

**Diasporic virginities: Social representations of virginity and identity  
formation  
amongst British Arab Muslim women**

Amena Amer<sup>1</sup>

Caroline Howarth<sup>1</sup>

Ragini Sen<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>London School of Economics, London.

<sup>2</sup>Centre for Policy Research, New Delhi; Logistics India, Mumbai.

**Abstract**

This study compares how practising and non-practising British Arab Muslim women position themselves in relation to representations of virginity. Overall, in our qualitative study, we found that representations of culture and religion influenced social practices and social beliefs in different ways: non-practising Muslim women felt bound by culture to remain virgins, while practising Muslim women saw it as a religious obligation but were still governed by culture regarding the consequences of engaging in premarital sex. Interestingly, some practising Muslim participants used Mut'a (a form of temporary 'marriage') to justify premarital sex. This, however, did not diminish the importance of virginity in their understanding and identification as Arab women. In fact, this study found that virginity, for the British Arabs interviewed, embodied a sense of 'Arabness' in British society. Positioning themselves as virgins went beyond simply honour; it was a significant cultural symbol that secured their sense of cultural identity. In fact this cultural identity was often so powerful that it overrode their Islamic identities, prescribing their behaviour even if religion was seen as more 'forgiving'.

**Keywords** Virginity, British Arab, Muslim, gender, culture, religion, social representations, Identity

## Introduction

Migrant communities often bring with them views and attitudes from their homeland influenced by their religious and cultural beliefs and pass on these expectations onto their children (Ajrouch, 1999). On occasion, these may sit in direct opposition to the views and attitudes held in their new home country. In the case of British Arabs, one such example is the importance placed on female premarital virginity. In exploring the perceptions of virginity held amongst second-generation British Arab practising and non-practising Muslim women through the use of social representations theory (SRT) (Moscovici, 1988), this study analyses how British Arab women situate themselves in relation to the world around them, drawing on representations of religion and culture to explain their behaviour. This provides some insight into the interplay of culture and religion in a so-called invisible community (Ermes, 2002).

Social identity is an element of the individual's sense of self which is manifested as a result of their knowledge and understanding in reference to their membership and level of affiliation to a group (Tajfel, 1981). Societies are patterned into numerous groups and these groups produce complex intersections (Brah & Phoenix, 2004) or hyphenated identities. The extent to which an individual draws on a community's social representations becomes the means by which they forge a sense of belonging, commonality and difference (Howarth, 2001). This provides not only a shared sense of identity but also develops common boundaries to which the community adhere or may choose to stay away. In this way, socially accepted representations are an expression of the identities held by communities, even in very diverse habitus (Howarth, Wagner, Magnusson, & Sammut, 2013). Through communal narratives and storytelling identities are shaped and these are the symbolic resources from which a personalised understanding of the world emerges (Jovchelovitch, 2007). Such narratives have the power to connect memories into a coherent history and knit this into the establishment of a group's social identity (Markovà , 2007).

Contrary to some critiques (see Voelklein & Howarth, 2005), SRT does not simply focus on the role of the group in the construction of shared meanings on the basis of which they live their lives. Such an overly consensual approach would assume that communities carry homogeneous, non-conflicting representations of the world around them and that these representations are resistant to change (Rose, Efrain, Gervias, Joffe, Jovchelovitch, & Morant, 1995). Rather, SRT acknowledges the role of the individual as an agent for change in the joint process of knowledge construction (Sen, Wagner, & Howarth (2015)). In fact, a

given community is able to simultaneously hold opposing and diverse representations (Jodelet, 1991), which can be continuously modified and renegotiated by social actors within it (Jovchelovitch, 2007). The existence of multiple and opposing representations is often understood using the concept of cognitive polyphasia (Provencher, 2011; Wagner, Duveen, Verma, & Themel, 2000). It is this which enables the co-habitation of multiple, sometimes conflicting understandings not only within a community, but within an individual as Howarth et al. (2013) have examined in diasporic communities. The formation of a diasporic ethnic identity emerges in the space between the immigrant culture and the host culture. A relationship is negotiated between the cultures in which both have a place creating a hyphenated or hybrid identity (Aveling & Gillespie, 2008; Fine, 1994, 2012; Hopkins, 2011; Wagner et al., 2010). Indeed, British Arab youth express a prominent sense of ‘Arabness’ which does not dilute their sense of ‘Britishness’ (El-Wafi, 2006; Nagel, 2002). Studies on British Muslims also highlight the use of hyphenated categories reflecting the complex multidimensional nature of their identities (Barrett, Cinnirella, Eade, & Garbin, 2006; Ryan, Banfi, & Kofman, 2009). However, these studies on British Muslims focus on the British Asian population, often ignoring the British Arab Muslim community.

