Perceptions of 'coming out' among British Muslim gay men

Rusi Jaspal[1]
Royal Holloway, University of London

Asifa Siraj
Independent Scholar, Glasgow

Biographical notes on authors
Rusi Jaspal is a Social Psychologist at Royal Holloway, University of London. He holds degrees from the University of Cambridge and the University of Surrey. Rusi's current research focuses upon identity processes and identity threat, particularly among ethnic, religious and sexual minorities. He has published in journals such as *British Journal of Social Psychology*, *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* and *Social Identities.*

Asifa Siraj received her Ph.D. in Sociology from the University of Glasgow in 2006. Her thesis was entitled "The Islamic Concept of Masculinity and Femininity". Her research interests centre on the lives of Scottish Muslims and especially on issues of gender, Islam and sexuality. She is as an independent scholar and currently conducting a qualitative study on South Asian gay men in Scotland.

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[1] Corresponding author: Rusi Jaspal, Department of Psychology, Royal Holloway, University of London, Egham Hill, Egham, Surrey TW20-OEX, United Kingdom. E-mail: rusi.jaspal@gmail.com

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Rusi Jaspal
Royal Holloway, University of London

Asifa Siraj
Independent Scholar, Glasgow

The cultural processes of heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality are acutely active within Islamic societies. The present study explored perceptions of 'coming out' among a group of British Muslim gay men (BMGM), focussing upon the potential consequences for identity processes and psychological well-being. Ten BMGM of Pakistani descent were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule. Interview transcripts were subjected to interpretative phenomenological analysis and informed by identity process theory. Four superordinate themes are reported, including (i) "social representational constraints upon 'coming out'; (ii) "'coming out': a source of shame and a threat to distinctiveness"; (iii) "fear of physical violence from ingroup members"; and (iv) "foreseeing the future: 'coming out' as a coping strategy". Data suggest that BMGM face a bi-dimensional homophobia from ethno-religious ingroup members and the general population, which can render the prospect of 'coming out' threatening for identity. Theoretical and practical implications of this research are discussed.

Keywords: coming out; gay Muslims; identity threat; sexuality; identity process theory; social psychology

Gays and lesbians in Britain have made enormous gains over the past few decades; greater tolerance and acceptance of homosexuality has been facilitated by social, political and legal changes. Yet, the situation for British Muslim gay men (BMGM) is markedly different (Jaspal, 2010). Far from making celebratory declarations of their sexuality; they continue to face prejudice and homophobia from within their own communities and families. Many BMGM live in a hostile social environment which forbids homosexuality. Given the ensuing feelings of alienation and isolation, in many cases the only solution is to remain silent and invisible, which symbolises their marginal status in society. Religious condemnation is based on the Qur'an's explicit prohibition of same-sex sexuality (Siraj 2009). The Islamic worldview is that of 'dual relations', which advocates the 'opposition of contraries'. In terms of sexuality, it emphasises the complementarity and unity of the sexes (Yip 2004b). The Muslim family is based on a patriarchal social structure with two discrete sexes with distinguishable gender roles (Dahl, 1997; Siraj, 2010). Islam is heteronormative, advocating compulsory heterosexuality (Bouhdiba, 1998). It explicitly condemns homosexuality, which is addressed through the parable of Prophet Lut in the Qur'an (Jamal, 2001). In their reading of the Qur'an, most Muslim scholars (e.g. Yahya 2000; Doi 1984) advocate that homosexuality is an aberration and violation of nature (Duran 1993), as well as a revolt against God (Yip 2004b). Crucially, this perspective is reflected in the views of many British Muslims; the categories 'Muslim' and 'homophobic' are increasingly treated as interchangeable signifiers (Haritaworn et al., 2008).

At a time when there is growing acceptance of homosexuality in Britain[2], according to a recent Islamic interfaith relations poll, not a single British Muslim believed that homosexuality

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was morally acceptable, compared to 58 per cent of the general public who believed it was. This was in stark contrast to France, which has a large Muslim population, where more than a third of French Muslims stated that they had no problem with homosexuality[3]. Accordingly, it is reasonable to assume that the disclosure of sexual identity (or 'coming out') may be problematic for many BMGM. The present study set out to explore perceptions of 'coming out' among a group of BMGM, as well as its socio-psychological consequences.

