# Exploring Religion and Sexuality: Pluralist Approaches to Qualitative Psychological Research

## Dr Rusi Jaspal

Self and Identity Research Group

De Montfort University, Leicester

rusi.jaspal@cantab.net

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# Qualitative research in psychology

- Involves "the collection and analysis of non-numerical data through a psychological lens (however we define that) in order to provide rich descriptions and possible explanations of people's meaning-making – how they make sense of the world and how they experience particular events" (Coyle, 2007, p. 11)

- And researchers "aim to understand 'what it is like' to experience particular conditions […] and how people manage certain situations […]" (Willig, 2008, p. 8)

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## Competing epistemologies?

- Realism
  - A reality exists independent of the observer.
  - This reality can be discovered and understood as it is.
  - This reality can be experienced and shared by everyone in more or less the same way

- Social constructionism
  - Knowledge is constructed by the individual, embedded in society.
  - A reality may exist independently of the observer, but the question of what it objectively is like is unanswerable at best.
  - So we should focus on how it is constructed and manifested in language (primarily)

- Frost and colleagues' (2010) Pluralism in Qualitative Research project highlights the benefits and creative tensions of integrating qualitative approaches to psychological approaches

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# BRITISH PAKISTANI MUSLIM GAY MEN:
# A CASE STUDY

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# Sexuality and Religion

- Much research in psychology has focused upon
  - counselling psychology clients who identify as LGB and of religious faith (Haldeman, 2004)
  - Religious tendencies and practices among LGB individuals of faith (Sherkat, 2002)
  - Spiritual versus religious manifestations among LGBT individuals (Halkitis et al., 2009)
    - The interface of sexuality and religion among gay Jews in London (Coyle & Rafalin, 2000)

- Some important sociological work on British Muslim men
  - Constructing a sexuality-affirmative "space" (Yip, 2005)
  - "Queering" religious text (Yip, 2005)
  - Managing family space (Yip, 2004)

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# Our Research Project

- Theological research is insightful but tells us little about the subjective experience of gay and lesbian Muslims
- Dissatisfied with the "snap-shot" insights that social sciences research seems to provide
- Sociological work understandably focused upon the relational, rather than psychological, level
- As social psychologists, we wanted to understand how individuals manage two identities that are in conflict
- Hence, our project "Being Muslim, Being Gay: Representation, Identity and Action"

# Homosexuality in Islam (1)

- Difficult to generalise about Islam
  - Distinct denominations and interpretations of Islam (e.g. Sunni, Shiite, Wahabbi)
  - Religion is entwined with local ethnic cultures (and some homosexual practices are tolerated in some of these cultures)
  - Sharia law is implemented to varying degrees in distinct countries (Iran imposes the death penalty, while Morocco imposes a prison sentence)
- Mainstream Islamic stance on homosexuality seems to be fundamentally negative (Murray & Roscoe, 1997)
- Islam emphasises the complementarity and unity of the two sexes, with distinguishable gender roles associated with either one (Yip 2004)
- The Story of Lot and certain Hadith interpreted as evidence of prohibition of homosexuality (Hugle, 2010)

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# Homosexuality in Islam (2)

- There is an emerging 'reverse discourse' concerning the Islamic position on homosexuality (e.g. Hugle 2010, Jamal 2001)
- Theological accommodation is still in its infancy, given that 'there are at present limited efforts in Islamic theology which offer non-heterosexual Muslims resources to construct a reverse discourse' (Yip 2005, p. 50)
- Emergence of organisations and pressure groups that seek to reconcile Islam and homosexuality
  - Imaan in the UK
  - Al Fatiha in the US
- Behaviour versus self-categorisation

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# British Pakistani Muslim gay men

□ Most Pakistanis are of Muslim faith – 74% of Muslims saw religion as 'important' (Modood et al., 1997; Hamid, 2011)

□ This is said to constitute a superordinate identity and to provide a "meaning system" for everyday life (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2011)

□ Anthropological studies describe religio-cultural processes of heteronormativity and compulsory heterosexuality (Khan 1997).

□ They demonstrate the importance to the concept of izzat (personal and cultural honour), which is strictly enforced (Shaw 2000).

  ■ fulfilment of the cultural expectation of heterosexual marriage, which in many cases is arranged by the family (Yip 2004b).

  ■ ostracisation to psychological or physical abuse (Jaspal and Siraj 2011).

□ What implications does the sexuality-religion interface have for individuals' sense of self?

