ESOL: An Opportunity for Challenging Homophobia

Rusi Jaspal, PhD
De Montfort University, Leicester UK

Abstract
In this article, it is argued that the ESOL context provides an excellent opportunity for challenging homophobic social representations and for enabling students to explore *alternative* representations regarding sexuality and sexual orientation. First, an integrative theoretical framework from social psychology is presented as a means of understanding and predicting responses to discussions around LGB identities. Second, a case study on the identities and experiences of British Asians is provided to elucidate the underpinnings of homophobia. Third, some speculative observations are made about the potential implications of sexuality-based discussions in the ESOL classroom for students and teachers. A key argument is that the topic of sexuality should be introduced in the ESOL classroom in ways that do not threaten culturally and psychologically valued identities.

Author biography
Dr. Rusi Jaspal is a Chartered Psychologist and Senior Lecturer in Psychology at De Montfort University, Leicester. His research focuses on the construction and management of sexual identity among LGB individuals. E-mail: rusi.jaspal@cantab.net

ESOL: An Opportunity for Challenging Homophobia

Rusi Jaspal
De Montfort University

Abstract

In this article, it is argued that the ESOL context provides an excellent opportunity for challenging homophobic social representations and for enabling some students to explore *alternative* representations regarding sexuality and sexual orientation. First, an integrative theoretical framework from social psychology is presented as a means of understanding and predicting responses to discussions around LGB identities. Second, a case study on the identities and experiences of British Asians is provided to elucidate the underpinnings of homophobia. Third, some speculative observations are made about the potential implications of sexuality-based discussions in the ESOL classroom for students and teachers. A key argument is that the topic of sexuality should be introduced in the ESOL classroom in ways that do not threaten culturally and psychologically valued identities.

Introduction

Since the decriminalisation of homosexuality in the UK in 1967, lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) identities have gradually gained greater visibility. However, homophobia has not completely disappeared at a social level. Indeed, in 2013/14, 4622 homophobic hate crimes were recorded in the UK, and it is generally acknowledged that many more go unreported (Home Office, 2014). Furthermore, homophobic bullying remains a problem in our schools, colleges and universities (Stonewall, 2012). Recent studies suggest that, on the whole, ethnic minority LGB individuals can face greater challenges than their White British counterparts in constructing their sexual identities (Jaspal, 2015; Yip, 2007). This can be attributed, at least partly, to homophobia from their ethno-religious communities, which are important sources of identity and social influence.

The ESOL classroom brings together students of very diverse backgrounds many of whom may have beliefs about sexuality that are firmly grounded in cultural and religious identities. The ESOL classroom is, thus, a complex social space in which sexual prejudice may occur but sometimes remain unchallenged. This has been attributed *inter alia* to disinterest among ESOL practitioners who may regard sexuality as irrelevant, to the perception that sexuality is too taboo an issue to discuss in the classroom, and to the feeling among practitioners that they are under-prepared to engage their students on LGB issues (Wadell et al., 2011).

In this article, it is argued that the ESOL context actually provides an excellent opportunity for challenging homophobic social representations and for enabling some students to explore *alternative* representations regarding sexuality and sexual orientation. First, an integrative theoretical framework from social psychology is presented as a means of understanding and predicting responses to discussions around LGB identities. Second, a case study on the identities and experiences of British Asians is provided to elucidate the underpinnings of homophobia. Third, some speculative observations are made about the potential implications of sexuality-based discussions in the ESOL classroom for students and teachers.

Insights from Social Psychology

A central proposition in this article is that identity is key to understanding homophobia and its consequences. People strive to maintain their identities, that is, their understanding of *who they are* and *what makes them them*, which is why "coming out" as LGB can be so challenging. However, this is also one of the reasons that people may manifest homophobia – they may perceive homosexuality as challenging who they are and the beliefs that they see as central to who they are. In investigating the significance of identity, two theories from social psychology – Identity Process Theory and Social Representations Theory - are particularly insightful.

