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Disclosure, discrimination and desire: experiences of Black and South Asian gay men in Britain

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Abstract

Using findings from a qualitative investigation based on in-depth email interviews with 47 Black and South Asian gay men in Britain, this paper explores the cross-cutting identities and discourses in relation to being both gay and from an ethnic minority background. Taking an intersectional approach, detailed accounts of identity negotiation, cultural pressures, experiences of discrimination and exclusion, and the relationship between minority ethnic gay men and mainstream White gay culture are presented and explored. The major findings common to both groups were: cultural barriers limiting disclosure of sexuality to family and wider social networks; experiences of discrimination by white gay men that included exclusion as well as objectification; a lack of positive gay role models and imagery relating to men from ethnic minority backgrounds. Among South Asian gay men, a major theme was regret at being unable to fulfil family expectations regarding marriage and children, while among Black gay men, there was a strong belief that same-sex behaviour subverted cultural notions related to how masculinity is configured. The paper concludes by highlighting the importance of social location, particularly education and income, when examining the intersection of ethnicity and sexuality in future research.

Key words: Gay men; ethnicity; discrimination; stigma; UK

Introduction

Focusing specifically on the experiences of gay men from the largest minority ethnic populations in Britain (Black African, Black Caribbean, South Asian), this paper seeks to add to the small number of qualitative studies which examine the challenging terrain of being both from an minority ethnic background and being a man who has sex with men. Keogh et al (2004), in their earlier study of the experiences of UK-born Black Caribbean gay men in London, describe how individuals endeavour to manage their social lives so that they can preserve their place within the Black Caribbean community and simultaneously fashion gay social networks. In their study of Black African-born gay and bisexual men living in London, Doyal et al (2008) describe how the challenge of finding a balance between being African and being gay is influenced by Christian beliefs and powerful cultural constraints against “coming out”. Drawing on a sample of men born in Jamaica and Britain, Anderson et al (2009) describe how Black Caribbean men who have sex with men (MSM), unable to reconcile their sexuality with their heterosexist environment, suffer from internalised homophobia, shame and distress. This literature is complemented by a small body of work comprising the life-stories and writings from a Black gay and lesbian perspective in Britain (see for example, Mason-John 1995, Hall Carpenter Archives 1989)

Little attention has been paid to the experiences of MSM from South Asian (Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi) backgrounds living in Britain. One of the aims of the present study is to compare the experiences of South Asian and Black African or Caribbean men. The major areas explored in this paper are: the challenges of coming out in the context of cultural taboos and expectations; compartmentalization and policing of sexual orientation as a means of negotiating the wider heteronormative environment; experiences of discrimination and exclusion as well as objectification and exoticization; the issue of “erotic capital” and perceived power in the context of attraction to White men.

There is an emerging literature, particularly in the USA, which recognises the importance of describing the intersection of different social identities which allows for shifts in the various social contexts in which individuals find themselves (Narvaez et al 2009, Stewart and McDermott 2004, Crawford et al 2002). An intersectional approach to the accounts of the participants in the present study recognizes that minority ethnic gay and bisexual men in Britain are likely to experience discrimination in a different way than heterosexual men from an ethnic minority background. Similarly, minority ethnic gay and bisexual men may experience discrimination that would not be faced by white gay and bisexual men since they will experience distinctive forms of stereotyping based on a combination of ethnicity and sexuality. Narváez et al (2009) point out that questions about intersectionality illuminate the relationships between homophobia, sexism and racism because “a person who holds such intersectional identities is faced not with each of these ‘-isms’ in isolation, but with a fluid and contextual sexualisation of race and a racialisation of sexuality” (2009: 65).

Methods

Recruitment

Participants were recruited for this qualitative study as part of the MESH Project, a national study investigating the sexual health of minority ethnic men who have sex with men living in Britain. The project, based at City University London, was advertised online using banners on community websites (e.g. ukblackout.com, gaysia.co.uk, imaan.org.uk), health promotion websites (eg THT, GMFA, Health Gay Living Birmingham, LGBT Scotland) and on gay dating and social networking websites (e.g. Gaydar, manhunt.net, blackgaychat.com). Offline recruitment strategies included advertising the project in sexual health clinics, bars, clubs and the media across Britain.

