CHAPTER 6

Managing Multiple Identities

Abstract The aim of this chapter is to examine how multiple identity elements in the self-concept are managed. As a case study, this chapter focuses on the relations between religion, ethnicity and sexuality—facets of identity that are often inter-connected—among gay Muslims. The chapter provides an overview of dominant social representations of homosexuality in Islam, how gay identity is understood, the challenges of constructing a gay identity, and how a sense of belonging is maintained in relevant social groups. The observations made in this chapter may be transferable to other identity configurations.

Keywords Multiple identities · Religion · Sexuality · Psychological coherence · Islam

Our identities are multifaceted. Throughout the life course, we will join and leave many different social groups. Some group memberships are transient, while others are viewed as primordial and fixed. Some facets of our identities can become 'inter-connected' over time often because other people highlight the links between them. For instance, religious authorities often problematise homosexuality and, thus, they render religion and homosexuality inter-connected in people's minds. Consequently, we begin to think about how the two identity elements fit together, that is, their compatibility and coherence. In this chapter,

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the intersections between religion, ethnicity and sexuality are discussed among British Asian Muslim gay men, as a case study for elucidating the mechanisms of managing multiple identities.

Social Representations Grounded in Islamic Theology

It is useful to consider dominant social representations of homosexuality in Islamic theology. Like most religious traditions, Islamic ideology appends hegemonic status to heterosexuality and it is widely interpreted as opposing homosexuality. This stance is ingrained in the major ideological channels of communication, such as Islamic holy scripture (the *Koran*), Islamic law (*Shariah*) and the verbal teachings of the Prophet Mohammed (*Ahadith*), all of which appear to outlaw homosexuality (Bouhdiba, 1998). Theological opposition to homosexuality is based on what is regarded by most Islamic scholars as the Koran's explicit prohibition of same-sex relations. The story of Lot in the Koran has been widely cited as evidence of God's condemnation of homosexuality. The Koran makes seven explicit references to the people of Lot, whose destruction by God is often attributed to their engagement in homosexual practices.

In Islam, the Koran legislates all aspects of social life but interpretations of the text have varied in accordance with time and place, and some interpretations have been favoured over others in particular denominations of Islam. Yet, in their reading of the story of Lot, many Islamic scholars advocate the social representation that homosexuality is an aberration and violation of nature, as well as a revolt against God.

Although there has been some discussion of the authenticity and accuracy of the *Ahadith* (records of the sayings and traditions attributed to the Prophet Mohammed), they are frequently invoked by Islamic scholars in order to substantiate the negative social representations of homosexuality in Islamic theology. The *Ahadith* represent homosexual acts as both immoral and illegal, and homosexuals as deserving of capital punishment. They construct both the active and passive individuals as equally culpable, although in societal thinking the passive role appears to be more stigmatised (Maatouk & Jaspal, 2020).

Most Islamic countries prohibit homosexuality and, in some of them, it is punishable by death. The Islamic Republic of Iran, which is governed by shariah law, has a particularly harsh legal stance on homosexuality (see Jaspal, 2014b). Iranian law dictates that two unrelated men lying

under the same bed cover will be punished with 60 lashes; that homosexual relations without anal penetration carry a penalty of 100 lashes; and that anal intercourse will be punished with death by hanging. According to shariah law, individuals can be convicted of homosexuality only if they confess four times or if four 'righteous' Muslim men can testify that they have witnessed a homosexual act taking place. In Islamic societies, judicial and extra-judicial measures taken against homosexuality collectively promote the social representation that homosexuality is immoral, illegal and, thus, punishable.

There is an emerging 'reverse discourse' concerning the Islamic position on homosexuality, with some scholars arguing that there is indeed scope for its theological accommodation. For instance, Wafer (1997) indicates that the mildness of the Koranic passages alluding to homosexuality vis-à-vis other religious infractions perhaps indicates that 'the Prophet took a lenient attitude towards sex between males' (p. 89). Some have contested the dominant interpretation of the Story of Lot, and argued that its destruction reflected God's condemnation of the people's promiscuity, violence, inhospitality, etc., rather than homosexuality per se (Jamal, 2001). Some gay Muslims seek theological accommodation of their sexuality, based on a 'new shariah' that emphasises the principles of freedom and justice that are central to Islam. However, it is noteworthy that such theological accommodation is still in its infancy and that these emerging social representations have met with significant resistance from mainstream Islam.