Identity Process Theory (Breakwell, 1986; Breakwell, 2014) provides a useful heuristic lens for understanding how people construct, regulate and protect their identities. More specifically, it focuses on how people react to "threats" to their identities. Identity Process Theory proposes that people construct their sense of identity by engaging in two psychological processes, namely (i) assimilation-accommodation and (ii) evaluation:

- The assimilation-accommodation process refers to the absorption of new information in the identity structure and to the adjustment that takes places for it to become part of the structure. For instance, an individual who comes to accept that he is gay *assimilates* this sexual category in his identity – it becomes a part of how he defines himself. However, in order to *accommodate* his gay identity, he may begin to re-think other aspects of his identity. He may, for instance, attenuate his Christian religious identity if he views this as being at odds with his sexual identity.
- The evaluation process confers meaning and value upon the contents of identity. For instance, an individual who comes out as gay may initially view this as a negative trait due to the heterosexism that is prevalent in his social context, but he may come to append positive value to his gay identity if he is involved in gay affirmative social networks, such as an LGB support group.

These processes function to create specific desirable end-states for identity, which are referred to as "identity principles." Identity processes are guided by the following principles:

- continuity – a continuous temporal thread connecting past, present and future
- distinctiveness - uniqueness and differentiation from others
- self-efficacy - competence and control
- self-esteem - personal and social worth
- belonging - inclusion and acceptance in relevant groups
- coherence - compatibility and coherence between identity elements

People strive to construct identities that are characterised by continuity, distinctiveness, self-efficacy and so on. The theory suggests that when identity processes cannot, for whatever reason, comply with psychologically salient principles, identity is threatened and the individual will engage in strategies to cope with 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, p. 78). Coping functions at three levels:

- Intrapsychic strategies include *inter alia* denial and re-conceptualisation. For instance, a man may be attracted exclusively to other men but refuse to accept his homosexuality, or he may re-conceptualise his identity as "bisexual" despite having no attraction to women.
- Interpersonal strategies are those that rely on altering relationships with others. Some LGB people may disassociate themselves from heterosexual people in order to immerse themselves in positive self-affirmative imagery and to escape homophobia.
- Intergroup strategies make use of intergroup dynamics in order to safeguard identity and include making strategic use of multiple group memberships and actively seeking group support through social networks or consciousness raising/ self-help groups. For instance, an individual may decide to join an LGB support group.

Crucially, people do not construct their identities in a social vacuum but rather through engagement with social norms, values, ideologies etc. These can be collectively referred to as *social representations.* Moscovici's (1988) defines social representations as systems of values, ideas and practices regarding a given social object. They are context-specific and create what one might call a shared social reality in which thinking and discussion regarding issues like sexuality can take place. Social representations are *tools* for communicating with one another – we understand each other, not just through language itself, but also through the social representations that underpin the words and phrases that we utter.

Moscovici (1988) outlines two processes that give rise to social representations, namely (i) anchoring and (ii) objectification. Anchoring refers to the process of making something unfamiliar understandable by linking it to something familiar. For instance, it has been found that British Pakistani men gay may themselves anchor homosexuality to "decadent British culture," which they use as an explanation for their sexual orientation (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). Objectification is the process whereby unfamiliar and abstract objects are transformed into concrete and "objective" common-sense realities. For instance, referring to homosexuality as a disease is a (metaphorical) objectification – homosexuality becomes tangible in people's minds, that is, as a disease that can be "cured".

In modeling the individual's relationship with a social representation, Breakwell (2014) points to the following factors:

- Awareness – people differ in their level of awareness of a social representation. For example, migrants from countries in which homosexuality is a taboo may simply be unaware of homosexuality *as an identity*, which can lead them to construe it as a set of negative and sinful behaviours.
- Understanding – people vary in the extent to which they understand a social representation. Some people may be aware of the social representation that homosexuality is sinful without really understanding why or what the source of this representation is.
- Acceptance – individuals accept a social representation to varying degrees. Migrants may be exposed to the social representation that homosexuality is an

innate sexual orientation, rather than a choice, but reject the validity of this representation. In other words, they may refuse to believe it.

- Assimilation – once accepted, the social representation needs to be assimilated to the network of existing social representations held by the individual. For instance, the Muslim individual who accepts the social representation of homosexuality as an innate sexual orientation may therefore need to re-think existing theological representations that homosexuality is a sinful choice.
- Salience – individuals' awareness and understanding of a social representation will likely depend on the extent to which the representation is salient in any given context. In societies in which homosexuality is a taboo, it simply is not discussed openly.

