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# Locating *Pagkatao*: Self-Reflexivity in Philippine LGBTQI History-Writing

## Research Note

Kiel Ramos Suarez

### Abstract

At a time when a global pandemic has disrupted lives to a large extent across the globe, doing research has become ever more complex, challenging and uncertain. Such unexpected shifts in the dynamics of research, resulting in unpredictable consequences, have prompted the author to further reflect on her positionality as a researcher writing LGBTQI history. In this paper, the author joins scholars who propose self-reflexivity as both an analytical and ethical tool in understanding volatile research contexts. In gender and sexuality studies much has been written about the importance of self-reflexivity in understanding the impact of researchers' social and epistemic locations in knowledge production. The paper argues that self-reflexive practice is especially important in studying the histories of gender and sexual identities in a multiply colonised society such as the Philippines. The author reflects on her own identity and its continuing impact on her research process. Through a decolonial lens, she uses the Filipino psychological concept of *pagkatao* and unpacks its multi-layered meanings as selfhood, humanness and human dignity – three crucial elements in writing the history of identities.

**Keywords:** Philippines, research ethics, self-reflexivity, historiography, *pagkatao*, LGBTQI studies, COVID-19 pandemic

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## The importance of self-reflexivity – a brief literature overview

### Gender and sexuality studies

Donna Haraway's seminal essay, which asserts that knowledge is neither neutral nor objective but partial and situated, has shown how authors' subjective positions play a role in the research process (Haraway 1988). Self-reflexivity, then, is an approach that takes a critical look at the researcher's self to understand factors that impact knowledge production. A concept central to self-reflexivity is the researcher's social location, which refers to "the complex interactions between our gender, race/ethnicity, age, ability, sexuality and socio-economic class" (Scott-Dixon 2004: 32). Much has been said about self-reflexivity in feminist research, since power relations remain an important issue in feminist methodologies. Harding urges researchers "to take a critical look at how their social location comprises their conceptual schemes for inquiry, including which epistemologies, assumptions, theories and methods are used" (Harding 1986 as cited in Sykes 2014). Patricia Hill Collins reflects on what she calls "the outsider within" in her discussion on self-reflexivity in Black feminist thought (Collins 1986). Hesse-Biber and Leavy define self-reflexivity as "taking a critical look inward and reflecting on one's own lived reality and experiences", wherein researchers consider how their subjectivities as well as those of their interlocutors impact the research process (Hesse-Biber / Leavy 2007 as cited in Sykes 2014: 584).

Doing research entails confronting ethical challenges, given the problematic, violent histories that underpin the very concept of "research". Scholars of postcolonial/decolonial research have shown that the term "research" carries weight and can serve as a reminder of colonial violence and exploitation, especially for indigenous communities (Tuhiwai Smith 1999: 1). As Linda Tuhiwai Smith notes:

It is surely difficult to discuss research methodology and indigenous peoples together, in the same breath, without having an analysis of imperialism, without understanding the complex ways in which the pursuit of knowledge is deeply embedded in the multiple layers of imperial and colonial practices. (Tuhiwai Smith 1999: 2)

To understand the role researchers and interlocutors play in the complex web of power relations in knowledge production, several scholars have proposed self-reflexivity as a means to uphold ethical research practice (cf. Cruz 2015, von Unger 2021). In the Philippine context, Rosa Cordillera Castillo proposes feminist, embodied and epistemic reflexivity as an ethical practice when doing fieldwork in a politically violent setting in the Southern Philippines (Castillo 2015). Paul Michael Leonardo Atienza reflects on the ethical implications of studying Philippine queer sexualities, wherein he notes that "practicing an ethic

of honesty requires more than self-reflection” and that researchers “must attend to asymmetrical positions between themselves and their interlocutors that change over time” (Atienza 2018: 239).

