

UNREQUITED LOVE AMONG YOUNG FILIPINO GAY MEN: SUBJECTIVE EXPERIENCES OF UNRECIPROCATED LOVERS

Eric Julian Manalastas

Abstract

In this exploratory study, I investigated lived experiences of unrequited love among young Filipino gay men in order to explore unrequited love beyond its heteronormative forms. Analysis of qualitative accounts from 11 out gay men who participated in focus groups indicated that unrequited love was a highly meaningful subjective experience involving a spectrum of negative affect, uncertainty, and self-esteem lowering. Non-reciprocity was often attributed to a lack of matching on dimensions like availability, sexual orientation, relationship goals, and personality. Non-homophobic social support was important in the reduction of uncertainty and management of distress, in addition to other strategies for coping with rejection and non-formation of the desired love relationship.

Keywords: *Unrequited love, Gay men, Romantic relationships, Non-reciprocity*

*"I love you, boy, if you only knew
Naiinis na ako sa 'yo
Sobrang manhid ka at 'di mo napapansin"*

- Anton Diva, "Boy"

Introduction

Close relationships—from beginning attraction to reciprocity, from growing interdependence to relational maintenance—are ubiquitous psychological experiences of life. In particular, romantic love is a central, compelling experience within the human condition (Hendrick & Hendrick, 2002). Romantic love and its pursuit are some of the more powerful ways of fulfilling the human universal need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). As such, the interdisciplinary study of close relationships has been organized around the processes involved in the development of such relations, as well as the structures and outcomes of interpersonal relationships like friendship and love.

In this paper, I focus on a particular phenomenon related to attraction and falling in love and to the phase in relationship life-cycles that researchers term ‘initial formation’: the experience of *unrequited love*. Unrequited love is the experience of one person becoming romantically attracted to another who does not return the same attraction (Aron, Aron & Allen, 1998; Baumeister & Wotman, 1992; Baumeister, Wotman & Stillwell, 1993).

How is unrequited love experienced by young Filipino gay men?

The goal of this exploratory qualitative study was to identify a number of salient aspects of the subjective experience of love that is unreciprocated, from the perspective of young Filipino gay men. In particular, my aim was to explore the following: (1) affective dimensions of unrequited love – the content, valence, and intensity of emotions; (2) cognitive aspects of unrequited love (including uncertainty, scriptlessness, and attributions for non-reciprocity); (3) behaviors and actions taken during the course of the unreciprocated attraction; (4) unrequited love in social context (including the role of young gay men’s social networks in the development of the attractions); (5) dealing with unrequited love and its psychological effects on one’s well-being. By framing unrequited love within these social psychological parameters (particularly those that have been termed *cognitive and emotional processes in relationships* by Collins, Welsh, and Furman in 2009), I considered how sexual minority youth like young Filipino gay men negotiate the ups and downs of this subjective romantic experience in the context of Filipino sexual culture.

Method. Eleven Filipino gay men, 18 to 24 years of age, all students from diverse academic majors (including political science, communication, psychology, philosophy, and biology) in a public university in Metro Manila, participated in two focus group discussions that centered on personal accounts and experiences of unrequited love. Participants had diverse gender expressions (from masculine to feminine in dress and appearance), and all self-identified as gay. All participants were volunteers who were identified using personal and academic networks and who had at least one experience of being an unrequited lover. I chose to focus on a youth age group, because the literature on attraction and close relationships suggests that falling in love, dating, and romantic relationships are particularly vivid and highly meaningful subjective experiences in adolescence and young adulthood, especially among sexual-minority youth, many of whom first begin to confront and pursue their same-sex attractions during these stages (Russell & Consolacion, 2003; Savin-Williams, 1996).

I facilitated the discussions using a semi-structured topic guide that explored the following points: (1) familiarity and recognition of the experience

of unrequited love; (2) personal accounts of unrequited love; (3) emotions and thoughts experienced; (4) social aspects of the experience, (4) dealing with unrequited love; and (5) overall views about attraction and love, especially in Filipino gay culture. Other topics not included in the original guide were also discussed, including the “dark side” of unrequited love and lessons learned in the course of falling in love with another man who failed to return the same feelings.

Discussions lasted over two hours each, with a lively exchange of ideas, humorous stories, jokes, and questions, and were recorded with the full consent of participants. I conducted qualitative data analysis based on transcripts of the focus group discussions, guided by the study’s main framework, and with an openness to new themes that became salient in our discussions.

