The psychological challenges of being BAME and gay
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Coming out as gay can be a challenging process – both psychologically and socially. One is seldom certain of how others – friends and family members – will react to this news. The individual may conjure up memories of previous conversations they've had with others about being gay to gauge their likely reaction. *How did dad react to that gay character on television? Was it a disparaging remark?* Such memories can plausibly lead us to anticipate a similar response to our own coming out. We consider this before we decide to tell others what is often a very important aspect of our identities – our sexual orientation. Thankfully, we live in a society that is increasingly accepting of sexual diversity and LGBT identities – according to the British Social Attitudes survey, in 2012 57% of British respondents viewed same sex relations between two adults as either "not wrong at all" or "rarely wrong".[1] Consequently, many young gay men report a very positive coming out experience.[2] However, for BAME gay men, coming out can be complex and problematic. Over the last few years, I have been researching the social and psychological aspects of coming out among Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) gay men. My work has focused on South Asian, Black Caribbean, Black African and Latin American gay men in the UK. Although BAME gay men's experiences are diverse, I have consistently found that the process of coming out can pose particularly severe threats to their wellbeing because of the "double jeopardy" of being BAME and gay.

Identity conflict: homophobia and racism
Human beings are of course extremely diverse – we often categorise ourselves into "races", cultures, religions, social classes and other groups that make us feel different from each other. However, our research (Jaspal & Breakwell, 2014) finds that there are some basic *psychological needs* that we all have, regardless of group membership:
- Self-esteem - we like to have confidence in our own sense of worth.
- Continuity - despite the fact that we all experience some form of change in our lives (e.g. getting into a new relationship, growing older), we like to see our lives as being coherent and as having a logical narrative structure.
- Self-efficacy - we like to have confidence in our abilities to control our lives.
- Belonging: we strive for feelings of acceptance and inclusion among others.
- Coherence: we like to feel that our group memberships (e.g. being Muslim and being gay) "fit together".

I've consistently found that coming out as gay can quite seriously jeopardise these important psychological needs. In some BAME communities, homosexuality is extremely taboo and, therefore, not discussed or acknowledged. This of course does not mean that there are no gay people or that men do not have sex with other men

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[1] http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-30/personal-relationships/homosexuality.aspx
[2] http://www.rucomingout.com/stories.html

in these cultures. Yet, the silence around gay sexuality can make some young men feel that they are doing something wrong and that their character is fundamentally flawed: "You just don't discuss it… My mum finds some porn but never mentioned it. Just turned a blind eye. I always felt like I'm sinning". Some of the Muslim gay men I've interviewed clearly exhibited internalised homophobia and believed that they would be punished by God for being gay. One respondent described his fear of divine retribution in a gay nightclub: "I sat down [in Heaven] and I kept thinking the roof was going to fall in any minute and that we'd all die there and then.. I knew it was a bad place with bad stuff going on around me. I hated that night" (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). This specific example illustrates the conflict that some Muslim men face in relation to their sexuality and religion. It is easy to see how these feelings can make some individuals question their self-worth – *am I a bad person because I like men? Does this make me a bad Muslim?* It can also threaten individuals' sense of coherence.

Furthermore, many British Asian gay men are raised in a culture that attaches considerable importance to (heterosexual) arranged marriage – this is a cultural expectation and something that families play an important role in planning. Some men themselves may hope to get married in a bid to "change" their sexual orientation, while others are deeply troubled by this prospect. Indeed, one British Asian participant indicated: "When I think about me getting married, it makes me feel actually sick. . . my heart starts beating and my stomach starts churning. I can't do anything to avoid that feeling". Others contemplated marriage as a possible "quick fix" to their problems at home: "looking ahead it might not be that bad after all, getting hitched, like I might get used to it... I could have kids and fill my mind with that." In many cases, the family expectation of an arranged marriage can radically challenge their sense of continuity – it's something that "disrupts" their plans and self-image, and individuals may fear the repercussions that could have for their families.

