GAY, IRANIAN-JEWISH, AND AMERICAN: NEGOTIATING TRADITIONAL IDENTITIES IN AN OPEN SOCIETY

By

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I. Abstract

This research explores the cultural taboo of homosexuality and the manner in which members of a triple minority group negotiate their identities as traditional and gay within an open American society. The first study to focus on gay Iranian Jews in the United States, this thesis is based on eleven in-depth interviews with people who live in California and New York and identified themselves as members of all three groups. The study is framed by findings and theoretical models from previous research on Iranian Jews, ethnic identity, sexual identity and homosexuality in traditional communities.

The Iranian Jewish communities in Los Angeles, California, and Great Neck, New York, originate in a collectivist country, Iran. This culture promotes interdependence, which is at odds with the American and western views of individualism. Iranian culture also emphasizes carrying on gender roles, getting married and having children. When a member of this community realizes he is gay, it is no surprise that he may experience feelings of conflict and alienation.

All participants feared being stigmatized within the community, especially those who have Orthodox families, and all expressed that their families felt that being gay tarnishes the reputation or the *uberoo* of the family. In the case of Mashhadi Jews, marrying a same-sex partner has resulted in excommunication. Even so, reactions of family and friends to disclosure varied according to age and changed over time. Some participants shared that a devaluation of their sexuality, and even rejection, has had a negative impact on their relationships and has compromised their mental well-being. This study describes participants' experiences coming out and living as gay Iranian Jews, and it offers recommendations.

II. Acknowledgements

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III. Introduction

> My experience was unique to me. I've always been a religious minority. I've always been a racial minority. I've always been a sexual orientation minority and never grew up in a place I was with a larger majority of the people.
>
> -David[1], 28, Iranian Jewish and gay

David was born to Iranian immigrant parents in the South of the United States and eventually moved to Los Angeles as a child. His experiences growing up as a triple minority are similar to that of many others. How do people like David experience being gay in a tight-knit, traditional community that values heterosexual marriage? This thesis explores this question through interviews with gay Iranian Jews living in the United States. Even though there is research on Iranian Jews and gay Jews, there seems be a gap in research about gay Iranian Jews. Research on the intersection of sexuality and religion has primarily focused on Christian gay men (Ganzevoort, Van Der Laan, & Olsman, 2011; Levy & Reeves, 2011; Walton, 2006; Wolkomir, 2000), and the potentiality conflicting identities of gay Jewish men (Coyle & Rafalin 2000; Schnoor 2006) have also been explored, but very few studies focus on the impact of ethnicity, religion, and sexuality (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010).

The lack of research thus far could be a result of the stigma about this sub community, lack of disclosure about sexual orientation by individuals or perhaps a lack of interest by researchers. As a member of the Iranian Jewish community who was raised in Los Angeles, I attend various Iranian Jewish functions and synagogue. There seems to be an emphasis placed on marriage. Often times, I found it challenging to balance my identities as an Iranian Jew growing up in America. Then, I thought about how much

[1] All names are pseudonyms.

more complicated it can be to balance identities if a person identifies as gay or lesbian within my community. This research fills a void, gives voice to marginalized members of society and offers insight about the values, behaviors and expectations of the culture.

Following the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Iranian Jews fearing for their safety in Iran, fled to the United States and other countries. Large pockets of this immigrant subgroup of exiles eventually settled in Los Angeles, California, and Great Neck, New York. As a result of the discrimination Iranian Jews faced in Iran, they strongly identify more with their ethno-religious background as Jews over their nationality as Iranian (Soomekh, 2008). The communities eventually organized themselves and established organizations to cater to their needs in the United States.

The communities have become active in synagogue life and hold membership in traditional Iranian Jewish, Orthodox, Conservative and Reform synagogues. Members of the group mainly socialized with each other in Iran and have carried the close-knit tendencies of their culture to America. Generally, Iranian Jews have cohesive family structures, in addition to parents, siblings, uncles, aunts, grandparents, first cousins; their networks are extended to second cousins, third cousins, great uncles and great aunts. As one man shared:

> Family isn't just my first cousins. It's like my grandmother's cousins' children. So I realized this during Shabbat dinner at my grandmother's cousin's house last week that there is a tribal element to being an Iranian Jew. In some way, it isn't good. I realized that- listen, no matter what I've been through in my life, they've never disowned me, they've never denied me, as much as they wanted to. They stick together and when something goes wrong, they are there for the most part. I think it's a sense of loyalty.

Even though there are strong support systems and unity, the culture promotes interdependence that at times clashes with the American values of independence. The

community encourages endogamy and adheres to traditional gender roles and this creates conflict for those who diverge. Through eleven interviews, I researched the manner in which participants negotiate their multiple identities in their traditional communities. Various themes emerged, such as societal pressures, the impact of disclosing gay identity, feelings of alienation and places of comfort.

IV. Literature Review

History of Iranian Jews

In order to examine today's Iranian Jewish community, it is important to understand the history and political turmoil that led to the mass migration to the United States. Under the regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, religious minorities were tolerated; Armenians, Christians, Bahai's and Jews represented 2% of the Iranian population before the Islamic revolution (Bozorgmehr, 1992). Most Jews in Iran lived comfortable lives: 10% of Iran's 80,000 Jews were wealthy, 80% were middle class, and 10% were poor (Sitton, 1985).

In 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini's fundamentalist regime overthrew the Shah and seized control of the government. Khomeini, once in power, began accusing the Jewish community of distorting Islam. He believed that Jews took over Iran's economy and depicted them as Zionist spies (Soomekh, 2006). Jews were considered *najess*, or things considered impure in Shi'i Islam, such as dogs, pigs, and feces. Habib Elghanian, a prominent Jewish businessman, was falsely accused of spying for Israel and later executed. His death sent a shockwave through the community, which was supportive of the Shah and Israel. The violence and uncertainty brought about significant changes to the 2,500-year-old Jewish community in Iran.

Prior to the revolution, Iranians who left the country were primarily students and the economically motivated (Sabagh & Bozorgmehr, 1987). However, after the revolution, 60,000 Iranian Jews immigrated to the United States, Israel, and throughout Europe (Safaradi, 2011). There is little research on Iranian Jewish communities; however,

some researchers studied and identified patterns and trends of this immigrant subgroup (Bozorgmehr, 1992; Golshan, 2005; Hanassab, 1993; Safaradi, 2011; Soomekh 2008).

History of Mashhadi Jews

In 1830, Muslim mobs attacked the local Jewish community of Mashhad, Iran. Torah scrolls were destroyed, synagogues were burnt, homes were ransacked, girls were abducted and local Jews were killed (Russo, 2007). This devastated the Jewish community. Heads of the Jewish community came together and agreed for the community to proceed with a mass conversion. Many took on Muslim names, and the word *Jadid* or *new* was also added to some last names. This surname represented the converts who were new to Islam. Some Jews escaped to other cities. Similar to the Marrano Jews of Spain, the Jews outwardly practiced the religion of the local community, Islam, but inside their homes, they practiced Judaism. Some Jews became well versed not only in the Torah, but also in the Quran. They purchased Hallal meat from the local butchers and fed it to family pets. Privately, they slaughtered meat according to Jewish law. The Jewish community would marry their youth to one another to prevent marriage to the local Muslims and uphold their ethno-religious identity.

In 1925, when Ahmad Shah Qajar was overthrown, Reza Shah Pahlavi came into power and began to modernize the country. Repressive policies were removed, Jewish life improved and the Mashhadi Jewish community began to openly practice Judaism. With the rise of Nazism, Reza Shah reinstated discriminatory policies and was soon after deposed. Mohammed Reza Pahlavi replaced his father and built relationships with the Jewish communities. Before and especially after the 1979 revolution, the majority of Mashhadi Jews immigrated to Europe and the United States, mostly Great Neck, New

York. Currently there are approximately 15,000 Mashhadi Jews around the world, and the majority live in New York (Russo, 2007).

Today, the Mashhadi Jews in New York desire to in-marry and carry on customs that are unique to their community (Mashhadi Jews in New York, 2003). Membership to the synagogue is by birthright only; there are no annual dues. As one participant mentioned, "Since basically everyone in the community marries each other, we are all related to each other at most through one degree of separation."

Internal Ethnicity

As a result of discrimination, minorities in Iran, including Jews, formed solidarity groups: insular communities, family cohesion and ethnic self-identity (Bozorgmehr, 1992). Iranian Jews are not only a minority in the United States, but they were ethnic minorities in their homeland. Bozorgmehr (1992) refers to Iranian Jews as an ethnic minority with an internal ethnicity. An ethnic minority is a group of people from a larger society whose members have a common race, language, cultural practices, religion or ancestral homeland. However, internal ethnicities form or emerge when at least one subgroup of people have one or more ethnic indicators within a national origin group.

Internal ethnicity applies to subgroups, such as Iranian Jews and Iranian Armenians, who are both ethnically and religiously different, yet they share the same nation of origin. If internal ethnic cultures are not studied separately, characteristics of one group may contaminate the examination of the entire ethnic group, leading to inaccurate conclusions (Bozorgmehr 1992). Therefore, research on Iranian Muslims may not necessarily reflect the experiences of Iranian Jews. Research has primarily focused on majority immigrant groups, ignoring the experiences of minority groups (Bozorgmehr,

1992). For instance, Bozorgmehr advises researchers to be aware of the research and questionnaire designs when evaluating people with an internal ethnicity. Iranians are composed of the Muslim majority and minority subgroups like Jews, Armenians, Bahai's and Zoroastrians. Religion is an important identifying factor within a religiously diverse nation, such as Iran (Bozorgmehr, 1992).

Iranian Jews are a significant group because they are members of the larger Iranian community and the larger Jewish community in America. Therefore, it is worthy to evaluate the experiences of Iranian Jews as separate from the larger Iranian and Jewish populations.

