

Identity threat among British Muslim gay men

Rusi Jaspal on the challenges faced by those viewing sexual identities through a religious lens

Being gay in a heteronormative world can be difficult and stressful, but for Muslims who identify as gay, life can be particularly problematic. This is due primarily to negative social representations of homosexuality within Islam. This article elucidates some of the socio-psychological challenges which may be experienced by British Muslim gay men through a brief discussion of the relevant literature in this area. It is argued that psychologists ought to engage with these issues to complement ongoing work within sociology, and that studying the interface of sexuality and religion has important implications for policy and practice, particularly within counselling psychology.

One of the most scandalous storylines of recent times on *EastEnders*, the long-running popular British television soap opera, involved Syed Masood, a young British Muslim character who identifies as Muslim and gay. In accordance with his religious identity, he is represented as feeling personally and socially obliged to marry his Muslim fiancée despite being gay and romantically involved with another male character in the soap. Unsurprisingly, given its controversial, 'will he won't he' nature, the storyline proved popular among viewers.

On the one hand, it seems encouraging that exposure to such topics, particularly among Muslim viewers themselves, may encourage awareness of the potential social and psychological implications of identifying as Muslim and gay. On the other hand, such media representations probably do not go far enough in terms of changing dominant representations and perceptions vis-à-vis homosexuality in Islam. Indeed, I remember overhearing a conversation about the storyline between two first-generation British Muslim women; one of them seemed to entertain the possibility that homosexuality might actually exist in the Muslim community, while the other rather cynically attributed the portrayal of the Muslim character's homosexuality to the traditional farfetchedness of *EastEnders*' storylines. This conversational exchange attests to the varying interpretative repercussions that media representations of gay Muslims will have in the broader population.

But why would homosexuality in the

Muslim community elicit astonishment and disbelief among religious group members? We know that the dominant view among many Muslims is that homosexuality is incompatible with Islam, given that Islamic holy scripture (the *Koran*), Islamic law (*Shari'ah*) and the verbal teachings of the Prophet Mohammed (*Ahadith*) explicitly outlaw homosexuality (Bouhdiba, 1998). Accordingly, it is likely that the cultural processes of heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality are acutely active in Islamic religious contexts. Consequently, for men who identify as Muslim and gay it is likely that this identity configuration will present social as well as psychological complications.

It is largely within the field of sociology that some of these issues have been paid scholarly attention. Perhaps the most important contributor to the sociological literature is Andrew Yip. He has argued that British Muslim gay men (BMGM) may discard their religious identity in favour of their sexual identity as a means of resolving the dissonance associated with self-identifying as gay and Muslim (Yip, 2007). Moreover, Yip (2004) has suggested that, provided both identities are maintained within the self-concept, BMGM may activate each of these identities in distinct social contexts. However, much of this sociological work falls short of providing insight into the psychological factors underlying this identity configuration among BMGM.

As for our own discipline, there has been some important social psychological research on the reconciliation of religious and sexual identities, albeit among other ethno-religious group members. In their qualitative interview study with British men who identify as Jewish and gay, Coyle and Rafalin (2000) found that participants' perceived incompatibility of being Jewish and gay frequently gave rise to identity conflict, which was said to have negative consequences for psychological well-being. Rejecting the religious aspect of one's Jewish identity was described as one possible strategy for minimising the

identity conflict that was shown by participants. Similarly, Phellas (2005) in his study on gay Cypriots found that some participants struggled to find acceptance in the Cypriot community because of their sexual identities. These social psychological studies hint at some of the potential psychological difficulties faced by BMGM and the importance of coping strategies in minimising threat. However, due to the centrality of religious identity among many Muslim individuals and the idiosyncrasies of this religious group, these studies are unlikely to be adequate for explaining the experience of being gay and Muslim, in particular.

