

PHENOMENOLOGY OF DEATH: ANALYSIS ON THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF THE GOLDEN GAYS

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ABSTRACT

The elderly gay population has had little to no research done. In this paper, Phenomenology of Death: Analysis on the Lived Experiences of the Golden Gays, the researchers have found out that most elderly gay men have been living on their own for the majority of their lives. Though this may be the case, based from the interviews, these individuals have been living happily. The PERMA Theory and Meaning Management Theory strengthened this claim. Also, these individuals, while taking into consideration of their age, have come up with subjective meanings towards their end of life as interpreted in the coding process. These subjective meanings are formations taken from their experiences that led to creating an idea of what death is. Death is a race to some, others view it as a destination, and some view it as inevitability. These subjective experiences make these individuals seem as if though they are unfazed and contented with what they have.

Keywords: *Golden Gays, Death, PERMA Theory, Meaning Management Theory*

INTRODUCTION

Old age is an inevitable stage that we all have to go through as the course of nature dictates. No one can go against this spell as we are all bound to age from the day we were born. We start off as a pair of cells and grow into a full human being, this is what we call development. As we grow, we encounter lots of people, learn a lot of things, and gain a lot of experiences. These experiences, good or bad,

will then become memories that will be recalled at the later stages of our lives. This is highly reflected in Erik Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development, particularly the last stage Integrity vs. Despair, which starts at the age of 65 and lasts up until death.

Erikson's Psychosocial Development Theory suggests that people go through eight distinct developmental stages throughout the course of their lives. His theory stands out among other known developmental theories as his theory does not readily focus on childhood events, but tends to look at the development of an individual throughout the entire course of their lifespan. At each stage of development, individuals are faced with a crisis that, when resolved, would contribute to the overall psychological well-being of that said individual. This may be the case for most of the elderly population but, have you ever wondered what it is like for the members of the LGBT Community, especially among the elderly.

There has been a big rise in the number of LGBT Organizations throughout the Philippines, and almost the whole nation have been very open to the spread of said organizations. Moreover, a very positive feedback comes from the LGBT Community, and most of the Filipino population started to accept them into mainstream society. Although this has been a promising sight, this has been limited only to the teenage – young adult bracket of the society. Most of the gay populous are now middle-aged adults or even senior citizens.

There has been a trend wherein most of the elderly populous are sent to nursing homes or Homes for the Aged as people nowadays cannot afford to support their elderly anymore. This is more or less widespread with the gay elderly populous as they are mostly shunned away from their families for their sexual orientation, but looking on the brighter side of things, these individuals tend to have a more positive outlook in life despite the ordeal. This raises the question, are they no different from the elderly population that we have today? Do they have the same concerns? According to Erikson's Theory, the last stage, Integrity against Despair, starts at the age of 65 in which an individual's crisis is concerned with his or her mortality. This is triggered by life events such as retirement, the loss of a spouse, or starting to contract terminal illnesses and this is where individuals start to reflect on the life

they have lived. This is also the time wherein an individual comes to a realization that they have either lived a content life in which they begin to have a sense of fulfillment, or, begin to have a sense of regret and despair for they have not yet been contented with the life they have lived.

If one successfully resolves this crisis, an individual is then led to what Erikson termed as ego integrity. This is where an individual accepts the life he/she lived and is able to face his/her end of life with a sense of contentment and wisdom. As stated earlier, are the concerns of the gay elderly population the same with the rest of the elderly population? Since these individuals are living in nursing homes with only themselves as company, with little to no interaction with their families, how do these individuals prepare for their own end of life? It's also worth noting that these individuals may have seen their own companions face their own end, how do these individuals address the end of their own companions? Does this affect their own thoughts or perception about their mortality?

