



Stigma as Part of Identity Development of Gay Men in Penang – A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Background: The sexual identity of gay men is placed as the polar opposite of heterosexuality and as such is studied as a deviance from the norm. This study is focused on the experience of stigma by gay men in Penang as part of identity development. **Method:** A total of 33 gay men were identified using the snowballing method. Qualitative data via in-depth interviewing was the method of data collection. Respondents signed a consent form approved by the Ethics Committee of Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia. Each respondent was then given a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality of the respondents' identity.. Each respondent was interviewed separately at a date, time and venue of their convenience and were asked identical open ended questions. Each interview was audio recorded, transcribed and analysed using content analysis matrix. **Results:** Stigma had positively or negatively affected the sexual identity of the respondents interviewed. At best stigma brought respondents' strength and courage and at its worst, it has brought out fear and recrimination. The common types of stigma reported by respondents were name-calling, the creation of "in-group" and "out-group" situations, bullying (being ridiculed) and religious prejudice. The stigma faced by the respondents had not resulted in activism and to an extent forced some of the respondents to conform (at least when in public) to society's expectations. **Conclusion:** Stigma had assisted in the development of sexual identity of the respondents. Sadly, it is stigma and not a more positive experience of socio-cultural interaction that had assisted in the development of sexual identity.

Keywords: Bullying, Gay Men, In-group, Out-group, Sexual Identity, Stigma.

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INTRODUCTION

Gay men continuously face stigma (D'Augelli, 2003; Duran *et al.* 2007; Herek *et al.* 2010; Savin-Williams *et al.*, 2010; TreatAsia, 2006). Incidents

of such stigmatization have been rarely recorded in the Malaysian context although homonegativity exists within the Malaysian culture (Baba, 1995, 2001, 2002, 2006; Scoville, 2004). This study is focused on the experience of stigma by gay men in Penang as part of sexual identity development. Sexual identity is understood here as the development of the individual gay men based on the understanding that his same-sex sexual attraction differentiates him from most of his peers (Dowsett, 1996). Sexual identity encapsulates eroticism, fantasy, affection and attraction for members of the same sex. Sexual identity also includes the development of a personal frame of reference and how the self is viewed through this personal frame of reference. This in turn leads to feelings of self-worth, confidence and self-acceptance or the opposite of these qualities (Sylva *et al.*, 2010). This narrative would add further understanding to the socio-cultural experience of this part of the Malaysian population.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dowsett (1993, 1996) states that the sexual identity of gay men is placed as the polar opposite of heterosexuality and as such is studied as a deviance from the norm. Glick *et al.* (2007) saw effeminate gay identities as threats to heterosexuality (while masculine gay identities were not viewed as much as a threat). Wilkerson, Ross and Brooks (2009) note that heteronormativity also constructs the sexual identity of gay men as it gives a polar opposite to what is considered “acceptable” sexual identity in many

cultures. With this, gay men may experience sexual identities that either confirms this polar opposite of heteronormativity or construct sexual identities that display heteronormative behaviours verbally and non-verbally in order to avoid stigmatization (Sylva *et al.*, 2010).

Stigmatization comes from non-acceptance of feminine traits and/or behaviours in men, simply meaning that men who exhibit effeminate behaviour or caring and nurturing characteristics will face stigmatization (Parrot, Adams & Zeichner, 2002). With such expectations of heteronormativity comes homophobia, the irrational fear of homosexuality. Homophobia can also construct the sexual identity of gay men via “in” and “out” group positions based on social, cultural and religious expectations (Duran *et al.*, 2007; Savin-Williams *et al.*, 2010). Homophobia, whether internal, interpersonal or institutional can lead to isolation, bullying, violence and lack of access to support lead to depression, lack of impulse control and despair (Dyson *et al.*, 2003).

TreatAsia (2006) notes that in almost all countries in Asia and the Pacific, male-male sex and gay sexual identity is still heavily stigmatized even in the countries where consensual sex between adult men in non-public places has been decriminalized as in Australia, Hong Kong, and New Zealand. Many countries, particularly former British colonies, including Bangladesh, India, Malaysia, Pakistan and Singapore, still have laws that criminalizing same sex sexual activity. Other countries, including China

and Japan, never had laws criminalizing homosexuality.

