

# Navigating identities: subtle and public agency of bicultural gay youth.

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*Journal of Homosexuality* 64(5), 654-670

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## Abstract

Young people who discover their sexual attraction to people of the same sex often go through a period of ambivalence or distress, especially when they grow up in an environment that condemns homosexuality. The Dutch socio-political context makes the expression of same-sex desires among those with non-Dutch roots even more complicated and risky, as prevailing schemes of interpretation render the two identities incompatible. This study explores the expressions of same-sex desires and identities as well as the different forms of agency of bicultural gay youth. In-depth interviews with fourteen young adults reveal how young people negotiate bicultural identities in Dutch society that brings to the fore complexities in managing diverse sexual identities and strong religious and cultural affiliations in tandem. Their strategies have the effect of questioning dominant discourses and transcend the oppositional dichotomy between sexual and ethnic forms of socio-cultural otherness.

Keywords: bicultural, gay, identity, same-sex desire, agency, ethnic minorities, young people

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## Introduction

Amsterdam is one of the strong competitors for the title 'gay capital of the world'. Its 2015 gay pride canal parade, boasting 80 floats, attracted hundreds of thousands visitors from all over the world (Stichting Amsterdam Gay Pride, 2015). Many Dutch visitors – mostly heterosexual – celebrate the parade as a carnival that symbolizes the nation's diverse identity. The gay pride parade can thus be seen as iconic for the way homosexuality is defined and performed in the Netherlands. The freedom to choose a partner of the same sex is broadly accepted as a sexual right in the Netherlands (Keuzenkamp, 2011). Moreover, (homo) sexuality is seen as fundamental to one's identity, expressing an authentic self. Nevertheless, this discourse of sexual rights and (homo) sexual identities is not shared by every citizen in the Netherlands. Religious and ethnic cultural groups often espouse divergent discourses on sexuality (see for example Cense, 2014; Ganzevoort, van der Laan & Olsman, 2011; Kugle, 2014;

Shannahan, 2009). The acceptance of homosexuality is significantly lower in ethnic and religious minority communities. Where only 17% of native Dutch citizens find it problematic if their child chose a partner of the same sex, this rises to 33% for Antillean and Surinam people and 75% for Turkish and Moroccan people living in the Netherlands (Huijnk, 2014).

A recent Dutch study revealed that homosexuality is seen as problematic in ethnic minority communities not only because certain sexual behaviour or relations are seen as sinful, but also because homosexuality is associated with crossing gender norms, behaving in an 'unmanly' or 'not feminine' way, undermining social bonds, violating borders between private and public domains, bringing shame to the family, and breaking the general silence about sexuality (Kriek, Vonk, Heuts, Bos, Ganzevoort & Doodeman, 2015). Another study revealed that family members are subjected to severe social pressure when the sexual orientation of their son, daughter, brother or sister becomes public. As a response family members try to hide this 'shame' and keep the sexual orientation of their family member secret. So it is not only the gay youth themselves who suffer from social restrictions and a lack of freedom but also their families (Duyvendak, Bos & Hekma, 2010; Kriek et al, 2015). Although these studies provide very useful information about conflicting social norms and limitations for ethnic minority young people, few researchers have investigated how young people themselves exercise agency to navigate between pitfalls and negotiate their identities. This is particularly important as research is showing increasingly complex ways in which young people navigate their sexual desires and identities (McCormack, Wignall & Anderson, 2015; Savin-Williams, 2005). In order to make sense of this complexity, our study explored how bicultural young people in the Netherlands express their same-sex desires and practices and which strategies they use to negotiate their double affiliation.

### **Constructions of sexual desires, practices and identities**

The academic term 'sexual orientation' refers to the configuration of three categories: (1) sexual desires, (2) sexual practices, and (3) sexual identity. Empirical studies show that these three categories often do not converge (Kuyper, 2006). The average age of becoming aware of sexual attraction to the same sex is around eight, while connection to the term 'homosexual' occurs around 13 and self-definition as 'homosexual' or 'gay' around 17 (Savin-Williams, 1998). However, this sequence is not a universal phenomenon, as several studies show the essential role of culture and power in the processes that relate to the construction of sexual desires, practices, and sexual and gender identities (Ben-Ari, 2002; Blackwood, 2000; Dubé & Savin-Williams, 1999; Madureira, 2007; Wekker, 2006). In their study on ethnic sexual minority male youths Dubé and Savin-Williams (1999) found that ethnic minority youths varied in their sexual identity sequence. The majority of African American young men in their sample engaged in sex with men before labelling their sexual identity. Ethnic groups varied in the developmental trajectory through

which they established their sexual identity, the extent to which they disclosed this identity, and the rates at which they became involved in heterosexual relationships. Ethnicity proved to be a significant context in which to understand the formation of non-heterosexual identities (Dubé & Savin-Williams, 1999).

