

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# My Family, My Self: Reflections on Family Interactions of Malaysian Gay Men Within the Asian Cultural Context

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**Abstract:** The social construction of identity in a multi-cultural setting becomes more intricate within the context of marginalized sexual identities and family interactions, dynamics, and roles. The research focused on the construction and reconstruction of identities of self-identified gay men within their families utilizing phenomenology as the theoretical underpinning to describe and analyze lived experiences. Qualitative research was employed utilizing one-on-one semi-structured interview questions. A total of 33 respondents were interviewed and data were recorded and transcribed. Data was analyzed utilizing a content analysis matrix for thematic and experiential construction and reconstruction of identity within family relationships and dynamics. Mixed results were found in terms of family expectations, family structure, family dynamics, family roles, family expectations, and family objections based on the identity of the gay respondents. Flexibility in adjustment to the sexual identity of the respondents was sometimes obstructed by family obligations, but also reflected acceptance and family affection. Cultural expectations of maintaining the “face” of the family were also taken into consideration by respondents when constructing their identities. The family is important in the construction of sexual identity in terms of acceptance and integration into familial roles. As roles are played out and expectations are met, a certain flexibility is evident in how families interact with gay male family members. Dynamics become more nuanced and require more intersubjective clarification and creation. While not reflective of Malaysian society in its entirety, the data indicates that change is occurring in terms of acceptance and integration of gay men within ethnic familial contexts.

**Keywords:** Malaysia, gay, family, ethnicity

Issues and ideas surrounding sexuality of any sort are more often than not, enveloped in a mixture of scandal, secrecy, religious backlash, and recrimination within the cultural context of Malaysia. As a nation, Malaysia achieved independence in 1957 from the

successive colonizing powers of the Portuguese, Dutch, and British and has paved its way to the present state through the collaborative economic, social, and cultural efforts of the various ethnicities that make up the population of the nation. However, due to its

colonial past, the nation retained, to a great extent, the vestiges of the British colonial past in the form of its Penal Code. This Penal Code, specifically Section 377A, criminalizes homosexuality under the arguably vague statement of “sexual acts against the order of nature”, places men who are identified as “gay” at a legal disadvantage, open to criminal proceedings, and social as well as cultural reprobation (Felix, 2014).

As Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country, the social and cultural reprobation that men who are identified as gay stems not from one source of cultural norms, mores, and values; rather, as Malaysia is a country whose population is presently made up of indigenous tribes, proclaimed settlers of the land, migrants who made Malaysia their home prior to independence, and the progeny of inter-ethnic marriage the social and cultural norms, mores and values that govern the nation are an inter-weaving matrix of expectations. These expectations may be similar in nature or be specific to a particular ethnic group. In any case, these expectations play a significant role in how relationships within a family are managed and executed, how expectations of each family member are set and adjudicated, and what are the potential sanctions set against the family who do not meet or who deviate from these set expectations.

This manuscript focuses on the reflections, travails, and experience of men who self-identify themselves as gay from various ethnic backgrounds within the cultural context of Malaysia. The main ethnic groups that this paper focuses on are the Malay ethnicity, Malaysians of Chinese ethnicity, and Malaysians of Indian ethnicity. I wish to stress that there is a definite difference between the terms “Malay” and “Malaysian: that “Malay” is the specific dominant ethnic group in Malaysian society, whereas “Malaysian” refers to the nationality of the citizens of the state of Malaysia. It seeks to describe their experience of family expectations within the structure of ethnically-defined cultural expectations, analyze their narratives utilizing the theoretical framework of phenomenology to understand how their interaction and position within their families have been constructed or reconstructed due to their sexual identity, and question how, if plausible, being a self-identified gay man has given them a new avenue in affirming their place in their family.

