I'm Coming Out: Phenomenological Study on Self - Acknowledgement of Closeted Gays

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Abstract: **The purpose of this phenomenological research is to trace and understand the experiences of closeted gays before and after they came out of the metaphorical closet, in terms of interpersonal relationship. Qualitative method was used in the study and interview was conducted to nine participants from the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual (LGB) Community. The data collected from the participants were validated and supported by the information given by two key informants. The results determined that the interpersonal communication between closeted gays and the people around them is different before and after they come out because before coming out, closeted gays has more aloof interpersonal relationship with people as they were afraid that their real orientation will be revealed; however, after disclosing their real sexual orientation, closeted gays enhanced communication with people as they can share more information about themselves. There are various ways on how closeted gays came out of the closet, in terms of communication–verbal and non-verbal. The enhancement of the communication that closeted gays receive differs according to the acceptance they were given by the people whom they disclose their real sexual orientation with. However, there are still boundaries to the kind of information to be shared between gays and straight community, due to diverse level of acknowledgement. Jointly, these findings suggest the need for narrowing the scope of the term interpersonal communication and setting age perimeter of the participants to be able to extract more precise data and also for the study to be narrower.**

Keywords: **Closeted gays, Coming out, Self-Acknowledgment.**

1.   INTRODUCTION

Today, gender is a very delicate subject of discussion for anyone in the world, since it denounces prejudice towards the different kinds of gender. According to Psychology Today on sexual orientation, these genders are categorized according to their sexual orientation of a person, such as the heterosexual (a person attracted to the opposite sex), the homosexual (a person attracted to the same sex) the bisexual (a person attracted to both sex) and the asexual (a person not attracted to any sex). In the past decades, gender equality is at the forefront of most-if not all gender-related movements in the world. These advocates fight for the right of all individuals' equal treatment and recognition, while trying to erase the line representing the division of the masculine and feminine stereotypes present in society. As mentioned by S.A. Beebe, S.J. Beebe and Redmond (2008), the generic term for gender is the psychological and emotional characteristic that is the basis of other people to assume masculine, feminine or androgynous roles in society. The biological term of gender on the other hand is based on the actual male and female reproductive system upon birth (Wood, 2005).

It is not uncommon to see people objectifying and criticizing members of the opposite sex, making gender one of the most talked about issues in the past decades.

Gender is significantly more intricate than sex, as society based its definition on genetic and biological aspects or for some, through their experiences in their lives. It is defined by society and expressed by individuals through interaction with others and media. In addition, it changes over time so it is neither necessarily intrinsic nor constant (Wood, 2009).

On the other hand, culture is the constitution and traditions that represent a certain social category by authorizing definite values, expectations, meanings and patterns of behavior, for gender is the center of a cultured life given that the views of society on gender is emulated and endorsed by an array of social organizations and traditions (Samovar, Porter & McDaniel, 2012). As mentioned by Weedon, "One of the primary practices that structures society is communication" (as cited in Wood). Nonetheless, the different cultural concepts and symbol systems of people's interaction enough to influence the actual communication taken place, is called the intercultural communication (Samovar, Porter, McDaniel & Roy, 2013).

Thus, gender, culture and communication are all connected. This explains why people ought to study the other two in order to understand it all. Gender depends on cultural values and customs; the manner by which a culture defines masculinity and femininity shapes expectations on how men and women communicate; and how one communicates defines the meanings of gender that, eventually influences cultural view (Wood, 2005).

As stated in the Guidelines for Psychotherapy with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients (2000), Gender Identity refers to "one's sense of oneself as male, female, or transgender" (as cited in American Psychological Association, 2006). Sexual Orientation on the other hand, is "the sex of those to whom one is sexually and romantically attracted," which is categorized by attraction of members of the same sex (male gays and lesbians), attraction of members to the opposite sex (heterosexuals), and the attraction of members to both of the sexes (bisexuals). While these ideas are related, they are not synonymous. Whereas the former "focuses on how one identifies oneself with the gender traditionally associated with one's sex at birth, and the latter to "whom a person is attracted to", one of the same sex, opposite sex, both or neither (Guerra and Mason, 2011).

