

## **Foucault's *Sophrosyne*: A Qualitative Analysis of Self-identity Creation through the Coming Out Process of Same-sex Attracted Men of Chinese Ethnicity in Penang, Malaysia**

**Felix, M. S.**

*Department of Society and Health, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Mahidol University, 73170 Bangkok, Thailand*

### **ABSTRACT**

The Foucauldian conceptualisation of *sophrosyne* as moderation, self-mastery, control and freedom is deepened to gain deeper nuance of the coming-out process of same-sex attracted men in Penang, Malaysia who are of ethnic Chinese descent. The deepening of the concepts focussed on moderation, balance, structure, self-realisation, individuality and personal growth in the coming-out process of the respondents. Qualitative in nature, this research is based on a sample of 15 men who identify as same-sex attracted who were interviewed in-depth on the subject of their experience of coming out as same-sex attracted. The data suggest that similarities exist between *sophrosyne* and the coming-out process as described by Western scholars. However, due to conservative Asian values, *sophrosyne* allows respondents to focus more on the personalised and individualised experience of coming out that does not necessarily reflect major Western models.

*Keywords:* Coming out, ethnic Chinese, Foucault, identity, same-sex, *sophrosyne*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Foucault (1990), in his second volume of *The History of Sexuality*, focussed on how sexual pleasure was regulated and utilised in ancient Greek society by dissecting the

works of Plato, Aristotle and Xenophon. In his treatise, Foucault analysed how values surrounding human sexuality were codified. These codes guided actions connected with and the motivations behind the experience of sexual pleasure and sexuality. Contrary to popular belief, Greek society was not a mélange of sexual depravity, but rather, a society in which sexuality was guided by virtues steeped in moderation and societal expectation.

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*E-mail address:*

[drmarkfelix@gmail.com](mailto:drmarkfelix@gmail.com) (Felix, M. S.)

This paper argues in particular that Foucault's dissection of *sophrosyne* is pertinent to understanding the place that coming out has in the development of male same-sex sexuality. Through an analysis of the coming-out process of ethnic Chinese males within the geographic parameters of Penang, Malaysia, this paper hopes to show that by establishing sexual identity, albeit within a conservative ethnic culture, men who are same-sex attracted take control of and master their sexual identity.

### ***Sophrosyne* as Structure: Interpretations and Concepts**

Foucault drew attention to the use of the following concepts: *aphrodisia* (the enjoyment of sexuality and pleasure), *chresis* (the "right way" to enjoy sexuality and pleasure), *chresis aphrodisia* (the share of time and resources allotted to sexual pleasure and the way an individual is allowed by society to enjoy these pleasures), *enkrateia* (the right attitude that is necessary for ethics and pleasure and the right use of them) and *sophrosyne* (moderation, self-mastery, taking control of oneself and freedom) in regulating sexuality. By regulation, however, what Foucault arguably meant was that there were means by which sexuality should be structured. This structure does not speak of suppression, repression or rejection. Rather, what Foucault spoke of in his work was the way that sexuality is structured to bring forth the best in an individual so that he may bring the most benefit to himself and to society.

Of particular interest to this author is the concept of *sophrosyne*, which speaks of moderation, self-mastery, taking control of oneself and freedom. This author argues that these concepts are based on the view that *sophrosyne* allows for reaching the fullest development of all areas of an individual's life. Here, the idea of moderation hints of balance between all parts of an individual's life, including sexual and libidinous needs, in a harmony with all aspects of his life. This balance allows for the individual who is same-sex attracted to seek satisfaction in same-sex attraction while meeting societal expectations of being a good citizen. Moderation too is taken to mean that sexual pleasure is not the only focus of the individual's expenditure of energy; rather, there is a time and place for expenditure of same-sex sexual energy, and the individual is aware of the time and place for this expenditure. In the context of this paper, it could be argued that same-sex attracted males recognise a time and a place for asserting their identities, thus meeting the value of moderation.

