Religion, Male Bisexuality and Sexual Risk in Lebanon

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Abstract

The social position of bisexual men in Lebanon and in other Arab Middle Eastern societies is complex – on the one hand, bisexuality *as a practice* is silently tolerated but, on the other hand, bisexuality *as an identity* is rejected as a cultural anomaly. In this chapter, the interface of religion and bisexuality and its implications for mental and sexual health are explored. First, theoretical issues concerning bisexuality as an orientation or identity are outlined, and social representations theory and identity process theory from social psychology are suggested as useful frameworks for understanding identity among bisexual men in Lebanon. Second, the social, theological and psychological aspects of bisexuality and religion in Arab Middle Eastern societies are presented. Third, the chapter provides an overview of key religious, cultural and political aspects of Lebanese society and its stance on sexuality issues. These sections contextualize identity construction and maintenance among bisexual men in Lebanon. Fourth, drawing on social representations theory and identity process theory, identity and wellbeing issues are discussed in relation to bisexual men in Lebanon. In the absence of previous empirical research into bisexual men in Lebanon, some tentative hypotheses are offered in relation to this population.

Introduction

In most Western industrialized societies, there has been a shift towards greater acceptance of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) identities. Countries like the UK and the US and political institutions like the European Union have now enshrined LGB rights in law, to varying degrees, protecting the interests, identities, wellbeing of these diverse communities. Yet, there are societies in the world in which LGB identities are not recognized and in which LGB people face social stigma, ostracism and criminalization. Furthermore, while gay men and lesbian women have won increased recognition and acceptance, the identities of bisexual men and women remain largely invisible, poorly understood, and stigmatized for being 'indecisive' or 'uncertain' (Monro, 2015; Mulick and Wright, 2002).

The social position of bisexual men in Lebanon and indeed in other Arab Middle Eastern societies is complex – on the one hand, bisexuality *as a practice* has been silently tolerated in Arab societies for many centuries but, on the other hand, bisexuality *as an identity* is rejected as a cultural anomaly. Put simply, one can 'do' bisexuality but cannot 'be' bisexual (Murray and Roscoe, 1997). This is further complicated by the strong position of religion in Lebanese society, which often rejects bisexual and other sexual minority identities, potentially causing internalized stigma in bisexual men. The deleterious consequences of internalized stigma are manifold - including poor psychological health, increased suicide risk, and poor sexual health (Igartua, Gill and Montoro 2003; Ross *et al*., 2013).

In this chapter, the interface of religion and bisexuality and its implications for sexual health are explored in relation to Lebanese men. First, theoretical issues concerning bisexuality as an orientation or identity are outlined, and social representations theory and identity process theory from social psychology are suggested as useful frameworks for

understanding identity among bisexual men in Lebanon. Second, the social, theological and psychological aspects of bisexuality and religion in Arab Middle Eastern societies are presented. Third, the chapter provides an overview of key religious, cultural and political aspects of Lebanese society, its stance on LGB rights, and cultural, religious and sexuality issues. These sections contextualize identity construction and maintenance among bisexual men in Lebanon. Fourth, drawing on social representations theory and identity process theory, identity and wellbeing issues are discussed in relation to bisexual men in Lebanon. There is a particular focus on mental health and sexual health issues, in view of the small body of research into gay and bisexual men in Lebanon which has focused largely on the sexual health inequalities they face compared to heterosexual people. Some tentative hypotheses are offered in relation to bisexual men in Lebanon.

The social psychology of representation, identity and action

This section focuses on research into the social psychological aspects of bisexuality and its social representations in distinct societal contexts, and the distinction between sexual orientation and sexual identity. Social representations theory and identity process theory from social psychology, and their relevance to exploring bisexuality in Lebanon are outlined.

Bisexuality: orientation vs. identity

Although the focus of this chapter is on the social psychological aspects of religion and bisexuality in Lebanon, it is worthwhile to describe briefly research into the definition and prevalence of male bisexual orientation. Some of this research has made its transition into public consciousness in the form of social representations of bisexuality and is, thus, relevant to the present discussion.

The American Psychological Association (2015) defines sexual orientation as 'one's enduring sexual attraction to male partners, female partners, or both. Sexual orientation may be heterosexual, same sex (gay or lesbian), or bisexual'. Research shows that the vast majority of men are heterosexual, that a small minority are gay, and that a much smaller minority report sexual attraction to both sexes (bisexual). The most recent census in the UK revealed a 0.6% prevalence of bisexuality in men (Office for National Statistics, 2017). Yet, even among those men who describe themselves as bisexual (bearing in mind that most studies of sexual orientation rely on self-reported sexual orientation), there are many who are in fact not attracted to both sexes but believe, or perhaps hope, that they are (e.g. Rieger, Chivers and Bailey, 2005).

