

Ph.D. Research Proposal

Doctoral Program in

Political and Social Sciences

Department of Political Science and Social Sciences
University of Bologna

**Identity & The Insult among
Marginalised Queer Minorities:
A Sociological Study**

Fares Bou Nassif
May 10, 2018

Chapter 1: Introduction

This proposal is centred around two concurrent activities, one ethnographic and the other literary, leading towards one aim: furthering our understanding the needs, struggles, and contributions of what we can define as marginalised queer minorities or MQMs.

Reviewing previous work and the current state of academia regarding the topics at hand displays a framework for how scholars such as David Valentine and Didier Eribon have gone about their work, with commentary and criticism by the likes of Susan Stryker, Judith Butler, Eve K. Sedgwick, and others. The writings and theories developed by them, and several others, are further described in chapter 2 of this proposal. While this framework has been extremely valuable thus far, its inherent limitations are visible once we look into and further comprehend the nature of the MQMs, the subject of our study.

Initially, the plan to study MQMs sprung from a desire to give a voice to fetishist and BDSM circles in society, many of whom are content in their closets, happily living two distinct personas. These groups, especially the more veteran among them, consider their invisibility a key aspect of their sexual identity. This also applies to some groups within transgender and genderqueer circles, as described by Valentine.¹ As my research expanded and formed towards a scholarly, academic direction, the idea form into a more defined and comprehensive representation.

Let us, then, give the MQM a tentative definition, one that can be further refined over time. A MQM refers to groups that consist of: anybody over 60, regardless of gender, since most research on discrimination fails to consider the de-sexualisation of older age groups; the MQM is intersex, it is transmen's opinions about female-bodied people being disregarded, it is the asexual's sexuality being brushed off as non-existent, it is the doll fetishist, the male submissive, little, or baby; MQM is the monogamous couple in the fetish community, it is the polyamorous in hetero-normative communities, the non-heteronormative cis-male. The disabled, the 'fat', the individual that many cannot imagine sexualising or fetishising because they are not within their realm of what can be attractive. A grasp of cultural differences is also essential:² it is the gay man who is part of normal society in Europe but flies back home to Saudi and his freedoms, truths, and agency is eliminated; she is the lesbian with a girlfriend in Berlin and a husband in Beirut, and no voice or agency in her communities. The MQM is the marginalised within communities that have been marginalised and should know better than to inflict that discrimination on one from within, but often do.

¹ Valentine 2007: Introduction

² Simmons 2014; Boushnak & Boshnaq 2017

Current literature completely forgets to even study many of these. It could also be that many of these groups don't want to be studied. Their invisibility is their shield, in many cases. There then becomes a need to develop an ethnographic method for the approach and study of genderqueer individuals across various cities within Europe and the Middle East, one that takes into account the hidden nature of many of the people I am proposing to study.³ Statistical research and more quantitative methods should also be considered, but they could prove impossible in some situations. Chapter 3 provides a review of the various possible methods, leading towards further exploration during the coming year.

Much of the work to be done is spread across the coming 18 months, and chapter 4 takes us, briefly, through the milestones that themselves will generate further milestones, wrapping up the directions of this research proposal.

Chapter 2: Where are we?

A key purpose of this research is to unearth, and understand, the varied and ever-changing identities MQMs (who Goffman would refer to as the 'stigmatised') create for themselves, hope for, and propagate in their closeted communities.

David Valentine's conviction that transgenderism transcends a singular social identity denies this reality (in context, for very good reason).⁴ Where identity might be too complex for a genderqueer individual, Didier Eribon's stipulation that silencing it reinforces the inferiority and vulnerability of the stigmatised, insulting them, holds true in practice.⁵

Furthermore, a recent study by Schnabel has shown evidence of the importance of an individual's sexual identity in their social and political stance,⁶ thereby emphasising the value of understanding the contribution that the MQM can provide to queered circles and their representation.

³ Eribon 2004, p. 31: "only people who already self-identified as gay are likely to take the step of buying a gay magazine" elaborates on the logic of only those who are willing to come out will be able to represent the MQM, and most MQMs don't come out simply because they feel that they would be attacked if they did, thereby making any representation near impossible

⁴ Valentine 2008, p. 27: "I don't think that people shouldn't use 'transgender.' I simply think we need to be careful about what we mean by it"

⁵ Eribon 2004, p. 51: "the control over homosexuality rests on this imposed silence and this forced simulation, as it does on the feelings of guilt and inferiority inevitably produced"

⁶ Schnabel 2018

To cover the literature and research present at the moment in its fullest would take too long, and much of what exists is not directly relevant to the wider aims of this research. Suffice it to say that the bibliography at the end of this document reflects a diversity of thoughts and readings around the subject,⁷ representing a deficiency of thought on the plight of the MQM specifically and the diversity of issues within queer minorities in general. Since the only ‘minority’ in queer culture that has received attention is that of the transgender, the rest of this chapter pays particular attention to Eribon’s work on the insult, and its relevance here, and only highlights primary sources on transgender studies and asks questions that will be answered through ethnographic, phenomenological, and quantitative research (mostly) to be conducted in coming years.

