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Title: Arranged Marriage, Identity and Wellbeing among British Asian Gay Men

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Abstract: The cultural expectation of an arranged heterosexual marriage poses social and psychological challenges for British Asian gay men. This article examines the diary accounts of twelve British Asian gay men concerning their perceptions and feelings concerning marriage in face of familial pressure to get married and the implications for identity processes and psychological wellbeing. Data were analyzed qualitatively using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis and Identity Process Theory. The following themes are outlined: (1) “Bringing it up”: Coercion, threat and negative emotions; (2) Sidestepping marriage: Strategies for coping with threat; and (3) “A no-win situation”: Marriage as a dilemma. Familial coercion into marriage can threaten identity and psychological wellbeing and individuals will deploy intrapsychic/interpersonal coping strategies with have limited long-term efficacy.

Keywords: arranged marriage; forced marriage; gay men; identity; wellbeing; British Asians

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Arranged Marriage, Identity and Wellbeing among British Asian Gay Men

Non-heterosexual ethnic/religious minorities can experience threats to identity, negative emotions and low psychological wellbeing when they perceive their ethno-religious and sexual identities to be incompatible (Anderton, Pender & Asner-Self, 2011; Coyle & Rafalin, 2000; Jaspal, 2012a). It is acknowledged, both in academic research and in public discourse, that the cultural expectation of marriage, in particular, can pose social and psychological challenges for non-heterosexual ethnic/religious minorities (Hill & McVeigh, 2010; Jaspal, 2012b; Samad, 2010, Sandhu, 2010). The norm of marriage can force individuals to take a stance, both psychologically and publicly, on their sexual identity. This can be challenging due to existing identity conflict, fear of “otherization” and sometimes even homophobic abuse (Jaspal, 2012b; Yip, 2004).

There has been considerable academic interest in the cultural practice of arranged marriage among diasporic South Asians. Much research has focused upon the notion of *forced* marriage, in particular – its relationship with arranged marriage (Uddin, 2006), its legal aspects (Gill & Anitha, 2009), and its socio-cultural underpinnings (Samad & Eade, 2002). Yet, this body of research has largely neglected the identities, experiences and wellbeing of British Asian gay men (BAGM) who face the cultural expectation of a heterosexual marriage (though see Samad, 2010). According to the Forced Marriage Unit in the UK, a significant number of BAGM face familial pressure to get married (Hill & McVeigh, 2010). This article addresses this lacuna, and brings together work on sexuality and arranged marriage, by examining the diary accounts of twelve BAGM concerning their perceptions and feelings concerning marriage in face of familial expectations for them to get married.

Identity construction, threat and coping This article draws upon Identity Process Theory (IPT) (Breakwell, 1986; Jaspal & Breakwell, 2013), an integrative social psychological theory of identity construction, threat and coping. IPT provides a useful heuristic lens for understanding how BAGM’s identities may be affected psychologically by perceived expectations of an arranged heterosexual marriage, and how they may attempt to safeguard psychological wellbeing.

According to IPT, identity construction is regulated by two universal processes. The *assimilation-accommodation* process refers to the absorption of new information in the identity structure (e.g. “my family wants me to get married”) and of the adjustment which takes place in order for it to become part of the structure (e.g. “my culture values heterosexual marriage so maybe I am not gay”). The *evaluation* process confers meaning and value upon the contents of identity (e.g. “being gay is good and, thus, being married to a woman would be bad”).

These processes are guided by identity principles, which “specify the end states that are desirable for identity” (Breakwell, 1986, p. 24). Jaspal (2012a) argues that the following principles seem to be most relevant to BAGM: continuity across time and situation (*continuity*), competence and control (*self-efficacy*), personal and social worth (*self-esteem*), inclusion and acceptance in groups (*belonging*), and compatibility and coherence between inter-connected identities (*psychological coherence*). IPT predicts that when identity processes cannot, for whatever reason, comply with psychologically salient principles, identity is threatened. Identity threat is said to be aversive for psychological wellbeing. Consequently, the individual will engage in strategies for coping with threat. A coping strategy is defined as “any activity, in thought or deed, which has as its goal the removal or modification of a threat to identity” (Breakwell 1986, p. 78).

British Asian gay men Religion constitutes an important source of representations concerning morality and sexuality (Silberman, 2005), and this has been shown to be true for many non-heterosexual individuals of faith (Jaspal, 2012a; Yip, 2007). Most British Indians are, at least nominally, of Hindu or Sikh faith (Ghuman, 2003). Neither Hinduism nor Sikhism officially prohibits homosexuality and, thus, homophobia within these communities can more accurately be attributed to “cultural” rather than theological factors (Jaspal, 2012a). Conversely, Islam, which is the religion of most British Pakistanis, generally takes a negative stance on homosexuality and is opposed to Western conceptualizations of homosexuality in the sense of “coming out” as exclusively gay (Duran, 1993). Yet, homosexuality may be “tolerated” or denied in Islamic societies provided that it remains socially invisible and that men fulfill their religious/cultural duties, such as heterosexual marriage and procreation (Murray & Roscoe, 1997; Yip, 2004).

There is now a growing body of research into the identities and experiences of British Pakistani Muslim gay men, which has focused largely on the interface of religion and sexuality (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010, 2012; Jaspal & Siraj, 2011; Yip, 2004). There has been some research into the impact of cultural identity (encompassing religious and ethnic heritage) upon the development of sexual identity among BAGM (Jaspal, 2012b; McKeown et al., 2010). Collectively, the literature outlines various issues pertinent to the construction and management of sexual identity, such as “coming out” (Jaspal & Siraj, 2011), interpersonal relations on the “gay scene” (Bassi, 2008; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2012) and the cultural expectation of heterosexual marriage (Jaspal, 2012b; McKeown et al., 2010; Yip, 2004).

