

Coming Out of the Closet Stories: Phenomenological Experiences of LGBTQ Senior High School Students Towards Their Gender Identity

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Abstract

Coming out of the closet or coming out is a process by which an individual recognizes his or her sexual orientation and openly discloses it to others, is an important personality identity development. (Greenfield, 2015 as cited in Gattamorta & Quidley-Rodriguez, 2018). Many LGBTQ adolescents fear disclosing their gender identity towards their parents and the society as whole. They see the process as highly stressful experience. They worry about their parents' negative reactions. This situation prompted the researcher to conduct this qualitative research with an objective to understand the coming out of the closet phenomenological experiences of LGBTQ Senior High School students. Specifically, it aimed to determine the characteristics of the coming out of the closet phenomenon. Ten participants were selected using purposive sampling. They were interviewed through audio-recording and transcribed verbatim. The data collected were analyzed through thematic analysis with inductive approach.

The results revealed that the coming out of the closet experiences of Senior High School students are characterized by two major themes namely, (1) identity disclosure to parents, friends, and peers, and (2) the concept of acceptance with restrictions, disappointments and rejections, and fears and confrontations. Findings highlight that coming out of the closet can be both stressful and liberating. LGBTQ adolescents perceive their parents as a barrier to tackle in coming out. It is a series of events that involves negative emotions which leads to acceptance through time. Therefore, future studies should focus on how schools can become holistic avenues for embracing gender identity.

Keywords: coming out, gender identity, experience, LGBTQ

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, one of the challenges that young individuals come across to is on how to embrace and express their identity and be accepted by society. In the words of Jenny Betz, a School Climate Specialist, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) students have historically been invisible, underserved, or misunderstood or all three (Cerna, 2021, para. 1). She also added, “If you don’t feel accepted, have to hide something fundamental about who you are, or are scared every step, you obviously won’t be fully present and immersed in learning” (2021, para. 1). Being unable to open about one’s sexual identity led LGBTQ students to having poorer relationships and academic performance in schools. Lack of support from family and friends are perceived to have made a huge difference in their situation.

For a long period of time, the LGBTQ community has been struggling for acceptance and equality amid attacks and discrimination. However, there is a new generation of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual (LGB) young people coming of age in this contentious climate. For them, the process of identifying as non-heterosexual is a high stakes gamble that immeasurably influences how they make sense of who they are and how they fit within their families, peer groups, communities, and society (Fournier Rodriguez, 2014, p. 2).

Moreover, the decision to come out and disclose one’s identity entails courage. As one example, Legate et al. (2012, as cited in Fournier Rodriguez, 2014, p. 2) argued that identifying oneself as LGB and disclosing their identity, or, coming out, is typically preceded by a great deal of introspection and anticipation. That is, it takes place over time, and one that is unique to each individual. It seems plausible that for young people who identify as LGB, decisions about when, how, and to whom to come out are often difficult.

In a study by D’Amico and Julien (2012, as cited in Fournier Rodriguez, 2014, p. 13), the term coming out is frequently used to describe the experience of disclosing one’s identity as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. It is understood as having both individual and relational aspects: people first come out to themselves by identifying their non-heterosexual identity, and then come out to other people in their lives. The term coming out of the closet is emphasized as a process rather an event. Moreover, Gray (1991 as cited in Fournier Rodriguez, 2014) said that the term refers “not to a single moment or event but rather an ongoing revelation and performance of self that comes into play each time someone new or perhaps familiar (re) enters a queer person’s life.”

On the researcher’s personal interaction with peers that are members of LGBTQ, most of them claim that their coming out of the closet experiences have been a perplexing process. Many of them have faced discouragement and frustrations as well as humiliations. In this note, the researcher decided to conduct this study to understand the coming out of the closet experiences of LGBTQ Senior High School students as well as to determine the characteristics of these experiences. Through this study, the researcher hopes to enlighten and educate society as well as show support to the LGBTQ community.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study is to understand the coming out of the closet phenomenological experiences of LGBTQ Senior High School students towards their sexuality.

Specifically, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the “coming out of the closet” experiences of LGBTQ Senior High School students?
 - a. What characterizes this experience?
 - b. What comprises this experience?

METHODS

Research Design

This study used phenomenology as a research design. Phenomenology is a philosophy of experience. For phenomenology the ultimate source of all meaning and value is the lived experience of human beings. All philosophical systems, scientific theories, or aesthetic judgments have the status of abstractions from the ebb and flow of the lived world. The task of the philosopher, according to phenomenology, is to describe the structures of experience, in particular consciousness, the imagination, relations with other persons, and the situatedness of the human subject in society and history (Armstrong, 2005).