Homophobia is defined as 'the dread of being in close quarters with homosexuals' (Weinberg, 1972, p. 4). This definition has been expanded to include heterosexual feelings of disgust, aversion, anger, anxiety, and discomfort towards homosexuals (Hudson and Ricketts 1980). In dominant Islamic discourses, heteronormativity constructs homosexuality as a problematic 'Other' (Siraj 2009; Halstead & Lewicka 1998). The study of homosexuality and Islam has broadened theoretically in recent years, from studies focussing on theological perspectives (Jamal 2001; Kugle 2003; Murray and Roscoe 1997) to accounts from gay and lesbian Muslims (Yip 2004a, 2004b; Siraj 2006, in press; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010, in press). Gay and lesbian Muslims have also become more organised in fighting for both recognition and a voice in Britain (Yip, 2005). Although alternative interpretations of homosexuality in the Qur'an have emerged (Kugle 2003), they do not represent dominant social representations of homosexuality held by mainstream Muslims. For Muslims, the idea of homosexuality as a natural alternative lifestyle contradicts Islamic teaching. Indeed, Muslims in Britain generally remain opposed to any public recognition of homosexuality as a possible lifestyle (Halstead & Lewicka 1998). Siraj's (2009) study of dominant social representations of homosexuality held by heterosexual Muslims suggested that, in some cases, extremely negative representations were legitimated through their 'anchoring' to representations of Islam (see Moscovici, 1988). Her participants' responses ranged from outright disgust, a sense of unnaturalness about same-sex sexual behaviour to tolerant attitudes towards homosexuals. Moreover, tolerance was qualified by comments constructing homosexuality as wrong, unnatural and contrary to Islam (Siraj, 2009). Since many BMGM are acutely aware of the negative social representations of homosexuality, which operate in ethno-religious social contexts, it is likely that they fear rejection and ostracisation from other members of their ethno-religious groups. This could, for instance, result in their positioning as ingroup 'Black Sheep' (Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988).

Homosexuality in the 'West' is a term which is defined not only in terms of sexual behaviour but involves desire, lifestyle, culture, gender, politics and identity. Seabrook (1999) comments that 'Western' conceptualisations of homosexuality are incompatible with those of other cultures, since 'homosexual' or 'gay' generate different social meanings in distinct societies. With respect to South Asian nomenclature, there are no particular expressions for homosexuality and heterosexuality (Khan, 2001). In Urdu, Punjabi and Hindi, there are specific terms applied to men who penetrate and those who are penetrated, all of which are derogatory (Murray, 1997). This indicates that in the 'cultural and structural organization of sexuality in the respective societies . . . [there is an] . . . absence of an identity constructed primarily around sexuality' (Islam, 1998, p. 72). Sexual behaviours are produced in relation to appropriate penetrative or penetrated behaviour for men and women. To be penetrated is to be 'not-man', a 'woman' (Khan 1997). Thus, it is noteworthy that 'coming out' may entail the need to explain and justify one's sexuality to individuals who hold negative social representations of

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[3] http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/patriotic-respectful-and-homophobic-a-portrait-of-british-muslims-state-of-mind-1681062.html

homosexuality. Indeed, awareness of these representations will likely discourage the disclosure of sexual identity (Breakwell, 2001).

In exploring the lives of BGM as a sexual minority, we must pay special attention to the ethno-cultural contexts within which they live. Despite the religious injunctions against same-sex sexual activity, Muslim identity is not just a religious identity but also an ethno-cultural identity (Jaspal & Coyle, 2010a). For many Muslims, homosexuality challenges ethno-cultural norms and values in relation to the fulfilment of the heteronormative social order, such as marriage, family-building and procreation. Moreover, for British Pakistani families there is a strong sense of kinship among friends and family members who are seen as sources of strength and moral support (Modood et al., 1994). Families also provide psychological and economic support. 'Coming out' may be eschewed due to the perceived importance of family honour, marriage and close-knit kinship among ethno-cultural ingroup members. Collectively, these factors problematise 'coming out' for many BMGM (Yip, 2004b). The present study seeks to explore empirically how these factors shape perceptions of 'coming out'.

