

# **GREEK SEXUAL CULTURE, IDENTITY AND**

## **ETHNICITY**

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## **1. Introduction**

The study of identity development for ethnic minority lesbians and gay men has previously examined identity development in the context of ethnic minority and lesbian or gay identity models (Espin, 1987; Wooden, Kawasaki, & Mayeda, 1983). Both studies used the theoretical Model of Homosexual Identity Formation (Cass, 1979) as a model for understanding the six stages of development that an individual moves through in developing an integrated identity as a homosexual person. In her study of identity development among Latina Lesbian women, Espin (1987) also used the Minority Identity Development model (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1979) as a model for understanding Latina identity.

As Espin (1987) noted, these two models of identity development describe more or less the same process of identity development. Each model, however, presents a means for understanding identity development of either homosexual identity or ethnic minority identity. How does an individual who is gay or lesbian and a member of an ethnic minority group come to terms with identity issues?

Morales (1983) proposed an identity formation model for ethnic minority lesbians and gays that incorporates the dual minority status of this group. This process seems to center around five different states. Each state is accompanied by decreasing anxiety and tension through the management of the tensions and differences. As cognitive and lifestyle changes emerge the multiple identities become integrated leading toward a greater sense of understanding of one's self and toward the development of a multi-cultural perspective.

The life of an ethnic minority lesbian or gay person often means a life that is lived within three communities: the gay community, their ethnic community, and the predominantly White heterosexual mainstream society. Each community has its set of norms, values, and beliefs, some of which are fundamentally in opposition to each other. Some choose to keep each community separate, and others vary the degree to which they integrate the communities and lifestyles. Each community offers important aspects supporting lifestyles and identities. Each community can be self-

sufficient if the individual chooses to stick with a particular one. The gay community offers support in the expression of one's sexual orientation identity, the ethnic community offers emotional and familiar bonding as well as cultural identity, and the mainstream society offers a national and international identity as well as a mainstream culture and multidimensional social system.

In an ideal world a lesbian or gay person of colour would have drawn resources from and maintain associations with each of the three communities. But as Carballo-Diequez (1989), Espin (1987), and Morales (1990) have suggested, such associations carry negative consequences with them. Their ethnic minority community has homophobic and negative attitudes toward gays in general; the gay community is a reflection of the mainstream White community and mirrors the racist attitudes toward the lesbian and gay people of colour through discrimination and prejudice; the mainstream White heterosexual community embraces the homophobic and negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians as well as the racist attitudes and practices toward the lesbian and gay people of colour. As a result of the above the ethnic minority lesbian and gay people find themselves weighing the options and managing the tensions and conflicts that arise as a result of the multiple interactions (de Monteflores, 1986).

Where do the lesbian and gay people of colour turn for support though? A possible source is the members of the mainstream gay and lesbian community who become important outlets for social and moral support. However, lesbian and gay people of colour report discriminatory treatment in gay bars, clubs, and social and political gatherings, and in individuals within the gay community (Dyne 1980, Cochran 1988, Morales 1989, Garnets and Kimmel 1991, Chan 1992, Gutierrez and Dworkin 1992,

Greene 1994). They describe feeling an intense sense of conflicting loyalties to two communities in both of which they are marginalised by the requirement to conceal or minimise important aspects of their identities in order to be accepted. Lesbian and gay people of colour frequently experience a sense of never being part of any group completely, leaving them at a greater risk for isolation, feelings of estrangement, and increased psychological vulnerability.

My discussion<sup>1</sup> in this paper focuses specifically on Anglo-Greek men resident in London<sup>2</sup> (who have sex with men) because they receive marginal if any attention in the sociological and psychological literature. For the most part, empirical investigations and scholarly work on ethnic minority gay men devote little time or attention to the specific issues relevant to Anglo-Greek men and the ways that ethnicity and racism ‘colour’ the experience of sexism (Hall & Greene, 1996; Williams, 1999).

This paper first examines some of the key cultural concepts and relevant historical factors that may shape the development of Anglo-Greek gay identity. Accounts of sexual identity experiences provided by second generation Greek Cypriot gay men in London<sup>3</sup> are examined in the light of this analysis to explore how these men negotiate their Anglo-Greek and gay identity.