Caveats. A number of limitations should be noted in the current study. First, the use of a small, non-probability sample of young Filipino gay men who are out and university-based sets constraints on the generalizability of the findings. It is not known, for example, how closeted gay youth (or same-sex attracted youth who do not self-identify as gay) may experience unrequited love. (This was a point brought up in one focus group, where participants speculated that perhaps the distress of unrequited love would be exacerbated by not being open about one’s being gay to others, as this would make social support-seeking particularly difficult.) Future research would do well to expand the diversity of backgrounds and voices of unrequited gay lovers by exploring narratives among non-identifying youth, especially those outside the university setting.

Second, this analysis is focused specifically on the experiences of young Filipino gay men. Falling in love is not an experience limited only to youth (Aron et al., 2008), and certainly how older gay men develop, make sense of, and act on their attractions, including the unreciprocated ones, would provide more insight on this universal experience. Likewise, the unrequited love experiences of Filipino lesbian women would be an analytically interesting topic of exploration, particularly because of the heavily gendered meanings ascribed to falling in love and to romantic relationships in general (Rose, 2000). More systematic analysis using direct comparisons among gay, lesbian, and heterosexual modes will provide the best evidence for the similarities and differences in unrequited feelings toward a more complete understanding of the all too human experience of romantic love that is given, but is somehow unreturned.

Before discussing the results of the study, an overview of social psychological aspects of unrequited love and of gay relationships is first presented.

Social Psychological Aspects of Unrequited Love

Cross-sectional and retrospective research has shown that, for men and women, experiences of romantic love that is unreciprocated are common, cutting across age, class, and sexual orientation (Hill, Blakemore & Drumm, 1997; Wang & Nguyen, 1995). A number of theorists such as the humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers (1992) have posited that being *bestowed* unconditional love and acceptance is a necessary ingredient for a person's well-being and development. In contrast, others have argued that it is not receiving love but the *giving* of love that should be championed and indeed mastered, a classic position most eloquently articulated by the neo-analytic psychologist Erich Fromm (1956). Because of the non-reciprocity that defines it, unrequited love offers a naturally occurring instance where the two processes of giving of love ("loving") and receiving of love ("being loved") are disentangled and can be investigated analytically. In addition to its analytic significance, research into unrequited love can be taken as a starting point toward applications and interventions, especially in the area of counseling and mental health. Earlier research on unrequited love and other related relationship experiences among college students has shown that it is significantly related to depression, low self-worth, and other negative emotions that affect other life-domains like studies and impact upon overall well-being (Evans & Augelli, 1996; Hill et al., 1997). Taken to extremes, unrequited love has also been implicated in behaviors such as stalking and harassment (Ogilvie, 2000).

Viewed as a form of directed social interaction, we can refer to the two participants in this social interaction as the *lover* (the person who feels the romantic attraction that is unreciprocated) and the *target* (the object of the lover's desire and attraction). The first social psychological studies on unrequited love, conducted by Roy Baumeister and Sara Wotman in 1992, explored the perspectives of both lovers and targets using interdependence theory (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978). Unrequited love is conceptualized as a bilaterally distressing social phenomenon that is marked by emotional interdependence and mutual incomprehension. According to interdependence theory, a person's outcomes in a close relationship are a function of both the actions of the self and the actions of the other (Rusbult & Arriaga, 2000). Unrequited love – even though it is not the prototypic romantic relationship because of the absence of emotional reciprocity – represents nonetheless an instance where both individuals' outcomes are interdependent: the target's responses being dependent on the advances of the lover, and the lover's state on the favorable or unfavorable responses of the target. This suggests that an understanding of the outcomes and experiences of unrequited lovers requires an investigation of how the target responds to the attraction, which may include actions like rejection and avoidance.