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a phenomenological design to interpret the experiences and perspectives of the participants in a given situation. The researchers employed a qualitative approach to be able to predict what the participants' perceptions are, what drives them to behave in such a way that is relative to their current state in their life. The respondents of this study were elderly homosexual males that are between the ages of 60years old and above, and are currently being sheltered at the "Home of the Golden Gays" for more than 3 years. The home is a non-profitable foundation that addresses the concerns and needs of the respondents. The home is located in the heart of Pasay, Manila. Data were collected through multiple interview sessions with a set of structured interview questions that placed emphasis on insights, life experiences on death of a companion, and their preparations for the final stages of their lives. The researchers used thematic analysis to analyze and interpret the data they have collected from the conducted interviews. After the transcription, thematic analysis was applied to sort and bracket common statements and themes from each transcription

and create an interpretation that answered the cause of the phenomena.

Participants

The respondents of this study are elderly homosexual males, between the ages of 60 years old and above, affiliated with the “Home of the Golden Gays.” They have not been in contact with their immediate family for the past years. The home is a non-profitable foundation that addresses the concerns and needs of the respondents. The home is located in the heart of Pasay, Manila.

Procedure

This research study utilized various qualitative methods wherein the researchers conducted observations, narrative interviews, and focus group discussions in collecting the needed data. The interview and focus group discussions was guided by a set of structured questions that placed emphasis on the insights, life experiences on the death of a companion, and their preparation on the final stage of life.

Observations were conducted and it enabled the researchers to observe the behavior of the respondents in a natural setting. In particular, participant observation was applied to learn about the activities of the respondents and participate in the activities to develop an insight on the guide questions that will be used for the interviews. This also allowed the researchers to identify the factors that affected the respondents and its contribution to their preparation for the final stage of life.

Narrative interviews were conducted on individual respondents. This method was used for the purpose of attaining personal insights from the respondents regarding the final stage of life and their experiences on these matters. This method has allowed the respondents to tell their experience freely without any interrupting factors. Through this method, the researchers were able to compare and contrast the experiences of each respondent.

Analysis

When the observation was conducted, the researchers took down notes of all the observed behaviors and noticeable changes in the environment and of the respondents inside their temporary home. The narrative interviews have been conducted, video-taped, and recorded as per the approval of the respondents. The researchers transcribed the interview and noted non-verbal behaviors in the video.

The researchers used thematic analysis to analyze and interpret the data they have collected from the interviews that were conducted. After the transcription, thematic analysis was applied to sort and bracket common statements and themes from each transcription and create an interpretation that answered the cause of the phenomena. Thematic analysis was applied to gain different concepts that will interpret the current phenomena and allow the researchers to associate factors that are correlated with the current phenomena.

RESULTS

The researchers found out the differences and the similarities among the participants based on the objectives of the study: a) Preparation for death, and b) Effects of the death of a companion to their perspective in life and towards their preparation for death

METHODS OF PREPARATION

The theme spans from the observed modes of preparation of the Golden gays and are divided into four parts: Financial Preparation, Emotional Preparation, Spiritual Preparation, and Physical Preparation that answers the question, “How do the Golden Gays prepare for their death?”

Financial Preparation

A recurring theme among the countless lines from the transcription, and from the name itself, it shows how the Golden Gays prepare for their end of life. The researchers thought that the modes of financial preparation have variations, but they have settled and pinpointed one culprit, and that is the preparation of the Golden Gay's own casket and memorial lot, the researchers thought that these things are very important to the respondents since they have not much to work with, the respondents were living alone most of their lives if not away from their family for the longest time. The researchers thought of who would take care of their Funeral wake when they pass away? Aside from their peers, the respondents have not much to turn to for support except for themselves, in which they are very equipped in doing so. There are other factors that can affect the preparation of the respondents' end of life in terms of finances. As pointed out by the researchers, they were living under the poverty line. This hinders the progress of the respondents. One respondent said:

“Kasi yung parang yung plan, kaya yung ikaw, yung sasali ka yung sa life plan, yung ganon. Kaya lang yung sakin yung hinuhulugan ko noon, sa burial lang yun. Kaya yung sa kabaong lang yun, pero yung sa ano- yung sa lupa pa, sa sementeryo, wala pa yun.”

“It's like a plan, so if you're going to avail the - life plan, that's it. But the thing is, the thing I was saving up for is, it's for my burial only. It was for my casket only, but for the the lot in the cemetery, I still haven't saved up for it.”

The researchers found out that the average cost of caskets and came to a conclusion that most of the participants of the study did not experience the final stages in life since most of them live under the poverty line.

