

“I never faced up to being gay”: Sexual, religious and ethnic identities among British Indian and British Pakistani gay men

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a comparative qualitative study of British Indian and British Pakistani gay men, all of whom self-identified as members of their religious communities. Data were analysed using thematic analysis and identity process theory. Results suggest that the intersection between sexuality and religion is more relevant to British Pakistani participants, while the intersection between sexuality and ethnicity is more relevant to British Indian participants. For British Indian participants, in particular, homosexuality seems to be socially problematic, posing potential obstacles for interpersonal and intergroup relations. Conversely, for British Pakistanis, homosexuality is both socially and psychologically problematic, affecting intrapsychic as well as interpersonal levels of human interdependence. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

Keywords: gay; religion; British Indian; British Pakistani; men

In Britain, the social, political and legal positions of individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transsexual (LGBT) have greatly improved over the last few decades, leading to greater tolerance and acceptance at a societal level. However, minority ethnic and religious individuals who identify as LGBT can continue to face discrimination from within their ethnic and religious communities (Yip 2007). Social representations of homosexuality within these communities may be stigmatising, potentially resulting in decreased willingness to 'come out' (Jaspal and Siraj 2011) and perceived conflict between their sexual and ethno-religious identities (Bhugra 1997). When ethnic and religious contexts prescriptively advocate heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality, LGBT individuals tend to remain invisible, may avoid public exposure and actively conceal their non-normative sexual identities (Yip 2007).

Recently, there has been some empirical research into the experiences of British Pakistani gay men (BPGM) of Muslim faith, although this remains an under-developed area of investigation (Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010, 2012; Yip 2004, 2007). Work has focused largely upon the interface of religious and sexual identities, with only cursory attention to the role of ethnicity. Moreover, there is no existing research into British Indian gay men (BIGM) who identify as Sikh and Hindu. This paper seeks to redress the balance by exploring the intersections of sexuality, religion and ethnicity among both groups, that is, among British South Asian gay men (BSAGM). Findings contribute to an emerging literature on identity construction and management among ethno-religious minority gay men, although it is acknowledged that these issues could and should be

examined in relation to other non-heterosexual groups (e.g. lesbians; bisexual individuals). After an overview of key theory and research, the paper discusses the management of sexual, religious and ethnic identities; the role of family, culture and interpersonal relations in identity management; the prospect of marriage in life narratives; and maintaining a sense of belonging in relevant in-groups.

Identity process theory

Identity process theory (IPT) (Breakwell 1986) provides a useful heuristic lens for understanding identity management. It integrates identity construction, threat and coping, while synthesising the social and psychological levels of analysis. IPT proposes that identity construction is regulated by two universal processes, namely assimilation-accommodation and evaluation. The assimilation-accommodation process refers to the absorption of new information in the identity structure (e.g. I am gay) and of the adjustment which takes place in order for it to become part of the structure (e.g. I am gay so maybe I cannot be a Muslim). The evaluation process confers meaning and value upon the contents of identity.

These processes are guided by the following principles: continuity across time and situation (continuity), uniqueness or distinctiveness from others (distinctiveness), competence and control (self-efficacy), personal and social worth (self-esteem), inclusion and acceptance in groups (belonging), significance and purpose (meaning), and compatibility and coherence between inter-connected identities (psychological coherence). IPT suggests that when identity processes cannot, for whatever reason, comply with psychologically salient principles, identity is threatened and the individual

will engage in coping strategies to alleviate the threat. A coping strategy is defined as ‘any activity, in thought or deed, which has as its goal the removal or modification of a threat to identity’ (Breakwell 1986, 78). IPT acknowledges the importance of social representations in shaping how elements of one’s social and psychological worlds will impact identity. For Breakwell (1986, 55), a ‘social representation is essentially a construction of reality’, which enables individuals to interpret the social world and to render it meaningful (Moscovici 1988). Social representations dictate what is socially and culturally important in a given context.

British Pakistani gay men

Most BPGM are Muslims. Islam emphasises the complementarity and unity of the two sexes with distinguishable gender roles associated with either one (Yip 2004). Islamic ideology tends to be strictly opposed to Western conceptualisations of homosexuality in the sense of ‘coming out’ as exclusively gay (Duran 1993). This (Western) social representation of homosexuality is likely inform meaning-making among BPGM (Yip 2004). However, it is acknowledged that homosexuality may be ‘tolerated’ or denied in Islamic societies provided that it remains socially invisible and that men fulfil their religious/cultural duties, such as heterosexual marriage (Murray and Roscoe 1997).