Like feminist and post-/decolonial research, LGBTQI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex) research necessitates critical self-reflexivity. Ellen Lewin and William Leap reflect on “the growing need, of straight researchers as well as gay, to specify and understand their motivations, an insistence that anthropologists recognise how positionality affects processes by which they construct understandings of cultural phenomenon” (Lewin / Leap 1996: 22). Furthermore, Deborah Elliston and Adam Isaiah Green amplify the need for critical self-reflexivity in doing sexuality research, given the nature of shifting identities and positionalities (Elliston 2005, Green 2007). As Grace et al. note, “to engage in LGBTQ research is to embrace and question fluid identity positions and to be committed to openness. Researchers – both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ – have to develop high degrees of self-awareness, exploring their individual capacities to know and understand sex, sexual, and gender differences” (Grace et al. 2006: 340). I join Grace et al. in asserting that “most importantly, researchers need to be self-reflexive, linking knowledge and understanding gained to actions taken to give LGBTQ persons presence and place in education and other communities where they can be visible and proud, respected and valued” (ibid.).

## History-writing

As in gender and sexuality studies and post-/decolonial research, the discipline of history requires self-reflexive analyses. Several historians have highlighted the importance of self-reflexivity in deepening our understanding of historical research and history-writing. Self-reflexivity allows one to reflect upon the ways in which selfhoods and identities influence historians’ choice of topics, methods and approaches. Jordanova advocates for what she refers to as “self-aware history” in place of “unbiased history” (Jordanova 2000: 5). Similarly, Ann McGrath posits that historians’ personal experiences deeply inform their engagement with the past:

Historians’ journeys into the past both bring them away from and towards their self. Each project presents opportunities to struggle not only with distant others, but with old and new selves in a process of recreation. (McGrath 2009: 10)

In a blog post entitled “Does My Reflexivity Embarrass You?”, Lucy Robinson calls for the introspection of the self in history-writing:

As a historian of identity I know that the self is a central part of my work, of all of our work. But I want to suggest that we should accord the role of the self, and the implications of that, the same careful thought as we do with the rest of our work. It is not enough to state our personal engagement, we need to think about what it means. (Robinson 2015)

In Philippine historiography, Teodoro A. Agoncillo, as early as 1978, argued against “objective history” and highlighted the relevance of the historian’s subjectivity and humanness in re-creating the past, since the historian “as man or woman cannot run away from himself/herself”:

We as human beings have feelings, emotions, prejudices, loves, and jealousies which play a part in our writing, whether this be a mere letter, essay, or an extended historical work. It is my belief that an objective historian is unhuman and, therefore, dull and impossible to deal with. I do not know of any such unhuman historian. (Agoncillo 1978)

Historians of sexuality have also called for a more self-reflexive historical research process. Bri McKenzie proposes self-reflexivity as an important practice in researching and teaching Western Australian queer history (McKenzie 2020). In his work on sexuality and Spanish colonialism, Zeb Tortorici warns historians of sexuality of what he calls “misinscription and voyeurism” in encountering sources that reveal sexual acts and violent deaths (Tortorici 2018). In his archival encounter with a 1604 sodomy trial in colonial New Spain, he notes:

Though I was reading about the torture and eventual killing of fellow human beings – individuals for whom I felt a certain affinity – my first reaction was one of exhilaration. I was ecstatic – a feeling that I can barely describe even now. I had my first significant “archival find” in the history of sexuality. (Tortorici 2018: 78)

To which he poses the question: “Did my own affective reactions to archived subjects and their stories play into a certain historical objectification?” He further notes:

This was an archival encounter, that, unsurprisingly, confirmed weighty differences (of temporality, identity, situation and experience) between the historical subjects that I was researching and myself. Their bodies and desires were profoundly misinscribed, as we have seen – through language, gender, colonialism, and the trappings of representation – in the historical record but also through my own imagined identification with, and use of, them in the writing of this book. (ibid.)