The constructions of (homo) sexual desires, practices and identities always take place in a certain time, at a certain place, in a certain political and social context. Public discourses on sexual freedom, on young people's agency, and on gender equality intersect with private strategies and identities. McCormack, Anderson and Adams (2014) examined bisexual men's experiences of coming out across three age cohorts. They found that the oldest cohort encountered the most stereotypical views and prejudiced behaviour, while those of the youngest cohort expressed predominantly positive coming-out stories. They attribute the cohort differences in these experiences to a decrease in cultural homophobia, alongside changes in the social organisation of masculinities.

The terms gay and lesbian refer not just to a clinical psychological state (homosexuality) but also to a self-conscious identification with a subculture (Kugle, 2014). Ethnic minority youth in the Netherlands often do not refer to themselves as gay or bisexual (Yerden, Smits, & Koutrik, 2012). According to the non-heterosexual youth this was a label forced upon them. In 'The New Gay Teenager' (2005) Savin-Williams described this phenomenon of rejecting to be categorized as gay as a broader issue, not just linked to ethnic minorities: 'Teenagers are increasingly redefining, reinterpreting, and renegotiating their sexuality such that possessing a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity is practically meaningless' (Savin-Williams, 2005, p.1). This phenomenon is also called the 'narrative of emancipation, in which sexuality is no longer the 'primary index' of identity' (Cohler & Hammack 2007, p. 54). Coleman-Fountain (2014) describes a more varied and fluid process in which lesbian and gay young people use labels but question their meaning, adopting some meanings and resisting others. Hegna (2007) identifies four discourses of gay identities in contemporary Norway: 'a possibly heteronormative homosexual identity related to anal sex with men; an essentialist gay identity based on an idea of a stable homosexual core; a constructivist gay subjectivity related to a gay lifestyle where being happy and beautiful are central demands and a self-understanding echoing a 'queer' rejection of identity labels' (Hegna, 2007, p. 582). Hegna concludes that 'it remains to be seen whether a rejection of categories represents new possibilities of agency' (Hegna, 2007, p. 600).

Despite all the possible changes in resisting or redefining identity labels, 'coming out' narratives (Plummer, 1995) are still dominant in education materials and counselling strategies to help young people dealing with their sexuality. The emancipation of gay people, in this discourse, consists of allowing them to become their true and authentic selves, a process of liberation that often literally requires shedding constraining norms and traditions and that may imply breaking ties with those who uphold and represent these traditions:

parents, families and the social environment of one's youth. A 'proper' coming out story includes the journey of discovery to be true to their inner self, enduring suffering and coming home at the end, taking on a strong identity and becoming part of a community (Plummer, 1995).

### **The intersection of sexual identities and cultural and religious identities**

In understanding the experiences of bicultural gay young people, it is necessary to recognise the intersection of their sexual identities with their cultural and religious identities and to explore how discourses on homosexuality intersect with concepts of culturality or religiosity.

Expressions of and responses to homosexuality by ethnic and religious minorities should be seen in the context of the on-going broader social dynamics of exclusion and integration of ethnic and religious minorities in contemporary Dutch society. Ganzevoort, van der Laan, and Olsman (2011) studied the identity strategies of Christian gay youth by analysing discourses both at community level and individual level. They argue that the public conflict between Christians and gay people is used by both parties to strengthen their identity by representing the other as an enemy (Ganzevoort et al., 2011). In today's highly charged public debate in the Netherlands, Islam is often even more strongly presented as incompatible with the values of the Dutch Christian and/or secular societal order (Buitelaar, 2010; Mepschen & Duyvendak, 2012; Verkaaik & Spronk, 2011). Mepschen and Duyvendak (2012, p. 74) argue that 'proponents of this new 'culturism' (Schinkel, 2008) frame migrants as outsiders and emphasize a perceived need for their cultural education and their 'integration' into a Dutch, European, and 'modern' moral universe'. Current official Dutch citizenship courses teach immigrants they have to accept homosexuality. Muslim citizens have become the most conspicuous objects of these 'discourses of alterity' (Schinkel, 2008). Yip (2005) found that for LGBT Muslims in Britain, sexuality does not take on a 'master status' in identity construction as racism and Islamophobia are pressing realities for many.