Recent research into the interface of Muslim and gay identities suggests that BPGM may face threats to several identity principles (Jaspal 2012). The most prominent threat concerns the psychological coherence principle, as individuals may fail to establish feelings of compatibility and coherence between their Muslim and gay identities which they see as being ‘inter-connected’. Jaspal and Cinnirella (2010, 852) argue that ‘it is primarily the intrapsychic level at which there is potential for conflict and distress

resulting from lack of self-coherence and from the awareness of one's conflicting identities'. Furthermore, exposure to homophobia from their ethno-religious communities can have negative outcomes for self-esteem. Some BPGM can fail to derive a positive self-conception on the basis of their gay identity (Yip 2007), leading to 'symmetrical' evaluative patterns concerning Muslim and gay identities. Muslim identity is evaluated positively and associated with Good, while gay identity is constructed as 'wrong' and 'evil' (Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010). At a social level, religious and cultural homophobia can mean that the disclosure of one's gay identity in these circles could lead to ostracisation and 'otherisation' (Yip 2007). Thus, the belonging principle is often vulnerable to threat among BPGM who have not yet disclosed their sexual orientation (Jaspal and Siraj 2011), and coming out itself can essentially result in actual threats to belonging (e.g. family disownment) (Yip 2004). Unsurprisingly, it seems that many BPGM may actively resist relations with other gay men due to fear of disclosure (see Jaspal and Cinnirella 2012). While there is a growing body of knowledge on BPGM, there is no previous research which focuses upon how sexual, religion and ethnicity interact among (primarily non-Muslim) BPGM.

British Indian gay men

Most British Indians are, at least nominally, of Hindu or Sikh faith (Ghuman 2003). Sikhism has no specific teachings on homosexuality; there is no mention of homosexuality in the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh holy book. This has created ambivalent interpretations of the 'Sikh position' concerning homosexuality (CBC News 2005). Similarly, there is little consensus regarding the Hindu position – homosexuality was historically presented as an aspect of human sexual desire and is even depicted in the

architecture of ancient Hindu temples, yet it is rarely discussed openly in Hindu theology. However, the UK Hindu Council has officially declared that Hinduism does not oppose homosexuality, while attributing homophobia among Hindus to ‘cultural’ factors (The Indian Express 2009). Furthermore, Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus seem to manifest their religious identities differently from Muslims. Ballard (1994) argues that most young Sikhs see their ‘Sikhism’ in terms of an ethno-cultural rather than religious identity. Furthermore, levels of religiosity seem to differ among Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus in Britain; in a survey, 74% of Muslims saw their religion as ‘very important’, while only 46% of Sikhs and 43% of Hindus did (Modood et al. 1997). Thus, it seems important to examine the role of ethnicity, not just religion, in shaping perceptions of gay identity.

One observable commonality between Muslim, Sikh and Hindu South Asians concerns their cultural prioritisation of the concept of *izzat* or personal and cultural honour, which tends to be conceptualised by them in similar ways (Ghuman 2003). An essential tenet of maintaining familial *izzat* is the fulfilment of the cultural expectation of marriage, which in many cases is arranged by the family. Any contravention of cultural norms concerning sexuality (e.g. being gay) can be regarded as a threat to the collective group as a whole, potentially resulting in negative consequences ranging from ostracisation to psychological or physical abuse (Jaspal and Siraj 2011).

In an early study of coming out among BSAGM, Bhugra (1997) noted feelings of regret, self-deprecation and self-hatred among many of his participants, given the ‘traumatic discrepancy’ between being Asian and gay. More specifically, Bhugra (1997, 556) located the problem in individuals attempting to construct ‘a coherence sense of self from the two identities he seeks to attain: Asian and gay’, alluding to threatened psychological coherence. Furthermore, he described BSAGM as having ‘a foot in each

culture, without feeling a complete sense of belonging in either’, suggesting threats to belonging (Bhugra 1997, 555). While this is certainly true for many BPGM (Jaspal and Cinnirella 2012), there is no recent empirical evidence supporting this assertion among BIGM. It is not clear that being gay makes BIGM feel any less connected with their ethnic or religious communities. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that in recent years British Asian support groups and even gay nightclub events (Bassi 2008) have been developed with the aim of facilitating a positive sexual identity among BSAGM. Such social capital can provide ‘an environment for the establishment of resources, networks, relationships, norms, meanings and trust that enable smooth social engagements among members’ (Yip 2007, 86). Thus, the socio-psychological meanings attached to homosexuality and the perceived interactions between their gay, religious and ethnic identities are likely to differ among BIGM and BPGM.