Tortorici admits that even with his best intentions as a historian and queer studies scholar, he too was “complicit in the processes that misinscribe and misrepresent” (ibid.: 79). To write about the desires of a historical other and “to mold archival narratives about that person into ‘history,’” according to Tortorici, is “to always partly misinscribe.” He concludes:

There are no easy answers, yet I hope that asking self-reflexive questions and analyzing the content of archival documents in conjunction with our own affective responses (and attractions) opens up imaginative possibilities for practicing the history of sexuality. (ibid.: 80)

Self-reflexivity is important in studying history and in analysing sources as they form part of the research process. Self-reflexive historical accounts challenge the myth of the detached, neutral, objective, unfeeling and “unhuman historian”. As I seek to show in the following, self-reflexivity is imperative in engaging

with LGBTQI history research, especially in a multiply colonised setting such as the Philippines.

## Colonial archives and the COVID-19 pandemic

The archives remain a place where scholars mine data for different disciplines, not only for history but also gender and sexuality studies (Arondekar 2009: 1). Following Ann Laura Stoler's call to move from the "archive-as-source" approach to one that regards the "archive-as-subject" (Stoler 2002), scholars have started to understand the archive not as a neutral repository of documents, but as a space symbolic of institutional power. Writing the history of a multiply colonised society such as the Philippines necessitates visits to archival centres. Many of the archival sources pertinent to the Philippine history of the 16th to 20th centuries are housed in buildings located in former colonial powers, specifically in Spain and the United States (Diaz-Trechuelo 1969, Beredo 2013). Indeed, archival histories are not separated from histories of colonialism and imperialism. As Cheryl Beredo has argued, the establishment of archives plays a crucial role in the implementation of the colonial agenda (Beredo 2013).

I began my PhD programme in 2019 and proposed a doctoral thesis on the history of the medicalisation of diverse genders and sexualities in the Philippines during the US colonial period (1901–1946). This was an attempt to expand my master's thesis on the same topic (Suarez 2017). I chose this topic because it was during the US colonial period that medicalisation became prominent, as the US colonial government institutionalised public health and colonial psychiatry (Anderson 2006, Bautista / Planta 2009). By March 2020, I was prepared to fly to the United States to visit selected archives and libraries such as the Library of Congress and the US National Archives, among others. However, the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic had already begun at that time. One week before my trip, the US government banned all flights from the European Union, thus initiating more than a year of uncertainty and anxiety over the future of my doctoral project. Doing research during the COVID-19 pandemic presented a context that can be described as volatile, unpredictable and constraining, adding another layer of ethical, epistemic and methodological challenges that affected the flow and direction of my doctoral project.

With death, sickness, unemployment, loved ones at risk and great losses all around, I considered the opportunity to pursue research a huge privilege. I was still expected to continue with the PhD programme despite all the uncertainties and volatilities caused by the pandemic. I still wanted to write about the history of genders and sexualities in the Philippines but travel to the United States at that time did not seem feasible. After giving it much thought and with the support

and guidance of my PhD supervisors, I changed the time period of my study, from the US colonial period (1901–1946) to the Spanish colonial period (1565–1898). This decision was based on two primary reasons. Firstly, compared to the US colonial era, there is more existing literature on gender and sexual diversity in the Spanish colonial Philippines, and there are more known primary sources.<sup>1</sup> At a time of extreme uncertainty, I deemed it best to work with what was already known and potentially accessible. Secondly, going to Spain to do archival work proved to be a more feasible endeavour, since Spain is closer geographically to Sweden, where I was living, and I did not have to apply for an additional travel document.

Reframing my project from one colonial regime to another proved to be quite a challenge. Aside from having to define a new set of research questions, I struggled with my limited knowledge of the Spanish language and colonial palaeography. Even when I thought that things were going as planned, I faced an additional travel barrier. The processing of my Swedish residence permit took longer than expected, during which time I was unable to leave Swedish territory for six months. This added another layer of anxiety and uncertainty. Thankfully, a number of sources have been digitised and made available online. I was also able to obtain important books through the support of the Linnaeus University Library. I worked with the available materials while waiting for the release of my travel document.

