

# **The Experience of Relationship Dissolution among British South Asian Gay Men: Identity Threat and Protection**

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Relationship dissolution has generally been associated with decreased psychological well-being, but little is known about how ethnic and religious minority gay men experience and cope with relationship dissolution. This article examines interview data from sixteen self-identified British South Asian gay men who provided insights into how they experienced and coped with relationship dissolution and into the potential effects of this for identity. Data were analyzed qualitatively using interpretative phenomenological analysis and identity process theory. The following themes are outlined: (i) constructing identity around the relationship; (ii) relationship breakdown and threats to identity; and (iii) repairing identity in silence. The data indicate the centrality of the relationship to identity because of its ability to enhance identity processes and the detrimental effect for identity processes that dissolution can therefore have. Individuals relied heavily upon intrapsychic, deflection strategies for coping with identity threat, which was due to a general lack of social support. Minority group members who are fearful of disclosing their sexual identity to others may cope inadequately with relationship dissolution, exposing identity to chronic threat.

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# **The Experience of Relationship Dissolution among British South Asian Gay Men: Identity Threat and Protection**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Close relationships, and particularly romantic relationships, are an important source of happiness, life satisfaction and psychological wellbeing for many people, regardless of sexual orientation (Berscheid & Reis, 1998). Consequently, individuals may experience threats to their happiness, satisfaction and wellbeing when a relationship breaks down. This in turn can trigger a range of social and psychological strategies for coping. There has, however, been little research into the potential impact of relationship dissolution for individuals' sense of self. Relationship dissolution can force the individual to re-think how they view themselves both as individuals and in relation to others. Although there has a long tradition of research into relationship formation, development and dissolution among heterosexual couples (e.g. Furman, 2002; Huston, Niehuis & Smith, 2001; Tashiro & Frazier, 2003) and a growing number of publications focusing on the same issues among lesbian and gay couples (e.g. Kurdek, 2006; Mohr & Fassinger, 2006; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007), there has been no published research into the experience of relationship dissolution among ethnic and religious minority gay men and lesbian women. This article addresses this lacuna by examining the experiences of relationship dissolution among a demographically important ethnic minority group in the UK, namely British South Asian gay men (BSAGM). In recent years, this group has been the focus of numerous studies of the interface of ethnicity and sexuality in the UK (Bassi, 2006; Jaspal, 2012; Yip, 2005), but how they cope with relationship dissolution remains unexplored. This is an important lacuna because there is currently little understanding of how "hidden" populations, whose members may develop romantic relationships in secrecy, cope with the challenges of relationship dissolution and, thus, research of this kind can potentially inform therapeutic practice as well as social psychological interventions targeted at enhancing the lives and identities of ethnic minority gay men and lesbian women.

## **Identity construction and management**

In a series of previous empirical studies, Identity Process Theory (Breakwell, 1986; Jaspal & Breakwell, 2014) has provided a useful heuristic lens for understanding identity processes among BSAGM. The theory integrates identity construction, threat and coping, while synthesizing the social and psychological levels of analysis. Identity Process Theory proposes that identity construction is regulated by two universal processes, namely (i) assimilation-accommodation, and (ii) evaluation. The assimilation-accommodation process refers to the absorption of new information in the identity structure (e.g. accepting that one is gay) and to the adjustment that takes place for it to become part of the structure (e.g. accepting that one is gay and therefore questioning one's membership in one's religious group). The evaluation process confers meaning and value upon the contents of identity (e.g. viewing one's sexuality positively).

The "principles of identity" are essentially desirable end-states for identity, and they guide the aforementioned identity processes. The principles include: (i) continuity across time and situation (continuity), (ii) uniqueness or distinctiveness from others (distinctiveness), (iii) competence and control (self-efficacy), (iv) personal and social worth (self-esteem), and (v) compatibility and coherence between identity elements (psychological coherence). The theory suggests that when identity processes cannot, for whatever reason, comply with psychologically salient principles, identity is threatened. For instance, non-volitional relationship dissolution may plausibly call into question one's self-worth, particularly if one habitually derives one's sense of

self-worth from the relationship, potentially compromising self-esteem (Park et al., 2011). This would induce a threat to identity and motivate the individual to 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).

In response to threat, people may draw upon intrapsychic strategies, such as denial and re-conceptualization, which serve to deflect the threat so that it cannot gain access to consciousness, or social strategies, such as the use of social networks and group memberships in order to seek solace. It is generally recognized that those strategies that are conducive to some form of acceptance and identity change are most likely to be effective in the long term vis-à-vis strategies that rely on transient suppression of threatening cognitions (Breakwell, 1986; Carver et al., 1989).

### **Ethnic and religious minority gay men**

Much of the existing research into aspects of identity among LGBT ethnic and religious minority individuals has generally focused upon African Americans, which generally demonstrates that there can be challenges associated with the construction and management of ethnic, religious and sexual identities (e.g. Bowleg, 2013). Ward (2005) describes Black churches as “a significant source of the homophobia that pervades black communities” (p. 493), and argues that this theologically-based homophobia can adversely impact self-esteem, social relations and health among LGBT African Americans. Given that religion constitutes a generally important aspect in the lives of many African Americans (Battle & Defreece, 2014; Walker & Langmire, 2013), it has been shown that LGBT African Americans seek to construct coherence between their religious and sexual identities by *inter alia* challenging the moral authority of the Black Church (Pitt, 2010), deriving a sense of belonging in particular domains of the church such as music ministry (Jeffries et al., 2008) and immersing themselves in more gay friendly sections of the Black Church (Chaney & Patrick, 2010). Moreover, a key theme in research into the social relationships of LGBT African Americans has been that of racism, which is said to impede social capital and integration in the wider LGBT community.

