

Navigating Risk Situations Faced by Filipino Youth: Learning to Say “No” through Theater for Development on HIV

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Abstract

The Philippines is one of the countries with the fastest growing number of HIV cases in the last decade. Among age groups, the highest increase in the proportion of cases from 2013–2023 were among 15–24 years old. Because the issue of HIV often overlaps with social and moral discourses, it has often been regarded as a sensitive topic in the country, creating a culture of silence and propagating a norm of passivity that leave vulnerable groups such as the youth in the margins of discourse. Arts-based educational tools such as Applied Theater are used outside the formal education setting to open opportunities for discussion on the topics of HIV, sex and sexuality. However, studies on the use of Applied Theater for HIV in the Philippine context documented in academic literature appear to be scarce. To contribute to the literature on HIV prevention and Applied Theater, and explore the experiences of Filipino youth related to sex, sexuality, and HIV in the context of the Philippines, this study raises the following questions: (1) *What are the factors that drive young people into risk situations?* (2) *What skills did the young people learn in the workshop that could help them in these risk situations?* (3) *How did they use what they have learned to navigate these risk situations to protect themselves from HIV?* Data were gathered from two three-day Theater for Development on HIV (T4DHIV) workshops in Cavite, Philippines. This study discovered that young people consider sexual curiosity and peer pressure as the main drivers that lead them to risk situations. To protect themselves from HIV, young people used their refusal skills to avoid relationships or situations they do not want to participate in. This act allows them to regain their agency to express themselves and let their voices – that have been silenced by culture and norms – be heard.

Keywords: applied theater, HIV prevention, theater for development, Filipino Youth, Risk Situations

INTRODUCTION

The Philippines had the fastest growing HIV epidemic in the Western Pacific from 2010 to 2017 (Alibudbud, 2021). From 2012 to 2023, there was a 411% increase in daily incidence recorded (Gangcuangco & Eustaquio, 2023). As of March 2023, 29% of the recorded 114,008 cases were in the 15–24 age group when they were first diagnosed. The proportion of HIV cases in this age group nearly doubled in the last decade from 17% in 2000 to 29% in 2019. Within this age group alone, 97% was infected through sexual contact (DOH, 2019). Because the issue of HIV often overlaps with social and moral discourses, it has often been silenced and shelved as a sensitive topic, if not, entirely taboo. This makes dissemination of correct and appropriate information on HIV transmission, prevention, and treatment very challenging.

In the Philippines, discussions about sex and sexuality are considered indecent for they are regarded as “bastos” or “profane” (Ujano-Batangan, 2003). Arts-based educational tools such as Applied Theater is used to complement the discussion in the formal education setting. According to a survey conducted by the Demographic Research and Development Foundation, young people who are confident that they have enough knowledge on sex only amount to 27% and this percentage has not changed significantly between 1994 and 2013 (Kabamalan, 2016). Though, compared to other countries, the median age of sexual initiation in the Philippines is relatively high at 18 years old for males and females as of 2013 (Marquez, 2016). Majority of these first time encounters, though, are unprotected as only 22% of young people surveyed used contraception (Marquez, 2016).

The low uptake of condom use among young Filipinos could partly be attributed to inaccessibility of condoms and the lack of other available methods of contraception to people their age as these are not strongly endorsed by the Catholic Church. The way young people pursue or regulate certain behaviors is shaped by the environment they live in and the norms that govern it. In collectivist societies like the Philippines, transgressions of such norms may threaten a person’s position in the group they belong to and the harmony among their networks of relationships (Hofstede, 2011). Young people may find themselves in awkward, compromising situations that may pressure them to conform to or agree with certain ideas or actions even if these are against their personal will. Young people have to navigate complex situations and relationships towards an HIV prevention strategy that they feel is most appropriate for them.

The Philippines was chosen as the research site because it is one of the countries with the fastest growing number of HIV cases in the last decade.