The two phases explained here help divide the work into two distinct entities that later merge to create the whole: phase 1 is about understanding our subject from a theoretical, critical perspective, while phase 2 brings to light the study of the actual groups of MQM across borders and across societies and social groups. Later, merging a deeper understanding of existing research with a rich ethnographic foundation for further research sets the stage for many questions to be posed and, hopefully, comprehensively answered.

Phase 1: Insult & Identity

While this is a conversation about the freedom of individuals to exist in a social order that does not insult them, let us not forget Judith Butler’s gentle reminder that “sometimes it is the very disjunction between gender identity and sexual orientation”⁸ that constitutes our eroticism and gender: our acceptance of our personal identity is driven by our understanding of our desires and our eroticism.

In doing so, we must consider the Insult as a performance that carries causality:

“insult is a performative utterance. Its function is to … establish or to renew the barrier between ‘normal’ people and those Goffman calls ‘stigmatised’ people and to cause the internalisation of the barrier within the individual being insulted.”⁹

To be able to approach MQMs appropriately, we must remember that they have internalised the insult, that they are angry or sad, that they have been inferiorised by the dominant discourses on and around

⁷ More about this is in the note at the start of the bibliography

⁸ Butler 2004, p. 80

⁹ Eribon 2004, p. 17

their communities. Thus, the idea of the stigmatisation and internalisation of the insult within MQMs is at the core of the investigation proposed by this research, and its direct and indirect correlation with healthy social interactions, the social economy, and the formulation of a person's social identity.

The eroticism and desire that MQMs need to help form the person that they become is equivalent to the struggle that homosexuals dealt with in the past when attempting to accept their personal desire and its relationship with their identity, thereby creating a parallel between this research and the work of Eribon on the homosexual question: to understand the repression of the MQM, we must understand how the insult has influenced their behaviour in the same way it has affected the gay community.

Valentine sums up a commonly accepted stance within transgender studies, describing the limitations of a simplified social identity:

“Identity fails when there is complexity: ... humans have lifeworlds too complex to be accounted for by the restrictive ontologies of identity.... Jettisoning “identity” may, indeed, be necessary in order to open up the full consequences of its role in shaping modern selves”¹⁰

His work across *Imagining Transgender* explains this argument clearly,¹¹ and creates a valid case for the need to go beyond basic understandings of the term transgender and its many and complex meanings and associations.

However, could we define a variant understanding of social identity that permits MQMs to form a loud declaration of “I am queer” that fights against the inferiorisation of their self-hood and proclaims them strong, capable of resisting the stigma of the insult? As Eribon explains¹² and countless others have emphasised, our need to proclaim our identity is a key show of power and confidence that is an essential first step in furthering our ability to fight for our own voice, and would be essential for MQMs in creating their own spheres of conversation.

Again, Schnabel recently shows that a deeper comprehension of the attitudes of individuals vis a vis their sexuality and the drives and desires that motivate them give queered persons a special investment in their polity and their social attempts at integration:¹³ being part of society is fundamentally a state that they approach from the lens of other ideologies and belief systems, but each of those is further revitalised by the state of freedoms they expect to receive with regards to their sexual identity.

¹⁰ Valentine 2014

¹¹ Valentine 2007: Introduction

¹² Eribon 2004, p. 27

¹³ Schnabel 2018

This is another key question of this research, one that Richard Jenkins attempts to question as well:

"our cognitive maps no longer fit the social landscape around us. We encounter people whose identities and natures are not clear to us. We may no longer even be sure about ourselves."

Phase 2: The Unobserved MQM

In some cases, MQMs tend to hide themselves, avoiding representation and observation. This is particularly true of certain BDSM and fetish communities and individuals, as well as, in some regards, polyamorous and polygamous groups.¹⁴ Is there a way to surmount this hurdle, and reach out to them without compromising their status? Eribon explains that an identity that is "sayable and showable" is essential for a community's improved social status, even for those who reject the 'scene' and remain hidden.¹⁵

We also look into the behaviour within mainstreamed queer communities of people of colour and other ethnic or social minorities: certain familial and social cultures still force individuals from otherwise normalised queer cultures to hide in their closets. Marginalised minorities in queer culture are not limited to those whose queerness is misunderstood or confusing; while in cities like Berlin queerness does not need to hide, it does in many other major cities, in Europe and especially in the Middle East.