The researcher chose this research design because it seeks to understand the phenomenological experiences of LGBTQ Senior High School students. Phenomenology as explained by Smith (2018) studies the structure of various types of experience ranging from perception, thought, memory, imagination, emotion, desire, and volition to bodily awareness, embodied action, and social activity, including linguistic activity. The structure of these forms of experience typically involves what Husserl called “intentionality,” that is, the directedness of experience toward things in the world, the property of consciousness that is a consciousness, of or about something.

Participants of the Study

The participants of this study are ten (10) students who are purposively selected following the inclusion criteria.

The characteristics of the participants needed in the study are as follows:

1. They can either be male or female.
2. They must be a bona fide Senior High School student of Malay National High School for the school year 2021-2022.
3. They must be an open member of the LGBTQ community and has coming out of the closet experience.
4. They must be currently residing in mainland Malay, Aklan.

Table 1 - Participants' Profile

Participant	Age	Grade level	Address	Year of Coming Out
Mj	18	Gr. 12	Caticlan, Malay, Aklan	Gr. 8
Bri	17	Gr. 11	Balusbos, Malay, Aklan	Gr. 8
Dre	17	Gr. 11	Napaan, Malay, Aklan	Gr.7
Arc	17	Gr. 11	Caticlan, Malay, Aklan	Gr.8
Mars	17	Gr. 11	Sambiray, Malay, Aklan	Gr. 1
Fila	19	Gr. 11	Balusbos, Malay, Aklan	Gr. 9
Best	17	Gr. 11	Nabaoy, Malay, Aklan	Gr. 5
Elle	17	Gr. 11	Caticlan, Malay, Aklan	Elementary years
Rain	17	Gr. 11	Kabulihan, Malay, Aklan	Gr.9
Mal	19	Gr. 11	Dumlog, Malay, Aklan	2018

Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling was used in the selection of the participants. Robinson (2014) said that purposive sampling is intentional selection of informants based on their ability to elucidate a specific theme, concept, or phenomenon. Purposive sampling (also known as judgment, selective or subjective sampling) is a sampling technique in which researcher relies on his or her own judgment when choosing members of population to participate in the study (Dudovski, 2022).

As stated in an article entitled *Purposeful Sampling in Qualitative Research* (2020), the following are the benefits of Purposeful Sampling:

1. The basic benefit of this sampling technique is that rich information is possible to collect on even a low budget.
2. It is easier to get in-depth information since the researcher identifies the right audience and selects them.
3. On a small budget the researcher cannot employ systematic random sampling and if used properly this sampling method can substitute systematic sampling.

Locale of the Study

This research study was conducted at Malay National High School located at barangay Motag, Malay, Aklan, Western Visayas, Region VI. This location was chosen because both the researcher and participants are enrolled at the said school and mainly due to easy accessibility. Furthermore, the location provides convenience and familiarity for the participants enabling them to be more comfortable and less rigid during the interview process.

Data Collection Process

Data collection for this study followed a step-by-step process. First, the researcher made a letter of consent and permission to the school head, the parents of the participants, and for the participants themselves. All these people are given ample amount of time to decide if they are going to give the researcher the consent, he needed to conduct the study. After all the letters of consent were given and returned to the researcher, that was the time the researcher started crafting the interview guide and questionnaire. Then, the researcher set up an appointment with the participants for the interview. The researcher made sure that the appointment is at the own convenience of the participants. Some participants opted to have their interviews conducted through phone calls and voice calls. The minimum health and safety protocols given by the IATF like wearing facemasks and using alcohols and sanitizers, and maintaining social distancing are observed. During the interviews, the researcher made sure that the privacy and security of the personal information of the participants are being protected and kept confidential. Voice recorders and cellphones were used during the whole interview process. After the interview, the recordings were transcribed by the researcher himself and the data analysis then followed.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis with inductive approach was used in analyzing the data collected from the participants. Thematic analysis is a method of analyzing qualitative data. It is usually applied to a set of texts, such as an interview or transcripts. The researcher closely examines the data to identify common themes – topics, ideas and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly (Caulfield, 2022, para. 1). According to Braun & Clarke (2006, as cited in Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2), it is a method for identifying, analyzing, organizing, describing, and reporting themes found

within a data set. The researcher made use of the common six step process of thematic analysis which includes familiarization of the transcript, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and writing up. The inductive approach was utilized in making the conclusions since it involves allowing data to determine themes. In this approach, logical thinking plays an important role in generalizing and making conclusions. It starts with an observation or collecting of data, then searching for patterns and draw conclusions. This makes it exploratory in nature which can help in generating new theories.

