Chapter 9

Intersectional Influences of Sexual Orientation Microaggressions in South Africa

Deepesh Nirmaldas Dayal

Abstract

Following South Africa's democracy, a new constitution was adopted that allowed for freedom of all citizens. This legal protection has, however, not fully translated into a change in attitudes of members of society. Raising the topic of gender being on a spectrum in an African context is bound to result in controversy. Many African countries continue to criminalise same-sex relationships. Therefore it can be understood that the notion of a same-sex desire is seen to be un-African. A common view is that the spectrum of gender identities is a Western import. This chapter focuses on how cultural nuances hinder South African Indian gay men from fully expressing themselves within the South African Indian community. Non-acceptance of South African gay men by the South African Indian community is often based on factors such as religion, patriarchy, hetero-normativity and the idea of same-sex relationships being un-African. Theoretically, intersectionality is used to make sense of discrimination. Intersectionality also serves as a lens because it considers an individual has multiple identities based on race, culture, gender, social class, age and sexual orientation, which are derived from power, history and social relations. Within this chapter, accounts from research studies as well as e-zine articles will be used to demonstrate aspects of the intersectionality theory.

Keywords: South African Indian; LGBTQ+; microaggressions; intersectionality; religion; homosexuality

The self has many different identities. Usually, people are categorised by their core identities, such as race and sex, and often these identities intersect. Within the realm of my research interests, which investigates the identity development and microaggression experiences of South African Indian gay men, I explore the intersectional influences that contribute to their experiences. Born in South Africa, South African gay Indian men hold multiple identities: that of being South African, being of Indian descent and self-identifying as gay. Research on intersectionality informs us that due to our multiple identities, our life experiences diverge, where 'the simultaneous experiences of all the (different) identities result in different meanings and experiences than what could be captured by consideration (of a single category alone)' (Stirrat et al., 2008, p. 91).

This chapter will attempt to integrate some aspects of the multiple identities that South African Indian gay men hold, and how that leads to the microaggressions experienced by them. There will be a focus on the un-Africanness of identifying as LGBTQ+ in South Africa, patriarchy, collectivism and religion. These provide a unique examination of the lives of South African Indian people who identify as LGBTQ+. It must be remembered that the political climate that South African LGBTQ+ people live in, which was discussed in Chapter 6, is as much an intersectional influence as the other categories discussed in this chapter. The chapter will end with a discussion, which attempts to integrate the various intersectional categories. This discussion will involve a snapshot of the theme from a research study by the author of this chapter, Dayal (2021), focusing on 'Honour and Shame', which will be used to practically demonstrate intersectional discrimination.

What Are the Types of Intersectionalities and How Do We Make Sense of Them Using an Intersectionality Framework

Through an intersectionality lens, identities such as race, class and gender are seen to intersect with each other 'together or simultaneously to get some sense of the ways these spheres of inequality support each other to maintain the status quo' (Zerai, 2000, p. 185). People's identities are therefore pluralistic and layered, with linkages to history, social categorisation, social interactions and power relations. Through this interplay, people can be advantaged in one category, while simultaneously being disadvantaged in another. Despite these definitions and attempts to simplify the definition of intersectionality, we need to remember that intersectionality has definitional fluidity, as the intersections of our identities and the definition of our being are constantly evolving.

Crenshaw (1991), who provided a foundational framework for intersectionality, presents a threefold typology of intersectionality, namely structural, political and representational intersectionality. Structural intersectionality covers those oppressions based on race, gender, class and other identities which come from state structures. An example of this is a police force which may not be suitably trained to assist LGBTQ+ people with their reports of hate crimes or discrimination and end up perpetuating the same experience that victims ask them

to address. Political intersectionality occurs when political movements seek justice for certain groups of people – such as LGBTQ+ people or people from a certain race group – thus reinforcing inequality by excluding the needs of certain other groups. The final type, representational intersectionality, is visible when images of a group distort the complexities of the group.