What is the state of queer society in the Middle East? How different is it from various European cities? What about the ever-present travel and dialogue between the two? Does a person from Doha living in Paris behave the same in Beirut as they would in Doha, or in Paris? What is the influence of geography on behaviour in society among MQMs? Does living abroad help, like Eribon's homosexual man moving to the city, or leaving their own country?

Research on the MQM is scarce to begin with, and I have found nothing describing MQMs across cultures or in divergent locations. There is bound to be conversation about these topics, and further research should help expose that.

¹⁴ a quick review of the predominant conversations, at any given time, on Fetlife's Kinky & Popular reflect a desire to remain in the shadows, mostly due to the repercussions and complications of being or coming "out".

¹⁵ Eribon 2004, p. 27

Chapter 3: What now? Directions, Goals, Methods

Aside from traditional critical analysis of texts on the wider subjects of the insult, identity, and transgender or queer studies, in an effort to draw parallels with the MQM community and build a structuralist discourse around common issues, a large factor in the upcoming research will be the ethnographic study involved.

Moving forward, certain directions are considered more fruitful, and less heavily explored, than others, key among them the similarities and differences between queer minorities in various cultures. Looking into Middle Eastern Studies, we find a distinct shortage (compared to European or Western research) of discourse on queer topics outside mainstreamed lesbian and gay research; identities and sexualities that transcend gender binaries or heteronormative traditions tend to be non-present, or existing in distinct spheres of discourse, despite evidence of non-heteronormative behaviour in various societies in the area.

While their presence in the wider discourse is not in itself an important driving force for this research, the lack of work to fall back on creates a space that needs to be examined more thoroughly to help elucidate the points of contention within the research.

Before a wider study of queerness in the Middle East and Europe can be considered, we must comprehend the general state of identity involved, and the fears of individuals within MQMs: this is where the shortage of existing commentary in academia and in media becomes problematic.

To find a balance, some examples might be more useful to explore. Potential research papers that could be developed and published over the first year of the programme include:

- a study of openly submissive heterosexual male sissies: social acceptance, workplace pressure, and life in general
- urbanising transgenderism in the Middle East, and the sociology of coming out
- are you woman enough? the insult in queer society in Arab and Eastern Europe for women over 50 years of age
- queering heterosexuality: how queerness as a non-heterosexual identity limits wider discourse
- the rise of feminism in the Arab World and its derogatory association with lesbianism
- a survey of discourses of the sexuality of the asexual person

Many of these will necessitate an ethnographic study heavily grounded in field work, sometimes with a focus on testimony from the lens of the marginalised. The way MQM communities talk about

themselves is as important here as how we observe them, and observing their day to day behaviour, struggles, and thoughts is key to understanding the plight of the MQM in the long-term.

Chapter 4: What next? Plan, Test, Work

After the first year, topics can be gleaned from the findings of the above suggestions, branching deeper into the sociological implications of each of these studies, and the wider implications of considering these findings in the context of various regions within Europe and the Arab World.

Further steps are grounded in the findings of the first few months, and possibly the first year, of research. Building on field notes and the results of more specific research case studies suggested in the previous chapter, a plan can be formulated.

Expectations can, however, be summarised here: the first year will be heavily ethnographic and will continue to dig into existing publishing around the key topics of the insult, identity, and a Middle Eastern review of queerness, all of which will possibly need to review scholarly and popular publication to generate useful and actionable work on the problem.

Throughout, empirical findings and anecdotal analysis will be the main driving force for expanding on the work proposed here. The possibility of publishing within the fields of gender studies, transgender research, and Middle Eastern (queer and feminist) sociology will bring further richness to our current understanding of the topics at hand. Ultimately, the next year can provide greater clarity that would either be brought about through this research, or through evidence generated by an as yet nascent gender and queer academia in the Arab world.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

The fundamental theoretical framework moves around ethnographic field work that helps elaborate on the current state of the MQM communities across the Arab World and Europe, while revolving around Didier Eribon's statement on the Insult as a driving energy behind the homosexual's understanding of their role in society.

Building on Eribon, this research draws parallels between his argument on the homosexual with the state of the marginalised queer minorities in both major European cities and major Middle Eastern cities. This analysis leads to a potentially new view of discrimination and representation.