This study focuses upon experiences of relationship dissolution among British South Asian gay men (BSAGM) and its potential impact for identity. In this article, the category ‘British South Asian’ is employed to refer to British citizens of Indian and/or Pakistani ancestry. Most Britons of Pakistani descent are of the Islamic faith. Mainstream Islam tends to be strictly opposed to Western conceptualizations of homosexuality in the sense of ‘coming out’ as exclusively gay (Duran, 1993). However, homosexuality may be ‘tolerated’ or denied in Islamic societies provided that it remains socially invisible and that men fulfill their religious/cultural duties, such as heterosexual marriage (Murray, 1997). In general, this can give rise to a perception that one is not “authentically” Muslim as a result of one’s sexual identity and LGBT Muslims may strive to demonstrate their Muslim identity, sometimes to the detriment of their sexual identity (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2014). The Britons of Indian descent who participated in this study were of the 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). It is possible that some LGBT Sikhs may employ aspects of their religious identity (particularly the focus on equality in Sikhism, for instance) in order to legitimize their sexual identity in the eyes of fellow ethnic community members.

Although religion is an important source of social and moral representations for British South Asians (Ghuman, 2003), ethnic culture also plays a pivotal role in determining attitudes

towards (homo)sexuality and sexual norms. One observable commonality between South Asians concerns their cultural prioritization of the concept of *izzat* (personal and cultural honor) (Ghuman, 2003). An essential tenet of maintaining familial *izzat* is the fulfillment 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 family's honor, potentially resulting in negative consequences ranging from ostracization to psychological or physical abuse (Jaspal & Siraj, 2011). This is one clear context in which ethno-cultural and sexual identities can intersect and present challenges for the individual. BSAGM experience difficulties in disclosing their sexual orientation to ethnic ingroup members, and particularly to their family, because of perceived homophobia and anticipated rejection.

Recent social psychological research suggests that BSAGM may experience threats to identity due to perceived incongruence between their ethnicity, religion and sexuality (Jaspal, 2012). The most salient threat concerns the psychological coherence principle, as individuals may fail to establish feelings of compatibility and coherence between their ethno-religious and sexual identities which they see as being 'inter-connected' (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). This can be particularly acute when the ethno-religious ingroup is regarded as being opposed to homosexuality, as is the case for many BSAGM. Similarly, exposure to homophobia from one's ethno-religious community, which is often highly valued among BSAGM, can have negative outcomes for self-esteem, since this may inhibit a positive self-conception on the basis of one's gay identity (Yip, 2007). The continuity principle is also susceptible to threat among BSAGM. For instance, South Asian ethnic cultures tend to attach importance to the institution of arranged marriage and, among BSAGM, the cultural expectation of marriage can induce a disruption in the psychological thread connecting past, present and future, thereby compromising the individual's sense of continuity (Jaspal, 2014). While there is a growing body of knowledge on identity processes among BSAGM, there is no previous research which focuses specifically upon the experience of relationship dissolution among this under-researched population.

### **Relationship dissolution**

Much research into relationship formation and development among LGB individuals has focused on similarities and differences between LGB and heterosexual relationships (Kurdek, 2004; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007). An important divergence between these groups concerns their perceived level of social support. Lesbian and gay couples tend to perceive that they have less social support than their heterosexual counterparts, which can mean that they cope less well in times of difficulty in their relationship, as well as with relationship dissolution (Kurdek, 2004). Social support is only possible if one is willing to disclose one's sexual identity to others. Schmitt and Kurdek (1987) found that gay men who informed others of their sexual orientation scored lower on trait anxiety, sensitization and depression and higher on sexual self-concept than gay men who had not disclosed their sexual orientation. Moreover, in a survey of Californian same-sex couples, Fingerhut and Maisel (2010) found that social recognition of one's relationship was positively associated with both relationship satisfaction and life satisfaction more generally.

This scholarship provides some insight into the social and psychological benefits that sexual self-disclosure may have for gay men in general, but this is unlikely to be the case for all BSAGM, some of whom fear negative social consequences if they disclose their sexual identity to others (Jaspal & Siraj, 2011). Religious and cultural homophobia can mean that the disclosure of one's gay identity in these circles could lead to ostracization and otherization (Yip 2007). People may fear that their sense of belonging in relevant social circles (e.g. the ethno-religious ingroup; family circle) will be compromised, which can render the very prospect of "coming out"

threatening for identity. Furthermore, it seems that many BSAGM may actively resist relations with other gay men due to fear of disclosure (see Jaspal & Cinnirella 2012), although there is an emerging gay nightlife culture tailored for British South Asians (Bassi, 2006, 2008). BSAGM may be reluctant to frequent the “gay scene” (i.e. gay bars/nightclubs), especially if they have not publicly disclosed their sexual identity, rendering it difficult to develop a social circle that can provide support for BSAGM. Furthermore, many decide to delineate their (largely heterosexual) family and friendship circles and their romantic relationships, which may render the relationship insular and “claustrophobic”.

The particular circumstances surrounding relationship formation among some BSAGM may mean that relationship dissolution is experienced differently from other groups. In the context of heterosexual couples, it has been noted that the dissolution of a romantic relationship can often be experienced as a highly stressful and sometimes psychologically traumatic event (Chung et al., 2003). At a basic level, the social and psychological transition to singledom requires adjustment to a new, or at least altered, identity (Amato, 2000), which is most obviously threatening for one’s sense of continuity. Relationship dissolution has been associated with emotional experiences such as hurt, frustration, grief and depression (Chung et al., 2003). There is some evidence that in the immediate aftermath of relationship dissolution individuals may experience depressive symptoms, which can either gradually wane or develop into full-blown depression (Park et al., 2011; Rhoades et al., 2011). Clearly, relationship breakdown is often complex and how it is experienced is dependent on a number of factors, such as the intensity of the relationship, its insularity, the level of available social support (Frazier & Cook, 1993), and who it was that decided to dissolve the relationship (Sprecher, 1994). Indeed, the leaver may construe the dissolution as a positive and necessary step in their lives, while the individual who is left can experience negative psychological outcomes, such as anxiety, stress and depression, particularly when they feel that they have invested greatly in the relationship and when the break up is non-volitional from their perspective (Fine & Sacher, 1997). Researchers (e.g. Chung et al., 2003; Lagrand, 1988) have described a number of coping strategies that tend to be deployed in the aftermath of relationship dissolution, most of which are social in nature. Most importantly, individuals have a tendency to fall back on their social circles, particularly close friends and family, in order to re-focus their attention from the relationship to significant others who can provide positive feedback (Frazier & Cook, 1993; Kessler et al., 1985).

