Raising A Gay Son in the Time of the COVID-19 Lockdowns – A Filipino Father's Autoethnography

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ABSTRACT

This autoethnography explores a Filipino father's journey of rediscovering his relationship with his gay son during the COVID-19 lockdowns in the Philippines. A communications professional with over three decades of experience, the author confronts the gap between his public expertise and his private-sphere communication, realizing that his silent acceptance of his son's identity was not the same as active understanding. Using personal journal entries and structured self-reflection as primary data, this paper analyzed the transformative process of moving from passive tolerance to engaged dialogue. Key themes emerged from the analysis including: the paradox of knowing but not knowing; the lockdown as a catalyst for enforced intimacy; the necessity of reframing paternal expectations; the discovery of new forms of intimacy through shared vulnerability; and the redefinition of fatherhood through a willingness to be vulnerable. This study contributes to discourses on Filipino fatherhood, masculinity, and family communication by arguing that vulnerability can be a source of strength and that true acceptance of LGBTQ+ children must be enacted through ongoing, curious, and compassionate communication. Ultimately, the paper posits that crises can serve as crucibles for renegotiating familial roles and deepening relational bonds.

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic was more than a global health crisis. For many families, the lockdowns transformed the home into the center of everyday life, creating an unusual opportunity for prolonged togetherness. While this enforced proximity often generated stress and conflict, it also exposed patterns of family communication that had long been hidden beneath the routines of work, school, and daily life. For me, the lockdowns became an unexpected lesson—not simply in fatherhood, but in communication. They forced me to confront a paradox I had carried throughout my professional life: after more than three decades of studying, practicing, and teaching communication, I had assumed I already knew how to communicate with the people who mattered most. In reality, I had never fully learned how to listen to my own son.

For more than 35 years, I built a career around communication. I worked as a journalist, later as a public relations practitioner, and eventually became a university professor teaching communication. My work required me to ask questions, understand people, and tell their stories. Ironically, I had not asked enough questions of my own son. During the lockdowns, I came to realize that professional expertise did not necessarily translate into meaningful communication within the family. Although I had always considered myself an accepting father, I slowly discovered that acceptance was not the same as understanding. I had accepted who my son was, yet I had rarely taken the time to understand how he experienced the world.

This realization forced me to rethink what it meant to love my son well. For years, I had believed that love could be adequately expressed through acceptance, provision, and trust. The lockdowns taught me that these, while essential, were not enough. Genuine understanding required something more deliberate: listening with curiosity, asking questions with humility, embracing vulnerability, and sustaining conversation over time. The issue was never my son's identity. The issue was the quality of our communication.

Although Philippine scholarship has significantly expanded knowledge on LGBTQ+ identities, much of the literature has focused on identity formation, media representation, advocacy, or the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals themselves. Considerably less attention has been given to the communicative experiences of parents—particularly fathers—as they move beyond accepting their LGBTQ+ children toward genuinely understanding them in everyday family life. Even fewer studies have examined this process through analytic autoethnography, where the father's own lived experience becomes the primary site of inquiry. As a result, we know much about the importance of parental acceptance, but comparatively little about the communicative processes through which acceptance becomes understanding.

This study addresses that gap by examining how communication during the COVID-19 lockdowns transformed my relationship with my gay son. Drawing on personal journals and structured self-reflection, I explore how everyday conversations, shared routines, and moments of vulnerability deepened my understanding of both fatherhood and my son. More specifically, the paper asks how communication enabled me to move beyond passive acceptance toward genuine understanding, and what this journey reveals about Filipino fatherhood, masculinity, and family communication. Rather than treating acceptance as the endpoint of parenting an LGBTQ+ child, I argue that acceptance is the beginning of an ongoing communicative process through which understanding, trust, and intimacy are continually negotiated.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Autoethnography as method in family and gender Studies

Autoethnography has emerged as a qualitative research approach that bridges personal experience and cultural understanding. Ellis, Adams, and Holman Jones (2011) defined it as "an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience." Unlike traditional ethnography, which primarily studies others, autoethnography positions the researcher within the phenomenon under investigation, making the self both the subject of inquiry and the lens through which broader social realities are interpreted. Anderson (2006) further argued that analytic autoethnography extends beyond personal narrative by connecting lived experience to theoretical and cultural analysis.