In addition to homophobia from their ethnic and religious circles, BAME gay men may also face racism from other gay men. FS Magazine recently produced a timely and fascinating issue on racism on the gay scene,[3] which vividly exhibited how one particular psychological need – *belonging* – can be severely jeopardised. BAME gay men frequently report being shunned on gay dating apps and on the gay scene, which can make them feel that, due to their ethnicity, they are not accepted and not welcome. In a recent study I conducted (Jaspal, in press), interviewees elaborated their experiences of racism on the gay scene. While we tend to think of the gay scene as a liberal and accepting environment, one participant claimed: "I never faced racism until I came out, actually never", suggesting that this was particularly commonplace (and perhaps unacknowledged) on the gay scene. Commonly, the forms of discrimination people face on the gay scene are quite subtle. One respondent exemplified this by noting that people "have all these stereotypes about Asians, like 'Oh, you're a Muslim so you must be all messed up'". Some men also reported feeling judged because they had not come out to family members. Given the growing social acceptance of LGBT identities, people may expect gay men to come out and to feel comfortable about doing so.

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[3] https://www.fsmag.org.uk/fs148-racism-and-the-gay-scene

How do BAME gay men cope with threat?

I've always been heartened to observe that, despite the threats and challenges that face, we tend not to sit around doing nothing – rather, we attempt to cope. We try to put the pieces back together again. Sometimes we succeed, and sometimes we fail. The success of coping logically depends on the specific coping strategy we use. I firmly believe there are "good" strategies and "not so good" ones. It is striking to observe that, although people tend to think about their sexuality as being fixed and rigid ("you're either gay or straight"), during the course of a single interview, BAME men may describe themselves as gay but later sporadically to define themselves as "bi-" or "curious". As a Muslim interviewee remarked, "I've never been with a woman but I can't call myself gay either.. I refuse to do that because I just don't feel gay." It was clear that the idea of being gay was deeply troubling for some individuals. This amounts to a form of *denial* – people may try to suppress aspects of their identity that they view as troublesome so that can retain their self-esteem. Being gay loses its power to threaten self-esteem because it is simply not acknowledged. Denial is not generally effective in the long-term because other people tend not to let sleeping dogs lie. For example, an interviewee of Caribbean background described getting into a physical fight with a friend who pressured him into acknowledging his sexual orientation, which he did not feel ready to do: "I just smacked him one because he was calling me a gay and in my mind being gay was basically a diss but later on yeah I did accept it".

Another problematic but common coping strategy is what psychologists call "compartmentalisation", whereby individuals keep their identities "separate" in their minds: "When I'm with my straight friends, I'm basically straight but when I'm out on the scene I'm gay". This largely reflects what some people refer to as "leading a double life". This strategy is unlikely to be effective in the long-term because it can eventually make people feel that they are "living a lie" and that their lives lack authenticity. Evidently, the most effective coping strategy is self-acceptance. A Latin American interviewee who struggled to accept his gay identity and HIV-positive status highlighted the benefits of self-acceptance: "When I had time to think about who I am and accept myself, all the abuse and rejection were unreasonable in my head. It was something I wouldn't tolerate any more from others." While self-acceptance can be difficult at first (because of the initial threats to self-esteem, continuity and so on), this strategy can be facilitated by building cohesive social networks (consisting of other gay men) who can provide more positive images of being gay, acceptance and inclusion, and a new sexuality-affirmative worldview.

Ways forward

We should celebrate, rather than resist, diversity in the gay community. BAME gay men often face multiple threats to their wellbeing, as many have to grapple with the challenges of both homophobia and racism. Many wish to retain connections with *both* their culture and sexual identity. There are also elements of internalised homophobia which may give rise to poor psychological wellbeing, increased sexual risk-taking and a generally less connected and harmonious gay community. I believe that we can collectively redress this problematic reality by *supporting* members of our diverse gay community. Self-acceptance is a key means of coping with adversity.

As a community, we can facilitate this by creating a more cohesive and harmonious environment for the gay community, in all its diversity.

References

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