Title: *Uniquely Positioned?: Lived Experiences of Lesbian, Gay,*

and Bisexual Asian Muslims in Britain

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Introduction

This paper highlights some of my reflections on the data drawn from an empirical research project entitled *A Minority within a Minority: British Non-heterosexual Muslims*, conducted in 2001 and 2002. Specifically, the project explored three dimensions of the lived experiences of non-heterosexual (specifically lesbian, gay, and bisexual; Hereinafter 'LGB') Muslims who are primarily of South Asian origin. These dimensions are: (a) individual/cognitive (e.g. how they reconciled their sexuality with religious faith, given the pervasive censure of homosexuality); (b) interpersonal (e.g. how they managed social relationships with potentially stigmatizing social audiences such as family members, kin, and their ethnic/religious community); and (c) intergroup (e.g. how they managed social relationships with potentially supportive social audiences such as the broader LGB community which is predominantly 'white' and secular).

The 42 participants (20 women and 22 men) - recruited primarily through support groups, LGB Press and personal networks – were interviewed individually for about two hours. In addition, two focus group interviews were conducted. Most of the sample lived in Greater London, and the vast majority were under the age of 30, and highly educated (for more details about the research methodology and the sample, see Yip 2003). Owing to space, I shall only highlight some prominent empirical and theoretical issues here, with references to more detailed discussions I have offered elsewhere.

Significance of the Socio-Cultural, Religious and Political Context

I believe that the process of identity construction and management is not solely a personal matter, because social actors always engage with various structural factors that constitute the social context within which this process takes place. Thus, in order to explore the lived experiences of British LGB Muslims, it is important to understand the socio-cultural, religious and political context within which they live. This context is important because it reflects their position as not only members of a sexual minority, but also members of an ethnic and religious minority within the British society.

Indeed, LGB Muslims in Britain are in a unique position of straddling the Western cultural sphere which is generally secular, tolerant of sexual difference, and prioritizes expressive individualism; and the Asian/Muslim cultural sphere which is generally religious and prioritizes social obligations. By this, I do no mean that these cultural spheres are mutually exclusive, and that LGB Muslims are 'torn in between'. As I shall demonstrate later – consistent with literature on second and third-generation Muslims in Britain, and in the West in general (e.g. Samad 1998) – many LGB Muslims are 'competent cultural navigators', despite the challenges posed by their belonging to these cultural spheres. Their unique position is simultaneously enabling and constraining, offering important insights into the intricate interconnectedness of structure and agency.

The most significant issue all participants acknowledged is the pervasive religious and cultural censure of homosexuality within the Asian/Muslim community. Dominant religious discourse that hegemonizes heteronormativity constructs homosexuality as a problematic 'other'. This is buttressed by a cultural discourse that problematizes

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homosexuality as a 'Western disease', reflecting British society's excessive individualism, secularity, and moral permissiveness. Thus, to many within the Asian/Muslim community, a LGB Muslim identity is more than a manifestation of one's personal immorality, but also one's betrayal of the 'pure' Asian/Muslim cultural heritage as a result of - as a participant put it - 'westoxication': being intoxicated by the corrupting and secularizing forces of Western culture. These religious and cultural discourses police the boundary between the moral/pure ('us') and the immoral/impure ('them'). It clearly demonstrates the structural position of the Asian/Muslim community as an ethnic and religious minority, where religion plays a significant role in the process of ethnic identification.

Further, compared to other non-Christian religions, Islam is increasingly politicized in the West, significantly fuelled by the September 11[th.] terrorist attack, and similar events in different parts of the world since then. The political sensitivity that surrounds the Muslim identity is therefore a prominent issue that LGB Muslims have to confront as an everyday reality (for more details, see Yip 2004a; 2005). Indeed, for LGB Muslims, ethnicity and religion are as prominent as, if not more prominent than, sexuality.

On the cultural front, there are other significant factors with which LGB Muslims have to engage. Three factors are particularly salient in this respect: (a) the emphasis on family honour (*izzat*); (b) the pressure to get married; and (c) close-knit family and kinship network. All these factors inextricably constitute a socio-cultural sphere that is not conducive to the development of an LGB identity (for more details, see Yip 2004b). These factors, of course, are not unique to the Muslim culture. Nevertheless, they significantly inform and affect the lives of LGB Muslims.

