

Gay and Behind Bars: Life Stories of Filipino Gay Prisoners in the Leyte Regional Prison

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This is a qualitative study on the life stories of Filipino gay prisoners in the Leyte Regional Prison (LRP) to explore their lived experiences and how they make meaning of these experiences. A triangulation process was conducted through interviews with six Filipino gay prisoners and their romantic partners in prison and an analysis of the participants' profiles in the LRP. Being a Filipino gay prisoner presents several hardships but it does not make him a captive of misery. Instead, the Filipino gay prisoner continues to find meaning in his life and hopes to gain full acceptance and respect from society. Writing about the life stories of the participants can provide them with an opportunity to be heard and can help the institution tasked to rehabilitate them in coming up with more holistic understanding of this segment of the population which will facilitate future programs to promote the well-being of Filipino gay prisoners.

Keywords: LGBT, gay prisoners, life stories, lived experiences, meaning making

The role of incarceration evolved from a punitive measure of punishing law offenders to a more humane system of rehabilitation that prepares them for their reintegration in the society, or at least, redeems them from the crimes they committed (Roberts, 2006).

However, despite the developments in the programs of many prison systems in the world, the physical and social environments that the prisoners face remain harsh and hostile. In the Philippines, for example, one of the human rights violations identified by the United States' Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor ([DRL], 2013) is the torture and inhumane treatment of prisoners.

Overcrowded prisons, lack of basic provisions such as food, potable water and medical attention, limited opportunities for self-development, and abuse perpetrated by prison staff are just some of the problems faced by prisoners in the country. This is even more difficult particularly for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) prisoners because, aside from exposure to the problems mentioned, they are also vulnerable to discrimination and victimization in prison systems due to their sexual orientation and gender identity (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes [UNODC], 2009).

LGBT prisoners face a wide array of challenges in their stay in jails and prisons; however, the literature offers only a limited discussion about these challenges and focuses only on the LGBT prisoners' access to justice, health care and family links, protection from and complaints about sexual abuse and rape (Alarid, 2000; Association for the Prevention of Torture [APT], 2015, Dumond, 2000; Harawa, Sweat, George, & Sylla, 2010, Just Detention International [JDI], 2009b; Pintobtang & Bualar, 2012; UNODC, 2009; World Health Organization [WHO], 2007) as well as the perception and attitudes of prison staff and other prisoners toward homosexuality and gender-nonconformity in prison (Blackburn, Fowler, Mullings, & Marquart, 2011; Eigenberg, 2000).

UNODC (2009) identified police brutality as one form of victimization that LGBT people suffer when arrested. However, complaints about this are silenced by fear of retaliation which discourages LGBT prisoners to seek justice. They may also be denied access to a legal counsel because prison staff are not willing to assist them partly due to their negative attitudes toward LGBT people. This sexual prejudice is also a factor that determines the protection afforded to them when they are already imprisoned (Dumond, 2000; Eigenberg, 2000; UNODC, 2009). Because of the belief that LGBT prisoners are responsible for sexual assault and rape in prison (UNODC, 2009) and

that they play an active role in sexual violence (Eigenberg, 2000), the fact that they are more likely to be victimized is ignored by prison staff or correctional officers. This may lead to authorities' disregard of the protection needed by LGBT prisoners.

Neglect of LGBT prisoners' needs for security and support can cause further victimization. Because there is no one who will protect them in the prison system, they may rely on an inmate who has enough power in the prison hierarchy to protect them from other inmates (UNODC, 2009). However, this may force them to fulfill the demands of that "protector" inmate, which may include sexual requests. They are also prone to a certain form of prostitution in which the "protector" inmate asks them to perform sexual services to other inmates or prison staff in exchange of money, which may or may not benefit LGBT prisoners (Dumond, 2000). Their participation in prostitution can then exacerbate the prison staff's sexual prejudice against them, which may be rooted from their ambivalent understanding of such activity. Eigenberg (2000) argues that, on one hand, prison staff seem to perceive LGBT prisoners involved in prostitution as willing participants, thus, making them more deserving of contempt, than protection, since they use their experiences of victimization to gain "profit" for themselves. On the other hand, these prison staff may also view prostitution in prison as LGBT prisoners' way of earning protection; however, staff often believe that the means employed by these prisoners is repulsive. Nevertheless, whichever attitude the prison staff may hold, it may still intensify their unwillingness to provide protection to LGBT prisoners.