BSAGM tend not have access to such social support and may therefore be unable to deploy social strategies for coping with threat (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2014). Their relationships may be experienced as intense and insular given the secrecy that tends to characterize their sexual orientation. They may opt for the delineation of their social circles in order to isolate their sexuality from other aspects of identity (such as family life, friendship circles etc.). This can make disclosure of the relationship to significant others difficult and thereby complicate the process of coping with associated threats to identity. This article reports the results of a qualitative interview study using thematic analysis and Identity Process Theory, which explores how non-volitional relationship dissolution may affect identity processes among BSAGM, and how they may respond socially and psychologically to this challenge to identity.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Using a snowball sampling strategy, 16 self-identified BSAGM were recruited in the West London area. Nine participants were of Pakistani background and identified as Muslims, and the remainder were of Indian background and identified as Sikhs. All of the participants defined

themselves as “moderately religious”. Participants were aged between 23 and 31 years ( $M=26$ ,  $SD=3.01$ ). Eleven participants had university-level qualifications, and the remaining 5 had completed college education. All of the participants reported having disclosed their sexual orientation to small number of close friends but only 3 participants claimed to be “completely out”. Respondents had been out of the relationship for a mean period of 3.19 years ( $SD=2.01$ ). Twelve respondents had not been in a relationship since, and the remaining 4 were in new relationships. This study was concerned principally with individuals’ retrospective accounts of how they *had been* affected social and psychologically by relationship dissolution and how they subsequently coped with it, rather than with the effects of relationship dissolution for their current identities. Moreover, there was no attempt to provide a systematic comparison of single individuals and those in new relationships. Consequently, both single individuals and those in new relationships were considered eligible for participation in the study.

### **Procedure and analytic approach**

Interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule consisting of ten exploratory, open-ended questions. The schedule began with questions regarding self-description, self-categorization and identity, followed by more specific questions on the development of their relationship, its dissolution, and their feelings and emotions associated with this. There was a focus on the circumstances surrounding the breakdown of the relationship, the impact for identity processes and how individuals coped. Interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. They were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2008) is a qualitative analytic technique that aims to capture participants’ attempts to make sense of relevant aspects of their personal and social worlds. The approach conceptualizes the participant as a “cognitive, linguistic, affective and physical being,” and assumes a relationship between verbal reports and the cognitions and emotions with which they are concerned (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 54). Since the method focuses upon the meanings that particular lived experiences hold for the individual, it was anticipated that this analytic strategy would shed light upon the subjective perceptual processes associated with participants’ attempts to make sense of their former relationships, how relationship breakdown had impacted their identities and how they had coped. Moreover, the method’s idiographic mode of enquiry facilitates in-depth exploration of each individual’s account of their experiences.

The author transcribed the recordings and studied the transcripts. During each reading of the transcripts preliminary interpretations were noted in the left margin. These included *inter alia* participants’ meaning-making, particular forms of language, and apparent contradictions and patterns within the data. Initial codes aimed to capture, from the analyst’s perspective, participants’ attempts to make sense of their identities and experiences. At the next step, the right margin was used to collate these initial codes into potential themes, which captured the essential qualities of the accounts. Themes were developed as part of the data analysis, in order to provide insight into the phenomenological worlds of participants. The list of themes was reviewed rigorously against the data in order to ensure their compatibility and numerous interview extracts were listed against each corresponding theme. At this stage specific interview extracts, which were considered vivid, compelling and representative of the themes, were selected for presentation in this article. Finally, superordinate themes representing the themes derived from participants’ accounts were developed and ordered into a logical and coherent narrative structure. In the interview extracts presented in the next section, three dots indicate where material has been excised and other material within square brackets is for clarification.

## **ANALYSIS**

### **Constructing Identity around the Relationship**

For several participants, their first long-term relationship was of considerable psychological significance and acquired centrality and salience in identity - it became the focal point of the entire identity structure. In many cases, participants believed that, for the first time and only within their relationship, they were able to articulate openly their sexual orientation and the feelings and cognitions associated with it:

I think it was special for me because you know I could finally talk about who I am and say out loud "I'm gay" [...] I could, I don't know, be myself with him, so this was special [...] I loved spending my time with him and yes that did mean that my friendships suffered [...] I couldn't mix my friends and him because he was like my secret boyfriend, you know. It had to be that way because of the culture (Ali, Pakistani)

The significance which Ali attributed to his relationship was echoed across the entire sample – respondents unanimously pointed to the psychological benefits of being able to voice more openly their sexuality-related feelings and cognitions. Ali exemplified this by highlighting the pleasure he derived from the ability to "say out loud" that he was gay, which illustrated the importance of externalizing a thought that was hitherto internalized and part only of the subjective "private self." Many BSAGM and, particularly, those of Muslim faith reported only limited involvement in the gay community, which essentially reduced their social capital, providing them with little access to alternative networks from which to derive a positive sexual identity (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2012). Conversely, the relationship provided at least some social capital in that it allowed individuals to manifest their sexualities much more openly than they could before. As Ali indicated, it was possible to "be oneself" with one's partner in a way that was impossible with friends and family members.