Another approach to unrequited love is based on a self-expansion model of attraction and close relationships (developed by Aron et al., 1998). This model assumes that people seek to expand the self by attempting to include others through the establishment of close relationships. In this approach, unrequited love is a “motivational paradox” inasmuch as loving an other in the face of non-reciprocity seems to depart from standard predictions of reinforcement theories (Aron & Aron, 2000). That is, the absence of reciprocity of one’s affection and desire should, from a reinforcement perspective, discourage and weaken this affection. However, unrequited lovers can and do persist, even in the face of zero returns; this is a finding inconsistent with the principle of behavioral reinforcement.¹

Pathways to Unrequited Love. One possible starting point of unrequited love, according to Baumeister and colleagues (1993), is the phenomenon of ‘assortative mating’. According to the matching hypothesis, even though we generally prefer physically attractive partners, we tend to end up with those who are roughly equivalent to our own level of attractiveness and desirability (Kalick & Hamilton, 1986). Unrequited love may then involve a case in which the unrequited lover is perceived as less desirable by the target – or conversely, that the target is more attractive and desirable to be matched to the unrequited lover. In other words, unrequited love is an instance of “falling upward”. A non-match is ground for the non-reciprocation of the attraction.

I argue that we may expand the scope of non-matching to other attributes beyond physical attractiveness, as it has been originally specified in the theory. Dissimilarity on a number of dimensions may lead to the non-reciprocity, for example, specific differences in age, class, and sexual orientation. Targets who are young and prefer to associate and form bonds with other young people might be less likely to share interests with a much older potential lover. Those from a higher socioeconomic status may find social barriers, such as discouragement and dissuasion by family and friends, to pursuing relationships with less affluent lovers. Finally, most central to this paper, lovers may find themselves in situations where their targets are of the correct gender but of the “wrong” sexual orientation – as in the hypothesized case of gay men falling in love with heterosexual men, who would not return such feelings.

Another possible path to unrequited love is suggested by Sternberg’s (1986) Triangular Theory of Love, which argues that loving relationships are the result of a combination of three factors, namely *passion* (sexual and physical attraction), *intimacy* (closeness and interdependence), and *commitment* (the decision to maintain relational ties over time). Unrequited love may be the case of a relationship that begins with one component, for example, intimacy only (a

relationship which Sternberg refers to as “friendship”). One of the friends develops an additional component (for example, passion) while the other fails to do so. In this sense, unrequited love is a case of a would-be romantic relationship that failed to take hold. This model suggests that unrequited love is a case of incongruence in how relational dynamics developed – one man who begins to feel passion and intimacy for another who only returns passion or intimacy, but not both. Indeed, this trope is evident in popular representations of unrequited love among Filipino gay men, who are often depicted as emotion-filled individuals pining away for other men who only wish friendship or even other men interested only in casual sex (Garcia & Remoto, 1994).

Phenomenology of Unrequited Love: Uncertainty and Scriptlessness.

Communication scholars have long argued that uncertainty and its reduction are crucial in the development of close relationships (Berger, 1988). Uncertainty about the other as well as uncertainty about the future of a relationship are said to be associated with the intense emotions of romance. As individuals obtain more information about each other and become more predictable and explainable, levels of emotion in the relationship decline and romance may become more of a memory, leading to a more companionate rather than passionate interpersonal climate.

Individuals attempt to reduce levels of uncertainty in relationships by engaging in various information-generating strategies, as well as by conscious and effortful cognitive activity (Surra & Bonham, 1991). During the period of relationship formation, uncertainty levels are particularly high. This motivates people to engage in attributional processing to explain why they (both self and other) are behaving the way they do and why relationship-relevant events are happening – or in the case of unrequited love, why events are not happening. Because unrequited love represents an early stage of a relationship (which has not and does not appear to be materializing), we expect that uncertainty levels will be high, that unrequited lovers will attempt to reduce this uncertainty, and that the intensity of their affect will be related to uncertainty.

In addition, individuals in the context of attraction and close relationships possess ideas of what they believe typically happens in specific situations like a date, a breakup, or courtship. These cognitive representations, called *scripts*, are used to organize our interpersonal worlds and to guide actions (Rose, 1996). Script theory appears useful in the analysis of unrequited love, particularly when examining the experience of targets who have been shown to report greater levels of scriptlessness as they are at the receiving end of unwanted attraction (Baumeister & Wotman, 1992). On the other hand, unrequited lovers may be guided by at least two scripts: the aspiring lover script (during the initial attraction)

and the broken-hearted victim script (in the face of non-reciprocity). In line with the uncertainty approach, greater distress may be experienced when scripts are fuzzy or when one is about to shift from the first script to the other. Having scripts for unrequited love is argued to be one of the few advantages that lovers have over targets, since cultural representations of the “plight” of unrequited lovers are more widely available, like in popular music such as “torch songs” studied by Scheff (2001).

