

# Roadmaps and Crossroads of Life Transitions: Exploring Career Decision-Making of Filipino Gay High School Students

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The unique situations faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth serve as important considerations in preparing them for their future career encounters. This research aimed to explore inclinations, considerations, and tribulations of Filipino gay high school students in choosing and deciding their future careers. Using a phenomenological inquiry design, the researchers conducted interviews with five selected gay high school students. Six themes emerged from the analysis and were used to come up with the roadmap and crossroad model of career decision-making by gay high school students. Implications and recommendations for career counseling with gay youth are discussed.

*Keywords:* LGBT, career counseling

The youth play an important role in making positive transformation a reality in every nation, and the roles of both parents and teachers serve as important elements in the future career decisions of the youth (Seelman, Forge, Walls, & Bridges, 2015). These career decisions, leading to their career anchors and paths, then shape the means by which they will contribute to their people and their country (Kaplan, 2014).

The current study is centered on LGBT youth, particularly gay

high school students, to understand their career decision-making. We aim to contribute to both theory and practice by developing a model that is grounded on the views and experiences of gay youth in order to improve career counseling practices relevant to their situation.

### **Career Decision-Making among LGBT Youth**

Deciding for one's future career is not an easy task because of the challenges such processes entail. Young people who identify themselves as part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community may face added pressures and challenges as a result of stigma and discrimination (Baiocco et al., 2012). Because the mainstream literature on career decision-making has focused on heterosexual youth, we argue that there is a need to look at the uniqueness and richness of the lived experiences of LGBT youth, in order to add breadth and depth to the psychological perspectives that shape the lives and careers of LGBT people (Clarke, Ellis, Peel, & Riggs, 2010).

Previous research in LGBT psychology has looked into the experiences of LGBT children, adolescents, working professionals, and elderly people. This study calls attention to adolescence, a stage during which there is a high need for support because of the different struggles experienced by LGBT youth such as coming out; fears of ostracism, discrimination, and violence from others; the possibility of at-school victimization; and the need for opportunities for LGBT-affirmative socialization and support while in the school setting (Bontempo & D'Augelli, 2002; Heck et al., 2014; Maguen et al., 2002; Seelman et al., 2015). These initial steps are expected to prepare LGBT youth to manage their career development properly as they move forward in life (Nauta, Saucier, & Woordard, 2001).

While most of the studies done in the Philippine context focus on LGBT experiences like coming out (Docena, 2013) and mental health (Manalastas, 2013), the current study focuses on career decision-making among LGBT youth, particularly gay high school students. We explored gay students' career *inclinations* (defined as their specific work interests and aspirations), *considerations* (their reasons and anchors for choosing career paths), and *tribulations* (the foreseen challenges and impediments that may prevent the attainment of their

goals in life) to provide a perspective on an understudied topic within this specific subpopulation. As diversity continues to shape the modern workplace, organizations must move into adopting inclusion practices to leverage all differences (Kreitz, 2008) and transform the workplace to an inclusive environment which celebrates and capitalizes on the benefits afforded by workplace diversity (Polat, 2011; Mor Barak, 2005). Organizations must take steps toward becoming more inclusive domains that place high importance on cultural differences and equally incorporate all members through pluralism as an acculturation practice rather than as an end result in assimilation which, in turn, can minimize intergroup conflicts, biases, and favoritisms (Shiraev & Levy, 2010; Thomas, 2005). Further, it is given that individuals have the tendency to develop stereotypes which then influence how they deal with or manage others. However, guided by proper education and the ability to correctly evaluate others' behaviors, diversity and inclusion efforts can be carried out more successfully in organizations (Hechanova, Teng-Calleja, & Villaluz, 2014). In the course of the study, we answered the central question of what characterizes gay high school students' inclinations, considerations and tribulations in choosing and deciding for their future careers.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were five Filipino high school students who satisfied the following inclusion criteria: self-identification as gay, currently in the 10th or 11th grade in high school, and ages 15 to 17 years old. As an exploratory study, the sample size was deemed sufficient for the study at hand. As Patton (2002) puts it, "Qualitative research is geared toward better understanding of human experiences. There are no rules in sample size in qualitative inquiry. Sample size depends on what you want to know, the purpose of the inquiry, what is at stake, what will be useful, what will have credibility, and what can be done with available time and resources." (p. 244).

Participants confirmed gay self-identification through specific behaviors such as having the desire to wear feminine clothes, using

accessories and make-up that are typically perceived as feminine, developing crushes on males, and being generally comfortable to mingle with gay youth and girls as their immediate social network. They expressed that their families are aware that they are gay and mentioned that they have relatives who are gay as well. All five students participated in structured interviews which we scheduled with participants at their most convenient times. Interviews took one hour and a half at most.