Emotional Preparation

Continuing with the coding process, the researchers have discovered that the respondents have responses that led to the

conception of Emotional Preparation as a second theme. Emotional Preparations or what we could also say Emotional Buffers for death provides the Golden Gays a heads up for their inevitable passing. According to them, the emotional buffers greatly help the Golden Gays in maintaining a positive outlook in their lives. The researchers also took into consideration their hardships and successes throughout their long lives. In line with the topic of positivity, a participant then said:

“So, kaya kami wala kaming fear, dahil hindi namin talagang binigyan yan ng panahon na kumbaga sa ano gumawa kami ng preparation, wala. In short, kami talaga happy-go-lucky, kung ano ang dumating tatanggapin namin at kung uh-hindi man masyadong maganda uhh nagagawa namin ng paraan maging maganda tsaka maging makatuturan yung mga difficulties na yun.”

“The reason why we don’t fear anything is because we didn’t really give time into preparing for anything, nothing at all. In short, we’re happy-go-lucky. We will accept whatever comes our way, and if it isn’t that pleasant, we find ways into turning our difficulties into a good situation.”

The participant has shown a great deal of positivity when it comes to his outlook in life but the researchers asked themselves what constitutes their way of thinking? Sub-themes emerged as follows:

Sense of Independence

As what the researchers have gathered from the interviews, through the harsh reality that gays face in the olden days, the 1950’s, wherein discrimination against gays was rampant, being gay is considered taboo, and the Golden Gays have suffered rejection and physical violence in many forms.

“...comparable dun sa uh dark era na binabanggit ko 60's - 70's na talagang di ka pwedeng lumantad, hindi ka pwedeng magsabi na ikaw ay bading ka, di ka pwede magcross-dress dahil kasi di man physical abuse ang abutin mo baka patayin ka pa ng mga ibang tao (comparable to the dark era that I mentioned, the 60’s-70’s wherein you were never allowed to

come out, you weren't allowed to say that you were gay, you weren't allowed to cross-dress because it's not just physical abuse that you'd get, you might get killed in the process)..."

These experiences have forged their wills into steel, and the fact that their experiences with their families are mostly filled with rebellion, it goes to show that through the passage of time the Golden Gays have learned to stand on their own two feet.

Contentment with Life

Another sub-theme that the researchers have formed is that of Contentment with one's lived life. With how things are going for the Golden Gays, the researchers thought that the key to being happy as per Erikson's Developmental Theory: Ego Integrity vs. Despair, which states that if one is not contented with one's lived life, one experiences regret and ultimately despair which would then make one fear the impending inevitable death. A lot of the respondents are contented with their own lives and are very much prepared to face death. One of the participants said:

"Tatal natikman ko naman na, natikman ko ng mag-abroad, siyempre kumita ka ng malaki dun, natikman ko na magkaron ng mga alahas, mga gadgets actually. So (clears throat) so ngayon (clears throat) kung ano lang yung meron ako, kuntento na ko, masaya na ko dun. Saka yung dito sa Golden Gays, parang ano nga eh, parang hindi pa rin natatapos yung buhay namin..."

"Well since I've had a taste of what's it like to live the good life, working abroad, of course anyone could raise a lot of money from there, I've also experienced having jewelries, and gadgets actually. So, (clears throat) so now (clears throat) whatever things I have, I'm contented with it, I'm happy with what I have. And what I have here with the Golden Gays, it's like...it's like our lives doesn't end here..."

Leading a very successful life in the past, he has been able to experience all that is good in life while growing up independently. Though it was very materialistic, as with all the wants of someone who

is growing up, he had learned to start letting go of the things he once cherished and start focusing on the more important things: building connections, or spending more time with friends.

Sense of Belongingness in the Society

Contrary to what they usually claim, the Golden Gays are still human. They are social beings, and being able to connect is hardwired to all of our existence. Nobody can really live alone, even if one thinks he can, he will find or want at least one person he can confide to. In this case, he wants to belong within the society.