This study aims (i) to compare BIGM and BPGM in their meaning-making vis-à-vis sexual, religious and ethnic identities; and (ii) to explore how they cope with identity threat due to their identity configuration.

Method

Participants

A sample of fifteen self-identified BSAGM was recruited in the East Midlands of England. The study focused upon the experiences of BIGM and BPGM (of Muslim, Hindu and Sikh backgrounds). A snowball sampling strategy was employed with initial participants recruited from within the author’s own social networks. The author has established contacts with BSAGM as a result of his previous research with this population (see Jaspal, 2012). The study was presented to potential participants as an

investigation of 'being gay, Indian/ Pakistani and of religious faith'. All Muslim participants reported being 'religious' or 'very religious'; three Sikhs reported being 'moderately religious' and one described himself as 'religious'; four Hindus described themselves as 'not very religious' while the remaining two reported being 'moderately religious'. The mean age of participants was 21.4 years (SD: 3.2). Four participants had university degrees, three were college students, and the remaining eight had completed high school education

Procedure and analysis

The interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule consisting of fifteen exploratory, open-ended questions. The schedule was adapted from a previous study of identity management among British Muslims (Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010) in order to accommodate the interface of sexual and ethnic identities among both BIGM and BPGM. The revised schedule began with questions regarding self-description, followed by more specific questions on the perceived origins of sexual identity; the management of any difficulties arising from the co-existence of sexual, religious and ethnic identities; and the effects for the identity principles outlined in IPT. Interviews lasted up to 60 minutes. They were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Pseudonyms have been used in this paper.

The data were analysed using thematic analysis, which has been described as 'a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data' (Braun and Clarke 2006, 78). Interviews and read repeatedly by the author. During each reading of the transcripts preliminary impressions and interpretations were noted in the left margin. These initial codes included *inter alia* participants' meaning-making, particular forms of

language, and apparent contradictions and patterns within the data. Subsequently, the right margin was used to collate these initial codes into potential themes, which captured the essential qualities of the accounts. Specific interview extracts, which were considered vivid, compelling and representative of the themes, were selected for presentation in the final research report.

Analysis

Identifying incompatibilities in the self-concept

Consistent with previous research (Yip 2004), BPGM tended to perceive their gay identity as an undesirable constituent element of the self:

I'm gay, it's me...I don't like it...because... it gave me grief...it caused me a lot of pain...But deep down, comparing it to today and right now in my life, I guess like as a child I never faced up to being gay, I just believed that sooner or later, I will change. Next year, if not next then the next one. But I was sure I'll change...As a Muslim, I can't be gay, I couldn't be, that's what I thought and think but now I am, I mean, that I just, just can't do it, turn straight, so that hope has gone man (Abdul)

Abdul seems to experience identity threat as a result of being gay. It is implied that during his childhood the 'grief' was immense *despite* his hope that he might be able to change his sexual orientation 'sooner or later'. Moreover, the perceived possibility of change meant that there was no immediate psychological need for confronting his gay identity and assimilating and accommodating it within his self-concept. Abdul attributes his 'grief' to the perceived incompatibility of being Muslim and gay. It seems that the perceived incongruence of his sexual and religious identities engendered within Abdul's mind a hope, rather than belief, that he would be able to change his sexual orientation and 'turn straight'. This

implicitly suggests that religious identity was attributed greater centrality than sexuality (Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010). Moreover, this is observable in his positive evaluation of Muslim identity vis-à-vis the relatively negative evaluation of gay identity. Despite his apparent abandonment of the hope that he will ‘turn straight’, the uneasy slippage between the past and present tenses suggests that he continues to regard his sexual and religious identities as incompatible.

Similarly, Omar highlighted his continued desire to change his sexual orientation:

I know what I’m doing is wrong...if I could choose I wouldn’t be gay... I know I’m going to go to hell for this...[I feel] sad, really ashamed, not comfortable or happy in my life, totally like my worlds are clashing (Omar)

Omar perceives his gay sexual orientation as ‘wrong’ and sinful, which he attributes primarily to the religiously derived social representation that gay people ‘go to hell for this’. The negative emotions of sadness, shame and discomfort seem to evidence threat to psychological coherence, that is, the perceived incompatibility between gay and Muslim identities. This is captured by Omar’s perception that his ‘worlds (represented by either identity) are clashing’.