Self-mastery and taking control of oneself had overarching connotations of restraint in the historical context in which Foucault placed his work. While there are these connotations of restraint, the exposition of Foucault's writing shows that self-mastery and control had more to do with shaping an identity than with restraint. He showed that through a structure that allowed for the exercise of sexual pleasure, the individual could develop an identity based on a social ethos. Additionally,

structure allows for both a framework through which identity can be formed while allowing the individual to decide the means through which the identity may be actualised. While structures may differ between cultures and subcultures, the end result is an identity that is recognised. For the purpose of this paper, the actualisation of an identity through self-mastery and control of oneself can be argued to be useful elements in the development and assertion of same-sex attracted identities.

Finally, *sophrosyne* as freedom by Foucault has connotations of freedom of individuality and recognition of individuality within the confines of ancient Greek society. In expounding on freedom, Foucault hinted that the individual is free to exercise his or her individuality. There exist boundaries in the form of mutual respect, seniority and also status. As long as these boundaries are not crossed, the freedom of individuality is deemed valid and the identity manifested by the individual is also deemed valid. However, crossing these boundaries would manifest for an individual an identity that is deemed a transgression. This concept of freedom then connotes the importance of individuality within the context of a particular society.

Based on this conceptualisation of Foucault's exposition of *sophrosyne*, this paper would then like to posit that these concepts are a means to gaining a deeper understanding of the process of coming out of same-sex attracted men. Specifically, this work focussed on the coming-out process as a means of identity

development that utilises moderation, self-mastery, control of self and freedom within the Malaysian context. However, to lay a stronger theoretical foundation for this paper, presented first are other theories of cultural identity for cross referencing. Also, coming out in other cultural contexts is also presented to provide a contrasting view for discussion.

### **Identity Formation – Theoretical Arguments**

Identity may be discovered (where potential has existed before in the person and needs to be actuated) or may be constructed (Berzonsky, 1990; Waterman, 1984; as cited by Vignoles, Schwartz & Luyckx, 2011). Both these assertions infer that for identity to be formed, action by the individual is needed to actualise identity to fully form personality, relational and behavioural patterns (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). Cultural identity is formed further through social cognition of the structure in which a person resides. In this, an individual may construct, maintain and re-construct an identity based on the cultural expectation of society as well as by being cognisant of individual roles and place in that society (Berzonsky, 2011).

It is in this process of the actualising, personifying, constructing, maintaining and re-constructing of an identity that the narrative history of a culture comes into play (McAdams, 2011). The narrative history of the individual reflects societal norms, mores and rules of the culture in which the individual is steeped. In the

context of coming out, a gay man has to take into consideration the narrative history of his culture and its implied rules and then create his own personal (or gay community) historic narrative. Often, the protagonist (the individual gay man) will create a historic narrative that portrays him in a favourable light and it is more self-focussed. He may even have role models to create a culturally accepted identity content and be willing to face the social sanctions for this identity as his personal self-discourse continues as well as find a place for himself within gay communities (Bamberg, De Fina & Schiffrin, 2011; Oyserman & James, 2011; Spears, 2011). This may place the gay man at odds with his cultural identity, especially within collectivistic societies. Eastern cultures are more interdependent whereas Western cultures are more individualistic. Eastern cultures focus on hierarchy, relatedness and inclusiveness, thus making any action or behaviour towards independence a transgression of cultural norms (Smith, 2011). Theoretically then, coming out, which is seen as an individualistic or selfish act, would defy the cultural expectations of Eastern cultures and take on a more globalised (Western) cultural identity (Jensen, Arnett & McKenzie, 2011).

However, it is in asserting his sexual identity as homosexual that a gay man truly begins to delve into his eudaimonic self. He understands and knows himself better and his process of identity creation continues. The focus then is on his own needs and the need for self-acceptance, acceptance

by society and integration into his cultural context. Congruence and integration are then the focus of the individual (Smith, 2011; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2011; Vignoles, 2011; Waterman, 2011) as he develops his sexual identities (Savin-Williams, 2011).

The researcher wishes to point out that while identity formation and cultural identities have their benefits and drawbacks, what is of concern for this research is how coming out may be interpreted differently from or in tandem with *sophrosyne*. The overarching themes that different identity and cultural theories show is that there is a definitive process of knowing the self better and knowing what the societal rules are and of navigating them. In essence, while pointing out that cultural codes are needed in identity formation, the theories briefly discussed in this section are Western in construct and do not necessarily take into consideration Eastern or Asian cultural values. The following section on coming out in other cultural contexts specifically points out the experience of East Asian gay men in the coming-out process and acts as both a counter-balance and a further explanation of these cultural and identity theories. This may or may not be totally synchronous, but does provide a wider view of the experience of the gay men who were respondents for this research.