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Though studies on HIV in the Philippines have been conducted (Alesna-Llanto & Raymundo, 2005, Amadora-Nolasco et al., 2002, Morisky et al. 2009), a study focusing on the use of Applied Theater for HIV education for young people appear to be scarce in the academic literature. To probe this topic more specifically in this context, this study raises the following questions: (1) *What are the factors that drive young people into risk situations?* (2) *What skills did the young people learn in the workshop that could help them in these risk situations?* (3) *How did they use what they have learned to navigate these risk situations to protect themselves from HIV?* This study investigates the outcomes of a workshop-based Theater for Development on HIV (T4DHIV) initiative in Cavite, Philippines.

Review of Related Literature

Building the capacity of young people to deal with risk situations by providing them with accurate and age-appropriate information and skills to act based on what they know is a key strategy in HIV prevention. Young people who are exposed to sexuality and HIV education before their sexual debut indulge in less risky behaviors (Pick, 2007). However, because change is not linear, knowledge alone does not automatically lead to the adoption of preventive behaviors, thus, programs that cultivate life skills tend to be more effective in reducing risk behaviors (Peters et al., 2009; Yankah & Aggleton, 2008). The term preventive health behaviors refers to “any activity undertaken by a person... for the purpose of preventing disease or detecting it in an asymptomatic stage” (Kasl & Cobb 1966, p. 246). In certain contexts like the Philippines, discussing sex, sexuality, and HIV in a formal setting is limited, if not entirely taboo, thus, other means of education outside the formal education system are being used.

Theater for Development (TfD) is a theater practice, under the huge umbrella of Applied Theater, that aims to “create a critical consciousness and raise awareness of the participants, enabling them to take action in order to solve their developmental problems,” thus, making them “proactive agents in their own development” (Epskamp, 2006, p. 43). TfD can be conducted by engaging participants in a workshop, presenting a community performance to a target audience or a combination of both (Epskamp, 2006). Theater of the Oppressed (Boal, 1979) is often used as a method in these instances. It is composed of “a system of exercises, games and techniques, that help everyone, whether professionally involved in the theater or not, to try to develop a **language** that one already possesses” (Boal, 1995, p. 47; emphasis in the original). Because of limitations posed by certain institutions, people are often silenced and fail to use this language as they are reduced as passive receivers of knowledge. Theater of

the Oppressed aims to develop one’s capacity to use that language to be free, “which means we can become subject and not object of our relationships with others” and with the institutions governing our everyday lives (Boal, 1995, p. 47).

In collectivist societies like the Philippines, loyalty and relationships to family and extended networks are highly valued (Hofstede, 2011). Lynch argues that one of the main goals of Filipinos in their social circles is to be socially accepted (1962). This is mainly done by keeping Smooth Interpersonal Relations (SIR), defined as “a facility at getting along with others in such a way as to avoid outward signs of conflict” (1962, p. 89). He adds that this includes “being agreeable, even in difficult circumstances, and of keeping quiet” (p. 89). This he said can be achieved through *pakikisama* or “to go along” with others. The performance of one’s identity and his everyday routines are subject to one’s relationships with others. People in his network are categorized into two, such as in-group and out-group, and the way one carries himself and associates with them differ according to which category the other person belongs to (Hofstede, 2011).

In performance studies, an individual presents himself in a social interaction by projecting and managing an expression of himself that would be consistent to the objectives one has for that particular interaction may it be to maintain harmony or otherwise (Goffman, 1956). This performance of the self in a social interaction shapes relationships and the behaviors performed within these relationships.