Iranian Jews and Acculturation

In the Iranian Jewish community, it appears that many community members maintain a high affiliation with their native culture and practices. Golshan's (2005) survey of Iranian Jews in Los Angeles found that they demonstrate a high retention of Farsi, as they find their native language to be an important part of their identity. 72% of respondents reported that most of their friends are Iranian Jews. They continue to observe Jewish holidays, socialize with one another and stress the importance of family (Phillips & Khalili, 1995). Organizations, such as the Iranian Jewish Federation, synagogues, charity, and social organizations, were founded to service the immigrant community. And in the last several years, children of immigrants have established a number of organizations that cater to young professional Iranian Jews and provide opportunities for networking and encourage philanthropy (Safaradi, 2011). With the various social outlets in the community to help retain close ties, it is not necessary for one to seek friends beyond their particular social circles. While Iranian Jews are comfortable making

external friends, many feel they have few things in common with people outside their community (Golshan, 2005).

In Iran, Jews practiced a traditional form of Judaism. When they moved to the U.S., they encountered several denominations, and now many have joined Reform, Conservative and Orthodox synagogues (Soomekh, 2008), not only the traditional Iranian congregations. In addition, some are shedding some or all aspects of their religion or exploring other religions (Melamed, 2005).

Since 1979, Iranian Jews have become one of the most established immigrant communities in Los Angeles, flourishing economically, socially and politically (Soomekh, 2008). The existence of Iranian Jewish culture is also apparent with kosher Persian restaurants and kosher Persian supermarkets in both Los Angeles and New York.[2]

The Iranian Jewish community provides social support, social control and cohesion and reaffirms social norms within the community (Soomekh, 2008). Even though most of their children are born and raised in the United States, the Iranian Jewish culture is an integral aspect of their lives (Soomekh, 2008).

Iranian Jews, both immigrants and children of immigrants, are learning how to negotiate clusters of varying backgrounds as Jewish, Iranian and American to form their current identities. Since the mass migration from Iran, it has become a challenge integrating the host culture while still maintaining traditions. The process of acculturation and identity is, therefore, multifaceted. Theories have been developed to explain ethnic and sexual identity formation among minorities in stage form. Developmental models can be informative in exploring the developmental process and behaviors individuals exhibit.

[2] The terms Iranian and Persian are used interchangeably.

Identity Development

Atkinson, Morton and Sue (1989) developed a five-stage model for racial and cultural identity development. In the first stage, *conformity*, the individual embraces the dominant culture's customs and standards and has no interest in learning of their own culture or ethnic heritage. When an individual enters stage two, *dissonance*, the individual begins to question their own identity and starts having conflicting messages from their own culture and the culture at large. During stage three, *resistance* and *immersion*, the individual will withdraw from the dominant culture and explore his or her own ethnic culture. In the fourth stage, *introspection*, the individual attempts to reintegrate their redefined identity from stage three into the mainstream culture without compromising aspects of their own ethnic heritage. In the final stage, *awareness*, the individual develops a secure sense of self and rather than seeing clashes between their own ethnic culture and the dominant cultures, they appreciate and balance their heritage. In addition to ethnic identity models, stage models exist for the development of non-heterosexual individuals (Cass, 1979).

Similar to models of ethnic identity development, theoretical research by Cass (1979) conceptualized sexual identity development as a series of six stages to gain identity as gay or lesbian and to "come out." The first stage is *identity confusion*, in which a person may be uncertain about their sexual orientation and question if they are gay. During stage two, *identity comparison*, a person may or may not identify themselves as gay and may deal with social isolation and grieve over possible losses he or she might sacrifice to embrace their homosexuality. In stage three, *identity tolerance,* there is an increase in commitment to being gay, and an individual may seek out other gays and

lesbians and build a sense of a gay or a lesbian community. In the fourth stage, *identity acceptance*, the individual accepts their self-image as being homosexual, increases contact with gay and lesbian cultures and may continue to grieve the loss of heterosexual life expectations. In stage five, *identity pride*, the person becomes immersed in gay and lesbian culture, involves themselves less in heterosexual settings and will disclose their orientation to friends and family. After the individual accepts their homosexuality, the final stage, *identity synthesis*, the person integrates their homosexual identity within the larger heterosexual society.

Although these two developmental models deal with different elements of identity – ethnicity and sexuality – they have a similar structure. During the first stage, individuals are unaware of the differences between themselves and the dominant culture and sometimes hold a negative view about aspects of their identity. They gain awareness about their differences in comparison to the majority culture and eventually come to embrace their identity as members of a minority community. The models imply that identity is formed through a series of interactions with the dominant culture and that individuals develop a sense of self, eventually integrating their identities.

Even though these stage models account for a form of ethnic minority development and sexual minority development, they both ignore the experiences of sexual and ethnic minorities, or of people who are "multiple minorities" (Jamil, Harper, & Fernandez, 2009). The stage models suggest that as a part of identity development, an individual should immerse themselves into their ethnic culture along with gay and lesbian culture (Atkinson et al., 1989; Cass, 1979). This is difficult for homosexual Jews, who may already feel a sense of alienation and homophobia from the Jewish community

(Schnoor, 2006). In addition to the homophobia in the Jewish community there may be a lack of acceptance for Jews in the queer community (Schnoor, 2006).

For sexual minorities, same gender desires may be suppressed because of the fears of experiencing harassment from their ethnic community (Harper, Jernewall & Zea, 2004). Therefore, immersion of sexual minorities into the ethnic community may be difficult. Because of all these issues, sexual minority Jews struggle for inclusion in a variety of communities and have difficulty negotiating multiple identities (Schnoor, 2006). Therefore, sequential stage development models do not fully account for a multidimensional psychosocial process (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005).

Similarly, D'Augelli (1994) writes:

> For the study of lesbians and gay men… to talk about the development of their lives without focus on family, social, institutional, cultural, and historical factors is fundamentally distorted. Indeed, to eliminate an appreciation of cultural and historical time is to assume that lesbian and gay lives are unresponsive to social circumstances, history, or culture. Such unidimensional perspectives have been preeminent in this enterprise as scholars, theorists, and researchers have focused on either medical, biological, genetic, hormonal, psychiatric, or physiological factors without explicit inclusion of contextual variables… most complex human behavioral patterns and characteristics – even such staples of unidimensional science as intelligence – are now seen as multidimensional and must be studied at multiple levels of analysis. (p. 122)

Various factors should be considered when examining multiple minority cultures. There are intersecting identities that represent an individual and include, but are not limited to, race, sexual orientation and religion (Jones & McEwen, 2000). However, most developmental models include only a single form of identity, such as ethnic or sexual orientation. The above models of sexual identity development and ethnic identity development do not address the manner in which an individual can develop and maintain a connection to their multiple identities. An individual's identity can be seen as having

multiple intersecting dimensions, such as race, culture, gender, sexual orientation, religion and social class. No single dimension can be understood alone, and an individual can express identities either one by one or simultaneously (Jones & McEwen, 2000).

One study that applies this understanding to gay Jews is Schnoor (2006). Expanding on Brekhus' (2003) model of ideal gay types such as the gay lifestylers, gay commuters and gay integrators, Schnoor interviewed 30 gay Jewish men from Toronto and found that there are a variety of ways people choose to construct their multiple identities. Participants in the study were categorized as *Jewish Lifestylers*, individuals who repress their gay identities, so that it does not interfere with their Jewish lives; *Gay Lifestylers*, individuals who place a strong emphasis on their gay identity and minimize their Jewish identities; *Gay-Jewish Commuters*, individuals who commute between gay settings and Jewish settings, separating their identities from each other, while enjoying both; and lastly *Gay-Jewish Integrators*, individuals who view themselves as having multiple attributes simultaneously, participate in gay Jewish organizations, challenge Jewish theological perspectives on homosexuality, emphasize linkages between Judaism and homosexuality, and use "Jewish values" to help guide them through the gay world. Schnoor's (2006) study parallels some of the findings in this study and can be implemented in understanding participants.

Identity is fluid, and under any given circumstance one dimension of identity can be more or less expressed for an ethnic-religious-sexual minority, such as a gay Iranian Jew. Therefore, developmental models of ethnicity and sexuality may not be applicable to the experiences of gay Iranian Jewish men. Even so, the current study keeps previous research in mind and focuses on the manner in which family, society and culture have

impacted the participants' development. This research goes beyond theory in an attempt to understand homosexuality from the individual's perspective.

V. Methodology

Procedure

Participants were recruited through a snowball sampling process where the researcher sent e-mails to Iranian Jews and Gay Jewish organizations. Announcements were made at gay Jewish events. Members of the Iranian Jewish community and interviewees made referrals of acquaintances, friends and family. It was a challenge to find participants because of the stigma that is attached to homosexuality. Initially, several were hesitant to participate, but they were reassured that interview information would only be used for research and that they would remain anonymous. All participants were asked to sign an informed consent form prior to the interview that explained that the interview was for research and names would remain confidential. Interviewees completed a pre-interview survey created for this study (Appendix A).

The primary research method was a semi-structured interview. This interview style allowed participants to discuss their perspectives on being gay Iranian Jews in America. Semi-structured interview questions are provided in Appendix B; some questions were borrowed from Schnoor's (2006) study. Interviews for participants in the greater Los Angeles area were conducted in person. For participants in New York, interviews were conducted either over Skype or by telephone. Interviews lasted 60-120 minutes and were recorded and transcribed.

Participants

Eleven participants were included in the study, all of whom identified themselves as Iranian or Persian, gay and Jewish. Respondents were all male and between the ages of 23 and 53. During the time of the interviews, participants were living in New York

(Brooklyn and Manhattan) and Southern California (Beverly Hills, Downtown Los Angeles, Glendale, Los Angeles, Silver Lake, Tarzana and West Hollywood). Nine participants identified their mothers as Iranian Jewish; one identified his mother as Lithuanian Jewish and another as Iranian Muslim. All respondents were born to Iranian Jewish fathers. Parents were born in Mashhad and various other cities in Iran. Participants and/or their families left Iran between the 1960s and the 1980s. Some were born outside of their parents' homeland, and four were born in Iran. Participants were raised in a variety of other regions outside of Iran: England, Germany, Israel, Italy, Texas and San Diego; they all eventually moved to the New York or Los Angeles areas. Ten of the eleven participants received Jewish education through Bar Mitzvah classes, Sunday school or Jewish day school. The participant with a non-Jewish mother did not have a childhood Jewish education and was raised with no religion.

