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RESEARCH BRIEF

# Gay Identity Construction of Ten Muslim Male Undergraduates in Penang, Malaysia: A Phenomenological Qualitative Study

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Both nature and nurture have been used to define same-sex attraction (Acosta, 1975; Davies et al., 1993; Edwards, 1994; Engle, McFalls, Gallagher, & Curtis, 2006; Helmeniak, 2004; Jonas, 1944 McConaghy & Blaszczynski, 1980; Roughgarden, 2004; Savin-Williams, 1988). Whatever the cause as perceived by the individual, same-sex attraction is found in all cultures in all geographic regions (Lippa, 2007; Whitam, 1983). It is therefore safe to assume that whatever the cause, same sex attraction is a human condition that is present in members of all societies. Malaysia is by no means separated from this.

However, in Muslim-majority Malaysia where Islam is the recognized official religion, only male-female penile-vaginal sexual intercourse is recognized as natural (Baba, 2001; Jenkins, 2006) and any other sexual behaviour is deemed contrary to the order of nature and is a worrying trend that is steeped in hedonism (Abraham, 2009; MacFarquhar, 2007). While Abdul (2008) reported that such views are steeped in incorrect interpretations of the Al-Quran, the overall view of Islam towards same-sex sexual behaviour is proscriptive. The literature also points out that within the context of Muslim Malaysia, homosexuality was deemed reversible

through counselling, therapy, and was also viewed as a social ill (Brown, Low, Tai, & Tong, 2015; Owoyemi & Ahmad Sabri, 2013a, 2013b; Pandian, 2015; Rehman & Polymenopoulou, 2012; Abd. Majid, 2015; Wilkison & Pearson, 2013; Momtaz, Hamid, Ibrahim, Akahbar, 2014).

As a nation, Malaysia was founded on the harmonious co-existence of different ethnicities. As the nation moves forward to achieving Vision 2020, it becomes apparent that the population of the nation has grown in diversity to include not just different ethnicities and a large migrant population, but also a growing LGBTIQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and questioning) population that faces duress and opposition. Challenges faced by the gay male population in the country remains an issue that is far from being solved. That Malaysia still retains its draconian Section 377A of the British Colonial-era Penal Code is testament to this as is the additional Section 377A of the Penal Code (Williams, 2009). Stigma directed at Muslim men who engage in sexual, romantic, and affectionate liaisons with other men is often rooted in religious belief in Islamic Malaysia (Owoyemi & Ahmad Sabri, 2013a, 2013b; Williams, 2009) and the rhetoric surrounding the

condemnation of male homosexuality from Muslim leaders does not ease the issue (Scoville, 2004).

Within this social context of both civil and religious proscriptions, Muslim males who are same-sex attracted form an identity that reflects their understanding and experience of their own sexual identity. This paper puts forward how this sexual identity is socially constructed, maintained, and pursued within the strong proscriptions of Islam through the exploration of experiences that are viewed through the tenets of phenomenology as posited by Berger and Luckman (1972). It is within this context that I sought to understand how Muslim men who are same-sex attracted reconcile their religious beliefs with their same-sex sexual attraction while constructing a sexual identity.

### **Phenomenology and Identity Construction**

It is then necessary at this point to briefly explain how Berger and Luckman (1972) explained the phenomenological tenets of consciousness of intentionality, identity formation, typification, socio-cultural construction, institutionalization, and universe maintenance. Consciousness of intentionality is a social process according to Berger and Luckman (1972, p. 34). Consciousness of intentionality also envelops identity, and this allows for individuals to maintain their social reality via the social process of maintaining friendships and other social processes that reaffirmed their sexual identity (p. 169). The consciousness with which the respondents of this research maintain their social reality and reaffirmed their sexual identity was also sought out, lending a deeper nuance to the sexual identity of the respondents and their religious beliefs.

Identity formation, according to Berger and Luckman (1972), is formed by social process. Once the identity of a person is crystallized, it was maintained, modified, and reshaped by social relations. The social process of formation and maintenance of identity is determined by a social structure. Identity may also react upon social structure, maintaining it, modifying it, or reshaping it (p. 194). Therefore, the research was interested in the dynamics by which the identity of

gay men was formed via social relations and the social structure that kept it in place. Typification of identity occurs within social interaction between social actors. By being able to typify himself against other social actors the individual is able to lend himself to a type of identity. This type of identity allows the individual to navigate the perceived realities of everyday life in each and every passing phase, and in doing so the individual's social reality of everyday life is fixed in a continuum of typification (pp. 46 – 47). Within this continuum, the identity of the individual morphs based on experience, and at specific periods within the continuum the identity of the individual could be observed and typified.