### **Coming Out in Other Cultural Contexts**

While much of the extant literature on coming out is based on the Western experience, this research would like to put

forward cultural identities and findings of other studies on coming out from the Asian perspective as a means of deepening understanding of the experience of coming out in the Asian context by considering it through the lens of *sophrosyne*. North Asian studies on the subject were specifically chosen as there is similarity between North Asian culture and the culture of present Malaysians of Chinese ethnicity or descent.

*Sophrosyne* as freedom and individualisation was not the finding of Cho and Sohn (2016) within the cultural context of South Korea. As suggested in the article of these authors, coming out has adverse impact in South Korea, especially in the area of mental health, where the identity could lead to suicide. However, the data collected were based on gay men who had been "outed" (revealed as gay or homosexual against their will). This suggests that the assertion that coming out may be negative in the culture of South Korea is somewhat misleading. From a cultural identity standpoint, being outed is not the asserting of one's identity, but rather the exposing of an identity deemed secret before the respondents were ready to share this identity openly. This is definitely not the meaning of freedom, choice, moderation and asserting individuality as inferred from Foucault's work. Rather, it is the opposite of these positive experiences. *Sophrosyne* here may still resonate within the cultural context of South Korea, but more research is needed to ascertain exactly what is the level and affinity of resonance.

Gay men in Hong Kong, as reported by Wong and Tang (2004), tended to disclose their homosexuality in early adulthood. Coming out at this early stage of adulthood allowed the respondents in the study to experience lower levels of psychological distress, and this lower level of psychological distress was linked through the coming-out process and identification with supportive communities. It can be inferred from this study that while cultural influences and cultural restrictions were present for these men of Chinese ethnicity in Hong Kong, they chose to come out early, and this experience of coming out early benefitted them in terms of their mental health. This increased the freedom they enjoyed as well as their self-mastery, both components of *sophrosyne* as expounded in this paper.

Khng (2001) pointed out that coming out in Singapore was a slow step-by-step process. This process was one in which cultural influences played a huge part in determining the assertion of sexual identity that is unacceptable according to conservative cultural norms due to parental disapproval, societal rejection and fear of losing a career. Coming out, then, is a personal journey for gay men in Singapore and it formatively creates an experience that is based on independence and bravery; in other words, it makes gay men stronger in their belief in their self-identity. This cultural experience is in line with the meaning of *sophrosyne*, where there is moderation between what is wanted by the gay man and the expectations of his

family and culture, where bravery is balanced with anxiety and claiming to be part of society despite potential social rejection. In this, there is freedom; in this, there is self-mastery. Although Singapore acknowledges itself to be conservative with draconian legislation, gay men in Singapore come out and claim their place while maintaining respect for the cultural norms of the society in which they live.

Similar to Singapore, Taiwan has a culture that is deeply steeped in filial piety and family bonds, which together, create identity. In Taiwan, sexual identity is closely intertwined to filial piety and the ability to produce children to carry on the family name. For gay men, this creates conflict as the inability to produce children through a heterosexual union is seen as having failed in a family obligation. Therefore, as gay men in Taiwan come out, they need to seek a balance between the assertion of their sexual identity and the proper place that this sexual identity has within the context of their family (moderation and self-mastery). At the same time, family members have to reassess and reinterpret their understanding of filial piety, allowing gay men to feel a greater sense of freedom of self. In this, family members and gay men show restraint and respect for the cultural structure in which they live (Wang, Bih & Brennan, 2009).

It is fitting that at this juncture, the discussion of same-sex sexuality and coming out moves to Malaysia as it is the geographic context of this research. A historic background of same-sex attracted

identities in Malaysia is presented, followed by cultural expectations surrounding sexuality. Then, Western models of coming out are presented, along with the benefits and barriers to coming out.