An alternative reading of these dynamics is offered by Kugle (2014). In his study on gay, lesbian and transgender Muslims, he describes the condition of Muslim lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people living in countries with a 'secular' separation between political rule and religious belief as a chance:

'these nations' democratic constitutions grant lesbian, gay, and transgender citizens access to certain rights and protection from oppression, allowing them the freedom to think, speak, and organize. (...) This context allows these activists to make full use of their multiple social positions: they are members of a minority religious community and ethnic group, but also members of a minority defined by sexual orientation or gender identity, even as citizens of a secular state. Their modes of activism reveal how they strive to balance these competing demands and find in this complex situation resources and opportunities

for protecting their rights and fostering their welfare' (Kugle, 2014, p.2).

In our study we explored whether Dutch bicultural gay youth does indeed experience their multiple social positions as an opportunity that creates space for manoeuvre or as a blind alley.

### **Developing strategies**

In Dubé and Savin-Williams's study (1999) approximately half of the ethnic-minority youths felt that they fully accepted their ethnic and sexual identities. Many youths overcame barriers to develop multiple and often competing identities, such as homophobia from family/ethnic communities and racism from gay communities. Dubé and Savin-Williams (1999) also note, however, that a number of youths reported that they felt pressure to choose between their ethnic and sexual identities. Research on LGBT Muslims shows how the struggle of accepting one's sexuality and persevering with one's faith, which is frequently hostile to self-acceptance, 'forces LGBT Muslims to a new level of self-criticism and self-awareness. The framework for personal behaviour that Islam has given them is not compatible with the dominant values of the wider LGBT Community' (Shannahan, 2009, p. 74). Thus, the intersection of different ethnic and sexual communities will have profound implications for how young people experience their sexual (and ethnic) identities.

Our study focusses on the way bicultural gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth exercise agency to negotiate their identities and their sexualities. Many definitions of agency focus on the autonomy of the individual, like Jackson (1996) who defines sexual agency as the rights and ability to define and control your own sexuality, free from coercion and violence. This definition lacks the social context in which young people navigate. Bell (2012, p. 284) includes social identities and relations in his definition of sexual agency: 'processes where young people become sexually active and the strategies, actions and negotiations involved in maintaining relationships and navigating broader social expectations'. In Bell's definition, sexual agency is not just about an individual's capacity to reach desired goals and outcomes, but it is broader contextualised in social expectations. We will make use of the distinction between public and subtle forms of agency. As Kugle (2014, p. 3) eloquently states 'some ways of struggling are more visible than others'. Public agency is about bringing social change by addressing social and moral restrictive norms and practices. Subtle agency refers to efforts to achieve positive changes in one's own life, without stirring up wide-scale dissent (Scheyvens, 1998, p. 237).

### **Methodology**

This article draws on findings from a qualitative study among bicultural lesbians, gay, bisexuals, and transgender young people (LGBT). The aim of this research was to gain a better understanding of the way bicultural LGBT

