

# Exploring the Experiences of Gay Men in Dealing with Societal Discrimination

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## ABSTRACT

Despite the advances in LGBTQ+ persons rights, many gay men struggle to battle the steadfast societal discrimination that throws into question their identity, purpose, and acceptance. This study explored the following research questions: 1) What is the context of the gay men lived experience of societal discrimination? 2) How do gay men navigate and cope with societal discrimination? And 3) How do gay men view themselves in the future amid societal discrimination? Employing transcendental phenomenology as a research design, this study aimed to understand the experiences of gay men about societal discrimination. Data were collected, using 3-phased in-depth phenomenological interviews, from the four participants who are residents of a municipality in Lanao del Norte, Philippines. Collected data were transcribed and analyzed using the seven-step method of Colaizzi (1978). Significant statements were identified and analyzed for codes, categories, and themes using Hyper Research software. From the narratives of the participants, three themes emerged such as: navigating one's identity, socio-personal resiliency and responsibility, and personal and collective transformation. The fundamental structure of their experience is toughness. Without toughness, this experience cannot be the experiences of these gay men against societal discrimination. In the face of societal discrimination, participants displayed amazing bravery by fighting discrimination and proving their value by drawing on their knowledge, inner strength, and family support. Future research may focus of the same topic using a quantitative approach.

**Keywords:** Societal discrimination, Toughness, Phenomenological study, Colaizzi method, Personal transformation, Social responsibility, Identity navigation

## INTRODUCTION

The prevailing cultural, social, and legal contexts have shaped the experiences of gay men in dealing with societal discrimination in the Philippines. Like many other regions worldwide, gay individuals in Lanao del Norte, often faced discrimination, stigmatization, and marginalization due to their sexual orientation. Such discriminatory attitudes and practices are manifested in various forms, including verbal harassment, exclusion from social networks, limited access to healthcare, and barriers to employment and housing opportunities. Jones and Smith (2022) delved into the prevalence of hate crimes and experiences of stigma among sexual minority adults, including those who identify as gay men sheds light on the psychological ramifications of discriminatory incidents such as physical and verbal attacks. Chen et al. (2023) highlighted the ongoing challenges faced by individuals in the LGBTQ+ community, particularly regarding the coming out process. They discussed how fear of familial rejection continues to be a significant barrier for many individuals, leading to strained relationships and emotional distress. Coming out is a two-edged sword: on the one hand, there is the hope of living freely and openly, and on the other, there is the fear of losing family support and love, which is an essential part of every human being. Furthermore, there are persistent challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in accessing healthcare services, particularly due to biases and insensitivity among healthcare providers (Lee and Wong, 2023). Despite significant progress in LGBTQ+ persons' rights, discrimination against gay men persists in various forms across societies worldwide, hence, the conduct of this study in order to probe into the nuanced and multifaceted nature of these experiences, considering cultural context, family dynamics, workplace environments, and social interactions.

## METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach specifically the transcendental phenomenological design. Moustakas' transcendental phenomenological research approach aims to capture the core essence of participants' experiences and discern the underlying meanings and intentions that influence their lived realities. It provides a comprehensive framework for qualitative researchers to delve into the subjective experiences of individuals and reveal the fundamental structures and essences that shape their lived experiences. The four participants came from one of the municipalities of Lanao del Norte, Philippines. This study used purposive sampling to choose the participants. Data were collected, using interview guides, from three-phased in-depth phenomenological interviews (Seidman, 2006). The following criteria were used to choose the participants: 1) at least eighteen years old; 2) identified as gay or homosexual; and 3) have encountered discrimination in any setting. The data were analyzed using Colaizzi Method. The researcher tried to observe the following steps: 1) reading the transcript; 2) pulling out significant statements; 3) interpreting statements; 4) grouping the drawn meanings into themes; 5) deriving descriptions based on the phenomenon; 6) reporting the phenomenon's importance; and 7) verifying the findings. Ethical considerations and trustworthiness were also observed in the implementation of the study.