### **Procedure**

We made use of a semi-structured interview guide comprised of 19 questions that probed the lived experiences of students regarding their career decision-making. We obtained informed consent before starting each interview session. After transcription by the researchers to ensure trustworthiness and accuracy of the data, notes were taken and summarized to support the data obtained from the transcriptions. In analyzing the data, an explication process following Groenewald (2004) was followed. The process included bracketing or phenomenological reduction, delineating units of meaning, clustering units of meaning to form themes, summarizing each interview, extracting general and unique themes from all the interviews, and making a composite summary

### **Analysis**

The study employed the use of the phenomenological inquiry design. Phenomenology is a data gathering method that implies attending to and describing people's lived experience concerning a specific phenomenon or occurrence (Smith, 2009). By taking into the consideration the varying world views of people, phenomenological inquiry can contribute greatly to exploring the lived realities behind every phenomenon (Bernstein et al., 2005; Sternberg, 2001).

## **RESULTS**

Six relevant themes were surfaced that typify the career decisions

of our gay high school students. Table 1 presents a roadmap and crossroad model of career decision-making by our gay high school student interviewees.

The themes were *Interpersonal Orientation* and *Altruistic Nature* for career inclinations, *Job Satisfaction* and *Talent Development* for career considerations and *Inclusive Workplace* and *Self-Presentation* for career tribulations.

Based on the interviews, the inclinations of the participants revolve around professions that are socially focused and people-oriented, hence the theme, *Interpersonal Orientation*. Interviewees said that they personally enjoy being in big groups of people and want social interactions to be part of the career that they will pursue later on. One of the participants said:

*Gusto ko po iyong nasa harap ng tao, iyong nakikisalamuha siguro sa tao. Ayaw ko po noong trabaho na nasa opisina ka lang. Kasi iyong sa iba ko po na nakikita kasi ganon lang. Ok din naman po, pero mas maganda kapag may interaction po.*

According to participants, career decisions that would lead to interactions with others will make them satisfied and fulfilled.

The participants further revealed that, aside from their social inclinations, they want to pursue jobs in the helping profession, thus surfacing a caring agenda as future members of the workforce. One of the participants mentioned:

*Pwede po ako maging teacher or kaya po nurse. Iyong magulang ko po sinasabi po nila noon na gusto nila ako maging engineer. Eh ayaw ko naman po kaya hinayaan na lang nila ako, kung ano raw po iyong gusto ko. Basta may kinabukasan. Ok naman po ako doon.*

This suggests that participants are also concerned about the contribution of their future profession to people in need and to society, which seems to be a manifestation of their personal interest as well.

Another said:

*Ako po sa ngayon, binabalak ko pong maging teacher po o kaya ay isang nurse. Bahala na po siguro si Lord kung saan niya po ako ilalagay sa future pero alinman po dito ok naman po sa*

Table 1. Roadmap and Crossroad Model of Career Decisions of Gay High School Students

Career Decisions					
Career Inclinations		Career Considerations		Career Tribulations	
Themes	Subthemes	Themes	Subthemes	Themes	Subthemes
Interpersonal Orientation	Social Orientation	Job Satisfaction	Personal Interest	Inclusive Workplace	Equal Opportunity
	People Orientation		Childhood Dream		Fair Treatment
Altruistic Nature	Helping Profession	Personal Fulfillment	Career Progression	Self-Presentation	Discreet Actions
	Caring Agenda		Professional Development		Workplace Sophistication

*akin. Actually kung pwede nga rin po isama ang stewardess papasukin ko rin po iyon. Nakakatuwa lang po siguro magpunta sa iba't ibang lugar."*

Mentioning that they want to be a nurse, a teacher, a flight steward, or a doctor of medicine someday, the participants emphasized the theme Altruistic Nature. Such career paths were also perceived to provide personal fulfillment due to opportunities in career progression, specifically the chance for international mobility.

Regarding the career considerations, the data revealed that while the participants admire the career profiles of their family members and relatives, their own personal interest in choosing their future careers still prevail. One of the participants explained:

*Kapag napapag-usapan po namin iyong tungkol sa future, kung ano po iyong magiging work, ano iyong kukunin na course, hindi naman po sila sumasagot ng course talaga. Lagi lang po nila ako tinatanong kung ano iyong gusto ko, kasi ako naman daw po ang mag-aaral noon. Ako naman daw po ang magtrabaho, hindi sila.*

This points to the support that their respective families give participants in deciding for the future career. Generally, the participants in our study have supportive family members who do not dictate upon them what road to take in the future.