# Identity Process Theory

□ Model of identity construction, threat and coping (Breakwell, 1986; Jaspal & Breakwell, 2014)

□ Identity construction is guided by culturally specific principles

  ■ Self-esteem; Self-efficacy; Continuity; (Breakwell, 1986)

  ■ Belonging (Vignoles et al., 2002)

  ■ Psychological coherence (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010)

□ If salient principles are jeopardised, identity is threatened

□ We engage in coping strategies to restore appropriate levels
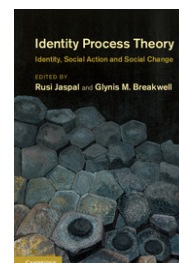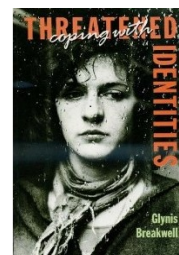
# Our research in this area

- Identity processes among British Muslim Pakistani gay men, using thematic analysis (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010, *British Journal of Social Psychology*)

- Experiences in "gay space", using thematic analysis (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2012, *Journal of Homosexuality*)

- Friendships and relationships with White British gay men, using grounded theory (Jaspal, in preparation)

- Perceptions of "coming out", using IPA (Jaspal & Siraj, 2011, *Psychology & Sexuality*)

- Safeguarding attachment to the religious group, using thematic analysis (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2014, *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*)

- Confronting social and familial expectations of arranged marriage, using IPA (Jaspal, in press, *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*) [11]

# Aims

- What is the distinctive contribution of qualitative methods to understanding the religion-sexuality interface?

- How can qualitative research methods help us to understand the implications for identity processes?

- How is a pluralist approach useful for research in this area?

# Methodological Issues (1)

- □ The studies
  - ■ 6 qualitative studies conducted between 2008 and 2012
  - ■ a psychological focus upon how individuals perceive and cognitively manage their identities
  - ■ a sociological concern with the development of social representations and social relationships

- □ Participants
  - ■ In total, 74 individuals between the ages of 18 and 28 have participated in our studies
  - ■ not affiliated to gay affirmative religious support group networks (e.g. *Imaan)*

# Methodological Issues (2)

- □ Data generation
  - ■ Individual interviews
  - ■ Diary method

- □ Qualitative research methods
  - ■ Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith & Eatough, 2008)
  - ■ Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2007)
  - ■ Grounded Theory (Charmaz, 1990, 2006)

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# Making sense of gay identity

- Exploring participants' understandings and conceptualisations of their sexual identities
  - "Sometimes I think it's wrong to be like this [gay] but then I guess I was born gay. It's the way I was born. Basically [God] made me this way."
  - "In the mosque we're told that [Satan] tries to tempt Muslims because he is evil and he makes us do evil things. I know that doing gay things is evil but I hope I'll change my ways and take the right path soon […] It's all about temptation, really. Life is a big test."
- External attribution but to whom/what? With what implications?
- Theologically-informed attributions are made

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# Threats to psychological coherence

- The psychological coherence principle refers to the "individual's subjective perception of compatibility between their identities"
  - "I know what I'm doing is wrong, yeah, and if I could chose I wouldn't be gay. I would be straight. I know I'm going to go to hell for this but I just can't help it, I tell you [...] my worlds are clashing."
  - "I was fighting with myself when I was little, it felt so right and so damn wrong all at once […] As a Muslim, it felt wrong"
- Some identity elements are seen as irrelevant and others as interconnected and, thus, important for maintaining coherence (Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Amiot et al., 2007)
- People view their sexual and religious identities are conflicting and destructive to an integrated sense of self

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# Identity Threat and Emotions (1)

- IPT appears to have viewed emotions as components of identity content, as aspects of who we are (Coyle & Murtagh, 2014)
- Individuals experience negative emotions due to identity threat

- Psychological coherence – shame and guilt
  - "It makes me feel really just bad inside, like bad about myself"
  - "I feel even more shit about myself than I did before"
- Threats to belonging – fear
  - "I live my life in fear, I'm scared"
  - "I just get scared, like really worried about what's going to happen"
- Threats to continuity – anger
  - "I feel so mad at myself, like I'm going crazy or something"
  - "Drives me mad […] It just shakes me up totally and I feel like shouting"

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# Identity Threat and Emotions (2)

- When emotions are acknowledged, it's clear that coping strategies become limited and tend to focus upon deflection, rather than acceptance
- Where language is the basis for exploring emotion, the analyst can look closely at how narratives are created, e.g. emphasis, pace, tone, emphasis, terms, metaphors, body language
- Psychological wellbeing is generally compromised as a result of identity threat and emotions can be a fertile site for tapping into threat
- As Coyle and Murtagh (2014, p. 60) highlight, "future theoretical breakthroughs on emotion in identity processes may well come from qualitative studies"