The personal accounts of these men demonstrate that their sexual identity does not always become their primary identity and that different identities are constructed by individuals at different places and times.

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<sup>1</sup> Phellas, C.N. (2002). *The Construction of Sexual and Cultural Identities: Greek-Cypriot Men in Britain, England*: Ashgate

<sup>2</sup> The issues raised in this paper may be equally applied to Anglo-Cypriot lesbian women resident in London. However, due to the complexity and richness of the challenges these women face it was felt that it would be inappropriate to discuss them in this paper.

<sup>3</sup> 25 self-identified second-generation Greek-Cypriot gay men living in London were recruited by advertising in the gay press, by writing to community groups and gay groups and organizations and by ‘snowballing’. Semi-structured face-to-face and telephone interviews were conducted with those men recruited through these channels. Data were subjected to thematic content analysis and multidimensional scaling techniques.

Most of the respondents indicated that the translation of their sexual desires and behaviours into the 'political statement' of gay identity is not only difficult but is strongly resisted. Instead, they chose to construct their identity in terms of their relationships with their families, their peers at work and other members of their community.

Finally, the findings of this research may help develop an understanding of the complexities surrounding the 'sexual and cultural identities' of Anglo-Greek gay men, thereby informing the practice of therapeutic professionals who may encounter these men in their work

## **2. Sexuality in the Greek-Cypriot Culture**

Some people might argue that the Greek-Cypriots living in the UK, present different social characteristics from the ones living in Cyprus. My own personal experience and the various conversations and meetings I had with diaspora Cypriots show a lot of similarities in terms of cultural and ethnic dynamics.

The same beliefs and values, traditions, motivations, religious practices, principles and moral codes, and to a large extent, psycho-social dynamics, exist. Indeed, it is true to say that, if anything, the Greek-Cypriot communities living outside Cyprus tend to show greater conservatism and adherence to 'old-fashioned' ideas than those in Cyprus.

The concept of sexual behaviour in the Greek-Cypriot culture is closely tied up with the concept of the 'honour and shame' value system. This system predetermines the way Greek-Cypriot women and men view themselves in relation to issues concerning sexual and moral codes and the way they are viewed by others in relation to these matters.

Women are considered to be both passive and threatening to the "masculine sexual" moral code of the society. They are believed to have the capacity to either make or break this moral code by the way they behave in the social sphere outside their homes. It is widely accepted that a mans' sexual drives and sexual urges are natural but uncontrollable. Therefore, the onus is on the woman to maintain this moral code by proper and decent behaviour. (Loizos, P., Papataxiarchis, E., 1991)

A husband's infidelity is more or less accepted amongst Greek-Cypriots. As long as he does not neglect his family duties and he comes back to his bed at the end of the day, he is forgiven. He has to show the necessary respect to his wife, his family and his parents if that is threatened by his extra-marital affairs then he will be accountable to the people around him (both the family and social circles).

The main categories that have dominated Western 'homosexualities' studies - 'heterosexuality', 'homosexuality', 'bisexuality' - are clearly present in Greek-Cypriot culture. Nonetheless, they have a history that is connected as in the Western Europe and the USA, to the emergence of modern medical science. Cypriot (homo) sexuality cannot be meaningfully understood simply as a postmodern by-product of multiple historically contingent identities. That would have been an ideal scenario for a coherent Western culture, and even within that, the social and cultural conditions for homosexual identities are many and varied.

The notion of a single homosexual identity or a distinct homosexual community or a gay ghetto is a notion fairly new to the Cypriot community. "The structure of the sexual life in Cyprus and, as a result, the way Cypriots perceive the concept of sexuality has traditionally been conceived in terms of a model focused on the relationship between sexual practices and gender roles on the distinction between masculine (*ενεργιτιηκοτητα*, activity) and feminine (*παθητικοτητα*, passivity) as central to the order of the sexual universe" (Faubion, J.D, 1993). As a result, the societal definition of homosexuality in Cyprus originates around the schema of penetration, and in this conceptualisation the label of the homosexual is attributed to any individual who is being penetrated or thought to be penetrated. The other remains free of this label, regardless of the fact that he is engaged in homosexual sex as well (Plummer 1991).

