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Cypriot Gay Men's Accounts of Negotiating Cultural and Sexual Identity: A Qualitative Study

Abstract

This paper examines some of the key cultural concepts and relevant historical factors that may shape the development of Anglo-Cypriot gay identity. Accounts of sexual identity experiences provided by second generation Greek and Turkish Cypriot gay men in London are examined in the light of this analysis to explore how these men negotiate Anglo-Cypriot and gay identity. Twenty-eight self-identified second generation Greek and Turkish gay men living in London were recruited by advertising in the gay press, by writing to community groups, and gay groups and organizations and by "snowballing." In-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with those men recruited through these channels. Data were subjected to interpretative phenomenological analysis. The personal accounts of these men demonstrate that their sexual identity does not always become their primary identity and that different identities are constructed by individuals at different places and times. Most men indicated that the translation of their sexual desires and behaviors into the "political statement" of gay identity is not only difficult but is strongly resisted. Instead they chose to construct their identity in terms of their relationships with their families, their peers at work and other members of their community. The findings of this research may help develop an understanding of the complexities surrounding the "sexual and cultural" identities of Anglo-Cypriot gay men, thereby reinforcing the notion that identity is multiple, contested and contextual.

Keywords

Ethnic minorities, Homosexuality, Qualitative Research, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Introduction

The study of identity development among ethnic minority lesbians and gay men has tended to draw upon models of ethnic minority identity or lesbian and gay identity (Morales, 1983; Chan, 1992; Espin, 1987). However, each model presents a means of understanding the development of either lesbian/gay identity or ethnic minority identity. How does an individual who is lesbian or gay and a member of an ethnic minority group come to terms with identity issues? Morales (1983) proposed an

identity formation model for ethnic minority lesbians and gay men that incorporates the dimension of dual minority status centered around five different identity states. Each state is said to be accompanied by decreasing anxiety and tension through the management of the associated tensions and differences. As cognitive and lifestyle changes emerge, the multiple identities are said to become integrated, leading toward a greater sense of understanding of one's self and toward the development of a "multi-cultural" perspective.

The life of an ethnic minority lesbian or gay person is often lived within three communities: the lesbian or gay community, their ethnic community and the predominantly White, heterosexual mainstream society. Each context has its sets of norms, values and beliefs, some of which-in the case of lesbian and gay communities and ethnic minority communities-may be seen as characterizing these contexts but may also be fundamentally in opposition to each other. Some individuals choose to keep each community separate (using a strategy which Breakwell, 1986, termed "compartmentalism") while others vary the degree to which they integrate the communities and lifestyles in which they are involved. Each community offers important resources that support lifestyles and identities. The lesbian or gay community can offer support in the expression of one's sexual identity; the ethnic community can offer emotional and familial bonding as well as cultural identity; and mainstream society can offer a national identity as well as a mainstream culture and multidimensional social system.

In an ideal world, an ethnic minority lesbian or gay person of colour would have drawn resources from and maintain associations with each of these contexts. Yet, as Carballo-Dieguez (1989), Espin (1987) and Morales (1990) have suggested, such associations carry negative consequences. Ethnic minority communities may well be characterised by homophobic and negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men; lesbian and gay communities are a reflection of the mainstream White society and may mirror the racist attitudes toward lesbian and gay people of colour through discrimination and prejudice; the mainstream White heterosexual society is the crucible of homophobic and racist attitudes and practices. As a result, ethnic minority lesbians and gay men find themselves weighing options in their interactions and managing the tensions and conflicts that arise as they move between contexts (de Monteflores, 1986).

Where do ethnic minority lesbians and gay men turn for support? Although a possible source is provided by individuals in lesbian and gay communities, discriminatory treatment in lesbian and gay bars, clubs and social and political gatherings, and from individuals within lesbian and gay communities (Dyne, 1980; Cochran, 1988; Morales, 1989; Garnets and Kimmel, 1991; Chan, 1992; Gutierrez and Dworkin, 1992; Greene, 1994; Coyle & Rafalin, 2000). They describe feeling an intense sense of conflicting loyalties to two communities, in both of which they are marginalized by the requirement to conceal or minimize important aspects of their identities in order to be accepted. Ethnic minority lesbians and gay men frequently experience a sense of never being part of any group completely, leaving them at risk of experiencing isolation, feelings of estrangement and increased psychological vulnerability.