Methodology

Data for this study were collected through participant observation, pre- and post-workshop focus group discussions (FGDs), and semi-structured interviews four months after the culmination of the workshop. Data were analyzed using Dramaturgical Coding, a coding method that views life as a performance and people as characters in conflict (Saldana, 2013). Dramaturgical codes include elements that may be used in a drama such as (1) *objectives*, pertaining to the motives of the actor, (2) *conflict*, referring to the obstacles the actor faces, (3) *tactics* or the strategies that the actor uses to manage the conflict, (4) *attitudes* or the perception of the actor towards others, (5) *emotions*, referring to what the actor feels, and (6) *subtexts*, pertaining to unspoken thoughts or impression management (Saldana, 2013, p. 143). As the workshop was conducted in a mix of Filipino and English, the original transcripts were coded and selected passages were later translated by the researcher to English.

There were two rounds of three-day workshops called Theater for Development on HIV (T4DHIV) conducted by Tanghalang Pilipino (TP) Actors Company in partnership with the Dynamic Teen Company (DTC). The workshop used methods from the toolbox of Theater of the Oppressed. The workshop had three main components such as theater games, image theater and a community performance. The workshop focused on three main themes such as personhood and sexuality, stigma reduction, and safer sex education and awareness.

The workshops were conducted in Cavite City, Cavite, Philippines. Cavite is a province that is part of Region IV-A, the region with the second largest number of HIV cases in the country, next to the National Capital Region (NCR) where Manila is situated. The public performances were conducted by the workshop participants in two communities in Cavite City such as Barangay 13 Aguila, and Barangay 60 Gangley.

There was a total of 16 workshop participants, seven males and nine females, aged 18–21 years old. Nine of them had a family income of below Php30,000 (roughly about USD600) per month, six had an income of between Php31,000–90,000 per month (roughly about USD620–1,800), and one did not provide an answer. Only three had access to an HIV/AIDS-related event before participating in the workshop; eight had attended a theater workshop before while eight had not. Thirteen of them had been living in that area since birth while three were migrants from other provinces. Twelve just graduated from Senior High School and were about to enter university at the time of the workshop and two were already in college. Nine of them identified themselves as Born Again Christians, six were Catholics, and one was a Baptist.

Findings

This next section is divided into three parts. The first talks about the risk situations identified by the young people who participated in the workshop; the second talks about the lessons learned by the participants through the workshop; and the third talks about the prevention strategies chosen by the participants to deal with the risk situations they have identified.

Factors that Drive Young People into Risk Situations

This study discovers that young people in the Philippines considered sexual curiosity and peer pressure as the two drivers that may possibly lead them to risk situations. Indulging in their sexual curiosity, may lead them to engage in unprotected sex, sexual activity with multiple partners and agreeing to a partner’s

desire even if it is against their will, while peer pressure may lead them into imitating the actions of the majority to please others, agree to what the rest of the group says in order to belong and participate in activities they might not be totally in favor of.

Curiosity about Sex

The participants opened up during the FGDs and the semi-structured interviews about how they found themselves very much curious about sex. Ryan, one of the participants, shared his initial perception on sex and admitted his curiosity about it. However, after the workshop, he expressed his realization that engaging in sex was not only about feelings, but also about health. He recognized that a sexual activity could be risky if done without protection.

Before, I imagined how good it was to have sex. I was still very young then, around 10 or 11 years old, but I already had that in my mind. I wondered how it felt. I thought, there's nothing wrong with having sex. I hear my friends talking about it all the time. It's okay to have sex because nothing bad will happen to you. In my mind, having sex with someone means you love each other, so it's okay. So now, after the workshop, I realized that there were some things that I had to change with the way I think about sex. 'Sex is life' for other young people, but once you engage in unprotected sex, you face a risk of getting infection.

In the environment Ryan grew up in, his friends talked about sex very freely among themselves, however, they did not talk about protection or the consequences of engaging in unprotected sex. Because of this, his perception on sex as a risk-free activity had been shaped. After realizing the possible consequences of unprotected sexual activity, he thought that these practices could put other young people at risk.

He also explained how young people these days, including his friends, openly talked about their desire to be in a relationship on social media. Ryan noted that young people's desire to find "true love" could put them in a vulnerable position if they are not careful.