'Coming out' reflects not only the process of disclosing one's sexuality but also the 'developmental process through which gay persons become aware of their affection and sexual preferences, and choose to integrate this knowledge into their personal and social lives' (McDonald, 1982, p. 48). Thus, 'coming out' may be threatening at the social level, since it potentially exposes the individual to discrimination, and at the psychological level as it entails the assimilation-accommodation of gay identity within the self (Jaspal & Cinnirella, in press). This illustrates the need to explore how dominant perceptions of 'coming out' impact the lives of BMGM.

There are several models that chronicle the 'coming out' process and sexual identity formation (Cass 1984; Coleman, 1981; Troiden, 1989; see also Clarke, Ellis, Peel & Rigg, 2010). These models generally describe various developmental stages which characterise the individual's progressive assimilation and accommodation of gay identity within the self (cf. Cass, 1984). While Troiden (1979) describes four stages: sensitisation, signification-disorientation/dissociation, 'coming out' and commitment, Cass (1979) proposes six stages: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride and identity synthesis. Yet, these models have been based exclusively on the experiences of White American men (Brown, 2003; MacDonald, 1982). Eliason (1996) argues the models fail to consider other aspects of identity, as well as the ways in which gender, race, ethnicity, class and, religion may intersect with sexuality. Consequently, these models are unlikely to be adequate for accounting for 'coming out' among BMGM. However, there are models which do take ethnicity into account; Morales (1990), for example, created a five-stage ethnic gay and lesbian identity model which included: (1) denying conflicts, (2) bisexuality versus homosexuality, (3) experiencing conflicts in allegiances, (4) establishing priorities in allegiances, and (5) integrating the various communities (Morales, 1990). An adequate model would theorise the role of both religious and ethno-cultural norms in BMGM's meaning-making vis-à-vis 'coming out'. The theologically-based homophobia against this population means that 'coming out' may be a deeply threatening prospect at the social and psychological levels (Siraj, 2009; Jaspal & Cinnirella, in press).

Given the scope for stigmatisation and identity threat in the BMGM experience, the theoretical approach employed in this paper is derived from identity process theory (IPT; Breakwell, 1986, 1992, 2001). IPT proposes that the structure of identity should be conceptualised in terms of its content and value/ affect dimensions and that this structure is

regulated by two universal processes, namely the assimilation-accommodation process and the evaluation process. The assimilation-accommodation process refers to the absorption of new information in the identity structure and of the adjustment which takes places in order for it to become part of the structure. The evaluation process confers meaning and value upon the contents of identity.

Breakwell (1986, 1992) identifies four identity principles which guide these universal processes, namely continuity across time and situation, uniqueness or distinctiveness from others, feeling confident and in control of one's life and feelings of personal worth or social value. IPT refers to these, respectively, as continuity, distinctiveness, self-efficacy and self-esteem. Extending IPT, Vignoles and colleagues (Vignoles et al., 2002; Vignoles et al., 2006) have proposed two additional identity 'motives', namely belonging, which refers to the need to maintain feelings of closeness to and acceptance by other people, and meaning, which refers to the need to find significance and purpose in one's existence. Moreover, Jaspal and Cinnirella (in press) propose the psychological coherence principle, which refers to the need for perceived compatibility and coherence between inter-connected identities (e.g. religious and sexual identities). IPT suggests that when salient identity principles are obstructed by changes in the social context, for instance, identity is threatened and the individual will engage in coping strategies to alleviate 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).

Recent socio-psychological research into BMGM has focused upon the management of gay and Muslim identities (e.g. Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010, in press). The present study builds upon this work by presenting an empirical examination of social representations of 'coming out' within a small sample of BMGM. More specifically, the aim is to explore participants' willingness to disclose their sexuality and the potential impact of 'coming out' for identity processes.

METHOD

Participants
A sample of ten self-identified BMGM was recruited from the Pakistani community in a city in the East Midlands of England. The study focused solely upon the experiences of British-born self-identified Muslims of Pakistani heritage in order to recruit a more homogeneous sample, which was deemed important due to the small sample size. Participants were aged between 24 and 28 years with a mean age of 26.3 years (SD: 1.3). One participant was a university student, five had completed college, and the remaining four had GCSE/A-levels.

A snowball sampling strategy was employed, with the initial participants recruited through the first author's social networks.