The four main benefits of intersectionality are simultaneity, complexity, irreducibility and inclusivity (Carathathis, 2014). Many models exist that aim to add categories of influence on a list, ranked from most important to least important and these categories usually allow us to understand the various influences on one's identity. However, often these models are additive and simply add to each other, where some categories are privileged and some are disadvantaged. Categories are individually explained; however, their combined impact often is not. Within the intersectionality framework, a monistic approach is taken where multiple identities are seen to have unitary influences, where the different influences on identity are seen as all-encompassing, thus protecting against heteronormativity, elitism and power dynamics (Carastathis, 2014). In this way, intersectionality aims to be anti-categorical, emphasising that 'social life is considered too irreducibly complex, overflowing with multiple and fluid determinations of both subjects and structures, to make fixed categories anything but simplifying social fictions that produce inequalities in the process of producing differences' (p. 1173). Identities are seen to be more fluid, and the intersectionality approach aims to remedy the challenges faced by the monistic approaches which fail to capture simultaneous oppressions. This is of great value within all identity creation, and in South Africa, the categories of race, class and gender intersect on a historical and current basis.

Despite the theoretical victories of intersectionality theory, there are also some departures. Intersectionality theory has been criticised for being too vague, as the mechanism behind determining the multiple influences of identity is not clearly explained. For Ludvig (2006, p. 247), definitions of intersectionality are open to subjective bias. He asks: '[w]ho defines when, where, which and why particular differences are given recognition while others are not?'. It is also seen as too flexible, and to contain an inherent focus on categories, even as it claims a departure from them (Crenshaw, 2015). Despite claiming a desire to be anti-categorical, some researchers who use the intersectionality theory believe that there is merit in having categories, as it helps us to determine occurrences of sociocultural power and privilege present in interlocking identities (Shields, 2008). These challenges make intersectionality theory difficult to use in research studies. The outcomes of research studies using intersectionality as a framework, then, are often seen to be more descriptive than practical (Verloo, 2013).

Intersectionality of South African Indian LGBTQ+ Experiences in South Africa

LGBTQ+ people of all races face challenges in South Africa – though historically, White LGBTQ+ people tended to enjoy greater freedoms and protections (Gevisser, 1994). Especially South African Indian LGBTQ+ people have historically experienced intersectional challenges due to their race. These challenges were tied to politics, access to resources, infrastructure, education and other disadvantages. Today, despite Constitutional freedoms, aspects of these oppressions still exist. They are often attributed to the multifaceted influences of culture, race, class, gender, patriarchy and socioeconomic status. Some of the intersectional influences on the lives of South African Indian LGBTQ+ people will be discussed. Despite my reliance on identity categories, however, an effort will be made to integrate categorical influences, in keeping to the suggestions derived from the critiques of the intersectionality theory.

Un-Africanness of Identifying as LGBTQ+ in South Africa

The lived experiences of LGBTQ+ people of Indian descent in South Africa appear within the context of a racially and culturally pluralistic South Africa. Raising the topics of gender identity and sexual orientation diversity in South Africa continues to be contentious within some communities. Within the African context, same-sex desires are seen to be un-African, and these desires are labelled as a Western import (Msibi, 2011). It has been argued by some community leaders that same-sex desires have never existed within the African context and that these undesirable phenomena have been brought to the African continent through the movement of Western people, who brought their own cultures and identities (Msibi, 2011). Often, community leaders, who are mostly male, enforce dogmatic and patriarchal stances against LGBTQ+ people, promoting discrimination of same-sex relationships (Bennett & Reddy, 2015). This reminds us of the impact that patriarchy and the influence of hegemonic masculinity may have in encouraging the discrimination of LGBTQ+ people. The notion that LGBTQ+ identities are un-African creates an unsafe and challenging environment for LGBTQ+ people to navigate, as they find difficulties in openly expressing their gender identities and sexual orientation (Msibi, 2011). South African LGBTQ+ people of Indian descent are seen to navigate an identity within an African context, and therefore the rhetoric surrounding the un-Africanness of same-sex relationships creates an unsafe environment for them to develop this part of their identity in. The expressions of gender identity and sexual orientation are seen to intersect with a stifling community culture and a structural unsafeness related to same-sex identity views.