experience and express their same-sex desires and sexual identities and how they negotiate diverse sexual identities and strong religious and cultural affiliations in tandem. A part of the study that is not included in this paper focussed on the needs of bicultural LGBT people for information and support, in order to improve the services aimed at empowering young LGBT people in the Netherlands. The research was conducted within a social constructionist framework. We conducted in-depth interviews, inviting participants to talk about their cultural, religious, and sexual biography. In telling stories people are not completely free to make their own story, they always draw on culturally and historically available narratives (Plummer, 1995). 'The stories we can tell now are not the same as the stories we could tell in the past, which is not to suggest that past stories were untrue or less true and contemporary stories (more) true, but to argue that all stories are informed and limited by the circumstances or contexts of their telling' (Woodiwiss, 2014, p 140). Interviews lasted around two hours and were all conducted by the first author, a white Dutch woman. This 'whiteness' of the interviewer probably evoked more extensive descriptions of the role culture and religion played in the stories of the participants as they perceived her as an outsider. The interviewer introduced herself as a researcher, working for the Dutch non governmental organisation Rutgers. Most participants were familiar with the work the organisation does in the field of sex education and advocacy for sexual rights. This positioned the interviewer in the socio-political sense as taking a liberal stand towards sexual diversity, but also as representative of the whole field of sexual rights advocates and service providers, by whom some participants did not feel represented or served well. In two interviews this was noticeable by a reluctant start in which the participant wanted to know whether the gained information would be used in an effective way. The interviewer explained that the organisation was aware that the education, information and services Dutch organisations provided to bicultural LGBT did not suit everybody well and that the aim of the research was gain knowledge of their strategies and needs, in order to improve these services.

Most interviews took place at the homes of the participants at a time that suited them best and guaranteed that no family member could disturb the interview. The interviewer first introduced the aim of the research and the ethical guidelines such as anonymity. The anonymity of participants was strictly safeguarded. The interviewer also took the time to create a safe space and a non-judgemental atmosphere for the interview. The interview started with an invitation to draw an 'identity circle' and include all the different identities the participant felt connected with. This method derives from diversity training (Bos & Cense, 2005). This identity circle formed a starting point to explore the meaning of each identity and the conflicts between different identities. During the second part of the interview the participant was invited to tell her or his life story including the discovery of same-sex desires and the path they chose to go with these desires.

Participants were selected through the snowball sampling method. The first three contacts each gave two new names. After ten interviews the diversity in gender, sexual orientation, religious and cultural background was checked. There was a need to put extra effort into recruiting men to cooperate in the research, which succeeded due to a peer educators' network. The cultural, religious and sexual diversity was rich without extra effort. The final sample consisted of 14 young adults age 21–30 of which six identified as male, seven as female, one as transgender, five as gay, five as lesbian, three as bisexual and one as gay/heterosexual (see table 1). All the names in this paper are pseudonyms. We use the term bicultural instead of 'non-Western', 'migrant', or 'ethnic minority' because the participants in this study felt that they themselves belonged to two (or more) cultures, including the Dutch.

Table 1. Self-identified characteristics of participants.

Pseudonym	Self-identified gender identity	Self-identified sexual orientation	Cultural background	Religion	Age	Involvement in LGBT activist roles
Mike	Male	Gay	Indonesian	Atheist	23	No
Renu	Male	Gay	Indonesian / Dutch	Atheist	28	No
Omer	Male	Gay	Turkish / Dutch	Atheist	26	Yes
Gregory	Male	Gay	Surinamese	Atheist	28	No
Mubashir	Male	Gay	Pakistani	Muslim	29	Yes
Amuun	Female	Lesbian	Somalia	Muslim	25	Yes
Fayola	Female	Lesbian	Liberia	Muslim	25	Yes
Devi	Female	Lesbian	Indonesian/ Dutch	Atheist	29	No
Kathleen	Female	Lesbian	Surinamese/ Capeverdian	Atheist	27	No
Aysel	Female	Lesbian	Turkish	Muslim	32	Yes
Soufian	Male	Bisexual	Moroccan	Muslim	23	Yes
Henna	Female	Bisexual	Surinamese	Hindu	29	No
Joyce	Female	Bisexual	Surinamese	Christian	29	No
Shakira	First Transgender now female	First gay, now / heterosexual	Surinam/ German	Atheist	27	Yes

The interviews were recorded and transcribed. All interviews were coded using qualitative data analysis software (MAX QDA). We undertook open and selective coding to identify patterns from the stories of the transcriptions (Urquhart, 2013). Themes emerged from the data and were placed in a code tree. This code tree contained as main codes: (1) identities, (2) sexual identities, (3) sexual career, with subcodes expression same-sex desires, practices, relationships, (4) self-acceptance, with subcodes inner process, influence social norms, influence religion, influence family expectancies, strategies, (5) social acceptance, with subcodes aims and expectancies and subtle and public strategies, (6) threats, (7) support and (8) needs. The draft results were discussed in an expert meeting with counsellors and LGBT activists to check the recognisability of the analysis of strategies and sharpen the recommendations.