In the online survey we defined “minority ethnic” using the 2001 census question on ethnicity where respondents could tick one of the following: White (British, Irish, other); Black (Caribbean, African, other); Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Other); Chinese or other ethnic group; Mixed (Black Caribbean and white, Black African and white, Asian and white; any other mixed background). Using this framework, white British, Irish or other participants in the MESH Project were classified as “white” and all other groups were classified as “minority ethnic”.

In the first part of the study (the quantitative stage), MSM living in Britain (n= 17,425) were asked to complete a questionnaire online. Men from minority ethnic backgrounds who completed the online survey (n= 1,241) were asked at the end of the questionnaire if they would be willing to take part in an email interview and, if so, to supply an email address. Before participating in the interview, participants were emailed an information sheet outlining the aims of email interview and were asked to read it and submit any questions before sending an email indicating that they understood what was required and that they consented to take part in an email interview. All emails received from participants in the course of the interviews were copied into Word files, and each interviewee's Word file was given a serial number. The original emails were deleted. Email addresses and serial numbers were stored in a separate a password-protected database to which only the research team had access. The MESH project was granted ethical approval by the South-West Multi-Centre Ethics Committee (ref: 06/MRE06/71)

Email interviews

The qualitative interview consisted of a series of email exchanges over a period of three to four weeks. Each email typically contained six to eight questions. Probes and further questions in later emails, up to six emails in total for any one participant, were based on earlier responses. Participants were probed on aspects of previous responses. It was anticipated that the email interview would take two to three hours of a participant's time overall. The questions sought information about ethnic and sexual identity, disclosure of sexuality, experiences of discrimination and affiliation to wider gay culture.

The advantages of the email interview approach are the potential for enhanced openness, a greater readiness to discuss sensitive topics, increased reflection and reflexivity and a more balanced power relationship between the interviewer and participant (Hewson 2007, Evans et al, 2008). Disadvantages included the lack of rapport between the interviewer and the participants, a lack of visual and aural clues in the entirely text-based context and potentially ambiguous data. Like a face-to-face interview, the email interview must be viewed as a contextual social performance and the data should not therefore be accepted uncritically. However, the consensus around themes on a variety of complex issues, combined with an effort to ensure that participants reflected on their own experiences, combined to give a sense of internal consistency. As in all online-mediated research, it was not possible for the research team to verify that the respondent was the person who answered all the questions. An effort was made to monitor emails as they arrived for changes in style or divergent content. No concerns on the issue of participant authenticity arose.

The sample

In total, 327 men from minority ethnic backgrounds provided an email address and of these 123 provided consent to take part in a qualitative interview; 97 responded to the first set of email questions and 67 to two emails or more. Participants were included in the analysis for this paper if they responded to the questions of two emails or more and, given the focus of the paper, were, at least in part, from a South Asian (Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi) or Black (African or Caribbean) ethnic background (n = 47) (Table 1). The remaining men (n = 20) were from a disparate range of ethnic backgrounds. The numbers were too small in each category to enable meaningful analysis and so they were not included in the analysis. The current analysis is based on a total of 230 received emails (range = 2-6 emails per respondent, median number of emails per respondent = 3).

All eligible participants, that is, from a Black or South Asian background, self-defined their sexual orientation as "gay". No men from a Bangladeshi background or a "Pakistani & White" background took part in the email interviews. Information was not provided by all participants on educational attainment, but the majority of those who did provide data indicated that they were educated to university level or above.

Table 1. Characteristics of sample participants

Ethnic background	Total (n)	Born in Britain (n)	Live London (n)	Age range
Black African	5	4	3	20-44
Black African and White	6	3	4	27-44

Black Caribbean	8	7	6	18-46
Black Caribbean and White	8	7	6	23-49
Indian	7	6	4	22-52
Indian and White	5	4	4	24-43
Pakistani	8	6	3	20-37
Total	47	35	30	18-52

Analysis

Texts from all emails were entered into NVivo (version 8), a software programme for organising and conducting text searches. Using content analysis (Ryan & Bernard 2000) concepts that emerged from the text were identified and subsequently linked together. Based on a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin 1998), all transcripts were examined by two readers independently in an effort to identify broad themes that emerged from the data. Based on this thematic analysis, these broad themes were subsequently organised, evaluated and analysed for secondary themes. The illustrative quotations used come directly from the emails of participants. Annotations at the end of each quotation indicate first name (assigned by the authors and not the real name of the participant), ethnic background, participant ID number and age (BA - Black African; BA&W - Black African & White; BC - Black Caribbean; BC&W - Black Caribbean & White; Ind - Indian; Ind&W - Indian & White; P - Pakistani).