In addition, participants' personal interests are closely related to their childhood dreams. One of the participants recalled that when he was still a child, he would always play teacher roles with his cousins because he really wanted to be a teacher:

*Bata pa lang ako gusto ko na talaga maging teacher. Grabe iyong ginagawa ko talaga, kasi nagsusuot pa ako ng sapatos na mataas ang takong, tiyaka naglalagay ako ng kumot na kunwari palda ko siya. Kapag nandiyan iyong mga pinsan ko, o kaya naman eh mga kalaro ko, sila iyong nagiging estudyante ko. Minsan naman wala sila, pero tuloy pa rin ako. May blackboard akong maliit sa bahay, feel na feel ko talaga. Kaya dati pa lang teacher na talagai yong gusto ko po.*

The pursuit of personal interests and childhood dreams together make up the theme Job Satisfaction.

The participants also appeared to have a sense of responsibility already in looking at their foreseen career profiles since they anticipate a career that will not leave them stale and stagnant.

*I think maganda po kapag nagtrabaho na po ako, halimbawa po iyong pagiging teacher, siguro po hindi lang basta pagtuturo iyong gagawin. May mga time na mag-oorganize ka ng event din sa school, gaya po noong nakikita ko sa ibang teacher. Hanggang sa magawa mo na lahat, magiging coordinator ka na, iyong umaangat din po.*

In the previous quote, a gay student expressed his considerations related to career progression.

Aside from career progression, interviewees had a sense of professional development that centers on continuous learning experience. It is not enough for them to go up the career ladder, according to them, but it is also essential that they develop skills that will equip them to face further challenges that will come their way. One of the participants said:

*When I work already po later on, I would see myself po as someone who is continuously learning. Iyong tuluy-tuloy po iyong learning experience. Iyon din po iyong sinabi sa'min ng guidance counselor naming na dapat po hindi dahil gumraduate na, okay na iyon. So ayun, may forever po sa learning.*

Given these realities, Personal Fulfillment also characterizes the career considerations of the participants. The participants are looking forward to the continuous improvement of their skills and achievement of career growth.

Regarding career tribulations, participants demonstrated a sense of awareness about the typical situations encountered by members of the LGBT community in the Philippines, hence their concern for external factors that shape workplace situations. Their responses indicated a clamor for equal opportunity in the workplace, foreseeing that future employers may not favor sexual minorities:

*Hindi ko pa po maisip sa ngayon pero siguro iyong mga kontra*

*po sa bakla, iyong mga hindi po kayang tumanggap sa amin, magiging malaking balakid po iyon. Iyong iba po kasi minsan sinasabi nila, okay lang ang bakla. Tapos hindi naman po ganon iyong ginagawa nila. May mga kakilala po ako na nahirapan po sila maghanap ng trabaho, kasi pakiramdam daw nila, nahahalata na bakla sila.*

Understanding common realities experienced by LGBT people makes them feel undecided at some point; however, they still aim to make career decisions that could lead them to experience total acceptance in the workplace.

Another tribulation anticipated by participants was the need to call for fair treatment in the workplace once they start working. Participants expressed fears relating to discrimination, non-acceptance, belittling, and violence. As stated by one of the participants, *“Minsan po kasi kahit ngayon pa lang po, pakiramdam ko po pinagtitinginan ako ng tao nang masama, pero hindi naman po lahat. In general mahirap din po siguro kasi talagang maghanap ng trabaho. Marami po competition.”* The wish for equal opportunity and hope for fair treatment regardless of sexual orientation define our theme of Inclusive Workplace.

Finally, participants expressed concern about the self as part of their career tribulation. They said that it is difficult for them to act in a way that hides their “true self” but they believe that, in the future, they need to separate their personal life from their professional life. This theme, Self-Presentation, had two sub-layers, namely, discreet actions and workplace sophistication. The participants placed importance in exhibiting actions that they perceive to be appropriate to the workplace environment.

*Ako po personally may tendency po ako na maging very loud po minsan. Pero kaya ko naman po iakma iyong sarili ko sa situations. Although minsan hindi naman po maitatago talaga iyong pagiging bakla. Hindi ko naman po sinasabi na itago, pero iyong hindi po siguro sobrang malandi.*

Furthermore, the participants mentioned that in order to gain the respect of others, gay employees also need to show behaviors that are

worth respecting.

*May teacher po kami noong nasa grade six pa lang po kami na bakla, hindi po naming siya makakalimutan. Wala na po kasi siya ngayon, lumipat na siya ng school, nag-ibang work po. Bakla po siya, kitang-kita mo naman talaga sa kilos niya, sa kulay na gusto niya, sa pananamit po niya kapag hindi siya nakauniform. Pero mahusay na teacher po siya at malaki po ang respeto namin sa kanya. Marunong po siya magdala ng sarili niya.*

Looking at the themes generated by participants, it appears that the gay students in this study already have an awareness and realization of what lies ahead of them as part of the future workforce.