Aside from the limited support that LGBT prisoners receive from prison staff, lack of contact with parents and other family members is another challenge they face. This may be caused by their families' disapproval of their sexual orientation and gender identity and/or the crimes they committed (UNODC, 2009). Because prison staff and their families cannot provide them support and a "protector" inmate is a potential abuser, some of them choose to be surrounded by other LGBT prisoners. Pintobtang and Bualar (2012) found out that Thai gay prisoners may initially find it difficult to adjust in the prison environment, but upon finding and eventually joining a gay community, they gain more confidence in expressing their sexual orientation and gender identity. In the Philippines, gay prisoners can enlist themselves

to a *pangkat* of their choice. At the New Bilibid Prisons, for example, prisoners who identify themselves as gay can choose to separate from the *pangkats*, to be part of the so-called traditional *pangkat* (e.g., Batang City Jail) (Candaliza-Gutierrez, 2012) or to be part of an all-gay *pangkat*. Such community is beneficial for new gay prisoners because it helps them learn about gay life in prison and guides them in building intimate relationship with straight as well as other gay inmates. However, since prison authorities may believe that same-sex sexual encounters cause the spread of health problems in prisons, formation of gay communities are discouraged, making it difficult for LGBT prisoners to look for and gain social support (Pintobtang & Bualar, 2012).

Another challenge faced by LGBT prisoners is health concerns such as outbreak of sexually-transmitted diseases (STDs) in prison due to consensual and/or coerced unprotected sexual activities (Harawa et al., 2010; Pintobtang & Bualar, 2012; UNODC, 2009; WHO, 2007), as well as mental health problems (UNODC, 2009). World Health Organization (2007) identified the lack of condom provisions as one of the reasons for the prevalence of STDs in prisons. However, even in custody units where condoms are accessible to LGBT inmates, STDs are still rampant (Harawa et al., 2010). This may be caused by a limited number of available condoms, condom failure due to lack of lubricant provisions, and sporadic distribution of condoms. Aside from institutional factors, LGBT prisoners' knowledge about STDs and their perception of their partners' HIV status often affect their (non)use of condoms during sexual encounters. Moreover, when diagnosed with STDs, these prisoners do not immediately receive medical attention because of the lack of medical facilities in prison and/or prison staff with adequate training (UNODC, 2009). Although given less attention, LGBT prisoners' needs for psychological support and mental health care are also a crucial health issue that has to be addressed (APT, 2015; UNODC, 2009), especially if they experienced sexual abuse prior and/or during imprisonment. Experiences of discrimination and humiliation can also put LGBT prisoners at risk of suicide and self-harm. Thus, the social injustices, such as discrimination and victimization, suffered by LGBT prisoners are perpetrated by different individuals in the prison system and are aggravated by the inadequacies

of social services provided to them.

The lived experiences of LGBT prisoners seem to be virtually invisible in the literature and if they are given attention to, they are viewed as victims of the circumstances in their lives. Although telling their stories of struggle is an important way of uncovering social injustices that they experience, it is not the only way to empower this seemingly helpless population. We can also promote empowerment of LGBT prisoners by highlighting their stories of resilience in the midst of the challenges of imprisonment and “reframing how we position LGBT people from victims to agents” (Ofreneo, 2013, p. 12). Unfortunately, there seems to be a dearth of studies regarding the lived experiences of LGBT prisoners, in general, and of Filipino LGBT prisoners, in particular. Little is known about their lives since their issues are usually integrated in the stories of other vulnerable populations in detention, such as women in correctional facilities and children in conflict with the law (JDI, 2009a). Thus, this study seeks to advance our knowledge of Filipino LGBT psychology by exploring the life stories, particularly, of Filipino gay prisoners. It specifically attempts to answer two questions: (1) what are the lived experiences of Filipino gay prisoners, and (2) how do they give meaning to these lived experiences?

The current study took a narrative approach in examining the lived experiences of Filipino gay prisoners and their meaning making. It draws from McAdams’ model of identity as a life story (Parker, 2004) which is an approach in narrative psychology that uses “spoken or written presentation that is organized in the form of a story.” It is anchored on the basic premise that humans make sense of their identity and give meaning to their experiences by telling their stories. Docena (2013) noted its use in exploring LGBT identities and their stories of struggle and resilience.

METHOD

Participants

A purposive sample of six self-identified Filipino gay prisoners whose stay in Leyte Regional Prison (LRP) ranges from a year to 23

years participated in the study. Five of them came from low-income families in Eastern Visayas and one from the National Capital Region. As national offenders, they are all sentenced to more than three years of imprisonment with various criminal charges such as kidnapping, simple theft, homicide, rape and violation of Section 5 of Republic Act 9165 or the Comprehensive Dangerous Drugs Act of 2002. Since the researchers did not know who among the prisoners are gay, we asked the prison staff to help them find participants for the study. The prison staff were able to identify nine potential participants. Out of the nine, six agreed to be interviewed and all of them identified themselves as gay. For purposes of confidentiality and anonymity, the participants were assigned pseudonyms and identifying details in the narratives were either deleted or altered.