Procedure and data generation
The interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule consisting of eight exploratory, open-ended questions. The schedule began with questions regarding self-description and identity, followed by more specific questions on experiences of frequenting gay affirmative social contexts; and the possibility of 'coming out' and the perceived consequences of 'coming out'.

Interviews lasted between 60 and 120 minutes. They were digitally recorded by the interviewer and transcribed verbatim by the first author.

Analytic approach

The data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996; Smith & Osborn, 2008), which is a qualitative analytic technique that aims to capture participants' attempts to make sense of relevant aspects of their personal and social worlds. IPA conceptualises the participant as a 'cognitive, linguistic, affective and physical being' (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 54) and assumes a relationship between verbal reports and the cognitions and emotions with which they are concerned. Since IPA 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 social representations regarding gay identity and the role of these representations in their meaning-making vis-à-vis 'coming out'. Moreover, IPA's idiographic mode of enquiry (Smith, Harré, & van Langenhove 1995) encouraged an in-depth exploration of each individual's account of their experiences.

Analytic procedures

The recordings were transcribed by the first author, who also read the transcripts repeatedly in order to become as intimate as possible with the accounts. During each reading of the transcripts preliminary impressions and interpretations were noted in the left margin. These initial codes included *inter alia* participants' meaning-making, particular forms of language, and apparent contradictions and patterns within the data. Subsequently, the right margin was used to collate these initial codes into potential themes, which captured the essential qualities of the accounts. As highlighted by Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 82), 'a theme captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and represents some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set.' Thus, the 'keyness' of the themes reported in the present study depended upon their importance in relation to the research questions. The themes were reviewed rigorously against the data in order to ensure their compatibility and numerous interview extracts were listed against each corresponding theme. It was at this stage that specific interview extracts, which were considered vivid, compelling and representative of the themes, were selected for presentation in the final research report. Finally, superordinate themes representing the themes derived from the 12 accounts were developed and ordered into a logical and coherent narrative structure.

In the quotations from participants which are presented in the next section, three dots within square brackets indicate where material has been excised and other material within square brackets is clarificatory.

ANALYSIS

The present section reports four themes, which characterise participants' perceptions of 'coming out', namely (i) 'social representational constraints on 'coming out''; (ii) ''coming out': a source of shame and a threat to distinctiveness'; (iii) 'fear of physical violence from ingroup members'; and (iv) 'foreseeing the future: 'coming out' as a coping strategy'.

Social representational constraints on 'coming out'

Participants exhibited awareness of dominant social representations of homosexuality within their primarily Muslim social circles. This discouraged several participants from seriously considering self-disclosure to ethno-religious ingroup members:

Aziz: I've thought of telling people about myself but then no, I can't. Even in our language [Urdu] we've got swear-words for gays that are really bad. Like 'gandu' [bugger] or 'bund-marao' [butt-basher] [..] I'd die if people called me that, knowing that it's true.

Interviewer: Why would it bother you though?

Aziz: If people aren't throwing it in your face all the time, you can forget it's there, can't you?

Research demonstrates that social representations surrounding homosexuality are generally negative among British Muslims, even within educated sections of the community (Siraj, 2009). Aziz exhibits his awareness of these representations through his identification of the derogatory terminology specifically associated with homosexuality in his heritage language Urdu. Indeed, previous research attests to the general importance of the heritage language in the lives of British South Asians (Harris, 2006; Jaspal & Coyle, 2009, 2010b). Aziz fears that he too may be derogatorily categorised as a 'gandu' or 'bund-marao' if he discloses his sexual identity, which would likely result in a loss of self-esteem (Breakwell, 1986).

An interesting aspect of this account is his acknowledgement and acceptance of the stigma associated with gay identity: 'knowing that it's true'. These data suggest that Aziz employs the intrapsychic strategy of denial by transiently suppressing the memory of his sexual identity in order to minimise the threat to self-esteem (Breakwell, 1986). Indeed, Aziz alludes to the transient suppression of his knowledge of his gay identity, which enables him to downplay the threatening contents of his identity. He perceives the prospect of 'coming out' as jeopardising the effectiveness of the denial strategy since others' knowledge of his homosexuality would not allow him to deny this threatening aspect of his identity. Fundamentally, denial is not necessarily a *post-hoc* strategy for coping with existing threats to identity, but rather a pre-emptive strategy for proactively enhancing and protecting identity. These strategies may be activated in an *a priori* manner (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). The prospect of derogation from ingroup members could potentially damage his sense of personal and social worth: 'I'd die if people called me that'. Crucially, Aziz's implicit acceptance of these negative social representations highlights the ability of self-disclosure to threaten identity: 'knowing that it's true'. Thus, for some BMGM individuals, gay identity could be conceptualised as socially as well as *personally* stigmatised.