However, interviewees also acknowledged the social costs of their relationships:

My family and my mum started to notice because I was a mummy's boy and I was not really the same. Constantly on the phone. Missing meals. Going to bed early to talk to him. Out all day. These things are noticed in an Asian family [...] An Asian family likes to know what's going on (Waqas, Pakistani).

Individuals became estranged from their existing social networks and, particularly, from their family, as indicated by Waqas, and from their (heterosexual) friendship circles, as indicated by Ali. This was widely attributed to the perceived incompatibility of their "secret boyfriend" and their family and heterosexual friends, who were largely unaware of their sexual orientation. As he became romantically involved with his former partner, Waqas indicated that his family grew suspicious because of his growing distantness. Waqas reportedly began to dedicate most of his time to his former partner. Participants' sense of identity conflict arose from their trepidation at disclosing their sexual identity to family and heterosexual friends, from whom they anticipated a lack of understanding and possibly rejection (Jaspal & Siraj, 2011). Self-disclosure would violate key religious and cultural norms. Both Waqas and Ali tellingly attributed this to South Asian "culture," which they viewed as homophobic. Like Ali, most interviewees regarded the separation of their friendship circle and relationship as a non-issue at the time – the

psychological benefits of the relationship appeared to outweigh any of the consequential social costs:

One part of me, it felt alone before I met him [...] but my life just changed overnight [...] He came first in everything [...] I was going to university from A-levels and I was set for Durham and I didn't go. I went to London, to a crap uni, because he was in London and he came first. He became my everything really (Inderpal, Indian)

Participants' powerful descriptions of their relationships elucidated their centrality to identity. Inderpal pointed to his loneliness prior to this relationship, that is, "one part of me, it felt alone" – here, he made reference to his sexuality. Like Ali, he had felt unable to disclose his sexuality-relevant feelings and cognitions to others, which he construed as a form of (psychological) loneliness. Conversely, his relationship allowed him to articulate this aspect of his identity, which he perceived as life changing. Accordingly, he elevated his partner to the highest position in his identity: "he came first in everything." He reported having turned down a place at Durham University, one of the leading universities in the UK, in order to safeguard his relationship, an important identity aspect. The centrality of the relationship clearly began to displace other aspects of his identity, such as his education.

Interviewees attributed such significance to their relationship also because the relationship became a source of self-esteem, amid existing threats to identity:

I just felt great around [him]. It made me feel good about myself. Here, there was someone who said "you're cute, you're handsome, I love you". Words nobody had said to me and words that I thought I would never ever hear (Abdul, Pakistani)

I always thought my body was not great but he loved it. If I took my shirt off, he just said "nice" and it made me feel like someone (Sat, Indian)

BSAGM are susceptible to hyper-threats to identity (Jaspal, 2012). The self-esteem principle is particularly susceptible to threat as BSAGM may come to perceive themselves in negative terms (e.g. as inferior, abnormal and sinful), which can impede a positive self-conception. Conversely, for Abdul, his relationship provided him with a reason to "feel good about [himself]." Within his relationship, he was exposed to positive self-relevant information, particularly concerning his physical appearance, and he felt valued (Brennan & Bosson, 1998). Incidentally, individuals may also feel, and anticipate feeling, unloved by significant others. Sat had had a negative body image and regarded himself as unattractive and undesirable, but this negative self-conception gave way to the high esteem in which his partner held him. In short, these relationships provided the means for a positive self-conception and, therefore, benefitted self-esteem, which might otherwise be susceptible to threat.

Some individuals had reportedly avoided a relationship, because a relationship seemed to confirm their transition from being "potentially straight" to "definitely gay". However, they felt that, as a result of the relationship, their self-concept took a positive turn:

Yeah, it was hard. There was a bit of "what the fuck am I doing?" at the beginning but I felt so, so, so happy. Like on the top of the world. And this quickly became my new life. This felt like the real me basically. I realized I'd been hiding for a long time [...] It was hard in some ways but it was me for real (Baljit, Indian)

For Baljit and many others, entering their relationships was by no means free of social and psychological challenges – this raised questions about their conduct, which was perceived as inconsistent with their ethnic, religious and family identities. However, the euphoria that individuals experienced upon entering the relationship was conducive to psychological wellbeing. Although their relationship represented a change and, thus, a potential challenge to continuity, individuals rapidly established a new “baseline” for continuity – the relationship had come to define who Baljit “really” was. He appeared to embrace his relationship, that is, assimilate and accommodate it within his identity - it “felt like the real me.” He described his existence in the relationship as his “new life” after having “been hiding for a long time.” Baljit referred to his “real” (within relationship) versus “unreal” (prior to relationship) selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Turner, 1975, 1976). In short, for Baljit, his relationship set his life on a new course and allowed him to construct a more “authentic” identity. For many, this was an identity focused largely around the relationship:

This just became the story of my life. The relationship did. I look back and I didn’t really have a life. It was just him and my small little world with him. That’s what it was (Sukhy, Indian)

The perceived authenticity of their identities within the new relationship meant that for most individuals the relationship acquired centrality to their identity. For Sukhy, his relationship became “the story of my life,” without which he “didn’t really have a life.” This too echoed the distinction between real and unreal selves in that he perceived no authentic sense of self prior to the relationship. His existence was now re-conceptualized around the relationship. Similarly, for Mo, his partner had acquired particular psychological significance, which he described as an “infatuation”:

I was just thinking about him all day, all night, all the time. It was like an infatuation. I started to like things I hated because I knew he liked them. Hate things that I didn’t care about before [...] I even started loving his relatives more than my own because they were his [...] It was like he took over my life without wanting to (Mo, Pakistani)

Mo’s identity appeared to change in accordance with his relationship. He began to shift his own likes and dislikes in order to render them more consistent with those of his partner, who had clearly acquired centrality in his identity. This process of assimilating and accommodating this relationship in his identity resulted in the displacement of other identity aspects (e.g. the importance of family, his likes and dislikes). This was, similarly, echoed in Inderpal’s prioritization of his partner vis-à-vis his future education – the centrality of the relationship provided a specific lens for viewing the surrounding world. In short, for many individuals, the relationship had come to form the nucleus of identity and, thus, it became central to how they viewed and interacted with others. Consequently, relationship breakdown could create upheaval in the identity structure.