The Call of LGBT Psychology. Cultural scripts for interpersonal events such as courtship and marriage typically, often exclusively, involve roles gendered for a man and a woman. Thus, these representations are heteronormative in nature (Kurdek, 2005; Rose, 1996). Indeed, social psychological research exploring the nature of unrequited love, of loving versus being loved, has focused exclusively on heterosexual unrequited love, with no analysis of same-sex love. These studies have included analysis of autobiographical accounts of unreciprocated romantic attraction made by heterosexual women and men for each other (Baumeister & Wotman, 1992; Baumeister et al., 1993) and structured questionnaire-based surveys with heterosexual respondents, where lesbian and gay participants are routinely excluded from the analysis (e.g., Aron et al., 1998; Hill et al., 1997). By conceptualizing human experiences like close relationships in purely heterosexual terms, such psychological research reflects and reaffirms cultural biases and prejudices surrounding sexuality and sexual orientation (Herek et al., 1991).

Psychologists have underscored the political and empirical importance of recognizing, in public and through research, the experiences of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender individuals in the realm of attraction and close relationships (Evans & D’Augelli, 1996; Peplau, Viniegas & Campbell, 1996; Savin-Williams, 1996). Research stemming from this perspective called *LGBT psychology* (Kitzinger et al., 1998) offers the opportunity to test existing social psychological models, many of which were originally developed to account for opposite-sex relationships and may be implicitly or explicitly heterosexist (Rose, 2000).

Examination of the dynamics of attraction, including unrequited love, between men, in particular, offers an interesting perspective on gender and sexuality that may not necessarily be evident in heterosexual interaction. For instance, research into men and masculinities has pointed to widespread social norms that discourage overt displays of male-male affection among friends and even kin (Morman & Floyd, 1998). This social regulation of male intimacy serves to uphold a form of dominant masculinity, one that is based on internal relations of distance and low warmth/expressiveness. This may have

implications for how male lovers would manage and communicate attraction to their fellow male targets, if they even do intentionally.

Likewise, anecdotal reports and previous investigations of unrequited love have also hinted at the possibility of individuals falling in love with targets of the incongruent sexual orientation. An example would be heterosexual women who become romantically attracted to a man who turns out to be gay (Baumeister & Wotman, 1992). If we expect that many Filipino men are heterosexual (i.e., primarily or exclusively attracted to women, not to other men), then it may not be impossible for some Filipino gay men to develop attractions toward “wrong” targets (i.e., toward non-gay men who, by definition, do not reciprocate this desire). Indeed, one salient – if stereotypical – theme in Filipino gay culture is the irony and drama of falling in love with a heterosexual man (Garcia & Remoto, 1994), though there is little available data to show how truly common this experience is.

Finally, because attraction, love, and close relationships are always situated within a larger sexual culture, an analysis that is mindful of dominant sexual ideologies is important. Given prevailing heterosexist norms in Filipino sexual culture that privilege heterosexual forms of relating while denigrating same-sex desires and relations (e.g., Manalastas & del Pilar, 2005; Tan, Ujano-Batangan, & Española, 2001; Gastardo-Conaco, Jimenez, & Billedo, 2003), unrequited love among Filipino gay men may bear with it the lower-status (or even stigmatized) value placed on Filipino gay sexuality in general. This devaluation may be associated with the invisibility of such narratives of same-sex desire and love in both popular and academic discourses. Compared to heterosexuality, much is still unknown about the dynamics of same-sex relationships (Kurdek, 2005), and pervasive negative social stereotypes, such as the unhappy and unlucky-in-love gay man and the dysfunctional gay couple, persist (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). Cultural contexts of anti-gay bias have even been shown to facilitate isolation, anxiety, depression, and other poor mental health outcomes among youth who discover and experience same-sex attractions, particularly those who do not get to enjoy the protective factors associated with enjoying such intimacy in reciprocated same-sex relationships (Russell & Consolacion, 2003).

Given these issues, I argue that incorporating sexual orientation into research on psychological phenomena such as unrequited love, as in the case of the approach of LGBT psychology, provides us with a more complex, nuanced view of this experience beyond its male-female forms.

Assimilationist versus Separatist Views of Gay Desire, Love, and Relationships. When sexual orientation is made a central variable in the social

psychological analysis of desire, love, and close relationships, the question of similarity and difference becomes salient (Patterson, 2006). That is, are the relational processes – e.g., courtship, falling in love, sexual satisfaction, commitment, and breakups – among gay men the same as those for everyone else’s? Or are gay desires, affectional bonds, and relationships completely distinct from the documented heterosexual modes, requiring a specific social psychology of gay relationships?