Research in this area evidences the potential for identity threat in an IPT sense (Breakwell, 1986). In an early study of coming out among BAGM, Bhugra (1997) noted feelings of regret, self-deprecation and self-hatred among many of his participants, given the “traumatic discrepancy” between being Asian and gay. More specifically, Bhugra (1997, p. 556) attributed this traumatic discrepancy to individuals’ attempts to construct “a coherent sense of self from the two identities he seeks to attain: Asian and gay,” alluding to threatened psychological coherence (see also Jaspal and Cinnirella, 2010). Exposure to homophobia from one’s ethno-religious communities can have negative outcomes for self-esteem – BAGM may fail to derive a positive self-conception on the basis of their gay identity (Yip, 2007). Furthermore, Bhugra (1997, p. 555) argues that his participants may feel that they have “a foot in each culture, without feeling a complete sense of belonging in either,” which suggests threats to belonging (Bhugra, 1997, p. 555). Despite the compelling evidence that BAGM may experience identity conflict, there is no detailed research into how their identities and wellbeing may be affected by the cultural norm of an arranged heterosexual marriage, in particular. In order to explore this, one must first consider the concepts of honor and shame in South Asian cultures.

Honor, shame and marriage One observable commonality between British Asians of all three religious traditions concerns their cultural prioritization of the notion of *izzat* (honor) and their trepidation about experiencing *sharam* (shame) (Ghuman 2003; Werbner, 2005). An essential tenet of maintaining *izzat* is the fulfillment of the cultural expectation of marriage, which is usually arranged, to varying degrees, by the individual’s family (Uddin, 2006). Any contravention of cultural norms concerning sexuality (e.g. being gay; refusing to marry) may be regarded as a threat to family *izzat* and, thus, conducive to *sharam*, potentially resulting in negative interpersonal relations (Jaspal & Siraj, 2011; Samad & Eade, 2002).

Given that South Asian communities are often concentrated in residential clusters, gossip and scandal that negatively impacts family honor, such as social and sexual transgressions, can easily take hold in these close-knit communities and lead to *sharam*

(Werbner, 2005). In some cases, marriage may be regarded and utilized by the family as a means of avoiding potential, or “rectifying” actual, transgressions of this kind. Behavior that is perceived as jeopardizing family honor can trigger processes and outcomes that lead to a *forced* marriage.

According to the UK Home Office (2012),

[a] forced marriage is a marriage in which one or both spouses do not (or, in the case of some vulnerable adults, cannot) give free and full consent to the marriage and duress is a factor. Duress can include physical, psychological, financial, and emotional pressure, and sexual abuse. This form of marriage **is unacceptable** within the UK (p. 3, bold in original)

The present article is not about forced marriage *per se*, but it is acknowledged that homosexuality may be regarded as a serious social/sexual transgression that requires measures, such as a forced marriage, in order for it to be “rectified” (Samad, 2010). Although scholars and commentators frequently draw a firm distinction between arranged and forced marriage (Home Office, 2012; Uddin, 2006), sometimes this distinction can become blurred due to the ambiguous boundaries between persuasion, coercion and force as well as an observed lack of understanding of what “coercion” actually entails (Renteln, 2004). Although it is widely accepted in the British Asian community that physical force is unacceptable, there is less awareness of the fact that psychological and emotional pressure also constitutes a form of forced marriage. Accordingly, Samad and Eade (2002) have argued that arranged marriage and forced marriage ought to be viewed as points along a continuum rather than as discrete and perfectly delineable categories.

In his important research with male victims of forced marriage, Samad (2010) briefly discusses the experiences of gay men whose families coerced, or attempted to coerce, them into a heterosexual marriage as a means of “rectifying” their sexuality. However, the focus was not on gay men, in particular, or on the identity/wellbeing implications of (forced) marriage. Thus, this article complements Samad’s important incipient work in this area by examining the identities, experiences and wellbeing of BAGM faced with the cultural expectation of an arranged heterosexual marriage through the medium of personal diary accounts.

METHOD

Participants In a previous interview study with fifteen self-identified BAGM living in the East Midlands of England (Jaspal, 2012b), twelve participants referred frequently to cultural and familial pressure to enter a heterosexual marriage. Given the centrality of marriage in their narratives and the observable impact for identity processes and psychological wellbeing, this was deemed to constitute an important issue worthy of empirical investigation in its own right. Yet, the individual interview proved an unsatisfactory means of data generation due to participants’ difficulties in recounting such current psychologically challenging experiences. Consequently, these twelve participants were invited to keep a diary over a period of one month to record their experiences, thoughts and feelings in response to familial expectations and discussions regarding marriage. Individuals were originally invited to participate in an interview study on “Being gay and Asian,” and all of the participants in the diary study indicated their self-identification as “gay” and “Asian.” Of these twelve individuals, five were British Indians and seven were British Pakistanis. All seven British Pakistani participants reported being “religious” or “very religious” Muslims; and five British Indians reported being “religious” or “moderately religious” Sikhs or Hindus. The age range of participants was 18 to 26 years and the mean age was 21.6 years. Three participants had university degrees, one was a college student and the remaining eight had completed high school

education. All twelve participants reported living with their parents, which was one of the reasons that individuals were compelled to take a stance on the topic of marriage. None of the participants reported being in a relationship at the time of participation in the study.

Data generation It has been observed that diaries can yield rich and detailed accounts of personal experience on the participants' own terms (Milligan et al., 2005), partly because individuals are able to reflect upon their experiences over a longer period of time before recording them minimizing the risk of omissions (Mackrill, 2008). Furthermore, while the research interview can sometimes be a difficult context for the disclosure and discussion of sensitive information, particularly among "closeted" individuals, diary methods can provide a "safe" and comfortable space for participants (Breakwell, 2012). Reflecting upon their empirical studies of breastfeeding experiences, Williamson et al. (submitted) have argued that diary methods can provide a more detailed, holistic and complex snapshot of participants' experiences than interviews in which participants may experience "a pressure to produce a coherent and understandable account" (p. 21). All of these factors highlighted the potential methodological advantages of using the diary method in the present study.