Autoethnography has likewise gained increasing recognition within Philippine scholarship as a means of examining how personal lives intersect with cultural and institutional realities. Calica (2023), for instance, explored the competing demands of motherhood and academic life, revealing how Filipino cultural expectations shape women's professional identities. Similarly, Tudy (2022) chronicled the lived experience of a Filipino academic navigating the pressures of international scholarly publishing, demonstrating how autoethnography can illuminate the personal dimensions of institutional life. Together, these studies affirm that lived experience can generate rigorous scholarly insight. Building on this emerging tradition, the present study extends Philippine autoethnographic scholarship into the domain of family communication by examining how a Filipino father came to understand his gay son through everyday acts of listening, dialogue, and shared experience.

The methodological fit of autoethnography is particularly compelling in the Philippine context because it resonates with indigenous ways of understanding the self. Within *Sikolohiyang Pilipino,* Enriquez (1992) conceptualized *kapwa* as a shared identity in which the self exists only in relation to others. Personal

experience, therefore, is never purely individual but always embedded within relationships. Mendoza (2003) further argued that *kapwa* provides a distinctly Filipino framework for dialogue and intercultural understanding by recognizing that one's story inevitably reflects the lives of others. This relational perspective was evident in Nicolas's (2022) study of parents whose children were confined in Bahay Pag-asa during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite being physically separated and designated as taga-labas (outsiders) by institutional protocols, parents continued to sustain emotional connectedness through *pakikipagkapwa,* demonstrating that shared identity transcends physical proximity.

When viewed through this lens, autoethnography is more than a method of personal reflection. It becomes a culturally appropriate way of examining how communication shapes relationships within Filipino families. Rather than presenting an isolated account of one father's experience, this study understands that experience as part of a broader relational and cultural reality in which communication, family, and identity are continually co-constructed.

Filipino family and gender expectations

The Filipino family has long been regarded as the cornerstone of society, recognized in the Philippine Constitution as the foundation of the nation. Scholars describe it as fundamentally collectivist, with relationships extending beyond the nuclear household to include grandparents, relatives, compadres, and other forms of fictive kinship (Medina, 2001). These strong familial ties provide stability and belonging, but they also shape expectations about gender, authority, and family roles.

Within this cultural context, fathers have traditionally been viewed as *the haligi ng tahanan* (pillar of the home) – the principal provider, protector, and moral authority of the family. While this ideal affirms paternal responsibility, it has often emphasized provision and discipline over emotional openness. As Bulatao (1964) observed, Filipino fatherhood has long been characterized by a delicate balance between authority and affection, with love more often demonstrated through sacrifice and responsibility than through direct emotional expression.

Sikolohiyang Pilipino offers a broader understanding of fatherhood. Rather than defining the father's role primarily through authority, it emphasizes *kapwa*—a shared identity grounded in mutual recognition, empathy, and humanity (Enriquez, 1992). From this perspective, fatherhood is sustained not only by fulfilling responsibilities but also by nurturing relationships through *pakikipagkapwa*, the willingness to engage others as fellow human beings (Mendoza, 2003; Sison and Abuda, 2022; del Castillo, 2023). Emotional presence, listening, and reciprocal understanding therefore become integral expressions of fatherhood rather than signs of diminished masculinity.

These perspectives are particularly relevant when fathers confront a child's LGBTQ+ identity. Filipino constructions of masculinity have been shaped by multiple historical influences, including precolonial traditions, Spanish colonial notions of machismo, and Catholic moral teachings (Garcia, 2009). Together, these traditions have reinforced heteronormative expectations of sons while positioning fathers as custodians of family identity and lineage. The disclosure that a son is gay may therefore challenge deeply held assumptions about masculinity, inheritance, and paternal success.

Yet these cultural expectations coexist with equally enduring Filipino values of *pagmamahal* (love), *pag-aaruga* (care), and family solidarity. As a result, many families navigate LGBTQ+ identities through a mixture of acceptance and reservation – embracing their children while remaining hesitant to engage openly with questions of identity, relationships, or future family life. This tension reflects a broader paradox within contemporary Filipino society: public expressions of tolerance toward LGBTQ+ individuals often coexist with silence or discomfort in everyday family communication. It is within this space between acceptance and conversation that the present study is situated. More specifically, it asks how communication enables fathers to move from silent acceptance toward genuine understanding.