Hegemonic Masculinity and Patriarchy Within the South African Indian Community

Within different communities and in different cultures, there are different understandings of and associations with the concept of masculinity. Within the study of masculinities, there exist the understanding that there's a variety of types of masculinities, which can be dominant in a specific context to varying degrees (Connell, 2005). The type of masculinity which is called 'hegemonic' is the dominant type in most contexts and is seen to subjugate both women and diverging forms of masculinity. Often, gay men are perceived to be inferior by men who take on hegemonic masculine traits. Gay men are perceived in stereo-typical ways which are often linked to effeminate traits. A gay man in Dave's (2011) study reveals:

> You know I don't like this very stereotypical gay scene. The negative aspects if you say you're gay is that you're immediately placed in a box and that box is often you know very feminine guys and you know you see these guys everywhere… they carry little handbags around, um they have this squeaky voice and things like that. I just feel if you say you're gay then you get put into that box, which I don't see it as something that's positive because if I think you gay you can still be yourself, you don't need to feel gay and feel feminine.
>
> (Dave, 2011, p. 23)

Men who subscribe to the ideal of hegemonic masculinity often embrace 'social dominance orientations', meaning they attempt to dominate other people. Gay men are particularly vulnerable to this domination (Ratele & Suffla, 2010). Within the South African Indian community, the perpetrators of gender identity and sexual orientation-based microaggressions are usually male (Bonthuys & Erlank, 2012; Coopoosamy, 2018; Martin & Govender, 2013; Moonsammy, 2009; Sheldon, 2016). Within the South African Indian communities, men have historically been the financial providers for their families and due to the power associated with money, the communities have been largely patriarchal (Carrim, 2015; Patel, Govender, Paruk, & Ramgoon, 2006). This has made people who are dependent on these men for financial resources vulnerable, and these people are often made to follow certain rules set out by the patriarchal societies, which may disadvantage them.

Due to the patriarchal nature of the South African Indian community, positions of power held by men can be used to subjugate other men who they do not seem to approve of – often gay men. Connell summarises this as the subjection of gay men to 'political and cultural exclusions, cultural abuse, legal violence, street violence, economic discrimination and personal boycotts' (2005, p. 78). Traditional masculine values are believed to be learned in early childhood development, where attitudes such as status-seeking, antifemininity, heteronormativity, a focus on athleticism and the lack of emotional displays are taught as accepted

behaviours for Indian boys and men (Martin & Govender, 2013). There is also debate that the portrayal of men as being muscular and physically strong may emanate from the representation of Indian men in Bollywood movies, which often display strong and dominant heroes and villains with muscular bodies and physically dominant traits (Kaur, 2017; Martin & Govender, 2013). Younger boys and men who behave in ways that are in opposition to these traditional ways of being are discriminated against (Dayal, 2021). South African Indian gay men are marginalised by the intersections of culture, patriarchy and traditional gender norms. These South African gay Indian men feel threatened to express their masculinity in a way different than expected, as they fear being labelled and 'othered' in a negative way.

Collectivism

Collectivism is a focus on the importance of the group over the individual and serves as an important identity marker of Indian communities (Triandas, 1995). Indian people often construct their identities based on familial and communal markers of belonging. Aspects such as community beliefs, community relationships and community daily norms and practices are a regular part of the lives of Indian people. These practices are inherited and seen as a respectable part of community life. Interactions with family members and members of the community are seen as being of utmost importance and a key foundation to building a strong identity. In South Africa, the nuclearisation of Indian families was believed to be a product of Apartheid, under which systems Indian people in South Africa were moved to areas that involved high-density living (Khan, 2012). These areas produced unique living circumstances for South African Indian people, as they often lived in small homes, within close proximity, and shared communal resources. This made community interactions easy, as neighbours would know about each other's comings and goings due to the proximity in which people lived. A result was the collective responsibility that community members often took in terms of shared households and resources.