My focus in this paper is specifically on Anglo-Cypriot men resident in Londonⁱ (who have sex with men) because they have received very limited attention in the sociologicalⁱⁱ and psychological literature (for more on the study upon which this paper draws, see Phellas, 2002). For the most part, empirical investigations and scholarly work on ethnic minority gay men devote little time or attention to the specific issues relevant to Anglo-Cypriot men and the ways that ethnicity and racism "colour" the experience of heterosexism (Williams, 1986). This paper first examines some of

the key cultural concepts and relevant historical factors that may shape the development of gay identity among Anglo-Cypriot men. Accounts of sexual identity experiences provided by second-generation Cypriot gay men living in London are examined in the light of this analysis to explore how these men negotiate their Cypriot and gay identities. It is hoped that the findings from this research may help develop an understanding of the complexities surrounding the sexual and cultural identities of these men.

Sexuality in Greek-Cypriot Culture

Some people might argue that people of Greek-Cypriot background living in the UK present different social characteristics from those living in Cyprus. My own personal experience (as a Greek-Cypriot man born and raised in Cyprus) and the various conversations and meetings I have had with Diaspora Cypriots show a lot of similarities in terms of cultural and ethnic dynamics. The same beliefs and values, traditions, motivations, religious practices, principles and moral codes and, to a large extent, psychosocial dynamics exist. Indeed, it is true to say that, if anything, the Greek-Cypriot communities living outside Cyprus tend to show greater conservatism and adherence to “old-fashioned” ideas than those in Cyprus.

The concept of sexual behaviour in Greek-Cypriot culture is closely tied up with the “honour and shame” value system. As Lazarides (1994), argues:

This system predetermines the way Greek-Cypriot women and men view themselves in relation to issues concerning sexual and moral codes and the way they are viewed by others in relation to these matters. Women are seen as passive but also as a source of danger. Their supposed capacity to control their sexual urges and, at the same time, the belief that men’s sexual drive is ‘natural’ but uncontrollable renders women responsible for maintaining the moral code. (p.11)

A husband’s infidelity is more or less accepted amongst Greek-Cypriots. As long as he does not neglect his family duties and does not “overdo” it, he is forgiven. He has to show the necessary respect to his wife and his family and, if that is undermined by his extra-marital affairs, then he will be criticized by both men and women.

The main categories that have dominated Western literature on “homosexualities” – i.e., “heterosexuality”, “homosexuality” and “bisexuality”- are clearly present in Greek-Cypriot culture. Nonetheless, the notion of a single gay/homosexual identity or a distinct gay/homosexual community is a notion that is fairly new to the Cypriot community. The structure of sexual life in Cyprus- and, as a result, the way Cypriots perceive the concept of sexuality-has traditionally been conceived in terms of a model focused on the relationship between sexual practices and gender roles, with the distinction between masculine (activity) and feminine (passivity) being central to the order of the sexual universe. As a result, the societal definition of male homosexuality in Cyprus “originates around the schema of penetration and, in this conceptualization, the ‘homosexual’ label is attributed to any individual who is being penetrated or is thought to be penetrated. The penetrator remains free of this label, regardless of the fact that he is engaged in homosexual sex as well” (Tapinct, 1992:42). It is along the lines of such perceptions that the distinctions between male and female, masculinity and femininity have traditionally been organized in Greek-Cypriot culture. A Greek-Cypriot male’s gender identity is not threatened by homosexual acts provided that he plays the insertor role in sex.

Men should always penetrate and should never allow themselves to be penetrated. Therefore, the 'active' homosexual is still entirely and unambiguously a 'man'. He may transgress against religious prohibitions but he does not place his masculinity in doubt. As long as he is competent husband and householder, as long as he is manly and keeps his dalliances private, he is allowed by society to be a "sinner".

The above observations highlight a major difference between the "Western" and Greek-Cypriot cultural setting for male bisexuality, i.e., the lack of stigmatization amongst Cypriots of the active insertor participant in homosexual encounters. As a result of the above, many Greek-Cypriots do not believe that 'one drop of homosexuality' makes one totally homosexual, provided that the appropriate sexual role is played.

Methodological Challenges in Interviewing Cypriot Gay Men

Participants' Selection

Attempts were made to recruit self-identified gay Cypriot men resident in London who have sex with men. Twenty-eight participants were recruited through advertisements in the gay press and the Cypriot press (Greek & Turkish), through an appeal in the newsletter of the Cypriot Gay & Lesbian Group, through GUM clinics based in North and South London where the majority of the Cypriot community resides, through gay organisations that happen to have any Cypriot members and by "snowballing" from those who volunteered through these channels, with the aim of accessing men who were less involved in gay affirmative Greek contexts. When describing the study to potential participants, care was taken not to convey the hypothesis about identity conflict because of the risk of failing to attract participants who had not experienced conflict. Therefore the study was simply described as being interested in the experience of "growing up Cypriot and gay".

The Interview Protocol

Twenty-eight men were interviewed face-to-face about their experiences of constructing and managing Cypriot and gay identities. When it comes to the studying of gay men's sexual behaviour and lifestyle, quantitative methods have not given us a body of theory to guide the interpretation of either the behavioural patterns or of the empirically identified predictors of such patterns. Instead, they have given us descriptions of gay men's sexual behaviour over time, and also they have been used to identify some of the predictors of non-maintenance of safer sex.