Procedures

A modified version of McAdam's life story interview (2008) was used in collecting the narratives of the participants. The purpose of the study was explained to them and they subsequently answered questions regarding their life experiences during their formative years, their transgression of the law, arrest and trial proceedings, and their incarceration in local jails and in the LRP. They were interviewed at the receiving area of the maximum security area of the said prison during their most convenient time. All of them seemed enthusiastic to participate in the study since it was their first time to encounter researchers who are interested with the lives of gay men in prison; they also agreed to have the interviews recorded for ease of transcription. Each of the interviews lasted from an hour to 1 1/2 hours.

Aside from the interviews with the gay prisoners, the researchers also interviewed other prisoners who were identified by the participants as their romantic partner in the prison. All of them except one agreed to be interviewed. An analysis of the participants' documents in the LRP was also conducted. This triangulation process was done to verify the reliability of the participants' narratives.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to better describe the lived experiences and meaning-making of the participants. The researchers independently reviewed the transcripts on several occasions. We then met to examine the emergent ideas and decide on the organization of the data. Recurrent patterns were identified through open coding and reorganized through constant comparison. We used these patterns to come up with a list of principal themes with supporting excerpts from the transcripts which are presented in the next section.

RESULTS

Lived Experiences of Filipino Gay Prisoners

Four themes were identified that represent the Filipino gay prisoners' lived experiences. The first theme proposes that their *experiences of poverty* is central to their separation from their families, transgression of the law, denial of justice during trial proceedings, and their experiences in jails and in the LRP. The second theme discussed the *uncertainty* that they faced in their initial custody and eventual transfer from a rehabilitation center or a local jail to the LRP, and the adjustment they did to adapt to their new environment. The third theme describes their experiences of *mundane heterosexism* prior and during imprisonment and how they reframe it as their social environment's acceptance of their sexual identity. The final theme for this portion illustrates the *dynamics of intimate relationships* between the participants and their romantic partners in prison.

Experiences of poverty. Poverty is the most salient theme identified in the narratives of the Filipino gay prisoners. Moreover, the participants identified this experience as central to the different aspects of their lives; from their childhood up to their imprisonment in the LRP. On one hand, some of them were separated from their immediate families at a very young age due to poverty. As Gab put it:

*Two years old pa la ako, guin-bayaan na ako [ha akon lola].
Waray man kapas an akon kag-anak pagpadako hin damo nga anak labi na nga pobre la kami.* (I was left with my grandmother

since I was two years old. My parents could not afford to support me and my siblings since we are poor.)

On the other hand, there are also participants who voluntarily left home to help provide for their families' needs like Mark, who mentioned working as a hair stylist and a construction worker in Manila to earn money for his family and help send his siblings to school. Because of these difficulties they had gone through during their formative years, some of them were forced to participate in illicit activities, thinking that these would be easy ways to escape poverty. Chris explained how his participation in illegal trade of drugs helped him provide for his family:

Malaki kinikita ko noon sa pagbebenta ng shabu tapos yung kinikita ko, binibigay ko kay Mama. Panggastos na sa bahay yun. Di na nya kailangang magtrabaho kasi malaki naman kita ko sa pagdi-dealer. Nakakakain na kami ng tatlong beses sa isang araw, nakakabili ng mga damit at gamit sa bahay. Gumaan din yung buhay namin kahit na ilegal yung ginagawa ko. (I earned a lot by selling drugs and I gave the money to my mother. That was what we used for everyday expenses. She did not need to work because we have had enough through dealing drugs. We could eat thrice a day, buy things for our house. Our lives were easier despite my illegal acts.)

When they got caught for the crimes they had committed, poverty also played an important role in the justice afforded to them during the trial proceedings. Since money is involved in hiring a legal counsel, the processing of Mark's request for motion for reconsideration was delayed and eventually denied because he could not pay for the attorney's fees. John's settlement with his complainant did not push through either because of financial issues:

Diri niya guinkakarawat an kwarta kay kulang kuno. Singkwenta-mil an guin-aaro ha amon. Hain man kami hito makuha? Mga kablas gud la it akon kag-anak. Sanglit waray na kami nakig-areglo. Guinkasuhan na la ako niya. (She did not accept the money because it was not enough. She was asking for an amount of PHP 50,000.00. Where would we get that money?)

My parents were just poor. So we did not settle. She just filed a case against me.)