In a psychophysiological study using plethysmography, Rieger, Chivers and Bailey (2005) measured 101 male participants' genital arousal in response to erotic videos of males and females. Predictably, they found that heterosexual and gay men were aroused by videos of women and men, respectively. However, their more interesting finding was that the bisexual men who reported sexual attraction to both sexes were actually more aroused by videos of men than by those of women. This suggests that these men are not actually bisexual (in terms of sexual orientation) but rather that they self-identify as bisexual. Therefore, non-sexual reasons may underlie self-definition as bisexual in this cohort of men.

In many cases, this is a question of sexual identification (rather than actual sexual orientation) because it concerns how people wish to view themselves and how they wish to be viewed by others. For many gay men, initial self-identification as bisexual is a preliminary step towards embracing a gay identity, because by self-identifying as bisexual, the individual is not yet 'committing' to a full gay identity which he may still perceive to be stigmatized (Guittar, 2013). At this stage of his sexual identity development, he is not really part of the

gay community and thus would not be exposed to bisexual erasure or stigma from other gay men. Of course, many men in this situation do permanently self-identify as bisexual.

However, it must be stressed that there is also empirical evidence that bisexual men do manifest sexual attraction to both sexes but that the level of attraction to both sexes may not necessarily be the same (Ebsworth and Lalumière, 2012). Indeed, Kinsey and his colleagues' seminal studies of sexual orientation showed that human sexual orientation is best measured on a continuum (as a continuous variable) rather than as a dichotomy between gay and straight (Kinsey, Pomeroy and Martin, 1948). In their research into the perceptions and experiences of bisexuals, Flanders, LeBreton, Robinson, Bian and Caravaca-Morera (2017) found that some of their respondents concealed their bisexuality from others in order to avoid stigma or invasive questions about their sexuality. In a study of bisexual men in the US, McCormack, Anderson and Adams (2014) found a 'cohort effect' on the coming out experiences of bisexual men in that older men were exposed to more negative stereotypes and prejudice on the basis of their bisexuality than younger men. Moreover, older bisexual men appear to hold more heteronormative attitudes about sexuality and relationships than younger bisexual men (Anderson, Scoats and McCormack, 2015). Furthermore, in their qualitative study of bisexual male youths at sixth form colleges in the UK, Morris, McCormack and Anderson (2014) state that almost all of their participants reported positive experiences of coming out as bisexual, which were not characterised by stigma or prejudice. The authors attributed this effect to the gradual decline of cultural homophobia and biphobia.

The uncertainties that often surround bisexuality perhaps stem from the coping strategies that have come to be associated with sexual minority groups facing stigma (Jaspal, 2019). As same-sex attracted individuals began to campaign for their rights and to protest against discrimination, there was a need to self-label – people came to identify, and to present themselves, dichotomously as 'gay' or 'lesbian', often in opposition to 'straight'. This has led

to the perception that people are either gay or straight and, in some cases, to suspicion and scepticism about the existence of more fluid sexual orientations like bisexuality.

It is noteworthy that sexual orientation does not always lead to a sexual identity that is consistent with that orientation. The construction of a LGB identity can be challenging given that it entails the assimilation and accommodation of a non-traditional, stigmatized identity which may not always meet with acceptance from valued others. This can mean that 'coming out' occurs on three levels: the extent to which one (1) accepts one's LGB identity, (2) discloses this information to other people, and (3) views their LGB identity as a social group membership, that is, sharing common traits with other LGB people.

There has been impactful research into 'coming out' models focusing on gay and lesbian people (e.g. Cass, 1979; Sophie,1986), which has been critiqued for being unilinear and unidirectional and for failing to explain how and why some 'stages' are embraced and others are not (Jaspal, 2019). However, there is relatively little work on the construction and manifestation of bisexual identity. Weinberg, Williams and Pryor (1994) developed a four-stage model of bisexual identity formation focusing on initial confusion, the search for a self-label, self-acceptance in the new identity, and continued uncertainty. Yet, this model implicitly views bisexual identity as one characterized by uncertainty in spite of identity acceptance. In this chapter, it is shown how culture, religion and politics impinge on the construction of sexual identity in Lebanon – principally in the form of social representations.

Social representations

Social representations theory (Moscovici, 1988) provides a useful framework for understanding perceptions of bisexuality and the social backdrop against which bisexual men in Lebanon construct their sexual identities. The theory was designed to examine how science becomes 'common sense' knowledge, that is, how it enters public consciousness and

becomes a topic that can be debated. At a basic level, a social representation can be defined as a collective 'elaboration' of a given social object which in turn enables individuals to think and talk about it. This elaboration consists of emerging beliefs, values, ideas, images and metaphors in relation to any given phenomenon. Social representations provide a cultural group with a shared social reality or 'common consciousness'. Two principal social psychological processes converge in the creation of social representations:

1) Anchoring refers to the process whereby a novel, unfamiliar phenomenon is integrated into existing ways of thinking;

2) Objectification refers to the process whereby an abstract phenomenon is rendered concrete and tangible, often through the use of metaphors.