Reflecting upon their experiences of ‘growing up gay’, participants described their difficulties in reconciling sexual and religious identities.

[It felt] hard, hard and hard...It was a struggle, a fight, and yeah it was just so hard for me...I was just fighting with myself when I was little, it felt so right and so damn wrong all at once. I knew my family, friends and the community would hate me like spit on me if they knew I’m gay so that

part of my life felt so wrong to me, and like a dirty part of me...I didn't know nobody who was gay and like I did suspect that a couple of guys were gay but we never talked about it, it was wrong...I remember thinking 'do I wish I was born straight?' and the answer is 'no, because I love the male body and I love men'. I'm not proud of it but I wouldn't want it any other way, you know...It felt so natural and right (Yusef)

Yusef describes his childhood experience of sexual self-discovery as 'hard', primarily because of its inducement of an internal, fundamentally psychological struggle. He attributes this to the competing evaluations of homosexuality from himself and his 'family, friends and the community'. On the one hand, individuals within relevant social circles are regarded as perceiving homosexuality and, by extension gay people, as loathsome. Furthermore, the perceived silencing of homosexuality even among individuals whom Yusef himself suspected to be gay, contributed to his awareness of negative social representations of homosexuality in Islam. It is possible that this led him to question the socio-psychological legitimacy of being gay: 'that part felt so wrong to me'. On the other hand, Yusef tellingly remarks that, provided with the choice to change his sexuality and 'turn straight' as one participant put it, he would refuse to do so. Despite the negative representations of homosexuality and his own ensuing doubts concerning its legitimacy, Yusef seems to experience some attachment to his gay identity (cf. Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010) and perceives it as an aspect of who he is, as 'natural and right', regardless of its social 'correctness'. Yusef is not necessarily contradictory in his conceptualisation of gay identity as 'so wrong', on the one hand, and 'so natural and right', on the other. When regarded from a purely social perspective, homosexuality can appear to be 'wrong', due primarily to the salience of negative social representations. Conversely, introspection and self-distancing from these representations may engender a more positive construal of being gay.

Family, culture and interpersonal relations

While psychological coherence seems to be severely compromised by being gay and Muslim among BPGM, the continuity principle may in fact be more susceptible to threat among BIGM, primarily because of perceived opposition to homosexuality from ‘family and culture’:

Now I’m totally fine with it...relaxed and calm about who I am, being gay...It ain’t gonna change any time soon and it’s just me. I ain’t saying I’m really proud of it or like out there or anything but it’s fine...but it’s like the family and culture that makes it a big issue because they are not gonna accept it the way I have, are they? They basically bring me back to like square one...They can just ruin everything in a second, like ruin our family life (Jas)

Jas’ account suggests that his sexuality (being gay) and ethnicity (being Indian) no longer engender conflict at the intrapsychic level. Despite not necessarily deriving pride and self-esteem from his gay identity, Jas has accepted and assimilated it within the self-concept, showing that self-esteem is not necessarily a superordinate principle of identity construction (Breakwell 1986). However, at the social level, gay identity may continue to pose a threat. For Jas, it is ‘the family and [Indian] culture’ that collectively render his gay identity a threatening element of his identity. More specifically, ‘they’ are regarded as being unwilling to accept his gay identity, which renders it a potentially problematic component of the self. The social interdependence of individuals in this collectivist culture means that threats at the social level may ultimately translate into threats at the intrapsychic level. This notion is reflected in Jas’ assertion that his family and culture can ‘bring me back to like square one’, essentially ‘undoing’ the psychological progress made

towards facilitating the assimilation-accommodation of his gay identity within the self-concept. This is constructed in terms of 'ruin[ing] everything' such as 'family life', which refers to the maintenance of positive interpersonal relations with other family members.