Although not all gay Muslims will be aware of the theological underpinnings of the Islamic stance on homosexuality, it is evident that they at least contribute to social representations of homosexuality within this group. Both religious leaders and gay Muslims themselves invoke specific theological considerations as they attempt to substantiate their respective claims about homosexuality. Given the significance of religious identity in the lives of many gay men of religious faith, it is important to note that social representations grounded in theology are likely to inform their perception of their sexuality and, crucially, its relationship with their religion.

Stigma and Identity Construction

Research into the interface of religion and sexuality among British Pakistani Muslim gay men highlights the complex social and psychological struggles that characterise their experiences and identities (e.g. Jaspal

& Cinnirella, 2010). In order to explore how they construct and manage their sexual and religious identities, tenets of social representations theory and identity process theory are especially useful. Together, the two theories enable the analyst to understand the social norms, values and images that contribute to understandings of homosexuality in particular social contexts, and the social psychological processes that underpin how gay Muslims themselves construct and negotiate their religious and sexual identities.

The concepts of anchoring and objectification from social representations theory are especially valuable. It has, for instance, been found that, because gay Muslims evaluate their sexual orientation negatively, they may attempt to make sense of it by *anchoring* homosexuality to 'liberal Western culture'. This can enable the individual to construct a causal theory about the origins of his sexual orientation. In the process, he is able to retain a positive perception of his heritage culture and, crucially, his religion. Furthermore, in attempting to categorise their sexual orientation, individuals may refer to it metaphorically in terms of sin or immorality, which ensues from dominant social representations in Islam. This form of *objectification* also perpetuates this negative construal of homosexuality in the minds of gay Muslims themselves.

Breakwell (2014) has outlined the processes that underpin the individual's relationship with a social representation. The individual takes a stance on a given social representation, that is, he differs in the extent to which he is aware of, understands, accepts and assimilates to his thinking a social representation. For instance, although a gay Muslim may be aware of Islamic theological representations that outlaw homosexuality, he may not fully understand them. This lack of understanding could lead to confusion and the uncritical acceptance of, and inability to challenge, negative social representations.

A consistent finding in research (using identity process theory) is that gay Muslims may face identity threat due to: (1) the perceived incompatibilities between their religious and sexual identities (threatening *psychological coherence*), (2) the inability to construct a coherent narrative connecting past, present and future in relation to being gay (threatening *continuity*) and (3) the negative value and affect habitually appended to their gay identity, which nonetheless is recognised as an important component of the self-concept (threatening *self-esteem*).

When religious identity is construed as 'core', as it often is for Muslims, self-identification as gay can place gay Muslims in a threatening

position due partly to the perception that homosexuality is rejected by other Muslims. This can threaten identity, leading to a wide range of coping strategies, some of which are maladaptive (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). Evidently, social representations play a key role—if individuals are *aware* of social representations that stigmatise their sexual orientation, such as those summarised earlier in this chapter, these representations have the power to threaten identity. This is particularly acute if individuals themselves *accept* these social representations (i.e. if they believe them to be true), as is the case for some gay Muslims who value their religious identity and, thus, uncritically accept the social representations associated with it.

In the remainder of this chapter, three major themes that have emerged from qualitative interview research into identity construction among gay Muslims (e.g. Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010, 2012) is discussed. These include how gay Muslims make sense of their sexual orientation, the threats to psychological coherence that can arise when thinking about their religion and sexual orientation, and the ways in which they seek to maintain a sense of belonging in social groups in which the legitimacy of their membership is challenged—most notably, the religious ingroup.