Such an experience shows how a scholar who holds a Philippine passport can face multiple barriers to archival access and historical research (linguistic, bureaucratic, and mobility barriers; and for many, institutional funding). These barriers were further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. In January 2022, I was finally able to go to Seville and conduct a two-week archival visit to the Archivo General de Indias (“General Archives of the Indies”). The Archivo General de Indias was established in the 18th century and currently houses valuable archival sources on the history of Spanish colonialism in Asia and the Americas. After more than a year of delay, the archival visit finally allowed me to move forward with my thesis-writing journey.

Such uncertainties and circumstances brought about by the pandemic, coupled with the complexities of doing LGBTQI history-writing in a multiply colonised context, prompted me to think further about my own positionality as a researcher. To understand how volatility, vulnerability and unpredictability impact research, I came to reflect more deeply on my own identity and its influence on my research process.

1 Cf. Garcia 1996, Brewer 2004, Quintos 2013, Reyes 2012, Tortorici 2018, Marquez 2021.



## Locating *pagkatao* in history-writing

In my discussion of self-reflexive historical research, I explore the use of the Tagalog/Filipino concept of *pagkatao*. In the 1960s, a movement began in the social sciences that sought to de-centre Euro/Anglo-American theories and methodologies in Philippine academia. *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* (“Filipino Psychology”), pioneered by psychologist Virgilio G. Enriquez, is an example of such an endeavour. *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* refers to “the psychology born out of the experience, thought and orientation of the Filipinos, based on the full use of Filipino culture and language” (Pe-Pua / Protacio-Marcelino 2000). This approach is “one of ‘indigenization from within’ whereby the theoretical framework and methodology emerge from the experiences of the people from the indigenous culture.” As Rogelia Pe-Pua and Elizabeth Protacio-Marcelino (2000: 53) argue, *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* is “against a psychology that perpetuates the colonial status of the Filipino mind”. *Pagkatao* is one of its central concepts.

What is *pagkatao*? The term *pagkatao*, in my understanding, is multi-layered. In English, the words “selfhood”, “humanity”, “personhood”, “character”, “being” and “identity” are central in Anglo-centric psychology. In Filipino, there is one word that encapsulates all those concepts – *pagkatao*. *Pagkatao* is derived from the root word *tao* which means “person / human”. The affix *pagka-* used in this context signifies the essence or nature of the root. It is similar to the English suffixes “-ness” as in “happiness” and “-ship” in “relationship”. In this sense, the hyphenated *pagka-tao* literally means “the essence of being a person” or put simply, “humanness”. Moreover, *pagkatao* can also mean “human dignity”, as e.g. in *Niyurakan ang aking pagkatao* (“My dignity was trampled upon.”) In my view, *pagkatao* carries the history of the self. One’s *pagkatao* is moulded, forged and transformed through time, space and experience.

When I refer to *pagkatao*, I refer to mainly three things: first, I use *pagkatao* in the meaning of “selfhood” and “identity” to locate myself in the research process. The notion of identity is essential in LGBTQI studies and identifying as an LGBTQI researcher lies at the forefront of my work. Second, I consider *pagkatao* as “humanness” helpful in the attempt to illustrate the vulnerability of doing (historical) research. Lastly, I interpret *pagkatao* as “human dignity” – a central concept in understanding gender and sexuality, bearing in mind the historical dehumanisation and marginalisation of persons with diverse genders and sexualities. By introducing the concept of *pagkatao*, I especially aim to 1) use a concept in my native tongue to capture the linguistic nuances of my experience; 2) attempt to de-centre Anglo-centric discourses of selfhood and self-reflexivity; and 3) follow a concept of *Sikolohiyang Pilipino* as a decolonial strategy.