For BIGM, it seems that it is specifically the continuity principle, which remains susceptible to threat as a result of social pressures, rather than the psychological coherence principle. Any potential incompatibilities between sexual and ethnic identities seem to be wrought, although the risk of negatively altering existing personal and social relationships persists (Yip 2004). BIGM may regard their gay identity as increasingly harmful to the psychological thread between past, present and future (that is, continuity), particularly as they reach adulthood:

Everyday being gay is like getting harder for me because I can just see it in my head—mum is crying, dad is crying too and like just thinking 'he can't be my son' and my brothers would be like freaking out that I'm queer...I wouldn't be the same guy for them, the same son, or same brother or whatever. I couldn't handle it (Sunil)

Being gay is perceived by Sunil as having negative outcomes primarily because of the anticipated reactions of his family. There is a fear of social rejection as he perceives the possibility that his father may ultimately question their relationship: 'he can't be my son'. Vignoles et al. (2000) have described position (within the family, for instance) as one source of distinctiveness, particularly within collectivist cultures. Thus, his gay identity could indirectly jeopardise the distinctiveness principle. Furthermore, his 'outing' as a gay man could result in a breakdown in valued interpersonal relations (Yip 2004), threatening his sense of continuity. However, like Jas, Sunil does not necessarily perceive his gay identity as threatening at an intrapsychic level. He does not perceive being gay as

wrong or sinful in a religious sense, as many BPGM seem to do (Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010, 2012). Rather, the perceived vulnerability of social relations with significant others can result in potential threat.

Situating the prospect of marriage in life narratives

The topic of marriage emerged as an important concern among both BIGM and BPGM. For BIGM at least, it seemed to render salient formerly latent and dormant threats to the continuity principle:

I never thought about coming to terms [with being gay], I just ignored it when I had to...You reach an age where like, say now my folks start chatting about 'oh one day you'll be married and you'll have kids'. When I was younger they did like used to say it and it made me uncomfortable...sometimes it took me like days to get it out my mind. I was just scared of the future, not scared but uncomfortable...I go to uni, friends start getting hitched, I go and do a masters, friends are having kids but still I got an excuse, I'm still studying, I'm still officially a kid, right?
(Pavan)

Pavan reports never having thought about 'coming to terms' with his sexuality and having actively 'ignored it', which echoes the denial strategy of coping with threat (Breakwell 1986). The efficacy of denial as a protective strategy seems to be gradually deteriorating, as he turns his attention to the ethno-cultural institution of arranged marriage, which allows the direct participation of South Asian parents in arranging the marriages of their children (Ghuman 2003). This increasingly renders his gay identity a threatening component of the self.

The concept of marriage presents a dilemma; it is clearly valued from the perspective of his ethnic identity but from the perspective of his sexual identity its invocation at various temporal stages in his life caused identity threat. For instance, even as a child the assertion that he would be married and have children reportedly induced feelings of prolonged discomfort. In retrospect, Pavan constructs his education partly as an ‘excuse’ to avoid ‘getting hitched’ and ‘having kids’ (Yip 2004). By continuing to study, Pavan perceives scope for the construction, or rather the projection, of a ‘kid’ identity, which obviates the need to think about or discuss marriage. This helps to maintain a sense of continuity over time by barricading identity from a social stimulus which can introduce subjectively undesirable change and thereby disrupt their sense of continuity.

Like Pavan, Raj constructed his university experience as a strategy for deflecting marriage. His reflections upon the experience of having to confront the prospect of marriage in a conversation with his father elucidated the extent of identity threat:

I always had an excuse...I dreaded getting a job because... I’m running out of my reasons, excuses...Like what will I tell them when it’s time, eh?...I just put the deposit on a house and then that sentence finally came out my dad’s mouth... He was chatting about marriage and I froze...It wasn’t shock. It was like being told you got a disease, like by the doctor in his surgery, already like knowing you’ve got it but just pretending that you don’t.

Faced with the threatening prospect of marriage, Raj reports feeling ‘dread’. Securing employment and the purchase of property seemed to symbolise his coming-of-age and thus eligibility for marriage. While marriage may constitute an ethno-culturally desirable progression from university education, employment and the purchase of one’s own property, potentially enhancing continuity at a social level, for Raj, as a gay man, marriage clearly constitutes a threat to continuity at the intrapsychic level.

Raj elucidates the threat of marriage by objectifying it metaphorically in terms of a doctor's diagnosis of 'a disease' (Moscovici 1988). Like several participants, Raj seems to have been aware of the threatening nature of marriage and of its eventual emergence as a topical family concern over time. However, deflection strategies (e.g. denial) ensure that the threatening stimulus becomes latent over time, although significant others nonetheless retain the ability to render this threatening salient this stimulus, as does Raj's father (Jaspal and Cinnirella 2012).