Participants grew up with and currently have friends of varying backgrounds, including Iranian Jews, Iranian non-Jews, Jewish non-Iranians (including those with heritage from Russia, Morocco, Israel and elsewhere), and American non-Jews. Participants' groups of friends became more diverse with age. They all speak Farsi. Ten of the participants grew up Jewish, but at different levels of devotion: on a scale of religious observance (Not at All, Very Little, Somewhat, To a Great Extent, and Very), six marked Somewhat, three marked To a Great Extent, and one marked Very. Eight people went down in religiosity levels, and two stayed the same. Six participants marked their current level of devotion as Very Little, two marked Somewhat, one marked To a Great Extent, and one marked Very.

Strengths and Limitations

This is the first study to explore the manner in which gay Iranian Jews negotiate their identity. Although this study gives voice to an understudied population, it also has several limitations. Initially, this study was open to LGBT individuals, however during the recruitment process snowball sampling resulted in only gay male participants. Therefore, the voices of lesbian, bisexual and transgendered individuals are missing from the study. Another group of people missing from the current study is those who may deny one or more aspects of their identity, such as gay Persian men who no longer identity as Jewish, or Persian Jewish men who suppress or deny their gay identity. When I asked participants why it may have been difficult locating lesbians for the study, several shared that there is more pressure on women to get married and women in general have fewer outlets than gay men. Several participants mentioned that areas such as West Hollywood celebrate gay identity more than lesbian identity. Therefore lesbian women may have fewer outlets to express themselves. In addition, another group of people missing from this study are gay Iranian Jewish men who do not live in major cities and may not have access to a gay community.

VI. Findings

Identity Conflict

All participants interviewed faced challenges at some point during their lives, and they continue to grapple with integrating their ethnoreligious and gay identities. Sam, a Mashhadi man in his 20s, says, "Being a Jewish person who tries to keep religion and being gay, I feel they are not compatible at times." Sharone, a 41-year-old man living an openly gay lifestyle, said, "Sometimes I didn't know which identity to support first. Do I deflect the gay? The Jewish?" This challenge of reconciling gay and Jewish identity is in line with previous research on gay Jews (Coyle & Rafalin, 2000; Schnoor, 2006).

For the men in this study, their current identities were not established at a particular age or moment in time; rather identity construction is an ongoing process of development and growth. Some participants were aware of their feelings towards male peers and schoolmates at a young age. Sharone recalled the feelings he had for a male classmate at the age of five:

> I remember every time I would see him; my heart would start beating. I didn't know what it was, but I knew forget the girls, forget everyone else, I want to be with him.

Unlike peers, who took interest in girls, some of the men in the study knew at a young age that they were attracted to men. Some described these feelings as "wrong" or "different" because they did not share the same feelings as their male classmates. Several of the most predominant theories find that individuals' feelings towards the same sex is conflicting because their attraction is different than that of their heterosexual counterparts (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1989). In addition, the words "different*"* and "wrong" were used perhaps because homosexuality in the Iranian community was and continues to be viewed

as a deviation from the norm. Another man in his late 20s, born and raised in Italy, shared that he saw his feelings towards other men as a mental health issue, "I described it as sick. I thought I was having a mental issue. I didn't know better. In Italy, I never saw gay people on TV, so I thought something was wrong."

Most participants shared an initial sense of guilt or denial about their attraction to men. Joseph, the youngest participant shared, "I knew, in my mind. But I repressed it [being gay]. I wanted it to stop." Some participants suppressed their feelings towards men because they felt that having attraction to the same sex was a phase. Some shared that they used denial as a response because they feared the implications of being gay and the barriers it could possibly create for their desire to be close to their families and to their lifelong goals for having a family and children of their own. In other cases, participants went to great lengths to see if the attraction towards women would develop. Participants who tried to develop feelings towards women expressed a sense of pain in attempting to alter who they were. For example, a medical student shared about the things he would do to suppress his feelings:

> I would force myself to watch straight porn instead of gay porn through junior high and high school. That is what I did**.** I would pray for it to go away. I would cry and say, "Why does it have to happen to me? I wish I could be straight."

Several participants shared their sadness associated with denial of their gay identity and the negative impact it had on their emotional well-being. Peyman stated, "I was devastated when I first found out I was gay, because I thought people are going to look down on it." Jacob, a man is his mid 40s, stated, "[I told myself] just accept it... There was a time that I thought I'd get married and learn to be attracted to women. All of

that." Out of pressure from family members in finding a wife, he would go on set up dates with women to try and change himself.

For most participants, a feeling precipitated awareness of attraction to the same sex. For others, it was a bodily arousal or that other males evoked an erection. A study by Jamil, Harper, & Fernandez (2009) found that awareness of attraction to the same sex was either through sexual interaction or through sexual fantasies of other men. One man, Behrooz, a 53-year-old man and the eldest participant in the study, remembered feeling more than a crush or a feeling for another man; rather, he felt a physiological difference on a bus ride from Esfahan to Tehran:

> I realized there was more than wanting to be close to a man and wanting to be touched by a man. I knew there was something more going on. At 16, it was hormones, this guy sat next to me and he was getting close to me and I could feel it. This guy was looking at me and all these emotions and he was following me and I wanted him.

Behrooz later shared that while he didn't have a clear idea of what sex exactly was, he was sure of his feelings. The common denominator for most participants was that they didn't know what it meant to be gay or they had negative associations with attractions to the same sex. In the Persian language as, as one participant said, "They call them [gay people] *eva-khahar*, boys that are very girly." The Farsi term *eva-khahar* literally translates to "oh sister." It is a derogatory term used to describe an effeminate man or a gay male.

Another barrier in grasping the concept of homosexuality was the lack of positive gay role models around participants and the negative depiction of gay men. Jacob, a man in his 40s, shared, "I wish I knew more and had a [gay] role model. I always knew I was different. But I didn't really know what being gay meant." The older participants shared

that there weren't as many gay people out while they were growing up. In addition, there was a lack of people they could relate to in their environment or in the media. As one participant who grew up in Israel mentioned, "The time I was in Israel, there weren't out people. The only gay characters were villains, the cartoon clownish types, the psycho killer that was gay, the city villain." Essentially, there were rarely gay role models, and it was rare to find what one participant called "a normal person who has the same-sex attraction."

Joseph, 23, explained that he had an idea of what being gay meant, but hesitated to label himself because of anxiety about the future and what associating himself with being gay meant to him and his family: "I don't think I was aware of it enough to assign a word. I was scared. I was fearful. When I was 13, I knew it. I heard my family talk about it, in a negative way, of course." This is similar to Cass' (1979) theory on gay identity development: gay men become aware that their feelings are similar to that of other gay men, and initially hesitate in labeling themselves as gay until some time has passed. After opening up about his sexuality to his family, Joseph recalled what his father had told him, "You can't have a normal family. You can never have a real family. Those were things I heard and it was really hard."

Joseph's father put down and dismissed his son's sexuality. In this context family was defined as marriage between a man and a woman that would produce children, implying that a gay man cannot father children. Joseph reveals the cultural context of his parents' generation and the misunderstanding about homosexuality. Participants revealed this theme time and time again. Given the traditional environment in Iran, homosexuality and even sexuality more generally were taboo concepts. Ashkan stated that his mother

had an "idea of homosexuality, it was just such a taboo concept. She grew up in Iran and it was never discussed then."

Taboo Subjects and Secrecy

The majority of participants are first generation Americans, and they revealed that a part of the Iranian culture is to deny or not talk about certain topics. Some said that growing up their parents had little to no knowledge about homosexuality. One participant explained, "You accept them for their limitations, and you don't fault them. This is the way they were brought up, and you just have to expose them to the best side you got." Daniel, A New Yorker in his mid 40s, echoed these statements:

> People from that generation [his father is 85]- what I'm hearing I'm not the first, but back in those days, you still got married to a woman, had kids and from time to time you do something on the side. It wasn't something you spoke about or lived openly.

Behrooz mentioned, "The only married [gay] man I know of, was my dad's brother. He was as gay as could be." Behrooz' uncle lived a normal life married to a woman and had children, but he was caught being intimate with other men in Iran. The couple remained married and his uncles' same-sex interactions were kept private among some family members that knew. Anthropological research has found that in some cultures, same-sex behavior is not stigmatized as long as the individual meets his or her gender expectations (Harper et al., 2004). Since Behrooz' uncle had a wife and children, the family seemed to ignore or overlook his extramarital affairs.

These examples imply that in Iran, there was a sense of secrecy and taboo subjects were not openly discussed. In addition, Jews in Iran never publically discussed social problems outside the family because there was a stigma attached to "airing your laundry" in public (Melamed, 2007b). Even though a majority of Iranian Jews has left

Iran, the idea of secrecy and taboo subjects has followed them and has been implanted in their communities in America. Iranian Jews tend to be secretive and private about their personal lives (Soomekh, 2008). Taboos associated with being openly homosexual have created tremendous challenges for Iranian Jewish men who are gay. One participant, alerted me to his concerns for participating because of the value placed on privacy. He wrote about his fear in an email:

> While I am openly gay, many of my family members outside of my immediate family do not yet know that I am gay, so I do need to make sure that any identifies of who I am remain confidential.

I assured him, and other participants, that pseudonyms would be used. While confidentiality is expected in any social science research, it is particularly important in a study of taboo identities in a community in which people knows each other and news travels fast.