Regardless of whether same sex sexual relations are criminalized or not, socio-cultural and religious mores support the condemnation of, and the discrimination and prejudice against homosexuality. For example the practice of Islam in Bangladesh and Indonesia, Catholicism in the Philippines, Christianity in New Zealand and cultural traditions and norms in China Hong Kong and India all appear to be contributing to the marginalized status of gay men (TreatAsia, 2006). The gist of the information above is that gay identities in Asia and the Pacific have a historic and cultural significance. These gay identities have played out into the present day as gender, sexual identity and sexual preference are part of human sexuality. However, acceptance of this is not wide in many societies and often stigma of and discrimination against gay sexual identity takes shape in the form of homophobia.

Homophobia is defined as explicit hostility or prejudice toward gay men and women (Herek, 1986), irrational fear or intolerance of homosexuality or homosexual persons (Herek, 1986), and a pathological fear of homosexuality and a fear of HIV which causes AIDS (Bouton *et al.*, 1987). According to Schwanberg (1993) the dread of being in close proximity to homosexuals brings out highly aggressive feelings in heterosexual men. Ryan (2003) as well as Kessel and Knowlton (2005) concur with these findings and also note that many writers have affirmed that homophobia

(in its entire spectrum) has roots in social norms and gender roles (as well as the roles of women); and can have various manifestations, e.g. physical, verbal or attitudinal.

D'Augelli (1998) has found that antigay attacks include being called names, not having a person to open up to and being found out as being homosexual. Antigay attacks can also happen within families and these take the form of ridicule, rejection, loss of physical and monetary support, verbal and physical violence. Antigay attacks also take the form of hate crimes (Franklin, 1998) such as being chased or followed, objects thrown at victims, physical assault, vandalism, being spat on and assault with a weapon. Jenkins (2004) makes the point that homophobic violence also has become a kind of performative masculinity, almost a rite of passage, with most such acts carried out by young men in groups. This frequently happens in nations where gay activism is escalated and that Malaysia is one nation in which homophobic events have taken place (Jenkins, 2004).

Sexual identities and behaviours attract a great deal of attention in Malaysia, and sexually normative behaviour is expected in a conservative Asian society. As such gay men face definite challenges in Malaysia as gays exist in Malaysia even though at present they are not socially and politically accepted (Baba, 2001, 2002). Historically however, male-male sexual identity and sexual behaviour have existed in Malayo-Polynesian culture. According to Dr Farish Noor of Nanyang Polytechnic University,

Singapore, the ancient stories of Prince Panji (circa 13th to 17th century AD) prove that same-sex relationships existed in the region (Lee, 2008). Even as recent as the 1950s, transsexuals were accepted as Mak Andam (wedding organizers), “joget” dancers, cooks and artistes (Teh, 2002). However, the return of Malaysia to the fundamentals of Islam have changed acceptance of Malaysians of alternative sexualities, forcing them into hiding and facing persecution. In general Malaysia has not been very positive to responding to gay and lesbian related issues.

The present situation according to Baba (2001) is that a lack of positive role models (socially, politically and in the media), anxiety in identity portrayals and discrimination lead to discomfort with sexual identity among Malaysian gay men. Stigmatization and rejection also lead to discomfort with sexuality in the Malaysian gay male population. Baba (2002) adds that “(N)egative portrayals of homosexuality do not help gay men feel comfortable with their sexuality”. Add to this that non-representation and the banning of gay sexual identities in the Malaysian media in 1994 has obliterated all references to gay sexuality (UNAIDS, 2004; West, 1997; Winder, 2006) the present situation is one where sexuality of gay men in Malaysia has no point of reference.