In sum, this section has highlighted the salient characteristics of the socio-cultural, political, and religious context within which LGB Muslim identities are constructed, contested, and managed. I must reiterate that it is not my intention to offer a deterministic view of LGB Muslim identity construction, that the process is totally dictated by structural forces, and there is no space for agency. Having said that, I also reject the ideology of endless self-invention, navigated by a reflexive self that is totally free of the shackles of structure, which so characterizes a lot of writings on LGB identity, underpinned by the Anglo-American model which prioritizes expressive individualism. I shall return to this theme later. In the following section, I shall demonstrate how LGB Muslims engage creatively with the enabling as well as constraining forces of this context.

Engagement with the Context

The data demonstrate that the participants engaged with this significant context in diverse ways. Some participants succumbed to the weight of socio-cultural and religious expectations primarily because of the fear of rejection by family members, relatives and the community, as well as respect for parents. Others, on the other hand, rose above various constraints and constructed safe space for the various forms of expression of their sexuality. The following sub-sections highlight the various dimensions of engagement.

Coming out to Family/Kin and Negotiating Marriage

Against a backdrop of religious and cultural censure, coming out was indeed a significant issue. Around 50% of the participants were 'out' to at least one of their parents, particularly the mother. A higher percentage of participants (about 80%) were 'out' to their siblings. The likelihood of coming out to the mother rather than the father probably reflects the hierarchical and patriarchal nature of the family structure, where authority rests primarily with the father. The mother, on the other hand, was perceived to be more caring and sympathetic. Siblings were more likely to be the target of disclosure primarily because of the participants' perception that, as their contemporaries, they generally were more tolerant of sexual diversity (for more details, see Yip 2004b).

Coming out to family members led to various responses. While there were isolated cases of extremely negative responses (e.g. physical assault, forced into marriage), most family members responded with cautious tolerance. Nevertheless, the pressure to get married often escalated as a result of disclosure. Underpinning this is the parents' view that marriage – as a cultural as well as religious rite of passage - would bring their 'wayward' children back to heteronormative life, as Omar's account illustrates:

> You tell them [the parents] that you are gay, the pressure [to get married] increases because they think, oh, if he's gay, let him get married and he will be all right. He'll be healed. When my parents started having these inklings that I'm homosexual, the pressure increases.

Several participants (about 26%) succumbed to the pressure and got married. Ironically, having fulfilled this significant social responsibility and religious obligation, thus distanced

themselves from the parental 'gaze', some participants used marriage as a convenient cover to explore their sexuality discreetly. Although most of them were clandestine about their activity, in isolated cases, the participants managed to strike a tacit agreement with their spouse and/or parent to continue with such activity, as long as they remained married. Invariably, this kind of double life exacted enormous emotional and social costs on the participants. Some consequently resorted to divorce, which often complicated familial relationships, since it tarnished family honour.

Interestingly, a small number of participants opted for marriage because they themselves believed that it would 'cure' their homosexuality. This reflects 'internalized homophobia', underpinned by a socio-cultural environment that offers little or no space for any alternative to heteronormativity.

Compartmentalizing Sexuality and Religious Faith

Given the complexity of familial and kin relations, some participants decided not to come out to their family members. In these cases, individual expression is outweighed by social obligation. Coming out, to them, would not only exact personal costs, but also tarnish family honour in the close-knit community. The physical and emotional proximity among family and kin in such a close-knit community makes this a prominent issue for consideration, as Zahid argued:

My parents are extremely important to me. I'd rather sacrifice that [sexuality] for them. All my friends said it's your life, you should do what you want to do. But I find

that an extremely selfish viewpoint… What's the point in telling my parents and

going through all this hassle and stress? It would virtually kill them. They would

never be able to show their face in the community. They would rather be dead.

Participants such as Zahid were inclined to separate their sexuality from their religious faith

and cultural life. They carried out such compartmentalization as skillfully as possible,

primarily to minimize, if not eradicate, the social costs of being LGB, although the emotional

costs on themselves were often high. This strategy was important not only in minimizing the

possibility of negative experiences with potentially stigmatizing social audiences, but also in

reducing cognitive dissonance on the part of the participants. In most cases, this means either

their sexuality or religion took prominence in a particular context, without leading to the

relinquishing of the other, which in turn took on prominence in another context (for more

details see Yip 2004a, 2004b). This is clearly illustrated in the following account.

If I am going to clubs I am not being religious and religion is at the back of my head.

And then if I'm religious, I will not go out clubbing. So that's the way I deal with it.