As a threatening stimulus, the prospect of marriage seemed to (re-)shape the relationship of some BIGM to their 'homeland', potentially undermining existing relationships with ethno-cultural heritage. Karan stated:

I hate the idea of even going to India, like a family holiday to India would be hell now. It wouldn't be a holiday, it'd be marriage arranging, match-making. I can't handle that. To think how much it'd ruin my life just going there and I'd end up telling them.

Coming-of-age among some BIGM may entail a re-negotiation of their relationship to the 'homeland'. Karan anchors trips to the homeland to a broader parental agenda of 'marriage arranging, match-making'. Thus, the prospect of travelling to the homeland becomes similarly threatening for continuity. Qualitative research with (not necessarily LGBT) British South Asians has shown that they tend to manifest a sentimental attachment to the 'homeland' and that it can therefore be important for the self-concept (Jaspal 2011). The important point is that some BIGM seem to revise their psychological relationship with the homeland, potentially becoming averse to it, as a result of its anchoring to the threatening prospect of 'marriage arranging, match-making'.

Conversely, BPGM may incorporate marriage within their narratives regarding the future, given that this is frequently perceived to constitute a 'logical' step forward. This position is consistent with the perception that being gay constitutes a sinful behaviour. Accordingly, participants reiterated their intention to enter into heterosexual marriages:

This whole thing is kind of a phase in my life, it has to be because I've got to get married and I'm going to have a family some day (Yusef)
It kind of feels like it'll like get better if I like get with a woman and have kids. I might forget about guys and my life before (Ahmed)

Given the perceived incompatibilities of gay identity and heterosexual marriage (cf. Muirray and Roscoe 1997), Yusef attenuates the centrality of gay identity in the self-concept and downgrades this to the level of 'a phase in my life', rather than as an identity. This may be motivated by the perceived ethno-religious obligation to get married and to 'have a family some day'. However, gay identity can represent a barrier to these aspirations, interrupting one's constructed life trajectory. Similarly, Ahmed perceives marriage as a means of attenuating behaviour and self-aspects associated with his gay identity. Accordingly, marriage may serve as a buffer against the negative implications of gay identity for the self-concept. Unlike BIGM, BPGM tended to perceive marriage and travel to Pakistan as in fact enhancing continuity:

I like going to Pakistan...if I'm gonna get my life sorted, on track, then it's gonna be in Pakistan, like getting married and shit (Abdul)

Unlike several BIGM, Abdul evaluates trips to the homeland in more positive terms. He perceives Pakistan as a context, in which he might be able to ameliorate his lifestyle, primarily through marriage. Thus, the homeland can indirectly provide a sense of

continuity. It facilitates marriage, which is included within his constructed life trajectory and, conversely, undermines his gay identity, which contradicts this constructed life trajectory.

Maintaining a sense of belonging

For BPGM, coming out or involuntary disclosure of their sexuality can potentially result in social ostracisation, potentially threatening their sense of belonging in their religious and ethnic ingroups (Jaspal and Siraj 2011). BPGM were generally concerned about their positions within their ethnic and religious groups:

Interviewer: Can you imagine ‘coming out’ as gay to your family?

Ahmed: Never, no chance in hell...I’d be hated, kicked out the community or worse than that, who knows...I can’t imagine being alone in the world.

Ahmed clearly constructs coming out as a potential barrier to acceptance and inclusion in his ethno-religious in-group. The data suggest that his ethno-religious in-group constitutes a primary source of belonging for Ahmed, and that there do not seem to be any alternative sources of belonging. IPT would predict that individuals will make use of their multiple group memberships in order to maintain a sense of belonging. However, it is possible that ‘closeted’ BPGM do not actually have access to alternative sources of belonging, primarily because of their reported inability and refusal to partake in ‘gay space’, such as bars and support groups (Jaspal and Cinnirella 2012).

Several BPGM reported their need to remain accepted and included within religious circles, in particular:

The mosque is an important part of my life and I need to go every *joma* [Friday], like being with other Muslims, hearing the Imam, these are all important things in my life as a Muslim...Being gay, it's like a curse because I know that like when I'm with guys or whatever, I am like risking all these important things for nothing (Mohammed)

Mohammed clearly prioritises the collective social elements of his Muslim identity, including mosque attendance and close interpersonal relations with other Muslims. Given that his gay identity is seen as potentially jeopardising access to these collective religious elements, he conceptualises gay identity in terms of a 'curse'. There is a clear attenuation of gay identity and accentuation of Muslim identity as a source of belonging (Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010).