Terms for referring to the sexual identity of gay men in Malay are usually derogatory and denote men who are effeminate (“*bapok*”, “*kedi*”, “*pondan*”, “*darai*”) (Baba, 2001). On top of having their sexual identity

defined in derogatory terms, Malaysian men who admit to a gay sexual identity and engage in same-sex sexual activity in Malaysia face not only societal disapproval but also legal persecution. Legal persecution can be pursued via use of Section 377A of the Penal Code which prohibits sodomy (anal intercourse) and “gross indecency” with punishments including up to twenty years in prison (The Commissioner of Law Revision Malaysia, 2006; Scoville, 2004). Clearly, gay sexual identity is not easily accepted in Malaysia and gay men face stigmatization by whom?.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Stigma is a social phenomenon that is experienced. Being “branded” as unacceptable often leaves gay men at odds with their social experience (Jenkins, 2004, 2006). The question raised by this study is: “What has been the experience of stigma by gay men in Penang as part of identity development”? As stigma is a social phenomenon a narrative approach is necessary to understanding the experience of stigma by gay men. As gay men fear stigma and are hidden, a qualitative as opposed to quantitative approach is taken to gaining data.

METHODOLOGY

A total of 33 self-identified gay men were interviewed using the in-depth interviewing method of data collection. By “self-identified gay men”, this research seeks out men who only have sexual relations

with other men and who do not perceive themselves as heterosexual, bisexual or transsexual (Jenkins, 2004), whose sexual attraction is only directed to other men (The Naz Foundation (India) Trust, 2001) and who are categorized as Type 1 Open Preferential Homosexuals by Hewitt (1998). The respondents were gained via the snowballing method. All respondents were given pseudonyms to protect their identity and signed a consent form to secure their participation. Each respondent was posed with the question “How has stigma affected your sexual behaviour”? Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to form primary data. The primary data was qualitative in format. Primary data was analysed using a content analysis matrix. The content analysis matrix is a simple matrix of rows and columns where each respondent’s responses were recorded and then compared and contrasted for recurring experiences and themes in an orderly fashion. The example of the content analysis matrix used can be found on the following page.

I. Content Analysis Matrix

Section: Stigma and identity

Question: Can you please describe the stigma you have experienced as a gay man.

| Res | Data | Analysis | Overall |
|-----|------|----------|---------|
| 1. | | | |
| ↓ | | | |
| 33 | | | |

RESEARCH FINDINGS

A total of 33 respondents were interviewed for this research. The total number was

reached as the information gained from the interviews had reached the point of theoretical saturation. All respondents met the criteria of being gay men (Hewitt, 1988; Jenkins, 2004; The Naz Foundation (India) Trust, 2001) who are Malaysian citizens who reside in Penang. All respondents have been sexually active within the past 12 months. All respondents only reported having sex with men. The respondents ranged from 21 years of age to 55 years of age. Of the respondents, fifteen were Chinese Malaysian, ten were Bumiputra Malaysian, four were Indian Malaysian, two were Eurasian Malaysian, one was of Chinese-Thai descent and one was of Kadazan-Murut descent. The occupations of the respondents included university/college students, entrepreneurs and professionals. Respondents were also employed as executives of various multinational corporations (MNC), hoteliers and engineers. One of the respondents is retired from employment and two of the respondents are involved in sex work. Of the respondents, 30 lived on the island of Penang and three lived in Seberang Perai, location. The experiences narrated below are the most descriptive and vivid of the 33 interviews.

Jack¹ reported the stigma he faced as being treated as an outcast, being called names and not being accepted for who he is by heterosexual peers and heteronormative society. He was treated as the “black sheep” of his family and this gave rise to many

¹ Pseudonyms are used for all respondents in order to keep privacy, confidentiality and security as per the Consent Form signed by all respondents.

tense situations within family discussions and gatherings where his sexuality became the bone of contention, ridicule and family condemnation. He was considered a “black sheep” because he did not fulfil the obligation of a Chinese son to get married to a woman who would give birth to sons who would perpetuate the family name. He was called names such as “queer” by his peers and this also created many tense situations for him as he was considered an “outsider” by many of his contemporaries who went so far as to ostracize him from social gatherings and extra-curricular activities. Non-acceptance by a society with heteronormative expectations made him fearful of repercussions such as the verbal abuse of name calling and continued ridicule by his family. However, this non-acceptance by family members and peers also urged him to look at things from a different perspective and to see these experiences as challenges to better himself as an individual. This strengthened his identity as a gay man.