Developing Theological and Social Capital

In spite of the complications and challenges stated above as a result of structural constraints,

the participants demonstrated a certain degree of agency in carving out space for the safe

exploration of their sexuality in relation to their religious faith and ethnicity. They developed

various strategies to maximize success in this respect. Of course, these inter-related strategies

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were used with different degrees of effectiveness by different participants. Nevertheless, they played an important role in generating much-needed theological and social capital.

The most important strategy in this case is the 'queering' of religious texts. Like their counterparts of other religions that uphold heteronormativity, LGB Muslims recognized that religious texts constitute the primary – though not exclusive – basis of religious censure of homosexuality. Even a theologically uninformed person would often use religious texts to buttress her/his censure of homosexuality, no matter how unsophisticated the argument is.

The strategy of 'queering' religious texts (in the case of LGB Muslims, the *Qur'an*, the *Shari'ah*, and the *Hadith* are key material) takes several approaches. The most common of this is the critique of traditional interpretation of religious texts that seemingly censures homosexuality, by highlighting its inaccuracy and socio-cultural specificity, clearly illustrated in the following narrative:

> I had assumed, like most Muslims, that Islam was very homophobic and the penalty for being gay was death. But I have since done some reading and discussed it a lot with people who know more about Islam than I do. I now know that there are various interpretations of what the *Qur'an* says… I turned to the passage most Muslims would turn to – the story of the Prophet of Lot. I read and re-read it in English and Arabic, because it didn't occur to me that it was referring to sexuality at all…. So, as I discussed it more [on-line and in a support group] and read more, I became convinced by the argument that the passage didn't refer specifically to homosexuality, but to various things like inhospitality and the [negative] treatment of guests. That was a huge sense of relief! (Jamila)

Having highlighted the problematic nature of traditional interpretation, the participants argued for a contextualized and culturally relevant interpretation, which takes into account modern understanding of human sexuality and current socio-cultural realities. Further, they also challenged the credibility of institutional interpretive authority by highlighting its inadequacy and ideology, and relocating authentic interpretive authority to personal experience. For the theologically-informed, they also constructed LGB-affirming resources for their spiritual nourishment (for a full discussion of these approaches, see Yip 2005).

Alas, participants who were as confident and theologically informed as Jamila above remained a small minority. Unlike LGB Christians, for instance, LGB Muslims currently have little theological capital to re-think and challenge homophobic traditional interpretations of key texts (see Jamal 2001 for a good example of LGB-affirming Islamic theology), although the internet offers increasing opportunity for positive development in this respect.

In relation to the 'queering' religious texts strategy, the participants also attempted to make Islam more LGB friendly by re-contextualizing it, through uprooting it from the cultural base that underpins their parents' and grandparents' understanding of Islam. This interesting strategy involves drawing a clear line of demarcation between essential Islamic principles, and heterosexist and andocentric cultural practices from their forebear's countries of origin. In short, the participants argued that Islam in essence upholds human diversity, equality, and social justice for all. Thus, heterosexist and andocentric values and practices within Muslim communities are remnants of their forebear's cultural heritage that have tainted 'pure' Islamic principles. This highlights the need to return to a form of Islam that is free from culturally-specific heterosexism and andocentrism, and more in line with Western

socio-cultural reality that prioritizes personal liberty and respect for diversity. The following account clearly demonstrates this view.

> For me I think I, as a lesbian, have all the rights in Islam as anybody else, man or woman. [In the past] Islam gave women the rights to inheritance, to divorce. Women went into battle during the times of Islamic ruler with the Prophet, you know, they joined him in battle. It was a very emancipating time for women. Now, we need to look at Islam afresh in a way that try to get away from all the clutter that's built up around Islam, the cultural and traditional clutter that's been there and trying to get to the true spirit of Islam. (Zareena)

This form of counter discourse borrows heavily from Western (primarily secular) discourse of human rights and personal liberty. This is where straddling between the Western and Asian/Muslim cultural spheres proved to be an enabling and empowering experience. Indeed, when LGB Muslims question their sexuality, particularly in the light of Western socio-cultural realities, they simultaneously question Islam, and seek to re-align it to their lived experience in the West. In other words, in their effort to develop a positive identity that harmoniously incorporates their sexuality and religious faith, they also have to re-examine the character of Islam as a belief system and way of life. Straddling the western and Asian/Muslim cultural spheres puts them in a unique position for this quest. The outcome of this affects no only their identity, but also their understanding of Islam within the context of their lived realities, which differ sharply from those of their parents' and grandparents' countries of origin (for more details, see Yip 2004a).