Making Sense of Sexual Orientation

In reflecting upon their initial construal of their sexual orientation, some gay men report very early awareness (i.e. 'I have always known') while others are able to identify a particular temporal point at which they acquired awareness (e.g. 'I realised I was gay when I was 20'). As outlined in Chapter 3 of this volume, gaining 'awareness' of one's sexual orientation is by no means a straightforward matter. Although the individual may become aware of his same-sex attractions, these attractions may initially be dismissed as a 'phase', reconceptualised as non-sexual, or suppressed. This can mean that the individual simply does not regard his sexual orientation as an element of identity but rather as a behavioural trait, for instance. This essentially protects the individual's sense of continuity as, by denying the reality of his sexual orientation, he is able to maintain his previous 'desired self'.

Gay Muslims may struggle to make sense of their sexual orientation and the feelings, emotions and desires associated with it. Individuals attempt to define and append meaning to their sexual orientation, which

in turn will shape the way in which they decide to 'categorise' their sexual orientation. As noted earlier in this volume, the category 'gay' is a Western construct, which some ethno-religious minority individuals with same-sex desires may therefore reject as an inaccurate descriptor of their sexual identity (e.g. Maatouk & Jaspal, 2020). In Western understandings, being gay is often constructed as a group-level category, which implies a sense of commonality and solidarity between members of this category. According to this perspective, the individual perceives a sense of affiliation to the group and shares some key norms, values and practices with other members of that group.

Some gay Muslims conversely construe homosexuality in terms of an individual characteristic, rather than as a social group membership. In other words, they describe sexual orientation as an entirely personal characteristic and eschew any sense of social identification with other gay men. Some even stigmatise and denigrate other gay men—gay Muslim interviewees in previous research have made reference to the 'promiscuous lifestyles' and 'blatant exhibitionism' of gay men. In short, they may feel that it is unnecessary and even problematic to express one's sexual identity publicly and that it should remain concealed. In some cases, this reflects individuals' internalised homophobia in that they uncritically accept the stigma appended to homosexuality. This decreases the likelihood of developing friendships with other gay men (cf. Kocet, 2014) and may deprive gay Muslims of social support networks that normally facilitate effective coping.

As individuals begin to contemplate the meanings of their sexual orientation and the implications for identity, they make attributions in order to ascertain the causality of their sexual orientation. In short, they may wonder *why* they are gay and, in many cases, *how* they can change this. Given that gay Muslims generally append importance to their religious identity, they may come to view their sexual orientation through the lens of their religious identity and draw upon theological explanations for it, such as those outlined earlier in this chapter.

Some gay Muslims attribute their sexual orientation to God and, given the perception that God is perfect, this attributional tendency can enable them to deduce that God's creation (namely homosexuality) cannot possibly be imperfect or wrong. This amounts to a form of anchoring—a link is established between homosexuality and divinity. Moreover, homosexuality is metaphorically represented as God's *creation*, which is an example of objectification. In view of the centrality

of Muslim identity, this strategy can enable gay Muslims to evaluate homosexuality positively. For instance, some distance the notion of sex from their homosexual relationships and instead emphasise the importance of companionship, security and intimacy in these relationships. In interviews, gay Muslims have lamented the focus on sexual behaviour in people's perceptions and noted that it was promiscuity, not homosexuality, which invites disapproval from God. Incidentally, this echoes alternative interpretations of the Story of Lot offered as part of the aforementioned 'reverse discourse' against the mainstream Islamic stance on homosexuality. Unsurprisingly, this positive evaluation of homosexuality can facilitate the assimilation and accommodation of one's sexual orientation.

Conversely, some gay Muslims attribute their sexual orientation to malevolent forces, such as Satan, and deduce from this the social representation that homosexuality is imperfect and perhaps even evil. In previous research (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010), gay Muslims have expressed the social representation that homosexuality is a Satanic corruption, which they, as Muslims, must attempt to resist. In short, homosexuality is anchored to images of evil and sin. When perceived as a 'Satanic corruption', the reality of one's homosexuality is likely to threaten the self-esteem principle of identity. This attributional style can therefore preclude the assimilation and accommodation of homosexuality in the self-concept.