Marriage

Marriage in the Iranian society plays a vital role in the continued maintenance of a social system and serves as a form of socialization (Hanasab & Tidwell, 1993). In Iran, the norm was arranged marriages, where families would find potential suitors for their children to marry. Marriages between cousins were common and were seen as a means of strengthening the extended family (Phillips & Khalili, 1995). Marriages are not only a union between the two individuals getting married, but also between the two families. There is a desire to carry on the unique traditions of the culture. In general, Iranian Jews feel comfortable with their sons and daughters marrying Jews from various regions in Iran, but members of the Mashhadi community have separate synagogues from other Iranian Jews in New York and maintain their closeness by marrying mostly other

Mashhadis (Mashhadi Jews in New York, 2003). While some traditional communities prefer arranged marriages, Iranian Jewish parents merely wish to know the family their children are marrying (Phillips & Khalili, 1995). The community has established a hierarchical system of potential marriage partners based on a family's socio-economic status, education, professional career and success (Soomekh, 2008).

Soomekh (2008) conducted interviews among three generations of Iranian Jewish women – grandmothers, mothers and daughters – and researched how history, political turmoil and social expectations affected them. She writes that the women in her study were validated into the Iranian Jewish community upon marriage and childbirth. One of her interviewees shared during family gatherings that people say, "Hopefully next year when you come, you will come with your husband." Once a woman is married, they say, "Hopefully next year when you come, it will be with your baby."

Participants in the current study also felt pressure to get married from their family members. Michael, a man in his 30s, said about an older family member, "She always asks me if I have a girlfriend…*enshallah* [G-d-willing], whatever that shit is. She asks me if I have a girlfriend for my wedding every time I see her." Ashkan from Los Angeles also shared:

> My brothers' friends always ask me, "How are the ladies? *Omeedvaram* [hopefully] for your wedding." All the time. "*Be-omedeh khodah voseh arooseeyeh toe beeyaym* [G-d-willing we will come for your wedding]." All that stuff.

Some of the men said they had been set up with women on dates, but eventually stopped and refused to marry women. Iranian Jewish men are expected to continue traditional ideals and take on certain gender roles within the community. In addition to getting

married, one of the most important expectations, as described by participants, was to have children. A Mashhadi man in his late 30s, mentioned:

> I mean every time I go to a Persian wedding, and I get cornered by a second cousin or a *zan-amoo* [wife of dad's brother] or by a this or by a that. "Why aren't you married? What is wrong with you?" They don't think that you are a real person until you have created a family and carried on the torch of your family name.

As family is the basis of Persian and Jewish culture, marriage and children are highly valued. Family includes parents, siblings, cousins, grandparents, aunts, uncles, great aunts, great uncles, second or third cousins, etc. (Soomekh, 2008). Hojat et al. (1999) found that family and the kinship network take precedence over other social relationships, and it was revealed that 96% of participants agreed with the statement that their "Greatest loyalty is family" on their questionnaires. Responses imply that the close relationship with family is rooted in immigrant Iranians. The participants are expected to get married, ideally to an Iranian Jewish woman, and have children. From the perspective of the Iranian Jewish community, gay Iranian Jewish men fail to meet the traditional familial standards, as they do not marry women and do not have children. One of the two participants who is married to a man and in his early 40s revealed, "My father is still in denial. He knows fully well what's going on, but he's still trying to find me a wife."

Success and Wealth

In addition to the pressures of getting married and having children, Soomekh (2008) points out that the women in her study were validated through their husbands, his family name and his job. There is pressure on men not only to provide for their families but also to have a "good" family name and be financially successful. Payam, a man in his late 30s, discussed the emphasis on social status in the Iranian Jewish community in LA:

"Success has a number. You have to hit this. You have to have this title. Live in a certain part of the city. Associate with a certain group of people." A man from New York in his late 30s expressed a similar sentiment:

> I am a well known journalist within my field and I make a living and I am not supported by my parents and I live well and so on and so forth. And I can go on about my own achievements, but when I go to them, it's meaningless. It's as if we haven't succeeded.

This statement implies that even though financial success is important, there may be specific professions that are respected more than others. Participants shared that within the community, certain professions, such as a successful business owner, a doctor or a lawyer, equals success. Other professions can be minimized or viewed as unacceptable. Michael, a man raised in England, compared the differences between the mentality of Iranian Jews in Los Angeles and the British mentality:

> It's difficult for me to be around the superficiality… I'm talking Jewish Iranian in LA, is what I know. I can't tell you how many times I've been to family functions and people ask me what I do. I say standup comedy, and the first question is how much money do you make. To me being raised in England, that is an inappropriate question and I never know how to answer it.

With the attention placed on materialism and conventional financial success, people within the community will go to various lengths to hide things that would be considered imperfections to uphold a certain image. Some members of the Iranian Jewish community invite 500 or more guests to their weddings (Melamed, 2007a). The issue is that it is costing young Iranian Jewish professionals up to six figures in debt to pay for these lavish celebrations in order to keep up with traditions and display a sign of wealth. Young Iranian Jewish newlyweds shared that even though they did not necessarily want a large wedding, they felt the pressure from family (Melamed, 2007a). This has created a larger problem in regards to continuity of the Iranian Jewish community. It has created a

fear that Iranian Jews will marry outside of their community or outside of their religion to escape the pressure of costly and debt incurring weddings.

The pressure to display material wealth and the taboo of homosexuality both stem from an expectation that people must fit a certain mold to gain acceptance within a tight-knit community. A Mashhadi man sees this phenomenon happening across the board from Iranian Jews in Los Angeles to Mashhadi Jews in New York:

> You wouldn't know the economy is struggling because they are still walking around like everything is perfect in this world…I think there is a tendency to hide imperfections. I don't think they'd talk about their children having problems, whether it's drugs or alcohol or children struggling with sexual identity or you know they pretend that it does not exist.

Community members are aware of the social problems but few are willing to advocate for change (Melamed, 2007b).

Collectivist Culture

A common theme in interviews was that the pressures to marry, have children and display wealth stem from an understanding that each individual is living his life for his family and his community. The cultural belief is that parents live for their children and children live for their parents (Soomekh, 2008). The people in the Iranian Jewish communities of Los Angeles and New York originate from a collectivist society. In contrast to the American values of individualism and self-discovery, Iranian culture emphasizes obeying elders, adhering to group norms and serving the greater good of the group. One participant shared:

> A lot of us are born in America and we see the independent lifestyle of what makes us happy versus our parents, it's doing what makes others happy, what makes your parents happy. My mother is so submissive, so obedient to her parents.

As children of Iranian immigrants and for those growing up inside the United States, there is a conflict taking place between the culture of their parents and that of western societies. Another participant shared his experiences about being born and raised in Germany and attending an international American school. He explained the contrast between Germany and his Iranian Jewish community in America. He explained that children were encouraged to be independent and that there was an element of self-discovery. He shared, "We met people of all stripes and I never felt that I had to be straight." This sentiment was rare among other participants. This man considers his lack of conflict with identifying as gay to be a product of the individualistic environment of his upbringing. He then explained that once he and other Iranian Jewish families moved to America, their parents reverted to the collectivist orientation of their Iranian upbringings. They no longer encouraged self-exploration, and they began to worry about why their children were not getting married. One man summed up the collectivist orientation of the Iranian Jewish community in Los Angeles: "Everyone wants to fit into this very small frame of who he or she should be and what they should do. They feel everyone has to be exactly the same."

Shaming the Family Name

Iranian Jews in Los Angeles tend to act as though they fit into the communal frame and to criticize those who do not. Karmel Melamed, an Iranian Jewish journalist, has been approached by an overwhelming number of Iranian Jews who ask him to write about societal problems in the Iranian Jewish community. However, the majority refuse to go on the record to speak about issues they are dealing with (Melamed, 2007b). Taboo topics include "drug abuse, spousal abuse, religious inter-marriage, gambling, shady

business dealings, embezzlement, alcoholism, divorce, sexual behavior for young men and women, and excessive spending on parties" (Melamed, 2007b).

Melamed emphasized that although some of these issues are not common, they all exist in the Iranian Jewish community. He believes that discussing societal issues and admitting to them is the first step to moving forward. With the expectations of conformity weighing on them, families are not supposed to discuss personal taboo topics. There is a fear of shaming and ruining the family reputation. As Sharone stated about "forcing the issue" of being gay:

> I came out to my family and I'm talking about to all 550 of them back in the late 90s, and it was a slow process. The sense of *uberoomoo raft* [literally translated to our reputation has gone, meaning our reputation is tarnished]. The sense of family honor has been displaced with family disgrace.

The youngest participant in the study shared the same concern:

> My father very much dwells on the reputation of the family. That means so much to Persians. You come from Iran; a lot of people with nothing and all you have is your reputation. He was worried that once people would find out [about me being gay], they would alienate him. And they will have a bad perception of the [last name], what did you do to the [last name] family.

Being an openly gay man may stigmatize not only the individual, but also the individual's family, and some participants feel that opening up would mean that their families would be alienated within their social circles or it would be difficult for family members to get married. David, a man in his mid 20s who opened up to his parents about his sexuality, stated, "I told my parents and they said we already had a feeling, but please don't tell anyone yet; it will be hard for your sister to get married."

A Mashhadi man in his mid 20s stated that initially, his older sister was accepting of his homosexuality because she understood that it was not his choice. She later changed

her opinion. She started to be unsupportive and continues to argue with her brother about keeping his sexual identity private.

> So keep in mind that if I come out, my nephews and nieces will never be able to get married in the community and she's convinced of that. She's giving me examples where someone in the family did something bad and as a result, the community punished their immediate family. Her fears are true. Unfortunately, the community blames the wrong people for things like this. She said if you ever come out, you will never see your nieces and nephew.

The Role of Gossip

One of the many concerns that came up about being members of the Iranian Jewish community is that members tend to spread rumors, making other people the subject of gossip. Information about people's lives is discussed and information quickly spreads. Ashkan explained, "A lot of my cousins know about my sexuality and who knows whom they've told. I think word spreads, especially in the Persian community, they spread."

