalayo, lalayo ako. Lalayo nalang ako..” (lesbian, 18)

“‘Yun, katulad ng “Yan, kadiri ‘yan, kadiri. Pumapatol sa kapwa n’yang babae.” Gan’on. “Di ka ba nahihya?” Ayun, sad lang.” (lesbian, 18)

Another difficulty is the “Deprivation of Showing their Real Feelings” towards their parents which leads to their own denial of their real selves.

“Nahihya ako i-show sa kanila kung ano ba talaga ako, kaya ang nangyayari hindi ako nagpapakatotoo”(gay, 19)

“Kasi nung highschool na ako nagkaroon nang boys yung dati kong school na all girls dati nahihya ako ayoko ilantad pero nung graduation na ako nung 4th yr ngayun hanggang 4th yr naglandad na ako..” (lesbian, 18)

“Pagdating sa part ng pamilya, hindi ko Pero kinakahiya pero tinatago ko.” (lesbian, 18)

Lastly, a homosexual adolescent that is not out in his/her family develops a “Feeling of Sadness” towards himself or herself. It is the emotion that causes the homosexual to feel sorrow and grief because of his/her sexual preference.

“minsang nararamdaman kong ano... ahmm.. sad parang malungkot... minsang napapayak nalang bigla kasi nga ayun sa pagpapanggap.. mahirap talaga..” (gay, 18)

"... nararamdaman ko? Sadness.. yes .. that's the reality of life.." (gay, 19)

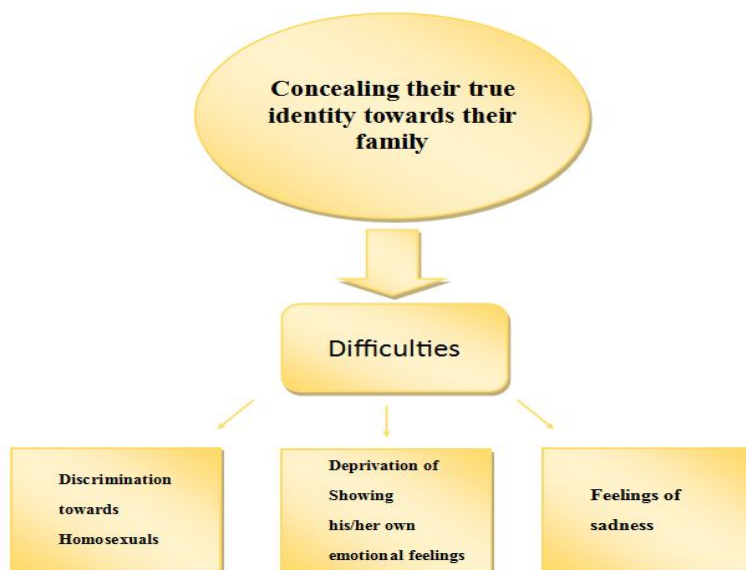


Figure 2: Difficulties of Concealing the True Identity of Homosexual Adolescents

Discussion

Linking the results of the study to the Homosexual Identity Development Theory by Cass (1979), it was found that homosexual adolescents who selectively disclose to other people are in the first three stages, namely - Identity Confusion, Identity Comparison, and Identity Tolerance. Morrow (2004) describes Stage 1-3 as a "red zone" of concern for homosexual adolescents. Here, they experience the conflict of discovering themselves in contrast to a society where homosexuals are treated as a minority which, in turn, makes them more susceptible to problems such as lower self-esteem, depression, and social avoidance.

Firstly, these adolescents are in the Identity Confusion stage. It is where they feel things not usually experienced by other adolescents. It could be the attraction for another person with the same sex or thoughts of wanting to be treated as the opposite sex. Because of these feelings, they feel a sense of confusion within themselves.

As found in this study, these adolescents choose to still act “straight” at home despite these thoughts, because they, themselves, have “feelings of confusion” on how they really feel. Particularly, they are uncertain if they will still have the same gender preference in the future.

Secondly, in the Identity Comparison stage, these adolescents embrace the possibility of being homosexuals and at the same time, weigh the implications of being one. They tend to isolate themselves from other people whom they think will be most affected by them being gays/lesbians. As found in this study, it is their family members to whom they hide their true identity. Particularly, it is to their parents, whom they think would find it the hardest to accept once they disclose at home. This is supported by the study of Ben-Ari (1995), which concluded that the parents are the most difficult persons to disclose to. Furthermore, D’Augelli, Hershberger, & Pilkington (1998, as cited in Carnelley et al., 2011) added that parents are rarely the first to whom their child discloses to. In this study, it was found that homosexual adolescents feel the “fear of being rejected” because of the “high expectation” of their parents. They fear that they will be a source of disappointment and think that their sexuality will bring shame and disgrace to their families. Also, they are anxious that their family’s treatment will eventually change once they admit their real sexual orientation to their family. Worse, they think that their family will negatively react to their disclosure.