I notice that teenagers on Facebook always want to have an active love life. When you open your Facebook, you'll see posts saying, 'Pengeng love life.' That's what they want, they want a partner. The more they look around for 'true love,' the more they become at risk. While looking for the 'right' person they engage in unprotected sex with multiple partners putting them at higher risk of being infected.

Minerva, in her interview, also expressed her disagreement with casual sex as it is something that she did not believe was okay to do. She emphasized the value of sexual purity as a Christian, which favors monogamy and sex within the bounds of marriage.

The lessons in the workshop, complemented my values especially when it comes to how I perceive casual sex. As a Christian, [sexual] purity has a value for me. So, when we talked about casual sex in the workshop, I thought it wasn't okay according to my personal beliefs.

Lily Anne presented another perspective on sexual curiosity when she explained how difficult it was to negotiate with a partner. She recognized how vulnerable she could become because of her tendency to find it difficult saying “no” to a partner or as she put it, “someone she loves.” She explained:

It's true, I am very vulnerable when it comes to love. For me, whatever the one I love wants, I'm okay with it. It's difficult if the person negotiating with me is someone I love. If he wanted to do something, I'd find it difficult to say 'no' because I love him.

However, despite acknowledging her vulnerability, she recognized that sex is an act that made her curious, but should not be pursued by her at the moment:

Not because you are curious means that you should do it. Because of the workshop, even though I get really curious, I know I cannot do it yet because I know what the consequences will be. Young people are usually swayed easily to agreeing to have sex because of their curiosity. For me, I think about what the impact to me will be if I engage in sex now.

The passages above showed that young people acknowledged their curiosity about sex as natural, however, they recognized that this curiosity, if they are not well-informed of the consequences, may lead them to engaging in unprotected sex, having sexual activity with multiple partners and passively agreeing to a partner's desire.

Peer Pressure and the Importance of Being “In”

Participants in the workshop shared their view on peer pressure and the importance for young people like them to be accepted in a clique. Sarah in the FGD, emphasized how peer pressure force young people to conform because of their desire to be “in.” If they fail to please the other members of the group, they

become an outcast. Since being part of a group is very important for your people, they have the tendency to imitate what their peers are doing.

If your friends are doing something, but you're not, that means you're not cool enough for the members of the group. You have to do it too. For example, when they have sex with their partners, you have to do it too. If you feel like you need to find a partner, you should. That's what fuels you. They'd say, 'You're the only one who doesn't have a boyfriend, all of us do.' To please them, you'd have to find a way to be 'in.'

Jessica shared her experiences in the interview about desiring to be a part of the group and her fear of exclusion. She even explained how her friends would threaten to expel her from the group if she did not join them.

When you decide not to go with them, they'd exclude you in the group next time. I saw it happen to our other classmates. I didn't want that to happen to me, so at first I took it as a challenge to join them. However, later on, I didn't want to join them anymore, but they wouldn't stop asking me. Sometimes, they would even make me feel guilty by teasing me, saying 'this friendship is over, don't ever come near us.'

In order to prevent herself from being cast out of the group, Jessica joined her classmates at first, although, she noticed that had some behaviors that she was not resolved to adopt.

I would go with them, I would party with them, but I wouldn't drink, I wouldn't smoke. But sometimes, my classmates would start doing other things. They would start making out with each other.

The passages above noted that the failure to be “in” and be accepted in a group would result to them becoming an outcast in the group. Thus, to prevent this from happening, participants tried to keep up with the group by imitating what the rest of them were doing even if it meant engaging in activities that may put them at some form of risk – for example, in Jessica’s case, engaging in activities such as drinking and smoking, and others that were sexual in nature.

Kristine and Minerva explained in the FGD why group inclusion was so important for them as young people:

Kristine: As teenagers, we spend more time with our friends than with our family because of school. But even if we're on school vacation, even on weekends, we are with our friends. Apart from our family, they are our biggest influencers, and we tend to adopt the culture formed within that group.