Although, from the recent years, homosexuality is accepted in some form across the world, the only notable problem is that others still thought of gayness as an abnormal behavior according to the normal sexual morality (Kelly, 2008). This leads to the pitiful problem of violent and discriminating reactions against the third gender collectively.

Due to these actions from some members of the society, people whose sexual orientation is different from the norm tend to hide as a precaution for fear of negative consequences.

Truthfully it is hard to locate examples of closet gays here in the Philippines or anywhere in the world, as most of them hide their true sexuality in place of safety, even though a portion of the Philippine population does consent to the existence of the so-called gays. And yet, there are still closeted gays who chose to publicly disclose their actual sexual orientation (Robles, 2014).

 In the Philippines it is more common to see that kind of people; however, due to the conservative tradition passed down to every Filipino generation it is hard to come out as gay within Philippine culture, making gay individuals hide their true sexual orientation, or also known as closeted gays.

By observing this minority, it is clear to see that different sexual identification provides factors on how closeted gays communicate with others before, during and after the coming out process. In accordance with Tan (2012), coming out is a move to broadcast to the public that he or she is a part of the LGBT community. Contrary to the common belief among the LGBT community, coming out is not as "good for you" as it claimed to be not unless it was announced to the immediate family of the closet gays.

"Out" was a magazine show program of GMA 7 launched in 2004, that was all about the LGBT community, It shows and documents the lives and experiences on how these people came out of the closet to the people close to them. Through this program, the LGBT advocate promotes equal rights; rouse anti-discrimination bill and due to its positive representation of the LGBT community image. It has empowered closeted individuals to finally come out of the closet (Ligunas, 2014).

In hindsight, the stereotypical impression of the society towards the gay community refers to the physical attributes such as their appearance, behavior, and the way they communicate with others in the general public. "Gay people often suffer discrimination and hostility from the straight world" (Martin & Nakayama, 2014). Unfortunately, these also affect the way people create relationships with the LGBT subculture that then in turn deconstruct and separate how society perceives the issue with sexuality and gender stereotypes.

Thus, this research focuses on studying the importance of what today's societal needs are. As mentioned, sexual orientation, specifically the LGB community is an ongoing topic discussed by everyone from all walks of life. The research focuses on the actual experiences of these people as they come out of the metaphorical closet.

Hence, this study focused on tracing and understanding the experiences of closeted gays before and after they came out of the metaphorical closet, in terms of interpersonal relationship, specifically communication. Particularly, this research solely examined how closeted gays build interpersonal relationship with the people around them, identify the difficulties that the closeted gays bear before and after they came out, determine the factors that interfere with the disclosure of closeted gays' actual gender and lastly, determine the level of self and social acceptance that closeted gays receive after they came out. In this research, limited data were used and gathered from selected closeted gay participants, under the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or LGB community, specifically composed of 10 persons who belong to the said community. Also the data used are from existing pieces of literature about the topic and interviews from the experts. The selected participants were chosen through the standards and criteria set by the researchers.

This research did not cover the law, religion, discrimination and further issues that former closeted gays are experiencing or have experienced in any area. However, some of these issues were tackled and mentioned throughout the study. Also, as mentioned by Eadie, some transgenders do not consider themselves as gay or lesbian but rather regard themselves men in women's body and women in men's body (as cited by Samovar, Porter and McDaniel, 2012). Transgenders do not consider themselves gay, but rather as transwoman or transman, and as this study focused on sexual orientation that only includes LGB, Transgender will be excluded in the study as part of the LGBT community. For that reason, together with those who are confused of their gender, both will be delimited and will not be studied in this research.

2.   LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender, culture and communication are all linked in each other. This explains why we have to study the other two in order to understand it all. We communicate our gender identity to others using the cultures as a basis of meaning (Wood, 2005). Gender identity depends on cultural values and cultures influence communication. We communicate our gender identity depending on the cultural groups' definition of man as masculine and women as feminine. To communicate effectively in another culture, individuals need to understand that culture is really important to know because it can affect the communication style. Gender, culture and communication are all connected and significant. According to Martin & Nakayama (2014) "cultures influence communication; communication influences culture". This means that culture is a variable of power to influence and manipulate how we communicate, the same with communication, it influences our culture.