This demonstrates the hegemonic status of such social representations of homosexuality. According to IPT, the rejection of negative social representations regarding homosexuality would be expected to have more favourable outcomes for identity, but given the hegemony and pervasiveness of such representations, individuals may have little choice but to accept and internalise them (Jaspal & Coyle, 2009). Given his acceptance and internalisation of the negative representation, the most viable short-term strategy for safeguarding identity may be the co-activation of the denial and passing strategies. Passing allows the individual to gain access to a social category by concealing their 'group origins' (Breakwell, 1986). This allows Aziz to gain access to the social category heterosexual by concealing his gay identity and by playing a heterosexual role. This strategy was observable among several others:

I just act straight really [...] it's not too hard for me actually [...] after a while you start believing it yourself in a way (Khalid)

Although Breakwell (1986) identifies several socio-psychological obstacles associated with the passing strategy, it is possible that the simultaneous activation of the intrapsychic strategy of denial may render passing more effective. More specifically, by suppressing one's own knowledge of one's gay identity, it may be possible to perform the heterosexual 'role' more effectively, as highlighted by Khalid's above-cited account.

The interview provided participants with the opportunity to highlight those social representations of homosexuality, which they perceived to be active in society:

> All my life actually I've always kind of like thought of it [being gay] as something so shameful because it's basically what we called each other at school when we wanted to diss someone, you know? It's never like been a good thing, just something to be ashamed of (Ahmed)

This extract suggests that awareness of these negative representations induce feelings of shame associated with occupancy of the stigmatised social position. Furthermore, the negative representations guide the operation of the evaluation process of identity, since they compel Ahmed to construe his gay identity in negative terms. Ahmed recollects the negativity of being categorised as 'gay' at school, which permeates his meaning-making as an adult. More specifically, use of the term 'gay' was perceived and employed as an insult: 'when we wanted to diss someone'.

Although it is acknowledged that social representations of homosexuality within the Muslim community are particularly negative (Bouhbida, 1998; Siraj, 2009), this should not detract one's attention from the existence of homophobic attitudes within the general population. Indeed, this was a point made by several individuals:

> It isn't just Muslims though, is it? Yeah, it's 'haram' [forbidden] to be gay but even White people say 'ah, that's so gay man' [...] they are just as homophobic [...] I don't want to be seen like somebody who's just 'so gay' (Shahid)

Shahid construes homosexuality as a sin according to Islam (Jaspal & Cinnirella, in press), but also in terms of a stigmatised social position, since 'even White people' are said to derogate gay identity. Like Aziz, Shahid invokes the use of language as an indication of the stigma associated with gay identity; he notes that the expression 'that's so gay' is employed pejoratively within the general population. Such language use confers upon gay identity a negative value, since 'gayness' essentially becomes *synonymous* with negativity in everyday language. At the intrapsychic level, this is likely to pose dire threats to the self-esteem principle of identity, as gay men may come to perceive an important aspect of their identity as socially de-valued and ridiculed (Breakwell, 1986). Thus, BMGM may face a bi-dimensional homophobia; a theologically-based homophobia originating from the ethno-religious ingroup (Siraj, 2009), in additional to a negative construal of gay identity within the general population.