" It is along the lines of such perceptions that the distinctions between (*αρσενικου*, male) and (*θηλυκου*, female), (*αρσενικοτητα*, masculinity) and (*θηλυκοτητα*, femininity), and the like, have traditionally been organised in Cypriot culture" (Faubion, J.D, 1993).

A Greek-Cypriot male's masculine gender identity is not threatened by homosexual acts as long as he plays the insertor sex role. Real Greek men should always hunt and

penetrate. They should never allow themselves to be stationed and being penetrated. “Therefore, the ‘active homosexual’ is still entirely and unambiguously a ‘man’” (Faubion, J.D, 1993).

The above highlights a major difference between the ‘Western’ and Greek-Cypriot cultural setting for male bisexuality: the lack of stigmatisation amongst Cypriots of the active insertor participant in homosexual encounters. As a result of the above, many Cypriots do not believe that ‘one drop of homosexuality’ makes one totally homosexual as long as the appropriate sexual role is played.

### **3. Gay Identity in the Greek-Cypriot Culture**

In the Greek-Cypriot culture the individual man is merged with the family and the community. He does not have an identity as his problems are shared with the rest of the family. It is very difficult to develop his own personality and character, as he often stays with his family until he gets married. Should he decide to break away from the family and set his own home without getting married, he is seen as acting against the family. Individuals are not allowed to have any secrets or, even worse, any private lives. If they do, then there is something wrong that ought to be shared and resolved within the family itself. Decisions regarding financial, emotional, or business, affairs are taken jointly with the rest of the family. From an early age, the children learn that their actions have a reflection upon the whole family’s status in the society. They cannot take any decisions without first considering the consequences their actions would have upon the rest of the family.

So, can one talk about a ‘gay identity’ within a culture in which ‘identity’ *per se* is problematic? How can Cypriot men (gay identified or not) start addressing their needs when they cannot even express their needs or voices as individuals. How can one accept and act on his sexuality when the family and society denies them the right to be themselves.

Gay identity emerges when people are free to make choices and decisions about their lives and lifestyles, hence a popular concept when discussing ‘Western

homosexualities'. However, in a culture where the individual is submerged in the community, such a definition becomes unrealistic.

As Yiannis (age 31) said:

'The main reason, I haven't come out is my mother. I cannot do that to her. Even though we're not close I do acknowledge that she has sacrificed her life for me. She was the one who was getting beaten up by my dad, she was the one who had to go out to work to feed us, and to say to her, "Yes, I am gay" would totally destroy her. You see, she is homophobic like most of Greek people. They're racist, you know. She is a typical Greek person ... it's O.K. to be anything else, anything you want to be as long as it's not in the family. That's their way of thinking and that's the way with my mum. As long as it's kept outside the family is fine. It's my duty to look after her. They've looked after you, that's the way I see it, now it's my turn to look after her.'

Coming out in the family and showing one's sexual flag may be considered as an act of treason against the culture and the family. It may be seen as a form of rejection and abandonment of all the things their parents are representing. As Espin (1984, 1987) and Hidalgo (1984) noted, a gay or lesbian family member may maintain a place in the family and be quietly tolerated, but this does not constitute acceptance of a gay or lesbian sexual orientation. Rather, it constitutes the denial of it. The gay son is very much welcomed in the family, so long as he does not disclose or declare his sexual orientation.

As a result, Greek-Cypriot gay men internalise all these negative attitudes as gleaned from loved and trusted figures. This has a negative effect on the development of a healthy identity and self acceptance.

One of my interviewees (Costas, aged 33) said the following when I asked him whether his religious upbringing had any effect upon his identity and personality development.

'In fact, I felt guilty from the very onset till I was mature and understood. But the society didn't recognise what I was up to. It wasn't normal to speak as a gay man. But in addition to that, the biggest factor that induced guilt in me was the religious aspect and it run very strong in my family. While I was in Cyprus, I was quite a

religious person. I used to go to the church very frequently. I used to be the priest's assistant basically. So, I saw my sexual tendencies as being in disunity with the religious teachings. So, it did bother me a lot. It still bothers me, but not as much as it used to bother me.'

When I asked him whether he has shifted over the years in the way he perceives himself, he answered:

'Yes. I have created a more positive image in that I don't fight myself the whole time, not as much as I used to. All the time, it was an internal battle between what I wanted to experience and what society, my family and the church wanted me to experience. You know, those people that obey the religious teachings and they have a married life, they do so many things that are equally more wrong for humans than what I'm doing wrong, basically by being gay.'  
(Respondent No 1, age 33).