People wish to distance from their self-concept those identity elements that challenge the integrity of identity. As a means of coping with the possible threat to identity, some gay Muslims hope to 'take the right path soon', that is, they resist what they construe to be Satanic temptations and wish to 'become heterosexual'. The principal aim is to align their sexual orientation with the perceived norms, values and expectations associated with their religious identity. Yet, by anchoring homosexuality to sin and evil, gay Muslims may face an additional threat to psychological coherence. Indeed, some wonder about the feasibility of self-identification as Muslim and engagement in behaviour that they deem to be evil and sinful (namely, homosexuality).

In making sense of their sexual orientation, gay men consider the extent to which they wish to disclose it to other people. In Western societies, there is a strong social norm of coming out as gay. When celebrities come out as gay, this is presented as a positive personal and societal act. There is also much social sciences research that highlights the social

and psychological benefits of coming out (LaSala, 2001). However, this is not necessarily the case for gay men in Muslim societies, where coming out as gay can bring about a series of social and psychological challenges. Gay Muslims may be fearful of 'bringing shame on the family' by disclosing their sexual identity, and the negative social consequences that this could entail.

Given that homosexuality is widely perceived as being incompatible with Islamic norms and values, gay Muslims have expressed the fear that their coming out could be construed as an act of apostasy, that is, the conscious abandonment and renunciation of Islam. Collectively, these factors may render the prospect of coming out challenging or even impossible. The more feasible alternative may be for some gay Muslims to develop ways of constructing and manifesting their sexual identities in ways that do not threaten their physical and psychological wellbeing (see Jaspal, 2014b). Yet, the psychological perception of identity compatibility remains.

Threats to Psychological Coherence

The psychological coherence principle of identity motivates the individual to seek a sense of compatibility in relation to identity elements that, for whatever reason, become relevant to one another. As indicated above, gay Muslims may regard their sexual orientation through the lens of religious identity and make religious attributions in order to make sense of it. This renders the two identity elements inter-connected and gives rise to the need to take a stance on their compatibility. It is clear that some gay Muslims struggle to derive a sense of coherence between these identity elements (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). They may feel that homosexuality is 'wrong' or 'sinful' from the perspective of their Muslim identity, and that homosexuality prevents them from being 'good Muslims'. In the process of attempting to establish coherence between their religious and sexual identities, gay Muslims may come to question the authenticity of their Muslim identity.

Despite varying levels of awareness of specific passages in the Koran concerning the Islamic stance of homosexuality, gay Muslims may continue to believe that homosexuality is incompatible with their Muslim identity. There is often a perception that it is wrong and sinful and, as indicated by some interviewees in previous studies (Jaspal & Cinnirella,

2010), that they will face divine retribution for this. Although individuals may not necessarily possess first-hand knowledge of holy scripture, they draw upon negative social representations of homosexuality that are grounded in Islamic theology. Some describe the Prophet Mohammed's alleged disgust towards homosexuality, which echoes the Ahadith, as well as God's intolerance of homosexuality, which resonates with the Story of Lot from the Koran. They draw upon an important identity element—their religion—in order to substantiate their views about homosexuality. Gay Muslims generally value their religious identity, which may lead them to accept uncritically and to internalise the social representations perceived to be associated with this identity. Internalised homophobia, coupled with consciousness of one's own homosexual behaviour, can induce threats to identity, including the perception of incompatibility between religious and sexual identities.

Interviewees in previous studies (e.g. Jaspal, 2012) have described the threat to psychological coherence metaphorically with statements such as 'my worlds were clashing' and 'I was fighting with myself'. These statements suggest a degree of internal conflict. However, as gay Muslims struggle to reconcile their sexual orientation and their faith, they may attenuate the significance of, or deny altogether, the identity aspect of lesser importance. In many cases, their sexual orientation is relegated to an inferior position in the identity structure. Accordingly, they may view themselves as heterosexuals while acknowledging their engagement in homosexual behaviour (Maatouk & Jaspal, 2020). The perception of homosexuality in terms of behaviour, rather than a characteristic of identity, essentially obviates the need to acknowledge the threat to psychological coherence. After all, it is easier to compartmentalise (that is, to separate out in one's mind) behaviours and identities. Moreover, behaviours can seem more mutable than identities.