The treatise also indicated that identity and behaviour were produced by the individual based on socio-cultural constructions, indeed the identification of self cannot be adequately understood apart from the particular social context in which they were shaped (Berger & Luckman, 1972, p. 70). While human sexuality was characterized by a high degree of pliability it was directed and sometimes rigidly structured in each and every culture. Institutionalization occurs when there was a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors. Institutions further implied historicity and control. Human sexuality was socially controlled by its institutionalization in the course of the particular history in question (pp. 72 – 73). Institutionalization also allows for the description of what was deemed unacceptable, and thus added further nuance to the lived experience of the sexual identity and sexual behaviour of the respondents. In the understanding of social reality, there was a conceptual machinery that was placed for the universe maintenance of social reality wherein outsiders were kept out and insiders were kept in (p. 105). In terms of using this tenet of phenomenology, universe maintenance is used as a means of maintaining the world view and experience of the individual in constructing an identity.

The research was based on qualitative in-depth interviews and follow-up interviews with 10 Muslim male undergraduates at a public university in Penang, Malaysia. It has to be noted that the sample population for this research was gained from a larger population on a study where the foci was the effect of sexual

identity creation and sexual behavior. Permission for the research was granted by the Ethics Committee of Universiti Sains Malaysia.

The sample was derived from both purposive sampling and the snowball technique. The number of respondents was reached when the point of data saturation was achieved. All respondents consented to the interview and signed the necessary consent forms. Each interview lasted between an hour and an hour and a half. All data was audio recorded which I transcribed. Data collection was conducted over a period of six months to fully understand the phenomenological experience of the respondents. Each respondent was given a pseudonym to protect their privacy and confidentiality, considering the sensitivity of the topic as well as the national context of how homosexuality was viewed in Malaysia. All hard copy information was sealed in a location known only to me and all soft copy information was protected by 128-bit encryption.

The research tool utilized was a semi-structured questionnaire that guided the interview process. Respondents were allowed to respond in the English Language, *Bahasa Malaysia* (Malay language) or a mix of both languages. Where necessary, translations of responses in *Bahasa Malaysia* were confirmed by the Language Unit of Universiti Sains Malaysia. The use of the semi-structured questionnaire allowed me to probe for more information where needed and to also re-phrase the question to meet the respondent's comfort level. Data was transcribed, and then analyzed using a content analysis matrix. The outcome of the content analysis matrix was further analyzed using the phenomenological tenets of intersubjective social construction, consciousness of intentionality, typification, institutionalization, and universe maintenance.

## Results

As mentioned in the previous section, the respondents for this research were from a larger research that focused on sexual identity formation and sexual behavior. As such, all respondents self-identified as gay men, were Bumiputra Malaysian, were between 21 and 24 years of age, and were

pursuing an undergraduate degree in a public institution of higher education.

### Identification: Sexual and Romantic Attraction

The identification as gay men for each respondent is strongly related to same-sex sexual attraction. All 10 respondents, when asked what made them gay, gave the answer that it stems from their attraction to men. These answers vary in terms of how this attraction is expressed. The respondents also note that they are not attracted to women sexually or romantically. Examples of these variations are presented in the following interview abstracts:

*I define and identify myself as a gay man through my sexual attraction to men and through my sexual activity with men. For me, sex is an important part of being same-sex attracted. – Abu, 21.*

*I define myself by my attraction to men. I do not find women attractive, but I find men who show care for me very attractive. – Ali, 22.*

*I feel a lust for men. This makes me same-sex attracted. I would watch men and be turned on by them. When I was younger I would watch pornographic movies and it confirmed for me that I am sexually attracted to men. I am not attracted sexually to women. – Ahmad, 21.*

*I am attracted to men whom I find good looking. I am not attracted to women at all. However, because I am not attracted to women I find it easy to become and stay friends with them. Being friends with women also helps me understand the feminine part of me. – Dol, 22.*

*I am only attracted to men and not women. I can easily mix around with women, but I am not attracted to them at all. – Erfan, 24.*

*I identify myself as same-sex attracted through the romantic relationships I have. Since I am in a romantic relationship with a man, I suppose that makes me same-sex attracted. – Erwan, 23.*