LGBTQ+ identities in the Philippines

The Filipino term *bakla* has a long and contested history. Although it is often translated as "gay," Garcia (2009) argued that *bakla* traditionally refers less to sexual orientation than to gender expression, particularly effeminacy. As a cultural category, *bakla* reflects a uniquely Filipino understanding of gender and identity that cannot be fully explained through Western LGBTQ+ terminology. The conflation of gender expression and sexuality has contributed to both visibility and stigma. On one hand, *bakla* is highly visible in Philippine society, particularly in entertainment, fashion, beauty, and other creative industries. On the other hand, this visibility has often been accompanied by stereotypes that reduce complex identities to caricatures of humor, flamboyance, or comic relief, limiting broader public understanding of LGBTQ+ lives.

Manalansan (2003) further argued that Filipino gay identities are shaped by the intersections of colonial history, Catholic religiosity, family expectations, and global queer discourses. As a result, there is no single way of being gay in the Philippines. Some Filipino gay men embrace traditionally feminine forms of self-expression, while others identify with more conventionally masculine presentations. These diverse expressions challenge simplistic assumptions about sexual identity and underscore the importance of understanding LGBTQ+ experiences within their cultural context rather than through imported categories alone.

Recent Philippine scholarship likewise highlights the central role of the family in shaping LGBTQ+ identity. Marquez et al. (2024) found that parental acceptance was a significant predictor of outness among Filipino queer young adults, whereas connectedness with the broader LGBTQ+ community was not. Their findings suggest that, within the Philippines' family-centered culture, parents continue to exert a profound influence on whether queer children feel safe enough to disclose and live their identities openly. While community belonging remains important, parental acceptance appears to provide the primary foundation for authenticity and self-disclosure.

At the same time, parental acceptance is more complex than simply acknowledging a child's sexual identity. To say that one accepts a gay son does not necessarily mean that one understands his lived experience. A parent may reject harmful stereotypes while still remaining unfamiliar with the everyday realities, language, relationships, aspirations, and struggles that shape a child's life. This distinction is particularly important in Filipino families, where love is often expressed through care and responsibility rather than through open conversations about identity and emotion. Consequently, acceptance may coexist with silence, leaving parents and children emotionally connected yet communicatively distant.

It is this distinction that frames the present study. Rather than asking whether Filipino parents accept their LGBTQ+ children, this paper explores what happens after acceptance. Specifically, it examines how communication enabled a father to move beyond acknowledging his son's identity toward genuinely understanding him as a person. In doing so, the study shifts the discussion from acceptance as an attitude to understanding as an ongoing communicative process.

Parenting during COVID-19 lockdowns

The COVID-19 pandemic created a unique social experiment. Families suddenly found themselves confined together for months on end. Studies globally (Prime, Wade, & Browne, 2020) noted that while some families experienced strain and conflict, others found renewed closeness. In the Philippines, where multigenerational households are common, the lockdowns amplified both the stress and the intimacy of cohabitation.

In most cases, parents had to renegotiate roles as homes became offices, classrooms, and sanctuaries all at once. The blurring of work and family life created opportunities for deeper interaction but also triggered clashes over privacy, space, and expectations (Karhu et al., 2024). For fathers, particularly, the lockdown disrupted the provider-centric identity. With mobility restricted and incomes uncertain, many fathers had to rediscover caregiving roles traditionally associated with mothers.

For LGBTQ+ youth, lockdowns had ambivalent effects. Some experienced heightened vulnerability, trapped in unsupportive households (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Others, however, found the lockdowns a rare chance to spend extended time with affirming family members. The pandemic thus became both a risk and an opportunity: a crucible where familial acceptance could either be withheld or deepened.