Lesbians, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender or LGBT is the categorization of the sexual orientation of a person, which in definition "refers to the sex of those to whom one is sexually and romantically attracted", it focuses on the attraction to someone, whether he or she is the same sex, opposite sex, both or neither (Guerra and Mason, 2011).

Coming out originally was the gay equivalent of a debutant ball, since what it really meant was a gay man being formally presented to the gay society; this kind of party is patterned to debutant or masquerade balls. The phrase coming out did not actually mean coming out of hiding but, instead, joining the cluster of the society. Although, through the years gay people started using the closet metaphor, which was derived from the idiom skeleton in the closet, as most men back then treat their homosexuality as a secret (Okrent, 2013).

Synthesis:

Gender, culture and communication are all different elements, yet all connected and interlinked to one another. The meaning of gender is based on cultural context and this societal values and traditions influences communication.

As the awareness of the people increase about the growth of the Lesbian, gay, bisexual community's existence; it is clear to see that the negative acts against the latter community are unavoidable and continue to worsen. So much so that, the individuals who sees themselves as gay tend to avoid disclosing their real sexual orientation to their family and the public; nevertheless, there are still closeted gays who choose to "come out of the closet" or to acknowledge themselves and to others that they belong to the LGBT community.

This study focuses on the process of coming out of closeted gays and how it happens, through going over the discussed basic needs present in the study such as, the relationship of gender, culture and communication, the LGBT community inside and outside the Philippines, the closeted gays and the process of coming out. By doing this research, the closet gays would be able to be inspired and be empowered to reveal themselves as gay to their family and the general public.

3. METHODOLOGY

As mentioned by Braun and Clarke (2013), qualitative research captures the complexity, chaos and contradiction that the real world has, though it still lets us give meaning of patterns of gist. According to Braun, "qualitative research emphasizes that we see things from a perspective" (as cited in Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Underlying the qualitative approach is the phenomenological research, which is used to identify the human experiences regarding a phenomenon as expressed by its participants (Creswell, 2003).

This study is qualitative in nature, in order to gain insights and to explore the focus of the research, which is the process of coming out of closeted gays in the Philippines. In this study, the researchers chose the phenomenological method for the study be in favor of it fitting the narrative of the selected topic of the researchers.

According to Willig (2009), phenomenology deals with the phenomena that surface in the awareness of society as it connects with the world. To simply put it, phenomenology solely focuses on the world as humans within a particular place and time frame experience it. This is due to the people presenting objects and subjects to them as something, to mean something more than it does, usually based on the perceiver's mental orientation which is desires, wishes, judgments, emotions, aims and purpose, these are referred to as intentionality, allowing objects to come out as phenomena.

In relation, this study is a qualitative phenomenological research because of the qualities that are present. Examining the quality of the relationship of the two variables present in the study, namely closeted gays and self-acknowledgement, which are classified as independent and dependent variables, makes the study as qualitative approach. Moreover, this study is phenomenological, as the researchers identify the experience of coming out of closeted gays-- the participants in the study.

In order to determine the data of the study about self-acknowledgment of closeted gays, a total of nine (9) participants were asked to partake. Applicable information is achieved through certain criteria that formulated by the researchers in choosing the participants. To be able to be qualified as participant, one must be a closet gay before and now he/she totally comes out in the society, or in other words, a participant must be someone who is gay of either sex whose prior identity is unknown to said person's family or the general public before but is now out as a gay.

The researchers aim to examine the uniqueness of closeted gays as they lived through their own subjective reality. To be able to derived data from the selected participants, the researchers used purposive sampling to seek potential participants as an initial contact to the subjects and continue on with the use of snowball sampling, to identify more participants for the study who are willing to share their experiences and inner feelings.

Purposive sampling is a choice where the subject is included in the sample in use by the researcher, based on a selection of criteria which may include specialist knowledge of the issues, and the participant must willing to participate in the research (Oliver, n.d). The main goal of purposive sampling is to focus particular characteristics of individual that interest to be participant, that will get a qualify answer that need of the researcher (Patton, 1990). Thus, the researchers purposively chose participants who passed in the criteria set by the researchers and partake in the study. In addition, with purposive sampling, the researchers were assured that the participants are the ones that needed for the study. Moreover, due to the sensitivity of the topic, the researchers also used snowball sampling to enable to locate required additional participants for the study. Snowball sampling is the secondhand participants interviewed that was referred by the initial selected participants (Handcock & Gile, 2011). It is a sampling approach for locating information rich key informant. According to Devlin (2006), snowball sample is a participant referred by the other participant. Therefore, in this study the researchers included participants from the referral of other or first participants that were chosen through purposive sampling.