## **Malaysian Culture and Past Asian Same-Sex Attracted Sexualities**

Malaysian culture as a generic term cannot be defined as it is a conglomeration of different cultural values that have been brought together by the different ethnicities that make up Malaysian society. However, these cultural values have been grouped together under the umbrella of “Asian Culture” by Malaysian politicians in the past (Sani, 2008; Sani, Yusof, Kasim & Omar, 2009). This grouping together of cultural values include the explicit statement that homosexuality is not accepted under the Malaysian socio-cultural context. In Malaysia, non-acceptance of same-sex sexuality has been rejected religiously, academically, and politically. On a religious level, the basic rights of any person who did not conform to heteronormativity had been refuted and have come under attack (Majid, 2015; Momtaz, Hamid, Ibrahim, & Akahbar, 2014) and this created a social situation whereby non-heteronormative individuals experienced increased internalized homonegativity (Brown, Low, Tai & Wen, 2016). At an academic level, studies of homosexuality or non-heteronormativity have been questionable, but easily accepted as it went with the trend of non-acceptance of non-heteronormative individuals. For example, studies done (Sabri, Owoyemi & Mangsor, 2014; Owoyemi & Sabri, 2013; Owoyemi, Sabri & Sani, 2013) had only used one respondent as a data source, and the respondent posited that homosexuality could be cured based on extensive experience—this begs the question of the veracity of these findings. Although other studies had been done on homosexuality in Malaysia that showed that homosexuality was present in the country (Felix, 2016a, 2016b, 2017a, 2017b), it could not be denied that such findings would have a small audience in Malaysia’s society outside of academic circles that were more open-minded. Politically, issues surrounding homosexuality were sensationalized, even to the point where it may be used as a political weapon (Pandian, 2015), resulting in more negativity aimed at homosexuality (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2013).

On a social level, there was the struggle for most gay Malaysians to find positive life role models as there was no cultural, social, or political point of reference that gay men in Malaysia could utilize. Also

due to the assumption that gay equated HIV/AIDS, homosexuality was not deemed part of Malaysian culture, leading to further derogation and maligning of gay men within the nation (Baba, 2001). In Asian societies (Poon & Ho, 2002), homosexuality worked against well-defined gender roles, family structures, filial piety, and family expectations in an Asian context. To be homosexual, or in the case of this manuscript, gay, was to be taken as putting aside the traditional Asian/Malaysian values of community and family for Western values of hedonism and individuality.

### **Ethnicity, Culture, and Parent-Child Relationships in Malaysia**

Behind this backdrop of the general climate toward homosexuality in Malaysia, gay men of various ethnicities interacted with their families within the context of cultural expectations. In general, Malaysian parents of the dominant Malay, Chinese, and Indian ethnicities favored an authoritarian style of parenting; this authoritarian style was a result of the collectivist culture that permeates the region (Kesharzveh & Baharudin, 2009). In gist, this collectivist culture advocated cooperation, helpfulness, obedience, dependence, and interpersonal relationships.

The Malay ethnic parenting style focused on parents as authority figures. Parents bore the responsibility of passing on the principles of Islam and cultural expectations to their children (Kesharzveh & Baharudin, 2009). Studies showed that communication in Malay families focused on both relationship and conformity to rigid societal and cultural expectations (the mother focused on the former while the father the latter). It was noted that sons were less likely to be communicative with their parents and less likely to conform, thus suggesting they were more likely to break out of rigid conformist patterns (Noh, Yusoooff, & Hasim, 2013). This all occurred within a cultural context where in Islam, caring for the sick and elderly, Islamic socio-cultural interactions, and self-value were highly prized, and where there was an emphasis on moral etiquette and code of conduct or manners (Masri, Yunus, & Ahmad, 2016).

Parents of Chinese ethnicity in Malaysia adjusted their level of authority on children based on age and gender (the parents becomes stricter as their child gets

older) and were expected to have a say in major life decisions such as marriage and career (Kesharzveh & Baharudin, 2009). The ethnic Chinese of Malaysia believed in a culture that was, for the most part, steeped in Confucianism whereby self-development, integrity, tolerance, loyalty to ideals and humanity, moderation, and moral discipline were prized (Siah, Ong, Tan, & Sim, 2015). From Confucianism, the principles of benevolence, integrity or uprightness, rite and propriety, moral understanding, and finally trust were strictly adhered to. From these five principles, the values of filial piety, loyalty, respectfulness, and integrity were born. The practice of these principles and values were governed by a hierarchy based on a structure where age, position, and status took precedence and where near total obedience was given to parents (Park & Chesla, 2007; Lee & Morrish, 2012). Such filial piety was seen as a sign of respect and obedience to parental authority, and was often augmented by the realization of the extent of the parents' sacrifice where parental care and well-being was paramount.