The interview schedule began with demographic questions, which were followed by questions on their Cypriot socialisation; the construction of sexual identity and their reactions to this process; the relationship between Cypriot and sexual identities and the management of any difficulties which arose; the disclosure of sexual identity to parents and within Cypriot communities; and conceptualisations of their current identities. The interviews lasted between an hour and two and a half hours and all were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Qualitative Method of Data Analysis

The objective of this study was to provide an understanding of some of the key cultural concepts and relevant historical factors that shape the development of Anglo-Cypriot gay identity: what is the experience of being an Anglo-Cypriot gay man living in Britain today? An interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA) was adopted to guide both research methodology and analysis, as it allowed both for a rich and detailed account of each individual's perspective to be examined, together with the processes involved in the construction of Cypriot gay identity to be explored.

Essentially IPA provides a systematic framework for conducting and analyzing qualitative data and exploring the meaning participants attribute to their experiences and cognitions. It is not concerned with objectifying or measuring experiences or events (Smith, Flowers and Osborn, 1997). At the same time IPA recognizes that meaning is constructed within the interaction between participants' accounts and the researcher's interpretative framework. This takes place within the interview itself and also during data analysis and interpretation. An assumption of IPA is that meaningful interpretations can be made about an individual's cognitions but not that these thoughts are necessarily transparent within an individual's verbal reports (Smith et al., 1997).

Smith (1996b) argues for transparency in the analysis of qualitative research and the analytic procedure used is outlined. (For a comprehensive account of this procedure see Smith, 1995a and also Smith, Osborn and Jarman, 1998). IPA analysis is an iterative process and involves examining and revisiting data at all stages of analysis. Repeated readings of the transcripts were carried out noting key phrases and processes. Content summaries, connections between aspects of the transcript e.g. issues regarding content and process, and initial interpretations were included in the initial note taking. A number of preliminary themes were elicited within each transcript from these notes, ensuring that these themes remained faithful to the data. This process was repeated for each transcript in turn.

Next, the initial themes obtained from all transcripts were examined and attempts made to identify patterns and formulate meanings from these groupings in order to produce a final set of over-arching themes. Relationships between themes and data were assessed again. The themes identified were not necessarily present in the accounts of all respondents; indeed themes may be produced both from similarities and differences in individuals' accounts. In addition, some higher order and sub-themes arose from analysis of the data while others resulted from the steer of the interview schedule.

IPA aims to produce a rich in-depth account of the nature and range of experiences within a particular area of study and draws on prior knowledge and theory. It is not concerned with the quantification of data. Indeed while establishing commonalities across the data was important, specific individual insights and experiences often provided greater depth of understanding of complex themes and underlying processes.

It has been persuasively argued that the traditional criteria for evaluating research quality e.g. reliability, are inappropriate in assessing studies of this nature (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1992). IPA acknowledges the inherent subjectivity of the researcher, the interpretative framework within which the researcher is working and their engagement with analysis, rather than aiming for researcher objectivity during analysis. Alternative criteria for gauging research quality has been suggested (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1999; Smith, 1996b), notably the criterion of persuasiveness, by

'grounding examples' applied through an inspection of interpretations and data. Here interpretations are illustrated by extracts from the data, thus enabling readers to determine how persuasive the analysis is for themselves. In the quotations cited, empty brackets denote the omission of verbatim material; information within square brackets indicates classificatory notes and ellipsis points - (...), mark a pause in the flow of a participant's comments.

Rather than following the traditional headings of results and discussion and in line with the narrative presentation of IPA analysis, this paper presents the main themes within an analysis section followed by a conclusion, in which the implications of the research for sociological analysis are discussed.

Data Analysis

Demographic Information

Participants' mean age was 30 - 36 years (range 21-42; SD 5.31). In terms of their highest educational qualifications, seven participants had a postgraduate degree or diploma, eleven had a degree, seven had qualifications equivalent to GCEs/O-levels, and three had A-levels (or equivalent qualifications). Using the International Standard Classification of Occupations (International Labour Office, 1990), sixteen participants were classified as holding professional jobs; four were senior managers or officials; and eight were located in the category of service, shop and sale workers. At the time of the study, all the participants lived in or around the London area.

In terms of their ethnicity twenty participants described themselves as Greek Cypriots and eight as Turkish Cypriots.

Initially by way of introduction and central to the analysis the theme of negotiating the two distinct identities (Cypriot identity and gay identity) is discussed. This is done by examining the various techniques the respondents employed in controlling how much information they disclose (about their sexual orientation) to their families, friends and work colleagues. This is followed by examining the implications that such a decision might have upon their family relationships. The last two themes examine the respondents' self-definition of identity (Cypriot versus gay) and their choice of community (Cypriot versus gay) in which the respondents felt more comfortable.