According to Harding (2013), qualitative study mostly involves interaction with people as a part of it, and the two frequently used methods for collecting data are interviews and focus group. As this study is a qualitative, the researchers did use interviews as a method in gathering the data needed. The researchers conducted interviews with the selected participants to acquire more detailed information; the said participants are the closeted gays whom have already expose their true gender, prior to this study. There are three various types of interviewing: semi-structured, unstructured and biographical (Harding, 2013). On the other hand, the researchers used semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Therefore, while interviewing the participants personally or face to face, the researchers also used interview guide that contained specific questions that were raised to the participants and with this, the analysis was done at ease because there were precise numbers of queries that the participants answered.

The data were collected upon the time of interviewing the respondents. The researchers are the one responsible on the data that were collected. In the actual interviews the data were recorded and be stored and reviewed after, therefore the data that were gathered are sure to be correct or accurate. Yet audio recording were undertaken with the consent of the participants. These recorded audios were transcribed and compiled together with other significant papers of the study.

The researchers conducted semi-structured face-to-face interviews with the chosen participants to gather the necessary data for the study. Therefore, an interview guide that was used by the researchers and, some queries were raised as follow-up and were asked to discuss thoroughly the interviewees' answer to the first question.

The researchers guarantee that the instrument that used to interview the selected participants are vital and appropriately made according to the focus of the study. The instrument is based from the findings that the researchers made during the review of literature. Moreover, the researchers have no doubt that the research instrument is valid because it was checked by the adviser, the grammarian and the thesis panelists.

As stated by Guion, Diehl and McDonald (n.d.), investigator triangulation is composed of various investigators from the same field that will analyze the data. To achieved deeper understanding on how different investigator sees the data, the findings of each investigator would be compared to one another and as the conclusion would be the same, the results will be treated as a valid one (Guion et al., n.d.). With the purpose of avoiding bias results, and to prove the data validity, the researchers used investigator triangulation. Selected authority in relation with the study, specifically, a psychologist and an LGBT advocate did triangulate or analyzed the data. One of the investigators was Ms. Ma. Lourdes Cervantes a psychologist and a well-known life coach who really helped in understanding the behaviors of closeted gays. Another investigator was Ms. Bemz Benedito, an LGBT and Indigenous Peoples Rights advocate, as this research is about closeted gays, an advocate from the same community helped to have more profound understanding regarding the topic.

The data that were gathered and were examined first by the researchers from the interviews of the selected participants and undergone on investigator triangulation; thus, it increased the credibility of the study.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

According to the participants' and the key informants' responses, together with the researchers interpretations and findings, the results are presented as to what questions in the statement of the problem they answers to.

For the statement of the problem "How did closeted gays build interpersonal relationship with the people in their environment before and after they revealed their real sexual orientation to the public?" Majority of the participants said that they were careful in interacting with other people, through measuring and filtering the information they were about to disclose, so their real sexual orientation would not be revealed. Also, they distanced themselves to others and shortened their conversations so it would not go deeper and their real sexual orientation will not be tackled or talked about. On the other hand, Most of the LGB participants developed better communication with their family and close friends after coming out because they were accepted easily. They share more information about themselves and built stronger relationship with the people around them who accepted their real sexual orientation. While in contrast, there are few participants who lost their communication with their family because of not being accepted.

For the statement of the problem "What difficulties did closeted gays endure before and after they came out?" The difficulties that the majority of the participants endured before they came out are; (1) to communicate their thoughts and feelings, and (2) to behave the way they want to. These two difficulties are due to; (1) the fear that they might not be accepted by the people around them, and (2) the fear of the judgments of others.

For the statement of the problem "What factors interfered with disclosing their actual sexual orientation?" There are several intervening factors that were present when the participants started to disclose their actual gender to others and these are; (1) fear that they might not be accepted by the people around them, (2) fear of the reaction of others and (3) fear that their reputation or image might be disrupted.