Significantly, this quest is assisted by the development of support groups specifically for LGB Muslims. Although such social capital is still scarce compared to, say, LGB Christians, recent years have witnessed the growth of such groups on the internet as well as within the community. Within the British context, *Imaan* (www.imaan.org.uk) and the *Safra Project* (www.safraproject.org) play a particular important role in this respect. The importance of such support network is undeniable, since the participants at times found the wider LGB community, which is predominantly 'white' and secular, culturally inhospitable or even Islamophobic. On the other hand, interacting with other LGB Muslims – online or in reality – offers a crucially safe environment for participants to explore their sexuality and spirituality, and for mutual support. Shazia's account below represents experiences of many LGB Muslims.

> It really is just nice to go somewhere where you could use the word 'gay' and 'Muslim' in a sentence without someone jumping down on your throat and saying, 'Oh, that's wrong', or 'You're not a real Muslim'. And it is nice to know that other people have lived it [the struggle]…. Their presence validates me.

Shazia's account powerfully demonstrates the importance of support network specifically for LGB Muslims, whose growth is slow, but certain (for more details, see Yip 2003).

Concluding Remarks

The socio-cultural, religious and political context within which the participants lived is generally not conducive to the expression of their sexuality. This context exerted a great impact on the ways they constructed and managed their identity. Most acknowledged that currently there was limited space within the Muslim and Asian community for the acceptance of LGB Muslims, and this significantly informed the ways the managed familial and kin relations. Some, however, had begun to develop theological and social capital that not only offered them resources for support and community building, but also challenged religious and cultural orthodoxy.

The participants' experiences have demonstrated that their identities, particularly in the area of family and kin relations, were fairly socio-centric and other-oriented. They engaged with socio-cultural factors and sought to manage their sexuality alongside social responsibilities and obligations. Their experiences in this area expose the limitations of current Western-centric discourses of LGB identity development, which is generally underpinned by two related theses – de-traditionalization and individualization. In a nutshell, the de-traditionalization thesis argues that in contemporary society traditions are increasingly losing their significance and impact on the organization of social and individual life. Traditions therefore no longer offer an uncontested blueprint for social roles and life paths, and this leads to the freeing and empowerment of agency. In relation to this, the individualization thesis argues that the self, rather than institution, now shapes the fashioning of our lives. Individual life and identity have therefore become more internally referential and reflexively organized. Morality, for instance, has increasingly become a matter of personal choice. Further, the democratization of emotions has transformed the family from an institution with rigid roles and hierarchical relations to flexible and negotiable 'practices'.

(for a detailed discussion of these theses, see, for example, Giddens and Pierson 1998; Bauman 2001).

A closer inspection of these two theses would reveal that they are primarily based on experiences of the 'white' population which prioritizes expressive individualism and secularity, and generally ignore experiences of religious and ethnic minorities. Yet, they underpin the dominant discourse of LGB identity development and management, and appear to be oblivious to temporal, ethnic, religious, and cultural specificity. Take for example the analysis of accounts of 'coming out' to families of origin. The dominant model assumes that LGBs, with sexuality as the 'master status' of their identity, would distance themselves from their families in the face of intolerance, and construct their own support networks (e.g. 'family of choice'), with little regards to other facets of their identity (e.g. social and religious responsibilities). However, the participants of this study demonstrated that sexuality need not assume a 'master status' that dictates the organization of their lives. The quest for expressive individualism is often balanced with a sense of social responsibility and responsibility.

In general, the participants' experiences illustrate the intricate inter-relatedness of structure and agency. There is no denying that the participants, as social actors in late modern Western society, demonstrated the capacity to construct space within the structural framework in their attempt to balance individualism, social responsibility and religious duty. Nevertheless, structure – in the form of cultural and religious norms – exerts its impact on this process. In fact, traditions are still prominent in the structural framework within which they constructed and managed their identities.

Indeed, their experiences seem to challenge the dominant sociological discourse of the construction of personal identity in contemporary society, which gives undue prominence to the role of agency in the construction of individual 'choice' biographies, at the expense of a nuanced examination of the role of structure (for a fuller critique of the individualization these, see, for example, Yip 2004b; Brannen and Nilsen 2005). The participants' experiences presented in this paper have illustrated the nuanced engagement of agency and structure, demonstrating cultural situatedness in the construction and management of identity and social relations. This should broaden and enrich the dominant discourse of contemporary identity in general, and contemporary LGB identity in particular.

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