Negotiation of Two Worlds

The central hypothesis in this study was that simultaneously holding a Cypriot and gay identity places an individual in a situation of potential identity conflict. The question now arises of the relative prevalence of the "exclusive" versus the "paired" double life against that of those men who are "fully integrated". All of the respondents admitted either disguising their orientation or passing at some time in their lives. It has already been noted that several of the respondents were employing passing or disguising techniques and most of them were living exclusive double lives within their families. However, these men have made regular visits to the gay scene and were open to other gay men about their sexual orientation. The few participants who expressed their dislike of the gay scene preferred to socialise in straight social circles. Since it has already been noted that the majority of the respondents who were systematic disguisers to their families, and since there were no instances of exclusive double lives in the homosexual realm (that is, no Cypriot man was out in

the family whilst still disguising on the scene), it can be seen that those respondents who were systematic disguisers within the family were always disguisers within the community.

I will offer two examples here:

I lived with my partner in the same house for the last ten years. My parents see him as my lodger and they're fine about it. However, they still ask me, 'When are you going to get married?' 'How long are you going to stay with that man?' (Andreas, aged 27)

I don't think I'll ever tell them [the parents] ...I just like things as they are...It's something that we don't discuss. Last time she [mother] asked me 'Well aren't you ever going to get married?' I said 'Maybe after I'm forty or never' (Kadir, aged 21)

The Control of Information Disclosureⁱⁱⁱ

The following is intended to briefly identify some of the alternatives open to the Cypriot gay man who passes in all contexts and there is an attempt to either verify or exemplify these from the respondents' interviews. In total six alternatives will be examined: Counterfeit Roles; Heterosexual Courting/Marriage; "Keeping Mum"; Disavowal; Covering and Remoteness.

(i) Counterfeit Roles

This method allows the individual to tender the manifestations of one's real stigma as evidence of a lesser taint.

My mum asked me the other day [] about girlfriends and getting married [] I told her jokingly that I want to enjoy life [] I am too young to settle down [] that's the usual excuse I give her (Kadir, aged 21)

(ii) Heterosexual Courting/Marriage

Most "discreditable" people believe that if they appear to be courting a member of the opposite sex then the people around them would perceive them as heterosexuals. Furthermore, some Cypriot gay men might go one step further and they get engaged or married in order to avoid the stigma of homosexuality. For example George told me:

The point is that I enjoy the company of women [] they make me feel comfortable and relaxed [] I enjoy being in a non-gay environment [] Sometimes I tell them [his parents] white lies [] It's a diplomatic way of keeping them happy and keeping myself happy [] I do go out with girls but I don't sleep with girls. (George aged 38)

(iii) "Keeping Mum"

By far the most popular method of passing that came up during a lot of the interviews by those respondents who were not open about their sexuality. The reason why this is so popular lies with its passive nature. Andrew who works for a Cypriot company in London said:

If people at work ask me [whether he has a girlfriend or not] I would usually try and change the conversation. My workplace is a typical Greek environment and I don't want any problems there (Andrew aged 35)

George aged 34, however, thinks that a little diplomacy wouldn't harm anybody. He argues that by employing the "keeping mum" technique the family relations are kept in balance. He said:

I think my Mum suspects [] I don't think I will ever tell them about my sexuality as that would hurt them very much. I guess I have to accept the fact that as a Cypriot gay man I have to protect my family [] My father has heart problems [] I couldn't never do this to him [] They adore me and I adore them [] I try to avoid conversations about girlfriends and usually I keep quiet about my whereabouts.

(iv) Disavowal

Here the individual completely denies his sexual orientation. He may also, denounce of others who are open about their (homo) sexuality in order not to arouse suspicions.

Mike said:

Well up until a few years ago, I used to call myself bisexual and I tried to stay away from gay people. For a while I dated a woman to convince myself and the people around me that I was heterosexual. If I was with friends and homosexuality was brought up I would be the first one to criticize gay people (Mike aged 31)

(v) Covering

This strategy is distinct from passing and it combines techniques of the stigma management and information control.

In the case of Fotis:

If my parents or any members of my family make any homophobic remark I would try and keep quiet [] sometimes I may join in [] I hate doing this [] the only way to keep them from suspecting (Fotis aged 27)

(vi) Remoteness

This method is more concerned with the management of social networks than with face-to-face encounters.