Parents of Indian ethnicity believed in the cultural value of patriarchy, patrilineality, and patrilocality whereby any show of independence, assertiveness, and autonomy on the part of the child was viewed as unacceptable; and achievement, obedience, and respect were praised (Kesharzveh & Baharudin, 2009). Additionally, traditional Indian culture focused on rituals and customs that were aimed at strengthening social bonds and gaining social acceptance. The value of the family was stressed and while individuals may be independent, their interdependence with their family was always present. Also present were cultural values of working well with society through conformity, respect for elders, and the centrality of the pre-determination of life events through religious beliefs (Bannerjee, 2008).

### **Research Focus**

Asian cultural dialectics focus on moderation and balance in all aspects of life. It also focuses on communal or collectivist needs as more important than personal needs, experiences, and desires which are seen as selfish and incongruent with cultural expectations (Wong, Ho, Li, Shin, & Tsai, 2011). The family is the locus of Asian culture and, as such, is viewed

as the paramount decisive factor in all decisions, aspects of life, and is the benchmark for all actions. It is believed that the promotion of family life is the anodyne to all social ills. Within this idea, gender norms and sexuality are expected to be regulated to meet Asian cultural expectations. In gist, any gender-bending or “alternative” sexuality that is not viewed as moderate, maintains a family status quo, or promote the community and collectivism is viewed as a challenge to tradition and religious beliefs (Stivens, 2006).

Bearing this in mind, the objective of this research is to describe the experiences of Malaysian gay men of being gay and managing the expectations of their family based on the cultural expectations of their ethnicity. The research describes the family interactions of each respondent and how they manage the changes in family structures, their placement in the family hierarchy, and the roles they are assigned upon sharing with their family that they are gay men.

The basis for the analysis of these experiences and descriptions is phenomenology, specifically because phenomenology is related directly to the construction of social realities based on the interactions of individuals and the relationships and interrelationships that flow from the construction of these social realities. Also, in phenomenology, social actors determine the aspects of the social world that are important to them and meanings and interpretations (hermeneutics) of individual worlds are determined intersubjectively through interaction with peers and other members of society (and in the case of this research, their family members) (Basset, 2006). It is also from the determination of the aspects of the social world and intersubjectively determined meanings that social actors create realities of the self that are based on lived experience, introspection, and retrospective glances after an action has occurred (existentialism). Phenomenology is also concerned with the universe of individuals and universal maintenance as well as the maintenance of society (Berger & Luckmann, 1972). Phenomenology also allows for actions or mental processes that had taken place and are objective to be studied scientifically. Therefore, for the purposes of this research, the meanings and interpretations of their individual world would facilitate the analysis of the interpretations of the respondents of their interactions with their family members and the changes of structure

and roles within the family, as well as attributed meanings to these changes that have been cognitively processed and experienced.

## Methods

The data collected was qualitative in nature. This route was chosen as the research aims to gain rich data and to allow for expression of individual experience with the consideration that self-identified gay men formed a minority who valued their privacy, safety, and security. Additionally, qualitative research was the route chosen due to the sensitivity of the issue of homosexuality in Malaysia. Qualitative methodology was also chosen as the target population was not easily identifiable and formed a minority within Malaysia. A list of open-ended interview questions was utilized in a one-on-one in-depth interview setting. The use of the in-depth interview method and tool allowed the researcher to probe (where necessary) and gain more information as well as a deeper explanation and detail of the respondents’ experience in terms of the source of their self-professed homosexuality. In total, there were nine interview questions, with appropriate probing and segue questions where applicable.

A semi-natural setting for the interviews was chosen where both the researcher and the respondent felt both comfortable and safe to speak freely and openly about the experience of the respondents. Each respondent was interviewed for an average of an hour, with the longest interview being an hour and 15 minutes and the shortest 57 minutes.