#### **4. Multiple Identities and Greek-Cypriots Gay Men**

It has become quite apparent from the interviews that the concept of 'multiple identities' is quite a normal thing among the interviewees. Sexual identity for the majority of the people I have interviewed did not become the primary identity. A lot of them have devised various coping mechanisms and tried to incorporate their sexual identity in their everyday life. The Greek-Cypriot men I have interviewed accepted the fact that constructing a full gay life-style may not be feasible. The ways of coping and dealing with their sexual identity vary from person to person. However, the main aim in all the coping mechanisms is to minimise the strain on them by finding a happy medium between their sexual identity and social lives. Their personal journeys and struggles do not make them less gay than the ones who allowed their sexual identity to predominate over other aspects of their identity.

How difficult is this constant struggle to maintain that equilibrium among the multiple identities?

Nicos (aged 28) spoke for a lot of my interviewees when he pointed to the difficulties of integrating (rather than simply juxtaposing ) aspects of his different worlds:

‘The thing that I dislike is not being able to come out to my family, that’s what stopping me from being a real gay person and a fulfilled person. Once you’ve come out to the family and they can accept it, which I know mine won’t, at least you can bring a partner home to meet the family. He could be someone who even if he does not understand my culture, at least I’ll be with them in a surrounding that I feel comfortable with. I think that’s the only annoyance that I’ve got not to be able to share my partner with my parents. It’s not with the gay life, it’s with my own culture and community, that’s the difference.’

And yet lesbians and gay men need the same strong connections with their family members, as everyone else. Furthermore, strong family ties are even more crucial to lesbians and gay men given the hostility and rejection they face in the outside world. It is clear from the interviews that, despite the anti-gay sentiment of the Greek-Cypriot community and their families, there is a deep attachment among the Greek-Cypriot gay men to their Greek culture and a frame of reference that most frequently claimed ethnic identity and community as a primary concern.

What has come across the interviews was a fear of being an outcast in their own community of such an importance. As a result, a lot of my interviewees spend a lot of energy and devise different behaviours to delicately balance the two worlds, and that can make life more difficult and stressful. The Greek-Cypriot gay men I have interviewed in London exist as minorities within minorities with the multiple oppression and discrimination that accompanies such status. A lot of them struggle to integrate two major aspects of their identity - sexual orientation and ethnicity - and usually their sexual orientation is devalued by the closest family before even themselves becoming aware of their gay or lesbian orientation.

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

‘The time I missed that Greek-Cypriot connection was last year when I went to a Jewish Bar Mitzvah. I went away feeling extremely sad. I often get this sense of deep sadness, because there isn’t a community I belong to. There’s the gay community but it doesn’t fulfill me. It’s not even a need for belonging, it’s a sense, yes, it’s a sense of belonging. When I hear Greek music being played sometimes it triggers off a sense of loss or a sense of not belonging. I felt it most strongly when I went to this Jewish gathering. If I go to a Greek gathering I tend to link up with my brother and his family and I feel ill at ease because they’re being very intrusive, they’re asking me all sorts of questions. I’ll answer them and if they ask me if I’m married, I’ll turn round and tell them the truth. Really it’s up to them whether they want to accept that or not. It’s the connection with my Greek culture I miss most’.

## **5. Conclusion**

It is clear from the above findings that identity can be problematic. Any attempts to globalise all gay men into a homogeneous group based on a ‘Western’ model of homosexualities can be misleading and dangerous. Not only can important differences between gay men be hidden but local and national differences of culture, traditions and political strategies will not be properly addressed.

The personal accounts that come out of this research reinforce the notion that identity is multiple, contested and contextual and show that different identities are constructed by individuals and groups at different places and times. For a lot of the Greek-Cypriot men in this study, the translation of their sexual desires and behaviours into a political statement of a gay identity was not only difficult but was also strongly resisted. Sexual identity – although relevant- was not a primary identity dimension to them. Many men had developed more or less effective coping mechanisms to manage the conflicts they faced. Most importantly, though, the men I spoke to were united in their struggle for acceptance by the Greek-Cypriot community.

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