The research was conducted according to the ethical guidelines of Rutgers and Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, which include voluntary participation,

anonymity, and respect for participants. According to Dutch law, due to the research form and research group no formal approval of an ethical committee is needed.

## Results

In this paper two main sets of findings from the study are presented: (1) insights into the way bicultural LGBT youth express their same-sex desires and experiences and (2) their subtle and public strategies for negotiating their same-sex desires and experiences with regard to potentially negative environments.

### *Expressions of same-sex desires and experiences*

As adolescents, all participants started sexual exploration with the other sex. Reasons given for this were because all their friends were doing so, in order to 'get rid of' their same-sex desires or because they did not dare to approach same-sex partners. These heterosexual encounters varied from single kisses to marriages. At the time of the interview all these heterosexual relationships had ended.

After acceptance of their sexual orientation, many participants experience their sexual identity as a prominent part of their identity. Amuun (25, parents emigrated from Somalia) has been raised as a Muslim. She said:

'When you start coming out, you feel your sexuality is the world. You think, I'm gay and that's it. After a while, when you have accepted yourself, you may see that your sexuality is just part of who you are.'

Amuun comes closest to expressing her homosexuality as an intrinsic part of who she is; she is also one of the few among the interviewed people for whom being lesbian was something she was aware of from a very early age onwards.

"I only fancy girls. I am a lesbian. I have known this since I was nine years old, but at that time I thought that this is the way one feels about a friend. That was all I knew. But when I was thirteen, I started realizing that I could also really feel desire for another girl, but I did not know what to do with that feeling because I did not recognise it. When I was 14, I received a kiss from a woman, from a girl of course, and that's when I realised: this is it, maybe this is it."

Soufian (23, Moroccan roots) expresses his sexual desires and identity is a less fixed way:

"[I first realized I also liked men...] That is two years ago, in fact. Two years ago, and I always had dated girls and at a given moment I met a boy with whom I also had a very good time. Yes, it was as easy as that."



[...] It does not mean that much to me. Well, in fact I am attracted to a person and not to a particular sex and that is still the case. Hence, if I would now meet a girl who is really nice, then I can as well have a good time with her. [...]"

Henna (29, family emigrated from Surinam) likewise needs more words to explain how she experiences her sexual desires. Henna had a secret relationship with her best friend, a girl, for four years, starting when she was 23 years old. For the outside world, they were just best friends:

"But for ourselves we knew it was more than that. But at the same time, in that period, I also thought, yes... in the end it will be marriage with a man, and perhaps we'll still meet secretly on occasions, but such are the things one thinks at that moment. But yes, it was a relationship. It lasted for four years, and it became even more serious and there was a point in time at which I also had to re-consider what it was I wanted to do, you see? I also met some men. What does one do?"

When looking back on her sexual experiences, she makes a distinction between an early period of experimenting that was purely sexual, and a period in which she started exploring deeper feelings of love and attraction. Like Soufian, Henna does not call herself gay or lesbian:

"No, it may sound like a cliché but I am attracted to people. That is true, I do not like labels [...] well yes, I cannot be a lesbian because I think that you are a lesbian when you do not have any feelings whatsoever for a man, and I do have such feelings."

When prompted, she tries to explain that for her the important thing is with whom she has a long-term relationship rather than whom she is attracted to. Further reflecting on this, she says:

"Obviously I am not the one to speak about this as I am not totally gay. [...] But I would like to see that being gay gets less of a label, not just in the black community. Because one wants to be a human being and be accepted as such by society. [...]"

Soufian and Henna do sometimes feel that they are forced by society to make a choice, or to make up their minds about their sexual identity. Soufian:

"...it may be difficult for my surroundings, but for myself... Sometimes perhaps it is a bit complex also for me; do I need to make a choice or not? Do I need to choose if I want to stay with a man my entire life, or my whole life with a woman?"

On the other hand, Soufian feels that he can choose to do whatever he wants and to be whoever he wants, which he links to living in Amsterdam. However,

he also feels that his sexual desires, practices, and identity need not necessarily be very visible and out in the open. Henna similarly states:

“... if I really wanted a label, it would be bisexual because everyone recognizes that.”