Conversely, even those BIGM who described themselves as moderately religious did not seem to regard religious circles as primary sources of belonging:

I am not bothered what they think of me at the Gurdwara [Sikh temple]. I only go there when there's a special occasion anyway...It's not like anyone really knows me there anyway (Gurjeet)

I wouldn't say that I feel that at home like in a Mandir [Hindu temple], I hardly know anyone there, it's just my mum's friends (Sunil)

Several BIGM highlighted their potential willingness to disclose their gay identities to significant others in time, provided that they perceived an alternative source of social support or belonging. For instance, participants derived feelings of support from their interpersonal relations with others:

After a while I realised there's more Asians like that, you know into guys...It was a real help for me, like I didn't feel alone no more and thought 'I can't stand on my own two feet' and I got my mates (Ram)

If the community leaves me like kicks me out then to hell with them...I'm more myself with White guys anyway...Much, much more understanding than Asians...I have plenty of White mates (Sat)

Both BIGM expressed awareness of the negative representations of homosexuality within their ethnic groups and that coming out could jeopardise belonging within them. Raj's discovery that there are other BSAGM, among whom feelings of acceptance, inclusion and solidarity could be developed, seemed to alleviate this threat to belonging. Similarly, Sat positively evaluates his interpersonal relations with 'White gay guys', among whom he can manifest his 'true' individual identity: 'I'm more myself'. Furthermore, in contrast with previous research, which suggests that BPGM may feel unable to connect interpersonally with White British gay men (Jaspal and Cinnirella 2012), Sat conversely regards them as being 'much, much more understanding than Asians' (see also Bassi 2008). The crucial point characterising both accounts is that these BIGM seem to have developed alternative interpersonal networks for deriving sufficient levels of belonging. This means that perceived rejection from one's ethnic or religious community may not necessarily be construed as threatening for belonging. Consequently, individuals may attenuate their religious and/or ethnic identities altogether.

Discussion

This paper demonstrates the different ways in which the self-concept may be affected by the inter-relationships between sexual, religious and ethnic identities among BSAGM. The results of this paper are not intended to be empirically generalisable, due to the small

sample size. However, a key advantage of this small-scale, in-depth approach is that it provides detailed, nuanced and contextually sensitive insights into the complex socio-psychological dynamics underlying the management of sexual, religious and ethnic identities among BSAGM.

Identity dynamics

This study taps into participants' construction of sexual, religious and ethnic identities by examining their internalisation of aspects, norms, values and practices associated with these social group memberships. For instance, when an individual views *izzat* as an important aspect of the self, this may be interpreted as symbolic of ethnic identity. Consistent with previous research (Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010), BPGM may face identity threat as a result of being gay and Muslim (Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010). However, while BPGM articulate concerns regarding conflict between their religious and sexual identities at a psychological level, BIGM tend to see their ethnic and sexual identities as potentially incompatible at a social level.

For BIGM, the co-existence of gay and ethnic identities did not seem to jeopardise the psychological coherence principle. Although several participants reported questioning the compatibility of their sexual and ethnic identities during childhood, as young adults they seem to have developed feelings of compatibility and coherence between them, obviating threats to the principle. This reflects an important difference between BIGM and BPGM participating in the study. However, awareness of negative representations within their ethnic communities has resulted in the construal of gay identity as a socially problematic

element of identity. British Indian participants reported feeling decreased self-esteem when these representations became salient in ethno-religious contexts, although there was no evidence to suggest that being gay was construed as ‘wrong’ or as threatening self-esteem at the intrapsychic level.

Furthermore, BIGM appear to have developed strategies to alleviate threats to the continuity principle at the intrapsychic level. An important starting-point is the assimilation-accommodation of their gay identity within the self-concept (Breakwell 1986). In many cases, this has resulted in the construal of gay identity as part of their life trajectory, while norms, values and expectations associated with ethnic identity (e.g. marriage) become psychologically latent. However, continuity can be problematised at a social level, since involuntary disclosure of their gay identity is seen as potentially disrupting valued interpersonal relations with family members. Furthermore, when the prospect of marriage is rendered salient by family members, this can induce discrepancies between ethno-cultural continuity and sexual continuity, essentially jeopardising the continuity principle. Crucially, identity threat is induced by social processes, such as invocation of marriage by significant others, rather than any intrapsychic questioning of identity coherence.