Global studies suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic produced a paradoxical effect on families. While prolonged cohabitation created opportunities for deeper connection, it also intensified stress, conflict, and emotional strain (Prime et al., 2020). Philippine evidence suggested that this tension was equally, if not more, pronounced within local households. In a quantitative study of Filipino families during the pandemic, Sison and Abuda (2022) found that households experienced heightened interpersonal conflict while family togetherness did not automatically improve despite prolonged physical proximity. Simply spending more time together under one roof did not necessarily translate into stronger family relationships. Rather, the pandemic exposed existing communication patterns and magnified unresolved tensions. This finding suggests that the lockdowns created not merely a period of enforced cohabitation but a communicative environment in which families either deepened dialogue or retreated further into silence.

Emerging Philippine scholarship likewise suggests that families responded to the pandemic through relational rather than purely individual processes. Communication within households became an important means of sustaining *kapwa* and *pakikipagkapwa,* as family members collectively navigated uncertainty, caregiving, and emotional strain (Cagayan et al., 2022). These perspectives complement quantitative findings by suggesting that the significance of prolonged cohabitation lies not in physical togetherness itself but in the communicative practices through which relationships are maintained and renewed.

Synthesis and Research Gap

The literature establishes that family relationships are shaped by culture, communication, and context. Autoethnographic scholarship demonstrates how personal narratives illuminate broader social realities (Anderson, 2006; Ellis et al., 2011), while Sikolohiyang Pilipino emphasizes that personal experience is inherently relational through *kapwa* (Enriquez, 1992; Mendoza, 2003). Studies of Filipino families highlight the enduring influence of fatherhood, masculinity, and cultural expectations (Bulatao, 1964; Medina, 2001), and research on LGBTQ+ identities consistently shows that parental acceptance is crucial to identity disclosure and well-being (Ryan et al., 2010; Marquez et al., 2024). Pandemic studies further reveal that prolonged cohabitation intensified both family stress and opportunities for connection, without guaranteeing stronger relationships (Prime et al., 2020; Sison & Abuda, 2022).

What these studies explain less clearly is how communication transforms family relationships. We know that parental acceptance matters, but we know comparatively little about how acceptance is expressed, negotiated, and deepened through everyday interactions, particularly from the perspective of Filipino fathers. Existing Philippine autoethnographies have examined teaching, motherhood, and professional identity (Calica, 2023; Tudy, 2022), but rarely fatherhood in relation to an LGBTQ+ child. This study addresses that gap by examining how communication enabled one father to move beyond accepting his son's identity toward genuinely understanding him during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

METHODOLOGY

This paper employed autoethnography, a qualitative method that combines autobiography and ethnography. According to Ellis, Adams, and Holman Jones (2011), autoethnography situates the self in culture, allowing personal narratives to illuminate broader social, cultural, and political phenomena. Unlike memoir, which is primarily literary, autoethnography is analytical; it is not content to narrate but seeks to theorize the personal.

My decision to use autoethnography arises from both circumstance and intention. As a communicator with three decades of experience, I am accustomed to observing others and crafting their stories. Yet the pandemic compelled me to turn the lens inward. It created conditions where my most pressing questions were not about audiences, markets, or publics, but about myself and my son. Autoethnography thus became the most appropriate method: it legitimized reflection as data and acknowledged the relational dynamics of fatherhood, masculinity, and gay identity within the Filipino family.

Data sources

The primary data for this study came from two interrelated sources: (1) a notebook of journal entries written during the COVID-19 lockdowns, and (2) responses to a structured self-questionnaire I developed to interrogate my reflections.

Throughout the lockdown, I kept a journal where I recorded not only events but also emotions, realizations, and questions about my son and our relationship. These entries were not initially written for research but as a coping mechanism during the uncertainty of the pandemic. Only later did I recognize their potential as autoethnographic data: they captured the immediacy of reflection, unfiltered by hindsight.

The journals included mundane notes (shared meals, conversations, moments of silence) as well as profound insights (moments of pride, flashes of ignorance, confrontations with my own biases). Together, they provided a

textured account of the father-son dynamic under lockdown conditions.
To bring more rigor to the reflective process, I designed a self-questionnaire. Its purpose was to transform vague impressions into structured reflection. Questions included:

1. How much do I really know of my son as a gay man?
2. How long have I known about his orientation, and how did I first react?
3. What expectations did I hold for him as a child, and how have these shaped our relationship?
4. What happened during COVID that prompted deeper reflection?
5. How have lockdown experiences affected my understanding of him and our relationship?
6. What lessons or insights have I learned?