Some Indian people responded positively to collective living: many Indian people have found merit in living in communities where they feel supported (see e.g. Pillay, 2015). However, LGBTQ+ people who live within close proximity to relatives believe that collective living makes it difficult for them to fully express their sexual orientations (Bonthuys & Erlank, 2012; Moonsammy, 2009). This is due to the fact that many LGBTQ+ people feel that they have to constantly live up to traditional norms and values, such as getting married, starting a family and, for men, being breadwinners. This made living a life that was different from the traditional norm difficult (Moonsammy, 2009). The end of Apartheid signalled an opportunity for Indian people to move away from these restricted areas. South African Indian people are now free to live in areas all across the country. However, the culture of collectivism remains. Some people find great joy in these living arrangements, whilst other people find limitations and challenges to creating a true identity amidst a collective lifestyle. The impacts of politics, culture

and sexuality are seen to co-exist during the process of creating an identity that is not always accepted and celebrated. Collective living may result in the policing of conservative and community practices that are often unsupportive of same-sex relationships.

Religious Practice

An important part of collectivism within Indian communities is the practice of praying together. Within South Africa, religion and prayer form an important part of the national identity. People find great comfort in praying and as a result, South Africa is rich in religions, places of prayer and community support systems that emerge from religious organisations. There is often a certain cultural identity that emerges from each religious organisation, which comes with its own community practices, ways of life and beliefs about the world.

Whilst conflicts between religion and same-sex attractions have been well documented (Bonthuys & Erlank, 2012), some parents of children who identify as gay are known to seek solace in religion when making sense of their children's sexual orientation (Livingston & Fourie, 2016). Despite the benefits that emerge from religious affiliations, studies in South Africa have shown that some people with strong religious beliefs were seen to discriminate against LGBTQ+ people at a higher rate than the national average (Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Ganga-Limando, 2014; Mukwevho & Fhumulani, 2018). There are also some instances of reparative sexual orientation therapy in South Africa, in which gay men are subjected to therapeutic practices aimed to change their sexual orientations (Van Zyl, Nel, & Govender, 2018). These men are made to believe that identifying as gay is a sin.

The incompatibility of religion and LGBTQ+ identities within the Indian community has been written about in many studies in both South Africa and other countries (Bhugra, 1997a, 1997b; Bonthuys & Erlank, 2012; Dave, 2011; Jaspal, 2012; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010; Minwalla, Rosser, Feldman, & Varga, 2005). Religious practices within the South African Indian community mainly emphasise the importance of religion as a vehicle of living a life that involves family, marriage and procreation (Bonthuys & Erlank, 2012; Hassim, 2013). Marriage is commonly understood as being between a man and a woman, and LGBTQ+ people who have different thoughts about what signifies a marriage are seen as unnatural. The close ties of community to religion in South Africa make it difficult for South African LGBTQ+ people of Indian descent to openly express their sexual orientation out of fear of being discriminated against on the grounds of religion. South African Indian gay men often believe that religion is used as a way to instil fear in them and that, often, religious texts are interpreted in ways that disadvantage them. Religious dogmas that stigmatise LGBTQ+ people are often expressed by conservative religious community leaders who display hegemonic masculine traits. However, some religious leaders openly accept same-sex relationships. Some researchers have reported instances where the 'community has been accepting of same-sex marriage, there is no fuss about it. Society does not frown on it either' (Coopoosamy, 2018). These religious leaders provide a safe

place for LGBTQ+ people to practice their religion in a non-threatening way. Despite challenges faced within religious communities, in a recent study, Dayal (2021) showed that South African Indian gay men still hold a strong connection to religion, and they find benefits in prayer and religious practice. Coopoosamy (2018) recorded a similar sentiment in his study when quoting from an interview with an openly gay man in South Africa. This interviewee told him that religion is a powerful vehicle for him to make sense of the world and that:

> All these contradicting things confused me because even at that time I knew I did not choose to be gay and why would such compassionate and a merciful God send me to hell for something that I did not choose?
>
> (Coopoosamy, 2018)

Therefore, he firmly sees the good in religion and finds the interpretations of religion that oppress gay men as being unfair and confusing. Another South African Indian gay man in Dave's (2011) study shared these sentiments: 'I don't believe in a God that is um twisted or vengeful and I don't think he'd make people this way and want them to be another way for some unknown point' (Dave, 2011, p. 25).