### **Same-Sex Attracted Identities in Malaysia at a Glance**

Male same-sex sexual attraction was part of Asian culture in pre-colonial times. Men who exhibited attraction to other men and who engaged in same-sex sexual activities were often attributed high social status. An example of this is that the *Sida-Sida* of the ancient Malayo-Indonesian archipelago were the only ones thought sacred enough to touch the raiment of royalty aside from royalty themselves (Peletz, 2009). Japanese literature holds the virtues of male-male love in high regard, where the beauty of one man would so enthrall the imagination of another man that the highest ideals of honour, virtue and sacrifice would bind the men together both in life and death (Schalow, 1989). The Chinese have historic documents to show the love that the Prince of Wei had for his male lover Jun Longyang was a passionate one. The prince cut off the sleeve of his robe on which his lover was sleeping so that the latter's rest would not be disturbed, thus creating the euphemism *Duanxiu* (cut sleeve) to refer to male same-sex love and attraction (Ng, 1989; Van Gulick, 1974).

However, the arrival of the European colonial powers, a Westernised notion of same-sex attraction and a backlash of Asian conservatism detracted from

the recognition of men who were same-sex attracted as an identity in Malaysia (Baba, 2001; 2002). Poon and Ho (2002) posited that same-sex sexual identity was unnatural in the Asian context as it worked against economic tradition and was in conflict with "the traditional gender roles and family structures which tend to be well-defined in Asian cultures." In general then, it can be asserted that sexual identity attracts attention in a conservative Asian context. According to Baba (2001), a gap in positive role models and anxiety in identity portrayals lead to discomfort with sexual identity among Malaysian men and the banning of representations of same-sex sexual identity in the Malaysian media has obliterated all references to same-sex sexuality (West, 1997; UNAIDS, 2004; Winder, 2006). Identity formation and development, then, in the conservative Malaysian context, become a distinctly personal process with few, if any, references or role models. This personal process has been identified by scholars as the process of coming out.

### **Culture and Same-Sex Attraction**

While the findings of a study by Whitam (1983) pointed out that individuals who are same-sex attracted exist in all societies in similar percentage and are present where an aggregate of people are enough to form a population, most cultures champion heteronormativity (affirmation of heterosexuality and its accompanying gender and sexual roles). In Chinese ethnic culture, the role of a man and the role

of a woman are clearly defined. To not fulfil these roles would mean that family structures have been usurped and this is deemed unnatural. The belief that same-sex attraction is unnatural in Chinese ethnic culture also adds to the conflict faced by men who are of Chinese ethnicity and who are same-sex attracted. Additionally, there are the issues of face-saving of the family, issues of shame and discontinuation of the family name that are connected to same-sex attraction (Ng, 1989; Cong et al., 2008; Poon & Ho, 2009).

In brief, the literature suggests three major points. First, that the coming-out process may take more than one avenue; second, that coming out is an essential part of identity formation of same-sex attracted males; and third, that Chinese ethnic culture has proscriptions against same-sex sexual identities.

### **Coming Out: Linearity and Self Expression Models**

The coming-out process is more than informing others of same-sex attraction. It is about the development of an identity (Maguen, Floyed, Bakerman, & Armistead, 2002) and cannot occur within a social vacuum (D'Augelli, 2003). Various scholars posited that coming out is a linear process, while other authors take the position that it is a process that requires self-expression. Briefly, the scholars who took the stand that coming out was a linear process name between three to four stages of coming out with sharing of same-sex sexual attraction occurring towards the final stage of the

process (Troiden, 1988, 1989; Edwards, 1994; Mondimore, 1996; Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz, & Smith, 2001; Marcus, 2005). Of particular interest is the work of Troiden (1989), which stated that the same-sex attracted man would follow a distinct pattern where he first tells his friends, then his siblings, then his mother and finally, his father of his same-sex sexual attraction.

Conversely, Rosario, Schrimshaw and Hunter (2008) noted that most if not all models of the process of sexual identity formation of gay men have a linear pattern but question if such linearity takes into consideration personal factors and a different developmental pathway is followed by each individual. As such, these authors proposed a new model that took into consideration self-discovery and exploration (becoming aware of sexual attraction, questioning sexual orientation and partaking of sexual activity) and identity integration (acceptance and commitment to sexual identity via forming positive perceptions of homosexuality and involvement in activities executed by the gay community). This proposed model took into consideration that individuals form identity development and integration at different points of life and that identity formation and integration is an on-going process.