Minerva: We trust them more than our family because they are the ones we spend most time with.

As young people spend more time with their peers, the peers become the biggest influencers and sources of validation. The “culture” of the group also dictated the values and the roles of its members and decides who is “in” and who is “out.” So, in order to be accepted by their peers, young people imitate the actions of the majority in the group to belong,” agree to what the rest of the group says and join them in activities they might not be personally in favor of.

Lesson Learned: Learning to Say “No”

When asked which theater activity had the most impact on them, several participants claimed that Wildfire left an impression on them. In this game, participants mingled within the group, and shook hands with each other. A handshake represented a sexual contact. When a participant who received a handshake with two scratches on the palm, it meant he had been infected, while a normal handshake meant that he was fine. Participants were given the choice to decide who to shake hands with and how to react to the handshake extended to them – whether to receive it or reject it. Among the participants was the “instigator” who was chosen by the facilitator at the beginning of the game; he represented an HIV-infected person from whom the virus started to spread.

In the first workshop, as soon as the facilitators said go, the participants, started walking around the room trying to gauge the atmosphere. Some participants started laughing, not sure whether to take a handshake offered to them or not, some just went straight to each other and shook hands, grabbing each other’s hands without reservation. A participant went straight to the Researcher, and shook her hand. He scratched the Researcher’s hand twice; the Researcher was “infected” with the first handshake. Knowing the Researcher was infected, she went around the room, looking at the participants with a friendly smile and reaching out her hand towards them. They all extended their hands and returned her smile in a friendly manner, appearing like most of them accepted it out of courtesy. This gesture can be a reflection of how Filipinos show recognition of and respect to certain authorities in the society such as the community, the church, and the family. These institutions validate one’s behavior and standing in society. It also shows an individual’s, in this context a young person’s, inability to reject or turn down someone whom they believe is older or in a higher position than they are, or someone they could not refuse simply because they do not want to create tension or ruffle some smooth-sailing relationships.

During one of the FGDs, Lily Anne explained the reaction usually elicited from the elderly when they hear young people brush on the topic of sexuality, even subtly, in their conversations, “They will tell us to stop talking about these things because we are still young, we should not be talking about these things because it is bastos [or profane].” Jessica also added that talking about these things created a negative impression on other people. Young people are often prohibited to talk about their own sexuality because they are perceived as indecent. Jessica explained this by saying:

Elderly people often become angry when they hear young people like us talking about sexuality. For example, they would ask me where I heard about these things and tell me that it’s probably because I spend too much time hanging out with my friends on the streets that’s why I get to adopt this kind of language.

At the end of the *Wildfire*, the facilitator asked who among the group had received a handshake with two scratches. The facilitators then handed each person a red envelope, and all together, at the same time, all the participants opened the envelope. The envelope contained a paper that had a positive sign, signifying that they had been infected. Surprisingly, the whole group, including the Researcher had been infected.

One of the things the participants learned during the workshop to protect themselves was to exercise the power of their choice by using their communication skills to refuse certain people or situations. April and Ryan mentioned in the FGD that the workshop helped them realize the importance of making a decision after critically reflecting on a situation. April emphasized the importance of exercising one’s choice because this may lead to consequences that could not be undone later on. Ryan also seconded the importance of that choice by emphasizing that saying “no” was an option that was available for them. April explained:

Wildfire. That’s the activity that had the most impact on me. You have a choice to refuse or give in because even if you know the person [you’re having sexual relations with], you might not be safe. You might not remain healthy after what happened between you. Afterwards, you need to face the consequences because you made that choice, and you cannot undo it anymore.

Ryan talked about the norm of passivity wherein young people are keen to agreeing to have sex without asserting themselves or negotiating protection. Young people may have the tendency to accept whatever is being offered to them without making the choice themselves.

I also realized that I could go against the norm. It’s the norm to agree and give in if someone invites you to have sex. Your reaction towards it, if you approve of it or not, is your own choice. It’s your discretion. Just because someone does it doesn’t mean that you have to do the same.