Anchoring and objectification occur in a wide range of social contexts, including the media, film and literature, political discourse, patient-practitioner interactions and in everyday conversation. Interactions in these contexts all contribute to the genesis and development of social representations of bisexuality. Social, political and religious factors play a prominent role in Lebanese society and are, thus, also central to the formation of social representations. They will inform the ways in which bisexuality is anchored to, or objectified in terms of, particular social phenomena. Moreover, these factors inform the social context in which sexual identity is constructed among bisexual men in Lebanon.

Identity process theory

The chapter focuses principally on religion and sexuality, and the intersection of these identities. Identity process theory (Jaspal and Breakwell, 2014) provides an integrative model of how these identities are constructed and defended in the face of potential 'threats'. The theory postulates that individuals construct their identity by engaging in two social psychological processes:

1) Assimilation-accommodation refers to the absorption of new information (such as new identity characteristics or social representations) into identity and the creation of space for it within the identity structure. For instance, 'coming out' as bisexual requires the absorption of new information about oneself, that is, referring to oneself as bisexual and seeing this as an aspect of who one is (assimilation). The assimilation of this novel information may lead some bisexual men to re-think their relationship with other aspects of identity, such as their religion (accommodation). Crucially, bisexuality must first exist as a social representation in order for it to be available as an identity aspect (see Philogene, 2007). It has to exist as something that can be thought about, discussed, and identified with;

2) Evaluation refers to the process of attributing meaning and value to the components of identity. Social representations are also central to this process. For example, while there is stigma associated with bisexuality in Western societies, bisexuality may be viewed more positively for the active[1] sexual partner in Lebanese society because this does not necessarily challenge gender norms in the way that being sexually passive might (Roscoe and Murray, 1997).

The two identity processes are in turn guided by various motivational principles, which essentially specify the desirable end-states for identity:

1) Self-esteem refers to personal and social worth. For instance, the social representation that homosexual behaviour is a sin can lead to internalized stigma and the inability to derive a positive self-conception (Super and Jacobson, 2011);

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[1] The term 'active' is used to refer to the insertive sexual partner, while 'passive' refers to the receptive sexual partner. Stigma appears to be appended to the passive role, given that the active male may be more able to lay claim to a 'masculine' identity (Murray and Roscoe, 1997). The terms 'active' and 'passive' often imply a power dynamic whereby the active partner as the penetrator is more powerful than the passive partner. However, it is acknowledged that 'power' can be shaped by several factors – not least the economic capital possessed by a sex worker's client who wishes to be penetrated for pleasure. Indeed, in this case, being 'passive' would not equate to the loss of power.

2) Self-efficacy can be defined as the belief in one's competence and control. Some bisexual men report their inability to 'resist' the temptation of homosexuality, which can undermine self-efficacy (Jaspal and Cinnirella, 2010).

3) Continuity is essentially the psychological thread between past, present and future. It is easy to see how 'coming out' as bisexual, that is, acquiring an identity based on one's sexual orientation, could disrupt this psychological thread (Weinberg, Williams and Pryor, 1994).

4) Coherence refers to the perception that relevant aspects of identity are coherent and compatible. As indicated in this chapter, some bisexual men perceive their sexual orientation to be incompatible and irreconcilable with their religious identity (Jaspal and Cinnirella, 2010).

When these principles are compromised, for instance, by changes in one's social context, identity is said to be threatened (Breakwell, 1986; Jaspal and Breakwell, 2014). Individuals differ in the extent to which they value each of the principles – when a principle that is valued by the individual is abrogated, identity will be threatened (Bardi, Jaspal, Polek & Schwartz, 2014). Identity threat is generally aversive for psychological wellbeing. However, the degree to which one's wellbeing is compromised is determined by the importance appended to each of the principles, the nature of the threat, the number of valued principles curtailed by the threat, and one's ability to cope effectively. People attempt to cope with threats to identity at three distinct levels:

1) Intrapsychic strategies function at a psychological level. Some can be regarded as deflection strategies in that they enable the individual to deny or re-conceptualize the threat or the reasons for occupying the threatening position. Others are acceptance strategies that facilitate some form of cognitive re-structuring in anticipation of the threat. For instance, it is possible that a bisexual man living in

Lebanon where same-sex sexual behaviour is stigmatized may refuse to accept that he is bisexual and self-define as heterosexual, although this sexual identity is inconsistent with his actual sexual behaviour;

2) Interpersonal strategies aim to change the nature of relationships with others. Most interpersonal strategies are maladaptive given that they may isolate themselves from others or feign membership of a group or network of which they are not really a member, in order to avoid exposure to stigma, for instance. Although a bisexual man is aware of his bisexual orientation, he may present himself as heterosexual in heteronormative contexts in order to avoid homophobic and biphobic stigma. An example of a proactive interpersonal strategy is that of self-disclosure, given that this can facilitate the acquisition of support from others. This can include 'coming out' as bisexual to a trusted significant other;

3) Intergroup strategies aim to change the nature of our relationships with groups. Most strategies are proactive. Individuals may join groups of like-minded others who share their predicament in order to derive social support. They may create a new social group to derive support or a pressure group to influence social representations. It was in the 1990s that bisexual people in the US began to form a community and to advocate for the rights of bisexual people (Udis-Kessler, 1995). Similarly, the emergence of LGB support groups in Lebanon like *Helem*[2] have created a social and political space in which LGB Lebanese people can advocate for their rights and create better conditions in which sexual minorities can live their lives (Makarem, 2012).