Identity Process Theory acknowledges the importance of social representations in determining identity content (i.e. the information that is accepted and assimilated), and the impact that social representations can have for identity processes (i.e. whether they are threatened or enhanced). For example, a social representation that challenges one's self-esteem, continuity etc is unlikely to be accepted, because human beings are motivated to protect their identities. This integrative framework of representation, identity and action can be useful in understanding the antecedents and consequences of homophobia, and how it may be challenged in the ESOL context.

British Asian Gay Men: A Case Study
There is much research into the antecedents of homophobia (see Herek, 2000), as well as the negative social and psychological effects on LGB individuals (e.g. Meyer, 1995; DiPlacido, 1998). The aim here is not to summarise this research but rather to present just one case study, namely, British Asians (a demographically important ethnic minority group in the UK) to understand the potential consequences of thinking about homosexuality in this group. The term "British Asian" denotes a superordinate ethno-racial category, used typically to refer to individuals of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Sri Lankan descent. At the time of the 2011 UK Census,[1] there were 3,078,374 individuals of South Asian descent resident in England and Wales. Within this superordinate category, Indians were the largest group (1,451,862); Pakistanis the second largest (1,174,983); Bangladeshis the third (451,529). British Asians constitute over fifty per cent of the non-White population and are therefore the largest visible ethnic minority group in the country.

The socio-demographic make-up of British Asians is diverse and complex. The majority of British Pakistanis are practising Muslims, and most British Indians are, at least, nominally Hindu or Sikh (Ghuman, 2003). Despite the socio-demographic variation, what most of the Asian immigrants share is their socialisation in a largely collectivist culture which attaches importance to kinship ("biraderi") and honour ("izzat"). These cultural tenets have remained powerful in British Asian communities (Ghuman, 2003), and in some cases there remains a preoccupation among Asian parents that their children should be "shielded" from the perceived immorality of elements of British/Western culture. Although there is little research into attitudes towards homosexuality among first-generation Asian immigrants, there is some

---

[1] 2001 UK Census, http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/census/2011-census/key-statistics-and-quick-statistics-for-local-authorities-in-the-united-kingdom---part-1/rft-ks201uk.xls

evidence that this may be regarded in terms of a "Western disease" that has "infected" the Asian community (see Yip, 2007). Moreover, interview research with young British Asian gay/bisexual men suggests that their parents and family members may view homosexuality as unnatural, as contrary to the norms and values associated with their ethnic culture and religion and as detrimental for the family's "izzat" (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). It is possible that many of the issues highlighted in this section will be relevant to ESOL students from cultures and countries in which homosexuality is not viewed as socially acceptable.

Recent qualitative social psychological research has explored the experiences, identities and social relationships of British Asian gay men (see Jaspal, 2015). This interview-based research has set out to examine how British Asian gay men experience their sexual, religious and ethnic identities and, in particular, the potential challenges associated with the intersection of these identities, as well as how individuals' social relations may change as a result (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010, 2014). A major focus of this work has been on the threats to identity that can occur among British South Asian gay men and how they seek to restore a positive sense of self. The aim has been to develop potential interventions for enhancing wellbeing. The accounts provided by British Asian gay men in this body of researchh have also shed light on how their parents, family and friends have responded to their sexuality as, in many cases, these social networks are important determinants of how individuals themselves view and evaluate their sexual identities (Jaspal & Siraj, 2011). Identity Process Theory might suggest that, in view of the negative social representations of homosexuality in South Asian communities which construe homosexuality as a "threat" to key aspects of their cultural and religious identities, parents and family members themselves may experience identity threat when learning that significant others (e.g. their children, family members, friends) are LGB. In collectivist cultures, the family and the community are central to identity and individual identities are often subordinate. Thus, if a member of this unit is perceived as being immoral or sinful (negative epithets commonly used in relation to homosexuality in these communities), it is possible that self-esteem will be challenged. In the generally tightly knit British Asian communities, gossip and accusations of immorality and bad parenting can greatly impact on perceptions of self-worth. Due to the identity and behaviour of a significant other, whose identity is interwoven with one's own, one may feel unable to derive a positive self-conception (Gecas, 1982).