One perspective, the *assimilationist* view, argues that same-sex couples are similar to heterosexual couples and indeed should be treated no differently. Research following an assimilationist approach seeks to underscore the common processes that underlie all forms of love, desire, and relationships, whether they are between a woman and a man, between two men, or between two women. Another perspective, the *separatist* view, focuses on the particular aspects of lesbian, gay, and bisexual attraction and relationships that make them distinct from heterosexual forms. Studies guided by this approach, often favored by researchers highly critical of heteronormativity and indeed heterosexuality, have emphasized such features such as non-monogamy among gay men, division of labor in lesbian couples, the centrality of sex in male-male intimacy, and others.

These two opposing perspectives have both been found to have a certain degree of validity and empirical support (Patterson, 2006). Many similarities have been documented in studies comparing heterosexual, lesbian, and gay couples, including a common desire for intimacy, valuation of affection and shared interests, relationship satisfaction levels, and factors that affect commitment and relationship quality (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). At the same time, distinctive features have been noted and explored in the experiences of same-sex attraction and love, such as anti-gay stressors (e.g., homophobic rejection of the relationship by family, public harassment, and vulnerability to hate crimes), complex boundaries between friendship and sexual relationships (e.g., gay men remaining close friends with their ex-partners), and flux in sexual identity (e.g., same-sex attractions as psychological prompts for gay identity development). Attraction and romantic relationships between men thus possess both similarities and differences with heterosexual bonds, and the experience of unrequited gay love is hypothesized to be no exception.

Findings of the Study

Unrequited love was an all too well-known experience to the participants in the focus group discussions, many of whom reported having been in love more than once with another man who did not reciprocate the attraction. The highest number of unrequited love experiences among the young gay men was

more than ten. Familiarity with popular culture representations of the unrequited love experience was apparent, with participants naming a number of foreign and local films such as *My Best Friend's Wedding*, *The Object of My Affection*, and *Chasing Amy* (all Hollywood films that depict, interestingly, heterosexual unrequited love), and songs such as “Insensitive” by Canadian singer Jann Arden, “Waiting In Vain” by British recording artist Annie Lennox, and “Basang-Basa Sa Ulan” by the Filipino pop-rock band Aegis. No cultural representations of unrequited love between men were cited by participants, who could only reference heteronormative models of unrequited attraction.

Experiences of love in the face of non-reciprocity lasted months to even years in some cases. These subjective experiences were said to be very powerful, with one participant even remarking that it “consumed” him for a good part of his life. Unreturned romantic feelings were directed to various other men representing a range of prior relationships to the lovers. Targets were classmates, schoolmates, chatmates over the Internet, best friends, ‘fuck buddies’ (regular sexual partners with otherwise no other intimacy or commitment ties) and casual acquaintances whom they subsequently fell in love with.

After unrequited love, targets either remained friends with the possibility of reduced closeness, or the lovers and targets parted ways and lost touch altogether. Even in the face of fading interaction, the desire to obtain information about the other still lingered for some young gay men, who reported searching for the person’s name on the Internet (using search engines like Google or social network databases like Friendster) and asking mutual friends and acquaintances about how the other is doing.

Emotions and Self-Esteem Change. When asked about the emotions experienced during unrequited love, young Filipino gay men identified a wide range of negative affects, not unlike those identified in research on heterosexual unrequited love (Baumeister & Wotman, 1992; Baumeister et al., 1993). These included sadness, depression, jealousy, envy (if the other was partnered), anxiety, feeling “neurotic”, frustration, feeling “hurt”, anger (both toward the target as well as toward the self), and self-pity.

In addition, other subjective states were also named. Unrequited love involved powerlessness, a sense of lack of control over one’s life. There was “*hinayang*” (regret) about what could have been, resignation (if there was high certainty about the impossibility of reciprocation), doubt (about the other not having similar feelings of attraction), and indignation (about one not being loved back).

When pressed to identify any positive emotions felt during unrequited love, young gay men named only “*kilig*” (giddiness), which was brought about by the sheer excitement of being attracted to another man. This feeling was noted as being very transient. Some also pointed out a feeling of “nobility”, a kind of subjective satisfaction with the fact that one was in love – described by one gay man as “being in love with love” – and thus part of a “long, romantic tradition” of lovers, unrequited or otherwise.