The twelve participants agreed to keep a diary concerning their encounters with the topic of marriage over a one-month period. This included *inter alia* thoughts and feelings in relation to marriage; responses to other people's marriages; and discussions with family members regarding marriage. Individuals were asked to consider their diaries a space in which they could freely express their beliefs, thoughts, feelings and experiences in a frank and uninhibited manner as frequently as they wished. While most participants used their diaries at least once every three days, some used theirs several times in a single day with few hiatuses. By the end of the data collection period, participants had collectively produced over 200 A5 pages of diary notes.

Analytical procedure The textual data were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2008), which is a qualitative analytical technique that aims to capture participants' attempts to make sense of relevant aspects of their personal and social worlds. This method conceptualizes the participant as a "cognitive, linguistic, affective and physical being" (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 54) and assumes a relationship between verbal reports and the cognitions and emotions with which they are concerned. Since IPA focuses upon the meanings that particular lived experiences hold for the individual, it was anticipated that this analytical strategy would shed light upon the subjective perceptual processes underlying their encounters with the topic of marriage. Smith (2004), the originator of the IPA, has argued that the use of diaries as a method of data generation and can constitute a rich source of experiential and emotional data.

At the end of the one-month period, participants returned their diaries to the author who read through the diary entries repeatedly in order to acquire intimacy with participants' accounts. During each reading of the diary entries preliminary impressions and interpretations were noted. These included *inter alia* participants' meaning-making, particular forms of language, and apparent contradictions and patterns within the data. Subsequently, these initial codes were collated into potential themes, which captured the essential qualities of the accounts. The themes were reviewed rigorously against the data in order to ensure their compatibility and numerous diary extracts were listed against each corresponding theme. Finally, specific diary extracts, which were considered vivid, compelling and representative of the themes, were selected for presentation in this article.

Analysis

This section describes the following superordinate themes: (i) “Bringing it up”: Coercion, threat and negative emotions; (ii) Sidestepping marriage: Strategies for coping with threat; and (iii) “A no-win situation”: Marriage as a dilemma.

“Bringing it up”: Coercion, threat and negative emotions Participants’ diary accounts indicated differences in the ways in which British Indian and British Pakistani families seemed to broach the topic of marriage with their children. On the whole, British Indian participants reported that their parents invoked the importance of an arranged heterosexual marriage, which, for many participants, implied an expectation of marriage. Conversely, British Pakistani parents were reportedly more assertive in their expectation of an arranged heterosexual marriage and reminded their children of their religious and cultural obligation to get married. Although this was a general tendency, participants indicated that the ways in which the topic of marriage was broached by families changed in accordance with context. However, the diary accounts suggested that, once invoked, the topic of marriage persisted in participants’ thoughts, which could cause identity threat and negative emotional experiences. These experiences included embarrassment, shame and disgust at oneself:

I feel so inadequate, like a failure (Arjan, 21, Indian)

It’s a massive embarrassment every time I hear it [...] Everyone knows who I am deep down. (Iqbal, 18, Pakistani)

I feel like fake and phony, like even talking about me getting married because it know it can never work (Gupinder, 25, Indian)

I feel dirty like I’m doing something so wrong and disgusting [...] like by refusing to ruin some poor girl’s life, I’m taking this gay thing to another level (Karim, 26, Pakistani)

I’ve never felt so ashamed of myself before even when I first had sex and that made me feel pretty ashamed [...] now I realize how alone I am because I’m the only one who is like this [...] my parents don’t understand why I’m being so extreme, that’s what they keep calling me (Mohammed, 23, Pakistani)

Collectively, these extracts exhibit the threatening nature of the topic of marriage and its ability to evoke negative emotions among individuals. Invocation of marriage could evince feelings of inadequacy (highlighting a potential threat to the self-efficacy principle), embarrassment due to the perception that marriage was essentially at odds with one’s self-image and even public image (threat to psychological coherence); self-disgust due to the “shamefulness” and “wrongfulness” of being gay (threat to self-esteem); and loneliness as a result of the perceived non-normativity of one’s actions (threat to belonging).

Many BAGM do manage to reconcile elements of their sexual and ethno-religious identities at later stages of sexual identity development (Jaspal, 2012b). Yet, the prospect of marriage (both when invoked casually in conversation and when explicitly required by family members) may reignite threats to identity and evince negative emotions due to the stigma and non-normativity of being unmarried in early adulthood (Yip, 2004). The evasion of marriage of a heterosexual marriage may be regarded as “taking this gay thing to another level,” as highlighted by Karim. Although family members may silently condone homosexuality among their children provided that it remains “silenced,” the notion that this may become a lifestyle and that important ethno-cultural norms such as marriage may be abandoned amounts to an unreasonable escalation of the “gay thing” (Yip, 2004). Indeed, Mohammed’s parents reportedly referred to his resistance to marriage as an “extreme” action. This suggests that parents may regard their children’s non-heterosexuality as a transient “phase” in (sexual)

identity development, which impedes any understanding of their desire to evade heterosexual marriage.

Given the negative emotions induced by the prospect of marriage, both when invoked casually in conversation and when explicitly required by family members, most individuals were fearful that the topic could arise in conversation with family members. In particular, participants feared the potential assumptions that could be developed by their parents, as a result of their evasion of the topic of marriage. This could be threatening for identity:

“They [my parents] just think I’m really weird. Where is his curiosity for girls? Hasn’t he been dreaming about this all his life? It’s just that lack of understanding, a barrier [...] I know that if I tell them the truth that will hurt more and they’ll just change the way they are with me like the way they trust and love and talk to me, so I cannot tell them [...] we settle for misunderstanding and uncertainty” (Arjan, 21, Indian)

Like Arjan, several individuals attempted to safeguard their sense of continuity, that is, continuity of interpersonal relations with their family members. They feared that any discussion of marriage could induce negative perceptions among family members, disrupting valued personal relationships (Yip, 2004). Given the normativity of heterosexual marriage and, more specifically, the normativity of “longing for” marriage due to the cultural assumption of premarital celibacy, there was a fear that family members could “think I’m really weird.” Individuals were concerned that their “weirdness” could cause distress among family members. The problem implicitly highlighted in most participants’ accounts was a fundamental lack of understanding of homosexuality among parents – this was referred to in terms of a “barrier” which impeded communication and mutual understanding between parents and participants. Yet, for Arjan, a world of misunderstanding and uncertainty was preferable to one of hurt and distress which could be detrimental to valued family relationships.