Now that they are imprisoned in the LRP, experiences of poverty remain part of their everyday lives due to insufficient services they receive. One example of this is the quality of food served to them which, according to Vince, is not properly prepared. Another example of the harsh living conditions they experience, according to Paul, are the recurring blackouts and a lack of water supply:

Kun waray kuryente, waray gihap tubig. Yana kay pirmi brownout, waray gud kami kuru-karigo. Naabot pa gud ito hin pira kaadlaw. (If there is no power supply, there is also no water supply. Now that there is a recurring blackout, we go without taking a bath. It even goes for several days.)

Limited opportunities to earn income in the prison is also one of their concerns. They believe that they have the capacity to work but there are no available jobs that they can do so they are compelled to look for other ways to earn money. This is evident in Chris' story about how he has to offer manicure-pedicure services to some visitors of inmates just to have his own income:

Naku, wala kang mapapala dito kung di ka kikilos. Di ka naman nila bibigyan ng panggastos mo kaya maghanap ka na ng tatrabahuhin bago ka pa magutom. Kanya-kanya kaming hanap ng magagawa dito. Tulad ako, nagma-manicure-pedicure sa mga asawa ng ibang preso. Tapos yung binibigay nila sakin, pinambibili ko ng sabon, minsan sigarilyo. At least may sarili akong pera. (You would not get anything from here if you would not work. They will not provide for you so you have to find something to do before you starve. Each of us finds his own means here. Like me, I do manicure-pedicure for the wives of some of the inmates. Then whatever amount they give me, I use it to buy my own soap, sometimes for a cigarette. At least I have my own money.)

Thus far, the socioeconomic status of the participants has a significant impact on their experiences in the different stages of their

lives. Since the participants grew up in families living in poverty, they spent most of their formative years observing and going through the difficulties of their families' condition. This became one of the factors that led them to make a living out of illegal activities, believing that these would easily improve their situation. However, it cost them their freedom, which they could have defended if they were not denied lawful trial proceedings due to being underprivileged. Consequently, all these events in their lives led them to prison where they experience almost the same struggles, if not worse, as they did when they were still free.

Uncertainty and coping with changes. Another theme identified from the Filipino gay prisoners' narratives is the uncertainty they faced in their initial custody and eventual transfer from a rehabilitation center or a local jail to the LRP. Some of them were still young when they committed their criminal offenses so they were brought to rehabilitation centers, while others were old enough to be incarcerated in local jails. The participants reported that they initially felt anxious about the prospect of detention in an unfamiliar institution because they did not know what to expect then. Chris' account about the first time he was brought to an institution for detention succinctly captured the thoughts of the other participants:

Syempre, hindi ko alam kung ano mangyayari sakin dun. Wala akong kaalam-alam kung anong meron dun. Inisip ko nga, ano kaya gagawin nila sakin? Dun na ba nila ako papatayin? Natakot ako kasi hindi ko alam kung makakauwi pa ako samin. (Of course, I did not know what will happen to me there. I have no idea what is in there. I even thought, what will they do to me? Will they kill me there? I was scared because I did not know if I could still go back home.)

The participants faced that uncertainty again when they were set to be transferred to the LRP from the rehabilitation center or local jails where they were initially held. Some of them did not actually know that the LRP existed, like Paul who expressed, "*diri ako maaram na mayda ngay-an sugad ini kay waray man hito nag-iistorya ha amon*" ("I did not know there is something like this because nobody told us about it"). However, those who knew LRP had reservations for

fear that they might not survive its environment. This was revealed in Mark's account:

Di nyo ba alam, dun sa pinanggalingan kong kulungan, ito ang kinakatakutan ng mga preso? Maraming nagsasabi samin kung mahirap doon, mas mahirap dito. (Did you not know that from the jail where I came from, this is what scares the inmates? A lot of them said that if it was difficult there, it is even harder here.)

With the participants' relocation from one institution to the LRP, there were changes in their environment. These changes compelled them to cope with the new challenges they faced in prison. One example was the discontinued visits from their families due to the LRP's distance from their hometowns and the high travel costs. Consequently, for some of them not to feel alone in prison, they befriended other inmates and even some of the prison staff, like John who expressed:

Waray ko man maka-istorya dinhi han syahan sanglit nakig-sangkay ako han iba nga preso. Nagkaka-among-among man kami pati hit iba na empleyado. Amo ito nga bisan waray ko bisita hin pera katuig, diri ako nawuwurok kay mayda ko mga sangkay. (I have no one to talk to so I made friends with some of the inmates. We get to be together and bond with some of the prison staff. That is why, even when nobody visits me for years, I do not feel alone because I have friends.)

For others, making friends with other prisoners served as their way of gaining protection from anticipated aggression of other inmates. Vince noted that senior inmates observe and scrutinize the newer ones. New inmates have to be careful with their actions because one mistake can be taken as an insult against senior inmates and can lead to altercations. However, even if one is new, as long as he can easily gain friends and he is easy to be with, befriending senior inmates would not be difficult. As for the participants, their easy disposition made it easier for them to adjust to the prison hierarchy and find friends who can protect them.