Epoche. Before the analysis, we tried to understand our position, biases, and assumptions which may cloud our description of the data. We considered the self-reflection practice that allowed us to look at our traits and viewpoints in the study. We took note of the essence to remain in our position in this research process. We understand our sociocultural context, background, experiences, and beliefs, which may influence how we treated the voices of the participants. Through this reflexivity method, we understand the participants lived experiences in its purity. We strived to approach the study with empathy and open-mindedness toward the participants and their stories. We built relationships in ways that allowed us to earn trust in order that our participants would feel psychologically safe. We believe that through this process, the participants could share their experiences without fear or reservation. We applied self-reflexivity by reflecting throughout the entire process of the study, thinking over and over about what biases, preconceived ideas, and assumptions we possess. We endeavored to practice self-reflexivity in ways that our perspectives do not dominate the narratives put forward by the participants. Recognizing our positionality and practicing reflexivity allowed us to appreciate the importance of the voices and views of the gay men in this municipality.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Three themes emerged from data. These themes are: *navigating one's* identity, socio-personal resiliency and responsibility, personal and collective transformation.

Navigating one's identity refers to being traumatized, being attracted to the same sex, hesitant to come out, being judged as inept, being excluded, not accepted in the family, pained by other people, being unique and accepting one's gender identity. These categories demonstrate the search for personal and social identity among the participants of this study. For example, Participant 3 accepted that: The time when I was hurt and made fun of—especially when the teasing was about my appearance, ma'am—I truly couldn't understand what I was feeling. If only our hearts could be seen, ma'am, maybe then we would actually see what a broken heart looks like. The thing is, we can't literally see it, but that's how I would describe it: I can compare it to something like a glass that's been shattered or completely broken—that's exactly what pain looks like. The deep hurt you feel in moments when you're facing discrimination. This is not an overreaction. (Participant 3, Transcript No. 2 Line No. 1045-1052).

The participants describe a deeply emotional response to being teased about their appearance, highlighting confusion, emotional pain, and a sense of inner brokenness. This intense reaction reflects the anxious state often triggered by discrimination. The metaphor of a shattered glass vividly illustrates the emotional damage that can't be seen physically but is deeply felt. This underscores how anxiety, in the context of social rejection or ridicule, is not an overreaction but a valid response to ongoing emotional distress and marginalization. Individuals often rely on anxiety as a way to manage emotional pain, highlighting the need to embrace rather than resist it by (Owen O'Kane, 2024).

Socio-Personal Resiliency and Responsibility means expecting fair treatment, choosing to be a good influence,

family setting the rules of conduct / conditions, letting go of grudges, acceptance starts at home, being careful not to offend, proving that rush judgments are wrong and seeing the family as inspiration. This theme shows the context of the lived experiences of societal discrimination, how gay men navigated and cope, the strategies they employed, the coping mechanisms that were effective for them, the decision of when to confront instances of discrimination and when to avoid confrontation. Lastly, the participants also shared how their emotional well-being was been affected by the discrimination they have experienced.

Expecting fair treatment means asking equal opportunities, upholding fairness, equal treatment, continuing individual rights and gender equality. It describes the proactive demand or insistence that all people or groups receive fair and equal treatment, rights, and opportunities, irrespective of their gender preferences, status, identity, or background. This category emphasizes the aspiration and endeavors to establish a society in which every individual has an equal opportunity to prosper and be respected. Participants expressed how they feel about gender discrimination and the undervaluation of their talents and abilities. Participant said: that was the moment I was really hurt—because they looked down on gay people so much. I was told, “Maybe you won’t be able to work properly if you’re assigned nearby, because you might just act gay since there are more male workers at that branch.” So, if I analyze what they said to me, ma’am, from my perspective, it was really unfair—because they judged my ability based on my gender, not on my performance.) (Participant 4, Transcript No.2 Line No. 1295-1300).

Based on participants’ narrative, they were unfairly judged at work based on stereotypes about being gay, rather than their actual performance. This reflects common workplace discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ individuals. Williams Institute (2023) found that many LGBTQ+ workers experienced discrimination, highlighting the need for equal treatment and inclusive policies. The Center for American Progress (2024) also emphasized that demanding equality and adopting anti-discrimination measures are essential for a fair work environment.