As I attempt to show below, using *pagkatao* as a lens – as selfhood/identity, humanness and human dignity – renders historical research and queer studies deeply personal. My reflection on *pagkatao* and the nature of shifting researcher identities and positionalities in volatile research contexts resonates with what previous scholars have argued (cf. Elliston 2005, Green 2007, Grace et al. 2006) on the need for critical self-reflexivity among LGBTQI scholars working on gender and sexuality in postcolonial settings.

## Reflections on my *pagkatao* and LGBTQI history-writing

The Philippines, home to more than 7,000 islands in Southeast Asia, has a long history of multiple colonialisms. The country was colonised by Spain (1565–1898) and the United States (1901–1946) and occupied by Japan (1942–1945). Today, legacies of these colonial regimes continue to impact the lives of Filipinos and indigenous communities both in the archipelago and in the diaspora. Being part of the LGBTQI community in the Philippines exposes one to various forms of homophobia, transphobia, discrimination and micro aggression, as well as barriers to resources and opportunities. As a kid growing up in Metro Manila, I was often called *tibo* and *tomboy*, local Filipino terms for females assigned-at-birth who typically exhibit masculine behaviour and presentation.

I was born to a middle-class Filipino family, raised in a Catholic household, and went to all-girls schools for my primary and secondary education. My journey to LGBTQI history-writing began as an undergraduate student at the University of the Philippines-Diliman. In 2013, I took a course on Philippine historiography where I learned more about the trends in Philippine history-writing. I became acquainted with the works of Teodoro Agoncillo, one of the historians who advanced the Philippine point of view in understanding Philippine history (Agoncillo / Alfonso 1969, Agoncillo 2017). I also learned more about *Pantayong Pananaw* (PP) which roughly translates to “from-us-for-us perspective”, a critique of Euro/Anglo-American centrism in Philippine history (Salazar / Guillermo 2000, Veneracion 1997). *Pantayong Pananaw* was part of the “indigenisation movement” in the Philippine social sciences, which advocated for the use of native languages in local understandings of history, culture and society. Moreover, I learned about historical scholarship focusing on “people’s history”, “history from below” and the “history of the inarticulate” (Constantino / Constantino 1975, Ileteo 1979, Scott 1982). These scholarly contributions influenced my understanding of marginal histories and histories of marginalisation and of the role historians play in shaping such historiographies. In the same year, I took the course “History of Women in the Philippines”, in which I learned about the so-called “invisibility” of women in history-writing

and the need to challenge the dominant, male-centric Philippine historiography. I remember looking at the course syllabus thinking that while women were highlighted as important historical actors, the content was still very much heteronormative. Nothing was said about the history of non-normative genders and sexualities in the Philippines. For that course, I wrote a paper on “lesbian invisibility” in Philippine literature, which prompted me to embark on a historical project on pioneer lesbian organisations in the Philippines for my bachelor’s thesis (Suarez 2014). At that time, I was also grappling with, and eventually coming to terms with, my *pagkatao* – my gender non-conformity and queer sexuality.

Reading more and writing about LGBTIQI history in the Philippines enabled me to understand my *pagkatao* better, as well as my relationships with my family, partner and peers. I came across J. Neil Garcia’s seminal work, *Philippine Gay Culture*, and Roselle Pineda’s *Bridging Gaps, Making a Struggle* (Garcia 1996, Pineda 2008) which formed the scholarly basis of my later research. Using oral history methodology, I collected narratives of the movement from pioneering lesbian activists from different parts of the archipelago. My conversations with these activists prompted me to pursue graduate studies focusing specifically on LGBTIQI history in the Philippines. “*Ituloy mo yan, maganda at mahalaga ang paksang ‘yan*” (“Continue working on that, it’s a good and important topic”), one interlocutor said. During that time, I aspired to go abroad for graduate training, as there was little institutional support in universities in the Philippines for LGBTIQI history-writing. In many ways, pursuing gender and sexuality studies and LGBTIQI history-writing has significantly helped in my coming-out process, and this has had a direct, personal bearing on my research.