In summary, the different accounts of same-sex desires and experiences show that there are many more ways of experiencing homosexuality than the common idea of homosexuality as a fixed identity. Some participants indeed reject gay identity labels, others reframe the meaning of a sexual identity by focussing on whom you are connected to in a long lasting relationship. At any rate, for individuals with a bicultural or religious background it may be less viable to develop a fully gay social identity.

#### *Subtle and public strategies for negotiating same-sex desires and identities*

Participants all described how their religious and cultural background influenced their process of self-acceptance. Many participants were raised with the idea that homosexuality is sinful and wrong or simply does not exist in their culture. Fayola (25), who emigrated from West Africa, describes:

“In our family they say: we Africans are not like that; it is a Western phenomenon you have adopted. I felt I was doing something terribly wrong, I had wrong feelings and I was a bad person. (...) Integrity is very important to me. It was a very confusing period discovering my feelings but at the same time feeling responsible towards my culture and religion. It caused a big internal conflict.”

Mubashir (29, parents migrated from Pakistan) describes that he was mostly worried about the minority status his sexual orientation caused:

“For myself it was not a problem to be attracted to boys. No. But it was.. so to say quite inconvenient for my family. So I felt, why me? I am having a hard time being a minority already, Pakistani, Muslim, I don't want to be a triple minority.(...) Look, I may consider myself as super Dutch, but other people always see a coloured guy.’

Amuun explains the process she had to go through before she could become an activist:

“We grow up in a 'we-culture'. It's all about family. If you take a decision you have to put the interest of the family first. In the Netherlands it is the other way round; children have to think for themselves, choose for themselves. But with us, you will be called egoistic, spoiled, westernized. I have this struggle myself. Whenever I want to do something with the media, I always feel reserved, as it will bring shame

on my family. And family means a lot to me. You have to learn to think for yourself. You must learn to choose for yourself.”

The background of cultural norms of family loyalty and a taboo on homosexuality on the one hand and living as ethnic minority in the Netherlands on the other hand, results in the development of different forms of agency.

### *Subtle agency*

The first example of subtle agency is to avoid making an explicit statement about one’s sexual orientation. Many bicultural young people grow up in a family environment in which it is inappropriate to talk about sexuality. As there is no dialogue between parents and children about love and sexuality, there is no need to make an explicit statement about being gay either. Henna explains:

“In the Surinamese Hindu culture we don’t talk about sexuality with parents. They don’t ask about boyfriends like Dutch parents do. And I do not think it is important or relevant to mention your sexual orientation. I really dislike the term ‘out of the closet’. I do not feel it is that important to make this statement.”

Doubts about the relevance of being explicit and open about your sexual preference and about the use of having a ‘proper’ coming out are common among bicultural LGBT. Participants in this study expressed the following views; ‘we don’t do that’, ‘for us that is not needed’, ‘in our cultural group we don’t feel the urge to give words to everything’. ‘Quiet diplomacy works better than the (Dutch) shouting from the rooftops’. Many participants give positive cultural labelling to more subtle strategies, as these are seen as showing more respect and loyalty towards the cultural community. They reject the Dutch approach of being ‘out and proud’, with some participants also rejecting too much emphasis on their sexual preference. They experience it as something too intimate and private to expose. As Henna expresses:

“I think it’s pretty Dutch to go fight for your rights. I actually find it a very good thing that you do have a bit of that grey area. We don’t need to hang out the Rainbow flag to show what we really are.”

Not mentioning homosexuality is also a strategy of the social environment. Some participants described how they nevertheless knew their families were aware of their sexual orientation by not asking the obvious questions about marriage. Devi (29) talking about visiting her Indonesian family:

“When we were visiting relatives abroad, they never asked ‘Do you have a boyfriend?’. I was there with my girlfriend, and as I am 29, you are supposed to have a husband and children. So it is often the first question you are asked. But not one of my uncles or aunts asked about my relational status.”

