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Queer Respectability and Indigenous Belonging: Lesbian and Gay Lives in Indigenous Communities in Abra, Philippines

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Abstract

The article examines how lesbian and gay people in Indigenous communities in Abra, Philippines, navigate everyday struggles, cultural expectations, discrimination, support and resilience. Based on a qualitative case study involving six self-identified lesbian and gay participants from two Indigenous communities, the article shows that sexuality was negotiated through relational belonging rather than through an individualist politics of disclosure alone. Participants described childhood ridicule, family unease and subtle prejudice, but they also narrated support through kinship, prayer, community participation and the moral value of service. The findings develop the concepts of queer respectability and relational resilience to explain how participants sought belonging by performing respect, humility, contribution and self-restraint within Indigenous social life. Rather than treating culture only as a source of exclusion, the article demonstrates how Indigenous values can both discipline sexual difference and create pathways for coexistence. The study contributes to literature by foregrounding rural Indigenous Philippine contexts in debates on sexuality, culture and resilience.

Introduction

Research on sexuality has increasingly shown that lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer lives are shaped by place, class, family, religion, ethnicity and culture rather than by sexual identity alone. In the Philippines, debates on sexual citizenship and inclusion are often framed through urban activism, legal recognition and school or workplace discrimination. Less attention has been given to sexual minorities who live within Indigenous communities, where kinship, reputation, ritual participation, family obligation and respect for elders shape the terms of belonging.

The article examines the experiences of lesbian and gay people in Indigenous communities in Abra, a province in the northern Philippines. The study focuses on six participants who described how they negotiated ridicule, family expectations, subtle discrimination, spiritual support and community participation. Their narratives show that the question was not simply whether they could be “out” or “accepted”. Instead, they negotiated the everyday moral grammar of communal life: being respectful, useful, humble, self-reliant and able to contribute to family and community.

The article therefore reframes the original case study from a descriptive account of struggles and resilience into an analysis of queer respectability and relational resilience. Queer respectability refers here to the ways participants managed appearance, speech, behaviour and contribution in order to maintain honour and avoid public shame. Relational resilience refers to coping that emerged not only from individual strength but also from kinship, friendship, spirituality and community participation. These concepts help explain why participants described Indigenous culture as both constraining and sustaining.

The article contributes to debates in Sexualities by showing how sexuality is organized through rural Indigenous social relations. It also adds to Philippine queer scholarship by foregrounding Indigenous communities outside the usual urban and institutional sites of analysis. The central question is: how do

lesbian and gay people in Indigenous communities in Abra negotiate sexuality, belonging and resilience within social worlds organized by kinship, reputation and communal responsibility?

Sexuality, indigeneity and relational belonging

Sexuality is never lived outside social organization. In rural and Indigenous settings, the visibility of sexual difference is often filtered through kinship, religious practice, public reputation and the obligations of everyday community life. The participants in this study did not speak of sexuality only as an individual identity. They spoke of it as something interpreted by parents, neighbours, elders, friends and community members. Their accounts therefore require an analytic frame that attends to relational life rather than treating disclosure as the only measure of liberation.

A growing body of work has examined the intersections of Indigenous identity and sexual diversity. Calabias (2022), for instance, analyzes Igorot lesbian lives in Hong Kong and shows how indigeneity and sexuality are entangled with mobility, labour and belonging. Work on Indigenous LGBTIQ+ experiences in Australia likewise demonstrates that sexuality and Indigenous identity are not separate concerns, because racism, queerphobia and cultural exclusion affect social and emotional well-being (Briskman et al., 2022; Sullivan et al., 2024). These studies suggest that sexual minority experience must be situated within place-specific social and cultural worlds.

Philippine studies on sexuality have also shown the importance of religion, care and social respect. Del Castillo et al. (2021) found that religiosity remains central for many Filipino LGBTQ people, suggesting that faith may both regulate and sustain queer life. De Torres and Pacquiao (2024) likewise show that sexual and gender minorities in the Philippines often encounter stigma but also seek recognition through care, respect and culturally competent interaction. Such findings are relevant to Indigenous communities in Abra, where Christian spirituality, ancestral belonging and social expectations intersect in everyday life.