Personal and Collective Transformation means conquering challenges, having effective communication, empowering, wanting to take the lead, being honest and authentic, affirming self-worth, taking social roles, earning respect and making contribution to the community having societal impact and being accountable. It is how the participants viewed themselves in the future amid societal discrimination, specially looking at the what ways of handling discrimination differently. The imagined their lives would be different if societal discrimination were reduced. Conquering challenges refers to overcoming adversity, pain, hindrances, coping discriminations, pursuing more and overcoming safe space. It describes the process of confronting, enduring, and conquering challenges or barriers in life by fortitude, tenacity, and development. As a source of inspiration and encouragement for others, the participants showed the bravery and fortitude of people who overcome great obstacles. Participant 4 said: As a gay person, ma'am, I now see myself as someone who knows how to fight back if ever, I face societal discrimination again. I have a positive mindset and confidence in myself, ma'am, that no matter what challenges come my way, I can overcome them — especially with the support my family has shown me. And of course, ma'am, my strong faith and trust in God remain with me.) (Participant 4, Transcript No.3 Line No.1228-1234). The participants adopted a positive mind set and self-confidence, viewing challenges as opportunities for growth. With unwavering support from their family and strong faith, they are determined to overcome societal discrimination and prove their capabilities. Human Rights Campaign's LGBTQ+ Youth Report (2023) emphasized that LGBTQ+ youth with supportive families and communities exhibit greater resilience and better mental health outcomes.

Exhaustive Description. Exploring the experiences of gay men in dealing with societal discrimination reveals the complex journey of navigating one’s identity, socio-personal resilience and responsibility, personal and collective transformation among gay men. It highlights their quest for sexual and personal identity. Along the process of navigating one’s identity, they were overwhelmed with various emotions such as being traumatized, being attracted to the same sex (like male to male), being hesitant to come out, being judged as inept, being excluded, not being accepted in the family, being pained by other people, being unique, and accepting one’s gender identity. Moreover, the process of navigating one’s identity is a huge challenge in the society and also the different perceptions of individuals concerning homosexuality.

Dealing with societal discrimination also entails socio-personal resilience and responsibility on the part of the gay’s individual. Gay men are also people who are committed to their family and their personal protection. Their

resiliency in expecting fair treatment, choosing to be a good influence in the community where they live, and letting go of the negative perspectives of people about gays. At all times, they are very careful not to offend and prove that rush judgments are wrong when they are seriously affected by the standards of society. However, all of these factors provide them with the strength to confront the daily challenges they face in their lives.

Furthermore, dealing with societal discrimination requires a personal and collective transformation. Gay men should conquer the challenges against them through having effective communication, empowering themselves, and wanting to take the lead. Also, gay men should face societal discrimination through collective efforts of the community being honest and authentic, affirming self-worth, taking social roles, earning respect and making contribution to the community having societal impact, and being accountable to lessen gay men's discrimination in a society filled with "machismo" perspective.

Fundamental structure. The journey of gay men in dealing with societal discrimination revolves around navigating identity, socio-personal resiliency and responsibility, and personal and collective transformation. For these gay men, dealing with societal discrimination means toughness. Removing toughness from the experiences of these gay men can no longer be their experiences. Toughness allows these gay men to resolve their identity and so making them transformed individuals, individuals who are ready to face the challenges of the society amid being gay men.

## CONCLUSION

Societal discrimination among the gay men participants is a difficult and deeply personal struggle they faced. Understanding their identity, extent of resiliency and responsibility allows them to transcend their struggles for social discrimination. But, going beyond these struggles require personal and collective actions as supported by the Social Constructivism Theory and Symbolic Interactionism Theory. These theories pointed out that social discrimination is rooted in the social environment where these gay men belonged to. Furthermore, accepting sexuality is not a one-time job but a process that lasts a lifetime. It is therefore important to make paces that are welcoming for everyone, building resilience through support networks, and raising knowledge about gender issues in society.

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