The release that religion provides gay men was further revealed in a study on the coming-out experiences of South African gay men and lesbian women (Nair, 2020). In this study, a gay man expressed:

> I do hold my religion very dear to me it's not something that I want to let go of. I was able to sit on my prayer mat again and I'll never forget the very first conversation I had with God after many many years was, 'I'm so sorry but I'm gay' that was the first thing that I said and 'you're going to kill me and strike me dead now's your time just strike me dead because I've had it I cannot keep this lie going on I need to talk to you I need you'. You know I broke down in tears and from that point on I was like ok that felt good I actually need to do more of these conversations and I started praying more often […].
>
> (Nair, 2020, p. 55)

What is evident is that many South African gay Indian men believe that identifying as gay is a part of one's being and one's sexual orientation should be lived out and not changed based on societal expectations. Some gay men are made to feel ashamed about their sexual orientation due to societal views about the incompatibility of identifying as LGBTQ+ and community values. This balance between honour and shame is discussed next.

Honour and Shame

This section of the chapter focuses on a theme from the aforementioned study by Dayal (2021), which focused on the microaggression experiences of South African Indian gay men. One of the themes accounted for the major focus on honour within the South African Indian community and the emphasis on the shame that emerges from supposed non-conforming behaviours from members of the community.

'What Will People Say?'

Honour and respect are strong notions that form the foundations of self-worth and status within Indian communities (Bhugra, 1997a, 1997b; Dave, 2011; Dayal, 2021). Members of the family are often reminded that they need to be responsible for their actions as their actions are firmly tied to the honour of their families. There is a clear association with other collectivist cultures where members of the Indian community are expected to sacrifice aspects of individuality to please group beliefs (Dayal, 2021; Triandas, 1995). Within Dayal's (2021) study, a participant mentioned that when he openly expressed his sexual orientation, his mother was more concerned about community messages than his feelings. He reveals: 'I am very close with my mother and it was particularly hard on her, you know, and one of her biggest concerns was, "What were people going to say?"' (Dayal, 2021, p. 69). Families often discount the feelings and experiences of individuals, giving importance to the views of the community. There is often an embarrassment attached to men identifying as gay within the Indian community (Dave, 2011; Dayal, 2021). These messages are direct microinsults as they openly express condemnation of gay men. However, there are also microinvalidations, where the lived experiences of gay men are being ignored, and their sense of vulnerability is not supported.

Another participant in Dayal's (2021) study revealed an experience of telling his mother about being in an open same-sex relationship. She expressed condemnation:

> I told my mother that I want to bring my boyfriend to a family function. Only she knew that we were dating. She said that he [Participant's boyfriend] was too effeminate. She was more worried about other people's opinions. I was so fed up of always living in this dark cloud of the community. It was always, 'What would people say, what would people think. You are supposed to have a girlfriend, not this! This is not normal'. So silly! It really hurt.
>
> (Dayal, 2021, p. 70)

These microinvalidations are linked to assumptions that identifying as gay is unnatural and being in a same-sex relationship is not normal. The participant in

Dayal's (2021) study is made to believe that what he is doing is not right and is against the natural order of society.

Many South African Indian gay men and lesbian women have experienced negative responses upon openly expressing their sexual orientation (Bonthuys & Erlank, 2012; Dave, 2011; Moonsammy, 2009). Studies in India and the United Kingdom have also confirmed these experiences of gay men being discriminated against when expressing their sexual orientation (Bhugra, 1997a; Jaspal, 2012; Medora, 2007; Mimiaga et al., 2013; Træen, Martinussen, Vittersø, & Saini, 2009). Studies in South Africa by Dave (2011) and Moonsammy (2009) revealed that the message of non-acceptance of gay men and lesbian women within the South African Indian community is due to the idea that they are sexually deviant, and the open expression of sexual orientation will bring shame to the family name. The underlying rejection is often tied to the religious beliefs and the collective culture that values marriage and procreation, which, according to members of the community, can only be achieved through heterosexual marriage and a heteronormative way of life.