The sudden changes in the participants' lives caused them distress. Not knowing what they would do and what would happen to them left the gay prisoners concerned with the direction of their

lives. This feeling of uncertainty may have caused them troubles but it also drove them to make sense of their situations and adapt to the prison environment. With the help of other people in the prison, the participants continued to survive.

Although these experiences may not be specific to the participants, it implies that there are stressors faced by prisoners regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity. These are general stressors (Meyer, 2003) that are experienced by all people. However, Filipino gay prisoners face an additional burden because of their minority status.

Heterosexism and perception of acceptance. Heterosexism was a common experience among the Filipino gay prisoners prior to and during imprisonment. When they were young, they reported that they were bullied by other children for their sexual identity. Name-calling, jokes, insulting remarks, and snide comments were just some of their experiences of bullying. However, it should be noted that even at a young age, they had already viewed bullying as an intrinsic part of a gay man's life and resisting it could even endanger their lives. For them, as long as they are not physically abused, there is no need to stand against heterosexism.

For some of the participants, mundane heterosexism seems to signify that they are accepted in the community. As Vince put it, "*karawat man kami ha amon kay baga waray man nalabot, sugad hito*" ("we are accepted in our community because nobody hurts us, like that."). Gab supports this claim saying that the same treatment is given to them in the prison. He mentioned that there is a rule which prohibits them from insulting or hurting one another and they are given the opportunity to work for the prison staff which they interpret as an acceptance of their sexual orientation:

Maupay man it ira pagtratar ha amon didi bisan la kami bayot. Waray man nira maraot na binubuhat ha amon. Bawal ito dinhi it pasunlog-sunlog. Guintatagan pa ngani kami nira hin authorize para manungkulan ha Bantay Kalusugan. (They treat us well here even if we are gay. They do not do anything bad to us. Teasing is not allowed here. They even give us the authority to work in Bantay Kalusugan.)

However, even if they think that they are accepted in the prison, they recognize the instances when they are discriminated against by some prison staff. Chris stated:

Ang hirap kasi dito, porket bakla kami, akala nila pwede na nila kaming alilain. Wala naman kaming problema dun pero minsan yung pagpapaakyat nila samin ng ura-urada tapos tatawagin kami, gusto nila akyat kaagad. Hindi nila alam na may ginagawa rin kami sa baba. Yung ibang preso, di naman nila ginaganun. Bakit kaya no? (What is difficult here is that, since we are gay, they think they can enslave us. We have nothing against it, but sometimes when they ask us to go upstairs, we have to go there immediately. They do not consider that we are also doing something downstairs. They do not do it with the other inmates. Why is it like that?)

The participants' experiences of everyday heterosexism prior and during imprisonment is something unique to them because of their sexual identity. They may not notice it because it is either not obvious to them or they do not know they are being discriminated against, but it still pushes them to position their sexual identity in the context of institutional heterosexism. And in cases of more apparent heterosexist treatment, resistance is not considered an option.

The participants do not only cope with everyday challenges posed by their environment, both outside and in the prison. They also have to deal with different forms of homonegativity and discrimination (Meyer, 2003). The most salient minority specific resource that help them survive imprisonment is the support of their romantic partners in prison.

Romantic relationships with inmates. The participants recognized that same-sex attraction cannot be avoided, particularly in prison. The lack of women makes it possible for heterosexual inmates to direct their attention to the participants and eventually, get attracted to them. However, the gay prisoners came to the conclusion that the attraction they may feel towards their fellow inmates will have to be first initiated by themselves, since they understand that heterosexual men will not make the first move due to fear of being tagged as gay. John recalled what he had to do in order to confirm from his romantic

partner if the attraction was mutual:

Maaram na ako na karuyag ako niya kay, kun sugad nagkakatapo kami, iba hiya kumita ha ak. Bagan nalaga it iya mata kun nakakakita hiya ha akon pero kay maaram ako nga diri man hiya mag-uuna pakig-istorya ha akon asya nga ako na an kumadto ha iya selda. Nakigkilala ako ha iya tapos basta an sunod, nakig-iistorya na ako. Ako na la an umuna kay syempre, lalaki gud hiya. Han kaiha-iha, nagpakiana ako kun pwede ko ba hiya maging uyab. Nagsiring hiya na okay man la kuno. (I knew that he likes me because whenever we meet in the area, he stares at me. His eyes seem to sparkle whenever he sees me but since I know that he will not start a conversation with me, I decided to go to his cell. I made the first move because of course, he is a man. When time passed, I asked him if he could be my boyfriend. He said it was okay with him.)