Moreover, when a significant other discloses his/her sexual identity, people often begin to view this individual differently – that is, *primarily as a homosexual person*. The "lens" of sexuality may become the most important one and all other characteristics of the individual may become subordinate to their sexual identity. Negative social representations are activated and they can impact on patterns of behaviour with the LGB individual. This *negative* change in perception and behaviour can challenge the continuity principle of identity. Many British Asian gay interviewees have spoken of their parents' attempts to *change* their children's sexual orientations given that they may view it as a phase or as the result of negative external influences (e.g. liberal British attitudes). Some may pressurise their children into agreeing to an arranged (heterosexual) marriage which they may view as "rectifying" their sexual orientation. Others may seek, or encourage their children to seek, religious or spiritual guidance with a view to coaxing their children into "becoming straight". In these ways and others, learning of the non-heterosexual identity of a

significant other can challenge identity, which in turn can produce ineffective strategies for attempting to cope.

These negative social representations of homosexuality in South Asian communities of course have important implications for LGB individuals of South Asian background. Research underpinned by Identity Process Theory has described experiences of identity threat among LGB members of these communities. There is evidence that homophobia and self-esteem are negatively correlated for gay men (Dupras, 1994). Given that psychologically meaningful groups, such as their ethno-cultural and religious ingroups, insist on the negativity of homosexuality, LGB South Asians themselves may themselves buy into such representations and develop internalised homophobia, that is, they may "experience some degree of negative feeling toward themselves" on the basis of their sexual orientation (Herek et al., 1997, p. 17). They may come to construe their gay identity as something to be ashamed of. The perceived possibility of otherisation and ostracisation from their family and ethno-religious circles - two valued group memberships - renders the belonging principle susceptible to threat. Exposure to negative representations can engender the belief that individuals will be excluded from relevant ingroups and, in the absence of other social support networks, this threat may be further accentuated.

There is now considerable data to suggest that the psychological coherence principle of identity can be severely jeopardised among Muslim gay men because many view the norms, values and practices perceived to be associated with their religious and sexual identities, respectively, as being in conflict. They may feel unable to derive any sense of connection between two identities that are important aspects of the self-concept. The perception that Muslim and gay identities are incompatible and incoherent can cause individuals to question their Muslim-ness, and to experience negative emotions such as shame, guilt, fear and anger (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). Crucially, these threats to identity can be particularly acute when they are flagged up by other individuals. Although threatened individuals attempt to cope, others may re-ignite the threat to identity. The ESOL classroom can become one such social context, particularly when homophobic social representations are introduced in the classroom. This specific context is considered in the remainder of the article.

ESOL: Challenges and Opportunities
Several scholars have examined the role and treatment of sexuality in the ESOL classroom (Nelson, 1999, 2009, 2010; Pawelczyk et al., 2014; Wadell et al., 2011). Some students in the ESOL classroom may come from countries and contexts in which negative social representations of homosexuality are prevalent. Some may, for instance, perceive homosexuality as a sin or a crime, particularly if this view is grounded in valued religious theology and if homosexuality is regarded as a punishable criminal offence in their country of origin. For instance, In the Islamic Republic of Iran homosexuality is forbidden on religious grounds, a view that is substantiated through reference to the Koran and the Hadith (accounts of the Prophet Mohammed's life and sayings), and sexual intercourse between men is punishable by death. The death penalty has been implemented for the "crime" of homosexuality and this appears to shape meaning-making vis-à-vis homosexuality (Jaspal, 2014). Students bring into the ESOL classroom their respective views, cultures, identities and social representations, all of which shape their engagement with the topics used by teachers to facilitate engagement with language learning. Some of these social

representations may plausibly be viewed as homophobic which may in turn induce challenges in the ESOL classroom when the topic of sexuality arises. These challenges concern learners and teachers - heterosexual and LGB alike.

ESOL students
Students who are embedded in homophobic social representations may reproduce these representations in the classroom. They may not necessarily view their remarks as at all problematic but rather as commonsensical. This is the very nature of social representations – to many of those individuals who have been socialised in societies in which a given representation is consensually accepted, the representation is synonymous with "common sense" (Moscovici, 1988). Students may be *aware* of positive social representations of homosexuality but they may attribute these representations of what they view as "excessively liberal" sexual attitudes or even sexual immorality (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). Alternatively, for those students who are immersed in contexts in which *only* homophobic social representations exist and prevail, they may not even be aware of positive alternatives. Indeed, in Nelson's (2009) interview study on sexuality in the ESOL classroom, many of her respondents reported never having interacted with openly LGB individuals before arriving in the US. In this context, it is entirely possible that individuals will have little exposure to positive, affirmative social representations of homosexuality.