## *Sampling*

As the nature of this research was sensitive, the purposive sampling method and the snowball method were utilized to gather respondents who met the set criteria of the research. The purposive sampling method was used when respondents that were known to be self-identified gay men were referred to the researcher and the snowball method was utilized when the self-identified gay men who participated in the research referred to the researcher their acquaintances, colleagues, and friends who were self-identified gay men. All respondents were self-identified gay men who were residents of Malaysia, were citizens of the



country, and were above the legal age of consent. No age, educational, or ethnic parameters were set for the research. This was done out of consideration by the researcher that it would allow for as wide and deep a breadth of rich data that could be collected. Additionally, the aforementioned parameters were not utilized to get as wide an experience of as varied a population of self-identified gay men as possible. Respondents were sought until the point of data saturation was reached and this was achieved when a total of 33 respondents were gathered.

#### *Research Tool and Research Analysis Tool*

All respondents were interviewed using the one-on-one in-depth interview method that was focused on the following subjects:

- Respondent's family reaction to revelation of the respondent's sexual identity.
- Respondent's interaction with family members post revelation of respondent's sexual identity.
- Change within the family structure and role in the family due to the respondent's sexual identity.
- Expectations and management of family expectations and objection to the sexuality of the respondents.

The one-on-one in-depth interviewing method took a semi-structured approach that allowed the interviewer to probe and ask pertinent questions as the interview was conducted. Additionally, email exchanges between the interviewer and the respondents took place after the data was analyzed to clarify points that were unclear, to seek deeper explanations, and to assure the respondents that their anonymity was being protected.

All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed via a content analysis matrix. All data were transcribed within 24 hours of the interview to maintain accuracy. All audio recordings were played back twice in the initial transcription process. Each transcription was then checked by replaying the audio recording a third time for accuracy. This processing of the data allowed the researcher to determine the accuracy of the data and if necessary, clarification was sought from the respondent.

#### *Data Analysis*

All data was first grouped in the content analysis matrix thematically for similarity of content. The data was then analyzed for content shared with the researcher that specifically denoted the reaction of family members to the revelation of the respondent's gay sexuality. Following which, the data was analyzed a second time for family interaction and family expectations. The data were then analyzed a third time for changes in family structure, changes of roles in the family, and family objections. These thematic groupings of the findings were then analyzed utilizing phenomenology to gain a deeper description of the respondent's family interaction and their outcomes in terms of meeting the cultural expectations of their ethnicity.

#### *Privacy, Confidentiality and Ethical Approval*

Privacy and confidentiality of the research was based on the following protocol:

When the potential respondent was referred to the researcher, either through purposive sampling or through the snowball method, the researcher contacted the potential respondent via an email address or telephone number that was provided to the researcher.

The researcher would explain to the potential respondent the academic purpose of the interview, either verbally or in writing, depending on the medium of communication used.

1. If the potential respondent refused to participate in the research, the potential respondent was thanked and no further communication was maintained; however, if the potential respondent agreed to participate in the research, a date and time for the one-on-one in-depth interview was negotiated based on the availability of the respondent. The venue was chosen by the respondent in deference to the respondent's need for privacy and security.
2. When the respondent was met, the researcher reiterated the academic purpose of the interview and presented the interviewer with approval letter of the Ethics Committee of Universiti Sains Malaysia for the research.

3. The respondent was then presented with a consent form that was approved by the Ethics Committee of Universiti Sains Malaysia for perusal and signature if the respondent agreed to proceed with the one-on-one in-depth interview.
4. If the respondent agreed to the one-on-one in-depth interview it was then conducted. If the respondent refused, they were free to leave and no further contact was established.
5. Within the protocol, had the respondent at any time during the data collection process refused to participate or participate further in the research, all data and contact information were deleted by the researcher.
6. All respondents were given a pseudonym for the research and this pseudonym was used when the respondent was referred to and when the respondent was quoted verbatim.
7. The content of the one-on-one in-depth interview was audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher within 24 hours. Extensive notes were taken where applicable.
8. All data, researcher notes, and signed consent forms were secured either using 128-bit encryption or locked within safe location known only to the researcher.

## Results

### *Family Reaction to Sexuality*

Findings show that the reaction of family to the respondents' sexuality as gay men was mixed as exemplified by the following interview excerpts:

My sister stumbled on my stash of (male homosexual) pornographic movies when she was looking for something in my room. She then asked me if the movies are mine. I said that the movies were mine. She had a hard time accepting that I am gay initially, but now we have become better friends as well as siblings. She still has her reservations about me being gay, but she loves me as I am her brother. – Ivan, Professional, 23 years of age.