By answering these questions, I forced myself to articulate assumptions I had left unexamined. The questionnaire thus served as both a mirror and a magnifying glass: reflecting my self-image while enlarging overlooked details.

ANALYTIC STRATEGY

My data analysis proceeded in three stages:

Layered reflection

I revisited journal entries and self-questionnaire responses, coding them into thematic clusters: knowing but not knowing, lockdown as catalyst, reframing expectations, new intimacies, father's vulnerability.
This layered reflection aligns with Anderson's (2006) notion of "analytic autoethnography," where the researcher moves beyond description to interpretive depth.

Dialogic Engagement

Autoethnography demands that personal stories engage with cultural narratives. I situated my reflections within Filipino family scripts: father as provider, masculinity as expectation, *bakla* as both celebrated and stigmatized identity.

This dialogic engagement highlighted tensions: my professional fluency in communication versus my personal silence with my son; my cultural role as *haligi ng tahanan* versus my vulnerability as a father of a gay child.

Critical Positioning

Finally, I positioned my narrative in relation to existing scholarship. My reflections were not treated as isolated anecdotes but as data that resonate with literature on family intimacy, LGBTQ+ acceptance, and pandemic parenting.

Ethical considerations

The journal entries used in this study were not written for research. I wrote them during the COVID-19 lockdowns as a personal way of recording my thoughts and emotions. It was only later that I realized that they could help me understand my experience as a father and contribute to communication research. Since they were originally private journal entries and not part of a planned research project, no institutional ethics review was obtained before they were written.

However, since this autoethnography includes experiences shared with my son, I took extra care in preparing this manuscript. I informed him fully about the study, and he agreed to the inclusion of our shared experiences. He also read the manuscript to confirm that the events were accurately described and that his privacy was protected. His name and other identifying details have been omitted. While the interpretations and analysis are my own, the experiences we shared were included with his knowledge and consent.

RESULTS

Knowing, but not knowing

Before the pandemic, I believed I knew my son well. I knew he was gay. I knew he had a boyfriend. I knew he enjoyed makeup and creative self-expression. Because I had never objected to any of these, I took quiet pride in thinking of myself as an accepting father. Looking back, however, I realized that what I knew were the visible facts of his life, not the meanings he attached to them.

One conversation during the lockdown completely changed how I understood our relationship. Motorsport had always been one of my greatest passions. When my son was growing up, I often brought him to the racetrack. In my memory, those weekends represented the kind of father-and-son bonding I wanted us to share. I assumed he enjoyed them as much as I did.

One evening over dinner, he quietly told me, "Dad, do you know I was terrified every time you brought me into the race car? While you were enjoying the race, I was screaming inside. I was so scared, but I didn't want to disappoint you."

I was stunned.

For years, I had remembered those race weekends as symbols of our closeness. He remembered them as moments of fear.
That night, I wrote in my journal: *"How many times have I mistaken my experience for ours? I kept thinking I knew my son because I knew what we had done together.*

Tonight I realized I had never asked him how those moments felt from where he was sitting."

Reading that journal months later, I recognized this conversation as a turning point in how I understood my relationship with my son. Until then, I had assumed that sharing experiences meant sharing their meaning. Instead, I discovered that I knew many of the events that shaped his childhood without knowing how he had actually experienced them. What I had mistaken for understanding was, in reality, familiarity. The conversation revealed a gap that I had never noticed before—not in my love for my son, but in my understanding of him.

Lockdown as catalyst

The COVID-19 lockdown was more than a public health measure; it was a social experiment. Families were confined in ways unprecedented in modern history. For us, the lockdown became a crucible that intensified relationships.

My journals from the early months of 2020 captured the awkwardness of suddenly sharing the same space with my grown children. The house, once a place of comings and goings, became the totality of our world. In this confinement, ordinary interactions took on heightened meaning. Shared meals became sites of conversation. Evening walks around the compound became moments of unexpected intimacy. Even conflicts—over chores, over noise, over space—revealed dynamics we had long ignored.

