Exploring Social Identity Processes among Filipino Gay Youths

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Abstract:- The study, which is anchored on Tajfel's Social Identity Theory (SIT) investigated the extent to which young Filipino gay men undertake the processes of group identification and intergroup evaluation. A total of 163 males (ages 15 to 24) who self-identify as gay comprised the sample. A questionnaire adapted from scales used in previous social identity studies provided quantitative data. Findings showed that Filipino gay youths expressed moderate levels of identification with their in-group; a good number expressed a sense of belonging and valued their membership in the social group. Moreover, the sample's in-group (gay) was evaluated in significantly more favorable terms than their out-group (heterosexuals), thus confirming that SIT processes are at work among Filipino gay youths.

Keywords:- Social Identity, Gay Young Adults, Group Identification, Intergroup Evaluation.

I. INTRODUCTION

Gay young adults go through an effortful process as they navigate their world. Having self-identified as gay, they wrestle with the consequences of being part of a culturally stigmatized social group, like lower self-esteem and well-being, and psychological distress. With society's prevailing sense of disgust and moral disapproval on gay men (Sherrill and Yang, 2000), it is likely that they would incorporate these negative views into their own identity, resulting to a range of feelings, from self-doubt and shame to self-hatred (Szymanski, Kashubeck-West, & Meyer, 2008). And with their negative view of themselves as part of a sexual minority, they may consequently project these feelings to the larger gay social group (Ramirez-Valles, Molina, and Dirkes, 2013). Fearing stigmatization caused by the prevalence of anti-gay attitudes (Herek, 2000), gay young adults may then dissociate with similar others, reducing what should be a strong identification with their social group, since unfair treatment and judgment by others can be triggered simply by one's group membership (Miller and Major, 2000). Other people's devaluation of the group may reduce the comfort and sense of belonging that group membership normally provides (Branscombe and Ellemers, 1998).

Recent theories, however suggest that members of devalued groups can, in fact derive positive feelings from their group membership. Social identity theory (SIT) proposes that members of low-status groups can protect their identity by paying attention to the positive aspects of their group (Tajfel and Turner, 1979). It further states that people strive to achieve or maintain a positive social identity (thus boosting their self-esteem), and that this positive identity derives largely from favorable comparisons that can be made between the in-group and relevant out-groups (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Hence, it becomes possible that after having proclaimed their sexual identity, gay young adults would perceive the social group they align with in a positive light through strategic social comparisons, thus maintaining stronger identification with the gay social group.

In this study, the extent to which the social identity processes of group identification and intergroup evaluation operate was explored, using a sample of Filipino gay young adults. Tajfel (1981) defined group identification as "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that group membership." As hypothesized by SIT, intergroup evaluations are the prototypical manifestations of positive distinctiveness (Brown, 2000).

➢ *Social Identity Theory (SIT)*
The importance of social group memberships to individuals' self-concepts and social behavior is well articulated in social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982; Tajfel and Turner, 1986), which posits that the self-concept has two distinct aspects. One is personal identity, which includes specific attributes of the individual, while the other aspect is one's social identity, defined as "that part of the individual's self-concept that derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership (Tajfel, 1981). According to SIT, a social group is a collection of individuals who see themselves as members of the same social category. Accordingly, social identity can derive from a variety of group memberships, including those based on race, gender, and occupation (Luhtanen and Crocker, 1992).

This study considered membership in the gay group/category, in particular, as the basis of the gay young adults' social identity. After self-identifying as gay, the young adult next identifies himself as belonging to the gay group/category, and depending on whether maintaining this affiliation makes him feel better about himself, this membership becomes a salient part of his self-definition.

In conditions wherein social interactions are determined by the individual's reciprocal group memberships, positive social identity can be achieved, in a vast majority of cases, only through appropriate intergroup social comparisons (Tajfel, 1982). As such, much of the "positivity" experienced by the gay young adult rests on whether his "gay social group" fares well when compared to the "heterosexual social group." Criteria for intergroup comparison are determined by the individual himself, and he strategically designs these comparisons to favor his in-group.

It is only through strategic social comparison that positive distinctiveness of the gay social group can be achieved, and as Tajfel and Turner (1986) noted, there are three classes of variables that might influence intergroup differentiation: people must be subjectively identified with their in-group (group identification); the situation should permit evaluative intergroup comparisons (intergroup evaluation); the out-group must be sufficiently comparable and that pressures for distinctiveness should increase with comparability.

Because social identities have these important self-evaluative consequences, groups and their members are strongly motivated to adopt behavioral strategies for achieving or maintaining in-group/out-group comparisons that favor the in-group, and thus of course the self (Hogg, Terry and White, 1995).