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[2] Helem is a Lebanese charity dedicated to the improvement of the legal and social status of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. http://www.helem.net

The chapter has hitherto focused on the theoretical aspects of religion and bisexuality through the lens of social representations theory and identity process theory. It is an opportune moment to turn to the social, theological and psychological aspects of bisexuality and homosexuality in Middle Eastern societies. The next section sheds lights on the social representations that will inform the construction of identity among Lebanese bisexual men.

Religion and bisexuality

Religious representations of homosexuality are generally negative. They are substantiated principally on the basis of Holy Scripture – the *Qur'an* and the *Ahadith* in the case of Islam and the Bible in the case of Christianity. Both Islam and Christianity – two major religions in Lebanon[3]– are heterogeneous traditions with many distinct denominations, cultural norms and practices. It is therefore difficult to generalize about their respective 'stances' on homosexuality. However, in general, it is reasonable to state that mainstream Islamic and Christian theologies in Lebanon generally append hegemonic status to heterosexuality and are largely opposed to homosexuality.

In Islam, this stance is ingrained in the major ideological channels of communication, such as Islamic holy scripture (the *Qur'an*), Islamic law (*Shariah*), and the verbal teachings of the Prophet Mohammed (*Ahadith*), all of which appear to outlaw homosexuality (Bouhdiba, 1998). Theological opposition to homosexuality is based on what is regarded by most Islamic scholars as the *Qur'an*'s explicit prohibition of same-sex sexual relations. In both Islam and Christianity, the story of Lot in the *Qur'an* has been widely cited as evidence of God's condemnation of homosexuality. The *Qur'an* makes seven explicit references to the

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[3] Lebanon has a specific profile of different religious communities, including Christian Maronites, Greek Catholics and Greek Orthodox, Sunni and Shia Muslims, and the Druze.

people of Lot, whose destruction by God is often attributed to their engagement in homosexual practices.

Although there has been some discussion of the authenticity and accuracy of the *Ahadith* (records of the sayings and traditions attributed to the Prophet Mohammed), they are frequently invoked by traditional Islamic scholars like Al Shafii, Malik and Ibn Hanbal in order to substantiate the dominant Islamic condemnation of homosexuality (Lange, 2009). However, some Islamic scholars have offered a more tolerant approach toward this topic. For instance, Scott Kugle argues that the divine punishment of Lot's people is a condemnation of assault and rape rather than homosexuality (Kugle, 2010).

Similarly, mainstream Christianity has always promoted heterosexuality and has not generally provided a space for the acceptance of homosexuality or bisexuality (Gnuse, 2015). Christian theologians who argue that the practice of homosexuality is condemned rely on texts from the Old and the New Testament. Beside the classic book of Genesis that describes the men of Sodom who wanted to rape the two male visitors to the city, the Book of Leviticus in the Old Testament - thought to be given to Moses by God on biblical Mount Sinai – is often employed to substantiate the claim that homosexuality is inconsistent with Christianity. Liberal scholars in Christianity like Gnuse and Goss have provided alternative interpretations of biblical references to homosexuality, referring, for instance, to linguistic nuances in the Greek language that call into question mainstream understandings of the term 'homosexuality'. They also argue that Jesus, who espoused the message of love and acceptance, would never punish a monogamous homosexual relationship that has Christ at its center (Gnuse, 2015; Goss, 2002).

In spite of these passages in Holy Scripture, homosexual relationships, especially those involving men with boys (known as pederasty), were generally tolerated in pre-modern Islamic societies. Homoerotic themes existed in poetry of the Muslim world as early as the 8th

century and resemble the traditions of Greco-Roman antiquity. Although Islam explicitly forbade all forms of homosexuality and pederasty, same-sex sexual practices persisted and, in some cases, were silently tolerated. During the Arab medieval era, many Muslim men belonging to the upper classes had wives, concubines and, sometimes, young male lovers. These relationships between adult men and their younger male partners were based on social and sexual inequality characterized by 'patriarchal sexuality' (Dialmy, 2010). Pederasty was tolerated and accepted but not openly discussed. The paradox is that, despite its prohibition in Islam and the religious conviction of the men who practised it, pederasty persisted during this era.