Using the thematic analysis with inductive approach, the researcher first transcribed all the interviews from the ten participants. Afterwards, he familiarized himself to the interview transcripts by reading. He made initial codes by highlighting the significant statements line by line. The significant statements were then clustered together based on its relevance to the research questions of the study. Next, he formulated meanings or sub themes then draw general themes accordingly. He made use of coding tables for easy understanding and analysis. Lastly, he wrote the summary of findings for each participant.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

This chapter presents the results and discussion of findings from the analyzed qualitative data using thematic analysis through inductive approach. It provides an overview of the participants' profile and their coming out of the closet phenomenological experiences.

Coming out of the closet is a process unique for everyone. This process encompasses a series of encounters which led to elucidate and make sense the whole experience. The coming out of the closet phenomenological experiences of the participants are characterized by nine major themes.

Identity Disclosure to Parents, Friends, and Peers

Participants commonly experienced coming out of the closet first towards their parents, friends and peers. According to Derlega et al. (1993, as cited in Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010), self-disclosure or sharing of personal information with others through verbal communication, is an integral part of the social interaction. Disclosure can provide an opportunity to express thoughts and feelings, develop a sense of self, and build intimacy within personal relationship. The main and most important developmental tasks for adolescents are to solve the identity versus role confusion crisis, construct their own unique sense of identity, and find the social environment where they can belong to and create meaningful relationships with other people (Chen et al., 2007).

Parents as the primary guardians of the participants were seen as the first avenue of their coming out. "Before making the decision to come out at home, LGB young people must balance the desire to be recognized and understood with the need to remain safe, secure, and protected. They must take into account their family environment and assess whether sharing an essential

aspect of who they are with family members is worth the risk of being misunderstood, ignored, or rejected.” (Fournier Rodriguez, 2014)

When participants disclose their gender identity to their parents, most mothers have easy acceptance while fathers have strong rejections and takes a while to accept their children’s identity. Mj shared that *“Wala...parang tanggap na talaga ako ni mama...pero si papa hindi pa. Kasi hambae bay ni mama hay ok lang maging bakla basta nasa ayos man bala ang ano...pero si papa hay hindi dahil ako bi ang panganay nga laki sa amon baea... Minsan bi hay ginabalbal nana ako para maging straight lang gid ako. pagbahol eon ko...unti-unti man dayon natanggap ni papa...”* For Bri, *“Si mama hay gaobserve lang maw always...wa man maw gaano...gawakal..observe lang gid maw. Ginahambalan nana ako nga kung ano mga possibility nga matabo after nga ano... nga ano baea...syempre baye aran...basi mag usoy it iba.”* As experienced by Mars *“pirme ginahambal sa akon it uhm..family nakon nga indi ako magmana kaya dahil uwa it mana sa among family...ginataw-an ako dati it mga pressure, pirmeako nape-pressure sayod ko bi nga mana yon ko kaya, halin pa kang, grade 1 ako, hasta nagtungtong ako it grade 11... kapag nagbakla ako ibitay ako ni papa sa may puno’t kawati...tanggap yon ko it kong both nga parents, pero medyo alanganin pa sa side it kong mama, dahil uwa gid bi it mana, nga part it family, Part it LGBT, sa family, sa side ni mama medyo nalisdan ako mag-out pa at ga-pretend pa gihapon ko nga straight abir di ko gusto.”*

Friends and peers of the participants played an important role in their coming out of the closet experiences. As quoted by Mj *“Pag amin sa akon mga classmate like bukon ako it straight...gay ako...ag sa paghulag...ag sapag tan aw it mga runway...hujan..jan nagstart...so alam na nila.”* Most of them disclosed their identity first to their friends as a they perceive them as their support system. Dre said *“Nung grade 7, nung grade 7, since marami na kong friends na part din pala ng LGBT don ko din, don ako kumuha ng lakas ng loob para ipakita kung ano talaga yung totoong ako.”* They somehow influenced and encouraged them to come out. In Arc’s words, *“Tang na-explain nakon Sa akon mga friends na-na-nag-isip ako anay, kung basi nakon naramdaman Ang mga mana ngato nga feelings, nga na-inlove ako sa isang laki, mana karan, kaya nag-isip isip Ako tapos hugto nakon, nag-decide ako nga, ay, bisexual gali ako, mana gali ako kaya, kaya Kailangan ko lang tanggapon mana karan.”*

Rageliene (2016) believes that adolescents’ identity development is positively related with their relationships with peers. Belonging to a peer group and good relationships with peers based on mutual respect and acceptance are positively related with adolescent identity development. Research studies show that LGBT young people has the tendency to come out first to their supportive friends, next, members of their peer groups, then members of their immediate family, and lastly, members of their extended families (Beals & Peplau, 2006 as cited in Fournier Rodriguez, 2014, p. 34.)