### **Relationship Breakdown and Threats to Identity**

This study focused upon the experiences of *non-volitional* relationship dissolution. Faisal described the threat to his sense of continuity as he began to realize that there was increasing “distance” between him and his former partner:

I couldn't bring him to my place because of my parents. I couldn't go to his place [...] I didn't work so we couldn't be in hotels. It just failed because we couldn't see each other [...] When the distance started growing, I felt suicidal. I just couldn't get used to not seeing him and, and I literally just missed him every second of the day. (Faisal, Pakistani)

It has been noted that young BAGM often have to manage their sexual and family identities (and the latter is often inextricably related to their religious and/ or ethnic identities), which can cause dilemmatic positions (Yip, 2004). Although it was clear that his relationship had come to occupy a prominent position in his identity, Faisal was unable to establish an arrangement that would enable them to spend time together regularly. Faisal believed that his parents suspected that he was gay and, as he was not financially independent, he could not move out or arrange regular meetings in hotels. Given the centrality of his former partner to his identity, even the shift in the quality of the relationship (that is, the growing distance between them) was experienced as threatening for continuity. Indeed, he reported that he "couldn't get used to not seeing him" and missing his partner appeared to consume his day-to-day life. The threat to continuity was so severe that Faisal felt suicidal.

The data clearly highlighted the threats to identity that ensued from the actual rupture of the intense and valued relationship which had come to dominate identity:

I built my whole life around this guy. He was literally my whole world [...] I wanted to move in with him and he wasn't ready for anything serious [...] But he was really, really closeted and didn't want anyone to know [...] Going my own way, it almost killed me (Nadeem, Pakistani)

Nadeem reiterated a point that was made by several respondents, namely that the relationship (and, more specifically, his former partner) had come to dominate his identity. The reason underlying the breakdown of Nadeem's relationship was a conflict of expectations and desires for the future – while he felt ready to formalize their relationship, his former partner was unwilling to make this *public* commitment. The breakdown was immensely threatening for his identity – "it almost killed me." Nadeem's relationship had come to form the baseline for his continuity and, thus, the breakdown jeopardized this principle.

For most interviewees, their intense relationship had acquired such centrality and salience because it provided them with the means of deriving a positive self-conception. Accordingly, relationship breakdown appeared to deprive them of self-esteem:

[After he left] all of my defects just became obvious. It's the way I look. My body. It's my personality. I'm boring. I'm and the list goes on. I felt like shit, worthless and it's a horrible thing to just hate yourself (Baljit, Indian)

I begged him, you know? [...] But it destroyed my self-confidence because I thought it was me. He met someone better than me and that feeling never left me. It made me almost feel "why was I born?" And I couldn't tell anyone [...] As a Muslim, I was going to tell my mum "Oh, I'm gay". I suffered alone (Salim, Pakistani)

These accounts compellingly demonstrate the threat to self-esteem which ensued following relationship breakdown. Baljit's "defects" became more salient to him and he viewed them as the cause, which was threatening for his self-esteem. Similarly, Salim's relationship breakdown was non-volitional, demonstrated by his desperate attempts to salvage the relationship, and this

was described as having “destroyed” his self-confidence. His self-esteem was compromised by the belief that his former partner had met “someone better”, which implied that he was, in some way, inferior. The threat to self-esteem led Salim to question his very existence, which must be considered in the context of participants’ construction of their identities around the relationship.

For several interviewees, the relationship provided them with feelings of distinctiveness because their former partners made them feel “special” and “unique” and, thus, relationship breakdown could violate this identity principle:

I had nobody in my life. Nobody. I just thought “this is the only guy that’s made me feel so special. Like, nobody is going to ever make me feel this way ever again” [...] I wished I was dead [...] my life lost its whole meaning (Abdul, Pakistani).

Abdul pointed to the uniqueness of his partner in that he was the “only guy” to make him feel special. People felt esteemed, valued and loved by their former partners, which had radically altered their self-conception in largely positive ways. Abdul believed that nobody would be able to perform the role of making him feel special, thereby depriving him of his distinctiveness. In addition, his sense of continuity was clearly compromised by the perceived rupture between his past and future - he believed that he would never feel special again. The loss of his relationship was severely threatening for identity – for Abdul, his relationship provided him with a sense of purpose, significance and meaning and, in view of his relationship breakdown, he saw no merit in continuing to live a life devoid of meaning. Although BSAGM often attach importance to their family, religious and ethnic identities (Yip, 2004), it appears that the relationship had displaced these other identity aspects.

Salim indicated that, as a Muslim, he could not share the relationship breakdown with his family. He viewed his Muslim identity as an obstacle to disclosing his threatening position to others who, in other circumstances, might have been able to suffer social and psychological support. Indeed, it has been observed elsewhere that BAGM may be fearful of “coming out” to significant others because of the perception that they will be judged, ostracized and perhaps even victimized. This lack of social support was clearly echoed across the sample of participants:

I was suffering a lot when he left me. My world was upside down. My family knew that I was going through something. I used to just start crying at home and my sister was like “what is it with you?” but I couldn’t tell her [...] I basically told my mum that it was a girlfriend and I had to like make up a story based on the truth about [him]. It just took all the energy out of me (Ali, Pakistani)

The very aspect of identity (namely, his relationship), which provided meaning and value to other important identity aspects (e.g. family, likes/ dislikes, study), had disappeared. Ali’s identity was threatened and the strategy which is most beneficial in such scenarios of threat, namely social support (Kessler et al., 1985), was not available to him. In an attempt to derive social support, he fabricated a story, albeit based on his experiences with his former male partner, about a *girlfriend* who had left him. This was by no means an optimal strategy for coping, since it entailed more dishonesty in a context in which Ali sought confidence in others to disclose his feelings. Given their lack of social support, most individuals appeared to opt for intrapsychic, rather than interpersonal and social, strategies for coping.

