

## Chapter #17

### **ROAD LESS TRAVELED: MOTIVATIONS AND PATHWAYS OF FILIPINO LESBIANS AND GAYS IDENTIFYING AS EX-LESBIANS AND EX-GAYS**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

This study explores the motivations and the pathways of past self-identifying Filipino lesbians and gays. In this study, the researchers seek to (1) understand the motivations that influenced ex-gays in modifying their sexual orientation and (2) delve more into the different pathways (stages and/or steps) that are involved in the sexual orientation modification of ex-gays specifically in the Philippine context. A semi-structured interview was conducted with 10 self-identified Filipino ex-gays. Inductive thematic analysis was then used to analyze the data and to identify common themes. Four themes emerged as motivations of ex-gays: Identity Dissonance, Spiritual Conviction, Cognitive Reconstruction, and Influential Role Models. Likewise, three themes emerged as common pathways taken by ex-gays: Church Involvement, Accountability/Support Groups, and Adaptation of New Lifestyle. Moreover, the study clarifies the current definition of being an ex-gay, and added an evidence to the existing notion that sexual orientation cannot be fully changed.

*Keywords:* ex-gay, sexual orientation, sexual orientation modification process.

#### **1. INTRODUCTION**

Ex-gay refers to individuals that experienced some modification in their sexual orientation ranging from exclusive homosexuality to exclusive heterosexuality, or ones either curious, attempting, or claiming to have altered their sexual orientation (Weiss, Morehouse, Yeager, & Berry, 2010). Consequently, the process of sexual orientation modification is generally associated to ex-gay ministries or organizations where faith is seen to be central in driving efforts to change (Shidlo & Schroeder, 2002; Weiss et al, 2010).

##### **1.1. Motivations of ex-gays**

Prior studies done in the west, identify religion as one prevalent motivation for sexual reorientation (Haldeman, 1994). It can be noted that in some cases the individual's spiritual identity proves to be more salient compared to their sexual identity, leading them to prioritize faith over sexual orientation (Bartoli & Gillem, 2008). Although not all ex-gays in the previous studies reported change, most either (1) no longer interpreted their same-sex attractions as requiring them to identify as gays/lesbians or (2) found themselves not entirely homosexual and/or predominantly straight. In addition, factors like strained family relationships, understanding the nature of one's sexual attractions, adoption of new perspectives, and receiving supportive atmosphere with other ex-gays are also reported as motivations for sexual reorientation (Robinson & Spivey, 2007).

## 1.2. Pathways of ex-gays

In accordance with Throckmorton (2002), the sexual orientation modification process of ex-gays is generally associated with different religious organizations. In which, these religions utilize different practices, activities, techniques, and/or steps that are considered in modifying an individual's sexual orientation. Likewise, the practice of sexual conversion process in the United States are prominent among religious communities specifically through what are called ex-gay ministries (Burack, 2015; Robinson & Spivey, 2007).

One of the major Ex-gay Christian ministry in the United States and Canada is *Exodus International*, that intends to help lesbian and gay (LG) individuals to lessen their same-sex attraction and eventually promote abstinence over homosexual desires (Burack, 2015). The community utilizes techniques that include strengthening the individual's level of religiosity and heterosexual identity (Shidlo & Schroeder, 2002). Likewise, Matheson (1993) describes *JONAH*, a Jewish ex-gay ministry in Brooklyn, which utilizes Jewish principles aligned with the Torah to help LG individuals in dealing with their homosexual issues. Furthermore, *Evergreen International*, a Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints ministry in Utah, also utilizes religious teachings and doctrines to aid in same-sexual attraction and to overcome homosexual behaviors (Robinson & Spivey, 2007).

In the Philippines, Christianity dominates the religious groups, wherein 86 percent of Filipinos are Roman Catholic, while another 6 percent of the population belongs to various nationalized Christian and Protestant groups (UNDP & USAID, 2014). Conversely, a Christian organization that promotes an ex-gay movement among Filipino LGs is *Courage Philippines*. This Christian group is an apostolate of the Catholic Church that gives spiritual guidance and support to Filipino LGs experiencing same-sex attraction (UNDP & USAID 2014). *Courage Philippines* centers on helping members to fully surrender themselves to God and to cultivate a life of interior chastity (Courage Philippines, 2012).