'Coming out': a source of shame and a threat to distinctiveness
Given the perceived prevalence of negative representations surrounding homosexuality both within participants' ethno-religious community and the general population, 'coming out' was generally regarded as entailing negative consequences for identity. More specifically, 'coming out' was construed as posing threats to a crucial dimension of their ethno-religious identity, namely 'izzat' (honour). Usman anchored social representations of homosexuality as a threat to

'izzat' to his sister's romantic relationship with an ethno-religious outgroup member. Both were regarded as threatening for 'izzat':

> My sister ran off with a White guy and my parents always blamed it on the [British] system [...] If I turn around and tell my mum I'm gay she'll think the same. She's just going to think I've been learning stuff off White people at college because they're more open about it [...] I don't want to disappoint her [...] I'm different from those people (Usman)

> Being gay is a White thing for my folks [...] Like you just have it here [in Britain] really, that's what they all think [...] That's just crap really (Aqil)

It has been found that homosexuality is widely perceived in terms of a 'Western disease' among Muslim parents and that BMGM are understood to have been 'intoxicated by secular Western culture' (Yip, 2004b, p. 340). This social representation may be anchored to existing ethnocentric social representations of 'British culture' as morally deficient *vis-à-vis* South Asian cultures, which are said to exist within the British South Asian community (Ballard, 1994). As noted above, participants exhibited a high level of awareness of this social representation among their parents' generation, which was illustrated by Usman's account of his mother's reaction to his sister's elopement 'with a White guy' and by Aqil's observation that 'being gay is a White thing for my folks'. In short, homosexuality is said to be associated with British cultural norms and values, rather than those of his heritage culture. Indeed, Jaspal and Cinnirella (in press) have demonstrated how some BMGM themselves might concur with such social representations in order to safeguard the psychological coherence principle of identity.

The distinctiveness principle may explain the desire of some participants to maintain 'izzat'. For instance, Usman seeks to avoid the prospect that 'she'll [his mother] think the same'; he wishes to be regarded distinctively from his sister. For Usman to be regarded through the interpretive lens employed by his mother to make sense of his sister's behaviour, namely that counter-normative behaviour results from 'learning stuff off White people at college', may threaten his sense of differentiation from (significant) others (Vignoles et al., 2000). His need to maintain a sense of distinctiveness from his sister and others is most clearly demonstrated by his statement that 'I'm different from those people'. Crucially, this does not necessarily reflect the fear of disappointing significant others, but rather that of being viewed as no different 'from those people'. Consequently, 'coming out' may well be construed as posing a threat to 'izzat', on the one hand, but it may also be perceived as evidencing their cultural assimilation to the White British majority and their adoption of fundamentally 'un-Muslim' norms and values. Given that this was represented as the 'norm' by some participants, the avoidance of 'coming out' for this reason could be interpreted in terms of the desire to maintain and enhance distinctiveness (Vignoles et al., 2000).

In this particular case, participants' mere *awareness* of these social representations renders their social position potentially threatening, given the vulnerability of the distinctiveness principle. Those individuals who seek to view their gay identity as an element of the identity structure will be more adversely affected by such social representations than those who seek to downgrade the role of their gay identity in the self-concept (Jaspal & Cinnirella, in press).

Fear of physical violence from ingroup members
Several participants envisaged the possibility of physical violence from ethno-religious ingroup members in response to 'coming out'. Ifti and Asad illustrated this by invoking the perceived consequences of contravening 'izzat':

> One Mirpuri girl ran off with a Kurd [...] That boy was Muslim, he was from our religion and he was a boy, she was a girl. Her own parents strangled her in her own house. If I tell my community I'm gay, what's stopping them from doing that to me? I don't want to take that risk (Ifti)

> I can remember just asking my sister but more like in a jokey way what she'd do if I told her I was gay and she told me she'd beat the shit out of me [...] it rang a bit too like true to me actually (Asad)

The cultural importance of 'izzat' is well documented in the literature on South Asian identity (Ghuman, 2003; Gilbert, Gilbert & Sanghera, 2003) and in sociological work on BMGM (Yip, 2005). For Asad, this perhaps constitutes an explanation for his sister's negative response to his sexual identity. Ifti anchors 'izzat' to the death of a young girl at the hands of her parents (Moscovici, 1988). It seems that this murder, which could be conceptualised in terms of an 'honour killing', comes to influence his perceptions of 'izzat' as well as the perceived consequences of contravening 'izzat'. Crucially, his imagined fate following disclosure is anchored to his existing representations of honour killing, which inevitably renders the prospect of 'coming out' personally threatening.