It was during these lockdown moments that I began noticing things about my son I had overlooked. His patience with his sisters, his creativity in coping with boredom, his confidence in presenting himself online – these were not merely traits but expressions of resilience. Lockdown forced me to see him not just as "my gay son" but as a full adult negotiating the same uncertainties I faced.

Thus, the lockdown acted as a catalyst: it forced proximity, which in turn demanded deeper seeing. What might have taken years of gradual observation was compressed into months of enforced intimacy.

Reframing expectations

The lockdown also prompted us to revisit memories of our family's religious life. Faith has always been important for me. As a teenager, I left Catholicism to join a Baptist church and seriously considered becoming a pastor. Although I eventually returned to the Catholic faith, I carried with me the same deep commitment to raising a family grounded in Christian values. My wife and I made sure our children attended catechism, and because he was my only son, I naturally hoped he would become an altar server. To me, it seemed a meaningful

way of nurturing both his faith and his character. Only years later did I learn how differently he had experienced it.

During one of our lockdown conversations, he quietly told me, "Dad, I never liked serving at the altar. I didn't enjoy being with the boys. I felt different, but I didn't know how to explain it to you."

His words forced me to revisit memories I had never questioned. What I had regarded as a cherished family tradition had also become a source of discomfort for him. I had assumed that because those experiences reflected my own values, they would naturally become his as well.

That realization challenged me more deeply than I expected. It did not weaken my faith, nor did it require me to abandon the values that shaped my life. Instead, it made me recognize that even the most loving expectations can become burdens when they are never discussed. I had been trying to pass on what I believed was good without first asking whether it was life-giving for my son.

I now see that fatherhood is not simply the transmission of values from one generation to the next. It is also the willingness to revisit those values in conversation with one's children. The lockdown became the space where those conversations finally took place.

New forms of intimacy

Perhaps the most unexpected outcome of the lockdown was the emergence of new intimacies between my son and me. These were not dramatic confessions or confrontations but small, ordinary moments that became transformative.

I recall journal entries describing our trips to COVID testing centers, to supermarkets, and even our late-night conversations where we talked about movies, fashion, and even politics. In those trips and conversations, I realized that the son I once knew had grown immensely, and that his sharp wit, empathy, and creative vision had fully developed. I also recall how he would experiment with makeup, and instead of retreating to silence, I asked questions about his choices of color and style. These simple questions were once unthinkable for me. Now, they opened doors to connection.

Another layer of intimacy came through shared domestic life. Lockdown required cooperation in chores – from cooking to cleaning to maintaining order. Working side by side blurred traditional gendered divisions of labor. I, the father, found myself learning from my son's insights in cooking and cleaning – tasks I once dismissed as trivial.

These new intimacies demonstrated that father-son relationships are not fixed. They evolve, sometimes unexpectedly in times of crisis. Intimacy, apparently, was not only physical closeness but emotional openness. And I realized that it was cultivated through shared experiences and mutual curiosity.

A father's vulnerability

The most profound theme that emerged was my own vulnerability. For decades, my professional life had trained me to project authority. As a journalist, I asked questions with confidence. As a PR practitioner, I crafted narratives with precision. As a professor, I stood before students as an authority. Yet, in the presence of my gay son, especially during the lockdown, I realized how unprepared I was to communicate.

The journals documented my struggles such as my hesitation before asking questions, my fear of offending him, my worry about revealing my ignorance. Vulnerability, for me, was something that should be hidden. Yet it became unavoidable. I had to admit that I did not fully know my son, and that my being a father did not make me all-knowing and infallible.

Vulnerability, however, opened pathways. It allowed me to listen without defensiveness. It taught me how to confess my ignorance without shame while asking for guidance from my son. In Filipino culture, fathers are often portrayed as strong, unyielding figures whose love is expressed primarily through financial provision, authority, and control (Jocson, 2020; Tan, 1994). Vulnerability is traditionally seen as a weakness that threatens this paternal headship (Gutierrez, 2024). Yet, in my case, vulnerability became strength. It redefined fatherhood not as control but as openness, not as certainty but as a willingness to learn.