However, for some of our participants, like Chris, having an affair with inmates does not require so much effort, which they distinguished from the relationship formation behaviors they did outside the prison.

Eh ang labanan dito, kahit 'Thank you' lang, libre na. Makukuha mo nga kahit isang stick lang ng sigarilyo, okay na, wala pang bayad. Kaysa sa laya na kung anu-ano pang arte, ang dami pang hinihingi. Kaya sabi nila, mas masarap daw dito sa kulungan kasi libre lalaki. (In here, even just a mere 'Thank you' will do. You can just give them a stick of cigarette. Unlike outside, men make several demands. That is why they claim that being imprisoned is good because men here are for free.)

All of them claimed that having a romantic partner is essential in their stay in prison. Mark even considers it as an important aspect of their lives that they cannot live without: *"Upod ito hit kinabuhi hit mga bayot kay diri kami mabubuhi kun waray kami lalaki. Labi pa kay adi kami ha kolonya"* ("It is a part of a gay man's life, because we will not be able to survive if we do not have men. Especially since we are here in prison."). Because of this view on relationships with other inmates, the gay prisoners really put effort into taking care of their romantic partners. In return, their partners make sure that they are

protected from danger. For our participants, their romantic partners served as their source of social support. Gab clearly stated how he and his partner are always there to support each other:

Han nasakit ito hiya, gintimangno ko ito hiya. Waray gud ako babaya kay syempre, nabaraka gud ako na bangin la may diri maupay na manabo. Tapos an ako liwat an napa-away kay mayda ko nakabatunay nga empleyado, hiya an nakig-atubang. Waray niya awaya pero ginsignan nga diri na ako labtan. (When he got sick, I took care of him. I did not leave him because, of course, I was worried that something bad might happen to him. Then, when I got involved in a fight with a prison staff, he was the one who faced him. They did not fight but he told him to back off.)

Another lived experience that is unique to the participants is their same-sex relations with other inmates. To them, it cannot be avoided because it is a need that one must satisfy; however, they understand that the targets of their attraction are socialized to adhere to hegemonic masculinity. Therefore, to ensure that the initial attraction will eventually flourish, the openly gay prisoners must make the first move without compromising the “heterosexual” identity of their potential partner. Moreover, they also see the difference between the dynamics of same-sex courtship in the prison and outside. This may or may not lead into a more serious relationship but when it does, the romantic relationship serves as their source of support and protection.

Filipino Gay Prisoners’ Meaning Making of Their Lived Experiences

The three themes identified to represent the Filipino gay prisoners’ meaning-making of their lived experiences revolve around their imprisonment. The first theme presents the participants’ view of their imprisonment as the price to pay for the crimes they have committed. The second theme focuses on their view of incarceration as an ongoing life-changing event. The last theme describes the lessons that other people can learn from their experiences.

Imprisonment as a price to pay. The gay prisoners were aware that the actions they had taken to alleviate their poverty were

not right. Moreover, they also viewed their imprisonment as the price they have to pay for wrong decisions they had made. Gab exemplified at length the participants' view of their imprisonment:

Maraot an akon guinbuhat hadto. Para ha guti nga kwarta, damo an akon guinbuhat nga diri angay buhaton. Nagbaligya ako hin drugs nga pwede makamatay hin iba nga tawo. Ako mismo, gumamit kay kahuna ko marasa. Hadto siguro, okay la adto. Pero maaram ako na maraot adto tapos ginpadayun ko la. Karma na la ada ini nga napreso ako. Imbis na maupay adto an amon kabutang, waray ko na lugod kwarta. Diri na ako nakakabulig, naging pabigat pa ngani ako. An masakit pa kay diri ko na makaka-upod tak pamilya. Gaba ini nak maraot na buhatan hadto. (What I did before was wrong. For a small amount of money, I did things which I was not supposed to do. I sold drugs that could kill other people. I even did drugs myself, thinking that it was worthy. Those times maybe, it was okay. Though I knew it was bad, I still continued doing it. I guess me going to jail is karma. We were in a good situation before; now, I don't even have a centavo. I could not help my family anymore, I even became a burden to them. What is painful is that I cannot even be with them. This is my punishment for all the bad things I have done before.)

What is interesting about it is despite owning up to their wrong doings, they also attributed their hardships to an outside force that is beyond their control. Nevertheless, they still believe that they deserved what they were going through, like Chris who thinks that, "*dapat lang naman sakin ito para talagang magtanda na ako*" ("I deserve this so that I can really learn from my mistakes.").