For some respondents who had recently been asked about marriage, their sense of continuity had been severely jeopardized as a result of the undesirable changes that this topic had induced in the familial context:

“Second time this week there’s talk about me getting married off. Hurts a lot every single time [...] My beautiful little life at home, my parents, my sis, my bro, us laughing and joking, it’s all coming to an end, I can see it [...] Things just can’t carry on like they were I reckon, sad days ahead.” (Karim, 26, Pakistani)

Karim’s diary entry provided greater insight into threatening nature of marriage. In reflecting upon marriage, Karim employed the passive voice (“me getting married off”), suggesting a sense of coercion rather than agreement and the psychological undesirability of marriage. It reportedly jeopardized his valued lifestyle and family relationships. Given that marriage was being discussed more and more frequently at home (“second time this week”), Karim felt that his valued lifestyle as he knew it was imminently “coming to an end” and that this would have negative outcomes in the future. The contrast between positive imagery of a “beautiful little life at home” and “sad days ahead” powerfully highlighted the threat to continuity, that is, the psychological thread between past, present and future.

Identity continuity and interpersonal relations were closely entwined in participants’ diary accounts. In most cases, changing patterns of interpersonal relations, due to the prospect of marriage, had a negative impact for identity continuity:

“How am I feeling tonight? Shock, pain, sadness, humiliation, my heart is beating fast. I walked out of the living room because they started going on about it and nowadays anyway each time I walk past their room, the living room, my heart starts to beat really fast and I feel like I can’t speak.” (Mohammed, 23, Pakistani)

Consistent with the observations made at the beginning of this section, Mohammed described his negative emotional (“shock, pain, sadness, humiliation”) and physiological (“my heart is beating fast”) experiences of encountering the topic of marriage. For several individuals, marriage could induce a “defensive” response which resulted in a family dispute and sometimes, as Mohammed outlined, a temporary breakdown in interpersonal relations. In order to evade the topic of marriage, Mohammed reported having “walked out of the living room” just as his family began to discuss the topic. The prospect of marriage seemed to be negatively impacting upon participants’ sense of continuity, since individuals, like Mohammad, felt unable to share family space (“their room, the living room”) and compelled to limit contact with family members, lest the topic of marriage emerged in conversation, causing further psychological distress. In Mohammad’s account, the apparent “necessity” to avoid particular social spaces (such as the family living room) was represented as being a sudden (“nowadays”) unwelcomed change in his life. There was a tension between maintaining individual continuity and introducing further discontinuity of a different kind.

While the prospect of marriage can clearly have a negative impact for continuity due to the perceived need to alter present living arrangements in order to avoid having to encounter marriage, there was evidence that it could also threaten individuals’ sense of self-efficacy:

“I hate my life right now and I hate my family. It’s like everyone is talking about someone else, not me, someone who is going to get married. It isn’t me [...] I just feel like I am slowly losing control over my life, bit by bit, and I can’t do anything to get it back [...] I’m just being shut out from it all.” (Samir, 21, Pakistani)

Like Samir and Mohammed, several participants attempted to evade or disengage from (even casual) discussions regarding marriage by leaving the room when the topic was invoked or by avoiding family space. However, much to their dismay, these tactics did not suppress discussions regarding the topic – they continued among family members in a detached manner and excluded participants themselves. Samir’s exclusion from decisions that clearly affected his life and future were construed as threatening. He felt unable to derive a positive self-conception on the basis of his life position (self-esteem); he reported negative interpersonal relations with his family (continuity); and described his loss of control and competence in the context of his own arranged marriage (self-efficacy). The threat to self-efficacy was implied primarily by his reported sense of “invisibility” in the family circle: “It’s like everyone is talking about someone else, not me.”

More generally, exclusion from marital arrangements was distressing for respondents because it seemed to indicate the sheer determination of their family members to ensure that their children were “married off,” regardless of their sexual orientation. Individuals felt that their attempts to evade marriage were futile. Thus, the strategy of evading discussions regarding marriage can inadvertently cause threats to the self-efficacy, since arrangements may persist and individuals may resultantly feel that they are “being shut out” from matters that affect them and “losing control” over their lives. Moreover, the continuity principle, which some individuals attempted to salvage by disengaging socially from the topic of marriage, also remains susceptible to threat, because marital arrangements persist, and therefore continue to impose discontinuity in participants’ lives.

Sidestepping marriage: Strategies for coping with threat Participants' diary entries elucidated the threats to identity that could result from encountering the prospect of marriage in thought and conversation, as well as their strategies for protecting identity from threat.

Some individuals reported a temporary psychological escape from their threatening position by recalling earlier phases in their lives, such as childhood, during which issues such as sexuality and marriage never emerged in conversation:

"I'm just lying on my bed and I close my eyes and go back to where I was all those years back and for a while it does really start to feel like I'm back there again, standing at the school gates without a care in the world and my dad comes and gets me from school [...] Just playing with friends on the street. On that street [...] I'm not worried, I'm not sad, depressed, I'm happy. I'm young [...] I open my eyes and I'm not in the same room in that house and it comes back to me so I wish I didn't have to open my eyes." (Abdul, 19, Pakistani)

Breakwell (1986, p. 86) has described the intrapsychic coping strategy of fantasy, which constitutes a form of "wishful thinking," temporary psychological escape from a threatening reality. Abdul and other participants in the study employed the strategy of fantasy in order to deflect the threat of marriage. Abdul's psychological escape to his childhood allowed him to banish from his thoughts issues such as sexuality and marriage, which lay at the root of his identity threat. Upon reflection, Abdul seemed to regard his childhood as a period during which he was able to maintain his valued family life and relationships. Participants reflected nostalgically upon their familial relationships and ordinary routines during an era in which marriage was simply a non-issue: "my dad comes and gets me from school." There was a renewed appreciation of the mundane and ordinary, as it protected identity from threat. Fantasy seemed to constitute a psychological "shield" or escape, which, at least transiently, became a lived reality for participants. For Abdul and other participants, the strategy of fantasy provided scope for re-positioning oneself psychologically in a bygone era in which threatening stimuli such as sexuality and marriage simply ceased to exist.