Another example of subtle agency is to introduce a serious relationship to the family when that is appropriate instead of claiming a sexual identity. Henna has not told her parents anything about her sexual relationships. She has decided she will not do so, before she has a partner she wants to introduce. In this way Henna respects the rules of her parents by following the same path of presenting a long-lasting monogamous relationship that is prescribed for heterosexuals in her family.

“I will introduce somebody to my parents when I really feel that we are going to be together for the rest of our lives. Then it will be official. I had a relationship with a woman for four years, but kept it hidden because I didn’t think it was that serious. I was also afraid of being rejected, afraid to hurt them and lose them. But when I would feel ‘this is it’ I would have no hesitations to tell them.”

The third subtle strategy the participants mention is to postpone the exploration of their sexuality until they move out of their parents’ house to another city. In this way, they do not have to confront their parents and risk damaging the relationship with them. Mike (23, third generation Indonesian) explains:

“I think I was twelve when I noticed that I fancied boys more than girls. When I went to high school I was pretty sure. I tried to conceal it. I felt it was not normal, not acceptable. When I was eighteen I couldn’t deny it any longer. I felt I had to choose for myself and find out about my sexuality. I left my friends and everything behind and started a life of my own.”

A fourth subtle strategy is showing loyalty and respect to parents by adjusting to their norms and sensitivities. Amuun gives a striking example of that. Amuun has told the news of her being lesbian to her sisters and brothers first. After their acceptance, she goes to her mother.

“My mother is from another generation. She has a different culture. I was raised more modern; she was raised in Africa. So I felt I had to treat her gently. I went to her place and asked to speak to her in private. I said, I have to tell you something. I like women. And she said, I like women too; you are my daughter. So I said, No, I am a lesbian. She fell silent. I felt ‘here we go...’. She was very emotional. I said you don’t have to say anything. I have accepted myself. I don’t ask acceptance from you. I know that would be too much to ask. The only thing I want from you is a little bit of respect. I will give you a year to let this news sink in. In that year you will see that I am still the same daughter. In that year I visited her and went to family parties just like before without us speaking about it. As if our talk hadn’t taken place, until she called me up, a year later, and said ‘We must talk today.’ I couldn’t believe she remembered. She said that she would always have difficulties with me

being lesbian because it's against our culture; it's against our religion, against everything she believes in. But you are my daughter and I will always love you and respect you. That was more than enough for me."

Although she really wanted to be open with her mother, Amuun also showed respect by giving her mother time to adjust to the idea, by not asking for acceptance and by showing her that she still fulfilled her role as daughter in the same way.

### *Public agency*

Public agency is visible to the outside world. Young people with public strategies give interviews in the media, are present at gay pride events and make themselves visible as peer educators in school. By doing so, they carry a big responsibility towards their families. As Aysel (29, Turkish) expresses:

"I am very conscious that by giving an interview on television it is not just me coming out of the closet, but my whole family."

Sometimes moving from a village to a town or migration to the Netherlands makes people change from subtle strategies to public strategies. Shakira (27):

"Being gay was a big secret when I lived in Surinam. It was after I moved to Holland, at the age of eighteen, that I could tell my mother. She was in shock first. After a while she said, you are my child, I accept you. Then I felt I could be myself. Without her support, it was too hard. And some times later I told her that I am transgender. Then I went on television, in a popular show and after that all my aunts called me saying 'how come we did not know!'. And I said, well, you forced me to act so macho all the time, you couldn't have seen."

These forms of public agency result in awareness raising and social change. But for those involved in forms of public agency, it may come at a risk – especially if their home environments are less accepting of homosexuality, as Amuun tells:

"I was walking with my former girlfriend in Amsterdam. Four Moroccan boys recognized me from television. I saw them looking at me. I was preparing myself for the shouting and the insults. I didn't expect them to beat me. A boy stood in front of me and said 'you dirty dike; how dare you call yourself Muslim? The prophet will punish you.' He spat in my face which really made me angry. It was two girls against four boys so we were severely beaten. But it made me stronger. I was so fed up with it, I thought: 'These are the people who want me to stay at home and be afraid but no ignorant bastard will sow fear in me.' So I reported it to the police."