Another participant also expressed a touch of happiness stemming from the realization that “at least someone out there exists”, i.e., that there was an actual man that exemplified his ideals in a potential romantic partner, despite heterosexist societal messages that depicted Filipino gay life as hard, lonely, and loveless. The small joy was brought about by having met this man and fallen in love with him.

Finally, feelings of conflict and ambivalence were also cited. Unrequited lovers were in the difficult position of being two motivational forces: wanting their love to be known to the other and not wanting to suffer rejection. Overall, accounts from young gay men were similar in that, for the most part, unrequited love is an experience marked by predominantly negative affect. As one participant put it, “Right then and there, it’s hard to feel any positive emotions.”

Related to the negative emotions during unrequited love was the feeling of lowered self-worth, which has also been documented in heterosexual contexts (Baumeister & Wotman, 1992; Baumeister et al., 1993). A common observation was that, as an unrequited lover, one would feel “very pathetic” about oneself. Lovers wondered about and ruminated on the absence of reciprocity, especially in situations where barriers like non-compatible sexual orientations or the other being partnered were conspicuously absent. That is, lovers felt especially bad about themselves when the target was also gay and also unattached, leading them to wonder why mutual feelings were not developing. As one gay man reported imagining asking the man he fell in love with, “Am I not worth your love or something?”

Uncertainty, Fantasies, and Attributions for Non-reciprocity. Apart from the emotional dimension of unrequited love, cognitive aspects were also central to the experience of falling in love that was unreturned. As theory suggests (Berger, 1988), uncertainty is salient especially during the beginning of the attraction. A number of participants were unsure, for example, whether the target was of the “correct” sexual orientation, i.e., whether he was also gay, or actually heterosexual. That is, some lovers did not want to make the assumption

that their targets were also gay; instead, they chose to “play it safe” and rely on heteronormative assumptions about other men.

So, although the hope that the target was indeed also attracted to men existed, lovers had to face what for them was the very real possibility that they had developed feelings for a heterosexual man. Unlike in heterosexual unrequited love where lovers rely on heteronormative assumptions about the sexual orientation of targets (and falling in love with a gay man or a lesbian woman was more the exception than the rule), young gay men were continuously aware that most men in the population are heterosexual – including, quite possibly, this one whom they had feelings for. Thus, for young gay men, uncertainty in love also meant uncertainty in the prevailing context of heterosexuality.

If they were sure of the target’s sexual orientation, sometimes uncertainty played out concerning another critical variable: the relationship status of the target. Was he single and available, or was he already partnered with another man? Uncertainty about the other’s feelings was also experienced, and for some, this led to the false hope of reciprocity and of the development of an actual romantic relationship. Many targets were described as failing to communicate their non-attraction immediately and directly, leading to confusion and the feeling that one was led on and “*pinaasa*”. This perception of being led on was brought about by ambiguous cues from the target, resulting in more hurt feelings for unrequited lovers in the end, when they finally concluded that there were indeed no romantic feelings being returned. In contrast to the negative effects of uncertainty (Berger, 1988), one participant who fell for a known heterosexual classmate recounted feeling less distressed. Because he was highly certain about the target’s heterosexuality, he became “resigned” about the non-possibility of reciprocity and accepted that no further developments would happen.

Along with uncertainty, there were hypothetical scenarios in the minds of unrequited lovers. These fantasies allowed young gay men to cognitively play out different pathways to loving and being loved, when real-world situations did not provide those opportunities. The most common was the happily-ever-after fantasy, that of finally ending up in a close relationship with the target. “It kept me going, the fantasy that we could be together,” remarked one participant.

Another scenario was the epiphany fantasy, that the other person would finally see the light and come to a sudden realization that the unrequited lover was actually “the right man” for him, even if he was not gay himself.

Other imagined scenarios reported by young gay men included: the other leaving his current boyfriend to be with the unrequited lover instead; the reversal fantasy (i.e., the target suddenly falling desperately in love and turning into an unrequited lover himself, with the power of rejection now in the hands of the self); and the looking-back fantasy (i.e., somehow ending up together and then in the future being able to recount the story of one's relationship to others, that it had begun as a case of unrequited love). These imagined narratives are also notable for a striking absence of heterosexism and homonegativity – participants casted a counterfactual future where love was returned, free from the pains of non-reciprocity and of the social stigma ascribed to male-male love. And while such positive fantasies may not necessarily be exclusive to gay men, they paint a rich mental world of love that is unreturned, one that may also be true for other instances of unreciprocated love.