In addition to allowing a nostalgic escape to the past, the strategy of fantasy was deployed by some individuals to construct an alternative *future* reality which could optimistically wish away the threatening elements of marriage. Close attention to the inconsistencies of the same individual's account over time provided insight into such use of the fantasy strategy. For instance, in Harjinder's sixth diary entry, he noted that:

"When I think about me getting married, it makes me feel actually sick [...] my heart starts beating and my stomach starts churning. I can do anything to avoid that feeling [...] I am here like "living with a woman for the rest of my life, no way, how am I gonna manage that? How am I gonna satisfy her, in bed like a husband does and outside the bedroom?" I can't do it." (Harjinder, 22, Indian)

Consistent with the first theme, Harjinder experienced both threat, on the basis of his anticipated inadequacies "as a husband" (self-efficacy), and negative emotions when he contemplated a heterosexual marriage. He doubted his ability to perform social (and sexual) roles perceived to be associated with being a husband and, therefore, attempted to block out marriage psychologically. However, in his fifteenth diary entry he appeared to begin to fantasize about married life, which provided a temporary exit from the *threatening* aspects of marriage:

"Maybe it isn't going to be that bad [...] Someone that marries me has got to be a lesbian [...] She'll turn out to be a lesbian [...] I'll just carry on with my boyfriend and she can have her

girlfriend and we can have kids somehow and do the whole family show together [...] love each other like friends do but live our lives like human beings do.” (Harjinder, 22, Indian)

Despite the apparent threat that the prospect of marriage seemed to pose his identity, Harjinder later seemed to accept the notion of marriage and to assimilate and accommodate it, at least transiently, within his identity. However, the assimilation-accommodation of his prospective heterosexual marriage was clearly aided by the fantasy strategy. Harjinder reasoned that any woman who agreed to marry him would surely be aware of his sexual orientation and must therefore be a lesbian herself. Having convinced himself of this “reality,” Harjinder proceeded to construct a “coherent and well-developed tale that one tells oneself under stress” (Breakwell, 1986, p. 86). His fantasy, described in the future rather than conditional tense, enabled him to construct a future reality in which he could manifest his sexual identity by maintaining relations with other men, on the one hand, and save face in familial contexts by presenting his wife to significant others, on the other hand (Yip, 2004).

It is easy to see how the principles of continuity and self-efficacy are enhanced by Harjinder’s wishful thinking – he is able to wish away the threats to continuity (of psychologically valued family relationships) and to self-efficacy, that is, his sense of competence and control. The vivid fantasy of an imminent marriage of convenience with a lesbian woman essentially replaces a threatening reality (of being married and, thus, losing one’s continuity and self-efficacy) with a more acceptable form of reality (of a marriage of convenience, which conversely facilitates these principles). Moreover, Harjinder appears to embellish his fantasy with the promise of “love” between himself and his wife – not romantic love but love “like friends do.” In short, in his fantasy, over which he has agency, Harjinder is able to construct a narrative that favors his life, identity and society - threat is blocked, albeit transiently, by the ability to narrate and to believe.

At an interpersonal level, several individuals contemplated re-thinking existing relationships in order to cope with the threat of marriage. As outlined above, there was a perception among some participants that if their family members persisted in coercing them to get married, they would have to reduce ties with them:

“My mum told me she’d sent my photo to some girl’s family and she told me they like me. I know that nobody is exactly dragging me down the alter but it just feels like I’m losing the last shred of control I had. I’m losing it [...] It feels like it’s decided and I have no choice. So I have to leave my family. It seems like the only way.” (Ali, 21, Pakistani)

“If my religion or people say I’ve got to marry some girl now that I’m in my twenties then f**k my religion and f**k my people. I can’t exactly throw away my life for my people and my religion.” (Jamil, 21, Pakistani)

These extracts quite clearly highlighted the potential threats to the self-efficacy and continuity principles of identity. While Ali referred to “losing the last shred of control” over his life (self-efficacy), Jamil feared that marriage would amount to “throw[ing] away [his] life” (continuity). Ali and Jamil coped with the threatening prospect of marriage by re-construing the importance of relevant interpersonal networks. Ali attributed his threatening position to the actions of his family – his mother had begun the process of arranging his marriage. Consequently, one means of potentially regaining self-efficacy was to reduce contact with his family. Ali perceived his departure from his family circle as “the only way” to salvage identity.

Conversely, Jamil attributed his threatening position to his “religion or people,” that is, to the cultural context in which his family and friends had been socialized (Jaspal &

Cinnirella, 2010). His response to perceived coercion to enter a heterosexual marriage was to disidentify with the social groups that were regarded as imposing obstacles in his (sexual) identity development. Jamil's diary entry seemed to indicate that, in order to salvage the continuity principle of identity, it was necessary to choose between his group memberships. Tajfel (1978) has referred to this as the exit option. Like Ali who opted for abandoning his family, Jamil decided to exit his "problematic" religious and cultural group memberships in order to avoid "throw[ing] away [his] life" and destroying his sense of continuity. The ethno-religious group membership is sacrificed in order to maintain an individual trait that is central to his identity – namely his sexual orientation (Breakwell, 1986). This strategy for sidestepping threat is interesting, because interview-based research in this area suggests that religious and cultural memberships seem to take precedence over sexual identity in BAGM's meaning-making (Jaspal, 2012a). Conversely, the more intimate, and potentially more sensitive, medium of the diary employed in this study suggests that individuals may be more creative and agentic in re-thinking group memberships in order to avert threat.