Given the negativity of social representations of homosexuality, according to valued identities and group memberships, students may experience threats to identity when they do encounter LGB affirmative social representations in the ESOL classroom. The representations may challenge their existing representations and their existing ways of thinking which have guided their sense-making vis-à-vis sexuality. It is easy to see how the continuity principle of identity (that is, the unifying thread between past and present cognition) may be challenged as a result of exposure to such social representations. Accordingly, they may simply reject them. Of course, rejecting a social representation is rarely just a matter of declaring that one does not believe that it is true - rather one often provides supporting "evidence" to substantiate their position. For instance, individuals with a strong religious identity may draw upon theological sources in explaining their stance on homosexuality (Garcia et al., 2009), thereby excluding LGB individuals from the religious ingroup.

In cases where a student does manifest a homophobic remark, this remark may be challenged by others in the classroom. The person who makes this remark may feel that their sense of acceptance and inclusion in the learning context is jeopardised. This can threaten the belonging principle of identity. Fundamentally, if the individual does accept a more positive social representation, perhaps through exposure to positive imagery of LGB identities in the classroom, the individual will need to assimilate and accommodate this new representation to their identity. While this may transiently alleviate the threat to belonging, it can pose challenges for the coherence principle of identity, because it will require them to re-think existing identities and the social representations associated with them. For instance, in previous work, it has been found that British Muslim gay men themselves may experience difficulties in accepting re-interpretations of religious scripture that have been offered by LGB affirmative Islamic scholars (e.g. Kugle, 2010), because it is incompatible with the dominant interpretation in their religious ingroup. Full acceptance of this new social representation would require some re-construal, or even rejection, of the existing

representation. Thus, the threat to coherence may remain and acceptance of the positive social representation may be only transient.

LGB ESOL students
Like most social and institutional spaces, the ESOL classroom can sometimes be considered a heteronormative one, that is, one in which all linguistic mechanisms "lead to heterosexuality being perceived as the naturalized norm" (Motschenbacher, 2010, p. 11). There may be an implicit assumption (among both students and teachers) that all of the students are heterosexual, and the linguistic mechanisms affirming this position may further obscure LGB identities in the classroom. Discussions regarding sexuality can also impact the identities of LGB students, even if they do not disclose their identities to other students. Incidentally, many LGB students do conceal their sexual identities to avoid homophobia from other students (Kappra & Vandrick, 2006; Nelson, 2009). This can create challenges for one's sense of identity authenticity as students are often encouraged to discuss their personal lives (including family life and personal relationships) with other students. The concealment of one's LGB identity may lead to the need to fabricate aspects of one's background and personal life, leading to decreased feelings of authenticity. Moreover, a common interpersonal strategy for coping with threats associated with a stigmatised identity is the passing, that is, "the process of gaining access to a group or social category (sexual, political, economic or religious) by camouflaging one's group origins" (Breakwell, 1986, p. 116). In addition to challenging one's sense of authenticity and continuity, passing can induce anxiety that the group membership that one attempts to conceal may eventually be revealed to others. In other words, one lives in fear of being exposed. This is unlikely to constitute a psychological position that is conducive to learning.

When a homophobic social representation is reproduced in the classroom, it may plausibly threaten identity, as described in the case study above, particularly if these homophobic representations are not challenged by others in the classroom. For instance, assertions from other students that homosexuality is a sin and that homosexuals should be punished could severely compromise the LGB student's self-esteem, as it could impede a positive self-conception on the basis of an important aspect of who they are, namely their sexual orientation. This may call into question their sense of self-worth, but to maintain their sense of *social* worth individuals may feel compelled to engage in the interpersonal strategy of passing.