The article draws on minority stress theory while also moving beyond it. Meyer (2003) explains how stigma, prejudice and discrimination create unique stressors for lesbian, gay and bisexual people. Participants in this study experienced these stressors through ridicule, gossip, family unease and self-monitoring. However, their accounts also show that resilience was not only an individual psychological response. It was relational, spiritual and culturally negotiated. Njeze et al. (2020) similarly emphasize resilience as an intersectional process shaped by strengths, relationships and social context. This study builds on that insight by showing how Indigenous moral values can become both the source of pressure and the language through which acceptance is achieved.

Methodology

Research design

The study used a qualitative case study design. This design was appropriate because the research sought to understand how lesbian and gay people made meaning of their experiences within a particular social and cultural context. The case was defined as the experience of lesbian and gay people residing in Indigenous communities in Abra, Philippines.

The analysis used deductive thematic analysis. Four organizing categories guided the analysis: struggles, Indigenous cultural and social norms, discrimination and support, and coping strategies. These categories were drawn from the study questions and were refined through close reading of interview narratives. This approach follows the logic of deductive qualitative analysis, in which prior concepts guide interpretation while the data are still examined for specific meanings, contradictions and subthemes (Fife and Gossner, 2024).

Participants and setting

Six self-identified lesbian and gay adults participated in the study. Participants were between 25 and 60 years old and were members of Indigenous communities in Abra. To reduce the risk of identification in small communities, the anonymized manuscript does not name the specific municipalities, villages or participants. Participant quotations are identified only through participant codes.

The small sample should be understood in relation to the sensitivity of sexuality, Indigenous identity and local reputation. Several potential participants were hesitant to join because of personal and cultural concerns. The final group nevertheless provided detailed accounts of family life, community participation, discrimination, spiritual support and coping.

Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview guide asked participants to describe the struggles they encountered as lesbian or gay people, the role of Indigenous norms in shaping their experiences, the forms of discrimination or support they encountered, and the coping strategies they used. Interviews were conducted in settings intended to support privacy, comfort and open conversation.

The researchers recorded detailed accounts of participants' narratives and cultural surroundings. Because the topic involved sexuality, family relations and Indigenous belonging, care was taken to avoid reporting unnecessary identifying details. Informed consent and ethical approval information are provided on the separate title page, in line with the journal's double-anonymized review process.

Data analysis and trustworthiness

Interview narratives were coded and organized using qualitative analysis procedures. Codes were grouped under the four deductive categories and then refined into subthemes. The analysis focused on

recurring patterns but also attended to tensions in the narratives, such as the coexistence of acceptance and pressure, support and silence, pride and self-restraint.

Trustworthiness was supported through repeated reading of the interview accounts, checking the fit between codes and quotations, and retaining participant excerpts to ground the interpretation. The authors also treated the small sample cautiously. The findings are not presented as statistically generalizable but as contextually grounded insights into sexuality, culture and resilience in a specific Indigenous setting.

Findings

The analysis generated four main themes: early struggles and public ridicule, Indigenous norms and relational belonging, subtle discrimination and forms of support, and coping as relational resilience. These themes show how participants navigated sexual identity through family, community expectations, spirituality and contribution.

Early struggles and public ridicule

Participants remembered that ridicule began early, often through jokes and name-calling in schools, gatherings, markets and everyday neighborhood life. Words such as *bakla* and *bayot* were used by children and adults to mark them as different. One participant recalled:

Even the elders joked about me during fiestas; they thought it was harmless, but I felt small. (P2)

The ridicule was usually described as casual rather than physically violent, but participants stressed that casual jokes still produced shame. Public teasing worked as a form of social correction: it reminded participants of the gendered behavior expected in the community. Another participant explained that childhood name-calling taught him to be cautious about how he moved and spoke in public.

The meaning of ridicule changed as participants grew older. Direct bullying became less common, but subtler forms of exclusion remained. Some participants felt that they were allowed to join community events but were not always trusted with leadership roles. One participant said:

They let me join the events, but never gave me leadership tasks. (P3)

These accounts show that exclusion was not always formal. It appeared through role allocation, jokes, whispers and assumptions about respectability. Participants learned that belonging required constant attention to how others interpreted their gender expression.