“A no-win situation”: Marriage as a dilemma

Although participants were resourceful in their attempts to protect identity from threat, their diary accounts suggested that, even when invoked casually in conversation with family members, marriage could present serious dilemmas and undermine the efficacy of coping strategies.

As one example, Iqbal's dilemma consisted of his desire to "live out" his gay identity, on the one hand, and his wish to start a family, on the other. These activities were regarded as mutually exclusive:

“For day now, they've been telling me if I don't get married I'm gonna end up an old and lonely man. I know I can't have kids. I'm not gonna be able to have a family [...] I'll be alone and die alone. And that's not me because here I am surrounded by my family and I'm not alone even for a minute. I keep thinking that maybe they are right [...] I don't fancy women. I can't see myself married but I've got to think about it if I want to keep this family life of mine.” (Iqbal, 22, Pakistani)

The unsettling warnings from family members that one would end up “old and lonely” unless one got married appeared to have a profound psychological effect on some participants, who internalized these beliefs themselves. Moreover, like Iqbal, most individuals expressed their belief that a heterosexual marriage constituted the only means of starting (and maintaining) a family, something that most participants explicitly desired in the future (McKeown et al., 2010). Iqbal appeared to have internalized the notion that gay people “can't have kids,” that they “won't have a family” and that they are liable to “be alone and die alone.” These heteronormative social representations may be so coercive and uniform in South Asian ethnic communities that they may be uncritically accepted by gay men as well (Jaspal & Cinnirella, in press). Incidentally, while most participants invoked issues concerning family life and having children, none of them expressed awareness of alternative ways of starting a family, such as adoption or surrogacy. Thus, in order to accommodate in his self-concept the desire to start a family, Iqbal appeared to sideline his sexual identity. Yet, given the phenomenological importance of sexual identity among most participants, this strategy frequently proved to be dilemmatic.

To borrow Markus and Nurius' (1986) notion of “possible selves,” it seems that participants' dilemma arises because the “possible self” (i.e. being old and lonely) that they visualized on the basis of their interactions with parents and family members seemed to be at odds with their “desired self” (i.e. to start and maintain a family). Participants clearly valued

their family relationships, but they came to perceive the prospect of marriage as a potential impediment to these relationships, due largely to the real or anticipated reactions to their sexuality from family members. Furthermore, individuals were fearful of the possibility of being “alone and dying alone” because this prospect was regarded as being inconsistent with their “desired self.” Although Iqbal defined himself as gay, recognized that he was not sexually attracted to women and reportedly could not imagine being married, he resigned himself to the cultural and familial expectation of an arranged heterosexual marriage. Iqbal and others regarded marriage as maintaining a sense of continuity in the domain of family life, although there was also a recognition that this could introduce *discontinuity* in other domains of their lives. The fact that distinct facets of the continuity principle (i.e. continuity of family relations versus continuity of sexual identity) remained susceptible to threat regardless of individuals’ decision regarding marriage highlighted the dilemmatic nature of this ethno-cultural expectation.

While Harjinder (above) fantasized about the circumstances of his future marriage, Gupinder strategically focused his attention on the *positive aspects* of marriage, despite acknowledging that he found it difficult to imagine himself in a heterosexual marriage:

“I can’t even think about being married right now at this point in time but if just looking ahead it might not be that bad after all, getting hitched, like I might get used to it [...] I could have kids and fill my mind with that. I’d like have someone to be with forever. I could feel good about myself for a change [...] It’s confusing because I can’t imagine it now but I might be able to then.” (Gupinder, 25, Indian)

In order to cope with the potential threat to identity associated with the possibility of “losing” his family, Gupinder re-focused his attention on the positive aspects and re-constructed marriage as a potentially positive development in his life. Despite being unable to entertain the prospect of marriage “at this point in time,” he appeared to be receptive to the positive outcomes of marriage. This included (1) the possibility of having his own children - this could potentially distract him from other domains of his life (possibly his sexuality); (2) lifelong companionship with another person (albeit a woman) which need not be focused around a sexual relationship; (3) a positive self-conception (self-esteem) which, according to this account, had been lacking. Thus, there appeared to be a re-focusing from the actual phenomenon of marriage onto its potential outcomes. This re-focusing process induced a dilemmatic psychological state because Gupinder could now see potentially positive aspects of a heterosexual marriage that he also regarded as being unfeasible at a practical level.

Some respondents faced the dilemma of occupying a “no-win situation”:

“I’m in a no-win situation, a lose-lose situation. I’m feeling desperate and helpless. Totally helpless. If I do it then I’m just dancing to their tune. If I don’t then I don’t dance to any tune [...] I’m not in the driver’s seat [...] but I’m just thinking it’s easier to just go ahead with it and see how it pans out.” (Satnam, 21, Indian)

Some participants regarded marriage as a psychological “cul-de-sac” – there seemed to be no convenient escape route from this difficult situation. Although some individuals appeared to engage in short-term coping strategies, such as denial, which re-constructed marriage as something potentially positive, others appeared to appreciate the potential futility of such strategies and therefore experienced discomfort at the apparent circularity of attempting to evade marriage. For instance, Satnam described his situation as being “no-win” and “lose-lose.” Like several others, he viewed his self-efficacy as being compromised – he no longer perceived feelings of competence and control in relation to his life and future. He perceived

no sense of autonomy – for him, a heterosexual marriage would amount to “dancing to their tune.” Yet, his refusal to marry could mean that “I don’t dance to any tune,” suggesting a loss of continuity. Having weighed up the potential advantages and disadvantages of marriage, both Gupinder and Satnam came to regard marriage as a potentially viable undertaking because, although threatening for identity (and especially the self-efficacy principle), it appeared to be the least detrimental option for identity as a whole.