> Bringing shame on your family is a dangerous thing for Pakistanis or like Muslims in general actually (Ifti)

Since gay identity is perceived by some BMGM as jeopardising 'izzat' and as potentially entailing physical punishment, its accommodation within the identity structure is likely to be challenging. An important question which emerges from this analysis concerns the reconciliation of 'izzat', a fundamental self-aspect of ethno-cultural identity, and gay identity. Clearly, this poses challenges for the psychological coherence principle of identity (Jaspal & Cinnirella, in press).

Foreseeing the future: 'coming out' as a coping strategy
Although most participants responded negatively to 'coming out', there were some dissenting voices within the sample. Those participants who reported frequenting gay affirmative social contexts (e.g. gay bars) on a regular basis and who had established close interpersonal relations with WGM were more likely to contemplate eventual disclosure to significant others (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). This was illustrated in Usman's account:

> Usman: Eventually I want to tell her [my mother] because I can't keep lying and stuff [..] She kind of suspects deep down and if I don't tell her it'll mess things up more between us. We were quite close.

> Interviewer: What has made you, I mean, how did your thinking about 'coming out' change?

> Usman: Since I've been going out I guess I've seen that it's possible. I mean, you can like be gay and survive really (laughs)

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While many participants reported engaging in the strategy of passing, for Usman this represented a transient, short-term strategy. Usman's awareness of his mother's suspicions regarding his homosexuality seemed to decrease the effectiveness of passing. These suspicions were viewed as imperilling his formerly positive relationship with his mother, which could be understood to threaten feelings of closeness to and acceptance from a significant other (Vignoles et al., 2006). This highlights an important theoretical point, namely that passing becomes less effective as a strategy when it, in itself, comes to pose a threat to the principled operation of identity processes. This point is alluded to by Breakwell (1986, p. 118) who notes that 'the person lives with the possibility of exposure, the repercussions of the stigma, and the loss of everything built upon the lie'. To refine this point with the data presented above, it seems that the belonging principle could be jeopardised by the imminent breakdown of the passing strategy, since his relationship with his mother and the life built upon his feigned heterosexuality could be imperilled. Moreover, Usman clearly regrets having to conceal his sexuality from his mother. Although this principle seems most susceptible to threat as a result of the failure of the passing strategy, others may be at risk. For instance, involuntary disclosure might lead others to regard him as dishonest, resulting in potential threats to his self-esteem:

> I will do it, yeah, I will, I need to for me or I'll just go mad in the end, lose my mind [...]
> If everyone found out firstly I've got to explain my sexuality and then I've got the
> bigger hurdle of explaining why I've been f***ing lying about my life all this time
> (Usman)

While most participants discarded the possibility of disclosure to significant others, Usman endorsed it possibly as a result of his positive interpersonal experiences with other gay men. This may have positive outcomes for the meaning principle, since it facilitates the construal of gay identity as a meaningful component of the self. In short, these experiences enabled Usman to find meaning and significance in his identity as a gay man (Vignoles et al., 2006). While his socialisation in his ethno-religious group encouraged, albeit implicitly, the social representation that it is impossible to be gay and Muslim, his experiences with other gay men exposed Usman to radically different gay-affirmative social representations, namely that 'you can be gay and survive really'. An effective strategy for coping with threats to psychological coherence, meaning and self-esteem as a result of being gay and Muslim may be voluntary or involuntary self-exposure to self-verifying social representations (see Breakwell, 2001). However, it has been noted that some BMGM may react negatively to positive representations of homosexuality, which challenge previous modes of cognition (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). In short, the effectiveness of the strategy of self-exposure to positive representations regarding gay identity lies in the extent to which it can change the threatened individual's *personal* representations of what it means to be who they are. This may be contingent upon one's level of religiosity, the relative importance of religious identity, and the extent to which the psychological coherence principle is subjectively prioritised by the individual.