When negative social representations of homosexuality are reproduced, they gain access to the consciousness of LGB students. Individuals who struggle with stigmatised identities may go through a process of attempting to derive some sense of positivity and pride from them, perhaps by engaging in the process of re-construal and focusing upon the positive aspects of the identity. While this may be effective at a psychological level, others may undermine this process by *re*-stigmatising the identity in question. This can be particularly challenging in a context in which one expects acceptance, rather than stigma. Wadell et al. (2011) describe an insightful anecdote in their work on incorporating sexual identity in TESOL – a migrant to the US decided to emigrate primarily to escape the homophobia that she experienced in her home country and hoped for greater acceptance in the US, but she and her teacher worried about the possibility that she might be rejected by her peers if she were to disclose her lesbian identity. Many LGB immigrants come to the West to escape sexual prejudice

and discrimination in the hope of constructing a sexual identity in a more LGB affirmative context (Jaspal, 2014; Nelson, 2009). However, these hopes may be curtailed, and continuity between past hopes and present experiences can be challenged, if homophobia is encountered in the ESOL classroom.

Threats to belonging may surface if the negative, exclusionary social representation is regarded as being consensually accepted by others in the ESOL classroom. One of the ways in which LGB students may cope with the ensuing threats to their identities is by attenuating those social representations that challenge their sense of acceptance and inclusion and, conversely, by focusing upon those that promote a sense of inclusion. Mere exposure to a social representation that they attempt to attenuate could once again trigger the threat to belonging. This depends on the classroom dynamics and, particularly, how the initial voicing of the negative representation is dealt with by other students and by the teacher who possesses a degree of power in this context. It is possible that the student who *voices* this representation is the one whose sense of belonging is threatened if others speak out against it, as outlined in the previous subsection. Accordingly, the teacher can play an important role in determining the effects that social representations can have.

Teachers
Understandably, there has been a concern with students' responses to sexuality in the classroom (e.g. Nelson, 2009), given that the classroom is perceived as a key socialising institution in which people's identities and knowledge structures are constructed (Freeman & McElhinny, 1996; Adger, 2001). However, it is important to consider the role of teachers which is key in the ESOL classroom. This remains under-explored (though see Appleby, 2012). When homophobic social representations are voiced and introduced in the classroom, the teacher is of course also exposed to them. Homophobic social representations could also negatively affect teachers who themselves self-identify as LGB, as their sense of self-esteem and belonging could also be challenged.

Wadell et al. (2011) discuss the decision-making processes that teachers may go through in regards to "coming out" to students, and the potential impact that this may have on classroom dynamics. For many ESOL students, their teachers are a primary point of contact in the host country – a bridge to both the language and culture. Teachers are acutely aware of this role and, therefore, manage the extent to which they disclose their sexual identities to their students. In a survey of ESOL teachers in the US (Wadell et al., 2011), it was found that many decided to avoid the topic of sexuality (including their own) to avoid causing offence to students. Teachers were concerned about offending students by invoking a topic that may be a taboo in their cultures or by opening up the possibility of a student making a homophobic remark. Indeed, this attests to the perception among many ESOL teachers that they are under-prepared for dealing adequately with the sensitive topic of sexuality in the classroom.

However, teachers can play an important role in determining the effects that social representations can have for students. For instance, if a negative social representation is voiced, teachers may foster awareness of *alternative* social representations which are more positive in nature. As discussed above, students' limited contact with LGB individuals may mean that they have little or no exposure to LGB affirmative social representations. Although there has been some debate concerning the strategy of

presenting "authentic" images of LGB people, particularly in relation to the rationale for selecting some images over others (Britzman, 1995), this is nevertheless a strategy that broadens students' awareness of the breadth of social representations of LGB individuals and identities. These representations can then feed into subsequent discussion and debate. In short, TESOL provides a space for initiating debates on social issues, such as sexuality, by introducing alternative ways of thinking.

The teacher may attempt to enhance students' understanding of these social representations and, especially, of the sources of these representations. Crucially, debates can more easily be encouraged if there is sufficient understanding of the social representations themselves. For instance, teachers may ask their students to consider the various social representations of sexuality and LGB identities and then to think about the sources and antecedents of these representations, as a means of enhancing their understanding of them and of encouraging critical thinking in relation to these representations. This could then lead into discussions about alternative understandings of orthodox religious stances on homosexuality, which could create the conditions for re-thinking their own views. After all, in order to challenge a social representation, it is important to understand its major tenets. Similarly, one ought to understand a representation if it is to be accepted and assimilated.