These opposing paradigms of coming out suggest that men who experience same-sex attraction have more than one avenue of approaching the coming-out process. It also suggests that while it is a conscious step to move through the process, results

of the process may differ due to other social actors involved. The literature also suggests that there is no specific end point. Rather, the coming-out process is ongoing throughout the social experience of individual same-sex attracted men.

### **Benefits of Coming Out**

Vaughan and Waehler (2010) found that coming out has led to personal growth for men who experience same-sex attraction in terms of a sexual identity that is psychologically strong and healthy and endow them with greater ability in social skills, fortitude and authenticity. There is greater internal acceptance of their sexuality and as such men who experience same-sex attraction who come out are able to transform their social and sexual identities in positive ways. Coming out also helps same-sex attracted men to develop healthy relationships, create romantic relationships and also set boundaries from which to distance themselves from unhealthy relationships. Coming out also helps these men to be involved in advocacy and to develop a sense of community. In general, coming out makes men who are same-sex attracted more psychologically and socially fit.

In contrast, the concealment of same-sex attraction and same-sex attracted sexual identity can lead to illness such as cancer, bronchitis and psychosomatic symptoms (Taylor, 1999). Additionally, repression as opposed to expression of same-sex sexual attraction adds to oppressive societal restraints and depression. Specifically, in

the case of HIV+ same-sex attracted men, repression leads to the exacerbation of HIV/AIDS symptoms (Ullrich, Lutgendorf, & Stapleton, 2003). It has to be noted that the coming-out process itself must be positive in order to have positive benefits. Rosario et al. (2001) found that if the coming-out process were positive, the same-sex attracted men would have more self-esteem and do more to practise safe sex due to the positive view of same-sex attraction. The opposite happens if the coming-out process is not a positive one. This is not to imply that men who are same-sex attracted who do not come out suffer medically and psychologically, nor does it mean that they are socially maladjusted. Rather, what is asserted is that concealment of a gay sexual identity may lead to physically and mentally debilitating conditions that can be avoided.

### Barriers to Coming Out

Aside from the negative implications of not coming out as stated in the previous section, same-sex attracted males face other barriers to coming out. Legalities and societal expectations against men who have same-sex sexual attractions stymie the process of coming out. This is true of many nations in the world, and Malaysia is no exception (Jenkins, 2004; TreatAsia, 2006).

While same-sex attracted sexual identity in and of itself is not a crime in Malaysia, same-sex attracted men who engage in same-sex sexual behaviour can be prosecuted under Section 377A of the

Malaysian Penal Code. This section of the Penal Code prohibits sodomy and gross indecency with punishments such as 20 years of imprisonment (Scoville, 2004). Societal expectation of men in general in Malaysia is to meet masculine gender norms (Baba, 2001). If these gender norms are not met, same-sex attracted men would face societal censure due to the irrational fear that surrounds same-sex sexual attraction (Herek, Norton, Alan, & Sims, 2010; Scoville, 2004). Additionally, same-sex attracted men may experience internalised fears related to their sexual attraction. This also acts as a barrier to coming out (Meyer & Dean, 1998; Simon, 1998).

### RESEARCH DESIGN

This study of *sophrosyne* focusses on same-sex attracted men of Chinese ethnicity in Malaysia as the Chinese culture has traditional gender roles and family structures that are usurped when same-sex attracted men do not fulfil their gender roles (Ng, 1989; Cong et al., 2008; Poon & Ho, 2009). As the Chinese ethnic community comprises 22.6% of multi-ethnic Malaysian society ([www.indexmundi.com/malaysia](http://www.indexmundi.com/malaysia)), this study, albeit from a qualitative data standpoint, would allow for greater understanding of the socio-cultural issues that are faced by ethnic Chinese Malaysian men who are same-sex attracted in creating an identity as same-sex attracted males.