In his chapter on the precursors to Islamic male homosexuality, Murray (1997) outlines the apparent tolerance of homosexuality in Islamic societies provided that it is collectively denied and never publicly acknowledged. In line with hierarchical patriarchy, the sexually passive homosexual male (*moukhannath,* literally 'effeminate man' in Arabic) was socially devalued and de-masculinized. Conversely, the active partner was not regarded as homosexual but rather as a *louti* - in reference to people of Lot in the monotheistic religions. Men were expected to perform only an active role in homosexual intercourse once they reached adulthood. Those men who performed the active sexual role were perceived as having a double-faceted virility because they penetrate both males and females. Thus, culturally, there was actually a blurring of boundaries between homosexuality and bisexuality in the case of those men who perform the active sexual role. Social representations position them as socially superior - they get married, have children, and perform their religious and cultural duties.

Against this social representational backdrop, it could be hypothesized that bisexuals are unlikely to experience the threats to identity associated with exclusive homosexuality. In Lebanon, they clearly enjoy a higher social status than homosexual men who are implicitly

understood to be sexually passive (Murray and Roscoe, 1997) and, thus unlikely to face the threats to self-esteem to which homosexual men are susceptible. The lack of a bisexual identity in many societies means that few will contemplate 'coming out' as bisexual, which enables their sense of continuity to remain intact. In short, they never have to assimilate or accommodate bisexuality in their identity. Yet, given the strong and coercive social representation that homosexual behaviour is inconsistent with religious teachings, there is certainly potential for threats to the psychological coherence principle of identity. Bisexual men may come to question the legitimacy of their sexual behaviour in view of their religious identity, which is generally important and valued. They may struggle to reconcile their homosexual behaviour with their religious identity.

Although they engage in same-sex sexual practices, many Middle Eastern men simply do not identify as being gay or bisexual (Murray and Roscoe, 1997; Siraj 2006). A hegemonic social representation promulgated mainly by mainstream religious scholars in Arab Middle Eastern societies is that homosexuality is a sinful and immoral behavioural choice. According to this social representation, God creates human beings perfectly and, thus, homosexuality is viewed not as an inherent human characteristic but rather as a choice that human beings themselves make and for which they are therefore responsible. Conversely, there is an emerging, competing social representation – championed mainly by LGB organisations and pressure groups in Middle Eastern countries and beyond – that advocates, and creates space for, LGB identities. This social representation shifts the focus from sexual behaviour to sexual identity and emphasises the emotional, affective components of homosexuality *as a sexual identity*. LGB affirmative charities and pressure groups have emerged in several Arab Middle Eastern countries. As a largely secular organization, the Lebanese organization *Helem* has had a limited impact on religious social representations – it has not possessed the societal credibility necessary to shape religious representations. Moreover, its focus has not been on the reconciliation of religious and sexual identities among Lebanese LGB people.

In the next section, the cultural, religious and political aspects of Lebanon – as a state and society – are explored, as these factors shape the construction and management of bisexuality as a potential sexual identity in Lebanon.

Lebanon: religion, politics and sexuality

Having been a French protectorate, Lebanon gained its independence from the French

Republic in 1943 with Beirut as its capital city. Between 1943 and 1975, Lebanon was one of

a small minority of truly democratic states in the Middle East. It was renowned for its tolerant

state ideological approach to different religious communities, including Christian Maronites,

Greek Catholics and Greek Orthodox, Sunni and Shia Muslims, and the Druze. The diverse

religious communities adhere to a set of national, public values, while retaining and nurturing

their respective religious and cultural norms.

However, in 1975 a long and protracted sectarian conflict began, which brought about

the collapse of the Lebanese government and, by 1990, over a million Lebanese people had

been uprooted from their homes and ninety thousand people lost their lives (Labaki, 1994).

The long and bloody conflict radically changed the demographic profile of Lebanon, and the

subsequent fragility of the Lebanese state and the fragmentation of Lebanese national identity

led to the strengthening of another competing social identity, namely religion. The primacy of

religious identities has culminated in a range of sanctions aimed at curtailing homosexuality

in Lebanon.

Lebanon has a problematic track record on LGB rights. According to Article 534 of

the Lebanese Penal Code of 1943, sexual relations which 'contradict the law of nature' are

prohibited by law, and those found guilty of this offence (which can include homosexual

relations) can face up to a year in prison (Human Rights Watch, 2018; Makarem, 2012).

Although this law has occasionally been used to harass, persecute and sometimes arrest LGB

people, it is not widely enforced and several senior Lebanese lawmakers have disputed the

law and the investigative practices (e.g. anal examinations) that it has encouraged. Thus, on

balance, Lebanon can be viewed as more accepting and accommodating of LGB people than other countries in the Middle East – other than Israel.

Indeed, since 2006, LGB groups in Lebanon have organised LGB awareness and visibility-raising events – often on the International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia, and Biphobia (IDAHOT). However, both Muslim and Christian religious leaders in Lebanon have repeatedly opposed LGB pride events through campaigns against these events or through the 'prior censorship approval' cover. For instance, Lebanon's Pride Week commemorating the IDAHOT 2017 was cancelled by the government on the grounds that the program might lead to unrest and violence. Government agencies did not issue a public statement regarding cancellation of the events but rather resorted to coercion and threatening language. For instance, the protection of organisers and of venue owners was not guaranteed in the event of unrest and violence.