As research has found, gossip serves a purpose in tight knit communities and is important to group interaction (Carey, 2005). With gossip, groups of people determine behaviors that are deemed appropriate. Gossiping too little or too much are both risky for group members. Gossip functions as a means for people to gain a sense of status within a group and insures a sense of security for members that are in fear of falling out.

Gossip in the Iranian Jewish community is centered on family and divorce (Soomekh, 2008), and sexual orientation is another topic that can be included. Word spreads fast because people come from extended families that are connected to other extended families and family friends. Participants mentioned there are some positive aspects to being part of this close-knit group, including having a strong sense of

community, family values, rich history, rich culture and strong sense of religion. However, as one man stated:

> Some of the positives [of being Persian Jewish] are also some of the negatives. A bit of a contradiction, but I think there is a sense of togetherness and community, which is a wonderful thing. There can also be a lot of judgment.

Gossip can bring large groups together, but it can also alienate people who do not conform to communal standards.

Impact on Psychological Well-Being

All participants mentioned the difficulties of being gay and the challenges they have been through. They experience the expectations to conform as emotionally straining, and several mentioned feeling bad about themselves or depressed at some point. Nine out of the eleven participants mentioned seeking out therapists for support of being gay at either college LGBT centers or private practices.

Hanasab and Tidwell (1989) found that Iranians with liberal views were in conflict with the traditional views held by their parents, which contributed to anxieties and confusion. They explain that the differences in parent-child attitudes become a psychological weight. We see this anxiety and confusion among gay individuals, as they are often denying or suppressing their desires because of the conflict it could create between them and their parents.

Participant experiences have impacted their mental well-being and psychological functioning. The men interviewed for this paper live close to Los Angeles, California and Long Island, New York. This gives them the opportunity of being connected to their family and their Iranian Jewish community; the environment, though, can create challenges for gay men openly talking about their sexualities. The pressure of attaining

success and the constant reminder of getting married leads to stressful circumstances. They want to attain close ties to family and to long-term family friends, but find it difficult and uncomfortable in not being honest to people who are close to them.

A man from the Mashhadi Iranian Jewish community stated that since he was ten or eleven years old, he became emotionally isolated, and increasingly depressed. "The jokes at every Shabbat lunch, every Shabbat dinner, every occasion, *Enshallah [God willing]* you get married this year. It really got to me."

The story of how this man came out relates to attending therapy sessions, which basically forced him to confront his homosexuality. "I was too afraid to tell my mother, and in time the pressure built up," the man said:

> I started having panic attacks in addition to the pressures that I had in school, in college. I was stressed out from exams and everything accumulated, and my homosexuality was this big secret that I had.

Another participant shared that after coming out to his mother, she rejected the idea of his sexual orientation and responded "hysterically." She said that she would go to the best doctors and psychiatrists to "heal" him. He was eventually taken to a hormone specialist who put him on rounds of testosterone for three months. He discussed how it was demeaning, especially since his uncle "would have to give it [inject the testosterone] in my ass." There was both physical discomfort and emotional pain. With the lack of acceptance from his mother and other family members, his feelings of depression and worthlessness emerged, and he experienced a downward emotional spiral. Unexpressed emotions, secrecy, lying and the lack of acceptance may lead some to substance abuse. One participant explained about his turn to drug abuse and risky behavior:

> I started hanging around transsexual prostitutes and their pimps and doing meth. I just got caught up in a crazy scene. But it all stems back to not feeling accepted and not feeling loved. I really believe I would have been able to get through not being accepted by peers, if I would have been accepted by my family.

The rejection of family and friends were not the only problems faced by these participants; they also had to deal with harassment outside their cultural environment. LGBT youth are at serious risk of becoming targets of bullying and Landau (2011) explores this in her broader study of bullying in Jewish day schools. Several participants shared their experiences about being bullied in schools by peers. One participant explained that the harassment began in fourth grade when he was nine years old. "Kids would tease and ask why are all my friends were girls. I would get picked on and be called gay, girly, faggot, all that stuff." Another participant shared that in his Jewish day school, bullying was the norm for him, and what made it more upsetting was that teachers did not intervene to stop the abuse. With sadness, one participant shared:

> I mean people would call me *poof*, which is a British derogatory word like fag. And I cringe every time I hear that word. I hate that word so much. I would get called, "Queer, bender, you are a girl, girl."

Research has found lesbians, gay men and bisexuals to have a higher prevalence of mental health disorders than heterosexuals (Meyer, 2003). One factor is that gay members of society live with a devalued sexual identity and limited systems of support. Stigma and discrimination create a stressful and hostile social environment and therefore mental health problems emerge (Meyer, 2003). Gay Iranian Jews have experienced prejudice events and rejection for their sexual orientation based on interactions with friends, family, and the community, as well as through the broader media. Several participants said that homosexuality is discussed negatively and sometimes becomes the butt of jokes. One participant mentioned a conversation between his co-workers about the

gay marriage bill that passed in New York, "I was hearing a lot of negative comments from people at work; I know it's there. *They are disgusting. Why are they allowing that*?"

This implies that a negative view of homosexuality exists in the greater community too. Participants mentioned that although the general attitude of Americans is getting better, there is still stigma, rejection or even offensive actions towards homosexuality. Conflict with the aspect of gay identity has affected participants' emotional functioning and has also impacted social relationships

Disclosure of Sexual Orientation to Friends, Family and the Community

This section focuses on the extent of sexual identity disclosure to friends, family and the greater community, as well as the impact of identifying and disclosing sexual identity or remaining closeted. Participants shared their reasoning of why and when they chose to disclose their sexual orientation. For most participants, it was about building a supportive network of people who would validate their sexuality and respond positively. Coming to terms with sexual orientation and disclosing it to others is a process that can take a long time. One participant, Jacob, stated that initially, he identified himself as gay before opening up to others:

> *Jacob*: When I came out to myself I was 33. I pretty much fought for over 20 years.
>
> *Interviewer*: What does it mean to come out to yourself?
>
> *Jacob*: What it meant was waking up one day and I said, "[Jacob], let go of the fight, this is not something that you can change. You are gay."

After defining sexual orientation for themselves, several of the men interviewed feared the negative reactions that would follow. They did not want to disappoint their family's expectations of them. Sharone shared that his parents were upset that he would

not share the lifestyle his parents wanted for him, especially in terms of having a wife. But he did not fault his mother for not accepting his sexual orientation because "it takes us so many years in our own skin to accept that we are gay; I would never put that pressure on an outsider to accept me."

One participant shared that he felt that being gay was a bad thing, and he was uncomfortable with himself until he watched a movie that depicted two men being intimate with each other:

> I watched it and it was the first time in my life I saw two men kiss and be openly gay. First time I saw anybody say gay is okay. And thought this isn't a bad thing necessarily. It's a good thing. Within a year I made friends with the weird kids, the hippies, the punks and the stoners and most of my friends were females. And I was comfortable to come out to her [a friend from school].

After participants recognized that they were gay, the majority began to open up to friends, cousins, siblings or colleagues that were closer to their age than their parents, likely because they have a more similar social environment. Reactions from friends, cousins, siblings and colleagues were generally more positive than negative. For most participants, disclosing sexual identity was a selective process; similar to Coyle & Rafalin's (2000) study, they chose to disclose their identity first to people they felt would react positively. A Mashhadi man stated, "My boyfriend and I have several Mashhadi friends here, but they are hand picked. They are obviously very cool, educated, open-minded Mashhadis as well." This statement implies that the overall Mashhadi community is conservative and perhaps not accepting of homosexuality. Another participant, a 23 year old, was seeing a therapist to deal with disclosing his sexual orientation. "I was very methodical with the way I came out. I was organized, controlled. I knew I had to be if I wanted the experience to be good, for as challenging it was going to be."

This selective disclosure allowed participants to gain support and see how others would receive them. It also meant that they had someone who would support them through the process of coming out to others. It was important to build a supportive network of people. In addition to friends and others those who were close in age (siblings, cousins), participants also gained support from LGBT synagogues, LGBT support groups, study abroad programs in college or the college environment. As some moved from the home environment and formed an independent lifestyle away from their parents and family, they gained the awareness and confidence to explore their gay identities. For some participants, this move represented a new start. One man stated:

> I remember it was sort of informative, a significant day at [Ivy league university] when I settled in my room. I said enough of the lying. I went to an LGBT meeting, my first week. So in my college, I decided that college was for me the beginning and that also led me to be honest to my close friends.

Participants were selective in coming out to their Persian Jewish friends. Behrooz, a 53-year-old man, stated:

> I have a cousin that is a part of this group of guy friends. We sat in school next to each other for years. He is conservative and their wives are conservative. Many times I felt like doing it [coming out to him], but then I figured I probably shouldn't.

It seems that the older generation of Iranian Jews may not be as accepting because of the social environment they were brought up in, in Iran, possibly having lack of exposure to homosexuality. Several others mentioned that being closeted created a barrier in the quality of friendships, and the delayed or lack of intimate sexual relationships was particularly frustrating. One man shared:

> Here I am at age 22 and I'm trying to start this socialization process and people think because you are 22 you've been socialized. But no if you were closeted and you bottled your emotions, you are no better than a 12 year old that is starting at

> ground zero; you are just at the same place. At 22 I was trying to figure out how to have friends and it was an effort.

No matter what age they came out, some experienced a process of re-socialization, in which they learned how to come to terms with their identity as homosexual within a majority heterosexual society.

Another participant reiterated that being closeted held him back "sexually and it had an impact on my social life. Friendships were as good as they could have been. I wasn't open to myself, how could I even be open to my friends?" Participants had difficulty accepting themselves as gay and felt that it was a burden not sharing their authentic self with others. Several felt their friendships growing up weren't as sincere and honest as they wanted them to be because they were closeted and felt censored from being themselves. Some participants shared they waited a while to open up to others because they were worried about how people would react.