For the statement of the problem "What is the level of self and social acceptance that closeted gays received after coming out as gay?" Most of the participants received better treatment from other people and had created closer relationship with friends and family. However, some participants were avoided by the people around them, and lost communication with those who did not accept them. Hence, there is difference in treatment that the participants received before and after coming out. More than half of the participants said that the treatment they received before they came out was the same,

but they built better relationship with others as they came out and after being accepted. On the other hand, the remaining participants stated that they had an extremely diverse treatment after coming out like, they are being rejected and avoided by the people they used to be close with. Almost all of the LGB participants felt relieved and happy after coming out because they already disclose their real sexual orientation. However, only few said that they did not feel happy or relieved at first, but they felt shy instead because they were still afraid of the reactions of others. However, all of the participants are happy because they are already free to do whatever they want to do, and they are free to be who they really are, beyond the fact that did not accept them.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms:

LGBT – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender

LGB – Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual

ACLU – American Civil Liberties Union

GLAAD - Gay, Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation

GLARP - Gay and Lesbian Association of Retiring Persons

HRC – Human Right Campaign

CLIC – Can't Live in the Closet

GLBTQ – Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer

WND – World Net Daily

NFL – National Football League

CBS – Columbia Broadcasting System

HAPI - Humanist Alliance Philippines International

5.   CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings and interpretations, the researchers conclude that before coming out closeted gays has more aloof interpersonal relationship with people in their environment due to the fact that they were afraid that their real sexual orientation might be revealed unexpectedly; however, after disclosing their real sexual preference, closeted gays improved and developed better communication with the people around them as they became more open about some information about themselves.

Also, the researchers found out that there are different ways of communication on how closeted gays reveal their sexual orientation. Some came out verbally through; face-to-face confession, written communication – letter, Facebook message and text message –and phone conversation. While others used non-verbal communication by; dropping hints, altering their appearance – cutting hair, applying cosmetics and clothing style – and body language.

Prior to coming out, closeted gays endure some difficulties including the difficulty to behave the way they want to because it reflects their character that would determine the way others will accept and treat them. Therefore, the major difficulty they endure is the fear of not being accepted. Which is in contrast with what they want, that is the acceptance from other people and not just tolerance, the one that the LGB community currently receives now.

There are three intervening factors that interfere in disclosing closeted gays' real sexual orientation and these are; fear of not being accepted, fear of reactions of other people, and fear of the reputation or image will be disrupted. However, there is also a shorter version of these factors, which are; fear of abandonment and fear of the unknown. And to overcome these intervening factors, closeted gays are proving that being an LGBT member doesn't make them any less than heterosexuals.

Coming out have layers, in disclosing their real sexual orientation, closeted gays have to determine which relationship is more important to them and their happiness, as this could affect their self-acknowledgement. In addition, it is beneficial for closeted gays to seek advice and guidance from others outside of the family, for it increases those chances of a healthier and happier self-acknowledgement knowing that even if there is not acceptance inside the family there are still people outside willing to accept the LGBT community and can relate to. In the Philippines, LGBT community is just being tolerated and not accepted, which is the opposite of the aim of the said community, because acceptance and tolerance is not synonymous with each other. In acceptance, the society accepts the totality of the LGBT community, without underlying conditions, and in tolerance, the LGBT community is neither accepted nor rejected, just treated with indifference and with no protection or recognition from the society.

After all, the betterment of the communication between closeted gays and their family and friends vary according to the acceptance they received from the people whom they disclose their real sexual orientation with. But, there are still limitations to what kind of information to be shared between gays and straight community, due to diverse level of comfort and acknowledgement – tolerance or acceptance. This different level of comfort and acknowledgment is shaped by the cultural differences.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Throughout the study, the researchers found few insufficiencies; therefore the researchers suggest number of recommendations for further improvement. First, when focusing in interpersonal communication, state clearly the scope of the term, as this could include the possibility of finding the answers to the questions without difficulty. Also, set age perimeter in choosing research participants because people in various age has different level of comprehension, and as it might result to conflicting data. Hence, considering these portions will allow the study to become narrower to be able to extract more fitting data.

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