Results

Sexuality and cultural background

Regardless of ethnic background, almost all participants took the view that the experiences of gay and bisexual men from their ethnic background are more problematic and challenging than those facing white British gay men. White British gay men were seen as coming from a primarily more liberal and accepting culture in contrast to their own which was deemed judiciously policed for anything which diverged from a hetero-normative path. This was observed by men from Black African and Caribbean backgrounds:

White British culture is more accommodating than Caribbean culture which can be relatively homophobic. (Adam, BC1, 34)

For them I reckon, they can be free whenever they're ready! White cultures are more accepting of sexual exploration! Certainly when there's issue, the person is hardly gonna be cut off from his community, whereas for black guys these are all living possibilities! (Taka, BA4, 20)

Similar observations were made by men from Indian and Pakistani backgrounds:

I perceive White British gay men to not have as many problems in a) finding partners and b) having as much trouble with family priorities. Their inherent conditioning and cultural heritage is very different, and in that respect I am reminded that as an Asian man, despite being born here my cultural heritage is very much foreign... (Deepak, Ind4, 32)

I think the main and only point that I can think of is the fact that being gay is now 'accepted' amongst the White British culture whereas with Asian, Black etc it is still a taboo subject and in that way it is harder for some gay people from ethnic minorities to 'come out'. (Irfan, P3, 25)

In this way, men from Black and South Asian backgrounds articulate an awareness that they, and people from the same ethnic background as themselves, are likely to face a specific set of culturally-generated obstacles that set them apart from the White British mainstream.

Black African and Caribbean

Many men from Black African and Caribbean backgrounds said the major issues they faced was the view of homosexuality as a taboo, that it challenges orthodox models of masculinity and simply that it is something which is not accepted by people in their families and communities.

Where I was born is really religious, if you're gay its like a sin, and also to be Black/mixed race and be gay is a big no-no in the black community... there still is a lot of sexual discrimination within the black community, it really is a shame sometimes. (Benjamin, BA&W5, 24)

Being Black and gay, the two things don't go together. It's just wrong according to most people, a taboo even though nobody knows why!!! That's why those Jamaica musicians can get away with all those homophobic songs... they are just reflecting what the people think already. (Samuel, BC&W3, 29)

This notion that that there is a prevailing belief that it is not possible to be both gay and Black was articulated by a number of men from Black African and Caribbean backgrounds.

Have a black female friend who... complained that I was focusing too much on being gay and not enough on being black. It is assumed by her that the black identity is superior and not complementary, and the implication in her voice and manner suggested that I was 'letting the side down'. She and other associates seem to struggle with the idea that you can be both simultaneously. (Gabriel, BA&W10, 34)

The idea that homosexuality is believed to be alien to African culture and is a contagious "white disease" was related by a number of men from Black African backgrounds:

I feel there is a conflict because there is an African stereotype that Africans are not gay and that being gay is a white/European disease, and therefore being African and gay means that that I/we try to be white. (Joseph, BA7, 27)

Possibly, disowned, they at the very least will not be happy. Possibly send me to a de-gayng institute or rehab. It's considered the white man's disease... for most of the community it [would] be an issue of gossip, close members to my family are all like-minded... so perhaps they may react the same way as my family. (Simon, BA&W4, 20)

Many Black men commented that they saw the negative and homophobic attitudes of African and Caribbean cultures towards gay men as ironic in light of their own historical experiences of discrimination and maltreatment.

Personally there should be [no homophobia] cause blacks should understand the best what persecution is (Paul, BC5, 21)

Shame was regularly mentioned in relation to homosexuality among men from Black African and Caribbean backgrounds:

I think there is still a lot of shame associated with being gay in the Nigerian community. My experience of Nigerians (and black people generally for that matter) is that we can be extremely proud people, and so we are the amongst the last to air our dirty laundry in public. (Michael, BA11, 31)

Letting people know that there is a gay man in the family would be very shameful for our families. This is true for many Jamaicans in particular. (Gary, BC6, 26)

For most men there was some attempt to control the information regarding their sexual orientation for fear of negative or homophobic reactions. Some men mentioned keeping their sexuality concealed from friends and work colleagues:

I never discuss my sexuality with anyone - either socially or at work, although I've heard some people suspect as I never discuss girls and never have a girlfriend. I think most people hide behind this positive front but maybe deep down they have pretty staunch views that verge on homophobic, especially young, black men who are often blatant with their dislike of gay people. (Jay, BA3, 28)

The potential rigidity of this compartmentalization was illustrated by one participant who lived with his parents and younger siblings but had not disclosed his sexuality to any family members and could not foresee a time when he would. At the same time, he was very active on the gay social scene, had over 25 sexual partners in the previous year and said he was very happy to be gay. He admitted that the continuing separation of his family and gay life could become more complicated if he were to want to have a long-term relationship with another man but that he would negotiate this if the situation were to arise but that in relation to disclosing his sexuality to his family: "they don't know and they will never know" (John, BC2, 27).

South Asian

Many South Asian men also articulated the tension between their ethnic background and their sexual orientation. The common perspective was that being both Indian or Pakistani and gay was mutually exclusive. The major driver of this view was the power of familial expectations to marry and have children.

I do still constantly feel a conflict between my Indian background and my sexuality. Just today I was thinking 'Never the twain shall meet'... As I get older I really struggle to see where I fit in the family structure and that does sadden me. It's about how I interact and deal with the family like everybody else but there is no framework outside of conventional marriage. (Dilip, Ind8, 32)

Many South Asian participants said their sexuality was therefore a barrier to the perpetuation of tradition and a derogation of their express "duty" to marry and procreate:

All my family are aware [that I am gay], but my parents, or moreso my mum, denies it to herself regularly. I'm the only boy in the family, so my "Asian" duty is to continue the family lineage... I do feel like there is no space in a culture that is so 'marriage and children' focused. (Ashok, Ind11, 28)

I know I will be expected to get married and have children and my mother expects me to as she says it is the Hindu tradition and Hindu duty but I explained to her that marriage is not the answer to everything. (Pravin, Ind2, 22)

Obviously the "done thing" is to get married to a girl and have a family, and seeing as that is not my thing there is a clear conflict there. (Iqbal, P5, 22)

A number of men from South Asian Hindu backgrounds said that the barriers to homosexuality were unfortunate given that their religion does not explicitly proscribe same-sex sexual behaviour:

Although I am convinced that being homosexual is not condemned explicitly in Hinduism, I know I almost never will be accepted by the Mauritian community and the Hindu community in Mauritius. (Pravin, Ind2, 22)

It's a shame as nothing in Hinduism prohibits homosexuality or even the necessity in getting married... so it's just the heavy cultural imposition which people like me have to deflect in order to live our lives the way we choose. (Deepak, Ind4, 32)

Some participants said that the powerful hetero-normative messages they internalised growing up meant that they felt they were letting their family down by being unable to conform to the cultural norms around marriage and children:

All the aunties are persistently asking about when I am ever going to marry. I do feel sorry for my mother, as she'll never have grandchildren bearing the family name. I'm 32 now and alarm bells have begun to ring even in India where my parents' relatives can't understand why I am still single. (Deepak, Ind4, 32)

Pride, honour and shame were frequently mentioned by men from South Asian backgrounds as being implicated in the culturally-generated silence around homosexuality:

No one said it but it is taken as a rule. Pakistani families and pride/ honour - any indiscretions like divorce and being gay are no-go areas. (Amin, P1, 37)

One participant from an Indian background said that if his sexuality became known among extended family networks that the negative impact on his family's reputation would be such that the marriage opportunities of his siblings would be jeopardised:

They've asked me to not date anyone until my brother gets married as they want to arrange a marriage for him and a gay brother is hardly a selling desirable dowry in Indian society! (Pradeep, Ind5, 30)

Discrimination and objectification

Only a small number of the participants in the present study claimed that they had experienced overt forms of discrimination in relation to either their ethnicity or sexual orientation. Instead the norm was to have experienced more subtle forms of discrimination and exclusion which differed in nature between the Black and South Asian men.