Opposition to the Pride events was prevalent across all faith groups in Lebanon. While Sunni groups were threatening to disrupt the Beirut Pride event in Beirut, a Christian Orthodox church in Tripoli, North of Lebanon, discussed in an open conference how to convert LGB communities to 'normative sexual behaviour'. Meanwhile, a Shia political and religious leader made a statement criticising Western countries for exporting LGB ideas to Lebanon: "Homosexual relations defy logic, human nature and the human mind"[4].   In this context, it is important to note that bisexuality is never brought up in public discussion in Lebanon. Though there are clearly bisexuals in Lebanon (e.g. Wagner *et al*., 2013), bisexuality is simply not acknowledged as an identity. Therefore, there is an erasure of bisexual identity amid acknowledgement, but condemnation, of homosexuality.

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[4] "Beirut PRIDE: an analysis from the inside" [available: https://dayagainsthomophobia.org/beirut-pride-an-analysis-from-the-inside/]

Social representations of non-heterosexual identities in Lebanon are generally negative. A 2013 study revealed that 80 per cent of the Lebanese respondents did not believe that homosexuality is acceptable (Pew Research Centre, 2013). This social representation is grounded in representations disseminated by both religious and political institutions which generally stigmatise homosexuality. Yet, despite the social, religious and political constraints on open expressions of LGB identities, Lebanese LGB people do 'live out' their sexual identities. Its capital city, Beirut, is one of the most socially progressive cities in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), with a vibrant gay community and gay bars, clubs and community centers. Moreover, online gay social networking sites and applications are pervasively used among gay and bisexual men to socialise, seek support and arrange casual sexual encounters. Many LGB young people do seek support with their relationships, sexual health issues, and claim their rights. Yet, it must be noted that Beirut is by no means representative of the whole of Lebanon, which is generally intolerant of homosexuality and devoid of a 'gay culture'[5].

One of the most prominent LGB organisations in Lebanon is *Helem*, which is a significant non-governmental organisation established in 2004 to advocate for the visibility and right of LGB people in the region, and against discrimination on social, cultural and legal grounds. The organisation has made a significant contribution to positive social change in Lebanon. For instance, it helped secure the release of many individuals following unreasonable arrest and has proactively challenged homophobic stigma from the media news about LGB community by delivering continuous workshops and roundtable events with the Lebanese media community (Makarem, 2012). Another organization, *Mosaic[6]*, offers a holistic program committed to improve the health and wellness of LGB groups in Lebanon

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[5] "Beirut PRIDE: an analysis from the inside" [available: https://dayagainsthomophobia.org/beirut-pride-an-analysis-from-the-inside/]

[6] MOSAIC is a organisation dedicated to the improvement of health and wellbeing in marginalized gender and sexual minorities in Lebanon https://www.mosaicmena.org

and in the MENA region. Through its national presence in Lebanon and its regional networks in the MENA region, *Mosaic*'s strategic goal is to achieve the coexistence of people in friendly communities and national systems. Unfortunately, *Helem* and *Mosaic* and other organisations have not yet succeeded in securing political and religious support to overturn Article 534 of the Lebanese Penal Code, which can be used to criminalise same-sex sexual behaviour.

In view of societal stigma towards sexual minorities in Lebanon, LGB people may face social and psychological challenges in relation to their sexual orientation. There have been some empirical studies of gay and bisexual men in Lebanon, which provide important insight into the lived experiences of non-heterosexual men but little specific focus on those of bisexual men. Yet, in view of the discussion earlier in this chapter, it is possible to offer some tentative hypotheses regarding the specific social and psychological experiences of bisexual men in Lebanon.

In a qualitative study of gay and bisexual men in Beirut, Wagner *et al*. (2012) found that most participants experienced discomfort in relation to their sexual orientation due to stigma from others and, especially, to the social representation that homosexuality is incompatible with their religion, and many anticipated or actually experienced rejection when disclosing their sexual orientation to significant others. In another qualitative interview study of gay and bisexual men in Beirut (Wagner *et al*., 2013), interviewees reported experiences of stigma and discrimination on the basis of their sexual orientation, and guilt and shame due to its perceived incompatibility with their religion. In accordance with identity process theory, it could be hypothesised that the stigma that bisexual men encounter on the basis of their sexual behavior and identity could undermine the self-esteem principle of identity and that the anticipation of rejection could challenge the continuity principle of identity. After all, rejection from significant others represents a rupture in the psychological thread linking past,

present and future. The adverse emotional experiences of guilt and shame may be responses to threats to self-esteem and continuity (Jaspal, 2012).