In addition, the significance of gender and sexuality in identity formation is also often underplayed. Women must constantly negotiate and transform the fixed boundaries of their identities recognising that their lives are defined by gender relations and gender roles (Bhachu, 1993; Brah, 1993; Dwyer, 2000; Knott & Khokher, 1993; Wagner, Sen, Permanadeli, & Howarth, 2012), which often provide guidelines for acceptable sexual behaviours (Weeks, 1986). Studies exploring identity formation amongst Arabs in North America highlight tensions relating to issues of gender especially regarding the issue of girls dating (McIrvin Abu-Laban & Abu-Laban, 1999). Indeed, for many North American Arabs interpretations of what it means to be Arab or American/Canadian is often reliant on perceptions of appropriate female behaviour (Ajrouch, 1999). Within Arab society and by extension Arab diasporic communities, women are made aware of the expectations of their gender roles and the importance of how their behaviour impacts their family’s reputation (Aswad, 1997). Indeed, the woman is often seen to embody the family’s honour through remaining ‘pure’, that is a virgin (Ajrouch, 1999; Al-Khayyat, 1990). While there is no agreed medical or biological definition of virginity (see Bersamin, Fisher, Grube, Hill, & Walker, 2007), social constructions of female virginity are often conveyed through terms such as ‘keeping’ and ‘losing’ her virginity. This is understood through the presence (or otherwise) of the hymen and evidenced by bleeding on penetration showing that the hymen

has broken. As El-Saadawi (1991) notes the family's reputation is completely reliant on the condition of the hymen which she refers to as 'the very fine membrane called "honour"' (p. 25). The pressure experienced by Arab girls and women to 'keep the hymen intact' is not confined to the impermissibility of sexual encounters. Rather, any activity which may potentially break the hymen, such as taking part in certain sports or using tampons, is discouraged (Hendrickx, Denekens, Lodewijckx, & Van Royen, 2002). These pressures governed by strong cultural understandings of specific gender roles and traditional values relating to female sexuality in turn impact the construction of the representations of female virginity.

The value placed on female premarital virginity is often regarded as the most important aspect differentiating Arab culture from their host culture (Eid, 2007). As a result, second-generation Arab immigrants may also see premarital virginity as a critical aspect of what makes their culture distinct. Being integrated members of their host society where sex before marriage is generally regarded as acceptable, second-generation Arab Muslim immigrants have to manage this social expectation alongside sometimes conflicting cultural and religious norms about appropriate behaviour, such as abstaining from premarital sex. Eid notes that premarital virginity is a predominantly female-specific obligation, one which is advocated by the majority of women, despite the fact that Islam specifies the importance of both men and women remaining virgins until marriage (Musso, Cherabi, & Fanget, 2002). The decision to engage in premarital sex or not is seen to indicate to both the Arab community they belong to and the so-called host society which 'side they are on' (Eid, 2007). Where on one hand there is the 'good', virtuous Arab girl who is respected yet bound by expectations, be they self-imposed or otherwise; on the other hand there is the 'bad' non-Arab girl who is not bound by these expectations and as a result is seen as less respectable and even promiscuous in the eyes of Arab diasporic communities in the West. Naber (2006), in her study on Arab Americans, refers to this as the battle between the 'Arab virgin' and the 'American(ized) whore'. Other studies have shown that Muslim immigrants find themselves confronting traditionally held views, changing their outlook on some issues, becoming more individualistic (Ahmadi, 2003a, 2003b; Farahani, 2007; Shahidian, 1999) with a weakened sense of one's cultural heritage (Berry, 2011). However, as others have found (e.g. Hopkins, 2011; Howarth et al., 2013) negotiating identity is often more complex, with different strategies used in different contexts. This is sometimes because there is a struggle between the need to belong and acting assertively in developing a unique identity.

In addition, an alternative interpretation of Islam's position on premarital relationships and sexual behaviour is *mut'a* or a temporary marriage, a concept rejected by the Sunni sect but accepted to differing degrees within the Shi'a doctrine (Walbridge, 1996). *Mut'a* is a contract between a man and an unmarried woman where the duration of the marriage is stipulated beforehand and a monetary sum is agreed upon. Conditions can be stipulated by both individuals which could include limitations to the degrees of physical contact. There is no requirement for witnesses for the union nor for it to be officially registered, but is considered bound in the eyes of God (Haeri, 1989). Research on *mut'a* is often confined to its practice in Iranian society (Haeri, 1989; Mir-Hosseini, 1994) with even less research on the practice in diasporic communities in the West. Walbridge (1996), focusing on the Lebanese Shi'a community in Michigan, found that *mut'a* was practiced predominantly by men and was largely rejected by the community. The few women who admitted to being in *mut'a* relationships all gave practical explanations for the union, for example being otherwise homeless. However, in the Iranian context Haeri (1989) notes that some women use *mut'a* as a means of claiming a degree of autonomy and a sense of control in their lives, occasionally admitting to using the practice to fulfil sexual desires.