Yannis said:

Once I accepted my sexuality and started going out I deliberately avoided places where I would bump into people I knew [] tried to divide my friends into people who knew and people who didn't [] was stressful as at times I caught myself feeling tired of all the lies [] feeling mentally tired from trying to keep the two groups [of friends] separate (Yannis aged 42)

Implications for Family Relationships

In Greek-Cypriot culture, the individual man is merged with the family and the community. It could be said that he does not have a discrete, individual identity as his private affairs are shared with the rest of the family. It can be very difficult for a man to develop his own personality and character, as he often lives with his family until he marries. Should he decide to break away from the family and set up his own home without getting married, he is seen as acting against the family. To a large extent, individuals are not allowed to have any secrets or to have private lives. If they do, this is seen as signifying that there is something wrong that ought to be shared and

resolved within the family itself. Decisions regarding financial, emotional, or business affairs are taken jointly with the rest of the family. From an early age, children learn that their actions reflect upon the whole family's social status.

Note that I am not suggesting that this state of affairs is necessarily a "bad thing"; the tightly-knit Greek-Cypriot social context carries many benefits that have been lost within more individualized, atomized, fragmented Western societies. However, for Greek-Cypriot men whose emotional and sexual investments are directed towards other men, their cultural context may well present them with significant difficulties. In specific terms, how can one talk about a

"Gay identity" within a culture in which the Western concept of individual identity is problematic? How can Greek-Cypriot men (gay identified or not) start addressing their sexual needs when they cannot even address their needs as individuals? How can a man accept and act on his sexuality when the family and society denies him the right to be himself?

Disclosure to the Family

Gay identity emerges when people are free to make choices and decisions about their lives and lifestyles. However, in a culture where the individual is firmly embedded within the community, such a definition becomes unrealistic. As Ioannis (aged 31) said in my study:

The main reason I haven't come out is my mother [] cannot do that to her [] she has sacrificed her life for me [] she was the one who was getting beaten up by my dad, she was the one who had to go out to work to feed us [] she is homophobic, like most of the Greek people. [My mum} is a typical Greek person [] who would laugh and criticize at anything which would not fit the bill [] it's my duty to look after her and make sure she is provided for... That's the way it is'

Coming out in the family and making one's sexuality public knowledge may be considered an act of treason against the family and the culture. It may be seen as a form of rejection and abandonment of all the things their parents and culture represent. As Espin (1984, 1987) and Hidalgo (1984) have noted, a gay or lesbian family member may maintain a place in the family and be quietly tolerated but this does not constitute acceptance of a gay or lesbian sexuality. Rather, it constitutes the denial of it. The gay son is very much welcomed within the family, as long as he does not disclose or declare his sexuality. As a result, Greek-Cypriot gay men internalize negative attitudes that have been conveyed by loved and trusted figures, which have a detrimental effect on the possibility of developing self-acceptance and a positively-evaluated perspective on one's sexuality.

Another respondent Kenan aged 24 realises as he grows older that his family does matter to him and he tries very hard to keep a balance between the two worlds. He said:

The older I get I've started to become more sensitive towards my family's feelings [] I've just told my sisters that I'm gay and that didn't go down too well. I used to think what I'll do as a young person is to run away from my family and never see them again [] I don't want to do that because I actually do love my family [] I'm considering coming out to my parents but I don't know what will happen [] I want to do it very much [] If they don't know that I'm gay there is a lot of me they don't know.

On the other hand, Lou aged 24, is quite happy with the status quo of the situation as long as his mother doesn't bring up the subject. He said:

I don't think I will ever tell my parents [] if you do that it's fifty percent they are going to accept you and fifty percentage they are going to reject you [] you lose all that loving, caring thing [] If I lose them I don't know what is going to happen. If things are running smoothly right now and I don't have any problems with them why change them? Stupid isn't it?

In some instances, little white lies seem to be the only solution. Michael aged 34 told me:

I often lie to my parents... I've got no hang ups about it... It's obviously better, just small lies like who I'm going out with or where I'm staying for the night... You see, my family is very important to me and I do love them.

Self-definition of Identity

To determine whether respondents differentiate between feeling a part of a community and acknowledging their own personal identity, respondents were asked which terms they used to identify themselves and which part of their identity (Anglo-Cypriot or gay) they more strongly identified. Results indicated that the two concepts (community identification and personal identification) are similar for the respondents.