In a survey study of 210 Lebanese LGB people, it was found that legal discrimination, religiosity and negative parental attitudes (either real or anticipated) were significant predictors of internalised homophobia (Michli, 2016). Crucially, self-compassion was not found to be associated with internalised homophobia, suggesting a more powerful effect of the aforementioned social variables. These studies converge in showing that gay and bisexual men in Lebanon face and anticipate stigma towards their sexual orientation and that religion plays a significant role in their own cognitive appraisal of their sexual orientation. These studies suggest that bisexual men also experience self-stigma on the basis of their sexual orientation, which could be referred to as internalised biphobia.

Religiosity and negative social representations of same-sex desire (disseminated by significant others, such as parents, and embedded in legislation) clearly contribute to this self-stigma among bisexual men. Although the studies did not use identity process theory, it can be deduced from these data that dominant social representations in Lebanon lead to identity threat among sexual minority men. However, as noted above, there is no empirical research into the attitudes and experiences of bisexual Lebanon men, in particular, and existing research appears to conflate the attitudes and experiences of gay and bisexual men.

In view of the negative social representations of LGB people, Lebanese men who actually self-identify as bisexual may feel compelled to re-examine their identities – especially in view of religious influences. Yet, it is important to avoid the assumption that religious influences are invariably negative, given that some bisexual men do also utilise religion as a source of social psychological support (Jeffries, Dodge and Sandfort, 2008). Religious identification may provide feelings of self-esteem through the pride and positive self-conception that membership in this group can often facilitate. They may feel empowered

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by religion despite the stigma of their sexual attraction. Religious identification often provides a sense of continuity which can connect the past, present and future. Thus, those identity principles that might be threatened as a result of one's sexual orientation might conversely be enhanced by religious affiliation.

Furthermore, some of the coping strategies outlined earlier in this chapter can facilitate a robust connection with religion despite its perceived incompatibility with one's sexual orientation. For instance, it has been shown that some Muslim gay and bisexual men may 'postpone' sexual activity with their same-sex partner during the holy fasting period of Ramadan as a means of retaining a connection with their religious identity (Jaspal and Cinnirella, 2014). Yet, it must also be noted that a bisexual orientation may also enable some Lebanese men to deny their true sexual orientation (bisexuality) and to construct a heterosexual identity which is deemed to be more consistent with their religious identity.

In view of the discussion earlier in this chapter, this may be especially feasible for a bisexual male who takes the active (insertive) sexual role. The active sexual role is socially represented as indicating masculinity and male virility and may therefore 'shield' the individual from the stigma of homosexuality, which conversely is associated with femininity and passivity in Middle Eastern cultures (Tolino, 2014). The male who penetrates both men and women is able to lay claim to the category 'bisexual' and therefore to benefit from on the social capital that this generates (*vis-à-vis* homosexuality). It is important to note that bisexuality is by no means a publicly acknowledged or celebrated identity in Lebanon and that many men in Lebanon do not think of themselves in those terms. However, it is certainly preferable to homosexuality in cultural consciousness and therefore may be claimed even by those who do not actually feel an attraction to women.

The impact of sexual identity on psychological wellbeing and sexual health

A growing number of empirical studies conducted in the MENA region, and especially in Lebanon, have addressed wellbeing and sexual health issues in gay men (Wagner *et al*., 2013; Wagner *et al*., 2015). As indicated earlier, most studies have either excluded bisexual men or treated gay and bisexual men as a single group – there are no studies fully devoted to bisexual men, in particular. However, on the basis of the observations in this chapter, some tentative hypotheses regarding bisexual men in Lebanon can be offered.

Studies of sexual minority individuals in Lebanon have generally revealed an association between the experience of stigma/discrimination and poor mental health characterised by depression, psychological distress, substance use and social isolation. For instance, in Wagner *et al*.'s (2013) study of sexual identity development among gay and bisexual men in Lebanon, it was found that the experience of stigma adversely impacted both psychological wellbeing and engagement in social relationships in the participant sample. Almost 66 percent of their study participants reported experiencing some discomfort with their sexual orientation, which could be attributed to societal stigma towards sexual minorities, on the one hand, and to participants' own religious beliefs, on the other hand. This demonstrates that individuals may internalise the stigma associated with their sexual identity. Acceptance of sexual orientation was related to sexual identity disclosure to family and parents.

Concealment of one's sexual identity is often coupled with the strategy of passing, that is, feigning heterosexuality, which can have negative consequences for self-esteem and continuity. The key point is that some Lebanese bisexual men may not accept their sexual orientation and, thus, refrain from assimilating and accommodating their sexual orientation in their identity and from disclosing this information to other people. It could be hypothesised therefore that behaviourally bisexual Lebanese men will not readily assimilate and accommodate a bisexual identity but instead continue to view themselves as heterosexual,

especially if they perform an active sexual role, which reinforces their self-image as masculine and virile.