This research attempts to shed light on the representations of female virginity held among self-identifying British Arab Muslim women. By dividing them into two groups (practising and non-practising British Arab Muslim women) on the basis of self-defined religious observance, we explore the extent to which religion and culture relate to these social representations. On the basis of this, we consider how these representations impact on identity formation and behaviour.

## **Research design**

### *Participants*

The sample, made up of 17 unmarried self-identifying British Arab Muslim women aged between 19 and 33, all lived in London and had been living in the UK for the whole or majority of their lives. Eight participants belonged to the Sunni sect of Islam and nine were Shi'a. Overall, eight participants considered themselves nonpractising Muslims whilst nine as practising Muslims. It was found that there was considerable consensus with regards to the definition of being a practising and nonpractising Muslim hence these labels were used.

Practising was defined as at least adhering to the basic tenets of Islam such as praying and fasting, while nonpractising referred to not observing these principles.

### Procedure

A semi-structured interview technique was used. It was particularly beneficial in this study given the sensitive nature of the topic. Interviews lasted between 50 and 80 min. All participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

### Situating the researcher

The first author (the interviewer) identifies as a practising Muslim and wears the *hijab* and this may have limited the degree to which participants were willing to speak openly about their opinions and experiences. However, as a result of a common heritage and language, many participants felt at ease and said that they could only discuss the issues raised within this research with ‘an insider’ who understood their cultural and religious perspectives. A common language, Arabic, sustained a flow in the narration since the participants were able to switch between English and Arabic with ease throughout the interview. This forged a sense of trust, understanding, warmth and also humour, as is evident in the transcripts.

### **Data analysis and results**

All interviews were voice recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed using an inductive thematic analysis technique (Braun & Clarke, 2006) enabling the coding frameworks to develop from the data rather than from any imposed expectations (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Four overarching themes emerge: ‘situating self’, ‘cultural pressures and expectations’, ‘honour’ and ‘dating boundaries’. Within these themes there are some differences between the practising Muslim and non-practising Muslim group most evidently for the theme ‘dating boundaries’.

### Situating self

All respondents discussed issues of positioning in relation to representations of religion and culture and, parental expectations.

### *Formulating own identity*

All our participants acknowledged their 'Arabness' and saw it as an integral part of their identity. This however did not conflict or reduce their sense of 'Britishness' and resulted in many participants hyphenating their identities to encompass their sense of self. Sonia (29, practising) explains '*it's okay to identify myself as British without having to leave other parts of my identity like my Tunisian heritage*'.

Religion plays a fundamental part in identity construction of practising Muslim participants, with many claiming it to be the most important aspect on which their '*whole life is based*' (Ayah, 20, practising). Some non-practising Muslim participants acknowledge the cultural role Islam plays in their lives, often engaging in '*social and cultural obligations during certain important Islamic occasions*' (Nadine, 24, non-practising) such as entertaining guests after sunset during Ramadan.

### *Parental influences*

All the participants describe their parents as having a large influence on the importance placed on culture within their identity formation. A large part of the significance of family life is language as '*speaking Arabic is really important*' (Razan, 21, non-practising) because it is one of the foundations for creating an Arab identity. Participants with religiously practising parents had the added aspect of religion governing their upbringing and subsequently affecting how they behave within the social sphere, be that within the Arab community or in the wider British society.

The extent to which participants' parents enforce Arab culture and/or religion onto their daughters is closely linked to their perceptions of Western society. By stressing the importance of Arab culture, parents may juxtapose its values with that of British culture and society. Participants comment on how their parents, although acknowledging good elements within British culture and society, largely are of the view that the values are often opposed to that of Arab culture and/or Islam. This is especially the case with regards to dating and the perceived openness and acceptability of premarital sex believing their daughters will be '*corrupted by the society*' (Neveen, 28, practising). As a result, many participants give this as an explanation as to why parents often restrict the freedoms of their daughters. Nevertheless, participants did not regard these imposed restrictions in a purely negative light or with any

sense of animosity. Indeed as Razan (21, non-practising) points out *'people see it as coming down hard and they see it as crazy Arabs living in the dark ages but really their intentions are good, they're trying to protect us.'*

### Cultural pressures and expectations

Parental influence was related to broader cultural expectations about marriage and 'the need to bleed'.

#### *The ideal woman for marriage*

One of the main cultural expectations these British Arab women face is to conform to being the ideal woman for marriage. The majority of the women interviewed accept marriage as inevitable, particularly after the *'socially accepted age'* (Alia, 19, non-practising) which is often *'once they've graduated'* (Sonia, 29, practising). This is not necessarily an imposed expectation; rather, it is something they all hope for themselves. Women who have passed the expected age and are not yet married are viewed with suspicion. All participants agree unequivocally that female premarital virginity is a requirement and in rationalising why a woman is not yet married, the community often assumes that it is linked to inappropriate sexual activity. Alia (19, non-practising) recalls her mother's comments about a 35-year-old Arab woman whose unmarried status was assumed to be because *'when she was younger she mucked about with a couple of guys and word got round and now she's viewed as used goods.'* Regardless of age, a woman's conduct with the opposite sex contributes significantly towards her image and marriage prospects. Therefore, she is required to maintain the perfect 'good girl' image by, for example, not being *'too flirtatious'* or dressing *'suggestive[ly]'* (Heba, 25, non-practising).