Black African and Caribbean

A major theme for Black African and Caribbean men was the objectification and eroticisation of "black bodies" by White gay men. Some saw this as a form of discrimination where they were being discounted as individuals and being desired only for the colour of their skin and its concomitant associations with hyper-masculinity. They noted that they were rarely seen as potential romantic partners:

I have been taken advantage of sexually by some men who I've later come to believe are attracted to black / mixed-race men because of the myth of the "big black dick" and the "sweet black ass".... They were generally interested in me only for sex and wanted no interaction that was not on a physical level... (Matt, BC&W10, 47)

I did notice in the past that some sexual partners reminded me that I was black, albeit harmlessly, but it made me wonder if they just wanted to have sex with anything that was darker-skinned than themselves. (Cham, BA6, 42)

Interviewer: What sorts of preconceived ideas do you think white men might have about black men, if any?

Participant: That we cannot be gay... that we are lower in terms of school, job and mental health... that we tend to be unsuccessful in life... also that we have large penises. (Paul, BC5, 21)

For some Black men, sexual encounters with White gay men could entail the playing out of power relationships where the White gay man could shift between dominant and passive modes with constant reference to the Black/White dynamic at play:

Interviewer: What sort of racist or derogatory things would White men say during sex?

Participant: He would say things like 'fuck me nigger' or 'suck my dick nigger' 'love my white dick nigger' 'love ur master'... (Simon, BA&W4, 20)

Interviewer: Do men ever make assumptions about the sexual roles you will play because of your ethnic background?

Participant: There is that lame 'black stud' assumption. But as I tend to talk to guys a lot before having sex with them, tend to get treated more like a person now. (Gabriel, BA&W10, 43)

Some men from Black backgrounds said that the objectification of Black men often made them question the motivations underpinning sexual advances by White gay men. While, on one level it could be flattering, and may lead to sex, it could often reinforce their sense of the ongoing exoticization of Black bodies. A participant from a Black African background described it like this:

If you are out in a bar or a club and you catch someone looking at you then you are always wondering what the motivation behind this is and so you are semi-conscious of this dynamic at all times. That's the subtle and insidious way this kind of cultural and sexual racism can rear its head. (William, BA2, 42)

The representations of Black gay men in the gay press were implicated as helping to reinforce prevalent stereotypes:

The only discrimination that British gay men do is the limited and stereotypical black and ethnic images in magazines/free press. There is an absence of black men who are just regular guys, instead we get hypersexualised objects (the big dick, black muscle stud etc), which is in itself a form of discrimination, maybe... (Gabriel, BA&W10, 34)

The images of white gay bodies portray a particular ideal of beauty which, obviously, ethnic minorities are excluded from...Black men are considered either less attractive or fetishised as a kinky, purely sexual fantasy. Their viewpoints are not centralised in porn or media narratives; instead they are the passive subject of the white gay Self. (Dwayne, BC&W7, 22)

At the same time some Black men contended that the general absence of Black representations in gay media could in fact be advantageous in that the lack of proscription created space for alternative possibilities:

The culture (magazines, press etc) is designed with [White gay men] in mind, they are the majority and therefore where the money is. As the ideals proposed by images in gay mainstream are automatically unattainable by those who are non-white, we are freed to make our own way, create our own values. (Gabriel, BA&W10, 34)

South Asian

Conversely, the absence of images of South Asian gay men in the press was noted as a marginalising influence:

More gay Asian people have to break into the media - or maybe just Heat magazine - and this maybe that will raise our chances. (Deepak, Ind4, 32)

Indeed, rather than being objectified like their Black gay counterparts, South Asian men characterised themselves as being excluded and ignored in mainstream gay culture:

I've found over the years that Asian men are something of a novelty, and as such, they're not the popular choice amongst cruisers... I've found that most people have a type, or an idea of what they want, and (probably due to ideologies created by the media) this doesn't usually include Asian men. (Deepak, Ind4, 32)

In contrast to the hyper-masculine stereotype of Black gay men, South Asian men often saw themselves as perceived and represented as neither sexual nor desirable.

Asian men of all sorts are considered the bottom of the list in sexual hierarchy preferences. This is because people look at us as being ugly, short and have a small dick so in short we [are the opposite] of what gay men should be... the total opposite from the cover of gay magazines. (Saeed, P2, 32)

The Internet was mentioned by a number of men as a context where they would often be subject to negativity in relation to their ethnicity.