In some cases, friends and family found out indirectly through extended communal networks. Ashkan describes the time he opened up to a colleague:

> We started talking and I realized she's cousins with my *zan dayee* [wife of mom's brother] and I told her I was gay. And I asked if other people know in the family and I started naming names and she said, "My mom knows." And I was like "Really?" And I've never even met her mom. I don't even know who her mom is and her mom may be 60? 70? 80? But she knows. Sometimes you think people don't know, but a lot of people probably know.

Third party disclosure was common among participants. Sometimes they would share the news with one parent, who would share it with the other parent. Or a sibling or parent would tell other family members, with or without the blessing of the person under discussion. It was sometimes difficult for participants to keep information limited to select individuals because of the prevalence of gossip within a close-knit community. Or,

as one participant put it, in the Iranian Jewish community, news spreads "like fire." This participant wanted to be open and free to date in college and be active in the LGBT Jewish group on campus. He shared:

> I wanted to do a lot of things and I knew people would start finding out. And I knew from somewhere, somehow they'd find out. So I told my family-friends in advance, and I said this is something that I just told my parents and they don't want others to finds out. I asked them not to tell their parents because that could affect the relationship they have with my parents. I think they might have told their parents.

This desire for selective disclosure stems from a fear of being alienated from other Iranian Jewish families or family friends. Indeed, reactions of parents and older family members were generally more negative than positive. Similar to a study by Coyle & Rafalin (2000) on gay Jewish men, initially, negative responses by family included disgust, denial or disbelief. Payman saw his father physically react to the news: "Dad got so upset that he started hyperventilating, that he almost passed out." However, Payman had one grandparent who responded in a positive, rational way: "We study biology. You see it in animals. There are gay roosters and there are gay chimpanzees and it's a part of nature, so okay."

Another common theme was the concept of supporters without acceptance. The idea that parents supported their children, even though they did not accept the concept of homosexuality. One participant reiterated his father's response, "Go be happy with your life, even if I don't approve of it, just go be happy."

Participants' explanations for their families' negative reactions to disclosure were based on families' view of homosexuality as a mental health issue or a physical health problem. Some families suggested reparative therapy, psychiatry, or for participants to try women, as one participant said, "They told me maybe I just haven't found the right

woman." Families were concerned about the continuation of tradition, finding a wife and producing children.

Despite the negative initial reactions, the views of parents and older family members often changed over time. Some parents became more understanding and educated themselves about homosexuality. Michael shared about his father, "He read books about what it is to be gay and watched documentaries. For an Iranian man, that is big."

For some participants, disclosing their sexual orientation relieved a great deal of unhappiness and stress and built self-esteem. It strengthened their friendships and familial relationships, and allowed participants to be honest and comfortable with others. As one man mentioned, "I carried this burden... When I told them, it was so much easier. Now I'm a member of the family, I was a cousin, brother, son, a [Last name of participant]." Another said, "Part of being Iranian is family and everything is family, family, family. Coming out allowed me to live the life I wanted to live and brought me closer to everyone." After coming out and after some time being accepted for who they were, participants became relieved, they were excited about participating at family functions, because people were accepting of them and they didn't feel the need to hide their gay identity or feel ashamed.

For others, disclosing sexual identity may pose a threat or risk within the familial structure and create a greater sense of discomfort or lack of acceptance. One participant described his cousin's negative and hurtful reaction, "He didn't feel comfortable with me being around his kids, when I used to babysit his kids. I used to organize cousin nights, cousin's day out." Another man shared that his siblings and nieces and nephews know;

however, his sexual identity is not disclosed to his siblings' spouses. The community or even in-laws may use participants' disclosure against the individual or the family. Behrooz shared about his brothers-in-law:

> I don't think they would understand, and they would use it against my sisters. For example, if a fight would happen, they will say, "Oh your gay brother." They would do that.

Reactions of family have therefore become more negative or may become negative.

Orthodoxy

A participant from New York, whose family has turned to Orthodox Judaism, shared that after coming out to his family, he was forced to speak with the rabbi. The rabbi took it well and did not bring up arguments against homosexuality, however the rabbi spoke about the possible repercussions being open would have on the family:

> He said you can always be single. You see all these older single guys that don't get married, no one knows why. He was basically saying I can follow that life, but if I'm open I will not be welcome [to synagogue]. He mentioned you have to do what's right not only for you, but for your family's reputation. So he was trying and he said if I decided one day to be open about it, I could not do that in this community.

Another participant said, "In Orthodoxy I think it is very difficult to be Jewish and be gay. It is almost impossible. I mean you have to hide it, and that is a negative thing." For those who have close Orthodox family members, being gay can be even more challenging, due to Orthodoxy's negative stance toward homosexuality (Coyle & Rafalin, 2000; Namdar, 2012; Schnoor, 2006). As one participant mentioned, "Whenever you discuss it with a rabbi that is not Reform, they always bring out the fact that being gay is an abomination." This stance is rooted in Leviticus 18:22, "And you shall not cohabit with a male as one cohabits with a woman; it is an abomination." Engaging in same-sex sexual behavior is mentioned again in Leviticus 20:13, "And if a man cohabits with a

male as with a woman, both of them have done an abominable thing; they shall be put to death; their blood falls back upon them." Even though there was the factor of shame and lack of knowledge about homosexuality in traditional Iranian Jewish homes, over time the perspective of some family members changed and became accepting. However, Orthodox Judaism holds an outlook that Jewish scripture is the word of G-d or *Torah Min Ha-Shamayim*, *Torah from the heavens* (Coyle & Rafalin, 2000). Understanding the Torah as divinely created carries the highest authority, and it is challenging to change this perspective. One participant mentioned:

> [My brother] was bringing up the religious argument with me; everything comes down to the fact that if the Torah does not allow something, you cannot work around it; according to them, it's impossible that G-d would make you gay.

In the case of Mashhadi Jews in New York, synagogue involvement is central to the functioning of the community and serves as a strong source of support. Mashhadis interviewed described the community as homogeneous and even tighter-knit than other Iranian Jewish communities. Daniel said:

> Their friends are exclusively Mashhadi Persians. Everybody is related to everybody in 5 different ways. So when you say one big family, it really is one big family, maybe 1st, 2nd, 3rd or 5th cousins. Try to explain that to non-Iranians and their mind blows. You are related to people in more than one way. This is my 1st cousin, who is also my 3rd cousin. Parents know each other; your parents were best friends, now you're best friends. There is a network of 2,000 cousins.

Most Mashhadis consider themselves separate from other Iranian Jews; they are encouraged to marry within the community, and "You see 23-year-old guys marrying 18-year-old girls and by age 25, they have 2 kids." This diverges from the trend in American society. It seems that some patterns within the Mashhadi community parallel patterns in the Orthodox community. Americans in general are marrying later than in the past, and the average age of non-Orthodox Jews getting married is 31 because people are obtaining

a higher education, often before marriage (Israel, 2001). Therefore, Mashhadis marrying young seems counter cultural.

Another area of cultural difference is that the Mashhadi community does not allow its members to marry non-Jews or converts. Those who do are excommunicated. The same applies for those who marry the same sex. One Mashhadi participant mentioned "the [Samuel] incident." As he explained, Samuel was a member of the Mashhadi synagogue and would often attend to spend time with his family and stay in touch with his traditions. However, pictures of Samuel's same-sex wedding were found online, and a controversy broke out within the community. He was officially excommunicated.

In the Torah, excommunication is referred to as *herem*, meaning banning a person from the community for disgracing G-d. Following the Babylonian exile, elders and rabbis deemed some crimes punishable by excommunication (Scheib, 2013). The Talmud implies that there are 24 acts punishable, including selling non-kosher meat as kosher and marrying a non-Jew (Scheib, 2013). During the medieval period, excommunication could also be implemented on family members of those who were excommunicated (Schieb, 2013). The practice of *herem* stopped existing in most Jewish communities in Europe after the Enlightenment, when Jewish courts lost authority and Jews became more integrated into the greater non-Jewish society (Excommunication, 2009). However, in Ultra Orthodox communities and in the Mashhadi Jewish community in New York, excommunication holds weight and is damaging to the individual, whose ties to the synagogue become severed.

Among Mashhadi Jews, when people are excommunicated for marrying a non-Jew, their relatives are pressured against inviting them to their own weddings. According to one interviewee, the heads of the synagogue send notices to community members saying something along the lines of: "We know you are the cousin of this person who married the non-Jew, and if you invite them, 500 families will not come to your wedding." People are forced to choose between inviting the particular mixed couple or the rest of the community.

Samuel kept his same-sex marriage private, but community members found pictures online and the news quickly spread. He was excommunicated from the synagogue and was not allowed to return. Even though the family was not excommunicated, there is a sense of shaming the family name that followed the incident. This case of excommunication, along with alienation from traditional Iranian Jewish synagogues, leads some gay Iranian Jews to avoid their families' synagogues and sometimes to explore other Jewish denominations.

Relationships with Judaism

Participants shared a spectrum of feelings about Judaism and Jewish involvement. Even though it is a challenge to integrate Iranian Jewish identity with sexual identity, several found comfort in the Iranian Jewish community and synagogue life because it gave them the opportunity to spend holidays with their loved ones and carry on traditions that they were familiar with. In Schnoor's (2006) study of gay Jews in Toronto, he classifies those who commute from gay specific and Jewish specific settings as Gay-Jewish Commuters. This group of people completely compartmentalizes their gay and Jewish identities by separating them from another. Several participants in the current

study can be classified as Gay-Jewish Commuters; especially for Mashhadi Jews and those from Orthodox families, intersection of the two identities would compromise their inclusion in the community.