Ivan experienced stigma in the form of gay men being equated with HIV/AIDS by heteronormative society. This equation was made in his presence, sometimes by his family but most often by his peers in school, college and the working environment. He found that when he was suspected of being gay by his peers in secondary school, he became the butt of jokes and the object of ridicule. His peers often called him names such as “*Ah Qua*” (homosexual in the Cantonese Language) and would make snide remarks about his buttocks and how often it had been used for penetrative anal

sex. He had managed to keep his identity as a gay man hidden from his parents as he feared the rejection of his parents, which as a person of Chinese descent is something he could not deal with. This was because as a son in a Chinese family he was expected to marry into a respectable family and produce male offspring who would carry on the family name. When he was in college pursuing a degree he was bullied, laughed at and jeered at due to his flamboyant fashion choices. This caused him to “tone down” his choice of flamboyant clothes (singlets, tight-fitting jeans, bright coloured t-shirts and bright pieces of jewellery). However, he found that even when he “toned down” his choice in flamboyant clothes his identity as a gay man became stronger as his sexual identity became more internalized and less expressed externally.

Anwar was stigmatised by name calling and jeering by his heterosexual contemporaries. He was often called “bapok” and “pondan” by them (provide similar English language synonyms). He had learned not to care about the name calling and he developed a tougher stance of believing that his gay sexual identity was a valid expression of himself as an individual and that he did not have to take the name calling and jeering seriously at all. As a soft-spoken man he often feared that the name calling and jeering would take on a physically hostile dimension (such as beatings) but had thus far not experienced any sort of physical abuse. He made it a point to avoid being in groups that were comprised fully of heterosexual men as

he feared that as an “outsider” he would potentially face not just rejection but also physical abuse. As a Muslim he also felt pressure to conform to Muslim society’s expectations that homosexuality was a sin and he should therefore make efforts to develop heterosexual sexual attractions. As such, to avoid stigma within Muslim society he made it a point to not draw attention to himself, preferring to keep to his small circle of friends and to remain silent and acquiescent in formal gatherings of Muslim men. Still, he felt that as a gay man being part of the “out group” helped him further define his sexual identity.

According to Ahmad, when his peers and contemporaries found out about his identity as a gay man, they distanced themselves. They distanced themselves on the basis that they did not approve of him having same-sex sexual partners. His peers believed that to be a “true man” he ought to have an interest in the opposite sex and his sexual interest in other men relegated him to the position of an “outsider”. This “in-group” and “out-group” situation caused Ahmad sadness, but he felt that he had to be true to himself and thus had to accept the loss of his friends. Being part of the “out group” helped him solidify his identity as a gay man, that being true to himself was more important than the shallow acceptance of his peers.

Kamal faced stigma from his community that is based on religious conviction. The religious conviction is that those who have a gay sexual identity (“out-group”) are not considered the people of the Prophet

Muhammad S.A.W. (“in-group”). He was also told that men who have a gay sexual identity are not part of “the correct way of life” thus further consolidating the “in-group” and “out-group” situation. Despite this he had not allowed his sexual identity as a gay man to be affected negatively. He did not believe that he had to conform to the expectation of others in order for him to accept himself or to have a productive and happy life.

Azam had been called names like “faggot” (a derogatory term for men with a gay sexual identity) and “gay”. He found that stigma began for him after he came out to some of his classmates in Secondary School. His school mates began calling him the derogatory names previously mentioned and began to keep a distance from him. At the time of the interview he had not faced any physical abuse. Facing all these instances of stigma made him braver in his gay sexual identity.

Hafiz faced stigma in the form of being made a fool of. He used the terms “*kena kantoi*” (being made the butt of practical jokes) and “*disindir*” (belittle) to describe in general his experiences of stigma. He felt hurt when he experienced all of this but the instances of stigma have buoyed his belief in himself as a gay man. He felt that his sexual identity as a gay man became more valid to himself after these experiences of stigma.