This study utilized the survey approach in examining (1) the extent to which Filipino gay young adults manifest group identification; and (2) whether Filipino gay youths engage in strategic social comparison to favor their in-group, as they attempt to build a positive social identity against a backdrop of social disparagement and discrimination.

II. METHOD

➤ *Sample*

A total of 163 Filipino male young adults whose ages range from 15 to 24 years old and who self-identified as gay were selected to take part in this study. As used by the researcher, the term "gay" specifically referred to males who described themselves as having a gay sexual orientation (or who experience same-sex attraction); as such, lesbians (or females with the same sexual orientation) were excluded.

The respondents were mostly sampled from two colleges and universities in Metro Manila. Some of them (the "emerging adults" in the sample) came from the researcher's social network of friends, referrals, and acquaintances.

Using purposive sampling, the actual respondents were chosen based on the researcher's personal knowledge (of their sexual identity); some were taken from referrals by the school's/college's guidance centers. As a further screening measure, young adults who identified themselves as heterosexual, or who concealed their real identities (based

on their answer to an introductory question on sexual identity), were excluded from the sample.

➤ *Measures*

Group identification. A 13-item instrument adapted from scales developed in two previous studies of Social Identity Theory (Brown, et al., 1986; Hinkle et al., 1989) was used to measure group identification. Each statement addressed an aspect of group membership (e.g. "I am glad to belong to this group"; "I see myself as an important part of this group"; "I identify with this group"). Participants were asked to state the degree to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement using a 10-point scale (1 = completely disagree, and 10 = completely agree). The in-group referred to is the gay social group. Responses were coded on analysis so that a high score equaled high identification. Internal consistency reliability of the group identification scale was α =.88.

Intergroup evaluation. Intergroup evaluation was measured through an intergroup comparison task. Participants were asked to think about the heterosexual "out-group." They were then presented with a list of 16 adjectives and were asked to rate how well each one could be used to describe the out-group. Ratings were given using a 10-point scale (1 = poor description, and 10 = good description). The adjectives were selected from a previous study involving Tarrant, Hargreaves, and North (Tarrant, 2002) and from Anderson (1968), and were chosen on the basis that they had been rated either positively (eight adjectives) or negatively (another eight adjectives) by participants in those two studies. The adjectives were presented to the participants in random order. The same set of adjectives were presented to the respondents a second time, but with the gay in-group in mind. Internal consistency reliability of the intergroup evaluation scale was α =.77 for the in-group evaluation, and α =.82 for out-group perception.

➤ *Procedure*

Permission to conduct the survey questionnaire was requested from two target schools in Metro Manila. Questionnaires were either group or individually administered to the respondents in their settings, depending on their availability. Since most of the respondents completed the survey in groups, the researcher personally supervised data gathering. For the other respondents who were solicited through referrals, the place and time for answering the survey forms were arranged, and were also personally supervised.

However, for about 30% of the emerging adults, contact persons who knew the identities of gay persons in their communities and organizations served as conduits for data gathering, and they themselves supervised data gathering with the researcher's instructions on hand.

Since the research involved gay young adults in various phases of self-identification and disclosure, the researcher carefully outlined measures for securing privacy and confidentiality of results. Individual consent of the

respondents was secured before conducting any form of data gathering.

➢ *Quantitative Analysis and Treatment*
Data were analyzed using the SPSS software. After responses were appropriately coded, means and standard deviations were computed to address the descriptive requirements of the study.

To empirically compare in-groups and out-groups, a t-test for dependent groups was performed. Effect sizes were also computed in addition to the hypothesis test to determine the actual magnitude of an effect. All hypotheses were tested at .05 level of significance.

III. RESULTS

➢ *Group Identification*
An overall mean of 7.02 was obtained for group identification (SD = 1.68), signifying that the gay young adult sample moderately identified with their in-group. A good number feel a sense of belonging and value their membership in the gay social group.

➢ *Intergroup Evaluation*
Mean values representing the gay young adults' evaluations of their in-group and the comparison out-group are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Mean Values for Intergroup Social Comparison

Social Comparison	Mean	SD
N = 162		
Outlook Toward Heterosexuals	6.28	1.096
Outlook Toward Gays	7.165	1.24

The higher mean value for "Outlook toward Gays" suggests that the young adult sample viewed their in-group more positively than the heterosexual out-group. A further test of the mean difference of 0.885 using a dependent t-test showed statistical significance. Outlook toward gays (M = 7.165, SD = 1.24) was significantly higher than outlook toward heterosexuals (M = 6.28, SD = 1.096, $t(161)$ = -8.54, $p<.001$). This finding augurs well for the members of his in-group, who are evaluated more positively compared to the out-group. The effect size (r = .56) additionally confirms this substantial difference in the young adult homosexuals' perceptions of the two groups.