The first person I came out to in my family was my sister. I had just broken up with my first boyfriend and I was depressed. My sister asked me what was wrong and since I needed a person to talk to I opened up to her. She listened to me and shared her experiences with guys. She accepts me for who I am. My sister understands that being a homosexual is not a crime, and that I am born like this. – Wong, Professional, 34 years of age.

I am out to my sister. When I told her she cried. She said she cried not because she was heartbroken and unable to accept it but she cried because she realized it would be a rough path in life for me. To me, that is a sign of her acceptance and support. She will text me from time to time and tells me that she supports me. – Joe, Entrepreneur, 39 years of age.

It was very hard. After my family came back from the United States I was sent to a boarding school in Kedah (a state in Malaysia). I was having sex with the other guys in the boarding school. I had some love bites on my neck and was caught by the disciplinary teacher for having the love bites. The disciplinary teacher called my mother to the school and at that point my mother realized that I am gay. She kept asking me why I am gay. I told her that I did not know. She did not want me to be gay. – Erwan, Undergraduate Student, 26 years of age

Coming out is hard. You have to be sure the person you tell can be trusted and you have to make sure that the person is not anti-gay. You also have to be sure that the person you tell has to be okay with you telling them that you are gay. Coming out is also difficult because in Malaysia people easily kick aside homosexuals. When I told my father he kept quiet. Later he told me not to tell my grandmother and my brother that I am gay. He said because my grandmother is old she cannot accept a gay grandson and she would be hurt if I tell her. My father also said not to tell my brother because it is none of his business, plus he never took care of me when I was younger. He also told me to be careful who I tell in my hometown as he wants to protect his reputation. – Foo, IT Professional, 25 years of age.

I came out to friends when I was between 16 and 17 years old. I came out to them because at that time I was heavily involved in the Catholic Youth Group of my church. I was very closeted when it came to religious based things, almost like living a double life. Then I came to a point when I was about 25 years old and began a relationship with my present partner. I made a choice to come out and say I am living this life with a man. I guess it is more about coming clean because in the past I had multiple sex partners and it was shameful to come out and say I am gay. But, it is not shameful to say that I have one special partner and I am trying to build a life with this one person. The paternal side of my family rejected me when I came out and I have had no further contact with them. My mother's side of the family on the other hand has been wonderful to my partner and me. They treat my partner like another son in the family. – Chai, Professional, 36.

I came from a very strict family upbringing. I rebelled against conforming so I am still a rebel today. My coming out to my parents happened by accident. My Mom is not the type of person who believes in personal space and privacy. To her, if you live under her roof she has the right to look through your things. One of my things that she looked through was my journal. At the time she found my journal I was writing about a crush that I had on one of my teachers. When she read this all hell broke loose. When she told my father, he said that I will be a good-for-nothing and that I will end up selling my backside (engage in sex work) for money. – Dennis, Professional, mid 30s.

It was horrible. Staying in Penang people tend to know each other and rumors about my homosexuality started getting back to my family. The rumors said that I was hanging out with a lot of gay men. My parents started questioning me about this and it was a bad situation as I was not ready to tell them that I am gay. I mean, if they had pretended not to know I would have just been more discreet and toned down my behavior a bit. But since I am the type of person who will challenge you, the

more they asked the more I fought back. One day I could not take the questioning anymore and I exploded. I told them that I am gay. I then wore a very outrageous outfit, flaunted it in front of them and then I disappeared from the house for three days. – Peter, Educator, 40s.

### *Family Expectations*

Findings show that family expectations of respondents have changed and also have not changed. In terms of expectations having changed, the respondents indicate that the family understands that the respondents will not carry on the family name. An example of this finding is as follows:

Since I came out over 20 years ago, I think that the expectations of grandchildren ceased since then. My parents, especially my mother, was aware enough that I should not go into a sham marriage and destroy another woman's future even back then. Other than that, I continue to be their son and help them out as much as I can. – Dennis, Professional, mid 30s.