The participants have expressed the want of being a part of community, to share equal rights with all the members of the society. They continue to seek for that recognition, the group continues to seek for equality even under the LGBT community. Monica, said:

“...sana nga dumating yung pagkakataon ng full recognition at tsaka full acceptance ng sa ganun ma-enjoy naman namin yung benefit na ineenjoy ng mga regular men at tsaka women na kasana natin dito sa society...”

“...I wish that time would come wherein we would receive full recognition and acceptance so that we could enjoy whatever benefit that regular men and women enjoy in this society...”

There were participants who found the sense of belonging early in their lives. People with the same interest and experiences became a factor into finding their sense of belonging. The sheer comfort of finding someone who could understand you in these times was very settling, and it meant a lot to the gays back then as they had no means of opening it up to anyone without facing much judgment.

Spiritual Preparations

Then it came to spirituality, which is greatly practiced in the Philippines as Filipinos are known for being highly religious, most especially those in the elderly population. The researchers also factored the highly religious nature of Filipino elders and the conservativeness of our country, going to Church, praying, Novenas,

having a few religious items at home, are the few things that the elderly do in their everyday lives. It has been observed that religiosity is common among the responses from the respondents as observed with one particular participant:

“Ahhh, ang maipapayo ko lang sa iyo, unang-una, kilalanin mo angating Panginoon at kung ano man ang-kung ikaw ay nagbabasa ng Bibliya, maniwala ka na iyon ang salita niya, yun ay kautusan niya. At hindi mo lang naman dapat paniwalaan o basahin yun, kung ano ang nakasulat dun na iniutos, gawin. Gawin mo ng buong puso kasi kung gagawin mo lang na, ayan-”

“Ahhh, just a word of advice, first of all, know our Lord and whatever thing that- if you’re reading the Bible, believe that it is His word, His commands. And you don’t just have to believe it or read it, whatever’s written in there, abide by it. Abide by it whole-heartedly, because if you’re just going to do it, there-”

With the uncertainty of death looming around, the researchers asked, “What happens after we die?” This would lead to many questions, and not to mention, a lot of fears and anxieties. What happens after we die? Nothing? Is there such as Heaven or Hell? An afterlife perhaps? Nobody knows, but one thing’s for sure, religion prevents these individuals from having these anxieties. They have something to hold onto for security. There have been accounts of the respondents saying that they have accepted their own fate which leads one aspect of spiritual preparedness, acceptance, and realizations that death is inevitable.

Acceptance and Realizations that Death is Inevitable

Due to their experiences in life, they’ve faced harsh discrimination, yet most of the Golden Gays have lived luxurious lives. Most of them have no fears when it comes to the final stage of life. Most of them have come to a realization that they have lived their lives to the fullest, all that’s left is to let go of their material belongings and surrender themselves to the future. Fulfillment is when one is able to

attain the experiences he aims to achieve, and the participants have come to that realization in this point in time. One said:

“– yung sa sarili kong buhay, fulfilled na rin ako kasi nakarating na rin ako sa ibang bansa, naranasan ko na rin yung...pagmamahal ng...iba’t-ibang lalaki dahil marami rin akong naging karelasyon.”

“- in my own life, I can say that I’m fulfilled because I’ve been to different countries, I’ve also experienced...the love...of different men because I’ve had a lot of relationships in the past.”

Death comes naturally according to them, and most of the participants are well aware of that. They just prepare and believe that they are in good hands with the Lord. Acceptance and merely realizing the limited time of human life is one. Accepting everything and making the most out of life is another.

The Golden Gays anticipate and wait for what the future holds for them. They aim to prolong the aging process for they aim to see what is to happen. The collective experiences of the Golden Gays have shown the researchers that they have been driven to stand up on their own two feet in order for them to thrive.

Physical Preparation

The researchers have come up with physical preparations, which describe the actions taken by the Golden Gays. They were merely prolonging the aging process by doing all sorts of stuff which vary from living a healthy lifestyle to prolonging the spread of illnesses. Health is wealth, and prolonging the health of any individual is the gateway to experience all the aforementioned preparations. It is simply logical that living a long life allows you to experience more. This is evident in one account:

“Pero yung talagang- ako sa sarili ko, talagang maingat ako, iniingatan ko din yung sarili ko din yung sarili ko. Kaya ayun matatanggap ko naman- yung pag-iingat ko sa sarili ko kasi

hindi naman ako yung talagang inom dito, inom doon. Yun talagang bigay laya sa ka- hindi ko ginawa yun. Mm-mm.”