Discussion

This article focuses on the identities, experiences and wellbeing of a small sample of BAGM reflecting on expectations of an arranged (heterosexual) marriage from family members. The results suggest that the cultural and familial expectation of marriage can pose considerable threats to various principles of identity, and that even the strategies designed to cope with such threats can themselves cause secondary threats to identity. This can result in the construal of marriage as a dilemmatic phenomenon – it may be regarded as incompatible with one’s sexual orientation and its avoidance may be construed as incompatible with one’s “desired self.” This article provides a social psychological account of participants’ encounters with the topic of marriage, and focuses upon the implications for identity processes. However, it would be worthwhile to complement the present research by examining engagement with the topic of marriage among BAGM from the perspective of other social sciences disciplines such as anthropology and sociology, which could provide detailed insight into the role of other key variables such as race, gender and social class. Given that the cultural expectation of an arranged heterosexual marriage is an important social and psychological issue for British Asian gay men, further research of this kind would be beneficial.

While the present research is not intended to be representative of BAGM as a whole, the diary method approach does provide detailed, nuanced and contextually sensitive qualitative insights into the social psychological aspects of encountering the cultural expectation of marriage. Moreover, the diary method has provided detailed insights into participants’ experience of identity threat in real-time, making a theoretical contribution to IPT, and a window into participants’ intimate perceptions and feelings vis-à-vis arranged marriage, a highly sensitive topic which researchers have been unable to examine fully in previous interview research (e.g. Jaspal, 2010b; Yip, 2004). More generally, this study contributes to the scholarly debate on arranged/ forced marriage by shedding light on BAGM’s responses to the familial expectation of an arranged heterosexual marriage.

Identity threat In most cases, the cultural and familial expectation of an arranged heterosexual marriage posed threats to identity primarily because participants did not perceive marriage as part of their life trajectories and, in most cases, had suppressed cognitions about it (Jaspal, 2012b). The results suggest that the continuity, self-esteem and self-efficacy principles appear to be particularly susceptible to threat. Although parents’ accounts suggested that British Indian families were generally more subtle in their invocation of the importance of marriage than British Pakistani families who more assertively demanded that their children fulfill the religious and cultural obligation of a heterosexual marriage, the accounts of both groups of participants indicated identity threat. This suggested that the topic of marriage itself was sufficient to threaten identity among individuals, regardless of the “coerciveness” of parents, which in turn has implications for how one conceptualizes “forced marriage.”

Contemplation of marriage jeopardized the continuity principle of identity, given its disruptiveness to individuals’ identities, particularly as a heterosexual marriage was viewed from the perspective of sexual identity. Although in interview-based research BAGM seem to prioritize their ethno-religious identities (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010), the more intimate medium of the reflective diary reveals a more nuanced understanding of how individuals

perceive their identities and how the continuity principle may in turn be affected. The perceived need to deflect the prospect of marriage, which, as participants acknowledged, displeased family members could result in family disputes and negative interpersonal relations (Yip, 2004). This too could threaten continuity since it disrupted psychologically valued family relationships. Thus, continuity seemed to be chronically threatened, because both the acceptance and rejection of a heterosexual marriage could disrupt the psychological thread between past, present and future.

One's perceived failure to adhere to the important cultural norm of a heterosexual marriage could inhibit a positive self-conception, threatening the self-esteem principle (Gecas, 1982). In some cases, participants reported feeling excluded from decisions regarding marriage that were being made on their behalf – family members reportedly continued to arrange their children's marriages. Resultant feelings of exclusion, inadequacy and incompetence were indicative of threatened self-efficacy. Given the threats to multiple principles of identity, participants reported experiencing negative emotions, such as embarrassment, shame, and self-disgust (Jaspal, 2012a).

Coping Identity Process Theory states that when identity is threatened, individuals will deploy strategies for coping with the threat and for optimizing psychological wellbeing (Breakwell, 1986). In interview research, it has been observed among non-heterosexual British Pakistani Muslims that “[p]arental pressure to get married sometimes led to the disclosure of sexuality” (Yip, 2004, p. 347). Conversely, the present research suggests that, when confronted with the threatening expectation of marriage, participants seemed to deploy more complex intrapsychic and interpersonal strategies for coping.

Some individuals reported fantasizing about an earlier phase of life, such as childhood, during which sexuality was a non-issue. This helped to restore a sense of continuity. Moreover, fantasy allowed individuals to retain, at a psychological level, interpersonal relations which were clearly valued but which were perceived to be vulnerable as a result of the pressure of a heterosexual marriage. Another variant of the fantasy strategy aimed to construct a narrative regarding heterosexual marriage, which was favorable for self-identity – some individuals resigned themselves to the cultural/ familial requirement to get married but fantasized that they would be able to inconspicuously “live out” their gay sexuality even within a heterosexual marriage (see also Yip, 2004). This suggests that individuals may envelop themselves in the protective confines of a fantasy and, at least transiently, lose touch with reality as a means of coping with the threat of marriage. Yet, while fantasy may provide a temporary escape from threat, it is unlikely to constitute a satisfactory coping strategy in the long term.

The invocation of marriage by significant others, such as parents and other family members, could jeopardize intrapsychic coping strategies, such as denial/ suppression of thoughts regarding marriage and fantasy, reigniting threat. Thus, there was a perception among participants that it would be necessary to limit and, in some cases, sever, ties with family members in order to evade marriage and identity threat. This could provide self-protection at an intrapsychic level, given the threats incurred by being coerced into thinking about marriage, but also some degree of interpersonal protection, since this obviated the need to disclose their sexuality to unsympathetic individuals who were regarded as lacking any understanding of homosexuality (cf. Yip, 2004). This is consistent with other research that suggests that “coming out” can constitute a threatening and undesirable prospect for BAGM (Jaspal & Siraj, 2011).