Indigenous norms and relational belonging

Participants did not describe Indigenous culture only as a source of exclusion. They also described values of respect, harmony and contribution as resources for belonging. Several participants emphasized that sexuality became less important when a person fulfilled a role in family or community life. One participant stated:

Gender does not matter as long as you are fulfilling your role in the community. (P1)

The statement is important because it shifts the basis of acceptance from identity to contribution. Participants suggested that a person could be recognized if they helped during rituals, participated in community work, supported family members or behaved respectfully toward elders. Service became a form of moral evidence. It allowed lesbian and gay participants to claim belonging without directly challenging communal norms.

Respect was repeatedly described as the foundation of coexistence. Participants understood respect as mutual care, avoidance of conflict and self-control. One lesbian participant explained:

We do not fight over differences here. We help each other during rituals or emergencies. (P4)

However, respect was also conditional. Participants said they were accepted as long as they were not seen as loud, improper or disrespectful. Acceptance therefore depended on moral performance. Queer respectability was produced through modest conduct, controlled visibility and service to family and community.

The relational form of belonging complicates simple narratives of either acceptance or rejection. Participants were not entirely excluded, but neither were they fully free from regulation. They occupied a negotiated position in which culture could discipline sexual difference while also giving language for coexistence.

Subtle discrimination and forms of support

Participants described discrimination as increasingly subtle in adulthood. Direct insult or fighting became less common, but jokes about family, relationships and gender remained. One participant said:

They do not insult me now, but they still joke that I will never have a real family. (P5)

Such jokes placed limits on tolerance. Participants were allowed to participate in community life, but their futures were sometimes imagined as incomplete because of their sexuality. Most participants responded by smiling, changing the topic or remaining silent. Silence was a protective strategy, but it also required emotional labour.

Family was a central site of both tension and support. Some participants remembered parental disapproval, especially from fathers concerned with family reputation. Yet they also described mothers, siblings and relatives who showed care through indirect actions. One participant reflected:

My mother never said she accepted me, but she always cooked my favorite dish when I was sad. (P2)

Support was often practical rather than verbal. It appeared through food, financial help, concern for health, prayer and permission to participate in community activities. Spirituality was especially important. Participants often interpreted prayer not as condemnation but as a form of love. One participant said:

My mother prays for me; that is how she shows her love. (P6)

The coexistence of stigma and care is one of the central findings of the study. Participants were not simply rejected by Indigenous communities. They were supported in ways that were culturally recognizable: through deeds, prayers, shared labor and guarded affection.

Coping as relational resilience

Participants described resilience as a combination of self-acceptance, humility, economic independence and reliance on trusted relationships. Self-acceptance was a turning point. One participant explained:

At first, I tried to hide who I was, but hiding made me miserable. (P1)

For some, self-acceptance was connected to faith. Rather than seeing faith only as a source of restriction, participants used spirituality to affirm that their lives had purpose. One gay participant said:

I stopped asking God to change me and started thanking Him for making me different. (P5)

Humility was another common coping strategy. Participants often avoided direct confrontation because open conflict could damage social harmony and family reputation. One participant stated:

When someone teases me, I do not fight back. I stay quiet; it is better than arguing. (P3)

The silence should not be read simply as submission. Participants interpreted restraint as culturally appropriate strength. At the same time, they acknowledged the cost of constantly controlling themselves. One participant admitted that there were times when he wanted to speak but held back in order not to disappoint elders.

Economic independence and community contribution also strengthened resilience. Participants who became professionals, volunteers or active community members reported that people judged them less by sexuality and more by contribution. One participant explained:

When I started earning my own money, people stopped criticizing me. (P4)

Resilience was therefore not only psychological. It was social and material. Participants became more secure when they had income, respected roles, friendships, family support and opportunities to serve. Their coping practices were embedded in relationships rather than isolated from them.

Discussion

The findings show that sexuality in Indigenous Abra communities is negotiated through respectability and relational belonging. Participants did not experience community life as a simple opposition between oppression and acceptance. Instead, they described a complex social world in which jokes hurt, family silence mattered, prayer comforted, service generated respect and humility protected belonging.

This pattern aligns with minority stress theory in that participants experienced stigma, prejudice and self-monitoring (Meyer, 2003). Yet the findings also suggest that minority stress must be interpreted through local cultural forms. Stress was not only produced by explicit homophobia. It was produced through fear of shame, the burden of maintaining a good name and the expectation that one should avoid conflict for the sake of harmony.