This research received clearance from the Ethics Committee of Universiti Sains Malaysia for execution. The research was

qualitative in nature due to the sensitive nature of the data sought and the fact that same-sex attracted men are not easily identified in Malaysian society. Additionally, men who are same-sex attracted practise the utmost discretion in sharing their experiences due to societal proscription. The sampling methods utilised were purposive sampling through contacts of the AIDS Action and Research Group of Universiti Sains Malaysia and snowball sampling. The geographic parameter chosen was the state of Penang, Malaysia as the state has an ethnic Chinese population of 41.5% (<http://penanginstitute.org/v3/resources/data-centre/122-population>).

The criteria set for eligibility of respondents were based on having Malaysian citizenship, being male, having expressed same-sex sexual attraction, being of Chinese ethnicity and having taken up residence in the state of Penang. Age, occupation and level of education were not taken into consideration; however, these data were collected to offer a brief demographic analysis of the respondents who met the research criteria. A total of 15 respondents were gained when the point of data saturation was achieved.

All respondents were presented with a consent form by the author to gain informed consent. The consent form was an abbreviated version of the medical consent form used by Universiti Sains Malaysia and it was approved by the Ethics Committee of Universiti Sains Malaysia. Respondents were informed that they were allowed to withdraw from the data collection process

at any time that the research was being conducted and the author's contact details were shared with the respondents for this purpose. The privacy and confidentiality of the respondents were protected through the use of pseudonyms and 128-bit encryption for saved data.

Respondents were interviewed in-depth via a semi-structured interview questionnaire research tool that allowed for necessary probing and expression of the experiences of the respondents. Each interview took between one and one and a half hours. All interviews were audio-recorded after permission was sought from and granted by the respondent. The interviews were then transcribed. Transcribed data were then transferred onto a content analysis matrix. Data were then analysed for evidence of *sophrosyne* (moderation, self-mastery, taking control of oneself and freedom).

## FINDINGS

### Sophrosyne and Moderation

The concepts of balance, moderation and recognition of a time and place for coming out were both present and not present in the findings. The following two interview excerpts attest to this:

*My coming out happened by accident. My mum saw my diary. My mom is not the type to believe in personal space and privacy so as long as I was living under her roof she felt she had the right to look through my things. She found*

*the entry on my diary where I was writing about a crush I had on my teacher, and when she found out all hell broke loose. When she told my father he said I will never amount to anything because of my attraction to men and that I will end up selling my body for sex to make a living. This pushed me to succeed so that I could prove him wrong. Since then, my mother has come to accept my orientation. My father not so much. But the revelation of my same-sex attraction has redefined my relationship with my parents. Somehow it has made us stronger. Before the incident I felt that there was a barrier between us, but since coming out I feel closer to them. – Mike, early 30s, Executive*

*First I came out to myself. I have known I am attracted to men since a young age, but I could not accept it as I was from a strong religious Christian background. So I lived a double life, suppressed my attractions and trained to become a pastor. I quit working for the church because I felt like a hypocrite as it is not affirming of men like me, and I had fallen in love with a man from South Africa. This was my first solid step in affirming my same-sex attraction. I was then able to live freely and coming-out allowed me to live the life I live now. I moved to Kuala Lumpur and then on to Penang to be with more same-sex*

*sexuality affirming Christians and we share our love for God and his ministry together. My family and old friends may suspect my same-sex attractions but with them I will leave it as a suspicion for now. – Seb, mid 40s, Entrepreneur*

In the first interview excerpt, no balance was in play initially. The respondent did not achieve balance through his coming out for two reasons: first, the situation was forced upon him, and second, the parent-child dynamic did not allow him to assert his identity positively. However, over time, a balance was achieved in the relationship the respondent had with his parents. In this instance, the respondent had met the societal expectation of maintaining his position of son within the parent-child dynamic. The use of the word “redefined” as used by the respondent suggests that there was a process of change that occurred for both the respondent and his parents, and this suggests a moderation born of acceptance. This respondent demonstrated the concept of moderation in that he was able to use the initial negative reaction of his father to spur his professional ambition. For the second respondent, there was no balance prior to accepting his same-sex attraction as his internal conflict between his same-sex attraction and the dogma of his religious convictions made him live a double life. Developing romantic feelings for another same-sex attracted male began the process of balancing his same-sex attraction and his religious convictions. While it may be argued that the *sophrosyne*

of moderation could be put further to the test for this respondent by coming out to his family, the counter-argument would be that he has recognised that the appropriate time and place should be decided by him.

