

UNDERSTANDING DISCLOSURE AND IDENTITY FORMATION: A NARRATIVE AND CULTURAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT: *This study explores the intricate relationship between the disclosure of traumatic experiences—particularly sexual abuse—and identity formation within the cultural context of the Philippines. Using a narrative and cultural analytical framework, it examines how Filipino survivors navigate the act of disclosure and how this process shapes their evolving sense of self. The findings reveal that cultural values such as hiya (shame), pakikisama (harmony), and utang na loob (debt of gratitude) significantly influence survivors' willingness and manner of disclosure, often impeding open communication and reinforcing internalized stigma. Disclosures commonly occurred through informal networks, with outcomes heavily dependent on the nature of the responses received. Affirming reactions fostered healing and positive identity reconstruction, while dismissive responses exacerbated trauma and self-blame. The study also highlights the intersectionality of identity factors—such as gender, social status, and digital engagement—which shape disclosure experiences in complex ways. Ultimately, this research underscores the need for culturally sensitive interventions that validate survivor narratives, strengthen informal support systems, and create safe spaces for disclosure. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of trauma, identity, and the socio-cultural dimensions of healing in non-Western contexts.*

Keywords: disclosure; traumatic experiences; identity formation; cultural analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

Disclosure of traumatic experiences, particularly sexual abuse, plays a pivotal role in shaping identity. It is not merely the act of revealing an experience but a dynamic process that influences an individual's self-concept, emotional well-being, and social relationships. Research has consistently demonstrated that both the manner of disclosure and the responses received significantly affect psychological outcomes and identity reconstruction [1, 2]. Disclosure is an essential part of personal storytelling and self-definition—revealing deeply personal experiences and emotions, often in ways that determine how individuals are perceived and supported by others.

Although considerable work has been conducted from psychological, sociological, and cultural lenses [3, 4, 5]; e remain substantial gaps in understanding how disclosure operates within specific cultural contexts—particularly in non-Western societies like the Philippines. This study aims to bridge that gap by examining personal narratives of Filipino survivors and analyzing how disclosure processes influence identity formation across different social domains.

Theoretical Background on Disclosure and Identity

Seminal research in psychology has explored the mechanics of self-disclosure, linking it to mental health, social connection, and resilience. [3, 4] Disclosure has been shown to contribute to self-clarification, relationship building, and emotional regulation. However, stigma plays a critical mediating role. Studies by others [6, 7, and 8], emphasized that stigmatized identities—such as those related to sexual abuse, mental health, or marginalized status—often make disclosure a risky act, shaped by perceived safety and anticipated consequences.

While much of this literature is grounded in Western contexts, emerging research calls for a culturally sensitive understanding of disclosure, particularly in collectivist

Societies where group harmony and social roles strongly influence behavior.

Narrative Disclosure in Context

Disclosure can take varied forms—spoken, written, or

documented—shaped by emotional readiness, perceived risks, and the availability of support systems. Survivors often engage in either open or selective disclosure, depending on their social environment and cultural background. In narrative-based studies, storytelling becomes a vehicle for constructing meaning, reclaiming agency, and negotiating identity.

Cultural Dimensions of Disclosure in the Philippines

The Philippine sociocultural landscape adds complexity to the act of disclosure. Core values such as hiya (shame), pakikisama (social harmony), and utang na loob (debt of gratitude) often discourage open confrontation or emotional vulnerability, especially when discussing topics like abuse, gender identity, or mental health [9].

Survivors must navigate familial expectations, religious norms, and tight-knit community dynamics. Research by Manalastas [10] and [11] on LGBTQ+ individuals reveals that disclosure is often hindered by fear of familial rejection and societal ostracization. Similarly, studies elsewhere on trauma and gender-based violence [12, 13, and 14] show that survivors frequently turn to informal networks—friends, neighbors, or religious groups—before seeking institutional support. These findings underscore the need for culturally grounded, safe spaces that encourage disclosure without fear of judgment or retaliation.

Domains of Identity Affected by Disclosure

Sexual and Gender Identity

Disclosure of sexual orientation or gender identity can be both liberating and fraught with risk. In Western literature, such disclosures are often linked to increased authenticity and mental well-being [6]. In the Philippine context, however, disclosures are heavily influenced by religious beliefs and family dynamics [11]. Despite these challenges, narratives show that disclosure can still foster alignment with one's authentic self when met with support.

Survivor Identity

Victims of sexual abuse and trauma often develop a distinct “survivor identity” following disclosure. According to [15, 12], this identity can serve as a source of strength and advocacy. However, when disclosures are met with disbelief,

blame, or minimization especially within family systems—the path to healing becomes obstructed. Public movements like #BabaeAko [16] demonstrate how collective disclosure can help challenge systemic silencing and foster solidarity.