Sexual Identities

The majority of the respondents who used the term "Anglo-Cypriot gay man" to identify themselves answered that they identified more strongly with the gay part of their identity:

I also have this terrible fear, and it comes from my childhood, that my family is going to swallow me up [] where they [Greek Cypriots] want to know what you're doing and who you're doing it with [] when I was very young I managed to break away, because I got involved in Theatre, which was something none of them knew about [] it was like my refuge and it's remained my refuge [] I think I have a very, very negative view of my ethnicity, actually if I'm honest. (Nick aged 33)

Cypriot Cultural Identities

In contrast, the few participants who said that they identified themselves by the terms gay Anglo-Cypriot and reported that they identified more strongly as Anglo-Cypriots made statements such as the following:

I identify as a Cypriot man first because similar backgrounds and experiences are stronger bonds for me than my sexual identity... Sex comes and goes...to have a solid ethnic identity is important. (Costas aged 37)

I would say that my Greekness defines who I am... I am first Greek and then a gay man... My sexuality may change one day but my Greekness still remains intact. (Georgis aged 33)

Yes. I would say that I am proud of being Greek and gay... want to socialize with other gay Greek men as we understand each other much better than any other English gay man would... If I have to choose I would say I am Greek first and then gay. (Fotis aged 29)

Combining Sexual & Cultural Identities

However, very few of my respondents refused to choose between the two identities. They reflect the reality that most Cypriot gay men feel most complete when they can be accepted as being both gay and Cypriot, as the following comments indicate:

I identify as being both. Why can't we marry the two [being gay and Greek-Cypriot] [] both my culture, my family and my sexuality are equally important to me (Stephen aged 32)

Both communities are not mutually excluded... I think one complements the other... The Greek community supports my Greekness while the gay community supports my being a gay man. (Kostas aged 28)

I believe both identities are important to me. I love the Greek music, the theatre and the arts. I love anything that is Greek. But at the same time I love men. For me there is no distinction (Tonis aged 38)

These results suggest that, when a choice of identification is required, more respondents identified themselves as gay than as Anglo-Cypriot but that others refused to choose because it would mean denying an important part of their identity. It is likely that each person determines for himself depending upon the stage of identity development he is in, whether it is more comfortable to be Cypriot among gay men or gay man around Cypriots or whether both are intolerable and he must be acknowledged as both Cypriot and gay by everyone. The above supports the argument that identity development can be a fluid and ever-changing process and as a result of that an individual may choose to identify and ally more closely with being gay or Anglo-Cypriot at different times depending on need and situational factors.

Choice of Community

We now turn our attention to coming out in the community. When asked about their social networks, the majority of the research participants replied that they socialised mostly with non-Greek gays. When asked if they were out to any Greek people other than family, only a few said they were, but none of these men were out only to other Greek gays.

Furthermore, when asked, "In which community do you feel more comfortable (Anglo-Cypriot or gay)" most of the respondents who chose the gay community gave the following reasons:

Gay Community

Double standards basically... They help you to succeed but when you succeed they [community] going to back stab you. (Lou aged 24)

I have more in common with gay men than with straight Cypriots. (Kadir aged 21)

All I want to be happy is somewhere nice to live... a boyfriend and a job that I enjoy. (Michael aged 34)

So, I never had too much contact with my own culture... When I did have contact with it, I disliked it [] I would love to learn my own language, love to

learn my culture [] mixing in with people that are like that [, I'd rather not. (Mike aged 28)

The Greek Cypriots think are far better than anyone else [] they look down on me because I don't have a house and I'm not married [] they are close minded... they think there is only one way to live a life...an unwillingness to be open minded.' (Stephen aged 32)

I'm proud of the women in my family [] I despise the men [] I don't want anything to do with Greek-Cypriot people who have got this kind of peasant mentality... can't bear it [] it's almost like connected to a class thing. (Nick aged 33)

Cypriot society works on gossip [] basically there is my family and everybody is very jealous [] my sisters are aware of the fact [that I am gay] and are just waiting for a slip up and that worries me (Kenan aged 24)

Cypriot Community

Those few participants who felt more comfortable in the Anglo-Cypriot community explained:

The closeness of the family and the support you may be getting if you are in trouble... I relate to myself as a Greek person first (Georgis aged 34)

The hospitality and the way we perceive life and people... My cultural beliefs are indeed Greek (George aged 33)

I suppose knowing what they want in life... Being ambitious, hard working...having a set of values... I think they (Cypriots) would be more faithful than maybe an Englishman would be (Stephen aged 32)

Yes, a lot of my thinking is influenced by my upbringing. The competitiveness is still there. The fact that I show a lot more initiative than English lads in a work environment comes from being Cypriot. I'm very glad, in many respects that my background is Cypriot, because a lot of English attitudes make me cringe (Tasos aged 42)

However, it is interesting that although these men remain closeted within the Greek community, this does not seem to extend to the gay community. In fact, most of the men were involved in gay rights activism as self-defined by participation in gay pride marches, participating in several charity functions and being involved with AIDS hospices and organisations. Considering the degree of media coverage such events often bring, this is far greater visibility than one might expect from Greek gay men living in London. All participants' families live in London. Regardless, several noted that although they worried over being "found out", either by a parent to whom they were not out or by a family acquaintance who might be watching the news and feel compelled to gossip, all felt it was important to follow through.