I am... attracted to English (Caucasian) men and often find it frustrating when I read things like 'no brown men please' on their Gaydar profiles. (Pravin, Ind2, 22)

Gaydar is an instance in point, especially because people can hide behind their online personas and say whatever they want. You often see "No Asians" on people's profiles which is not very nice. (Saeed, P2, 32)

The Internet also emerged as a context where some gay men find themselves subject to abuse in the context of the contemporary Western blurred distinctions between Islam, migrant and terrorist. In the following excerpt a participant from a Pakistani background describes how gay websites can often contain derogatory threads in relation to South Asian men:

I can't recall of anything like this to have happened in person. It happens online though. For example on the gay message boards in threads about immigration, and the suicide bombers etc. I've read some nasty things about Muslims + Pakistanis. It happens very often... And it's sad, because you

would think that a young gay teen in England would know what it's like to be in a minority group. (Iqbal, P5, 22)

His wish that White gay men should refrain from discriminating against minority ethnic gay men in light of the historic marginalization of gay men was a common theme that emerged in the discussions of discrimination with many of both the Black and South Asian men.

Desire and attraction

A striking feature of the material relating to ethnicity and sexual desire was that the vast majority of participants, both Black and South Asian, said they were particularly attracted to White men as potential sexual or romantic partners. Explanations underpinning their attraction to White men were varied.

I only like white guys. I personally find that brown guys are a bit too easy too score. But moreover, my primary sexual attraction is to white guys. I've been trying to change this, after feedback from some friends, but find it similar to not wanting to be gay in general. and i'm way past that. (Ashok, Ind11, 28)

The following participant claims that his lack of attraction to Black and Asian men is predicated on the problematic relationship they have to their ethnic background and that he therefore prefers White men only by default:

I wouldn't say i don't date black men. I say I don't date Jamaicans. And I won't date Asians who reject their culture to put on someone else's. I only date people who are true to themselves. I guess unfortunately it just happens to mean I more often than not end up with white lads. (Gary, BC6, 26)

Many men stated that they found certain physical attributes attractive and that these were only generally exhibited by White men. In the following example, hair colour is the attribute mentioned:

I do not mind men with the same ethnic background and I used to be attracted to south Asians. But I tend now to be more attracted to white boys... I am also attracted to ginger and blonde and they are more likely to be white... (Pravin, Ind2, 22)

Others suggested that the larger size of the White gay population compared to the Black one simply meant that there were more men from White backgrounds available to meet as potential partners:

I have only been with white guys... but also when i go out or online there is like only 25 black guys to choose from the first place so its more down to chances. if i only went for black guys I would have only a handful possibilities. (Paul, BC5, 21)

The following participant from a Pakistani background suggests that his reason for being attracted to White men was based on their social and cultural distance:

Will never go for Asian (Indian/Pakistani) they will remind me of family. Can't have that.
My main preference is white guys. I fancy every thing about white guys. I fancy white because they are every thing I'm not. I associate Europeans as white. Any Islamic backgrounds I stay away from since again I associate them with family. (Aziz, P4, 32)

Some men were unable to explain why they were primarily attracted to White men:

I don't like men from the same ethnic background for me, I don't know why, but it's the way it is. I like/ prefer British white men. (Amin, Ind1, 18)

I prefer "straight-acting" white males, though I don't think it's a "preference"; it's just the way I'm wired. (Cham, BA6, 42)

I do not prefer men with the same ethnic background. My preference is white men - although I have had other ethnic sexual partners (Daniel, BC&W9, 39)

Whatever the reasons given, no participant in the study said that they saw themselves having a man of the same ethnicity as themselves as a long-term partner.

Discussion

The aim of this qualitative study was to develop an understanding of some of the experiences of Black and South Asian gay men in Britain by taking an intersectional approach. Black African and Caribbean men emphasised the lack of acceptance of homosexuality among their families and communities as being generated by fears of breaking taboos and transgressing strong cultural beliefs about masculinity. The content of these narratives bore out Dollimore's observation (1991: 345-7) that Black MSM often grow up in a community where homosexuality is believed to be "the white man's disease," thus marking the Black gay male as somehow a traitor to his race. Indeed, it has been suggested, at least for Black gay teenagers in the USA, that their sexuality is much more problematic than that of their White gay peers. "[They] have tremendous fears of losing their extended family and being alone in the world. This fear is made greater by the isolation they already face in our society as people of colour" (Gibson, 1989: 123). Madu (2002) notes that, embedded as they are within cultural and religious practices, there is a reticence to question or challenge taboos related to homosexuality in Black African migrant communities.