The concept of queer respectability helps explain this process. Participants managed gender expression, speech, behavior and public participation in order to remain within the moral boundaries of the community. This was not merely personal preference; it was a strategy for survival and recognition. Respectability enabled participants to be included, but it also required self-restraint. It allowed them to be known as good children, useful community members and respectful adults, even when their sexuality remained a source of teasing or unease.

The findings also extend work on queer indigeneity in Southeast Asia. Calabias (2022) shows that Igorot lesbian lives are shaped by both Indigenous belonging and queer mobility. The present study adds a rural community perspective by showing how lesbian and gay people negotiated sexuality without necessarily leaving the community. Their belonging depended on participation in the moral economy of kinship and service.

The role of spirituality is also significant. Del Castillo et al. (2021) show that religiosity remains central for many LGBTQ Filipinos. In this study, prayer appeared as an ambivalent practice. It could signal family worry or moral unease, but it also became a form of care. Participants interpreted spiritual support as evidence that family members had not abandoned them. These finding challenges assumptions that religion functions only as exclusion; in this context, spirituality also mediated affection and endurance.

Relational resilience is the second contribution of the study. Resilience did not mean simply becoming strong as an individual. It meant finding ways to live with others: avoiding escalation, relying on friends, earning respect through work, helping in community events and interpreting pain through faith. Njeze et al. (2020) describe resilience as intersectional and strengths based. The present study shows how such strengths are built through Indigenous values of reciprocity, humility and contribution.

The findings also have practical implications. Inclusion programs in Indigenous communities should not assume that urban models of LGBTQ advocacy can be transferred without adaptation. Culturally responsive inclusion must begin with local moral languages: respect, family care, service, spiritual support and communal harmony. At the same time, these values should not be used to silence lesbian

and gay people. The challenge is to transform respect from conditional tolerance into genuine recognition.

Limitations and future research

The study has limitations. First, it involved only six participants from a specific Indigenous context in Abra; the findings cannot be generalized to all Indigenous communities in the Philippines. Second, the study focused on lesbian and gay participants and did not include bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex or non-binary Indigenous people. Third, because the topic is sensitive and the communities are small, participants may have withheld details to protect themselves or their families. Finally, the analysis was based on interview narratives and did not include extended ethnographic observation.

Future research may examine intergenerational views on sexuality in Indigenous communities, compare experiences across Indigenous groups, and include broader LGBTQIA+ participants. Further work may also explore how local government units, schools, churches and Indigenous leaders can develop culturally grounded approaches to sexual diversity that protect dignity without forcing silence.

Conclusion

The article has shown that lesbian and gay lives in Indigenous communities in Abra are shaped by the tension between sexual difference and communal belonging. Participants experienced ridicule, family unease and subtle prejudice, but they also found support through kinship, prayer, service, friendship and self-acceptance. Their resilience was not detached from culture; it was produced through culture's own moral resources.

The study argues that queer respectability and relational resilience are useful concepts for understanding sexuality in rural Indigenous contexts. Queer respectability captures the self-monitoring and moral performance required for acceptance. Relational resilience captures the support and strength that emerge through family, spirituality and community contribution. Together, these concepts reveal that inclusion is not only a matter of policy or individual identity declaration. It is also an everyday negotiation of respect, belonging and care.

For scholarship on sexualities, the study highlights the need to take seriously rural Indigenous Philippine contexts where sexuality is lived through kinship, reputation, spirituality and communal responsibility. For practice, it suggests that culturally sensitive inclusion must move beyond tolerance and create conditions where lesbian and gay Indigenous people can belong without carrying the constant burden of proving respectability.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Institutional Review

The study was reviewed and approved for academic and ethical conduct by an institutional research review panel composed of the subject teachers and panel members prior to data collection. Permission to conduct the study was also secured from the appropriate institutional and/or community authorities. The study followed ethical safeguards for research involving human participants, including voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymization of participant identities, secure handling of interview data, sensitivity to the participants' sexuality and Indigenous identity, and the right of participants to withdraw from the study.

Consent to Participate

Informed consent was obtained from all adult participants included in the study prior to data collection. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, the nature of their participation, confidentiality measures, possible risks, voluntary participation, and their right to decline questions or withdraw from the study without penalty.

Consent to Publish

Participants provided consent for the use and publication of anonymized excerpts from their interview responses. No real names, specific communities, municipalities, villages, or other identifying details are disclosed in the manuscript.

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