Namdar (2012) published a book about being outed and excommunicated by his Jewish community for marrying his same-sex partner. He expresses that he strongly connects to the foods, the customs and the tradition. Even so, he finds it disappointing that as dedicated as he is to his Judaism and his culture, he will not be allowed to honor his sister's one year anniversary of her death with his cousins and family in honor of her memory. As Dr. Namdar states in his (2012) book:

> Now that I have been 'disinvited' from my own synagogue, where am I supposed to go to mourn for my loss? Are there going to be enough strangers in a strange synagogue to answer amen to my *Kaddish* [Mourner's prayer]? How is a rabbi who did not know my family supposed to shed light on my loss? Is this unforgiving brand of Judaism really what I miss so much, or is it some totalitarian perversion of the customs that I love so much? How cruel can you be to look me in the eyes and advise me against having a *didan* [Literally translates to see, but refers to a night during shiva, the seven days of mourning, when the bereaved family receives a wider crowd of visitors in the synagogue as opposed to other nights when they stay home] at my community's synagogue for my sister? (p. 342).

Dr. Namdar felt that he was "lost without my home base." He shared that as difficult as excommunication was, it gave him an opportunity to explore other Jewish denominations. Later, he joined the Reform movement. Other gay Iranian Jews have chosen to leave their traditional synagogues because of the feelings of alienation. Several mentioned that they have sat through sermons in which the rabbi made derogatory comments about LGBT people and preached that they should not enter the sanctity of the synagogue.

Several participants mentioned that they have found some rabbis' sermons to be offensive. Safaradi (2011) reports that a rabbi at Nessah Synagogue in Los Angeles gave

a speech that focused on intermarriage and its destruction of the Jewish community. The rabbi continued to raise his voice and yell that using a microphone at Shabbat services would result in the extinction of Judaism in the community. This fear that is being preached is causing members – especially those who are gay – to turn away from Iranian synagogues. Several joined gay Reform synagogues and found acceptance there. One participant mentioned that he turned away from Judaism because of the negative experiences from Bar Mitzvah classes, and then reintegrated his Jewish identity when he found a gay synagogue. He stated, "I can't believe I allowed for someone to hijack my Jewish identity for some time." He separated himself from the Traditional branch of Judaism because of his negative encounters and later re-connected with Judaism through a positive encounter with Reform Judaism. As Jones & McEwan (2000) explain, identities are not necessarily expressed one by one, but rather are fluid. Under any given circumstance one dimension of identity can be more or less expressed for an ethnic-religious-sexual minority (Schnoor, 2006).

Another man expressed that he found more comfort in combining his gay and Jewish identity with the help of a Reform rabbi. The rabbi offered an alternative interpretation of the quote: "a man shall not lay next to a man the same way he lays next to a women." He would not live a life of lies, and he would not lay next to a woman, since he is attracted to men. This participant challenged Jewish theological perspectives of homosexuality that forbid sexual relations with the same sex. Yip (2005), as cited by Jaspal & Cinnirella (2010), theorizes that LGB Christians and Muslim men reinterpreted holy scripture as a strategy to find their religion and sexual orientation compatible. Therefore, by reinterpreting the Torah, the participant found a means to cope with his

possibly conflicting identities. He expressed that his Jewish identity was important to him and that the Reform movement allowed him to integrate his Jewish and gay identities, while the Iranian Jewish community did not. He says:

> I used to be actively involved in the Persian Jewish community because I feel that I am more Persian than American. I am not involved anymore because of the fact that it is a non-ending process of coming out. There's answering questions. "Why aren't you married?" I can't just walk around every time and tell people, "I'm gay, I'm gay, I'm gay."

However, not all participants feel comfortable in Reform settings. Some mentioned that their conflict with Reform Judaism lies in the difference in culture, including female rabbis or the style of prayer. Some have chosen to stay involved with their Iranian Jewish culture without synagogue involvement, however they connect to their religion through Iranian Jewish friends and share holidays with family at home. One participant told me about a gay Iranian Jewish Shabbat dinner gathering that included less than 10 people. Most participants turned to other Jewish sources outside of Iranian Jewish synagogue life in connecting to their Jewish identity. One participant expanded on the fluidity of Judaism, he expressed:

> Jewish – is being educated and establishing yourself. Being together with family… I mean at this point in my life there are a lot of things about Judaism that I didn't appreciate or don't appreciate. However, you have to find your own way or you don't have to. I feel connected to it.

Partnering/Children

The majority of participants expressed interest in partnering with a man who is closer to their own culture, especially an Iranian Jew. The participant who was raised with no religion moved to Los Angeles partly to find a partner who was also Iranian. Some stated that dating someone who is culturally similar would be more comfortable because of shared values. Several shared that there is an understanding of holidays,

tradition and the close relationship to family. Another participant said that having a Jewish partner would make it easier, "If one day I choose to start a family, I would want my kids to grow up with the same strong Jewish traditions, and so I think I can do that if I have a Jewish partner." One participant stated that he has dated men from other faiths and cultures, but when he began to date a Jewish man, he explained:

> I liked dating a Jewish guy, it was so easy because I no longer had to explain, "Hey don't bring a pork sandwich into my home." On the day of Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, whatever it is everyone is geared up and you don't have to explain why you are doing something.

Another participant shared that communication is an issue and he would prefer for his partner to speak Farsi and be able to communicate with the elders of the family.

The majority of participants feel that it would be easier to date someone of the same ethno-religious background, but finding such a partner is difficult. One man said, "I can't be selective because I do not have as many options for Iranian Jewish. It's not every day I meet an Iranian Jewish gay man. Let alone a Jewish man. I would like to try it." For members of a multiple minority group, the selection pool for partners is small, so many date people who are not Iranian, not Jewish or not part of either group.

Changing Attitudes

Despite the negative reactions participants have encountered within the Iranian Jewish community, there is evidence that attitudes are changing. Several mentioned that homosexuality is less accepted among older and more conservative Iranian Jews who may view it as "gross or disgusting," as one participant put it. However, reactions are more positive among younger Iranian Jews who are growing up in America and adopting American values and American education. Several participants mentioned that the broad view of LGBT people in the general community has become more positive and there are

more influential people such as Oprah and Ellen, an openly lesbian talk show host, discussing homosexuality in a positive light.

For individuals, more exposure and a better understanding of the topic have contributed to changing perspectives. Several participants mentioned that family members had little knowledge of the contemporary LGBT community. For example, they feared that as gay men, participants would contract AIDS and become sick. However, individuals often change their views after they gain a better understanding about the topic. The support of therapists has been especially helpful in mediating between gay people and their relatives who may otherwise oppose homosexuality.

In addition to individual interventions like this, prominent community members are beginning to deal with homosexuality and other controversial issues in a more public way. One participant mentioned a difference between Iran and America: "Here in the U.S. people are discovering help, like Dr. Holakouee. There's a huge shift." Dr. Holakouee is a Los Angeles-based Iranian psychologist with a daily radio program that explores issues relevant to the greater Iranian immigrant community in America. He discusses controversial issues, normalizing topics that may be stigmatized, offering his perspective and bridging cultural differences. Due to his popularity, many Iranians are more willing than before to admit there is a conflict and seek outside help.
Similarly, a panel at UCLA in March 2013 dealt with various taboo topics, including sexuality and homosexuality (Melamed, 2013). The event marked a milestone, the first time an openly gay Iranian Jewish man, Shervin Khorramian, shared the challenges facing gay Iranian Jews. He described gay Iranian Jewish men's fear of disclosing their gay identity to family and friends and explained that many live double lives. He said,

"The second you come out, the roles are reversed. You become the teacher, and your parents become the students – so you have to be patient, considerate, accepting and forgiving of them" (Melamed, 2013). This panel demonstrates a shift in some community members' willingness to raise awareness about homosexuality and other taboo topics.

VII. Conclusion

Due to the cultural taboo against homosexuality and the traditional values in the Iranian Jewish community, gay men are experiencing challenges in negotiating and integrating their identities. The participants interviewed struggled to identify and label their feelings as gay. Some described their feelings towards the same sex as sick, weird or different. Given the challenging circumstances and difficulties in coming out, nine of the participants mentioned that at some point they had visited LGBT centers or turned to therapists in private practice. Several mentioned that rejection and years of denial led to psychological instability, depression and, for one man, years of drug abuse. All participants mentioned that they feared coming out because of the expectation that they would be ostracized and would shame the family name within the community. Several mentioned that they were not accepted for being gay, and some think they never will be.

Even though the initial reactions of older family members were generally negative, beliefs about homosexuality have changed over time. Friends, cousins and siblings closer in age generally reacted more positively. For those families that did accept their son's sexual orientation, parents and other family members asked participants to keep their sexual identity private. In the case of Mashhadi Iranian Jews, marrying a same-sex partner results in excommunication, which breeds a culture of fear among gay Mashhadi men. In the traditional Iranian Jewish community, there is a sense of taboo towards the aspect of sexuality, but with time and education, some families have become more accepting about their son's homosexuality.

Participants have varied relationships with Judaism. Some expressed resentment toward Orthodox Judaism and traditional Iranian Judaism due to their conservative

stances toward homosexuality. Some feel alienated from their families' synagogues and have turned to the Reform movement for support. Several reported that they uphold their connection to the Iranian Jewish community through their friends or families. When asked about the perspective of the Iranian Jewish community toward homosexuality, participants felt that the general attitude is improving because people are becoming more familiar with the issue.

VIII. Recommendations

Based on my analysis of interviews with gay Iranian Jewish men and related scholarship, I have a number of recommendations for gay and lesbian Iranian Jews, therapists, synagogues and the Jewish community.

For individuals who have feelings for the same sex

Coming out is a challenging process. It is important to come out first to people who will react positively and support you in the process of coming out to others. Individuals in major metropolitan areas, such as New York and Los Angeles, can seek the support of LGBT synagogues. And no matter where they live, they can turn to organizations like JQ International, which is dedicated to "increasing visibility and opportunity for Queer Jews and allies" (http://www.jqinternational.org/), and Keshet, which "works for the full equality and inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Jews in Jewish life" (http://www.keshetonline.org/about/). These groups can help connect individuals with same-sex feelings to people who have had similar experiences and can mentor them through the process of coming out and negotiating identities. The support of a mentor can be very helpful in reducing psychological strain.