## Identification: Nurturing Same-Sex Attractions

Respondents report that the same-sex attraction they experience is nurtured into an identity via the socialization process with peers, role models, exposure to positive representations of gay sexual identity, and professional associations with other gay men. It is worth noting that not all nurturing was positive. Some of the nurturing came in the form of advice to be attracted to members of the opposite sex. Additionally, societal expectations also create negative feelings in the respondents. The following interview excerpts are evidence of this:

*I have had a lot of support despite being Muslim from my friends. They tell me to be myself because they understand that being attracted to men is who I am. They know I cannot be attracted to women so they urge me not to be a hypocrite and pretend that I like women. They said if I lie about my attraction to men I would be only lying to myself. But, there are also friends who knew me for a long time who were shocked and angry when I told them that I am attracted to men. They wanted to remain friends and advised me to be attracted to women. – Ali, 22.*

*Friends who are straight, they do not really care if I am attracted to other men. They just say get on with your life. All of this has abled me to express who I am and helped me be a more sexual person. – Ahmad, 21.*

*I have received support from my friends who are also same-sex attracted as well as from friends who are not same-sex attracted. They do not say things to me like “why don’t you change” or “why don’t you do this or that”. They just accept me for who I am. They tell me to be who I am and make myself happy first. They do not stress me out. On the other hand there are those who cannot accept same-sex attraction in the public. So they make me feel down and depressed sometimes. This also means I have to be careful who I mix around with and who I tell that I am same-sex attracted. – Erfan, 24.*

*My friends and I give each other support and from there we get our identity and our friendship. The environment also shows me that I am gay. What do I mean by the environment? I mean I see what it means to be gay on TV and on the internet, so I know I am like that. – Din, 22.*

*I define myself through my attraction for men. When I have gone through books and TV shows that say that being attracted to other men means I am gay I know that is what I am. – Badrul, 21.*

## Identity Construction and Islamic Proscription

Based on the findings, the respondents recognize that their identity as gay men faces heavy proscription within the context of their religious beliefs. While wishing to move forward as individuals who recognize their same-sex attractions, they are also cognizant of the proscriptions that are present within their religious cosmology. Levels of acceptance within the context of Islam varied for respondents and non-acceptance led to stigmatization and out-group ostracism. The following interview excerpts bear witness to this:

*I am careful to keep my same-sex attractions a secret from my family. I have been teased about being effeminate, but I have not been openly bullied. When I first started being open about being gay I lived in conservative Kelantan. I had to be more careful as Kelantan is very conservative and Islamic. – Abu, 21.*

*From people who are Muslim they say that because I am gay I am not part of the people of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). They say we are not part of his umat (followers). They also say that we are not part of lumrah hidup (the correct way of life). – Ahmad, 21.*  
*My Mom found out I was gay when I was 16. I was at a boarding school at that time in Kedah and I got caught by the disciplinary teacher, there were love bites on my neck and my Mom was called to the school because of this and at*



*that point my Mom started to realise that her son is gay. She was like “why are you gay” and I said I do not know. My family does not want me to be gay, plus I am Muslim. That makes being gay harder. – Bakar, 22.*

*I have to be very careful about being openly gay. I am a Muslim. It is difficult and I do not like to go through the stigma of being gay as well as going through scolding that I am not a good Muslim. – Baharom, 23.*

## Discussion

### Intersubjective Social Construction

The respondents intersubjectively gave meaning to their sexual identity as gay men despite proscriptions against homosexuality in Islam. While recognizing that the tenets of Islam proscribe same-sex attractions, the respondents recognize that to inculcate and present a heterosexual identity would be hypocrisy. To navigate this, the respondents are careful as to whom, where, and when they disclose their sexual identity and minimize instances where they have to compromise either their faith or their identities.

Intersubjectively, while Islam and some of the fellow Muslims of the respondents may take a negative view of homosexuality, the respondents see their same-sex attractions as part of themselves and do their best to live within the framework of individuality. They may not argue outright against the tenets of Islam, but they also do not allow it to change who they are. In essence, the respondents make the best of the duality of their situation to live their lives and to construct an identity that is comfortable and acceptable to themselves.