Some individuals may uncritically accept homophobic social representations simply because they are so salient in their respective social contexts. The ESOL classroom is by no means a context in which students are coaxed into *accepting* particular social representations and this should not necessarily be the aim, partly because of the negative impact that this could have for identity processes and, particularly, for the self-efficacy principle of identity. However, by simply introducing and creating awareness of social representations, we may be able to encourage students to think critically and to reach independent decisions about the feasibility of these and other representations. For instance, Wadell et al. (2011) describe an anecdote in which a student unilaterally introduced an LGB affirmative social representation in the ESOL classroom, which was later taken up and discussed by the other students, leading to widespread interest in sexuality despite students' acknowledgement that LGB identities were invisible in their home countries. This example suggests that it is possible to foster positive engagement with the topic of homosexuality, with fruitful outcomes, when this is not positioned as threatening the identities of students.

Coping and Protecting Identity
Given the plethora of coping strategies that an individual may employ in response to threat, predicting classroom responses to sexuality is a challenging task. Threats to identity are unlikely to be conducive to the social and psychological conditions for learning to take place, so this must be investigated. When social representations are so challenging for one's sense of self, one may plausibly remove oneself from contexts in which the representations are voiced. Those ESOL students who have little or no awareness of positive social representations of LGB identities may find exposure to positive representations threatening for their sense of continuity, while LGB ESOL students may experience the voicing of negative social representations as harmful to their self-esteem and belonging, possibly inducing internalised homophobia (Herek et al., 1997).

It is plausible that threatened individuals will simply disengage from their learning, both socially and psychologically. There may be a reluctance to participate in, or even attend, classes in which dominant social representations are viewed as inconsistent with one's identity. Within the classroom, students may feel less able to engage with the learning material and, particularly, with others in the classroom. Indeed, self-isolation is an interpersonal strategy that may be deployed by individuals who experience threats to identity (Breakwell, 1986). This is applicable to the ESOL classroom, given that students are often asked to discuss aspects of their personal lives, including their families and relationships, which may render the whole process rather daunting for LGB students who wish to conceal their sexual identities. Thus, some may view self-isolation and disengagement as feasible strategies for coping.

It has been argued that teachers, in collaboration with both their colleagues and students, have an important role to play in promoting positive change. They may utilise their position of power (as teachers) to introduce sexuality-related topics and, particularly, positive social representations of LGB identities in the classroom so that students acquire *awareness* of these representations. Although it has been argued that the notion of "authentic images" of LGB people may be problematic (Nelson, 1999), the presentation of such images would at least serve to increase the range of representations that people are aware of, thereby creating the social and discursive conditions for engaging in balanced debate. This is not to suggest that students should be told what and how to think about sexuality, but we can help broaden the range of social representations at their disposal. Overt acknowledgement of sexuality may be taboo in some cultures because it is rarely discussed in public – the silencing of these issues contributes to their stigmatisation. By incorporating sexuality-related topics into the curriculum, teachers would render *salient* social representations of sexuality, thereby decreasing the stigma surrounding this topic.

A central argument of this article is that identity is of critical importance in how people understand and respond to social stimuli, such as sexuality. When social representations are introduced in the ESOL classroom, they should be introduced in ways that minimise threats to identity. If a given social representation is to be accepted by an individual and assimilated to their existing network of representations, the threat to identity will need to be minimised. We should ensure that the representations we promote do not undermine culturally and psychologically valued identities, such as one's religious group membership. Acknowledgement of the potential implications that particular social representations can have for people in the ESOL classroom will be of immense benefit to ensuring that discussing sexuality does not impede, but *enhances*, the learning environment. It should be remembered that identity threat is aversive for psychological wellbeing, on the one hand, but also for the learning environment, on the other.

References

Adger, C. T. (2001) Discourse in educational settings. In Schiffrin, D., Tannen, D. and Hamilton, H. (eds.) *The handbook of discourse analysis* (p. 503–517). London: Blackwell

Appleby, R. (2012) Desire in Translation: White Masculinity and TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly*, 47(1), 122–147

Breakwell, G.M. (1986). *Coping with threatened identities*. London: Methuen

Breakwell, G.M. (2014). Identity and social representations. In R. Jaspal, G.M. Breakwell (Eds.), *Identity process theory: identity, social action and social change* (pp. 118–134). Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Britzman, D. (1995) Is there a queer pedagogy? Or, stop reading straight. *Educational Theory, 45,* 151–165