Coming Out of the Closet Experiences Involves Acceptance with Restrictions, Disappointments and Rejections, Fears and Confrontations

In their quest to disclose their gender identity, participants felt various emotions as they navigated their coming out of the closet experiences. They encountered challenges that shaped

them. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual adolescents face many of the same developmental challenges as do heterosexual adolescents, but they must also deal with a stigmatized identity (Padilla et al. 2010, p. 265 as cited in Fournier Rodriguez, 2014, p. 35). A few factors are said to contribute to the challenges and stress they face. One, young LGBT people struggle with the recognition that their sexual identity is generally considered socially inferior to heterosexual identity. Second, decisions about whether, how, and to whom to come out cause a great deal of tension and confusion that compound the difficulties typically associated with adolescence. (Heron, 1995, as cited in Fournier Rodriguez, 2014, p. 35)

Acceptance of their identity is usually accompanied by feelings of hesitancy and restrictions. They are accepted with premise that they must learn their limitations. When Elle came out, her parents showed, along with their conditions, their support. As quoted “*suportahan lang nanda ko basta indi lang kuno ko magbisyo... uwa nanda ko ginabawalan, ginsuportahan nanda ko kaso di lang gani magbisyo, indi lang magsobra.*”

As Bri said “*Tang may ginpakilala ako nga baye sa anda...una hay nahangit pero hay...sa ulihi man hay...unti-unti man nga ano nanda...nga nabaton pero hujan gihapon ang hope nga...nga may pag-asa bala nga maging ano ako straight.*” In Arc’s experience, he said “*nang naka-feel ako it mga Ano gani, mga insult, galling sa ibang tao basi mana kaw karan, ng laki ikaw Pero naa-attracted man ikaw sa kapwa nimo laki... Daw, ang-uncomfortable bala sanda sa akon wa sanda naila mag-lapit sa akon lalo ang mga sarili nakon nga cousins, daw nagkailang sanda sa kon pero, habang Gabuhay nga gabuhay natatanggap man nanda.*”

In addition, Arc also said that before he and his mother reconciled, he felt her disappointment towards him. In his words “*daw disappoint, daw nadula anang quan bala, medyo nadula anang pag-pagpalangga mana ran dawn a-disappoint imaw pero, tang sa ulihi, daw natanggap ron nana ko, di hato nagbalik man dayon among dating pagsasama ni mama.*”

Mars’ coming out of the closet experience was characterized by acceptance by his parents and fears of rejection from relatives and other people. He shared “*tanggap yon ko it kong both nga parents, pero medyo alanganin pa sa side it kong mama, dahil uwa gid bi it mana, nga part it family, Part it LGBT, sa family, sa side ni mama medyo nalisdan ako mag-out pa at ga-pretend pa gihapon ko nga straight abir di ko gusto.*” In Rain’s case, she feared opening up about her identity to her parents due to her knowledge of her parents preconceived notion’ about her gender identity. According to her “*kulbaan ko that time dahil bay, sayod bi nanda nga, daw, bi-bi lang ko, bisexual lang ko ran hola ko sa laki, pero uwa nanda sayod nga daw gusto bala nakon maging lesbian tapos, tang gin-hambal nakon to, syempre daw medyo hangit-hangit man sanda, pero tang ulihi, ginhambal ko sanda nga kung pwede suportahan nanda ko.*”

Most participants’ experiences showed that through the passage of time, they were accepted and supported and given continued guidance as they go on with their lives. Mars said “*indi yon nanda ko kaya tadlungon, at imbes nga itadlong nanda ko, or ibalik sa dati nga ako, ginsuportahan lang nanda ako.* They were happy that they were able to come out and show their true identities. “*...na blessed nakon dahil hay kahit to lang bala sa pagiging lesbian nakon, natanggap nanda ako...*, “according to Rain. In the same way, Mal shared that “*nalipay ako ma’am dahil si mama hay naintindihan nana ang akon nga nabatyagan.*”

Taken together, these findings put emphasis to the study conducted by Elizur and Ziv (2001 as cited in Fournier Rodriguez, 2014, p. 35) which articulates that “disclosure may bring about a negation of their feelings, estrangement and rejection.” This is also supported by the results of a study conducted by LaSala (2000), Heatherington and Lavner (2008 as cited in Kranz, 2021) which states that LG adolescents fear negative reactions from their parents such as feelings of shame, guilt, sadness, disappointment, or, anger, and at the behavioral level, parents’ ignorance, or denial of their child’s sexual orientation, or even parents’ rejection of their child as a person.

Implications and Future Directions

The coming out of the closet experiences of LGBT Senior high school students can become baseline data to further study how communication between parents and children influence their experience on gender identity disclosure. The results can also contribute to the minimal research evidence regarding gender identity in Philippine setting. Also, understanding the composition of the phenomenon, the results can be a guide for teachers and parents on how to effectively address gender sensitive topics. For future research, it is recommended to focus the study on the roles of peers and social media on gender identity disclosure.

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