DISCUSSION

Fatherhood and masculinity in transition

The findings highlight how the pandemic lockdowns disrupted traditional scripts of Filipino fatherhood. As noted in earlier scholarship, the father in Filipino culture is often described as *haligi ng tahanan* (the pillar of the home), expected to provide, protect, and maintain authority (Medina, 2001). Emotional vulnerability and intimate conversations are frequently sidelined, as fathers demonstrate love through provision rather than dialogue.

My autoethnography challenges this model. In being confined with my son, I could no longer rely on provision alone as proof of fatherhood. Food on the table, while necessary, was not sufficient for connection. Instead, it was through vulnerability that intimacy deepened – by admitting what I did not know and by asking questions without answers ready. This echoes emerging scholarship that

argues for a reimagining of fatherhood, away from rigid patriarchal archetypes and toward relational engagement (Dermott, 2008).

The pandemic accelerated this transformation. With nowhere to go and no meetings to rush to, I was forced to spend more time at home than I had in years. That was when I confronted an uncomfortable truth. I had spent more than three decades teaching and practicing communication, yet I had failed to do one of its simplest acts as a father – I had not really listened to my own son. I expected my children to listen whenever I spoke. It never occurred to me that fatherhood also meant listening to them. That realization changed how I saw myself. Strength was no longer about having the answers or being the authority in the house. Sometimes, it meant keeping quiet long enough for my son to tell me his story.

Communication as relational practice

One of the main realizations of this study is that acceptance is not synonymous with communication. For years, I had prided myself on "accepting" my son's identity. Yet this acceptance was passive, silent, and one-directional. It lacked the mutuality that communication requires.

Scholars of family communication emphasize that intimacy is co-constructed through ongoing dialogue (Galvin, Braithwaite, & Bylund, 2015). Silence, even when benevolent, can create distance. My journals revealed that I had mistaken tolerance for engagement. The lockdown shattered this illusion. By asking questions about his makeup, his dreams, his struggles, I learned that communication is not about broadcasting acceptance but about creating shared meaning.

This finding contributes to communication scholarship by illustrating the gap between professional and personal competence. As a professional communicator, I had mastered persuasive and strategic communication. But within the family, the task was not to persuade but to listen. Communication, in this relational sense, is less about control and more about curiosity.

For Filipino families, this insight is particularly relevant. In a culture where hiya (shame) often silences difficult conversations, moving from tolerance to dialogue requires deliberate effort. This autoethnography suggests that fathers, in particular, must model openness if families are to move beyond superficial acceptance toward deeper understanding.

LGBTQ+ family narratives in the Philippines

I had always considered myself an open-minded person. Long before the acronym LGBTQ+ entered everyday conversation, I believed I had accepted people of diverse sexual orientations. That conviction was shaped not by abstract ideals but by lived experience. My older sister is a lesbian, and as a child she often protected me from neighborhood bullies. I was a clumsy, awkward boy – only later realizing that I had lived with undiagnosed ADHD – and I was frequently taunted as bakling, a word that could mean both *bakla* and weakling. I knew what it felt like to be labeled for being different, and I believed those experiences had made me accepting of others.

So when my only son eventually told us he was gay, I did not reject him. I never questioned his place in our family or imagined that his sexual orientation diminished my love for him. For years, I believed that was enough. Yet during the lockdown, I realized that acceptance and understanding were not the same. I may have accepted my son's identity, yet my journals revealed that I had rarely asked about his fears, his relationships, his aspirations, or what it meant for him to grow up gay in a society that could be both accepting and judgmental. Like many Filipino families, ours had found it easier to express love than to talk openly about identity. I had mistaken silence for acceptance and acceptance for understanding.

This personal realization reflects a broader paradox within Filipino society. Public attitudes toward LGBTQ+ individuals have become increasingly accepting, yet meaningful conversations about sexuality and identity often remain difficult within families. Marquez et al. (2024) found that parental acceptance is a significant predictor of outness among Filipino queer young adults, while Ryan et al. (2010) demonstrated that family acceptance protects LGBTQ+ youth from adverse mental health outcomes. My experience suggests that acceptance, while essential, reaches its fullest meaning only when it is expressed through ongoing communication.

The lockdown gave my son and me the time we had never intentionally made for each other. Our conversations replaced our assumptions, and what used to be certainty was replaced by curiosity. What we taught was acceptance gradually became understanding – not because either of us changed who we were, but because we finally began to truly listen to one another.