There is also research that shows that the experience of discrimination is associated with engagement in sexual risk practices. For instance, exposure to gay-related discrimination has been shown to be associated with engagement in sexual risk behaviour among gay and bisexual men (Wagner *et al.*, 2015). This can include an increased rate of unprotected anal intercourse in the past three months, decreased knowledge of one's sexual partners' HIV status, and withdrawal from social networks that normally provide HIV knowledge. All of these factors can increase an individual's HIV risk.

It is easy to see how exposure to stigma on the basis of sexual orientation can compromise an individual's self-esteem, potentially leading to decreased self-care behaviours which might promote good mental and sexual health outcomes. Focussing specifically on bisexual Lebanese men, it could be hypothesised that bisexual men will be exposed to less discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation given the greater social acceptance of bisexuality in Lebanese society. However, it could also be predicted that bisexual Lebanese men are just as likely to engage in sexual risk practices, possibly because of decreased exposure to HIV and sexual health knowledge that they might encounter through engagement with gay social contexts, e.g. clubs, bars and social support groups.

In their study of sexual stigma, psychological wellbeing and social engagement among same-sex attracted men, Wagner *et al.*'s (2013) research shows that individuals may engage in the maladaptive coping strategy of 'passing' by adopting a heterosexual public identity while engaging in same-sex sexual practices in private. Given the absence of public acknowledgement and discussion of bisexuality in Lebanon, it could be hypothesised that behaviourally bisexual men are more likely than gay men to adopt a heterosexual public identity despite engaging in both heterosexual and same-sex sexual practices. In other words,

bisexuality is not a social representation in Lebanese society and, thus, is not readily available as a social category with which Lebanese men can identify.

Passing itself is a strategy that can compromise the individual's mental health by increasing feelings of anxiety due to fear of involuntary disclosure of their sexual orientation and by compromising their sense of authenticity. In the case of Lebanese bisexual men, it could be predicted that 'passing' as heterosexual might not be construed as a threat to identity authenticity since various factors (e.g. performing an active sexual role) may reinforce their sense of heterosexuality - in their minds at least.

Yet, other factors may compromise wellbeing. For instance, it has long been known that internalised homophobia/ biphobia can increase the risk of depression, suicidal ideation, substance misuse, and sexual risk-taking (Doll and Beeker, 1996; Peterson *et al.*, 1992). In his discussion of the relationship between mental and sexual health outcomes, Jaspal (2018) has argued that chronic exposure to identity threat, due to biphobia and other psychosocial stressors, can lead to maladaptive strategies, especially in social contexts in which social support is not readily available. In Lebanese society in which LGB identities are stigmatised, such social support may not be forthcoming for bisexual men.

Concluding remarks

This chapter focuses on the interface of bisexuality and religion and its implications for mental and sexual health in Lebanese men. Lebanon is a diverse society in which many religious groups coexist and for whom religious identity tends to be stronger than other identities. The norms, values and social representations associated with religious identity appear to stigmatise LGB identities. Even if the Lebanese state develops more accepting policies towards gay and bisexual men, it is hard to see how this alone would decrease the

stigma associated with powerful religious representations that many values and prioritise in Lebanon.

Despite the prohibition of non-heterosexuality, in Lebanon, bisexuality does appear to be tolerated as a practice but not as an identity. This is especially the case for those bisexual men who perform the active sexual role, rather than those who are sexually passive. There is a social representation of double-faceted masculinity for active bisexuals and one of femininity for those who are sexually passive. In view of the importance appended to religion in Lebanon, social representations that are grounded in theology may be drawn upon by members of society and bisexual men themselves in order to make sense of bisexuality. It is against the backdrop of these social representations that bisexual men construct and manage their identity. It is therefore important to intervene at the level of religion in order to promote more positive identities among bisexual men in Lebanon.

In a society characterised by overt homophobia, bisexual men may be susceptible to chronic threats to identity and to maladaptive strategies for coping with threat. There is an emerging culture of social support in Lebanon, such as local non-governmental organisations, but there are challenges – especially in view of the pervasive homophobia and criminalisation of homosexuality in the country. Social support for bisexual men is still in its infancy. It is easy to see how self-esteem, continuity and other identity principles might be threatened by the assimilation and accommodation of a bisexual identity. Put simply, bisexual men may be less willing to construct a bisexual identity despite continuing to engage in same-sex sexual practices. Identity is central to the behaviours that people adopt. If behaviourally bisexual men do not view themselves as bisexual, they may refuse, or be unable to access, social support aimed at bisexual men. In the absence of social support, bisexual men may adopt maladaptive coping strategies with negative outcomes for mental and sexual health.

This chapter has shown that there is a dearth of empirical research into bisexuality in Lebanon, but the available evidence suggests that the construction of bisexual identity appears to be challenging in this religious and cultural context. There is a pressing need for more empirical research into bisexual men in particular. There is a need for greater visibility and acknowledgement of male bisexuality in Lebanon. It is clear that negative social representations of bisexuality will need to be challenged at a religious level. In a country where religious identities are stronger than the superordinate Lebanese identity, this will clearly be a challenge but one that should be undertaken.

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