#### *The need to bleed*

Proof of virginity on the wedding night is mentioned as a major pressure experienced by these British Arab women. The participants describe the traditional Arab custom of displaying the blood-stained wedding night bed sheet as a proof of the female's virginity. As Maryam (33, non-practising) notes *'you've got to wave "the Japanese flag" out the window [[ . . . ]] it's the proof that you've been a virtuous girl.'*



Almost half of the participants assume that during the first time a female has sexual intercourse she would bleed. To them this is proof of her virginity. The remaining participants are aware that bleeding during the first sexual encounter may not happen and that *'the hymen's condition isn't a reliable indicator of whether she's lost her virginity or not'* (Sonia, 29, practising). However, this knowledge does not alleviate the pressures they face. Huda (32, non-practising) expresses fear of not bleeding in case her future husband expects her to do so or is unaware that it is not biologically necessary.

This fear of not bleeding has led to women finding alternative methods such as using *'gelatine capsule [s] with fake blood'* (Sonia, 29, practising) or women resorting to *'cutting themselves deliberately'* (Maryam, 33, non-practising) to ensure the bloodstain is accomplished. Some participants also note the rise of doctors offering hymen reconstruction surgery as a viable means of *'restoring'* a female's virginity. This need to bleed is perpetuated to the extent that although the majority of participants express that a woman remains a virgin if she has not had sex, they also recognise that a woman may *'break'* her hymen and *'lose'* her virginity by taking part in certain activities such as riding a bike and therefore avoid them.

### Honour

All participants discussed the importance of honour or reputation.

### Reputation

Reputation within the community influences the way in which premarital sex is viewed. The participants assert that *'it is important for Arab girls to preserve their reputation, as amongst society this is a reflection of the girl's family and her upbringing'* (Reem, 23, practising). Any actions, such as sex outside marriage, which will tarnish the family's standing within the community must not be engaged in. Nadine (24, non-practising) explains *'it brings such shame on the family if it's found out. It's nothing to be proud of.'* Thus, *the family's reputation is closely associated with the female's personal reputation because she is seen to carry 'the reputation of the family on her shoulders'* (Neveen, 28, practising). Furthermore, the reputation of the family is, in effect, an extension of her own as the woman's identity is never dissociated from that of her family. The individual and the familial identity become synonymous. Alia (19, non-practising) elaborates: *'You identify someone as part of*

someone's family. Like my uncles would never say 'This is {Alia}', they would say like 'This is {father}'s daughter'".

Within this family context, marriage is a central recurring issue. The participants repeatedly refer to the fact that they would '*never be able to get married*' (Inas, 20, practising) or would have great difficulty marrying as consequence of not remaining virgins. Engaging in premarital sex is too large a '*risk*' (Nadine, 24, nonpractising) given the reputational damage that would occur if found out. This reputational damage is not limited to premarital sex however. Participants mention that any behaviour which may be regarded as suspicious by the community could ruin a woman's reputation resulting in being shunned from the community or by their family. Culture and its rules thus define the boundaries for women. '*It's always in the back of my head like even if I go out with guy friends I'm almost paranoid that one of my parent's friends will see me and assume I'm dating them when I'm not*' (Heba, 25, non-practising).

Although none of the women interviewed had been shunned (only two admitted to not being virgins and that fact remains secret from both friends and family), some had heard stories of women in their community being '*insulted and shunned [...] for any little thin*' (Alia, 19, non-practising). This is described as being the only valid action to be taken by the family to restore the family's reputation within the community. Indeed, despite no longer being virgins, the two non-virgins (both of whom consider themselves practising Muslims) acknowledged that their conduct goes beyond affecting their own standing within the community and indeed has ramifications for their siblings and extended family, affecting the '*marriagability*' of their female relatives, whose conduct will also be called into question.

All the participants highlight that the concept of honour and how it dictates the actions of a female is purely cultural, with the practising group stressing that it is not linked to religion. Interestingly, the notion of reputation and carrying the family honour is not viewed as a necessarily daunting task. Rather, it is seen as '*an important aspect of Arab culture*' (Heba, 25, non-practising) particularly in British society as it shows that the woman is '*upholding the Arab tradition and upholding [...] family honour*' (Heba, 25, non-practising). Virginity becomes such an intrinsic part of a negotiated diasporic cultural identity that control of sexuality is not seen as a '*daunting*' task but instead becomes an identity marker.