Is there a case to be made for the importance of wider representation that is inclusive of even the smallest cultures within queer groups? Do these MQMs want to become more visible? Do they have a case they hope to present? Is the Insult a limiting factor in their ability to express themselves? Where do they stand within society and their, smaller, respective communities? How effective is it to apply existing queer and trans studies on the wider non-heteronormative spectrum to understanding their specific problems and issues?

These many questions are all active concerns of this proposal, and can lead to numerous enlightening findings within the scope of the research. Ultimately, and fundamentally, there are too many questions and most of them have yet to be answered. Hopefully, this proposal summarised the current state from which I hope to begin further investigation, and reflects my capacity to do so.

References

Many references in the bibliography refer to complete books; while the fullness of the book itself does not fit within the context of the proposed research, it still managed to influence my work and therefore it is inaccurate to simply select chapters or sections of the text cited: where specific parts are individually important, they are cited in the proposal. Most of what is in the bibliography acts as a foundational basis for a deeper understanding of existing writing on the topic at hand.

- Beckmann, A. (2009). *The social construction of sexuality and perversion: Deconstructing sadomasochism*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bourdieu, P. (2001). *Masculine Domination*. (R. Nice, Trans.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Boushnak, L., & Boshnaq, M. (2017, December 30). Coming Out in Lebanon. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/30/world/middleeast/lebanon-coming-out.html>
- Bray, Z. (2008). Ethnographic Approaches. In Porta, D. D., & Keating M., *Approaches & Methodologies in the Social Sciences: A Pluralist Perspective*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Butler, J. (1997). *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing Gender*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Eribon, D. (2004). *Insult and the Making of the Gay Self* (M. Lucey, Trans.). Durham & London, UK: Duke University Press. (Original work published 1999).
- Gilman, C. (2015). *Our Androcentric Culture*. Lanham: Start Classics.
- Glover, D & Kaplan, C. (2005). *Genders*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Green, A. (2007). Queer Theory and Sociology: Locating the Subject and the Self in Sexuality Studies. *Sociological Theory* 25(1), 26-45. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9558.2007.00296.x
- Jenkins, R. (2004). *Social Identity*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Love, H. (2014) Queer. *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 1(1-2), 172-176.
- McCann, H. (2016). Epistemology of the Subject: Queer Theory's Challenge to Feminist Sociology. *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 44(3), 224-243. The Feminist Press. Retrieved May 10, 2018, from Project MUSE database.
- Namaste, Ki. (1994). The Politics of Inside-Out - Queer Theory, Poststructuralism, and a Sociological Approach to Sexuality. *Sociological Theory* 12(2). pp. 220-231.
- Nordling, N., Sandnabba, N. K., Santtila, P., & Alison, L. (2006). Differences and similarities between gay and straight individuals involved in the sadomasochistic subculture. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 50(2-3), 41-57.
- Ortmann, D. & Sprott, R. A. (2012). *Sexual outsiders: Understanding BDSM sexualities and communities*. New York City: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Schmitter, P. C. (2016). The design of social and political research. *Chinese Political Science Review*, 1(4), 577-609.
- Schnabel, L. (2018). Sexual Orientation and Social Attitudes. *Socius: Sociological Research for a Dynamic World*, 4, 237802311876955. doi: 10.1177/2378023118769550

- Sedgwick, E. K. (1993). Queer performativity: Henry James's The art of the novel. *GLQ: a journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 1(1), 1-16.
- Sedgwick, E. K. (1990). *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Seidman, S. (2009). The Productivity of the Closet. In C. Lemert *Social Theory : The Multicultural and Classic Readings*. Boulder, CO: Taylor & Francis.
- Simmons, H. (2014). Dying for love: homosexuality in the Middle East. *Human rights and human welfare*. (Issue on Human Rights in the Middle East and North Africa), pp 160–172. <http://www.du.edu/korbel/hrhw/researchdigest/mena/Love.pdf>
- Stone, S. (2014). Guerrilla. *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 1(1-2), 92-96.
- Stryker, S. (2008). Transgender history, homonormativity, and disciplinarity. *Radical History Review*, 2008(100), 145-157.
- Valentine, D. (2014). Identity. *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 1(1-2), 103-106.
- Valentine, D. (2007). *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Weeks, J. (1986). The Invention of Sexuality. *Sexuality*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Weeks, J. (1993). Sexual Identification Is a Strange Thing. In C. Lemert (ed.), *Social Theory*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Weeks, J. (1998). The sexual citizen. *Theory, culture & society*, 15(3-4), 35-52.
- Weinberg, T. S. (2006). Sadomasochism and the social sciences: A review of the sociological and social psychological literature. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 50(2-3), 17-40.