In explicating their engagement in homosexual behaviours, some gay Muslims engage in the psychological process of external attribution, that is, they identify an external source (external to the self) to which their homosexuality can be attributed (see Kelley, 1967). Indeed, as noted above, some gay Muslims do attribute their sexual orientation externally—to either God or Satan. Additionally, previous studies have described a tendency for some Muslim gay men who live in the UK to attribute their sexual orientation to 'Western culture' (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010). According to this attributional style, gay Muslims are

able to distance their sexual orientation from identity and instead argue that, due to Western cultural influences (and particularly the 'normalisation' of homosexuality in the West), they have 'fallen' into homosexual behaviour. Some believe that, if they had grown up in Islamic societies, they would not have engaged in homosexual behaviours. Similarly, in another study (Jaspal, 2014b), the Iranian Muslim gay interviewees attributed their homosexual behaviour to their migration to Britain where it was reportedly easier to meet other men for sex. This attributional style enables individuals to continue to objectify their sexual orientation as a 'sinful behaviour' and to distance that behaviour from identity, thereby protecting identity from threat. This may be especially beneficial for the psychological coherence principle of identity.

However, those gay Muslims who, for whatever reason, cannot deny their sexual orientation and who acknowledge the difficulties in 'resisting' it, may come to question the authenticity of their Islamic identity. In view of the perception that Islam and homosexuality are fundamentally incompatible, individuals may question whether they are 'true' Muslims due to their sexual orientation. Given the importance of, and long-standing identification with, religion, this can compromise the continuity principle of identity. Doubts surrounding the authenticity of their Muslim identity can essentially represent a rupture between past, present and future—the future as a non-Muslim is perceived to be bleak. Loss of religious identity may amount to a perceived loss of community, which can plausibly affect other dimensions of life, such as family identity. Some gay Muslims express the hope that they will eventually be forgiven for what they perceive to be sinful and immoral behaviour, while others express their desire to 'become straight'.

Gay Muslims employ various strategies for aligning their sexual orientation and religious identity in a way that might enhance psychological coherence. These include self-distancing from the gay community, contemplating an arranged heterosexual marriage, and seeking religious guidance to 'convert' to heterosexuality. Yet, the recognition that it is impossible to change their sexual orientation in real terms may lead some individuals to perceive decreased self-efficacy, that is, some may feel helpless and resign themselves to the psychologically undesirable reality of their homosexual orientation. In short, the strategies deployed to enhance psychological coherence may be ineffective in the long term and induce additional threats to other principles of identity.

Maintaining a Sense of Belonging

Because religion constitutes such an important identity, gay Muslims may fear ostracism from this group membership. Moreover, in a context of elevated Islamophobia in the West, many Muslims in Western societies report feeling isolated and excluded (Allen, 2010). Recent research suggests that ethnic and religious minority groups, more generally, face racism and other forms of exclusion on the gay scene, which can inhibit access to social support in this context (Jaspal, 2017). There are, therefore, multiple factors that inhibit a sense of belonging.

In the face of exclusion, ethnic and religious minority individuals may become more immersed in their ethno-religious ingroup as this group membership can come to constitute a strong and reliable source of belonging, that is, individuals derive a sense of acceptance and inclusion from it. This can make some gay Muslims even more reliant on their religious ingroup and exclusion from this group may be construed as particularly threatening for identity. In previous research (Jaspal, 2012), one interviewee described his fear of being 'kicked out of the community' and of 'being alone in the world' if others discovered his sexual orientation, while another noted that he was 'not networked or well connected' outside of his religious and family networks.

Gay Muslims employ a series of strategies for attempting to maintain a sense of connection with their religious identity in the face of threats to belonging. Psychologists have described the strategy of 'compartmentalisation', which refers to the psychological process of keeping elements of identity separate in the mind as a means of coping with perceived incompatibilities between them (Breakwell, 1986). Indeed, use of this strategy is also observable in work on sexual and religious identification among gay Muslims (e.g. Jaspal, 2014a). However, compartmentalisation may not be as sustainable as a long-term strategy in this group. Although some individuals do report initially compartmentalising their sexual and religious identities in order to reduce the 'inter-connectedness' of these potentially incompatible identities, upon close scrutiny there are some contexts in which compartmentalisation ceases to be an option.