Ryan explained that he realized that each one had a choice, and this choice has to be exercised wisely.

I realized that it is really my choice to refuse. It doesn’t matter how awkward it is to refuse when someone invites you for sex. It’s your choice. That message had an impact on me. It’s not wrong to refuse. Nowadays, when you ask other young people why they agreed, they would just say, someone invited me. They don’t refuse. That’s how it goes. They would say, ‘I love him, we’re in the heat of the situation, when you’re in that situation you cannot refuse anymore.’ That’s also how I thought before. But now, I realized that if I were in that situation, I can say, ‘no.’ I can refuse to have sexual activity with someone if I think it is not the right time for me.

Navigating Risk Situations

The participants reported that refusing unwanted relationships such as with suitors or friends that have negative influence on them were actions they made to protect themselves from being in situations they do not want to be in and commit actions they do not intend to do – for example, engaging in unprotected sex or being under the influence of alcohol.

Refusing Unwanted Sexual Relationships

Rica relayed that she refused a suitor who had a very bold way of wooing her. She said that this guy had sent her a photo of his genitals back when they were only 15 or 16 and recently, he started courting her, but she decided to turn him down. She recognized she had other priorities such as her studies and keeping her scholarship. She recognized that the only thing this guy probably wanted from her was sex and she wished to be with someone who had the intention to wait for her until she was ready to commit to a serious relationship. While she admitted that sexual curiosity also instigated questions of “what ifs” on her mind, she decided not to let these thoughts get the better of her. She mentioned the consequences of engaging in sex when one is not ready:

When you have sex, there’s a big possibility that you’d get pregnant. If you don’t get pregnant, your partner might have HIV, or he is not clean and then transmits you something. That’s why you should get to know him well.

Rica shared that she considered it her responsibility to keep herself sexually pure until she marries the “right person” in the future, reflecting a sense of accountability to her future partner.

I think it's important to wait for the right person for me. If I just hook up with anyone, it's just a waste of time, it's like you have been treated like trash because a lot of people have used you already. I'm not sure if I can bear to marry the right person for me and I then won't be able to tell him that I have had past sexual experiences before him. It's difficult when you can't give the whole you [sic] to the person you're going to marry because you let someone else have it before him. I realized it more through the workshop that I really don't want to do it yet. I realized that I shouldn't be in a hurry.

Elsa shared the same view with Rica. She explained that she became more careful when making decisions for herself.

Because of the workshop, I became open to the thought that I shouldn't be quick to engage in sex with other people. I became more responsible by veering away from things I do not want to engage in yet.

When asked how she handled situations like this, she explained that she communicated with her suitors her unreadiness to be in a relationship that entailed romantic and sexual commitment. She also shared her belief in waiting for the right timing for things to happen, and that there was a reward for people who wait.

I talked to my suitors and made them understand that I'm not ready for it. Through open communication, I could explain to them the things I wanted to say. I don't have to rush things that are not yet meant to happen at this time. In God's time, it will happen. When you wait, what follows is a good result from a situation.

Both narratives above showed that the participants would rather reject their suitors and not put themselves in a relationship that they were not ready to be in. Also, both of them had a forward-looking attitude that aspired for a more positive outcome to unfold as a reward for waiting.

Refusing Bad Company

Just like Rica and Elsa, Jessica also used her communication skills to refuse friends she thought were exerting negative influence on her. She shared her story about how she preferred not to join their company in situations where she thought she might be put in a compromising position.

I have classmates who would go drinking when there's no school. They would go with our male friends. Then, they would invite me. I told them, 'We don't need to go drinking with the boys, because we never know what could happen when we get drunk.' Then, we'd regret it.