The fixation on what people will say is also rooted in the practice of gossip. The free flow of information between community members is said to be common practice within the South African Indian community (Dayal, 2021). Therefore there is always a high degree of vigilance around what is being shared with community members – out of fear that the messages will be perceived in a negative way, or the messages will be used to spread gossip about something that will potentially bring shame to the family. Due to this, many gay men and lesbian women of Indian descent compartmentalise their identities out of fear of being ridiculed or discriminated against. Gay men and lesbian women 'tend to be narrowly portrayed [… they] are hidden groups within our small community that have remained largely invisible' (Pillay, 2017).

The narrow focus on community over the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ people within the South African Indian community results from intersections of culture, religion, heteronormativity and societal expectations. What is evident is that the community views and opinions are prioritised over the well-being of LGBTQ+ people. These priorities are especially visible in the question most frequently asked of gay Indian individuals: 'When are you getting married?'

'When Are You Getting Married?'

Marriage is a very important part of life within the Indian community. Fatima Meer noted that 'inwardly family ties and religion keep them [the Indian community] firmly together' (1999, p. 103), and marriages are a way to accomplish this. Despite changes in the forms of relationships and the different concepts of intimacy that are becoming increasingly common, Indian communities continue to place great importance on the traditional heteronormative institution of marriage (Hassim, 2013).

The pressures to engage in heterosexual marriages were reported by many participants in Dayal's (2021) study. Participants who are openly gay frequently

expressed variations on this remark of one participant: 'During my twenties, they [family members] forever went on about when am I going to get married' (Dayal, 2021, p. 73). It must be noted that these participants confirmed that the questions they received focused on the heterosexual idea of marriage. Heterosexual marriages are seen to be influential in ensuring the continuation of cultural practices (Jaspal, 2014). Marriage is understood as a means to bring families together and gay men often experience great pressure from their families to marry women – in order for the family to keep family honour and maintain a certain image and status in society (Jaspal, 2012). There are also instances of people believing that if a gay man marries a woman he will be 'cured' and that his sexual orientation will revert to heterosexuality (Bonthuys & Erlank, 2012). There is a stigma associated with waiting too long to get married. Families who do not openly allow their gay sons to reveal their sexual orientation to the community fear that their 'secret' will be revealed if their sons do not get married before a certain age.

According to a participant in Dayal's study, some family members would curiously say: 'It's time you get married or else people are going to start wondering, they're going to think something is wrong with you' (Dayal, 2021, p. 74). This microinsult from a family member made the participant feel inferior. There may be cultural norms that dictate when one should get married; hence, the influence of cultural norms, traditional beliefs, gender roles and norms and societal expectations are at interplay in adding pressure on gay men to getting married.

The preoccupation of family members with heteronormative marriages leads gay men to conceal their same-sex relationships, out of fear of discrimination. One participant from Dayal's (2021) study said:

> Every time I had to hear my family go on about my brother's beautiful wife, and how 'you should get one too', I wish I could tell my family about my beautiful boyfriend, they know he exists, but I can't even talk about him. He had to remain hidden. I had to live this alternate reality, hiding important parts of my identity, just to not rock the boat.
>
> (Dayal, 2021, p. 84)

The participant, who is an openly gay man, is in a comfortable relationship with another man. However, he feels hesitant to reveal this relationship to his family. This is due to his family inadvertently rejecting his relationship without him. His family is focused on him getting married to a woman. As they are aware that he is gay, the insinuation that he should get married to a woman is seen as a microinsult, as his sexual orientation is not treated with respect. Consequently, conversations about his sexual orientation lead to insensitive responses from his family members.

Conclusion

The identity creation of LGBTQ+ people is marked by many intersectional influences. These influences have been shown to have the potential to

simultaneously disadvantage and advantage an individual. South African gay Indian men are believed to experience intersections of different parts of their identities, which make their individual and collective experiences unique. These intersections often lead to accounts of microaggression which negatively impact the lives of these South African gay Indian men and other people with diverging gender or sexual orientations within the South African Indian community. Despite these challenges, several research studies highlight how many LGBTQ+ people reflect on their experiences and attempt to make sense of the intersectional influences that are present in their lives, in an attempt to gain freedoms within these structures. South African gay Indian men are seen to attempt to transcend societal shame, working towards a more whole sense of self.

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