Iskandar does not feel that he cannot belong to any group of people and has tried to be friends with heterosexual men but they rejected his overtures of friendship on the

basis of his gay sexual identity. They could not accept him as a gay man and rebuffed all attempts at friendship. The main form of stigma he faced was the distancing of friends who did not want to be thought of as gay by association. However he found that this stigma had not affected his sexual identity in that it did not dissuade him from being honest with his same-sex sexual attraction and being true to his “*naluri*” (natural instinct).

Dennis reported that stigma is associated to homosexuality and considered as a taboo in Malaysia.. He experienced name calling but this did not adversely affect his gay sexual identity. The most painful stigma he had experienced was from his own family. When his parents (through invasion of the privacy of his private journal) found out he was gay his mother lamented that he was not a filial son. His father caustically said that if he was gay he would end up “selling his backside” (engage in sex work where he was the receptive partner in penetrative anal sex) and ultimately die of AIDS-related complications. Dennis shared that because of this experience he worked hard to be successful in secondary school, university and ultimately in his career to prove his parents wrong. He also shared that now he cared for his parents materially and emotionally (thus proving his filial piety) and that his successful career did not require him to resort to sex work. He noted that his relationship with his parents was stable and his sexual identity was no longer an issue of contention – in fact it was the catalyst for open communication within the family communication dynamic.

Being in the “out-group” did hurt the gay sexual identity of Tan and he was called “abnormal” to his face. This led him to being very careful whom he told about his same-sex sexual attractions. He found that stigma negatively affected his sexual identity as it had made him afraid of being attacked and labelled negatively by society. He felt it was necessary for him to hide his sexual identity as a gay man from his family as his family was traditional and old fashioned. Due to this he felt they would not understand nor accept his homosexuality and identity as a gay man.

Stigma made the gay sexual identity of Foo stronger in that it made him stand up to people who had called him names or ridiculed him for being a gay man. He has told people who are homophobic that they had better hope their own sons or grandsons do not turn out to be gay and be subjected to what he had been subjected to. For Foo, his sexual identity is not only about his same-sex sexual attractions but also being able to stand up to life’s challenges as an individual and as “a man”.

Kenny found it hurtful when stigma took the form of jokes against gay men. He did not understand why it was unacceptable to make jokes based on race and religion but it was acceptable to make jokes based on sexual identity. As a gay man he felt that when he heard these jokes it hurt him, but it would not deter him from being who he is as a gay man. He noted that despite such challenges he would continue to be honest with himself, even if it had strained the relationship between him and his father.

The stigma of illegality of homosexuality in Malaysia affected Wong personally and made him more careful at his workplace to ensure that stigma did not affect his career. He did not want to be passed over for promotions, travel opportunities and escalating remuneration because of the stereotypes and stigma of society towards gay men. As a gay man he found that stigma towards gay men made him uncomfortable and it made him want to hide his identity.

Stereotypes of men with gay sexual identity affected Rama as it caused people to look down on him. He found that society in general tended to stereotype him and “box” him into effeminate behaviour and also that as a gay men he would sexually prey on unsuspecting heterosexual men. He disliked the suspicions that people had about him just because he was a gay man. He shared that no matter the amount or type of stigma that was levelled at him he could not change who he was; so despite the stigma he faced he had accepted his identity as a gay man.

Mike reacted offensively toward stigma, and since the stigma levelled against him was verbal his offensive was also verbal in nature. For example if he was called names he would turn to the person who called him names and scold the person. He would also if necessary use a louder volume in his verbal offensive and if necessary make a show of physical strength such as pushing away a chair or any other objects within his reach. Instances of such stigma made him more daring when his gay sexual identity was threatened.

Joe reported that stigma for him took the form of gay men being viewed only for their flamboyant facade. The intelligence, hard work and dedication of gay men’s characters are overshadowed by this view. He himself had not experienced any verbal or physical manifestations of stigma, therefore for him the negative side of stigma was the stereotyping of gay men as previously mentioned.

Peter had faced blatant stigma, where although he graduated at the top of his undergraduate class he was denied employment at a firm he admired due to his gay sexual identity (this was reported to him by a friend who worked at the same firm). This pushed him to prove that he was excellent as a professional. He shared that his various professional successes and triumphs at a competing organization was his attempt to prove the former organization wrong about their assumptions and unjust treatment of him. His sexual identity in this sense made him feel like an outsider (“out group”) but had spurred him on to reach a high level of professional success.