As found in many studies, the parents’ reaction towards their homosexual children may vary. Disclosure may sometimes result in parent’s disappointment, anger, or shock (Robinson et al., 1989 as cited in Carnelley, Hepper & Turner, 2011). Many gay and lesbian adolescents say that they do not share the fact of their homosexuality to their parents because they fear that their parents will disapprove. And in reality, many of those who have shared their sexual orientation with their parents reported parental disapproval (Chafetz et al., 1974; Jay & Young, 1979; Mendola, 1980 as cited in Murphy, 2001). In a recent study, Gowers (2005) estimated that out of 30-40% of adolescents that had homosexual experiences, only 1-3% describe themselves as having a stable homosexual identity, in which the critical factor for gays and lesbians appeared to be the expected response of others, particularly the mother’s acceptance.

Lastly, homosexual adolescents who selectively disclose are in the stage of Identity Tolerance. It is where they admit that they are likely to be homosexuals and seeks out other homosexuals so as to battle their feelings of being isolated. They also disclose to those people whom they think will not judge them based on their gender orientation. For this reason, some adolescents prefer to be "out" at school. As found in this study, these adolescents feel that they have strong "peer attachment" at school that's why they are comfortable to disclose to their friends. They think and feel that their friends are open-minded enough to understand their situation. Whenever they hide their real identity towards their families, they open up to their friends because they "feel accepted", which they think they will never feel if ever they disclose to their families. Lastly, whenever they are with their friends is the only time they feel that they can "be true to themselves". Because they were unable to act as they really are at home, they feel that with their friends, they could express who they really are without being anxious of the reactions.

As found in the results, several difficulties are being experienced by many homosexual adolescents in hiding their real selves towards their families. Most of the families of homosexual adolescents are believed to have "discrimination against homosexuals". Negative reactions were feared because they know the capability of their families to burst strong words against homosexuals. As discussed by Adelson et. al. (2012), homosexual youths may be indirectly or overtly criticized by family members even when they are not personally threatened. They may observe other gay people experiencing disrespect, humiliation, lower social status, or fewer civil rights.

Additionally, because these adolescents are "deprived of showing their real feelings", they tend to deny their true self towards their parents. This becomes hard to them because there are only a few people (their friends) who can readily accept their real identity. Because of all of these difficulties, homosexual adolescents have "feelings of sadness". They feel down because their families who have been with them all their life were not able to accept them, but their friend whom they only met at school are willing and open to do so. According to Radkowsky & Siegel (1997), depression, hopelessness, and despair are obvious consequences of the barrage of negative attitudes and behaviors with which gay youth are confronted. Because of these hardships, these homosexual adolescents are forced to just act "straight" at home, and at the same time, "come out" at school.

The struggles of getting through the first three stages of Cass' model as well as the challenge of overcoming certain difficulties can be compared to the challenges faced by all adolescents in the Identity vs. Role Confusion Stage in Erikson's theory. These homosexual adolescents continually strive to develop a strong and positive sense of identity despite personal and social struggles that come their way. Also, due to the nature of Asians to be mutually-dependent, as found by Marcus & Kitayama (1991), social acceptance can be considered the biggest challenge for Filipino homosexual adolescents. This is the reason why some of them choose to selectively disclose (Herman, 1993) and are forced to resort to having multiple identities depending on the expectations of people that surround them (Hill et. al., 2013). Through this kind of coping, the thought and feeling of being socially accepted is achieved and the completion of the developmental tasks of adolescence is accomplished.

Upon knowing the struggles of homosexuals, it was found that different family and peer relations as well as the challenges of identity formation significantly cause these adolescents to live both "in" and "out" of the closet as a form of coping mechanism for social acceptance. This crusade for acceptance has began when in 1973, after 35 years of being considered as a mental illness, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from the official manual (DSM-III) that lists mental and emotional disorders. Despite this significant move, discrimination is still evident towards homosexuals until this day. Upon knowing these, what the researchers want is for people to know that homosexuals are also human beings who deserve to be treated equally as how we treat heterosexuals.

They need acceptance for sexual orientation to enhance their well-being and quality of life (Ehlers, Zuyderduin, Oosthuizen, 2001) as well as to become better individuals upon their transition towards adulthood (Hill et. al., 2013). They are entitled to every single right that heterosexuals have. They have the rights to life, liberty and to be happy. Homosexuality is not a disorder as well as crime. It is not a free choice, it is natural and it is perfectly normal.

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