She recognized the risk of being intoxicated and how a seemingly harmless get-together among friends could turn into a risky situation once everyone lost control of the situation. She also noted how moments like this could eventually cost her dignity or put her to shame:

If we get drunk and were tempted (to have sex), I could end up pregnant. My friends are not going to be the ones who'd get reprimanded by their parents, they're not the ones who'd be shamed and would lose dignity, it's me. I think first about what will happen if I join them. That's why when they ask me whether or not I'm joining, I ask them to wait first, so I can have some time to think about it and then afterwards I just tell them that I'm not going when they're about to leave.

When asked what she felt when saying “no” to these situations, she confessed that she did not find it easy at all.

Of course, it's difficult. I If my classmates invite me and then I don't go, they'd feel bad about it. But I don't think about that anymore, I just explain to them that I don't want to go. Sometimes, I make excuses saying I have other things to do. It's okay with me if they feel bad about it, at least, I know I'll be safe.

This time, she is less concerned with her friends' perception of her, but more with her safety. Despite the difficulty of relaying her decision to them, she prioritized the choice of avoiding consequences that might happen if she did go with them.

Of course, I'm having second thoughts whether I'd join them or not. I thought, if I don't join them, that wouldn't be a loss for me. I don't need friends who have negative influence on me and who would put me at risky situations.

Carlos also noted the importance of prioritizing his studies over spending time with friends who would ask him to spend his time on activities he deemed as unproductive such as drinking. According to Carlos, it is important to:

Consciously choose your friends. The friends that I choose to go with are those who, I know, will not lead me to a point where I'd acquire some vices. Not the people who would ask me to go drinking all the time. Now, that I'm

in college, it's difficult to find those kinds of friends because most students are very liberated, but I still found some friends who'd encourage me to study. When it comes to alcohol intake, I'd drink if there's an occasion, but when you ask me to just go drinking without a reason, I won't do it. There are people who invite me, but I turn them down. There are a lot of things I need to do; why would I rather go drinking?

In this section, participants relayed their decision to be more selective with the company they keep. They choose not to be with friends who might exert negative influence on their choices and behaviors. Jessica relayed how she refused to join her friends who could have negative influence on her by first reflecting on the consequences of these actions and instead of minding their perceptions of her, making a decision, which she thought would be more beneficial for her personal safety. Carlos also noted how he refused some friends who would ask him to go drinking and instead use the time he has on more productive activities like studying.

DISCUSSION

After the workshop, participants reported that there were two preventive strategies that they were able to exercise to avoid finding themselves in risky situations. They reported that by refusing unwanted relationships and bad company, they could protect themselves from engaging in unprotected sex. While they acknowledged their natural curiosity about sex, they recognized that premarital sex, especially unprotected sex, with multiple partners can put them at risk and thus should not be pursued.

Their perception of sex remains consistent with the Filipino perspective that puts value on women's virginity as it is equated with purity (Medina, 2015; Upadhyay et al., 2006). There are two Filipino values associated with having honor. *Puri* refers to honor that is related to something physical and may be associated with virginity, while *dangal* is honor that stems from within, such as one's character (Salazar, 1985). While the desire to keep themselves pure for their future partner is part of the participants' desire to maintain *puri*, the desire to refuse being associated with people – like their friends – who do not share the same values as they have can be considered as relating to *dangal*.

Another decision they made was to avoid joining the company of friends who they thought can influence them negatively by putting them in high-risk situations that may eventually end up in alcohol intoxication and unprotected sex. While the participants acknowledged the strong influence of friends on them and

their desire to be accepted in a group, they also recognized the risk of being dependent on these relationships. Thus, they chose to dissociate themselves from friends who may influence them negatively.