By sharing this story, I hope to broaden the conversation about Filipino fatherhood. I learned that love is not expressed only through provision, protection, or even silent acceptance. During times of crisis, it is expressed by asking difficult questions, listening without defensiveness, and allowing one's child to become known on his own terms.

Autoethnography as healing and scholarship

Ellis (2004) argues that autoethnography blurs the boundary between research and therapy. This was true in my case. The process did not only generate data but also transformation. It revealed that communication is not a finished skill but a lifelong practice. Each question asked of my son was also a question asked of myself: What does it mean to be a father? How does one reconcile cultural scripts with lived realities? How does one move from silence to speech?

Reading the literature, I now understand our conversations during the lockdown not simply as moments of disclosure but as moments of pakikipag*kapwa*. The more I listened, asked questions, and entered my son's world without judgment, the less I related to him through preconceived roles and the more I encountered him as *kapwa*—a fellow human being whose experiences deserved to be understood on their own terms. In this sense, communication became more than the exchange of information; it became the means through which our shared humanity was rediscovered.
I also found myself recognizing many of the themes. Yet I also realized that none of these studies quite captured the question I kept returning to as a father. I had accepted my son's identity years earlier, but had I truly taken the time to know him? That realization became the point of departure for this study.

The lockdown served as a trigger for deeper reflection. It forced me to confront the assumptions I had long carried, to move from passive acceptance to active engagement. Literature on COVID-19 parenting underscores this dual dynamic – that crisis magnifies vulnerabilities but can also accelerate transformations in family relationships.

Implications for Filipino Families

The findings carry several implications for Filipino families navigating issues of gender and sexuality:

- Acceptance is not enough. Families must move from passive tolerance to active engagement. Asking, listening, and dialoguing are crucial.
- Fatherhood must be redefined. The *haligi ng tahanan* metaphor, while culturally resonant, must expand to include emotional openness and vulnerability.
- Crises can be opportunities. While the pandemic created immense suffering, it also opened space for families to renegotiate relationships. Lockdowns forced conversations that might otherwise have been delayed indefinitely.
- Stories matter. By sharing narratives of acceptance, Filipino families can challenge stereotypes and inspire others. Storytelling, both within families and in the public sphere, can normalize LGBTQ+ identities and reframe fatherhood in more inclusive ways.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic will long be remembered for disrupting our lives. But for me, one of its most enduring legacies is the transformation it sparked in my relationship with my only son. What began as a crisis became a path to rediscovery. Through the lockdown, I learned that fatherhood is never finished – it is a continuing journey, one that requires humility, openness, and the willingness to be vulnerable.

This autoethnography has traced that journey through five interrelated themes: knowing but not knowing, lockdown as catalyst, reframing expectations, new forms of intimacy, and a father's vulnerability. These five themes chart the movement from superficial acceptance toward deeper understanding. My story demonstrates that vulnerability is far from being weakness. It can be the foundation of intimacy. By admitting what I did not know, by asking questions without answers ready, I became a better father. In this sense, masculinity was redefined: not as unyielding authority but as open-hearted accompaniment.

In closing, I return to the realization that frames this entire study. I thought I already knew how to communicate. Decades of experience in journalism, public relations, and academe had convinced me of this. Yet raising a gay son in the time of lockdowns taught me otherwise. Communication is not a skill I mastered once and for all. Instead, it is a lifelong practice of listening, asking, and learning. It is, above all, a practice of love.

Through this study, I have come to believe that fatherhood is not about molding our sons into the men we imagined they would become. It is about walking beside them as they become the people they were meant to be. Acceptance is only the beginning. Understanding is the journey. And in that journey lies both the greatest gift a father can give and the greatest joy he can receive.

Like all qualitative research, this study is limited in scope. Its findings cannot claim generalizability. Instead, it offers transferability: readers may find resonances with their own experiences of fatherhood, family, or LGBTQ+ acceptance. Another limitation lies in subjectivity. Autoethnography embraces, rather than eliminates, subjectivity. My narrative is inevitably partial, shaped by memory, perspective, and emotional investment.

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