### **Repairing Identity in Silence**

Participants were invited to reflect upon the ways in which they attempted to restore their wellbeing in face of severe threat to identity, which generally entailed the deployment of intrapsychic coping strategies:

I saw his profile on Gaydar and it said “looking” and it was pretty obvious that we were over [...] Everything was saying “it’s over” but I lied to myself. “Oh, it’s a mistake”. For a while I believed it because I wanted to (Sat, Indian)

Sat recounted his experience of learning of his former partner’s infidelity on a gay social networking site. Despite the “evidence”, at the time Sat reportedly denied the implications of this information at the time. In retrospect, Sat described this “lying to himself” and reached what he now regarded as the implausible conclusion that this was a “mistake.” This essentially prevented the information from threatening identity in the short-term, but other signs gradually began to emerge that the relationship was under strain. Due to the centrality of the relationship in his identity, he opted for the deflection strategy of denial by believing what he wanted to believe in order to protect his sense of continuity. Similarly, deflection strategies were deployed not only to avoid threatening knowledge but also to deny “the emotional implications of a change to the content dimension of identity” (Breakwell, 1986, p. 81):

When we split, I just thought to myself “OK, it’s for the best, I’m a Muslim and that”. It didn’t hit me, like “he’s my soul mate - who am I going to call to talk?” I put off thinking I’d end up feeling so unloved, like unwanted (Ahmad, Pakistani)

Although Ahmad attached much significance to his relationship and viewed it as a central identity element, he accepted his former partner’s decision to terminate the relationship. He revived an aspect of his identity that had hitherto been less central to his identity than his relationship, namely his religious faith. Here, the relationship breakdown was regarded as a potential means of restoring his attachment to his Muslim faith, which he felt had been problematized by the relationship. His account indicated that he actively chose not to think about the emotional/identity implications of his relationship breakdown. More specifically, he chose not to think about how it would feel to be “unloved” and “unwanted” (self-esteem and distinctiveness) and how he would adjust to losing his “soul mate” (continuity). Ahmad suggested that he was able to accept the relationship breakdown at the time, because he denied the implications that it would have for his identity and, conversely, focused on the potential benefits that this might have for his *Muslim* identity.

As individuals began to recognize the upheaval for identity caused by their relationship breakdown, there was a desire to try to re-configure identity in a way that was conducive to psychological wellbeing. In many cases, this entailed a sense of detachment from others in their social circles, particularly as individuals felt unable to communicate their feelings to significant others:

I had to be alone for a long time to collect myself [...] I couldn’t see any reason to live because all I could see was like a lonely life where no one even knows me [...] Only [he] did (Inderpal, Indian)

For many, relationship breakdown had irrevocably severed the unifying thread between past and present - individuals perceived no viable future for themselves. The coping strategy that several participants mobilized to anaesthetize themselves from threat, namely self-isolation, in fact

appeared to contribute to threat – Inderpal felt lonely as a result of his relationship breakdown. His sense of continuity was jeopardized by the perception that nobody other than his former partner would recognize his “real self”. As noted, it was within the confines of their serious relationship that interviewees could manifest an “authentic” identity (consisting of their sexuality). Some BSAGM may perceive self-isolation as a viable coping strategy because they perceive little social support from relevant others and because this allows them to “grieve” in silence without having to keep up appearances.

Self-isolation could lead to negative psychological outcomes. Three individuals reported having engaged in a form of transient depersonalization, which has been described as “the fleeting experience of being estranged from oneself” (Elliott, Rosenberg & Wagner, 1984, p. 115):

For a while I just lost touch with myself [...] I wasn’t myself and people said I wasn’t acting myself. I was like a different person [...] He’d been in every bit of my life and I wasn’t doing the things I’d done [with him] anymore (Karim, Pakistani)

Karim described the aftermath of the breakdown as a period in which he grew distant from his sense of self and no longer recognized himself. Breakwell (1986, p, 86) argues that, as a coping strategy, depersonalization “can act to anaesthetize the individual from the initial pain of the threat [to identity].” Indeed, Karim noted that his partner had been present symbolically in every sphere of his life and identity, and that the breakdown had compelled him to live his life *without* this essential component – namely, his relationship. The compulsion to assimilate and accommodate the loss of such an important component of identity was clearly too overwhelming for identity and, thus, required a non-volitional and only transiently effective strategy - depersonalization.

Individuals felt so threatened principally because there were few effective, long-term coping strategies at their disposal. A few encounters with significant others in the context of their sexual identity appeared to indicate that social support was largely unavailable to them:

Who could I turn to? Nobody. I broke down one day and told me sister. She didn’t approve [...] I felt judged, like put down and that took even more out of me [...] I knew I had nobody (Mo, Pakistani)

As a Muslim, Mo was particularly uneasy about disclosing his sexual orientation to others due to the perceived sinfulness of homosexuality from a religious perspective and to the anticipation of negative outcomes of self-disclosure. However, following the breakdown, Mo was so threatened that he felt compelled to confide in his sister with whom he reportedly had a close relationship. This echoed Ali’s desire to seek social support by confiding in his mother (see above). Mo sensed his sister’s disapproval, which aggravated his experience of identity threat. Indeed, he felt “judged” and his self-disclosure placed greater emotional strain on him. In addition to the decreased self-esteem due to his relationship breakdown (Park et al., 2011), his self-esteem was further compromised as a result of sexual self-disclosure to his sister (“put down”). In short, Mo’s attempt to deploy the coping strategy of self-disclosure was unsuccessful because he did not receive a supportive response, which could buffer the threat to his identity.