Imprisonment as an ongoing life-changing event. Remarkably, the participants initially thought their lives would be over once they became imprisoned. Mark even thought that it would be his death:

Akala ko pag nakulong ako, tapos na, wala na. Parang ang sa isip ko nun, patay na ako. Sakin naman, inisip ko na kamatayan ko na ang kulungan. (I thought when I went to jail, that's it, it's done. I was thinking before, I am already dead. For me, prison is

my death.)

However, upon realizing that it is not yet the end, they started believing that despite being imprisoned, they must continue living their lives. Doing so gave them the hope that better things would still happen to them, however difficult their lives may be, just like John who even mentioned his adherence to an old saying to describe his positive outlook in life:

Siring pa man han kalagsan, 'habang may buhay, may paglaum.' Damo pa it pwede manabo ha amon didi labi na hit makakalaya. Aww kay bisan ngani nga aadi pa, padayun man la gihap it kinabuhi. (According to the elders, 'As long as there is life, there is hope.' There are a lot of things that can happen to us here, especially to those who will be freed. Even when we are still here, life still goes on.)

Realizing that their lives must go on despite their imprisonment is an important factor that contributed to their optimism in life. It helped them set aside the negativities and instead become more proactive in redeeming themselves. They admit that their lives in prison are not easy but believing that this could have a silver lining keeps them going and motivates them to regain their direction in life.

Life as a source of lessons. Despite the fact that the participants believed they had made some wrong decisions in life, they still viewed their struggles as a source of lessons from which others, especially youth, can learn. One of the lessons they stated is the importance of obedience to parents, especially in putting value to education. The participants looked at education as a valid tool that one can use to improve one's life. Vince, who was not able to finish his studies, cited a belief in the equalizing effect of education to people living in poverty:

Diri gad pang-Maalala it akon kinbuhi pero damo it mahibabaruan hit kabataan. Sugad hiton dapat mamati hit kag-anak, diri magpinasaway, mag-eskwela hin maupay. Labi na gud it pag-eskwela! Dapat kamo, magtinuhay gud kamo kay bisan it pobre, nariko kun may iniskwelahan. (My life story is not worth featuring in [a Filipino anthology show] but there are a lot of things the younger generations can learn from it. For example,

listening to our parents, to be obedient, and to study well. They should do well with their studies because even the poor become successful when they are educated.)

They also mentioned the danger of peer influence, especially those who are inclined to violate rules. They advised younger generations not to give in to peer pressure and to distance themselves once they observe them misbehaving. Given that most of their friends also lived in poverty, they used their living conditions to explain their wrongdoings. With this, Vince advised youth to look for ethical means in improving their lives, instead of relying on “easy money”.

Oo, mahirap ka nga, desperado kang magkapera kasi wala nang makain pamilya mo pero wag kang gagawa ng masama. Maghanap ka dapat ng marangal na trabaho. Tingnan nyo ko, anong napala ko sa pagbebenta ng drugs, wala din. Kaya mag-aral kayo tapos magtrabaho kayo. Magpayaman kayo kung gusto nyo pero syempre wag naman yung sobra. Yung makakatulong lang sa pamilya. (Yes, you are poor and you are desperate to earn money because your family does not have anything to eat. But you do not have to do bad things. You have to find a decent job. Look at me, what did I get from selling drugs? Nothing. So, do well in school and work. Be rich if you want, rich enough to support your family.)

Aside from being a form of redemption from their past, the participants view their lives as stories of learning not only for themselves but for the community in general. Their experiences made them realize to do things “the right way” and to let not poverty and desperation be reasons for them to “swallow the bitter pill”. Likewise, these are the lessons they want younger generations to learn from them. They even emphasized the importance of education, positive peer influence and the role of hard work to better one’s life.

DISCUSSION

The objective of this study was to explore the life stories of Filipino gay prisoners. Using McAdams’ model of identity as a life story (see

Parker, 2004) in understanding their lived experiences and how they give meaning to these experiences, a group of Filipino gay prisoners in the Leyte Regional Prison were asked to share their narratives. These stories revealed that they were all going through different struggles such as poverty, uncertainty, and discrimination, which is supported by previous research (Alarid, 2000; APT, 2015; Dumond, 2000; Harawa, Sweat, George, & Sylla, 2010; Just Detention International, 2009b; Pintobtang & Bualar, 2012; UNODC, 2009; WHO, 2007). However, this literature seems to miss gay prisoners' complementary stories of hope, resilience, and positive experiences, as well as the value that they put in their lives and imprisonment.