As relationships are valued in collectivist societies, utmost importance is relegated to being in relationships that would preserve and uplift one’s honor and not taint it. These relationships are those, borrowing the words of the participants, with the “right persons.” However, if SIR is what Filipinos value, does it not appear countercultural for participants to choose to refuse relationships with suitors and friends as they reported in the passages above? Lynch may have emphasized the importance of maintaining SIR for Filipinos, however, for Enriquez (1978), the core Filipino value is centered on the concept of *kapwa* or “shared identity.” What concerns Filipinos the most is *pakikipagkapwa* or treating the other person as a fellow human being and that SIR is meant only for treating people in the out-group (Jocano, 1969). The way Filipinos interact with others depend on how they recognize these people – whether they are regarded as *ibang tao* or the out-group or *hindi ibang tao* or the in-group (Enriquez, 1978). The people they regard as *hindi ibang tao* are the ones with whom they share the most intimate relationships with. Thus, refusal in this context does not mean the rejection of SIR, but rather, a conscious decision to preserve *pakikipagkapwa* with people they feel they had a “shared identity” with – people who have the same values as theirs such as the “right” future partner or the “right” group of friends for them.

Participants exercised agency in the things that they felt they can control. This study argues that the mere exercise of their choice to refuse suitors and veer away from certain friends was not merely reactive, but rather, an active choice made out of one’s own intentionality and this act allows them to exercise their agency to express themselves and allow them to let their voices – that have been silenced by culture and norms – be heard.

While there is a norm of passivity that is preserved by a culture of silencing issues that are considered taboo like sex, sexuality and HIV, the intention to use theater games in the workshop aimed to de-mechanize the body from habits that participants had been used to performing (Boal, 1995). This is what Boal means by becoming free by using a language that people already know. The body knows how to act and react in certain situations, however, due to the limitations posed by certain institutions (for example, labor) (Boal, 1979), and in this case, social and religious norms, the body is mechanized to act according to the expectations of these institutions. In this context, participants have been “mechanized” to be receivers of lacking, incorrect or inappropriate information, and passive adherents to the culture of silence. However, in the theater workshop, the body

is de-mechanized to experiment on their actions and reactions by enacting certain imagined scenarios through the theater games like *Wildfire*. These allows them to process the information they received and practice life skills, such as communication skills, to act on the information. Participation in the theater games develops a performance of a new self (Goffman, 1956), transformed by being in the liminal space of the theater – distanced from reality, but not entirely detached from it as the basis of these imagined scenarios are happening in the real world and will be experienced again by the participants when they step out of the imaginary world and go back into the real world (Schechner 2013).

CONCLUSIONS

In this study, participants shared their decisions to refuse relationships that may not influence them positively in order to protect themselves from situations that may put them at risk of HIV. These were done with the use of their refusal skills, negotiation skills and critical thinking skills to imagine the future consequences of their actions. Participants opted to delay their sexual initiation by avoiding unwanted romantic/sexual relationships and peers that have negative influence on them. For the participants, engaging in casual, unprotected sex is a risk and against their belief of maintaining one's sexual purity until marriage. Also, the desire for validation and inclusion in a clique can also pose a risk for young people who would be willing to do whatever it takes to be accepted by their friends even if it means joining them in drinking parties and imitating their behaviors, including finding a partner even if they are not ready for it. In order to navigate such situations, participants decided to choose to wait for the right timing when they would be ready to commit to a serious relationship and engage in sexual activities, and avoided joining friends who engaged in what they perceived as promiscuous activities.

Though the study aims to engage in the discourse on HIV prevention through Applied Theater with the use of the Philippines as a research site, this study presents certain limitations as data were gathered within a short period of time and with only a small number of participants. Thus, these results were not meant to generalize but only to present a glimpse of the HIV situation in the Philippines. The narratives, as they are self-reported, may have been affected by the participants' recollection or interpretation of the event or the researcher's position as an outsider. Also, as this study was only conducted in one province, conducting a study on the perception of risk situations of young people from

various parts of the country might be useful to compare and see if there are differences in risks found in the rural-urban context.

The use of an Applied Theater intervention, in this case, may have supported participants to express themselves and allow them to find their voices. However, influencing norms related to HIV in a wider scale may need more drastic measures, such as integrating Applied Theater, education, and health services to promote a more cohesive HIV prevention strategy.

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