“But what really – for me, I’m really careful, I’m taking care of myself. So, I can fully accept it – taking care of myself, because I don’t really drink. I never did that, totally letting go of myself. Mm-mm.”

With proper exercise, diet, and lifestyle, one can grow strong and be able to live longer as being fit is relevant nowadays. With the continuous decrease of physical activities on these days, the life expectancy of people, nowadays, dramatically drops to a mere 60-80. With the rise of fast food, terminal illnesses that haven’t been rampant before have become a global issue today.

MEANING OF DEATH

This theme spans from the observed different meanings of death among the Golden Gays. It is divided into three parts: death is a race, destination, and inevitable. These highlights how the Golden Gays see death and attach meaning to the final stage of life.

Death is a Race

The researcher’s interview with one particular participant showed that for him, death is but a race in which the ones who was left behind must tend to the ones who went first. As per one of the participants:

“Alam mo, sabi kong ganyan nung wala na sila, una-unahan lang naman yan eh. Hindi naman kami sabay-sabay kukunin ng Diyos eh. (chuckles) Una-unahan lang naman yan eh. (gibberish) magkakaibigan kami, alangan naman sabihin lahat kayo sabay-sabay mamatay. Hindi. Sinong mag-aasikaso sakin pag namatay kami sabay-sabay? Siyempre sila (slight pause) mag-aasikaso. (pause)”

“You know, I said to myself when they were gone, it’s just a race as to who goes out first. We won’t go out be taken away by the Lord together. (chuckles) It’s a race, we’re friends, it’s not like we would die all together at the same time. No. Who would take care of me if we all died at the same time? Of course, (slight pause) they would be the ones to take care of me. (pause)”

The participant’s view of death being a race gave the researchers an insight on how fulfilled his life has been. Since he has led a very successful life, he is now literally just waiting for death to come. He also said that he has no more fears or regrets in life, and it was implied that he was ready to go any time since he’s basically fulfilled in life.

Destination

This has been recurring among the responses of the Golden Gays, and they have stated that death is nothing but a mere destination in which all of us would have to take someday. We may all take different paths, but it will all lead down into one road, which is death. One participant said:

“Kaya, di naman pwede sisihin natin, ka – kahit i-ikaw di mo pa alam kung ano ang landas mo, kung ano ang daanan mo. Lahat ng tao pinanganak na may kanya-kanyang daan”.

“So, we can’t really blame, e – even you don’t know what your path is, what you’re going to take. All of us are born with our own paths.”

Death is a destination, no matter how much you avoid the road paths that would lead you to an easy death, the final stretch of the road will still be death. The only thing different from others is found during the trip. In line with the previous theme, fulfillment of life enables the Golden Gays to be fearless against the face of death. Without those experiences and emotional buffers, the Golden Gays would be faced with fear and regret in their final days. It has been made clear to the researchers that Golden Gays view death as a destination, but for one particular participant, it’s more of a destiny:

“Kasi may pupuntahan ka talaga diyan, either good or bad kasi destiny yan eh.”

“We all have a place to go, wither good or bad because that’s destiny.”

In a sense, it is still a destination. The action that an individual takes is irrelevant, and it will not alter the course of the trip.

Death is Inevitable

As expressed by some of the Golden Gays, the researchers have come up with the theme which features the inevitability of death. Since death is unexpected, it strikes fear among the hearts of anyone who is not prepared for it. Death is so sudden. It can happen to anyone, from a mere infant to someone as old as 100 years. The main point is that death is inevitable, sudden, and it is a surprise. Just as one participant said:

“Anytime pwede ka namang ka naman kunin eh hintayin mo nalang kung kailan ka talaga kukunin ng Panginoon, ng Panginoon natin sa itaas, hindi mo naman masasabing ay ganung edad kailangan (stutters) mamamatay ako ganun.”