As Fassinger (1991) notes, most of the existing models of gay identity development, such as Cass's (1979) widely cited model, have a:

Linear and prescriptive flavour implying that developmental maturity rests on an immutable homoerotic identification as well as a positive public (and often political) identity. The models are insensitive to diversity in terms of race/ethnicity...The unfortunate implication is that non-political acceptance of one's gay identity is seen as a form of developmental acceptance (p.168).

Thus I would propose that it is indeed an interesting juxtaposition that occurs when one tries to apply Western models of coming out to beliefs surrounding the development of a positive gay identity of a Greek man living in London. On the one hand, an argument could be made that as a group, the 28 gay men in this study still possess a fair degree of internalised homophobia and shame, as some are not out to one or both of their parents, six are out in the Greek community, and most worried about being shunned or that their families would be exposed to hurtful gossip. Yet, by another measure, many appear to have gone beyond merely "accepting" themselves and are on the far end of the continuum of "outness, advocacy, and celebration", even by Western standards.

Conclusion

This study points to some of the difficulties that may be experienced by Cypriot men who are trying to construct a gay identity and who are trying to find ways of reconciling Cypriot and gay identity and managing information about their gay identity within Cypriot contexts in Britain. As the above examples demonstrate for the majority of the respondents identity did not seem to have crystallized around their sexuality so as to render sexual identity a primary identity dimension. They appeared to have accepted that constructing an all-embracing gay lifestyle might not be feasible for them without abandoning or at least challenging and unsettling their family and cultural contexts. It was clear from the interviews that, despite the anti-gay sentiments embodied and expressed in the Greek-Cypriot community and in their families, the men retained a deep attachment to their Greek culture and inhabited a frame of reference that most frequently claimed ethnic identity and community as more primary concerns than sexual identity. Rather than defining themselves primarily in terms of sexual identity, they chose to see themselves in terms of other personal relationships with their families, their peers at work and with other members of their community. What came across clearly in the interviews was the men's fear of becoming outcasts in their own cultural community.

The ways of coping and dealing with their sexuality varied from person to person. Many had tried to incorporate their sexuality into their everyday lives, sometimes by juxtaposing it with other aspects of their lives and sense of self. The main aim in all the coping mechanisms was to minimize psychological and social strain by finding a happy and workable balance between their sexuality and their familial and social lives. Ioannis aged 37 spoke for a lot of the interviewees when he pointed to the difficulties of integrating (rather than simply juxtaposing) aspects of his different worlds:

The thing that I dislike is not being able to come out to my family [] being a real gay and fulfilled person. Once you've come out to the family and they can accept it [] you can bring a partner home to meet the family [] even if he does not understand my culture, at least I'll be with him in a surrounding that I feel comfortable with [] the only annoyance that I've got [] not to be able to share my partner with my parents [] my own culture and community-that's the problem

As a result, a lot of my interviewees had expended considerable energy in devising ways of balancing the two worlds. These men existed as minorities within minorities, with the multiple oppression and discrimination that accompanies such status (see Bennett & Coyle, 2001, for another example of gay men who occupy this

position). Dimitrios (aged 43) spoke frankly of the imbalance between the worlds of his culture and his sexuality and the difficulty he experienced in finding a place for himself:

The time I missed the Greek-Cypriot connection was last year when I went to a Jewish bar mitzvah [] a sense of deep sadness because there isn't a community that I belong to [] when I hear Greek music being played it triggers off a sense of loss or a sense of not belonging [] it's the connection I miss most with my Greek culture

The results from this research indicate that the self-identification of gay Anglo-Cypriots is reflected in several factors: choice of community identification, choice of terms (Anglo-Cypriot gay man versus gay Anglo-Cypriot), situational factors such as whether they had disclosed their gay identity to their families and the Anglo-Cypriot community, and their own perceptions of how they are perceived by the gay community. Results also indicate that the majority of respondents identified more strongly with their gay identity than with their Anglo-Cypriot identity, although there were several respondents who insisted on acknowledging both aspects of their identity as Anglo-Cypriots and as gay men.

Because this study was carried out with a small sample of gay Cypriot men living in Britain today, the accounts of those taking part may not be representative of the experiences of gay Cypriot men negotiating sexual identity issues, either in the diaspora or Cyprus itself. It must also be noted that theirs are retrospective, contemporary accounts, which may therefore reflect biases in invoking the historical, social contexts of being a gay Cypriot man. However, it has been suggested that retrospective reports and autobiographical memory are not necessarily and inevitably inaccurate and unstable (e.g., Blance, 1996; Brewin, Andrews, & Gotlib, 1993; Neisser, 1994; Ross & Conway, 1986; Rubin, Wetzler, & Nebes, 1986; Wagenaar, 1986). It should be observed that the participants were drawn from a wide age range and a mix of Greek and Turkish ethnicities was included. Furthermore the commonality found in some themes and constructs suggests that the issues identified would be worth investigating with a larger sample. Further studies might include a more random sampling of gay Anglo-Cypriots, as well as the use of extensive quantitative analysis methods, more comprehensive interviews with a larger sample, or both.