### Dating boundaries

Dating and relationships are closely tied with representations of premarital virginity amongst British Arab women. Here, unlike the previous themes, there are significant differences between the practising and non-practising women. Among the practising Muslim group, six out of the nine had been or are currently in a relationship. Only three of the non-practising Muslim group (a total of eight) had been or are currently in relationships. While these numbers are too small to make any claims from this, it is interesting that it is practising women who used religious discourses to justify premarital sexual relationships.

### *Sexual relationship dating*

Justifications for being in sexual relationships were only given by practising Muslim participants and these related to religious validations to reduce the dissonance. These participants mention the concept of *mut'a* as a way in which sexual relationships can be formed and are '*acceptable in the eyes of God*' (Neveen, 28, practising). This element is crucial to them as practising Muslims. It is important to note that despite *mut'a* being purely a Shi'a Islamic concept, some participants who identified as Shi'a dismiss *mut'a* altogether. Another important point is that the Shi'a participants who disapprove of the practise discuss it in the context of only men, dismissing the view that a Shi'a woman would even entertain the idea of entering a *mut'a* relationship.

### *Opinions and discourses on sex and relationship*

Other than those who accept *mut'a* as legitimate in the Islamic context, the remaining practising Muslim participants, belonging to both the Sunni and Shi'a sects, state premarital sex as unequivocally Islamically impermissible or '*haram*' (Rasha, 23, practising). Despite this however, these participants stress a degree of choice explaining that the actions of an individual are '*between you and God*' (Ayah, 20, practising). The concept of repentance is associated with the idea that '*everyone has done mistakes in their lives*' (Ayah, 20, practising). Therefore, engaging in premarital sex is interpreted as a 'mistake' thus forgiveness from God is a key concept within this understanding.

Although religion plays an important role in the way the practising Muslim participants view premarital sex, they acknowledge that culture has more influence. As Reem (23, practising) states:

*it is not necessarily due to religious reasons that premarital relations are prohibited in our culture, because if that was the case Islamic rules will be applicable to both sexes. However it is only due to cultural reasons that the issue of premarital physical relations for girls is a definite no go.*

It is for this reason that relationships and sex are not discussed in the general sense and a level of secrecy is maintained even by those who use *mut'a* as a means of engaging in a relationship.

Unlike the practising Muslim participants, there is more adamance amongst the non-practising Muslim participants towards never engaging in sex outside of marriage. Many refer to the action and discussion of it as ' *Shib* ', the Arabic word for shameful and disgraceful but meaning something much more condemning than the translation suggests.

#### *Non-sexual relationship dating*

All the practising Muslim participants accept dating for the purpose of marriage. It is important to stress here that 'dating' does not refer to 'dating' in the western sense, rather, clear boundaries are set by the participants as acceptable levels of intimacy. These are influenced by their religious and cultural viewpoints. Arij (20, practising) explains that for her ' *dating entails meeting up with a person in a public place and the aim to is get to know the person [[...] the "dating " phase develops into a "relationship" with the long-term aim, i.e. marriage.* '

Amongst the non-practising participants, entering into relationships is only ever contemplated on the condition of getting to know someone for the purpose of marriage. Dating without the potentiality of marriage is seen as ' *a waste of time* ' (Maryam, 33, non-practising) and participants often stressed the importance of making this intention clear from the outset. Nadine (24, non-practising) describes that she would never consider dating someone behind her parents back, rather she would date ' *someone who is known to them* '. She goes on to state that they ' *would have no physical contact* ' limiting their physical relationship to a handshake and nothing more. Heba (25, non-practising) however has different personal limits explaining that she ' *would probably let him kiss [her]* ' justifying her boundaries by acknowledging how 'normal' it is in British society. Nevertheless, she does assert that this would only happen after she had ' *learnt to trust him* '. This shows that there is

an element of uncertainty in her willingness to be intimate in order to ensure that the man is serious about the prospect of marrying her.

### **Discussion and conclusions: Re-negotiating gendered identities**

The first act of sexual intercourse by a female is commonly considered significant within many cultures. The occasion is at times seen as the end of innocence, integrity or purity, and the sexualisation of the individual. Consistent with literature on the topic of virginity (Ajrouch, 1999; Eid, 2007; Hendrickx et al., 2002; McIrvin Abu-Laban & Abu-Laban, 1999; Naber, 2006), the British Arab women interviewed here hold strong cultural representations of female premarital virginity. These views are held in the context of their understanding of gender roles and in particular, marriage, which women must enter as ‘undamaged’. Marriage to a man is the culturally defined ultimate destiny for women. The notion of being anything other than a heterosexual female was not brought up by any of the participants and thus was not explored in this study.

In stressing the importance of the virgin, all participants highlight the perceived interrelationship between age and virginity. As a woman becomes older and remains unmarried she becomes suspect. It is often assumed that this is due to her no longer being a virgin and she is reluctant to get married since she would not bleed on the wedding night and prove the rumours to be true. In this way, cultural norms fuel the eagerness of these British Arab women to marry as a means of proving their chastity and dispelling any potential rumours which would in turn dishonour their family’s reputation. These narratives within the gossip are important in keeping certain representations and expectations alive. Indeed, as Jovchelovitch (2007) notes, ‘it is by telling stories that social knowledge comes into life’ (p.82). In this case, it is often through gossip that the topic of loss of virginity is broached and through these narratives the cultural representations that a woman must remain a virgin is dictated. In this way, narratives become a transcendent guide in the ritual of preservation and continuity of culture.