The threat was never adequately resolved and, though suppressed, it could strike at the identity structure in the future. Several indicated that memories of their relationship breakdown could still severely compromise identity:

I still dream about him and also that day when he just spent the day with me and that springs it on me, like “this is the last time we’ll meet. I don’t feel the same.” And my stomach churns when I wake up. I feel sick. I can’t cope with it (Jas, Indian)

Despite being in another relationship, Jas continued to have nightmares about his relationship breakdown and, more specifically, about the threat to his sense of continuity. He vividly described the experience of spending what appeared to be a “normal” day with his former partner and then learning of his former partner’s desire to terminate the relationship just before they parted for the day. This was to be the last time they would meet. It is easy to see how threatening this would be for an individual who was still closely attached to their relationship and who did not consciously anticipate relationship breakdown. The threat continued to linger and could challenge identity at any time, elucidating the vulnerability of the continuity principle and, possibly, future relationships. This may plausibly be attributed to the notion that identity threat was never adequately resolved through the use of appropriate coping strategies.

## **DISCUSSION**

For interviewees in this study, the romantic relationship was experienced as intense and overpowering, and it came to dominate the identity structure. The association of the relationship with self-esteem, continuity and distinctiveness may explain the centrality of this identity element. Individuals reported that they could construct a more “authentic” identity within their relationships as they were able to manifest their “private self” in an interpersonal context which was regarded as “safe” and trustworthy (Vannini & Franzese, 2008). For the first time, individuals felt increasingly at ease with their sexuality and were able to externalize gay-related cognitions and behaviors. Crucially, BSAGM did not feel that they were judged for doing so, which was the response that they anticipated from others. In her research into the construction of lesbian identity, Markowe (1996) has highlighted the psychological importance of constructing an “authentic” identity, which often entails being able to “be oneself” in relation to one’s sexuality. Moreover, the relationship clearly bolstered individuals’ sense of self-esteem, as it allowed them to derive a positive self-conception through exposure to positive feedback from their partner. For many, the relationship was the first time that they had perceived self-worth, which enhanced their sense of self-esteem (Park et al., 2011). In parallel, several respondents reported feeling “special” and “unique” when in their relationship, which provided feelings of positive distinctiveness. Amid the threats to identity faced by BSAGM (Jaspal, 2012), it is easy to see why the relationship would therefore be so central to identity – it bolstered the very motivational principles of identity which are reportedly susceptible to threat among BSAGM who grapple with their ethno-religious and sexual identities. Given this role in enhancing identity, the relationship could be viewed as promoter of psychological wellbeing (Breakwell, 1986).

While any change (including relationship formation) may be regarded as a potential obstacle for the continuity principle of identity, some interviewees clearly established a new “baseline” for continuity – the relationship seemed to constitute a “new beginning” for the self in that individuals regarded their lives prior to the relationship as inauthentic and characteristic of an “unreal self” (Markus & Nurius, 1986). The relationship had come to dominate identity in such a way that it provided a “lens” for viewing both the surrounding world and other identity aspects. Crucially, the relationship had important consequences for the structure and content of identity. Some interviewees indicated that they had distanced themselves from their families, friends and other social groups as a means of crystallizing their relationships – the relationship, as a central aspect of identity, came to feature prominently in identity vis-à-vis other elements (Park et al.,

2011). In short, given the benefits for identity, a new hierarchy of (identity) priorities emerged in the identity structure.

Relationship breakdown severed individuals' primary sources of self-esteem, distinctiveness and continuity, which clearly had negative outcomes for overall psychological wellbeing (Breakwell, 1986; Park et al., 2011). Yet, relationship breakdown also actively *threatened* these principles of identity. People experienced a rupture in the unifying thread between past, present and future as they had come to define the relationship as an aspect of their "true self" and they found it difficult to envisage life beyond the rupture. This challenged the authenticity of their identity, forcing them once again to "live a lie" (Markowe, 1996). Some interviewees reported feeling de-valued and unloved as a result of the relationship dissolution, which hindered self-esteem. Overall, this was aversive for psychological wellbeing as indicated by participants' descriptions of their feelings, emotions and helplessness (Breakwell, 1986; Jaspal, 2012).

Given that the relationship had acquired such centrality in identity and displaced other identity aspects, it was difficult for individuals to draw strategically upon alternative identity aspects which might otherwise have shifted the psychological emphasis from the threat to enhancement. For instance, some respondents reported having distanced themselves from their family and friends, their religious ingroup and from their educational aspirations and, thus, they could no longer focus on these networks/ identity aspects in order to seek alternative sources of self-esteem, distinctiveness etc. People were therefore rather limited in their coping strategies. This appeared to lead some people to internalize the causes of their relationship breakdown, viewing it as a product of their own doing (Davis et al., 2003). Moreover, given its severity, identity threat associated with relationship breakdown was particularly acute and could re-surface despite the passage of time and despite individuals' attempts to cope with threat. For many, memories of the threatening experiences were sufficient to re-ignite the threat to identity and to induce discord in identity.