Additionally, in this paper I have attempted to convey something of the multi-faceted reality of doing research with people of the same or partially shared ethnic and sexual background. As a researcher I was surprised to see the extent to which my sexual and cultural identity was directly or indirectly questioned or commented upon by the respondents. More attention needs to be paid to the assumptions that interviewees make about the sexual and cultural identity of the interviewer and examine how and in what ways these assumptions affect the unfolding of the interview: the interviewees may disclose certain kinds of information based on their assumptions about the researcher (social desirability effect); they might decide to give their personal accounts and describe their life stories and identities in terms which compare themselves to assumptions about the researcher. Personally, I wonder how the data collected would differ if I appeared to be heterosexual.

Finally, from this study, it was clear that any attempt to globalize all gay men into a homogeneous group based on a "Western" model of homosexualities can be misleading and inappropriate. Not only can important differences between gay men be hidden but local and national differences of culture, traditions and political strategies will not be properly addressed. The personal accounts that arose from this research reinforce the notion that identity is multiple, contested and contextual. For a

lot of the Cypriot men in this study, the translation of their sexual desires and behaviours into a political statement of gay identity was not only difficult but was also resisted. Sexual identity –although relevant–was not a primary identity dimension to them. Many men had developed more or less effective coping mechanisms to manage the conflicts they faced. Most importantly, though, the men I spoke to were united in their struggle for acceptance by the Cypriot community.

Endnotes

- i Some of the issues raised in this paper may be equally applied to Anglo-Cypriot lesbian women resident in London. However, due to the complexity of the challenges these women face it was felt that it would be inappropriate to discuss them in this paper
- ii So far very little research (with the exception of Anthias's book (1992)) has been published on the socio-cultural and economic position of Cypriots in British Society and their development from colonial migrants to a settler population. Furthermore, very little research is also available in the sociological and psychological literature on how non-heterosexual Cypriot men and women living in England form their sexual identity in a cultural context. The central tenet of Anthias' work is to examine and understand the dynamic interactions and experiences of the settler population of Cypriots within the host country of Britain. Rather than consider ethnicity as a concept, which can be uniformly applied to any given ethnic group, she argues that to understand ethnicity, the internalised socio-cultural characteristics of the group need to be considered within the structural and political processes of the host country. Ethnicity is thus not a unitary concept but is constrained by the divisions of class, gender and ethnic identity and is situationally dependent. This would have implications for the construction of sexual identities within ethnic minority groups and more specifically the effect that cultural diversity has on the coming-out process. Disclosing one's sexual orientation is also thought to be ubiquitously positive experience that creates self-acceptance and confidence through repeated practice. In fact, for gay men and lesbians, not making public pronouncements about their sexual orientation is presumed to be negative and less than healthy psychologically and is characterised by negative terms, such as living double lives, hiding, being in the closet, and being closeted. Living double lives or being closeted is presumed to indicate shame, denial, and self-hatred. In various forms, these assumptions have found their way into the conceptualisations of research on coming out, development of sexual identities, and homosexualities. Most of these assumptions, however, are based on clinical and empirical studies conducted with white lesbians and gay men. Lesbians and gay men of ethnic minority backgrounds have received scant attention in the sociological and psychological literature on homosexualities and development of sexual identities. This paper attempts to explore some issues and raise some questions about accepting one's homosexuality and subsequently developing a sexual identity as a process that is always embedded in a cultural context that can profoundly shape the experience of that process for individuals.
- iii Sexual stigma is different from the stigma attached to race as unlike skin colour, sexual preference is not visible. Goffman (1963) described a process individuals experience as a function of their known identity as minority. He

used the concept “discredited” for those who were of a racial or ethnic minority group and a “discreditable” for those who required disclosure in order to be identified as a minority. For the ‘discredited’ the issue is managing the tension generated during social contacts (e.g. deformity), whereas the “discreditable” the issue is managing information about the potential tensions that could be generated if their minority status was disclosed or revealed (e.g. one’s sexual preference). Following the above, the stigma carried by most non-heterosexuals is, in a sense, optional and many elect to conceal their deviance and “pass” (Goffman, 1963) as heterosexuals. This strategy (i.e. of passing) gives the chance to the “discreditable” to find out how others feel about the issue of homosexuality and how they would have reacted should they (“the discreditable”) disclosed their sexual preferences to them. The problem in each case is “to display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when and where” (Goffman, 1963, p.129).

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