



Rites of Passage: Debutante Balls in Filipino-American Culture

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The debutante ball is a traditional Western ritual often designed to celebrate young women's transition from childhood to adulthood. The word debut (i.e., to enter into society) comes from French language but came into use by the English during the reign of King George the 3rd (1760-1820). From 1837 on, the young women were referred to as debutantes later shortened to debs (Haynes, 2005). Being a debutante entails a distinctive aesthetic. The dresses, flowers, and other aspects of appearance (e.g., tiaras, gloves) are concerned with identifying a new adult member of a specific community. During the debutante's presentation, a debutante is often accompanied by a young man (an escort).

Debutante balls within the U.S. lost significance as a rite of passage and suffered a decline in popularity partially due to the cost of the event and to criticisms. These criticisms include that the ritual promotes unhealthy materialism and imprudent spending, encourages women to be obedient, and is a performance of a hegemonic type of femininity (Rodriguez, 2010). Regardless of the critique, the tradition of debutante balls has continued albeit customized by the groups that continue this ritual. For example, the regional Filipino Association (Joles, 2011, February 21) hosts an annual debutante event for both young men and women to celebrate their accomplishments as well as their transition to adulthood.

As the idea of a debutante continue to evolve with the adoption of this ritual by diverse cultural groups, our research purpose was to further understand the creation and continuance of the Filipino Debutante ball as a cultural ritual and to identify both the motivation(s) as well as the benefit(s) underlying Filipino youths' participation in the event. Our research questions were: What is the history of the debutante ball within the Filipino community in Minnesota? What are the motivations for hosting the ritual? What are the participants' motivations for partaking in the event? What outcomes are linked to participation in the event?

Methods: We used purposive sampling methods to recruit participants. Three former debutantes and three escorts volunteered to be interviewed. All the interviews ranged in length from 30 to 60 minutes, were audio taped, and transcribed. In addition to the interview, we attended the debutante ball event in February, 2012 to observe, take photographs, and gain additional information. The interview data were analyzed using components of phenomenological analysis (Moustakas, 1994). Significant statements, sentences, or quotes were highlighted in different colors. The statements were grouped into larger units of information, called "meaning units" or themes developing a description and identifying quotes to elaborate on the experiences associated with each unit. Lastly, the researchers created an interpretive description of each meaning unit. Meanings and relationships between various categories were discussed and explored until mutual understanding was achieved.

Findings: In February, the Filipino Association (FA) hosts an annual debutante ball. The debutante ball was first held in 1978 to support the growth and development of future leaders within the Filipino-American community. The debutante ball has been sponsored by the organization for 35 years to mentor youth, support their education by providing scholarships, and motivate them. Through the interviews with past debutantes and escorts, four themes emerged concerning motivations to take part in the debutante ball: to abide by a family tradition, to gain attention, to have fun, and coercion. Primary motivation to participate in the event was to abide by a family tradition the consequently will please parents. For example, a former debutante shared, "I wanted to participate because it had been a tradition in our family, and I knew my parents would be proud if I did it." The debutante ball was also a way for participants to get exclusive attention from family, friends, and community members. There were some incidents where participants took part in the event unwillingly and felt somewhat forced by their family or friends. Coercion was identified by former escorts as reflected in the following comment. "An old family friend was going to be a Deb so they asked me to be an escort. I reluctantly accepted. For me it was just a matter of helping out."

The debutante ball had significant impact on the participants' lives. All participants shared that they experienced long term changes resulting from their participation in the event. These outcomes included changes in personality, active involvement with the community, appreciation of their culture, and long lasting friendships. Although the event was held for one day, participants normally spent 11 weeks in preparation for the event. During those 11 weeks, participants built strong relationships with family members, friends, and individuals within the Filipino community. Those relationships positively impact them to the present. Interestingly, one participant shared that the event changed his personality to be active and outgoing. "I particularly was very shy when I was younger. When I did the event, interacted with people, it was like coming out of yourself. Got more interactive and outgoing"

Conclusions: The findings of this study provide a better understanding of Filipino-American Debutante ball and offer an in-depth information about the motivations as well as the outcomes underlying Filipino youths' participation in the event. Our findings revealed that parents had a major impact on Filipino youths' decision making to take part in the event. The debutante ball also initiated changes in participants' lives: their personality, interests, and involvement with the community.

References

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