George reported being bullied, molested and propositioned for oral sex while in secondary school. This stigma made him want to be a better and stronger person so he could put those who stigmatized him “in their place”. He often did this by telling those who bullied or molested him that he was not a cheap sex worker and they were wrong to assume such things about him because he was gay.

Rohan reported being taunted while in school by those who considered him an outsider. This drove him to have heterosexual sexual attractions and not be considered as an outsider. He wanted acceptance and compassion from his peers. Alex faced the same form of stigma as Rohan and this stigma caused him to exercise discretion about his gay sexual identity in order to gain societal acceptance and approbation. Eric felt that his identity as a gay man was “battered” due to the stigma associated with homosexuality. He felt that because of his identity as a gay man society “looked down on him as an abnormal person”. His religion also considered his identity as a gay man “a curse or something that is not right” and this added on to the negativity associated with his same-sex sexual attractions.

DISCUSSION

Stigma (homophobia) can construct sexual identity via “in” and “out” groups and religious prejudice (Duran *et al.*, 2007; Savin-Williams *et al.*, 2010) while also causing gay men to develop heteronormative social behaviours in order to avoid stigma (Sylva *et al.*, 2010). Stigmatization causes activism which forms sexual identity (Asthana & Oostvogels, 2001). As Duran *et al.* (2007) stated, stigma does cause an “in-group” and “out-group” situation. The experience of stigma and how stigma shaped the sexual identity of respondents from an “in-group” and “out-group” perspective add to the understanding of the sexual identity of gay men.

Stigma had positively or negatively affected the sexual identity of the respondents interviewed. At best stigma brought out the strength and courage in them, at worst it has brought out fear and recrimination. The most positive effects of stigma as narrated by the respondents had been being more sure and confident of their same-sex attractions and sexual identity; being able to manage and defend themselves when faced with name-calling and bullying; succeeding professionally despite misgivings by family; and honesty with self that led to better self acceptance and peace of mind. The opposite of this are the negative effects such as self-censorship; being fearful of being found out in a professional setting; being subjected to “out-group” behaviour; and feeling pressured to conform based on cultural, social and religious expectations.

The common types of stigma reported by the respondents range from name-calling (D’Augelli, 1998) to the creation of “in-group” and “out-group” situations (Duran *et al.*, 2007; Savin-Williams *et al.*, 2010). The “in-group” and “out-group” as posited by Duran *et al.* (2007) and Savin-Williams *et al.* (2010) was evident as well as in some reported cases religious prejudice. These have (negatively or positively) constructed the sexual identity of the respondents interviewed in this sample. There is also experience of being in the “out” group (Meyer & Dean, 1998) according to the respondents. The stigma faced by the respondents had not however resulted in activism (Asthana & Oostvogels, 2001).

The stigma reported by the respondents takes different forms (bullying, being laughed at, name-calling). But what is evident is that in the experience of gay men in Penang stigma is a reality and to an extent forced some of the respondents to conform (at least when in public) to society's expectations. The type of stigma most often reported by the respondents is the "in" and "out" group situation. Thus far there is no way to avoid this "in" and "out" group situation. However, the animosity found in such a context can be mitigated by developing a better understanding of homosexuality and the challenges faced by gay men in Penang.

CONCLUSION

Stigma had assisted in the development of sexual identity of the respondents. Sadly, it is stigma and not a more positive experience of socio-cultural interaction that had assisted in the development of sexual identity. As a population, the sexual identity of gay men would benefit from a more positive and affirming stance of society toward homosexuality. This affirming stance would be acceptance by society that homosexuality exists as an alternative form of human sexual expression (Roughgarden, 2004), that gay men not be subject to derogatory name-calling (Baba, 2001; 2002) by society and that gay men be judged on the content of their character and not solely on their same-sex attraction. However, within the confines of a conservative society such as Malaysia the need to move towards such a positive and affirming stance will require

more than just the recognition of stigma; it will require the joint voices of gay men to push society to listen to them.

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