## 1.3. Present study

Most of the literature on the motivations, pathways, and strategies of ex-gays have been studied solely in the western context only. For instance, Robinson and Spivey (2007) mentioned that most participants in the west disclosed developing negative and traumatic experiences after going through activities such as engaging in masculine-oriented hobbies, and putting blame on parenting shortcomings for their homosexuality. In contrast, the data regarding the ex-gay activities and strategies done in the Philippine context is still scarce. Although a Filipino ex-gay ministry and their overall goals towards sexual reorientation were presented, specific processes and activities done is yet to be explored. Moreover, motivations of the ex-gay individuals are still to be expanded upon and affirmed with respect to a different cultural context. In the present study, motivation is defined as the factors behind an individual's decision to change; while pathways refer to the overall modification process including practice, activities, techniques, and/or steps taken. The term ex-gay will be limited to lesbian and gay individuals who were previously attracted to the members of the same sex and/or currently claim to have an attraction to the opposite sex or deny any attraction at all. In general, the study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the motivations that influenced Filipino ex-gays to modify their sexual orientation?
2. What are the pathways (practices, activities, and/ or steps) involved in the sexual orientation modification of Filipino ex-gays?

## **2. METHODS**

### **2.1. Design**

A qualitative approach with a social constructivist stance was utilized in order to fully perceive the underlying opinions and sentiments of the participants. Likewise, a semi-structured interview was given to help in determining the participant's motivation in associating themselves as ex-gays and the pathways (stages and or steps) of they came to a point of identifying themselves as former gays.

### **2.2. Participants**

Ten self-identified Filipino ex-gays (four former lesbians and six former gays) participated in the study. All participants are from Christian religious affiliations, either Catholicism (20%) or Protestantism (80%). Age ranged from mid-twenties to sixties, most identified themselves younger than 30 years old (80%), working either as an employee, entrepreneur, or church volunteer, all of which were previously involved in same-sex relationships. Snowball sampling was used by connecting with organizations and or ministries that cater to ex-gays such as Courage Philippines (20%), Healing Grace Ministry (10%), and other ex-gay individuals (70%).

### **2.3. Procedure**

A semi-structured interview that includes questions on determining the motivations and pathways (specific steps or stages) that the participants have gone through was prepared. Eighteen initial questions were constructed based upon the previous studies about identity development and sexual orientation change of D'Augelli (2004), as well as Shidlo and Schroeder (2002). The participants were also asked about their family and relationship background to validate their previous identification as a lesbian/gay. Likewise, in order to provide an in-depth analysis of their sexual reorientation, and the notion of being an ex-gay, participants were also asked their definition of their current sexual orientation. Prior to the interview, participants received a consent form via email that allowed them to have an overview of the nature of the study which the researchers ensured was understood and duly signed. Participants were then audio recorded and interviewed for around 45 minutes to an hour, using English and Filipino. Afterwards, the data was transcribed and analyzed for patterns and themes, related to the motivations and pathways of identifying as ex-gays. Throughout the paper pseudonyms were used to identify the participants.

## **3. RESULTS**

### **3.1. Motivations of Filipino Lesbian and Gays in modifying their sexual orientation**

#### **3.1.1. Identity dissonance**

Most of the participants manifested having identity dissonance as their initial motivation in modifying their sexual orientation (9 out of 10 participants). Identity Dissonance was described by the participants as having an internal disconnect which includes constant feelings of discomfort such as having doubts and guilt at certain points in their homosexual lifestyle. A participant from an ex-gay ministry mentioned being unhappy when he was still living his homosexual lifestyle and having hesitations toward his personal character:

“Even when I was active as in LGBT advocate before, deep inside I was also not very happy with it. There was a disconnect, it’s a lingering interior feeling of negativity. It’s very complex; like a mix of guilt, a mix of shame, a mix of sadness, it’s like a feeling that is this what’s life only about? I guess the more I kept doing the lifestyle, the deeper the negative feeling I got, at least for me. It’s a complex negative feeling. I can’t pin point to which one is it. In fact, I said it before, that the members of the LGBT community typically said that this shame is because society does not accept them. It’s like I also had that perspective, maybe because the church is condemning me. But in reality, it was something inside me. It was not external.” (Joseph, personal communication, October 21, 2017).

While a participant from a Protestant church who has identified being an ex-gay for about a year, stated that during her same-sex relationship, she was having doubts about herself:

“I had a serious relationship with my block mate for 3 years, and she was my last girlfriend after I graduated. And all throughout I started doubting and questioning myself.” (Trish, personal communication, October 23, 2017).

