

# Exploring the 'Other' within the 'Other': Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) non-heterosexual engagement with the London night-time economy

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## Introduction

Little geographic research has explored how race and ethnicity intersect with sexuality in the everyday negotiation of space. As such, this study explored the intersectionalities of minority ethnic and sexual identities and the visibility of non-heterosexual black and ethnic minorities in the London LGBT scene. Problematising simplistic stereotypes associated with either identity, the project sought to investigate the performativity of identity in the backdrop of everyday spaces and their consequential societal relations, many of which are steeped in oppressive hierarchies e.g. racism, homophobia, social exclusion and sexual objectification (Han, 2007; Teunis, 2007)

## Research aims:

- How do non-heterosexuals from BME backgrounds engage with the London LGBT scene?
- To what extent, and in what ways, are their experiences shaped by racism, sexual objectification and cultural homophobia?
- How do these experiences influence their visibility and the performativity of their identities?

## Methodological approach

With contacts with Imaan (a London-based support group for Muslim LGBTs and their families) and NPL (a charity for BME LGBTs), 11 semi-structured interviews were conducted with BME non-heterosexuals. Using interviews, as Longhurst (2010) explains, allows for the exploration of societal experiences and emotions constituted in and by space. Having fully transcribed these, I then coded and analysed them, enabling me to identify key themes that emerged across the data.

## Initial findings

- Many participants described their non-heterosexual and ethnic minority identities as incompatible with one another: **"I'm almost living dual minority lives and I genuinely can't see them coming together"** (Michael, Black British African, 19)
- Participants increased their own invisibility through perceived notions of acceptability, when visiting the London LGBT scene: **"It plays on my head the Asian thing...I try not to fit into it with my clothes and generally just the way I am"** (Junaid, British Pakistani, 20)
- The importance of gender expectations within ethnic communities was explicitly stressed: **"I'm an Indian man...I'm supposed to get married, have kids and carry on the family name"** (Balraj, Indian, 25)
- An interesting finding was the notion that ethnicity was deemed more important than sexuality in terms of participants' identifications: **"I think my Pakistani identity means more to me than my sexuality, that's why I have to hide my sexuality"** (Junaid, 20, British Pakistani)
- Most participants (9 out of the 11) reported being both fetishised and rejected on the basis of what they felt were their ethnic minority identities: **"One time I went out this old guy thought I was exotic and tried to cop off with me...and at times I've been rejected because of my skin colour"** (Luke, Black British Caribbean, 19)

## Discussion

- Hierarchical forms of thinking of ethnic and sexual identities, along with other markers of social difference, serve to highlight and heighten the unequal experiences of BME non-heterosexuals (Bassi, 2008). Engagement with the London LGBT scene was consequently inhibited through prejudice and alienation
- Sexuality within ethnic communities can be directly linked to gender identities and expectations. Thus, it is crucial to think of identities as intersectional (exploring how different social markers shape identity) and on-going negotiations across different places, times and contexts (Hopkins, 2010)
- Sexual objectification, heteronormative discourses in ethnic minority communities and simplistic racialised understandings of ethnic minority sexualities (e.g. heterosexuality, patriarchy) are tied up in forms of spatialised power that negate nascent BME non-heterosexual visibility

## Bibliography

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## Future research

- Issues of whiteness in the LGBT scene, that seemingly normalised sexual objectification and passive racism, could also be analysed further by incorporating postcolonial perspectives on sexuality and race
- The identification of ethnicity as more important than sexuality was an intriguing finding, future research could explore how such ideas are formed and the places in which these perspectives are significant