Yet, this interpersonal strategy of self-distancing from significant others could produce a threat to continuity of its own, as a byproduct. Most participants felt threatened largely because they believed that their gay identity and consequential trepidation about a

heterosexual marriage undermined valued family relationships. Thus, although self-distancing from significant others potentially obviated the need to disclose their sexual identity formally, it nonetheless jeopardized continuity of valued family relationships and thereby introduced discontinuity in individuals' lives. It paradoxically threatened what participants were so eager to salvage – psychologically valued family relationships.

BAGM may convince themselves that a heterosexual marriage, though at odds with their sexual orientation, constitutes the only means of starting a family. Incidentally, none of the participants entertained the possibility of starting a family within a gay relationship, potentially highlighting their firm grounding in heteronormative social representations. Given the general importance of family life among participants, there was a tendency for individuals to glorify some aspects of a heterosexual marriage, such as the ability to start a family, and to attenuate some of the more problematic aspects of a heterosexual marriage, namely its incompatibility with self-reported sexual orientation (McKeown et al., 2010). This too appears to constitute a coping strategy with only limited success.

Implications This research suggests that BAGM's identities may be susceptible to threat and that their psychological wellbeing may be severely undermined due to the cultural and familial expectation to get married. Even when the topic of marriage is broached casually in conversation, which was particularly observable among British Indian participants, individuals may feel that they are being *forced* to get married (Samad & Eade, 2002). They may perceive their memberships in their religious and cultural ingroups and in their family circle to be jeopardized by both their sexual identity and their trepidation about fulfilling the cultural and familial expectation of an arranged heterosexual marriage. Thus, in the case of BAGM, the cultural expectation of marriage may be so threatening for identity that individuals may come to regard its mere invocation by family members as a form of coercion. By mentioning marriage, family members may be perceived as expressing their *expectation* of a heterosexual marriage. The pressure to enter into a heterosexual marriage may be so potent at the psychological level that the cultural expectation amounts to a subtle, though no less coercive, form of forced marriage. In particular, the weakened sense of self-efficacy observable among some participants may mean that they feel helpless in evading such coercion. Thus, the rigid boundaries that have been drawn between arranged marriage and forced marriage in writings on marriage among heterosexual ethnic minority individuals may be less applicable to BAGM, many of whom face complex social and psychological circumstances in relation to (arranged) marriage.

In exploring the potential antecedents of identity threat among BAGM, one cannot ignore the important role played by heteronormative and homonegative social representations of sexuality and marriage which clearly operate in South Asian culture (Ghuman, 2003). Participants are acutely aware of heteronormative representations that dictate that heterosexual marriage is culturally mandatory, and homonegative representations that construct homosexuality as immoral. Awareness of such representations is empirically related to lower psychological wellbeing among gays and lesbians (Lewis et al., 2003; Mireshghi & Matsumoto, 2008). In some cases, participants seemed to have internalized such representations, which led to contemplation of a heterosexual marriage despite self-identifying as gay. This may be attributed to the potency of the cultural norm of heterosexual marriage. Moreover, the hegemony of homophobic representations made it impossible for men to initiate a discussion with family members regarding sexuality and marriage, particularly as there is a general “silencing” of homosexuality in South Asian cultures (Yip, 2004). Thus, BAGM may refrain from “coming out,” which itself is associated with psychological distress (Morris et al., 2001), but find that they must nonetheless take a stance on the issue of their own marriage.

In his interview research into non-heterosexual Pakistani Muslims, Yip (2004) observes that his participants deployed strategies to “construct a safe space” in order to manage their sexual identity and negotiate the cultural expectation of marriage. Yet, in the present research, not all participants seemed able to create such a space. In their attempts to minimize identity threat and to optimize psychological wellbeing, some individuals exhibited signs of “giving in” and contemplated a heterosexual marriage despite acknowledging its incompatibility with their sexual orientation. They felt compelled to get married in order to salvage continuity, belonging and self-esteem. Although participants’ experiences may not correspond to conventional ways of thinking about forced marriage, there is clearly a degree of psychological coercion discernible in their diary accounts (Samad & Eade, 2002). Most participants felt that, if they did not conform to the norm of a heterosexual marriage, they would lose significant aspects of their identities, such as valued family relationships.

BAGM may occupy a particularly threatening and precarious position due to the immense stigma attached to homosexuality within South Asian cultures. Many feel that their parents and families will never understand their sexual orientation, which discourages them from disclosing their sexual identity despite parental pressure to get married (cf. Yip, 2004). This demonstrates the negative social psychological consequences of pressure to get married, on the one hand, and the need for researchers and policy-makers to think critically about the ways in which coercion and “forced marriage” can be manifested in the particular case of BAGM, on the other. Samad and Eade (2002) note in their research into community perceptions of forced marriage that their participants did not generally regard psychological and emotional pressure as coercion. This research demonstrates unequivocally that coercion can be powerfully enacted at a psychological level, particularly in the context of a threatened identity.

There needs to be a shift from heteronormative and homophobic social representations that clearly result in identity threat and decreased psychological wellbeing among BAGM, and greater awareness in South Asian communities of the psychological pitfalls of exerting psychological and emotional pressure on young men and women in the context of marriage. It would be beneficial for educators to draw attention to the reality of sexual diversity in order to normalize this in the minds of young people. This will be challenging given that there are still entrenched beliefs within some ethnic and religious communities that homosexuality is wrong and should not be “encouraged.” Thus, community leaders also need to engage with the topic of sexuality in order to create awareness of sexuality diversity among first generation ethnic minority individuals. It appears that many ethnic and religious minority individuals regard homosexuality in such negative terms because there is a “silencing” of homosexuality in their cultures. Greater acknowledgement of sexuality diversity could lead to an improvement in social attitudes and, thus, enhanced willingness for non-heterosexual individuals themselves to acknowledge and accept their sexual identities. This in turn may lead to more open discussions about arranged marriage and, thus, limit the negative outcomes for identity and psychological wellbeing. It is clear that this program of social change will need to be undertaken by researchers, policy makers and community members, collectively.

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