The current study offers rich insights into the life stories of Filipino gay prisoners; however, some caveats should be noted. The study is culturally situated, given that the lived experiences presented are specific to the Filipino gay men who are imprisoned in the Philippines. Because the prison where the participants are held is run by a government agency, their lived experiences may be different from those who are imprisoned in Western countries where prisons are privatized. The purposive nature of the sample also limits the generalizability of the study's results. Given the variability of environments that different prisons in the Philippines impose on inmates, the experiences of the participants may not fully reflect the lives of Filipino gay prisoners who are held in other prisons. The participants were also from families with low socioeconomic status and their experiences may also be different from Filipino gay prisoners of various backgrounds. Therefore, future studies can look at how the prison environment and other demographic information (age, religious affiliation, etc.) create unique experiences for Filipino gay prisoners.

As the results suggest, Filipino gay prisoners face different challenges, not only in the prison but even before they were imprisoned. This is particularly true for their experiences of poverty. Coming from families with low socioeconomic status, they were confronted with lack of resources for basic needs, education, and even familial support. They were also exposed to chaotic childhoods characterized by marital separation, separation from family, and child labor, all of which may lead to chronic negative life events (McGarrity, 2014), and in this case, their imprisonment and uncertainties in life. It seems that

the justice system they thought would defend them also operates on that same level. Contrary to the report of UNODC (2009), Filipino gay prisoners were denied just trial proceedings, not because of their sexual identity but because of their incapacity to pay exorbitant fees. The United States' Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (2013) specifically stated this as one of the prevailing human rights violations in the Philippines. Moreover, the inhumane conditions they experience in the prison also play out in that same line.

Filipino gay prisoners came from communities with members who have low income and less education, like their communities of origin and the LRP. As Bowman and Foster (2008) suggest, communities like these can pose anti-gay attitudes and behaviors to sexual minority individuals. This is reflected in their experiences of bullying during their formative years and in imprisonment. They have also been exposed to societal prejudice and stigma towards gay people their whole lives. Although not obvious to them, these experiences may have led to the formation of their belief that discrimination is an inherent part of a gay man's life. This shows that they have adopted the negative attitudes of their communities towards homosexuality in general and to them as gay men in particular (Clarke, Ellis, Peel, & Riggs, 2010).

The “Other Side” of the Story

Previous discussions on LGBT prisoners seem to focus exclusively on their stories of struggle. This may be one of the reasons why their experiences of discrimination and victimization are better documented in the literature. However, examination of their stories of hope, resilience, and positive experiences is virtually non-existent. The view that LGBT prisoners are victims in the prison system is probably perpetuated by this imbalanced presentation of their narratives. Although the current study did not specifically look for these stories of Filipino gay prisoners, it is still an important consideration if we want to frame them as agents, and not merely victims, in the prison context.

It is interesting to look at the romantic relationships that are established among Filipino gay prisoners in prison. Instead of having a one-sided relationship, in which the openly gay prisoner gives more support by serving his romantic partner, they mutually support each

other in various ways. This is in contrast to UNODC's (2009) report that LGBT prisoners cannot gain support from their inmates as they are potential abusers. In fact, a gay prisoner's romantic partner could also be his source, and recipient, of support in the prison.

Filipino gay prisoners' meaning-making also signifies that they can view their lives in a more positive light. Vaughn and colleagues (2014) call this the virtue of transcendence, which helps LGBT individuals create and provide connections among their lived experiences. Because they are given opportunities to help in some tasks, like in *Bantay Kalusugan*, they feel that they are valued in prison. Moreover, they also witnessed some of their co-inmates who were released from prison after serving their sentence. They all look forward to that day and believe that it will happen soon. These experiences help them form an optimistic point of view of their lives.

The lives of Filipino gay prisoners appears to be less miserable than how it is documented in the literature. The traits they possess and the relational opportunities for development they create are their sources of positive outlook in life.

Implications

This study shows that despite the adversities of life in prison, Filipino gay prisoners have the capacity for development of a more positive outlook in life and self-efficacy, on their own or with the help of others in the prison (i.e., romantic partners). This capacity can be properly fostered if the prison as an institution will enable these prisoners. Prisons as a rehabilitative institution must be able to help prisoners develop a sense of responsibility and agency that will enable them once they are reintegrated in the society. In fact, social institutions, like prisons, are believed to have the potential to promote the development of positive traits and positive subjective experiences, especially for LGBT people (Vaughan et al., 2014; Vaughan & Rodriguez, 2014).

It would also be beneficial to the Filipino gay prisoners if their stories of struggle and narratives of hope will be equally present in the literature. In this way, researchers would be able to use a more holistic perspective in understanding the lives of prisoners in general

and Filipino gay prisoners, in particular. This shift in perspective could catalyze change of attitudes towards them as helpless and mere victims. This would be particularly useful in action research that aims to identify and eventually implement LGBT-inclusive prison policies that will allow Filipino gay prisoners to live a more meaningful life while in prison.

AUTHORS NOTES

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