Practising participants saw sex outside marriage as haram (religiously prohibited) for both men and women, while the non-practising group see it as ‘*eib*’ (shameful). These differences in terminology when referring to premarital sex highlight the important variation in the way in which sex before marriage is perceived by the two groups. Where the practising group understand the impermissibility of sex before marriage through their religious interpretations, the non-practising understand it through culture. However, culture continues

to play a significant role in the perceptions of the practising group, although these participants deem culture to be hypocritical in terms of premarital virginity being imposed on and expected from females only. Cultural expectations are so strong that they dictate the participants' behaviour. In fact, often, culturally expected values and behaviours triumph over religion. This is emphasised further in that although the practising group see premarital sex before marriage as *haram*, the repercussions of 'losing' one's virginity outside of marriage are not processed through a religious lens but through a cultural one; being shunned by family and community as opposed to facing the 'wrath of God'. To them, God is forgiving, and once having repented a person should not be judged on their past sins. However, culturally this is not the case. Once a woman is found out to have engaged in premarital sex, she will then be continuously judged and treated as a pariah for the remainder of her life.

Interestingly, some practising participants use religious validations to justify engaging in premarital sex through the concept of *mut'a*. Those who do use these justifications do so to ease their personal conscience as self-identifying practising Shi'a Muslims. Nevertheless, those who engage in *mut'a* do so secretly, aware that the Arab community rejects *mut'a* from a cultural standpoint, regarding it as religiously legalised prostitution. Once again religion conflicts with culture and it is culture that fixes boundaries. This highlights the delicate interaction between individual values and those held by the community. By engaging in *mut'a*, participants attempt to break culturally bound restrictions to participate in dating relationships that would be deemed 'normal' in British society. Rejecting the representations held by the community highlights the agency of the individual in their attempt to reconstruct a social representation. Indeed, social representations are in constant transformation and change (László, Ferenczhalmy, & Szalai, 2010) and as a diasporic Arab community undergoing the natural transformation of ideas and representations through time, the process of potential change is amplified by the perceived polarisation of some of the values of their own culture and that of their host country.

Identity impacts the openness of an individual to other forms of social representation (Duveen, 2001), thus in having been exposed to dating in British society and seeing themselves as part of this society, the participants see dating as 'normal'. In positioning themselves within these two cultures, they then engage in dating relationships but only on the basis that it would lead to marriage and impose personal boundaries as to what dating entails. Marriage validates the act of entering into a relationship and setting boundaries distinguishes them from the wider society's interpretation of dating. There exists a mosaic of views with

regards to dating boundaries amongst participants, from no physical contact to engaging in sexual activities. In fact, differing views also coexist within the individual participant with many stating that although they cannot envision ever engaging in premarital sex and repeatedly emphasise the unlikelihood of it ever happening, some do say that they cannot unequivocally state that they never would, providing a space for change in behaviour (Voelklein & Howarth, 2005). However, engaging in premarital sex would mean a transgression in which they would no longer be considered 'Arab girls'. Thus, remaining a virgin becomes a means of preserving their Arab culture, especially in view of what they perceived as the 'sexually lax' British society in which they live. There is therefore no question of abandoning the importance of premarital virginity, for in doing so not only would their honour be destroyed, but their 'Arabness' would be endangered, destabilising their sense of self. Thus, virginity in the British Arab context becomes an integral social marker of 'Arabness'. Even the participants who justified engaging in sex through their Islamic understandings prescribed to the idea that virginity constituted a large part of the Arab woman's identity and thus thought of themselves as less Arab. In this way, identity and the social representations which accompany them are subject to constant renegotiation. Here we have seen how representations of culture and religion interconnect in ways that support very different social practices. In diasporic communities, certain social practices are seen as particularly integral to the preservation of a cultural identity and thus become crucial for the maintenance of certain cultural and religious identities.