There is also evidence that there are no changes in terms of family expectations, however, more from the standpoint of filial piety and responsibilities in terms of finances and caregiving. An example is shown below:

The expectation has not changed. I still assume the responsibility to take care of the parents just like other straight son to their parents. In fact, I think I spend more time with my parents (compared to straight friends married with children) since I don't have children or family. At times, relatives still throw the questions of getting married and having children at me. (There are) no interruptions at all (in life) since I still perform the duty and responsibility as a son that follows the Chinese culture. Nothing has changed, I still perform my duty as a son who will take care of the needs of the parents, in term of finances and time. – Wong, Professional, 34 years of age.

### *Family Structure, Family Dynamics, and Family Interaction*

Data for family structure indicates that there are hardly any changes in terms of the family structure. This is due to acceptance and continued familial obligations played by the respondents. An example of this data is below:

No because in the end, the gay sons or daughters end up doing all the filial work because the straight ones (children) get married, start their own life and just dump the seniors on their own and guess what? Oh since we are gay, we don't have family commitments, we are assumed to be so free and pick up the responsibility. – Fred, Professional, 31 years of age.

Respondents, however, note that while the family structure has not changed, their family dynamics of their interaction have changed both negatively and positively:

My family structure has not changed, but my mom has been stalking my movements and is suspicious all the time especially if I have any male friends. Dad and Mom will strongly suspect most of my male friends are gay too. Questions will pop out asking. Who are they? Are they married? How old are they? What job do they do? It stays the same, sometimes worse. Mom continues to nag about marriage. I think she probably is afraid of losing image/face with her relatives and friends. – Mike, Entertainer, 27 years old.

Well the family bond within the family has become closer and we spend more time together than before me coming out. It has made my family more open and loving towards each other. They look at me differently for sure, well in a good way. They know I'm a very independent, mature person and they always support in whatever I do in life. For example they do not ask me about my personal life until I talk about it, and they will respect my decision. I'm the youngest in the family, and I'm still treated as the baby of the family and I don't complain for they always have my back.

But in terms of my career or my personal life I keep it private and to myself, and they respect that and I prefer it that way. – George, Hotelier, mid 20s.

My parents have come to accept my partner and me. They adore him and treat him well. I think especially for my mother who has come a long way from being who she was to the person she is now. She recently spoke to another mother of a gay son who was struggling with the news of her son coming out. So her experience with me helped her to help another parent. – Dennis, Professional, mid 30s.

### *Family Roles*

The data indicates that no changes in roles have been reported by the respondents. They still fulfill their roles as filial sons and as male family members (e.g. “brother” and “uncle”). The family also still has expectations that they will fulfill their role as fathers and other masculine duties, as exemplified by the responses below:

My parents still expect me to get married as soon as possible. My Dad once said I am “the boy in the couple” so I still can get married and make babies. I was stunned. –Mike, Entertainer, 27 years old.

There have been no changes in my family role. I have always been strong-willed and independent and my family still expects me to chop trees and do the heavy lifting around the family home. – Fred, Professional, 31 years of age.

### *Family Objections*

Data collected indicates that family objections, if initially raised, have been managed within the family. Interestingly, the data also shows that the respondents take responsibility for managing themselves in terms of how they carry themselves within family circles and also in the larger community. Examples include:

My parents are now able to accept the fact that they have a gay son although I don't feel that they had treated me any differently from before



I came out to them. Although, my mother had explicitly mentioned that she doesn't want her extended family (her siblings, my cousins etc.) to know about my orientation. Also, I respect my mother's wishes that her extended family doesn't know about my sexuality. This was when they initially found out that I am gay. This is probably from being let down and their expectations not being met about having grandchildren or someone to pass on the family name. They have mentioned that "choosing" to be gay is not within the Asian values system and it was something I might have picked up from being exposed to too much Western culture.—Dennis, Professional, mid 30s.

My family is open about me, but I also have to control myself as society is not accepting. My family may be accepting, but people around us may not be. But I'm open to my friend and colleagues. I'm considered blessed to have this people around me. —George, Hotelier, mid 20s.

I would be more well-behaved, and control my gestures when I am with them. —Peter, Educator, late 30s.