Dissatisfaction with existing research in this domain has led us to explore the social and psychological implications of self-identification as Muslim and gay. Moreover, we have paid particular attention to the coping strategies that may be developed and activated by BMGM in order to cope with the potential threats to identity as a result of this complex identity configuration (Jaspal & Cinnirella, in press). Informed by identity process theory (Breakwell, 1986), our work has echoed cross-cultural findings that the reconciliation of religious and sexual identities may pose considerable psychological difficulties for individuals and, more specifically, that it may result in threats to identity. For instance, in their attempts to make sense of their sexual identities, the majority of participants in our interview studies exhibited feelings of guilt and wrong-doing, which were attributed to the widespread tendency among participants to view their sexual and other identities primarily through a religious 'lens'. As illustrated above, these negative feelings may be explained by the unambiguously negative social representations of homosexuality that are associated with Muslim identity. Although religious identity was, in the vast majority of cases, evaluated in particularly positive terms vis-à-vis sexual identity, the inescapable importance of being gay within the contexts of their life narratives rendered it impossible for individuals to simply ignore this other, somewhat problematic, identity. In an attempt to reconcile the two, participants frequently rejected any personal responsibility for, or agency in, their sexual identities. Instead they employed essentialist arguments, namely that they were born gay or that this was the way that they were 'built' (see also Hegarty, 2002). This strategy of attributing their homosexuality to an external source was observable among other participants; some attributed causality to Satanic attempts to turn them away from God and 'the right path', while others inculcated

'British culture' which was viewed by some individuals as facilitating and even encouraging 'gay lifestyle'.

It seems a logical assumption that interpersonal contact with other gay men might encourage BMGM to begin to reconcile their religious and sexual identities and to view being gay as an 'acceptable' identity, which is shared by many others. However, in a separate interview study (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010), I found that interpersonal contact in 'gay space' (e.g. gay bars, night clubs and meeting groups) could pose additional social and psychological problems for BMGM. These included a perceived risk of sexual disclosure as a result of socialising with White British gay men, who were frequently perceived as being 'too' open about their sexual identities, and religious discrimination from non-Muslim men. BMGM may feel more vulnerable to rejection and exclusion by members of their sexual ingroup (i.e. other gay men), by virtue of their religious identity, which is not shared by non-Muslims.

Moreover, contact with members of their sexual ingroup may be perceived as being conducive to involuntary sexual disclosure, which for many BMGM represented a dire threat due to the perceived prevalence of 'honour crime' in the Muslim community.

By employing a social psychological approach to research on BMGM we feel that we have been able to unravel some of the psychological intricacies of occupying this complex identity position, which remains largely unexplored among psychologists. The application of identity process theory, which theorises the experience of identity threat and how individuals cope with such threat, to data derived from BMGM has enabled us to understand some of the cognitive and behavioural patterns manifested by participants. On a more general level, research on the reconciliation of potentially conflictual identities feeds back productively into general theorising on identity processes, identity threat and inter-ethnic relations. Indeed, this line of

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research has led us to develop and build upon identity process theory by introducing the notion of psychological coherence, an additional identity principle that we believe guides identity processes (Jaspal & Cinnirella, in press).

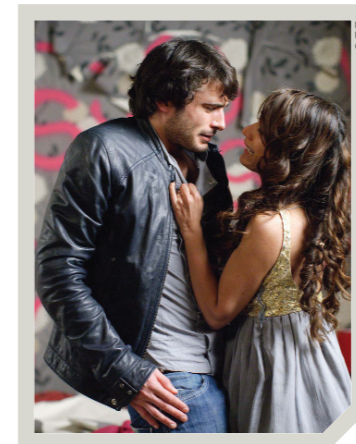
Undoubtedly, research on BMGM has important implications beyond the disciplinary boundaries of social psychology. Such research is likely to create greater awareness among counselling psychologists of the multifaceted nature of identity threat (both at the intrapsychic and interpersonal levels) to which BMGM may be exposed by virtue of their religious and sexual identities. Moreover, it is important to encourage greater awareness of the

idiosyncrasies associated with BMGM, rather than generalising findings from other populations and from other identity configurations (e.g. ethnic and sexual). This is vital given that religious identity is said to constitute a 'meaning system' for many Muslims and it is frequently perceived as a 'core' identity (Silberman, 2005). Furthermore, given the potential impact of this complex identity configuration upon psychological well-being, some awareness of these complex issues is essential for work with BMGM clients. As psychologists, we must explore and encourage ways in which potentially conflictual identities may be reconciled by individuals.

In conclusion, media representations of gay Muslims that encourage greater awareness of issues related to BMGM in the general population should be matched by scholarly inquiry into the psychological experiences of being gay and Muslim. From our research, it seems evident that social psychology is well-equipped, both theoretically and empirically, to answer important questions regarding the reconciliation of religious and sexual identities, whose answers have clear implications for policy and practice.



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In *EastEnders* (BBC) Syed felt socially obliged to marry his Muslim fiancée despite being gay

questions

What are the causes of homophobia?
What are the practical implications of psychological research into the interface of being gay and Muslim?

resources

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