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# Arranged marriage versus forced marriage (1)

- According to the Home Office (2012
  - [a] forced marriage is a marriage in which one or both spouses do not (or in the case of some vulnerable adults, cannot) give free and full consent to the marriage and duress is a factor. Duress can include physical, psychological, financial and emotional pressure […]
- Samad and Eade (2003) – most South Asian elders believe that physical force is unacceptable but are less aware of the psychological and emotional pressure
- There was no research into the religious and cultural "expectation" for a arranged (heterosexual) marriage

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# Arranged marriage versus forced marriage (2)

- In the absence of any tangible "force", individuals construct accounts of psychological and emotional force
  - "I hate my life right now and I hate my family. It's like everyone is talking about someone else, not me, someone who is going to get marriage. It isn't me"
  - "My mum told me she'd sent my photo to some girl's family and she told me they like me. I know that nobody is exactly dragging me down the alter but it just feels like I'm losing the last shred of control I had"
  - "For days now, they've been telling me if I don't get married I'm gonna end up an old and lonely man"
- They construct threats to self-efficacy and continuity primarily
- Participants' descriptions of their feelings and their strategies for overcoming feelings contribute to our understanding of the plight

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# Challenging assumptions (1)

- Self-removal from positions that pose a threat to identity (Tajfel, 1978; Vugt & Hart, 2004)
- Yip (2004) also hypothesises that Muslim gay men may abandon their religious identity in favour of their sexual identity – the "exit option"
  - "Being a Muslim is such an important part of my life so if I had to chose between being gay and Muslim, I'd just be a Muslim and not be a gay […] I often question if I'm really gay or not"
  - "I'm a Muslim so how can I be gay?"

  - "Stopping the gay thing is do-able in time but losing my faith is sort of end-of-the road"

- Participants' constructions, descriptions, evaluations of their identities show that the "exit option" may be difficult

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# Challenging assumptions (2)

- Compartmentalisation of sexual and religious identities (Amiot et al., 2007; Roccas & Brewer, 2002; Yip, 2004)
  - "I just don't think about being gay or about my sex life or anything"
  - "When I'm with a guy, I don't even go there [into religious issues]"
  - "Sometimes it just hits me, how does God see me when I'm in this place [the mosque]? […] I feel like I don't have the right to go [to the mosque]"
  - "Yes, actually, when they mention me getting married, I just freeze because it just shows that I can't do what other Muslims do – get married, because I'm gay
- Participants may initially make claims regarding compartmentalisation but probes elucidate contexts in which this is not possible

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# Challenging assumptions (3)

- □ "Coming out" is a positive psychological step in sexual identity development (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1989)
  - ■ "Bringing shame on your family is a dangerous thing for Pakistanis or like Muslims in general actually"
  - ■ "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."
  - ■ "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"
- □ Attention to language surrounding homosexuality shows what is at stake
- □ What other principles may be threatened as a result of coming out?

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# Conclusions (1)

- □ Qualitative methods allow us to go beyond the superficial level – thoroughly contextualised understandings of the sexuality-religion interface
- □ Individuals' awareness of religious and cultural homophobia – identity threat and negative emotions
  - ■ Belief that their gay identity contravenes key norms and values associated with their religious and cultural group memberships
  - ■ the assimilation and accommodation of a gay identity in the self-concept can be challenging and conducive to negative emotions
- □ Tend to opt for deflection strategies - due to their imminent failure in the long term, some reported engaging in self-flagellation and self-harm in order to alleviate their feelings of guilt

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## Conclusions (2)

- They may construct their gay identity in terms of a mutable behaviour, rather than as an identity, which is consistent with their hope that they may be able to 'become straight'
- Self-definition as gay can potentially cast doubt over the authenticity of one's Muslim identity at both psychological and social levels.
- Threatened Muslim identity can lead to hyper-affiliation to the religious in-group
- Need for a change in social representations of homosexuality in Islamic cultures and settings, in order to destigmatize gay identity and facilitate both Muslim and gay self-identification among British Muslim gay men.

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## Conclusions (3)

- Discussing particular scenarios in interviews can elucidate the type of situation in which threat tends to be occur
- Social constructionism can play a fruitful role in IPT research (Coyle & Murtagh, 2014), particularly in the religion-sexuality research
- Crafting narratives that achieve coherence over time
- "No" to methodolatry – "yes" to pluralism in qualitative psychology (Frost, 2011)

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