The aggression is not only directed towards homosexuality itself but also towards the public strategies, to the act of openness which is seen by the aggressors as a betrayal of one's cultural or religious roots. Public strategies do not just direct attention to the individuals who choose to be visible but also to their families and their communities. Amuun tells:

“There are family members who don't talk to me anymore. I knew beforehand, when I chose to tell my story on television that that would be the consequence. I took this step when I was strong enough to cope with the negative reactions, physically and emotionally. I was like, bring it on. I am strong enough to handle this. Still it was tough; the first time they ignored me, walking by like I didn't exist. The people you grew up with just pretending you don't exist.”

More participants who are activists have lost contact with their families and this has a profound impact on them. Essential to public agency is the backup of a strong community of bicultural LGBT people. Participants stress the importance of recognition and connection in order to find the strength to cope with negative responses and to become self-confident and empowered.

## **Discussion**

Previous studies show that being simultaneously gay and bi-cultural or/and religious puts a lot of pressure on people to negotiate this double affiliation (Dubé & Savin-Williams, 1999; Ganzevoort, van der Laan, & Olsman, 2011; Kriek et al, 2015; Kugle, 2014; Schnoor, 2006; Shannahan, 2009; Yerden, Smits & Koutrik, 2012; Yip, 2005). However, little research has been done to illuminate the strategies that bicultural young people, themselves, use in shaping their relations with their environment. In our study, we interviewed 14 bicultural young gay or bisexual people in order to explore their expressions of same-sex desires and practises and their strategies to negotiate their identities.

Our study shows that bicultural gay young people use creative and conscious tactics to re-organize loyalties and relations of 'bondedness' (Pham, 2013) and to re-negotiate the meanings of self and freedom in relation to sexual desires. Although the social dynamics of exclusion of ethnic and religious minorities in contemporary Dutch society are present in the life stories of most participants, as Mubashir illustrates, most participants express that their multiple social positions offer a lot of agentic opportunities, as Kugle (2014) found as well. Moreover, we found that their strategies have the effect of questioning dominant discourses. They make deliberate attempts to transcend the oppositional dichotomy between sexual and ethnic forms of socio-cultural otherness (reserving the first for those who belong to secular modernity). In doing so, they usefully pluralize and diversify the meanings of both sexual and ethnic/religious alterity. This amplifies the cultural possibilities of 'being' and 'doing' in relation to homosexuality as well as 'culturality' or 'religiosity'.

However, some limitations of the research are worth noting. This study involved fourteen people who all have found ways to express their sexual desires and identities in a way they feel comfortable with. Future research should invest in recruiting bicultural and religious LGBT people who have not yet found possibilities to express their desires and identities. Their stories will deepen our understanding of the obstacles that restrain people from agency (cf. Kriek et al. 2015). Secondly, this research does not adequately represent the expressions and strategies of bicultural and religious trans people, as just one interviewee does define herself as transwoman. The expressions and strategies of bicultural and religious trans people will reveal the lived experience of the intersection of gender nonconformity, (homo)sexuality, culture and religion.

## **Conclusion**

The stories of bicultural gay youth show that roads to sexual freedom and agency are not confined to the well-known public strategy of 'coming out', but may also consist of more subtle and consensual strategies. This study confirms that 'queer post-migrants might choose forms of sexual emancipation, of sexual freedom, that deviate from "modern", "normative" articulations' (Wekker 2006). Although conventional stories of emancipation tend to attach greatest value to the more public forms of agency – as these are seen as explicitly challenging constricting norms and social structures – and epitomize the free expression of one's desires and the forms of self-realization of western-liberal ideals, we argue that more subtle forms of agency may be seen as very significant forms of agentic power, and as important in bringing about social change. Social workers and other professionals should be more sensitive to these subtle strategies to enhance appropriate, culture sensitive provision of support to same-sex attracted bicultural youth. Policy makers and sexual rights activists should recognize and embrace the power of these subtle strategies in changing discourses and achieving social change by validating other roads than the western liberal road to sexual freedom.

## **Acknowledgements**

Parts of this article were presented at the symposium Rethinking Agency: Acting in practice, acting together, Bradford 2013, and at the 12th Conference of the European Sociological Association, Prague 2015.

The authors would like to thank the participants who took part in this study. We would also like to express our gratitude to the inspiring feedback of the reviewers and to Margreet Zwarteveen, Mark Spiering and Mark McCormack for reading through early drafts of the article.

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