DiPlacido, J. (1998) Minority stress among lesbians, gay men and bisexuals: a consequence of heterosexism, homophobia and stigmatization. In Herek, G. (ed.),*Stigma and Sexual Orientation* (pp. 138–159). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Dupras, A. (1994) Internalized homophobia and psychosexual adjustment among gay men. *Psychological Reports*, 75, 23–28

Freeman, R. and McElhinny, B. (1996) Language and gender. In S.L. McKay& N.H. Hornberger (eds.) *Sociolinguistics and language teaching* (pp. 218–280). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Garcia, J., Laboy, M.M., de Almeida, V. & Parker, R. (2009) Local impacts of religious discourses on rights to express same-sex sexual desires in Peri-Urban Rio de Janeiro. *Sexuality Research & Social Policy,* 6(3), 44–60

Gecas, V. (1982) The self-concept. *Annual Review of Sociology*, *8,* 1–33

Ghuman, P.A.S. (2003) *Double loyalties: South Asian adolescents in the West.* Cardiff: University of Wales Press

Herek, G.M., Cogan, J.C., Gillis, J.R. & Glunt, E.K. (1997) Correlates of internalized homophobia in a community sample of lesbians and gay men. *Journal of the Gay and Lesbian Medical Association*, 2, 17–25

Herek, G.M. (2000). The psychology of sexual prejudice. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 9(1) 19–22

Home Office (2014) Hate Crimes, England and Wales, 2013/14. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/364198/hosb0214.pdf

Jaspal, R. (2014). Sexuality, migration and identity among gay Iranian migrants to the UK. In Y. Taylor & R. Snowdon (eds.), *Queering Religion, Religious Queers* (pp.44-60) London: Routledge.

Jaspal, R. (2015) Nonheterosexual British Asian men: Social representations, identity and social relations. In J.D. Wright (ed.), *International Encyclopedia of the social and Behavioral Sciences* (pp.861–866), Second Edition. Oxford: Elsevier.

Jaspal, R., Breakwell, G.M. (eds) (2014) *Identity Process Theory: Identity, Social Action and Social Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Jaspal, R. & Cinnirella, M. (2010). Coping with potentially incompatible identities: accounts of religious, ethnic and sexual identities from British Pakistani men who identify as Muslim and gay. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *49*(4), 849-870.

Jaspal, R. & Cinnirella, M. (2014) Hyper-affiliation to the Religious Ingroup among British Pakistani Muslim Gay Men. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology,* 24(4), 265–277

Jaspal, R. & Siraj, A. (2011). Perceptions of 'coming out' among British Muslim gay men. *Psychology and Sexuality, 2*(3),183-197.

Kappra, R., & Vandrick, S. (2006) Silenced voices speak: Queer students re-count their experiences. *The CATESOL Journal, 18*(1), 138–150

Kugle, S.S.A. (2010) *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications

Meyer, I.H. (1995) Minority stress and mental health in gay men. *Journal of Health & Social Behavior,* 36(1), 38–56.

Moscovici, S. (1988) Notes towards a description of social representations. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 18, 211–250

Motschenbacher, H. (2010) *Language, gender and sexual identity: Poststructuralist perspectives*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins

Nelson, C. (1999) Sexual Identities in ESL: Queer Theory and Classroom Inquiry. *TESOL Quarterly,* 33(3), 371–92

Nelson, C. (2009) *Sexual identities in English language education*. New York: Routledge

Nelson, C. (2010). A gay immigrant student's perspective: Unspeakable acts in the language class. *TESOL Quarterly, 44*(3), 441-464.

Pawelczyk, J., Pakuła, Ł. & Sunderland, J. (2014) Issues of power in relation to gender and sexuality in the EFL classroom – An overview. *Journal of Gender and Power*, 1(1), 49–66

Stonewall (2012). The School Report: The experiences of gay young people in Britain's schools in 2012.
http://www.stonewall.org.uk/documents/school_report_2012(2).pdf

Wadell, E., Frei, K. & Martin, S. (2011) Professional Development Through Inquiry: Addressing Sexual Identity in TESOL. *The CATESOL Journal*, 23(1), 99–109

Yip, A.K.T., (2007) Sexual orientation discrimination in religious communities. In L. Badgett, J. Frank (eds.), *Sexual Orientation Discrimination: An International Perspective* (pp. 209–244). London: Routledge