Dealing with the “Tragedy”. Unrequited loving was a largely distressful experience, one that placed emotional and cognitive demands on young gay men who dealt with its ups and downs using a variety of affect regulation resources and strategies. The most important coping resource identified by participants was social support, particularly from friends, both gay and not gay, who reassured them of their positive qualities. These warm reassurances served to restore the lowered self-esteem of lovers.

On the other hand, a potential risk related to seeking support from others, according to participants, was the possibility of facing anti-gay prejudice (Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). Disclosing to others that one had fallen in unrequited love entailed disclosing that the target was another man and, by implication, that one was gay. This multiple disclosure carried the trade-off of eliciting homonegative reactions like unsympathetic dismissal or worse, outright denigration. In a sense, coming out as a gay unrequited lover may elicit double stigmatization from homonegative others, because one becomes identified as a member of a stigmatized group (i.e., sexual minorities), and at the same time, one casts oneself as a “failure” in the grand game of love.

Aside from seeking social support, unrequited lovers turned to behavioral disengagement strategies in order to cope with their situation. These included writing poetry, singing, eating out, listening to torch songs, exercising, being more active in sports, praying, shopping, and drinking alcohol. Going out, dating new people, and having an active sex life were also ways mentioned to take one's mind off the “failed” attraction.

In addition, unrequited lovers also engaged in strategies designed to boost their sense of attractiveness and desirability, such as going to a salon or spa,

dressing up, and getting a makeover. These actions followed cultural scripts on breakups and failed relationships that instruct heartbroken lovers to “move on” by improving the self, including one’s physical attributes.

Finally, in order to desensitize oneself to the hurt associated with the target, some participants suggested total avoidance of the rejecter, while others preferred a slower, gradual getting over him via graded exposure to reminders of the person (e.g., pictures, blog entries, etc.).

Many of these affect regulation resources and strategies are probably shared by gay men with other groups who find themselves in the situation of being in love with a disinterested other. The moderating effect of social support is well known in the literature; a theme that appears to be distinct in same-sex attraction, however, is the risk of negative, anti-gay responses to support-seeking (Gaines, 2001). Young gay men do find comfort from the shoulders of others, but unlike heterosexual lovers, they confront the real possibility of secondary rejection and hostility stemming from the cultural stigma ascribed to same-sex love and desire.

Unrequited Love in Social Context. Unrequited love, like any other attraction-based relational phenomenon, took place in an immediate social context beyond just the lover and the target. In particular, the close friendship network of unrequited lovers played a prominent role, not just as sources of social support but also as conduits of information relevant to the experience. Throughout the duration of unrequited loving, from initial attraction to post-attraction, young gay men relied on friends (both gay and non-gay, including women and men) to obtain information about the target – what he is like, what his interests are, and if he was also gay and single.

Friends, particularly shared friends, appeared to participate in the pursuit and negotiation of love by fulfilling two roles: (1) as informants and (2) as messengers. During the height of attraction, friends provided information about the target, including information about his sexuality and whether he returns, or might possibly return, the attraction. In addition, friends bridged the communication gap between unrequited lovers and the men they were in love with, both during and after the attraction. Friends were tasked to let targets know about the lover’s feelings. And later on, friends could also be asked to deliver a message to targets that the lover had moved on and was now “in a better place” (whether or not this was actually true).

The central role of friendships in the lives of gay men has been well-studied (Nardi, 1999) and it may be unsurprising that friends play such important

roles in young gay men's experiences of unrequited love, as conduits of information and as sources of social support. However, given the relative absence of research on the social contexts of unrequited love even in heterosexual contexts, with past studies focusing exclusively on individual and intrapsychic dynamics (Aron et al., 1998), this observation merits further exploration, especially in consideration of peer relations vis-à-vis romantic relationships among same-sex attracted youth (Collins, Welsh, & Furnam, 2009).

The Potential Dark Side. Though it was a more difficult angle to explore using self-reported data, we also explored some of the “darker” aspects of unrequited love. None of the young gay men reported extreme maladaptive behaviors such as self-harm or suicide ideation, although the possibility of these occurrences for unrequited lovers in general was acknowledged. A number of “dark” fantasies was entertained, including hypothetical scenarios such as dating the target's best friend, or stealing away the target's boyfriend for one's own. The latter cognitive scenario is another feature which is distinctive in gay (and possibly lesbian and bisexual) contexts; it is possible to develop romantic and/or sexual ties not just with the target but with his partner, if also male. This complexity of potential ties belies the fact that gay attraction can occur in triadic fashion (a true, closed “love triangle”), a possibility that is not present in strictly heterosexual contexts.