## Discussion

The findings show that a few initial observations can be made. First, the family is an important part of the lives of the respondents because they were included in their lives at a level that was honest about their sexuality. Second, they cared about the feelings of their family members and that familial love was involved. Third, although there are recollections of friction and disapproval, the root of the negative reaction was their concern for the well-being of the respondent within the context of larger society.

Within the framework of phenomenology, however, these interactions take on a much more complex and nuanced meaning especially since cultural expectations govern the interactions of the respondents and their family members. As social realities are constructed and are based on interaction, relationships, interpretation (hermeneutics), and intersubjective interaction, the data shows that the respondents and their families have constructed new ways of social interaction that

are governed by the symbolic universe of culture while creating new ways of interacting that take into consideration the sexuality of the respondents. Although not deeply entrenched within the cultural context of Malaysia collectively, the data suggest that families as the basic social unit have their own dynamics and do not necessarily conform to the accepted notion of Asian values.

The symbolic universe of culture is the overarching structure that gives legitimacy to the expectations of family members of the respondents. Examples of this legitimation include the expectation of heterosexual marriage by the respondents, the expectation to still play the role of filial son and caregiver, and the expectation to respect family wishes to not make their sexuality known to specific extended family members. However, I would argue that by legitimizing the expectations of the family, culture also delegitimizes the sexuality of the respondents through allusion to homosexuality being a Western influence, expectation of silence of sexuality to members of the extended family, and control of specific behaviors that may identify the respondents as gay. The symbolic universe of the respondents and their families ultimately reifies the institution of cultural expectations, and, in turn, the cultural expectations maintain the structure of the symbolic universe that places the respondents in the intricate position to maneuver themselves through the maze of culturally influenced family expectations.

The family expectations that are governed by culture also determine the roles that the respondents play within their family. Roles, in phenomenology, connote hierarchies in relationships and interactions as well as denote relevance within the social structure of the individual. Based on the findings, the respondents have, for the most part, retained their positions in their family by playing all of the familial roles that a son should be playing, except that of husband and father in a heterosexual relationship/marriage. They have remained relevant as sons, but not relevant as husband and father. Therefore, the respondents' full role as a member of the family seems unfulfilled as suggested by the data, thus, breaking away from the cultural expectations and receiving some family sanction. The findings at this time cannot indicate or suggest what would be the long-term ramifications of not meeting these

cultural expectations or family sanction would be, but it is plausible based on the data that the respondents would manage the long-term ramifications in ways that afford them both showing their family respect while maintaining their own positions about their sexuality. This new “production of self” is a creation that is mediated by the environment the individual is in, and possibly one that will continue to evolve as the individual respondent evolves as a person.

A family is able to shift its culturally-based perception of sexuality over a period of adjustment as shown in the data. This suggests that the institutionalization of culture as experienced by the respondents need not remain static, and therefore that culture may be recreated and reinvented. While sanctions still exist, the extent of these sanctions may be mitigated by intersubjective interaction to create new meanings for being gay in an Asian family cultural context as well as familial acceptance/accommodation. This also shows that while typification that is built based on proximity in a relationship can create hierarchies, it can also be used to create new dynamics in relationships based on this proximity. This may suggest that as a social organization, traditionally Asian families with Asian cultural values are malleable entities, and as such capable of receiving new ideas to transform itself based on necessity.

## Conclusion

The ethnic and cultural diversity of Malaysia plays itself out within the microcosm of the family where individuals are either buffeted or buoyed by these expectations. For gay men, these expectations play out in experiences that are unique as not only do they have to deal with societal expectations and prejudices at large, they also have to deal with familial cultural expectations that place various responsibilities on them. Family structure and family roles may be similar across ethnicities as these are born from similar regional cultural values, but interpretations of gay sexuality and how this fits into the family structure and family roles depend on the individual gay man and their family dynamics. Culture then as a guiding principle retains its superior status within the overall construction of reality for gay men in Malaysia, but

as this research suggests culture can be managed individually by gay men to meet the needs of the family as well as their own personal needs. Based on this, potential future research then could move in the direction of connecting religious expectations with cultural expectations and how it is managed by gay men in Malaysia, management of family expectation by gay male couples who are from different ethnic groups; and management of cultural expectations of homosexuality from the perspective of parents with children who are identified as gay.

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