The persistence of identity threat, such that some individuals even reported contemplating self-harm and suicide, could plausibly be attributed to the inadequacy of the coping strategies that were available to individuals. Consistent with previous research into LGBT relationships (Kurdek, 2004; Peplau & Fingerhut, 2007), there was a perceived lack of social support among the interviewees who unanimously believed that they could not disclose their sexual orientation to significant others, such as family and friends, because of perceived homophobia. While LGBT communities in the West receive some social support perhaps from within LGBT contexts, many BSAGM do not cultivate links with the LGBT community and may, therefore, feel particularly isolated. Perceived racism may be one explanatory factor (Ward, 2005). Respondents' reluctance to disclose their relationship dissolution and, thus, their sexual orientation to significant others could induce further self-isolation. Some believed that it was preferable to isolate themselves from others in order to avoid questions which might accentuate the threat to identity. Isolation was only transiently effective because, although it did allow people some solace from social stigma and interactions that re-focused their attention the antecedents of the threat to identity, it did not provide access to any form of social support that could buffer the threat to identity. Indeed, there is evidence that people are more likely to cope with psychological stress if they have access to a network of social contacts (Kessler et al., 1985).

Social support was not possible for most respondents because they were unwilling to disclose their sexual orientation to significant others. The timing of self-disclosure was not right for most – they simply did not feel that their sexual identities would be understood by others (Jaspal & Siraj, 2011). Many had not yet developed gay friendship circles and had attenuated

other social circles while in their relationship. BSAGM may find it necessary to distance themselves from existing friendship circles due to perceived difficulties in integrating the two components of identity (that is, one's friendship circle and the relationship). Therefore, there was an over-reliance upon intrapsychic, and particularly deflection, strategies for coping with the threat of relationship breakdown. Following relationship breakdown, some respondents reported having engaged in denial, that is, denial of the threat itself, perhaps by refusing to acknowledge evidence that the relationship was in jeopardy, as well as the emotional, psychological and social implications that the breakdown would entail. Others engaged in depersonalization, which seemed to provide individuals with a temporary "break" from the experience of threat. These strategies were not effective in the long term.

Some of the intrapsychic, deflection strategies for coping with threat described in this article have been associated with psychiatric disorder, e.g. depersonalization (Medford et al., 2005). Psychiatric breakdown may well occur when one's social and psychological circumstances generate threats to identity that exhaust and supersede the available coping strategies (Breakwell, 1986). Indeed, the BSAGM who participated in this study appeared to have few strategies at their disposal, especially ones known to be effective in the long term, essentially rendering individuals susceptible to chronic threats to identity. The most effective coping strategies are not those that encourage deflection of threat or its implications but rather those that are conducive to acceptance. Acceptance strategies aim "to bring about change with the minimum amount of damage [to identity]" (Breakwell, 1986, p. 93). Often, social and interpersonal strategies for coping are most effective because, through social influence processes, the threatened individual may re-construe what the threatening event means and its implications for identity.

### **Implications**

While the present article focuses upon relationship dissolution as a source of potential threats to identity, which may be difficult to resolve in the absence of social support networks that can provide the social and psychological tools for coping, future research ought to complement this study by considering relationship formation, maintenance and satisfaction among ethnic and religious minority gay men. It would be particularly insightful to examine the inter-relationships between relationship formation/ satisfaction and willingness to disclose one's sexual identity (Jaspal & Siraj, 2011). The need to establish a romantic relationship in secrecy could plausibly impact upon relationship maintenance and satisfaction. This would complement the existing body of research into aspects of identity among LGBT ethnic and religious minorities (e.g. Jaspal, 2012; Yip, 2004). Future work in this area might also consider the impact of relationship dissolution for one's sexual identity. Given that relationship dissolution may be the only means of manifesting sexual identity among some BSAGM, it is possible that relationship breakdown, which severely threatens identity, could adversely impact one's sexual identity and possibly induce a "hyper-affiliation" to one's religious/ ethnic identities (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2014). Indeed, some BSAGM have viewed heterosexual arranged marriage as a means of distancing themselves from their sexual identity and demonstrating their commitment to their religious/ ethnic identities. In short, while this article highlights the social psychological challenges of relationship dissolution, little is known about how the relationship itself may be experienced and maintained.

Nevertheless, this study offers important insights in terms of policy and practice. Social support provides individuals with the confidence that others are available and willing to listen, as well as the opportunity for positive feedback that may assuage the experience of threat (Frazier & Cook, 1993). It may provide individuals with the social and psychological capital for seeking out

alternative sources of self-esteem, distinctiveness and continuity when these principles are severely threatened by relationship dissolution. This is an optimal means of deriving psychological wellbeing (Breakwell, 1986). Identity Process Theory provides the tools for understanding the antecedents of identity threat and the possible strategies that can arise in the context of relationship dissolution among under-explored, “hidden” populations such as BSAGM. The results of this study, analyzed through the lens of Identity Process Theory, should inform therapeutic practice with ethnic and religious minority gay men who may have suffered from relationship dissolution in a context of decreased social support (Frazier & Cook, 1993; Kurdek, 2004). Therapists may explore with their clients potential means of deriving feelings of continuity, self-esteem, self-efficacy, distinctiveness and belonging – the very identity principles that are most susceptible to threat as a result of relationship dissolution. Furthermore, social interventions targeted at enhancing psychological wellbeing and mental health among ethnic and religious minority gay men could incorporate tenets of Identity Process Theory in training individuals to cope with identity threat, trauma and other forms of psychological adversity associated with sexual identity. In a group environment, BSAGM may be encouraged to reflect upon those aspects of their identities that continue to provide appropriate levels of the identity principles in an attempt to attenuate relationship breakdown (Breakwell, 1986). Moreover, practitioners should encourage the use of adequate coping strategies among vulnerable groups, such as BSAGM, so that they can more effectively overcome identity threat, minimizing its chronic nature and the associated aversive outcomes for psychological wellbeing. More generally, this article reiterates a point that has been made elsewhere, namely that we as a society need to promote changes to dominant social representations of homosexuality in ethnic, cultural and religious contexts. A positive change in social representations will encourage a more encouraging stance on sexual diversity, thereby developing opportunities for BSAGM and other ethno-religious minority LGBT groups to seek social support in times of psychological stress.

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