## DISCUSSION

Our findings support the contention of Kaplan (2014) that organizations need to promote an inclusive working environment that adds to talent attraction and retention. Diversity is becoming an important consideration for organizations at present (Anteby & Anderson, 2014). Bontempo and D'Augelli (2002) earlier argued that inclusivity should begin at school and should be a primary focus area for school administrators and stakeholders. This includes openness to and acceptance of the diverse sexual orientations of people (Maguen, Floyd, Bakerman, & Armistead, 2002). Nonetheless, at present there are still certain groups who do not see coming out and being open about one's sexuality as proper and appropriate in society (Bicmen & Bekirogullari, 2014; Brennan et al., 2013; Rothing & Svendsen, 2010). This study shows that gay high school students may realize the particular implications of their sexual orientation on their career decisions. Gay youth share similar experiences with heterosexual counterparts; however, their situations can be uniquely influenced by anti-LGBT stigma in society (Baiocco et al., 2012). The themes of Interpersonal Orientation and Altruistic Nature suggest that gay students are inclined towards career paths that will allow them to interact with people without any restrictions or without any fear of being labeled negatively because of their sexual orientation. As Hajek

(2015) explains, gay people still experience accommodation challenges in the forms of communicative convergence and divergence that are enacted in the interest of gaining approval from younger outgroup members, reclaiming lost social status, and achieving positive group distinctiveness. By and large, research on LGBT individuals' career choices suggests an emphasis on altruism as an important work value and greater likelihood of preferring non-profit employers compared to their heterosexual counterparts. One possible explanation is that the nonprofit sector may be seen as a safe haven for LGBT individuals as opposed to the public sector, which may be seen as too bureaucratic, and the private sector which may be perceived to prioritize instrumental over social responsibility concerns. Variations in career choices can also be seen among gay men gravitating toward traditionally female-dominated careers and lesbians leaning toward male-dominated careers. It must be noted that LGBTs should not be treated as a homogeneous group, as each LGBT individual may face unique challenges in the workplace (Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons, 2012). This can be a topic of further investigation for future researchers.

Participants also reported social inclinations about their future careers. Their career paths revolved around professional tracks such as teaching, medicine, and nursing, contrary to the common notion that members of the gay community tend to have limited work aspirations (Kaplan, 2014). Students become more successful in their endeavors if they follow their personal interests but are afforded the right guidance in order for them to succeed (Seelman et al., 2015). Aside from their expressed propensity to be part of the helping professions, the themes, Job Satisfaction and Personal Fulfillment, point to the reality that this group of people also desire happiness as an important factor in their decision-making. Therefore, institutions should consider this in preparing the youth for their future. The natural mentoring relationships (NMRs) described by Torres and colleagues (2012) could be used as a means to realize this objective as it aims to promote and protect the health and well-being of at-risk and marginalized youth which they found helpful among self-identified gay, bisexual, and questioning (GBQ) male youth.

It is important to pay close attention to the career decisions of students as early as possible. In particular, it is imperative for families

and schools to regard the particular situations faced by young people in the LGBT community. The themes Inclusive Workplace and Self-Presentation highlight the fact that gay students yearn for a society that will not restrict them from being who they are given that sexuality still remains as one of the primary human rights struggles in the present day (Schmidt, Chang, Silva, Lockhard, & Anagnostopoulos, 2012). Organizations must continuously make way for efforts to ensure a safe working environment for the LGBT community.

Guidance counselors, teachers, and industrial psychologists can use frameworks like our roadmap and crossroad model in coming up with programs that will help gay youth become more prepared for career decision-making.

While efforts to promote an inclusive workplace have been initiated over the past years, the perils of discrimination are still experienced these days by the LGBT community. Situations differ from one organizational context to another. Despite the successes of some initiatives in different sectors, gaps in the areas of hiring practices, training and development, rewards management, employee relations, among others, still remain that point to the further improvement of the lives of LGBT Filipinos (UNDP USAID, 2014). Even with the presence of instituted efforts and other anti-discrimination policies, LGBT employees are still at-risk to experience discrimination, particularly in the form of microaggressions as they may not be covered under conventional non-discrimination policies and programs (Galupo & Resnick, 2016; Francis & Reygan, 2016; Nadal et al., 2011; Drydakis, 2009). Current events that are consistently broadcasted in news, posted in social media, and reported in different media support this contention. Given these workplace realities, it is essential for gay youths to be primed in the earlier stages of their formation as part of their transition.

The results of the study do not necessarily reflect all the career decision-making processes in the LGBT community but it is a starting point in describing and understanding the situations of gay youth looking forward to work. Further research needs to be done to explore other factors that relate to the career decisions of members of the LGBT community in the Philippines as part of evaluating the findings in the study and introducing new insights in the field. Future studies can

utilize longitudinal methods that will further investigate gay youth's transition from career aspirants to workplace professionals.

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