### **3.1.2. Spiritual conviction**

Spiritual conviction as a product of faith appear to be a central motivation of Filipino LGs in modifying their sexual orientation (10 out of 10 participants). Although, brought up religiously, not all reported to be religious prior to modifying their sexual orientation. Some are already disconnected with their religiosity in order to realize their lesbian/gay identity but reported being reignited into faith through spiritual encounters or callings that transpired at a particular point of their lives whether through a church service, church activity, and/or answered prayers. These factors led them to compel for change. A participant from a Christian ministry described that he was motivated by his faith and personal encounters with Jesus Christ through bible reading as well as fellowship activities:

“In our office before, a lot are Protestants and most of the time, they would share the gospel. So I tried it myself. Afterwards, I attended my first Christian fellowship at Silahis Hotel, and this is where I met the Lord Jesus Christ. Like I was really captured by the Holy Spirit when I prayed and sang his songs. It’s like I started crying and I had a thirst in reading the bible. So the Lord really transformed my life, my heart, and my mind. No one else can do that except the word of God.” (Jose, personal communication, October 20, 2017).

### **3.1.3. Cognitive reconstruction**

Cognitive Reconstruction involves forming new perspectives with regards to their sexual orientation and manifesting a deeper understanding of one’s identity (9 out of 10 participants). It also includes the realization of the participants regarding the repetitive and tiring cycle of same-sex relationships and increased awareness of the health related diseases brought about by homosexual relationships. A respondent described that same-sex relationships does not usually last, and may often increase the risk of sexually transmitted diseases:

“Aside from my faith, the cases of HIV became so prevalent that if you look into the statistics, you cannot deny that a lot of them are same-sex. It’s like I have this fear that I don’t want to limit my life because of that disease and that I could have prevented it by “okay let’s just play it safe.” (Benedict, personal communication, October 22, 2017).

On the other hand, a participant who has identified being an ex-gay for about four years now, described that same-sex relationships are normally repetitive and doesn't usually last:

“Yes of course, because you get tired of the relationships. First, it's like it's really repetitive and having some sort of a formula. You would like the person, then you would love each other, then you would do something unusual (sexually), then you would break-up. And the gay community is really big but when you start to flirt, it gets smaller. It's like ‘my ex becomes your ex as well’ ...it's like you had sexual encounters with them (their exes) as well.” (Lawrence, personal communication, October, 18, 2017).

#### **3.1.4. Influential role models**

Almost all of the participants mentioned about witnessing a role model that motivated and inspired them to modify their sexual orientation (9 out of 10 participants). The role model may also include a person having experienced the same struggle or situation as the participant. In which, these role models have succeeded and persevered in their own attempts to turn away from their homosexual lifestyle. A participant mentioned that it is greatly inspiring to see people successful in their own pursuits in modifying their lifestyles:

“I was also influenced by my friends, not because I wanted to be like them at first, but knowing that there's a transformation that happened to them, that's why suddenly I wanted to read the “Word” (of God) that changed them” (Amanda, personal communication, October 30, 2017) .

### **3.2. Pathways involved in the Sexual Orientation Modification of Filipino Lesbians and Gays**

#### **3.2.1. Church involvement**

Church involvement appeared to be the common pathway involved in their sexual orientation modification (7 out of 10 participants). Church involvement referred to activities and practices that enriched their faiths. This includes attending church services and activities of the church such as bible studies & retreats, fellowship, and outreach programs. Two participants stated that the different church activities that they had aided them in modifying their sexual orientation:

“Of course, Church activities like reading the bible, retreat, fellowship, communication with fellow Christians, and also feeding programs. And because of the activities with the Church, I lessened my activities with my other gay friends. So I would only concentrate on my Church Activities”. (Jose, personal communication, October 20, 2017).

“When I had a Bible study, I finally admitted that it was a sin (homosexual activities), finally I said to myself that I cannot let go of my sin, But when you follow God, you can't leave anything missing, and it's not possible that it is just okay... if you want to be really transformed, Christianity is not a religion, it's really a relationship with God.” (Jackie, personal communication, October 29, 2017).

#### **3.2.2. Accountability/support group**

All participants reported accountable and supportive environments. Holding sharing meetings helped them to know about themselves. Also, having healthy platonic relationships with their support groups were the primary reasons why most of the participants came back and continued their sexual modification efforts. A participant mentioned that having

supportive environment with fellow community members helped them to know more about themselves:

“So I thought that only being able to vent out my experiences will help, but apparently sharing each other’s experiences helped us learned about each other. Actually, our experiences in finding ourselves doesn’t necessarily have to be Catholic because the abuses, self-unworthiness, is really psychological, that it’s like COURAGE is helping us.” (Benedict, personal communication, October 22, 2017).

Similarly, both participants from a protestant church described how supportive their community towards their struggles.