Neither masculinity nor taboos were mentioned by the men from South Asian backgrounds. For them, invariably, underpinned by conservative religious and family values, the pressure to conform to marriage and children was the dominant theme. As Mullatti (1992) notes, the family is widely characterized as the dominant institution in the life of South Asian individuals. For the Hindu family, in particular, extended family and kinship ties are of prime importance where families adhere to a patriarchal ideology, have familialistic value orientations, and endorse traditional gender role preferences. Deviating from these cultural entanglements was noted as problematic by almost all of the Indian and Pakistani participants.

In addition to the difficulty of homonegativity in ethnic minority communities, Black and South Asian men articulated how they could not presume full acceptance from the broader mainly White gay community. In the USA, according to Chan (1989), Asian gay men and lesbians, for example, report that they feel more comfortable identifying with the gay community than with their ethnic community, and Garcia (1998) makes the same observation in relation to Latino gay men. On the other hand, Greene (2008), in her research on the gay Black community, provides some evidence of the opposite phenomenon, that is, primary identification with the Black community. The prioritising of one identity over the other, that is, sexuality over ethnicity or vice versa, was not apparent among the participants in our study. Our findings are more in keeping with the observations of Keogh et al (2004) with regard to Black Caribbean gay men in Britain. In our study, South Asian, Black African and Black Caribbean men endeavour to negotiate the challenges related to being gay in familial and community situations, and to being from an minority ethnic background when engaged with the predominantly White British gay context. But one is not prioritised and the other rejected.

While previous research among British gay men has shown that they are likely to be subject to elevated levels of physical and verbal abuse (King et al 2003, King & McKeown 2003), and substantial numbers of ethnic minority MSM experience both racist and homophobic abuse (McKeown et al, 2008), only a handful of the participants in the present study claimed that they had experienced such overt forms of discrimination. Instead the norm was to have experienced more subtle forms of discrimination and exclusion which differed in nature between the men from Black and South Asian backgrounds. The narratives of the men

in the study reveal how they see themselves positioned in an ethnic hierarchy of desirability – with concomitant currencies of “erotic capital” (Green 2008). Erotic capital is possessed by an individual as a result of their sexual attractiveness; thence the historical status of, for example, the Black male as uncivilized sexual predator attains high erotic value, an often unwanted stereotype articulated by the men from Black African and Caribbean backgrounds. Conversely, South Asian men saw themselves as being characterised as undesirable as a result of being invisible, passive and physically under-endowed. The fact that White British gay men were seen to be positioned at the top of the ethnic hierarchy and were almost uniformly characterised as the ideal sexual or romantic partner, is likely to relate, along with greater visibility, to power and status perceived to be inherent in White British society by the ethnic minority participants. Interestingly, participants in the study did not articulate issues of low self-esteem or racialised self-hatred in relation to finding white men more attractive.

As described earlier, this paper only included participants who *self-identified* as gay. Therefore the themes described above may not be representative of Black and South Asian men who have sex with men but who do not identify as gay. The aim of the study was to examine common themes related to being from an minority ethnic background and, given this focus, we do not specifically examine the narratives of mixed race men separately. Another potential limitation of the study is that the participants were highly educated and volunteered to take part in the qualitative study. Had we been able to recruit Black and South Asian men from less educated backgrounds and lower socio-economic groups they may have articulated and emphasised experiences not described in this paper. Indeed, in contrast to the studies of Doyal et al (2008) and Anderson et al (2009), many of the participants in this study expressed a state of harmony among facets of their self-concept (Gock 1992) in that they expressed little conflict with regard to their sexuality and their ethnic background, were “out” to their family and wider social networks, and had experienced no forms of racial or homophobic discrimination or exclusion. This may be an outcome of the online recruitment process where those participants who chose to take part are more at ease speaking openly about their sexuality.

Almost all the participants in this study said that the experiences of Black African, Black Caribbean and South Asian gay men in Britain are more problematic and challenging than those facing white British gay men. However, rather than being depressed, alienated and devoid of agency, the relatively high educational attainment and income levels of the participants may well act as buffers to low self-esteem, stigma and discrimination (Major & Eccleston 2004). This demonstrates the importance of theorising social location when examining the intersection of ethnicity and sexuality in future research.

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