Social and Cultural Identity

Experiences of discrimination and marginalization whether based on race, ethnicity, or migrant status—also shape disclosure patterns.[17] found that disclosing experiences of racial microaggressions among Filipino-Americans strengthened group identity and resilience.[18] documented similar dynamics among Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), whose disclosures about labor exploitation revealed shifts in national identity and collective awareness.

Professional and Public Identity

Disclosure in workplace or public contexts such as revealing neurodivergence or psychological distress—can alter career trajectories and social positioning. While some disclosures lead to support and accommodation, others can reinforce stigma and exclusion.[19, 20] note that mental health stigma in Philippine workplaces discourages disclosure, perpetuating silence and emotional suppression.

Comparison with Previous Studies and Research Gaps

While previous studies have extensively explored the psychological and social aspects of disclosure, this study presents several unique contributions:

1. *Cultural Nuances:* Unlike Western-centric research, this study highlights how Filipino cultural values influence disclosure patterns.
2. *Intersectionality:* The findings reveal how multiple identity factors such as gender, sexuality, trauma history, and professional identity intersect in shaping disclosure experiences.
3. *Digital Disclosure:* With the rise of social media, online disclosures introduce new challenges and opportunities for identity formation and societal reception.

In addition, comparing these narratives with previous studies highlights both commonalities and unique cultural influences. While research in Western contexts emphasizes professional interventions, many of the disclosures in this study occurred within informal networks, such as family and friends. In the Philippine setting, where societal stigma and close-knit communities influence disclosure, survivors often rely on personal relationships rather than formal support systems [21]. This indicates a gap in culturally sensitive support structures for survivors of abuse.

Implications of Disclosure

The consequences of disclosure extend beyond the individual to broader social, psychological, and legal dimensions. Key implications include:

1. *Emotional and Psychological Impact:* Disclosure can be cathartic, allowing individuals to process and validate their experiences. However, it can also lead to psychological distress if met with negative reactions [5, 4].
2. *Social Perception and Stigma:* Society plays a critical role in shaping how disclosures are received. In cultures with strong collectivist values, such as the Philippines, disclosures about personal struggles may be perceived as disruptive to family harmony [9]. Studies by [6] explore the role of online anonymity in mitigating these risks.

3. *Legal and Ethical Considerations:* Some disclosures carry legal and ethical ramifications. For example, disclosures related to abuse or professional misconduct may require intervention from authorities, raising questions about confidentiality and responsibility.

4. *Support and Advocacy:* Positive disclosure experiences can lead to increased advocacy and social change. When disclosures are met with understanding and resources, individuals are more likely to engage in activism and community-building efforts (Herman, 1997).

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 Examining Narratives and Identity Formation. Each survivor's disclosure experience varied, shaping their identity in distinct ways. Below is an analysis of specific narratives and how these disclosures contributed to their evolving self-concept.

Ana: Identity Crisis and Revictimization. Ana described feeling "confused" after her traumatic experience, leading to an identity crisis. She disclosed her abuse to friends but found herself losing autonomy, reinforcing the cycle of revictimization. Research by [2] highlights that disclosures within peer groups often lead to further emotional distress when not met with support, mirroring Ana's experience.

Mary: Worthlessness and Stagnation. Mary described herself as "worthless" and "soiled," framing her identity around shame and impurity. She disclosed through crying to a neighbor, an act that symbolized deep emotional distress. However, her disclosure did not lead to resolution but rather solidified a sense of being "stuck as a victim." This aligns with [22] theory of stigma, where disclosure reinforces internalized labels rather than offering relief.

Kay: Playfulness as a Coping Mechanism. Kay's experience was tragic, yet her method of coping involved socialization, as she "goes out with friends." She was forcibly asked by her brother to disclose, leading to a loss of autonomy and potential generalized fear. Studies on coerced

Disclosures [23] suggest that when survivors are pressured into revealing their experiences, it can lead to re-traumatization rather than healing. Jess: Shame and Relationship Struggles. Jess internalized her abuse, stating she felt "soiled/dirty." She disclosed by crying to her mother, which did not alleviate but rather reinforced her shattered interpersonal relationships. Research by [24] indicates that parental reactions to disclosures greatly impact self-perception negative or dismissive responses can heighten guilt and self-blame, as seen in Jess's case.

Joy: Rescue and Emotional Burden. Joy was "rescued" from her abusive situation, yet her identity remained one of subjugation, as she identified with the term "slave." Her quietness in response to disclosure suggests deep emotional suppression, a common reaction among survivors in cultures where open discussion of abuse is discouraged [21].

Jean: Quiet Resilience and Limited Closure Jean, labeled a "dirty woman" by societal perception, was also rescued but remained silent about her trauma. Her quietness post-disclosure indicates a lack of closure, as studies [24] note that silence can often signify continued internal conflict rather than resolution.