### Consciousness of Intentionality

The maintenance of the social reality of their sexual identity was gained by the respondents through the use of consciousness of intentionality, despite Islamic proscriptions against same-sex attraction and behavior. The tool used by the respondents in consciousness of intentionality was socialization with others, both homosexual and heterosexual, who

affirmed the validity of their identity. Acceptance by these others through socialization also gave legitimacy of the identities of the respondents as gay men through affirmation of individuality and the advice as to not pretend to be someone that they are not. Through this process of consciousness of intentionality, the respondents were able to maintain their view that despite Islamic proscriptions, they were not unacceptable to, at least, themselves. This process also tied in directly with the identity formation process of the respondents by understanding the social structure of who would accept and reject them based on their same-sex sexual attractions. They maintained, modified, or re-shaped the social structure of their socialization partners to further form their identities as gay men through carefully selecting whom to disclose their sexual identities to.

### Typification

Typification for the respondents was not always a positive experience. When compared to the other social actors in the world of the respondents (e.g. family members and friends), the respondents recognized that they were different and would possibly face rejection based on the perceptions of homosexuality within the context of Islam of these social actors. While being told that Islam places homosexual men outside of the accepted identity for Muslim men, the respondents also recognize that they need to accept who they are and typified themselves based on both these structures. As typification recognizes that identity formation is a continuum, the identity of the respondents may change to lean more towards either Islamic conservatism or individual assertion of the validity of their identity as gay men. There is no data to suggest that they may become extreme on either side of the polarity, but, the data do suggest that this is a balancing act that the respondents deal with in terms of their identity formation.

### Institutionalization

The culture of Islam and institutionalization of Islam as the official religion of Malaysia have created for the respondents a culture where the formation of their sexual identity is both pliable and

rigid. The pliability of their identity is dependent on their individuality as well as their navigation of socio-cultural constructions of perceptions of Islam by other social actors. Rigidity was enforced by the institutionalization of Islam in the nation. While culture is susceptible to change, institutionalization of what is acceptable and what is not within the framework of a religion is not easy to reshape. Viewed from this standpoint, the experience of the respondents in creating their sexual identity is a process of “push-and-pull.” The data suggests that the respondents know they may not openly transgress the tenets of Islam, but within their own social circle they may assert who they are.

### **Universe Maintenance**

Universe maintenance in constructing identity, based on the data, is a measure that keeps the respondents and their allies within their social universe and their detractors outside of it. Through this, the respondents use the conceptual machinery of universe maintenance to avoid nihilation of their identity. The respondents know how to navigate around people who would reject them based on their gay identity as well as seek out those who would affirm their sexual identity. They have also become adept at using more than one means of socialization to discern and maintain who they are in terms of their sexual identity. Universal maintenance of the social reality in which the respondents live will become more important as the respondents continue to navigate further development of their sexual identity.

### **Conclusion**

The findings and discussion of this research point out that formation of sexual identity as gay men among the sample population is a socially constructed phenomenon. It is dynamic and experiences of the formation of sexual identity vary from individual to individual. The internalization and practice of a religion that opposes homosexuality has caused non-linear formation of identity based on social interaction and introspection. Therefore, it is safe for

me to assert that the formation of the sexual identity of the respondents is neither complete nor will it achieve a level of completion as identity formation will perpetually be impacted by continued social interaction and continued introspection. The snapshot provided in this research is merely that, a snapshot, and longitudinal studies of the same respondents would glean a wider and deeper picture of this formation of sexual identity as it is socially constructed.

Limitations of this study fell into three categories: i) Availability of respondents; ii) Willingness of respondents to share experiences openly with the researcher; and iii) Only students from one public institution were available for the study due to the geographic limitations set by the larger research from which this research was derived. Availability of students was a limitation as it was a challenge to openly identify respondents and also many potential respondents would presumably be afraid to step forward to share their experiences for fear of reprisals. Willingness of respondents to share experiences with me was obstructed by fear of having their identities revealed, fear of judgment, as well as fear of being connected to the larger research on sexual identity and sexual behavior. The third limitation was due to the geographic parameter of the research, in that only one public university exists on the island of Penang.

Proscriptions in Islam against homosexuality place direct obstacles in the formation of gay identity. However, the process of negotiation of meanings given and perceived of a gay identity allow for the formation of an identity for the Muslim males within the sample who wished to explore their sexuality and sexual identity. The phenomenon of this identity formation is an ongoing process and should be given due address in terms of identity creation within a socio-cultural context, albeit in a conservative Islamic context such as Malaysia. While respecting the political, religious, social, and cultural contexts of Malaysia, future research in the experience of homosexuality by Muslim men in Malaysia from a phenomenological perspective may be further widened to include other men who fall under the umbrella of the men who have sex with men (MSM) population.

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