For therapists working with Iranian Jews

Even though the Iranian Jewish culture may seem repressive, there are still many positive and supportive aspects that can assist clients who come from this community. Therapists should understand that individuals may retain some attachment to their family and community, and they may want to make sense of the culture instead of just abandoning it. They can assist their clients by meeting with their family members and providing educational materials about sexuality to the community. In addition, a clinician

may support a client in gaining a sense of self-confidence in themselves and their sexuality. Support means reducing psychological stress and assisting clients in identity management.

For synagogues

Some Iranian synagogues feature negative sermons about homosexuality. This breeds a culture of fear not only among those who identify as gay, but also among those who have gay relatives and friends. Rabbis and other synagogue officials should recognize that some of their members are likely gay. They should stop public shaming and replace it with discussions about taboo topics. This is an important step in creating a safe space for people with same-sex feelings, as well as others who differ in some way from what is expected of Iranian Jews.

For the Jewish community

Jewish organizations should recognize the issues unique to gay Iranian Jews and should create safe spaces for them to meet and forums to share their stories with the Iranian and broader Jewish communities. Some groups have taken steps in this direction, including the recent panel at UCLA. One group, JQ International, organized an invite-only gathering for Iranian Jews who identify as gay in New York. This kind of event enables people to meet others with similar experiences and recognize that they are not alone.

Gay Iranian Jews in America live in an open society that has become more accepting of homosexuality. However, as demonstrated by the recent controversy surrounding gay marriage in a Los Angeles synagogue with a large Iranian population (Nagourney, 2013), the Iranian Jewish community is not yet ready to embrace its gay

members. Most of the people interviewed for this study feel a strong connection to their community and their history and want to live an open gay Iranian Jewish life. But in the current cultural climate, they cannot do so for fear of harming their personal relationships with their families or jeopardizing the reputation of their families. As a Jewish community, we need to do what we can to help gay Iranian Jews: to foster the integration of their multiple identities and encourage their family and friends to accept them for who they are.

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X. Appendix A

School of Jewish Nonprofit Management - HUC-JIR
Capstone Project
Negotiating Multiple Identities

Name: **Date:**

Demographic Questions:

1.1	1.1.1 Question	*1.1.1.1* Response	*1.1.1.2* Comments
1	**Age**		
2	**What is your country of citizenship?**		
3	**What is your city/country of birth?**		
4	**What is your mother's city/country of birth?**		
5	**What is your father's city/country of birth?**		
6	**What year did you depart city/country of birth?** **(If applicable, otherwise leave blank)**		
7	**Growing up, most of my friends were…** **(Circle only one)**	**Iranian Jews** **Iranian Non-Jews** **American Jews** **American Non-Jews** **Members of the LGBT community**	**Other, Please List:**
8	**Currently, most of my friends now are…** **(Circle only one)**	**Iranian Jews** **Iranian Non-Jews** **American Jews** **American Non-Jews** **Members of the LGBT community**	

1.1	1.1.1 Question	*1.1.1.1* Response	*1.1.1.2* Comments
9	**Is your mother Persian?**	**Yes/No**	**If No, indicate background**
10	**Is your mother Jewish?**	**Yes/No**	**If No, indicate background**
11	**Is your father Persian?**	**Yes/No**	**If No, indicate background**
12	**Is your father Jewish?**	**Yes/No**	**If No, indicate background**
13	**Please indicate your ability in the following: (Circle one)** **Speaking Farsi**	**0= No Ability** **1= Beginning** **2=Early Intermediate** **3=Intermediate** **4=Early Advanced** **5=Advanced**	
14	**Please indicate your ability in the following: (Circle one)** **Reading Farsi**	**0= No Ability** **1= Beginning** **2=Early Intermediate** **3=Intermediate** **4=Early Advanced** **5=Advanced**	
15	**Please indicate your ability in the following: (Circle one)** **Writing Farsi**	**0= No Ability** **1= Beginning** **2=Early Intermediate** **3=Intermediate** **4=Early Advanced** **5=Advanced**	
16	**Growing up, how religiously observant was your family?**	**1 = Not at All** **2 = Very Little** **3 = Somewhat** **4 = To a Great Extent** **5 = Very**	**If your family practiced a religion other than Judaism, please indicate:**

1.1	1.1.1 Question	*1.1.1.1* Response	*1.1.1.2* Comments
17	**Currently, how religiously observant are you?**	**1 = Not at All** **2 = Very Little** **3 = Somewhat** **4 = To a Great Extent** **5 = Very**	

18. Have you had Jewish education? If so what type?

XI. Appendix B

Interview:

I wanted to follow-up on a few of the demographic questions:

- If applicable, what is the reason you/your parents moved to the United States or another country from Iran?
- While growing up, what language was spoken the most at home:
- What language do you use with your friends?
- Did you have any type of Jewish education (i.e. day school, afternoon school, Sunday school, bar/bat mitzvah education)
- What is your current highest level of education?
- Can you tell me your current relationship Status

Any other follow-up from the survey?

Where do you live now? How long have you lived ____ for?

A. Self-identification

1) Thinking about social categories, like race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, what categories do you most identify with?
    a.
    b.
    c.
    d.

    a. How do you fit into (identity)?

B. Meaning

1) What message do you get from being (identity)?
2) What are the roles and/or responsibilities of being (identity)?
3) Tell me about some of the positive things about being (identity)?
4) Tell me about the negative things about being (identity)?

C. Awareness

1) I'd like to know more about your personal experience. Tell me about realizing that you were (different, LGBT)?

    (Think: self-realization Iranian Jewish v. American)

    a. How old were you?
    b. How did you feel about it?

2) What were the words you used to describe this feeling? (If gay/lesbian was not in the vocabulary)

D. Friends/Family

1) Does your family know that you are (LGBT)?
    a. If some know and some do not can you explain who knows and who does not?

    a. IF YES –
    How old were you?
    How did they find out?
    Can you describe their reaction when they found out?
    Is their reaction the same now or different? How so?
    How has sharing this aspect of yourself affected you're relationship with your parents/family?

    b. IF NO-
    What prevents you from telling?
    How do you think they will react?
        *Why do you think they will respond in that way?
    How has not sharing this aspect of yourself affected your relationship with your family?

2) Do your friends know that you are (LGBT)?
    a. If some know and some do not know can you explain who knows and who does not? **(i.e., Persian Jewish versus others)**

    a. IF YES –
    How old were you?
    How did they find out?
    Can you describe their reaction when they found out?
    Is their reaction the same now or different? How so?
    How has sharing this aspect of yourself affected you're relationship with your friends?
    *Which cultural groups know?

    b. IF NO-
    What prevents you from telling them?
How do you think they will react?
    *Why do you think they would respond in that way?
How has not sharing this aspect of yourself affected your relationship?
with your friends?
*Which cultural groups do not know?

3) What do you perceive to be the general attitude of the Persian Jewish community towards (LGBT)?

E. Community

1) What communities are you comfortable coming out in?
   Why?
   In what ways are you connected with (community)?
   How did you develop this connection to the (community)?

2) What communities are you not comfortable coming out in?
   Why?
   What makes you feel disconnected with (community)?

3) How do you feel about your relationship with your Jewishness and your gayness?

4) Which community are you the most connected to?

F. Partnering

I am going to ask some sensitive questions. I want to assure you that everything we say will remain confidential.

If participant is currently in a relationship:

1) Is s/he Persian, Jewish or Persian Jewish?
2) How important is an issue is this of you?
3) Do you have any preferences as to the Jewishness or non-Jewishness of a potential partner? Why?
4) Regarding your attitudes about the Jewishness or non-Jewishness of a potential partner does the nature of the relationship make a difference (i.e. just for sex, dating, long term relationship, marriage)
5) Have your parents met the person you are currently seeing?
   a. How have they received him?
6) How do your parents feel about the fact the he is (Jewish/not Jewish)?
7) Have other Jewish family and friends met him?
   a. How have they received him? How do you feel about the fact that he is or isn't (Persian/Jewish/Persian Jewish)?

If participant is not currently in a relationship:

1) When was the last time you had a serious relationship?
   a. Was he Persian, Jewish or Persian Jewish, other?
2) How important an issue is this for you?
3) Do you have a preference as to the Jewishness or non-Jewishness of a potential partner? Why?

4) Regarding your attitudes about the Jewishness or non-Jewishness of potential partner, does the nature of the relationship make a difference (i.e. short-term relationship that may be for sex only vs. longer term relationship?)?
5) Did your parents meet your last serious partner?
    a. How did your parents receive him?
    b. How did your parents feel about the fact that he was/ wasn't (Persian/Jewish/Persian Jewish)?
6) Did your Jewish family and friend meet your partner?
    a. How have they received him?
    b. How do they feel about the fact that he is/isn't (Persian/Jewish/Persian Jewish)?

G. Marriage

1) How do you think about marriage for yourself?

If the person describes marriage to an opposite sex person, ask further prompts…
What will this look like in terms of your (gay) identity?

2) If you want to get married or live with a same-sex partner, how do you think? your family/friends will react?

H. Children

1) Do you plan to have children?
2) How do you think this will affect your family?

I. Area for further research:

- Do you know Iranian Jewish lesbians?
- How do you think their experiences compare to yours?
    - If you think there are some basic differences between the experiences of gay men in the Persian Jewish community compared to the experiences of lesbians in the Persian Jewish community, can you share what they are?

J. Supporters

1) What has helped you in the process of seeing yourself as (different, LGBT)?

2) Which people/institutions/resources have helped you?

Is there anything else that I have not asked you that would be important for me to know about how you understand the different identities in your life?

If I have further questions, is it okay to contact you again? What is the best way? Are you interested in receiving a copy of my final thesis?