When assessed independently of one another, the means obtained for the two groups indicate that outlooks toward heterosexuals and gays are both positive. It can be surmised that although the respondents rated both groups positively, the in-group received markedly higher (or more positive) ratings.

And consistent with SIT, a more positive evaluation of gays translates to a more positive evaluation of himself, being a member of the group.

IV. DISCUSSION

In the study, the Filipino gay young adults were found to exhibit moderate levels of identification with the in-group. They also evaluated their in-group in significantly more positive terms compared to the out-group. Essentially, this demonstrates that social identity processes are at work among the Filipino gay young adults.

The gay young adult knows that attaching himself to the gay social category makes him more identified with this group (he calls it his in-group), and whatever attributes are associated with gays become associated with him too.

Category membership (as belonging to the "gay" category) is thus represented in the young adult's mind as a social identity that both describes and prescribes one's attributes as a group member. That is, when a specific social identity is the salient basis for self-conception (i.e., his social identity as gay), self-perception and conduct become in-group stereotypical and normative. Consequently, perception of relevant out-group members (heterosexuals) become out-group stereotypical, and intergroup behavior acquires competitive and discriminatory practices (Hogg, 1992).

While the gay young adult may have other social identities on account of his other social category memberships (i.e., as student, as Filipino, as work group member), the salience of his social identity as gay is not difficult to understand. His self-identification as gay earlier in his life was a period of intense conflict and stress, brought about by his awareness that an integral part of his identity is used as a basis for treating him differently (Cruise, 2004). But despite this social intolerance, and as the questioning continues, he still adopts a gay identity, and movement away from a heterosexual self-definition takes place (Alderson, 2003). This contributes to his greater acceptance of his being "*bakla*," and his membership in the gay group, together with the attributes associated with them.

The gay young adult soon makes cognitive appraisals of the way these attributes are interpreted, and following his own evaluative criteria, proceeds to assess his in-group relative to a comparison out-group (in this case, the heterosexuals).

The cognitive process of categorization has been shown to accentuate similarities among stimuli falling within the same category and differences between stimuli falling in different categories, on dimensions subjectively perceived to be correlated with the categorization (Hogg, 1992). Since the category is that of sexual identity, the young adult accentuates his similarity with his in-group of gays (who received more positive evaluations) and distinguishes himself from his out-group of heterosexuals (whose evaluation was just slightly positive).

This then leads to an "accentuation effect," wherein gays see themselves as perceptually different from heterosexuals, who are lumped together (or "homogenized) on stereotypic dimensions.

When the gay young adults evaluated their in-group relative to the out-group (in SIT terminology, this is called "intergroup social comparison"), they rated themselves in significantly more positive terms. SIT explains that in-groups do not only strive to maximize intergroup differences, they also secure an evaluative advantage for the in-group (Hogg, 1992).

And since membership in the gay group is salient in his self-identification as gay, the young adult maximizes social comparisons in ways that will benefit the in-group. Hence, positive self-esteem (through self-enhancement) is attained through positive in-group distinctiveness.

"Intergroup differentiation" is achieved as the gay young adult strategically undertakes social comparison in a manner that favors the group he belongs to. And consistent with SIT, this favorable evaluation benefits not only the in-group (of gays), but more importantly the self (Hogg, Terry, and White, 1995).

For the gay young adult, therefore, choosing a non-mainstream sexual identity by self-identifying as gay connotes declaring a separateness and individuality as a member of a sexual minority group. This declaration of identity is not simply internal or personal; it is actually more external and group-based in a social sense. And in the face of unfavorable perceptions by other sectors (mostly heterosexuals), gay groups accentuate aspects of their lives which had been viewed as negative and instead express pride in their previously devalued status.

V. CAVEATS AND CONCLUSIONS

Despite some constraints in sampling (which limited the respondents to urban-based students and employees), the study revealed valuable insights pertaining to the processes that Filipino gay young adults undertake in dealing with the self-deprecating effects of social stigma and disapproval by identifying with similar others – his gay in-group. He then deliberately employs social comparisons between his in-group and heterosexuals, who comprise the out-group. These comparisons, of course, are specially designed to put his in-group in a more favorable light. The out-group, often a potent stigma source, becomes relegated to a subordinate position relative to the in-group. This disparity in evaluation is beneficial to the in-group (and to the gay young adult in particular), and the continued maintenance of this status evidently leads to a positive social identity.

The study showed that gay young adults valued their membership in their in-group; they identified with other gays, they considered themselves as important parts of the gay social group. This moderately strong in-group identification is most likely caused by the favorable evaluations they ascribed to gays (compared to heterosexuals). And because they viewed themselves favorably, their esteem is boosted, there is pride in being who they are (in spite of society's devaluation), and they are happy.

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