People need to belong in social groups in order to derive feelings of acceptance and inclusion (Baumeister and Leary 1995). However, gay identity can expose BSAGM to a risk of ‘otherisation’ from relevant in-groups. IPT predicts that individuals will make use of their multiple group memberships in order to minimise threat to identity (Breakwell 1986). BIGM did seem to make use of this strategy through self-inclusion within their

sexual in-group. Therefore, ostracisation from ethnic and religious circles, while psychologically undesirable, seemed to be construed as less of a threat to identity. This may be attributed to the availability of various group memberships to BIGM, such as the national and sexual in-groups, which can become alternative sources of belonging (Jaspal 2011). Conversely, it has been argued that British Pakistanis tend to be less integrated within British society and more ethnically and religiously ‘insular’ (Robinson 2009), which could limit the number of group memberships available to them. Thus, their ethno-religious group membership, as their primary source of belonging, may be all the more important. This identity is likely to remain ‘core’, primarily because other group memberships are perceived to be less available and thus inadequate sources of belonging.

Marriage and the ‘homeland’

While some previous work has examined how the ‘Asian wedding’ can be appropriated and re-created in ‘gay space’, such as the gay nightclub scene (Bassi, 2008), this paper provides some insight into how BIGM and BPGM relate socially and psychologically to the prospect of their own marriage (Yip 2004). BIGM seemed to construe marriage as a threat to continuity, since it can disrupt the unifying psychological thread between a present, which recognises gay identity as an established element of the self-concept, and an uncertain future, which may entail a (forced) heterosexual marriage. Given its threatening nature, BIGM seemed to have developed strategies for deflecting marriage, socially and psychologically. Moreover, there seems to be a discrepancy between cultural continuity, which requires marriage, and sexual continuity.

The homeland (i.e. India or Pakistan) may be anchored to the prospect of marriage, that is, since some individuals associate trips to the homeland with arranged marriage. This can induce a sense of ethnic dis-identification among BIGM. Conversely, BPGM seemed to construe the prospect of marriage as a potential buffer for identity threat. Marriage forms part of the constructed life trajectory of many BPGM, who may see coming out and a gay lifestyle as impossible (Jaspal and Siraj 2011). Marriage, being an element of their constructed life trajectory, is assimilated and accommodated within the self-concept. Thus, the realisation of this element of their life trajectory may be vital for maintaining a sense of continuity. Indeed, BPGM may see marriage as potentially ‘rectifying’ or ‘fixing’ sexual orientation, facilitating the construction and development of a heterosexual lifestyle, which is desirable from a Muslim perspective (Yip 2004).

In short, while marriage can be threatening for BIGM, it may be more of a coping strategy among BPGM. Interestingly, BSAGM seem to internalise Western social representations of homosexuality; our British Indian participants view marriage as incompatible with their gay identity, while BPGM may view it as a means of ‘ceasing’ to be gay in the long-run. This departs from the notion that homosexuality may be tolerated in Islamic societies provided that it exists alongside heterosexual marriage (Duran, 1993).

Implications and future directions

Although small in scale, this research may inform potential practical interventions. In particular, the research identifies factors which might affect how BSAGM manage sexual, religious and ethnic identities. Support groups should endeavour to provide their

members with sufficient levels of belonging by facilitating an atmosphere of acceptance and inclusion, given that the principle is particularly susceptible to threat. Moreover, there is a need to re-evaluate the socio-psychological meanings attached to 'homosexuality', so that it can be successfully assimilated and accommodated within the self-concept. Furthermore, there should be debate concerning heterosexual marriage in order to de-construct the social representation (among many BPGM) that heterosexual marriage constitutes a vital, non-negotiable 'duty' associated with ethno-religious identity (Yip 2004). Accordingly, BSAGM may come to feel less obliged to enter into a potentially misguided heterosexual marriage.

In future research, there is a need to examine the development and maintenance of interpersonal relations with other gay men, many of whom may be ethnic and religious out-group members, particularly as many BSAGM increasingly contemplate 'coming out'. Although there is evidence from the USA that 'race', ethnicity and religion may acquire particular salience in 'gay space' (Minwalla et al. 2005), and that individuals may face exclusion and discrimination in these contexts, there is very little UK-based work. This would complement work in human geography concerning the development of gay nightclub events for BSAGM (Bassi 2008) and the experiences of BPGM in gay settings (Jaspal and Cinnirella 2012). Clearly, experiences in gay affirmative social contexts will inform individuals' meaning-making vis-à-vis their gay identities, prompting them to envisage potential social responses from significant others including family and White British gay men).

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