While women's rights movements have highlighted the historical and cultural specificities of gendered inequalities for some decades (Cutrufelli, 1983), issues relating to religious differences have remained largely unexplored (Bracke, 2008), particularly with regard to the differences within and across Muslim communities. The gender debate is complex and requires a nuanced analysis since it is not merely an issue of inequities. For instance, the data show that despite the majority of practising and non-practising participants acknowledging that preservation of female virginity was a cultural expectation, they did not want to be seen as victims of a patriarchal order and the majority actively advocated it. Nevertheless, increasing exposure to individuality through normalising themselves in the networks and institutions of British society creates an ever increasing gap between real and expected behaviour. The participants see 'Britishness' as all encompassing, thus being British does not translate into ignoring other aspects of their identity. The fact that many participants were open to dating, albeit for the purpose of marriage and with strict personally enforced boundaries, is evidence of them selectively choosing a mixture of values from the cultures to

which they affiliate. In this way, participants are not passively engaging in retaining their 'Arabness' nor immersing themselves completely in their 'Britishness' but demonstrate the agency to challenge the cultural moral order expected of them as both British and Arab women. In doing so, these women carve out new, modified representations which reflect all aspects of their multifaceted identities, none of which sit in direct opposition to one another (see Hopkins, 2011). These help them to make sense of the world around them and support their positioning as British Arabs. They echo the feeling that a woman who is a virgin does what she does not for power or desire to 'fit in' (Woodman, 1988), but because that is her freedom, her choice being exercised when she is precariously poised at the hyphen. Two significant issues amongst others are brought upfront. The research highlights the complex ways in which religious and cultural expectations inform social practices, interconnect and are re-negotiated in diasporic communities. It shows the creative ways in which the resistant and dynamic process of identity transforms cultural and religious expectations and creates a new, more hyphenated forms of identity.

## **Funding**

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

## **References**

- Ahmadi, N. (2003a). Migration challenges views on sexuality. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 26, 684–706.
- Ahmadi, N. (2003b). Rocking sexualities: Iranian migrants' views on sexuality. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 32, 317–326.
- Ajrouch, K. (1999). Family and ethnic identity in an Arab-American community. In M. W. Suleiman (Ed.), *Arabs in America* (pp. 129–139). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.
- Al-Khayyat, S. (1990). *Honour and shame: Women in modern Iraq*. London, UK: Saqi Books.



Aswad, B. C. (1997). Arab American Families. In M. K. DeGenove (Ed.), *Families in cultural context: Strengths and challenges in diversity* (pp. 213–237). Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing.

Aveling, E. L., & Gillespie, A. (2008). Negotiating multiplicity: Adaptive asymmetries within second-generation Turks 'society of mind'. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 21, 200–222.

Barrett, M., Cinnirella, M., Eade, J., & Garbin, D. (2006). *New ethnicities among British Bangladeshi and mixed-heritage youth*. London, UK: The Leverhulme Trust.

Berry, J. W. (2011). Integration and multiculturalism: Ways towards social solidarity. *Papers on Social Representations*, 20, 2.1–2.21.

Bersamin, M. M., Fisher, D. A., Grube, J. W., Hill, D. L., & Walker, S. (2007). Defining virginity and abstinence: Adolescents' interpretations of sexual behaviors. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 41, 182–188.

Bhachu, P. (1993). Identities constructed and reconstructed: Representations of Asian women in Britain. In G. Buijs (Ed.), *Migrant women: Crossing boundaries and changing identities* (pp. 99–117). Oxford, UK: Berg.

Brah, A. (1993). "Race" and "culture" in the gendering of labour markets: South Asian young Muslim women and the labour market. *New Community*, 19, 441–458.

Brah, A., & Phoenix, A. (2004). Ain't I a woman? Revisiting intersectionality. *Journal of International Women Studies*, 5, 75–86.

Brake, S. (2008). Conjugating the modern/religious, conceptualizing female religious agency: Contours of a 'post-secular' conjuncture. *Theory, Culture and Society*, 25, 51–67.

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in Psychology. *Qualitative Research*

in *Psychology*, 3, 77–101.

Cutrufelli, M. R. (1983). *Women of Africa: Roots of Oppression*. London: Zed Books.

Duveen, G. (2001). Representations, identities and resistance. In K. Deaux, & G. Philogene (Eds), *Representations of the social* (pp. 257–270). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Dwyer, C. (2000). Negotiating diasporic identities: Young British South Asian Muslim women. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 23, 475–486.

Eid, P. (2007). *Being Arab*. Montreal & Kingston, Canada: McGill-Queen's University Press.

El-Saadawi, N. (1991). *The hidden face of eve – Women in the Arab World*. London, UK: Zed Books.

El-Wafi, L. M. (2006). *British Arab Muslims and the “War on Terror”*: Perceptions of citizenship, identity and human rights. UK: National Association of British Arabs. Retrieved from [http://www.naba.org.uk/Content/articles/2006/BrArabs/61010\\_BrArMus\\_AlWafiL.pdf](http://www.naba.org.uk/Content/articles/2006/BrArabs/61010_BrArMus_AlWafiL.pdf).

Ermes, A. O. (2002). *Invisibility of the Arab Community in Britain*. Retrieved from [www.naba.org.uk/CONTENT/articles/Diaspora/invisibility\\_of\\_the\\_arab\\_inBritain.htm](http://www.naba.org.uk/CONTENT/articles/Diaspora/invisibility_of_the_arab_inBritain.htm)

Farahani, F. (2007). *Diasporic narratives of sexuality*. Stockholm, Sweden: StockholmUniversity.