The idea of revenge was also considered, with some gay men engaging in actual behaviors to get back at the rejecter. These included behaviors such as sending repeated anonymous text messages, destroying property belonging to the rejecter, deliberately breaking up the target's existing romantic relationship, and undertaking smear jobs or bad-mouthing the target (“*sisiraan siya sa ibang tao*”). Not surprisingly, there was considerable reluctance to acknowledge these behaviors as harassment or stalking (Ogilvie, 2000).

Lessons Learned. If we conceptualize unrequited love as a romantic relationship that failed to bloom, one that experienced dissolution even before complete formation (at least from the perspective of unrequited lovers), then this experience can similarly be a source of personal growth and insight (Tashiro & Frazier, 2003).

Young gay men reported a number of realizations and personal growth changes brought about by their attempts to make sense of their unrequited love experiences. A few were related to the self; for example, the perception of having learned a great deal about oneself and one's capabilities in the course of loving someone who did not love back. Some participants reported coming to a sad conclusion that being a gay man essentially entails a high probability of

falling in unrequited love, given the distribution of heterosexual, gay, and bisexual orientations in the population. Others remarked that they came to develop less romanticized and less idealized notions about love in general after their encounters with unrequited love and its discontents.

Other insights and changes were related to the dynamics of close relationships in general, such as:

- learning to remain optimistic and hopeful about love;
- learning not to “confuse lust for love”;
- realizing that communication of feelings is helpful; and
- valuing closure and the need to make personal sense of experiences.

Finally, some lessons involved other people and the social world of attraction and love in general, such as: that exemplars of one’s ideal mate do exist and are “out there”, that partnered individuals are difficult to snag for one’s own, and that “there are people out there who will just be no good for you.”

Unrequited Love among Young Filipino Gay Men: Summary Reflections.

Results from this exploratory focus group study suggested that unrequited love was indeed a robust and psychologically significant subjective experience for young Filipino gay men. Personal accounts of unrequited love painted the picture of a complex experience marked by a spectrum of negative affect, distress, lowering of self-esteem, and various cognitions like fantasies of reciprocity and diverse attributions for the “failure” of relationship development. Factors that arguably contributed to unrequited love and its accompanying distress included non-matching on sexual orientation (i.e., falling in love with non-gay men) or on availability (i.e., falling in love with men who already had boyfriends) and fluctuating levels of uncertainty (about whether the target was gay or not, whether he was single or already partnered, and what the exact nature of his feelings were for the lover). Loving someone who did not return the attraction led to consequences both positive and negative, including relationship changes, possibly hurtful behaviors directed to the target, and personal realizations and insights into oneself and into love and human relationships. Various strategies for coping with the ups and downs of unrequited love were identified. Finally, the role of gay-affirmative social support appeared to be important in the reduction of uncertainty as well as the management of unrequited love’s distress.

Endnote

¹Aron, Aron, and Allen (1998) specify a multivariate motivational model, which is essentially a Value x Expectancy framework, that posits the intensity of an unrequited lover's attraction toward a particular target as a function of three factors: (1) the perceived potential value of being in a close relationship with this person, (2) the perceived probability of actually being in a close relationship with him, and (3) the perceived value of enacting the role of being in love in general, even in the face of non-reciprocity. According to this theory, the greater each of the three factors is, the greater the intensity of unrequited love. That is, the more a lover considers a future relationship with a target good and desirable, the more likely he believes such a relationship is attainable, and the more positive he feels about being in love (what has been termed "being in love with love"), then the more he is likely to report being deeply in love and to persist in such an affective state.

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Eric Julian Manalastas is an assistant professor at the Department of Psychology, College of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of the Philippines Diliman. He has a BA in psychology from UP Diliman and an MSc in gender and sexuality from the Universiteit van Amsterdam. He was a participant in the 1st International LGBT Psychology Summer Institute at the University of Michigan. His LGBT psychology research has included work on suicide risk among Filipino LGB youth, heterosexual men's misperceptions of gay men's friendliness as sexual interest, and close friendships between women and gay men.