“You’d usually think, you are the only one like that--the only one with that struggle. But no, you are actually many and you can help each other. And it really helped me a lot because we have the same struggle that we both can’t help stop doing.” (Amanda, personal communication, October 30, 2017)

“This ministry should be intentional. From meeting the parents... to introducing the person to who Jesus is, to when the person is already worshipping (attending services). It’s a journey, journey to His (God’s) kingdom. You eat with, you laugh with them, you cry with them, you talk to them, you be with them.” (Neru, personal communication, October 17, 2017).

### **3.2.3. Adaptation of new lifestyle**

All participants reported avoiding situations and practices that would have make them vulnerable to the gay lifestyle in their sexual reorientation process (10 out of 10 participants). This included ceasing use of dating apps, and limiting interactions with their gay peers. On the other hand, each participant also reported starting certain activities and practices that helped divert their attention from their homosexual lifestyle. This includes frequent church activities and having more personal time of reflection through Bible reading and praying. Jackie (personal communication, October 29, 2017), mentioned that she started reading the Bible, and stopped wearing male clothing and clipping her hair. A participant reported spending more of his time with his family and avoiding places that would make him vulnerable to the homosexual lifestyle:

“You would not go to places that you use to go to. You would spend more time with your family... I spend it with those people and activities that I know that would help me in my spiritual growth.” (Lawrence, personal communication, October 18, 2017).

## **4. DISCUSSION**

The findings in the study affirmed faith as the central driving force and main motivation in an ex-gay’s sexual orientation modification process which is similar to previous findings of research conducted in western contexts (Haldeman, 1994). While not all participants found themselves religious prior to being an ex-gay, most reported being reignited into faith prior to modifying their sexual orientation. Moreover, although participants identified parenting and dysfunctional family dynamics as one contributing factor to their gay/lesbian identity, expression of any negativity towards their parents were not seen. The studies done in the west, as that Robinson and Spivey (2007), as well as Shidlo and Schroeder (2002) mentioned that most ex-gays develops latent feelings of anger and hatred towards their family, as most of them were instructed to blame their parents for their homosexual orientation. In contrast, in the present study, although participants identified parenting and dysfunctional family dynamics as one contributing motivation to their sexual modification, expression of any

negativity towards their parents were not seen. Instead, most participants reported better family relationships as they chose to identify as ex-gays. Furthermore, participants in the study reported experiencing no physically or emotionally demanding activities. This may suggest that the approach of Philippine ex-gay communities is less aggressive than that of the ministries in the west, where negative and traumatic experiences from therapy were noted (Robinson & Spivey, 2007). Lastly, when asked about their current sexual orientation, participants admitted still having same sex attractions, although less powerful and intimate as before. Most of them were not familiar, and as well as hesitant towards the term “ex-gay”. However, they preferred to be described as individuals who have turned away from the gay lifestyle striving to live as how God wanted them to be. This preceding adds to the increasing evidence that people who identify themselves to have changed their sexual orientation still report significant homosexual struggles (Robinson & Spivey, 2007; Shidlo & Schroeder, 2002; Throckmorton, 2002). Hence, sexual orientation cannot be fully changed despite undergoing religious activities and ex-gay efforts. Lastly, the study is limited in studying solely the motivations and pathways of Filipino LGs identifying as ex-lesbians and ex-gays. It does not mean to prove the legitimacy of sexual orientation modification process, but rather why it happens and how it impacts the person as they decide to undergo the process despite its presenting risks with one’s mental, emotional, and even physical and spiritual health (Shidlo & Schroeder, 2002).

## 5. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Since the study only used participants in the Philippines, future research studies should also look at other Asian countries, and compare any similarities or differences in the motivations and pathways of ex-gays to the Philippine setting, as well as in the western context. Furthermore, other pertinent areas of future studies can be about determining the specific stage that differ between those who affirm their gay identity from those who persist sexual reorientation and understanding the family dynamics of ex-gays before and after their sexual orientation modification. Moreover, since sexual reorientation and psychological health is seen to be correlated (Beckstead, 2002; Serovich, Craft, Toviessi, Gangamma, McDowell, & Grafsky, 2008; Tozer & McClanahan, 1999; Weiss et.al, 2010; Wolkomir, 2004), a quantitative study on ex-gays and their psychological well-being can also be a profitable avenue of research. Other profitable avenues of future research can focus on sexual reorientation process of ex-gays with no direct affiliation with ex- gay ministries, and how their experiences compare to that of ex-gays that attended a Christian community. Overall, human change is a complex process but one worth looking into.

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