Fine, M. (1994). Working the hyphens: Reinventing self and other in qualitative research. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds), *The landscape of qualitative research: Theories and issues* (pp. 70–82). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Fine, M. (2012). Resuscitating critical psychology for “Revolt” times. *Journal of Social Issues*, 68, 416–438.

Haeri, S. (1989). *Law of desire: Temporary marriage in Sh'i Iran*. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse

University Press.

Hendrickx, K., Denekens, J., Lodewijckx, E., & Van Royen, P. (2002). Sexual behaviour of second generation Moroccan immigrants balancing between traditional attitudes and safe sex. *Patient Education and Counseling*, 47, 89–94.

Hopkins, N. (2011). Dual identities and their recognition: Minority group members' perspectives. *Political Psychology*, 32, 251–270.

Howarth, C. (2001). Towards a social psychology of community: A social representations perspective. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 31, 223–238.

Howarth, C., Wagner, W., Magnusson, N., & Sammut, G. (2013). 'It's only other people who make me feel black': Acculturation, identity and agency in a multicultural community. *Political Psychology*, 35, 81–95.

Jodelet, D. (1991). *Madness and social representations*. London, UK: Harvester/Wheatsheaf.

Jovchelovitch, S. (2007). *Knowledge in context: Representations, community and culture*. London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge.

Knott, K., & Khokher, S. (1993). Religion and ethnic identity among young Muslim women in Bradford. *New Community*, 19, 593–610.

László, J., Ferenczhalmy, R., & Szalai, K. (2010). Role of agency in social representations of history. *Societal and Political Psychology International Review*, 1, 31–43.

Marková, I. (2007). Social identities and social representations: How are they related. In G. Moloney, & I. Walker (Eds), *Social representations and identity: Content, process, and power* (pp. 215–236). New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

McIrvin Abu-Laban, S., & Abu-Laban, B. (1999). Teens between: The public and private spheres of Arab-Canadian adolescents. In M. W. Suleiman (Ed.), *Arabs in America* (pp. 113–128). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Mir-Hosseini, Z. (1994). *Marriage on trial: A study of Islamic family law*. London, UK: I. B. Tauris & Co Ltd.

Moscovici, S. (1988). Notes towards a description of social representations. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 18, 211–250.

Musso, S., Cherabi, K., & Fanget, D. (2002). An Arab-Muslim view. *Prospect*, 32, 207–215.

Naber, N. (2006). Arab American femininities: Beyond Arab virgin/American(ized) whore. *Feminist Studies*, 32, 87–111.

Nagel, C. (2002). Constructing difference and sameness: The politics of assimilation in London's Arab communities. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 25, 258–287.

Provencher, C. (2011). Towards a better understanding of cognitive polyphasia. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 41, 377–395.

Rose, D., Efrain, D., Gervais, M. C., Joffe, H., Jovchelovitch, S., & Morant, N. (1995). Questioning consensus in social representations theory. *Papers in Social Representations*, 4, 150–155.

Ryan, G. W., & Bernard, H. R. (2003). Techniques to identify themes. *Field Methods*, 15, 85–109.

Ryan, L., Banfi, L., & Kofman, E. (2009). *Muslim youth in Barnet: Exploring identity, citizenship and belonging*. Project Report. London, UK: Barnet Muslim Engagement Partnership.

Sen, R., Wagner, W., & Howarth, C. (2014). *Secularism and religion in multi-faith societies: The case of India*. New York, NY: Springer.

Shahidian, H. (1999). Gender and sexuality among immigrant Iranians in Canada. *Sexualities*, 2, 189–222.

Tajfel, H. (1981). *Human groups and social categories: Studies in social psychology*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Voelklein, C., & Howarth, C. (2005). A review of controversies about social representations theory: A British debate. *Culture and Psychology*, 11, 431–454.

Wagner, W., Duveen, G., Verma, J., & Themel, M. (2000). “I have some faith and at the same time I don’t believe”—Cognitive polyphasia and cultural change in India. *Journal of Community and Applied Social Psychology*, 10, 301–314.

Wagner, W., Kronberger, N., Holtz, P., Nagata, M., Sen, R., & Flores-Palacios, F. (2010). Essentialist theory of ‘hybrids’: From animal kinds to ethnic categories and race. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, 13, 232–246.

Wagner, W., Sen, R., Permanadeli, R., & Howarth, C. (2012). The Veil and Muslim women’s identity: Cultural pressures and resistance to stereotyping. *Culture and Psychology*, 18, 521–541.

Walbridge, L. S. (1996). Sex and the single Shi’ite. In B. C. Aswad, & B. BilgeÅL (Eds), *Family and gender among American muslims* (pp. 143–154). Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Weeks, J. (1986). *Sexuality*. New York, NY: Tavistock Publications.

Woodman, M. (1988). *The pregnant virgin: A process of psychological transformation*. Toronto, Canada: Inner City Books.