DISCUSSION

The data presented in this paper demonstrate that social representations of homosexuality are acutely negative within the British Pakistani Muslim community. The ubiquity of such representations is evidenced by the prevalence of derogatory terms employed to denote gay

people in the heritage language of participants. For instance, although the Urdu word for 'homosexual' is همجنس ('hum jins'), participants did not employ this term. Negative social representations perhaps dictate that derogatory terms such as 'bund marao' and 'gandu' prevail in everyday language. Moreover, several participants' uncritical acceptance of these representations suggests that 'coming out' may constitute an identity-threatening experience. It is reasonable to assume that the self-esteem principle of identity would be susceptible to threat if BMGM themselves accept stigmatising social representations of gay identity. Thus, in order to ensure a positive conception of themselves, some participants may employ the intrapsychic strategy of denial (Breakwell, 1986). The transient denial of homosexuality may be facilitated by the interpersonal strategy of passing, whereby one feigns heterosexuality in interpersonal contacts with others. It seems logical that the intrapsychic and interpersonal strategies complement and reinforce one another in their collective function to curtail, minimise and avert identity threat (Breakwell, 1986). The data suggest that individuals may activate both strategies in order to enhance the principled operation of identity processes. This work reiterates the importance of providing a 'typology' of coping strategies across different levels of human interdependence (Jaspal & Sitaridou, 2010).

The present paper provides some insight into the sources of stigmatising social representations among BMGM. Several participants identified the school environment as a major source of these representations, which are reportedly encouraged and disseminated through pejorative use of the term 'gay'. For instance, participants noted that the common expression 'that's so gay' was employed in order to highlight the negativity of a given social stimulus. Such expressions attribute negative value to gay identity, which in turn encourages negative social representations of homosexuality. Most participants expressed awareness of these representations (Breakwell, 2001). It is noteworthy that, while there is a theologically based homophobia within the Muslim community, this must not obscure the need to challenge homophobia within the general population, as exemplified by participants' experiences at school. This suggests the existence of a bi-dimensional homophobia, consisting of the theologically based homophobia associated with the Muslim community (Siraj, 2009) and homophobia manifested within the general population. Thus, it may be most effective to introduce interventions to minimise this bi-dimensional homophobia within the school environment.

Coterminous with previous research with the British South Asian community, 'izzat' (honour) was perceived by participants as an important facet of ethno-religious identity. Participants' perceptions of 'coming out' may be influenced by the perceived consequences for 'izzat'. Clearly, the contravention of 'izzat', a key self-aspect associated with ethno-religious identity, could result in potential threats to the belonging principle of identity (Vignoles et al., 2006). Moreover, data suggested that the distinctiveness principle of identity may be susceptible to threat (Vignoles et al., 2000). Given that British-born South Asians are reportedly regarded by the first generation as assimilating to the White British majority, some BMGM may actively seek to differentiate themselves from others by demonstrating to their parents that they resist assimilation. In terms of identity, 'coming out' may perceived as threatening the belonging principle and, in some cases, the distinctiveness principle. Moreover, some participants perceived the threat of physical violence as a result of contravening 'izzat'. Clearly, the perception that 'coming out' could induce physical violence or even threats to one's life could have adverse consequences for psychological well-being (Hale, 1996).

While the prospect of 'coming out' was most frequently construed as posing threats to identity and well-being, the data suggest that disclosure may also constitute a *coping strategy* for

some individuals. For instance, those participants who perceived the passing strategy as having negative outcomes for interpersonal relations with significant others generally regarded 'coming out' as a desirable compensatory strategy. This is coterminous with Breakwell's (1986) observation that passing is frequently employed as a transient strategy, which itself may come to threaten identity, especially if there exists the possibility of involuntary disclosure. For some BMGM, 'coming out' represented a viable strategy for coming to terms with their sexual identities and, thus, for identity enhancement. 'Coming out' may have multiple meanings for BMGM, which is possibly contingent upon the extent to which gay identity has been assimilated and accommodated within the overall identity structure (Jaspal & Cinnirella, in press).

While there is some indication that 'coming out' may constitute a coping strategy for some individuals, for many BMGM the prospect of 'coming out' may be threatening for identity; the belonging and self-esteem principles seem most susceptible to threat. Moreover, the perceived risk of physical violence is likely to jeopardise psychological well-being. Clearly, these threats to identity and well-being arise from negative social representations of homosexuality operating both within the Muslim community and within the general population. Individuals likely acquire an awareness of these representations during socialisation within the school environment. At a practical level, attempts must be made to modify existing social representations of homosexuality both within the Muslim community and the general population in order to eradicate this bi-dimensional homophobia. This would likely improve social representations of 'coming out' and sensitise BMGM to its potential social and psychological benefits. Moreover, it would encourage BMGM to assimilate and accommodate gay identity within the self-concept with potentially positive outcomes for psychological well-being.

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