A year after finishing college, in 2015, I was fortunate to receive a generous scholarship to study abroad and pursue a master’s degree in Women’s and Gender History at the Central European University and the University of Vienna. I learned more about the foundations of feminist, gender and queer studies, explored new spaces and exposed myself to new ideas. I met scholars who did similar work on gender and sexuality studies in various contexts, and I pursued my interests in LGBTIQI history as I wrote my master’s thesis on the medicalisation of “homosexuality” in the Philippines in the post-Independence era (Suarez 2017). At the time I was writing my thesis in 2017, my home university, the Central European University, was still located in Budapest, Hungary. That year was momentous in the history of the university, since in that year the Hungarian government passed a bill that threatened the existence of the university and banned the teaching of gender studies (BBC News 2017). I joined thousands of people to protest this bill and to defend academic freedom. I felt excited to be present in such a pivotal moment in the history of Budapest and the Central European University.

In the autumn of 2019, I moved to Sweden to continue my studies with a PhD thesis. Moving to Sweden was more than an education-related decision for me. Like many overseas Filipino workers, I wanted to relocate abroad, to “seek greener pastures”, to fend for myself and my family, and to escape the threat and possibilities of poverty. Migration, for me, was a way to increase my mobility, whether geographically, economically or socially. To live, study and work in Sweden is a huge privilege in many ways and on various levels. Being a migrant located in Sweden has and will continue to impact my doctoral research process.

## Conclusion

In a context such as the Philippines, where histories of multiple colonisation have had lasting impacts on the struggle for human rights and LGBTQI rights, critical research ethics remain highly crucial and relevant. This research note is an attempt to shed light on the multi-layered issues that affect researchers who work on LGBTQI history-writing in the Philippines in the midst of an ongoing global pandemic. In the so-called pre-COVID-19 pandemic times, barriers to colonial archival access (location, mobility, language proficiency, institutional funding, among others) unfortunately placed scholars from the Global South at a disadvantage. Researching on queerness in these archives, moreover, adds another layer of complexity due to matters concerning sexual orientation, gender identity and expression. These long-standing issues have become accentuated due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Doing research during a global pandemic reveals ethical, epistemic and methodological challenges faced by researchers working on volatile and unpredictable contexts.

As a means to make sense of these complex issues, I have attempted to use self-reflexivity as a necessary analytical and ethical practice in historical research. Through my use of the Filipino concept of *pagkatao*, I have shown how my own *pagkatao* as an LGBTQI-identifying researcher from the Philippines profoundly and complexly influences my research process at all levels. I argue that the concept *pagkatao* aptly captures the essence of one’s identity, humanness and human dignity in doing LGBTQI history-writing.

As I reflect on my own agency in navigating these uncertain times, I am reminded of the limits and (im)possibilities of doing research. There exist many variables outside of the researcher’s control which impact the form, content and outcome of research. Delays, frustrations, barriers and anxieties exist and persist. Every research project grows and expands, but also diminishes and disintegrates in other ways. Self-reflexivity provides researchers the space to consider how their social, epistemic, economic and geographical locations pro-

foundly shape the research process. Moreover, the research itself changes the researcher, too, in myriad, meaningful and lasting ways. In Ann McGrath's words, "each project presents opportunities to struggle not only with distant others, but with old and new selves in a process of recreation" (McGrath 2009: 10).

Today, Philippine historiography remains dominantly heteronormative, binary and male-centric. While I hope to contribute to decentring heteronormative historiography, I agree with Shah that we do not need a history to justify our queerness and existence. LGBTQI people exist today, and "on that alone we demand acknowledgement and acceptance" (Shah 1993 as cited in Arondekar 2009).

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