In a previous interview study (Jaspal, 2012), a gay Muslim participant described his experience of sitting in a mosque during Friday prayers and suddenly thinking about his sexual orientation and the implications that this had for his Muslim identity. This sudden 'realisation' after a long period of compartmentalisation was powerful and

inescapable—compartmentalisation had ceased to constitute a viable strategy. The interviewee described the onset of his feelings of insecurity and inauthenticity (in relation to his Muslim identity). Furthermore, in view of the religious expectation for a heterosexual marriage in Muslim societies, some Muslim gay men may be pressured into considering marital offers (Jaspal, 2014a). This can severely undermine the compartmentalisation strategy as social cues of this nature essentially force the individual to take a stance on the compatibility of his religious and sexual identities.

Individuals may engage in the strategy of hyper-affiliation to the religious ingroup. Hyper-affiliation can be defined as 'accentuated social and psychological identification with a social group in response to threatened group membership' (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2014, p. 266). For example, religious events such as Ramadan can render salient the perceived 'sinfulness' of homosexuality and thereby undermine the integrity of their Muslim identity. However, such religious occasions may also provide opportunities for 'proving' the authenticity of one's Muslim identity. Individuals may deploy intrapsychic strategies for authenticating their religious identity. One possible strategy is the diligent observance of fasting due to the belief that this compensates for engagement in 'sinful' behavior associated with gay sexuality. Another possible strategy is sexual abstinence during Ramadan. Some gay Muslims may regard these practices as a key aspect of Islam. Hyper-affiliation can transiently make gay Muslims feel more connected to their religious community, although the threat to belonging may resurface and continue to challenge identity processes.

There are socially oriented methods of safeguarding religious authenticity and belonging. In seeking to demonstrate the authenticity of one's religious identity in public settings, individuals may accept social representations, which they perceive to be central to their Muslim identity. A key example of this is the manifestation of homophobia, despite the individual's own engagement in homosexual behaviour. In some cases, this may stem from internalised homophobia. However, it may also constitute a means of 'convincing' other people within one's social ingroup of one's own identity authenticity. This means of authenticating one's Muslim-ness may be problematic because the perceived ingroup position on any given issue (i.e. homosexuality) may not necessarily be consistent with the individual's own individual identity (i.e. as a gay man). In other words, one may publicly express the social representation that homosexuality is a sin but not actually believe it oneself. This can induce a discrepancy between one's own construal and the perceived social construal of Muslim identity, challenging psychological coherence while safeguarding a sense of belonging.

Overview

In this chapter, it has been shown that the construction, assimilation and accommodation of gay identity can induce the need to consider its inter-connectedness and coherence with other identity elements. The case study of gay Muslims is presented in order to illustrate the social and psychological challenges that this can entail.

There is a strong and coercive negative social representation of homosexuality in Muslim societies. Some gay Muslims may themselves uncritically accept this social representation due to the primacy of religious identity and internalised homophobia. Given their awareness and acceptance of the negative social representation of homosexuality, Muslim gay men may also experience threats to identity as they struggle to reconcile their internalised homophobia with the reality that they cannot change their sexual orientation. In response to threat, Muslim gay men use a variety of coping strategies, some of which are ineffective in the long term. Some of the strategies deployed by gay Muslims can lead to secondary threats to identity, which is aversive for psychological wellbeing.

The observations made in this chapter may be transferable to populations and to other identity configurations, including social class, ethnicity, occupation and so on. Social representations are central to understanding how identity elements are managed. Put simply, when social representations position identity elements are being inter-connected, they become inter-connected in the minds of individuals. When social representations position gay identity and other identity elements as being incompatible, gay men must themselves take a stance on their compatibility. If they fail to derive psychological coherence, identity is threatened and the success of coping is variable.

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