Kat: Self-initiated Disclosure and Fear of Relationships. Kat,

who described herself as "useless/worthless," took a step towards agency through self-initiated disclosure. However, the shattered interpersonal relationships post-disclosure indicates lingering fears, particularly towards the opposite sex. Similar patterns have been observed in studies on sexual trauma and avoidance behaviors [25].

Bem: Confrontation and Isolation Bem displayed coldness and isolation post-trauma, and her disclosure was prompted by a confrontation due to her changed behavior. Studies suggest that when survivors are confronted rather than voluntarily disclosing, it can lead to increased emotional withdrawal [2].

Kim: Dual Emotions and Forced Exposure Kim described herself as "happy but still felt mistreated," revealing the complexity of her emotional state. She was rescued, but her disclosure occurred involuntarily when her sister witnessed the abuse. Involuntary disclosures can disrupt coping mechanisms and force premature emotional processing [23].

May: Regaining Integrity and Positive Identity Formation. May's narrative stands out as she transitioned from victimhood to empowerment. She felt "whole" post-disclosure and described her identity as "heroic," signifying regained integrity and a healthy self-concept. This aligns with research on post-traumatic growth, where survivors can develop resilience through meaning-making [26].

The results of this study underscore the profound impact of disclosure on survivors' identity formation. Disclosure emerged not simply as a recounting of traumatic events but as a transformative process that actively shapes an individual's self-concept, emotional state, and social interactions. Survivor narratives revealed that the manner of disclosure—whether self-initiated, coerced, or accidental—significantly influenced outcomes. Self-initiated disclosures, such as those by Kat and May, were associated with empowerment and a reclamation of agency. In contrast, disclosures that were forced or accidental, as seen in the experiences of Kay, Kim, and Bem, often resulted in increased emotional distress, mistrust, and a perceived loss of control.

3. FINDINGS

A key finding relates to the cultural context of disclosure in the Philippines, where societal norms such as *hiya* (shame), *pakikisama* (harmony), and *utang na loob* (debt of gratitude) influence how and when individuals choose to share their experiences. These cultural values often discouraged open disclosure, especially in cases involving sexual abuse, leading many survivors—like Jess, Jean, and Joy—to internalize shame and adopt identities rooted in silence and self-blame. The stigma surrounding such disclosures contributed to feelings of worthlessness, isolation, and stagnation in identity development.

Another prominent theme is the reliance on informal networks. Most disclosures occurred within personal circles—such as family members, neighbors, or friends—rather than through formal institutional channels. While these informal disclosures provided initial relief for some, they often lacked the structure, validation, and protection offered by trained professionals. The varied reactions from these informal networks shaped whether survivors experienced

healing or further harm. For instance, dismissive or judgmental responses, as observed in Ana's and Mary's accounts, often reinforced trauma and revictimization, whereas affirming responses, like those received by May, facilitated positive identity reconstruction and emotional resilience.

Furthermore, the findings revealed how intersecting identity factors—such as gender, trauma history, sexuality, and social status—contributed to the complexity of disclosure experiences. These intersectional dynamics shaped not only the survivors' willingness to disclose but also how they interpreted and responded to the reactions they received. The rise of digital spaces as avenues for disclosure was also observed, suggesting evolving modes of self-expression and the potential for both support and harm in online environments.

In summary, the study highlights that disclosure is a deeply contextual and identity-shaping experience. The outcomes are largely contingent on cultural factors, the nature of the disclosure, and the quality of response received. These findings call for a culturally attuned approach to supporting survivors that honors their autonomy, validates their experiences, and fosters environments conducive to healing.

4. CONCLUSION

Disclosure is a powerful and multifaceted process that shapes identity in deeply personal and socially constructed ways. In the Philippine context, where cultural norms and societal expectations profoundly influence behavior, disclosure is both an act of vulnerability and resistance. The narratives examined reveal that the outcomes of disclosure—whether healing or harmful—depend largely on the context, manner, and reception of the act. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing culturally appropriate interventions and policies that support survivors.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the findings, this study recommends the development of culturally sensitive support systems that recognize the influence of Filipino values such as *hiya* and *pakikisama* in shaping disclosure patterns. Mental health interventions should be tailored to accommodate these cultural dynamics, ensuring that survivors feel safe and validated. Strengthening informal support networks through community-based education and training can enhance the responsiveness of peers, families, and local leaders to disclosures. It is also essential to promote self-directed disclosure by creating safe, confidential spaces—both physical and digital—where survivors can share their experiences without coercion. Public education campaigns should raise awareness on appropriate responses to disclosures to minimize secondary trauma. Lastly, further research is needed to explore the long-term effects of disclosure and the role of intersecting identities in shaping survivor experiences, particularly in underrepresented Filipino communities.

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