“You could be taken away by our Lord, our Lord up there, anytime you just have to wait for the right time. You can’t really dictate that you should pass away at this age.”

He expressed that death will come suddenly by an accident or any form. It happen suddenly that nobody would really know when. We just have to wait for the right time for it to come, and that right time depends on the will of our Lord.

DISCUSSION

The group showed more similarities than differences in most of the categories. The differences in the categories were not significantly different from each other. One category that stands out among all of them is being “happy-go-lucky” or being very “present.” They are people who embrace life coming at them as defined by Assadi (2014). Happy-go-lucky is not only associated with being happy, but also with feeling lucky. According to Carter (2010), the extent of feeling lucky is connected to how grateful we are. This is also connected to the confidence and optimism that we have. Carter (2010) indicated that confidence and optimism are two incredibly important positive emotions. Looking at it generally, luck therefore plays a role in happiness. Digging deeper into the meaning of happiness, happiness is often referred by psychologists as the positive affect. It is an emotional state that brings general positive thoughts and feelings. Can happiness lead to a longer life span? According Schutz (2013), people who work for themselves tend to be happier because they try to keep themselves in a happy mood. In terms of being happy and maintaining that happiness, the PERMA theory was used to explain how the Golden Gays tend to be happier and live happier despite the circumstances that they face. PERMA (Positive emotion. Engagement. Relationships. Meaning and purpose. Accomplishment) Theory, Martin Seligman (2011) in his book “Flourish,” developed a working theory, and the PERMA theory does not only focus on the happiness, but also on the well-being of the person. The PERMA theory has related experiences that influence a person’s well-being and discusses the factors that lead to the experiences that the Golden Gays have, and explain how they have come up with such outlook in life. Happiness is the key to health in Old Age says Knapp (2014). Enjoying the things you do and living according to what you want allow you to have a long life span and longer physical mobility.

According to Keinlen (2017), surrendering to death bring healing, what does this mean? Surrendering means accepting the fact that you are to reach the last stage of your life sooner or later. Accepting it is healthier, she says, because as you surrender you also bring peace to your mind. The Golden gays have slowly accepted that fact which motivates them into embracing life, thus boosting their quality of life.

Thinking of your death in a more personal way allows you to pursue what you want and what you really value in life. This is the principle that is observed in the Golden Gays.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, these individuals are generally fulfilled in their own right with their lives. Although there are some minor incongruences with some of their statements, they are fulfilled materially, but they still yearn for the fulfillment of their emotional needs. In which, they still search for a genuine relationship with a man. The conditions back then did not make it easier for them to fulfill that need. So, these individuals had to learn the hard way as to how to manage their way around the world from an early age. Most of the respondents have rebelled against their parents in many shapes or forms. Some have fulfilled their own dreams in terms of having finished their schooling, but most of the respondents have not really completed their schooling. Though this is the case, they have found ways to survive. Even in the simplest of forms, they have proven their independency. With this, most of them were able to get through life and live a life of luxury. They can easily say that they are mostly fulfilled. They can truly let go of the material things and live a simple life with the knowledge that their final moments are accounted for, but the only thing that holds them back is the need for a genuine relationship. Life has been a journey that has allowed these people to create meaning and slowly let go of the worldly things. Death is natural and it is not to be feared. The Golden Gays choose to see death as something to look forward and allow them to live life happily to be able to control the death anxiety that they feel about death. Life is a trip and death is the final destination.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The researchers would like to recommend future researchers to conduct more studies concerning that of the LGBT community, especially the elderly population. Also, the researchers would like to recommend that future researchers should be more adept in the art of questioning as the current researchers had a hard time in drawing out the answers they seek. Asking the right questions leads to getting the

right answers, talking about one's entry in the final stage of life is not easy to disclose as the thought of death itself has a negative notion. Though the respondents of the study were open to talk about it, the answers were not all answered.

The researchers would also like to recommend that that future studies should focus not only to death and death anxiety, but also on the theory of meaning management. This theory shows great promise as to how we view death. Death in the psychological and philosophical sense allows to create more depth on how we have lived and how we are to create meaning that would allow us to be able to overcome obstacles that will lead us to living a healthier and meaningful life.

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