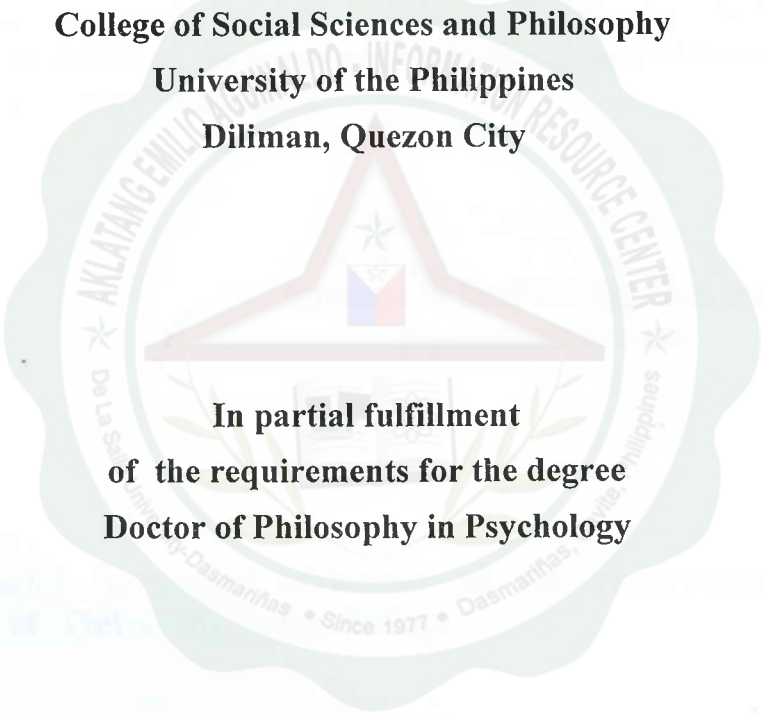


PHENOMENOLOGY OF THE CLOSET

**A Dissertation Presented to
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ABSTRACT

This study is about the experiences of lesbians of being in, and moving in and out of, the closet. It tried to understand how a lesbian identity develops, what the lesbians' experiences were of being in the closet, what it was like to stay in the closet and the impact this had on specific areas in their lives. It also looked into the extent of their being in the closet, their ways of maintaining it, and their descriptions or definitions of the closet based on their experiences. Using phenomenological analysis, the investigator also wanted to find out whether the life of a lesbian can best be described from the essentialist or constructivist perspective.

Analysis of the accounts showed underlying dynamics that described either the essentialist or constructivist paradigm. Some lesbians' accounts were essentialist in that they referred to (probably) innate or naturally occurring identities. However, other lesbians referred to their identities as assumed or matters of choice, and that meanings and experiences associated with these identities were mutable and tentative. The constructivist perspective was also revealed in their accounts of a fluidity in their sexuality, sexual desires, identities, orientations, and behaviors: they did not feel that they had to be constantly aligned to old or previous ways.

The analysis also revealed that lesbian identity/orientation development normally begins in childhood. It is pervaded by a conglomeration of feelings and thoughts and culminates in late adolescence where milestones like initial intimacies, first full sexual encounters and relationships occur. It was also seen that, as a defining moment in the samples' development, the resolution of identity issues did not automatically and totally lead

to the supposed momentous event of coming out. Instead, the account providers chose to be in the closet which, essentialism believes, could disrupt the completion of developmental tasks necessary for them to come to terms with their sexualities and to become more psychologically integrated. The outcome of such choice, as seen in most of the accounts, seemed to show otherwise.

Further analyses showed that as the account providers decided to be in the closet, they also had to decide on specific issues—how closeted can they become, where, when, and to whom-- with varying subjective and objective consequences. It is shown that the account providers are selectively closeted. Most opted not to disclose to the family while they chose to come out in other social contexts. Results also showed that the account providers preferred to use alternative terms to refer to their being closeted and being out. They felt that the categories, closet and coming out, as conceptualized in the west, do not fully resonate with their own experiences of being in the closet and coming out of it.

The account providers referred to the closet as both a psychological space and a process. They used different metaphors in referring to it. They chose to enter the closet for various personal, family, and social reasons. They also identified contextual and personal factors that could trigger more disclosures. The closet affected their relationships with their partners and their families, their stance toward the outside world, their careers, their sense of well-being, and sense of self and sexual identity.

Deeper analysis also showed how the account providers' subjective experiences relative to their identities and their closets manifested some assumptions from both paradigms. As such, the image of a shame-laden, stigmatized, fear-stricken lesbian who

seeks the closet for comfort has been confirmed, to a certain extent, giving credence to the essentialist position. However, this study also felt the constructivists' assertion about an intentional, constituted identity who, despite being in the closet, can still lead a productive and satisfying life. This, in turn, pictured a closet that tends to be less repressive, productive and at times, subversive. Meanwhile, although this research intended to find answers to the essentialist-constructivist debate, it was noted that the accounts could also be explained from a more relational-sociological framework i.e., the collectivist-individualist and gender perspectives.

In conclusion, this study is unique as it used accounts of Filipino lesbians and applied a more reflective approach in analysis. It is recommended that further inquiry using other approaches and focusing on the other salient themes identified in this investigation be done to come up with more immediate and textured descriptions of the closet.

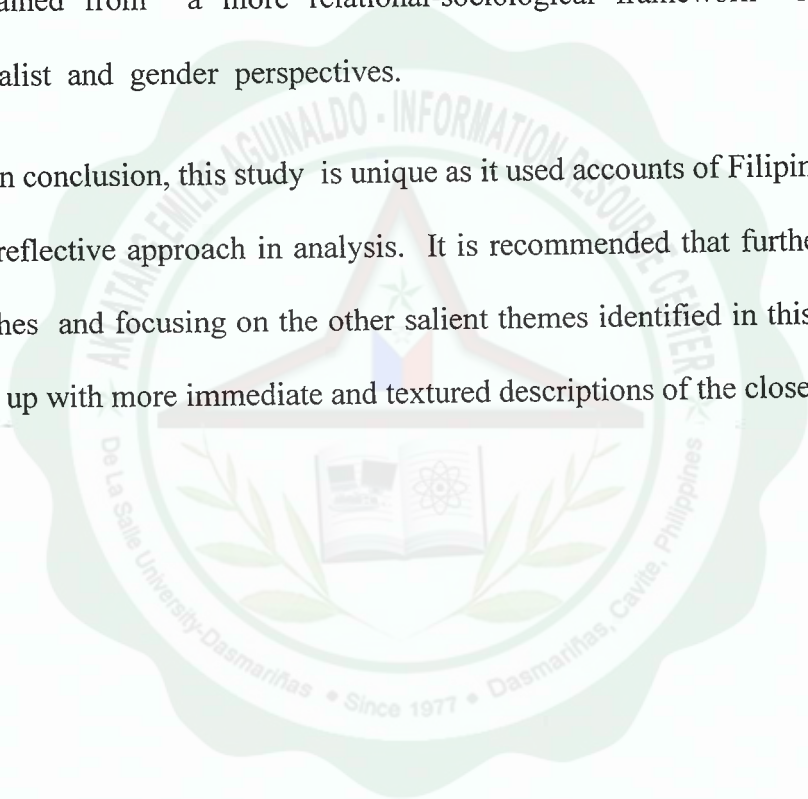


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