### ***Sophrosyne, Self-Mastery and Control of Self***

The use of structure in self-mastery according to the concept of *sophrosyne* requires a structure for identity recognition. The data suggested that while a formal structure may be followed by some respondents, others found control and self-mastery more from self-realisation. Examples of these are found in the following interview excerpts:

*My coming out process? I have come out to my close friends, my gay friends, some of my gym friends, not to my parents, I am out to my sister. – Joe, early 20s, Accountant*

*When I first came out I thought there would be negative reactions. In actuality it was positive and that was a relief. I was not going to be ostracised, get cursed, all that sort of horror stories where you hear other people's coming-out stories that they got thrown out of the house and they get disowned, you know all that sort of tragic stuff. But for me, it all strengthened me to be who I am and first of all to accept who I am before I can move to the next stage beyond a sexual*

*identity. I guess in a way that coming-out process strengthened my own resolve of who I am. – Lee, late 30s, Executive*

*I became a Christian hoping I would be "born again" and the Lord would make me straight. Then I dated a lady and we were in a relationship for three years. But at the end of the day I just figured I am fooling myself. I woke up one day looked myself in the mirror and said "Honey, wake up," and that's it, here I am. – Foo, early 30s, Executive*

*Definitely yes, because since I've come out I've become more comfortable. I have only come out to my biological sister, but after that I became more comfortable to be a gay man and being accepted by one of my family members helped. If I have any problems I have somebody to go to even if it is about a relationship. My sister will somehow give some advice and support from a lot of different aspects. And support from the friends as well, friends are very supportive from the aspect of lifestyle and the behaviour and the attitude that we are not different from other people. – Kev, mid 30s, Executive*

The responses from the first and the fourth respondent indicate that a structure as proposed by some scholars

was followed in the coming-out process. This indicates that, based on the concept of *sophrosyne*, steps are necessary for self-mastery and control of self in establishing an identity. However, *sophrosyne* also states that recognition of identity is important in identity formation. The responses of the second and third respondent suggested that self-realisation and moving forward with life are necessary to identity formation.

### ***Sophrosyne* and Freedom**

Conceptually, *sophrosyne* and freedom indicate recognition of individuality while respecting the social context within which the identity exists. The data indicated recognition of individuality rather than social contextualisation. The following excerpts are examples of this.

*Every day is a new challenge, every day is a new experience. The best thing about it is that the more experience you get you become surer you are of who you are. Still struggling, but living it, living every minute of it and it's a great experience. Being free to do what you want, you get experience and knowledge of who you are at the end of the day. Even though what I have done may be ethical or right it became part of me and recognising it allowed me to recognise who I am. That is how it shaped me. – Chai, late 20s, Graphic Designer*

*You really have to align yourself, what you want, what you need, who you are, who you want to be and you really have to go through all of this soul searching to really know yourself and then from that point, start again. And that basically charter a path. So I think that part has really made a lot of difference and then again helped me to make peace with myself. That is important for the later part of my life. So it is more of a reset, a reset button (laughs). I always think okay, this is not quite what I want so I reset, but it is not the end of the world, it is not the end of the journey. – Khoo, late 30s, Entrepreneur*

*Each day is a learning process, you learn it through what you do, what you experience. I would not say I am the best yet, but I am getting better. – Kong, 30s, Entrepreneur*

The freedom to be oneself and the freedom to express individuality are key themes in the *sophrosyne* conceptualisation of freedom as found in the data. The interview excerpts above indicated that freedom was not an end point. Rather, freedom was both part of a life journey of identity formation. No social contextualisation was mentioned by the respondents specifically about their interactions with society in general in their coming-out process.

## DISCUSSION

### Moderation

As shown in the data, the concept of moderation may have been utilised by the respondents to navigate the development of their same-sex attracted identity. The use of the concept of moderation may require redefinition of both the relationship with the self where internal conflict may be resolved significantly so that expectations from both parties may be managed. Additionally, the concept of moderation may be applied to finding a balance between same-sex sexual attraction and other aspects of the life of an individual. For this, men of Chinese ethnicity in Penang may or may not necessarily take the same steps as stated by scholars. Also, they may instead choose to work within the framework of Chinese cultural ethnicity and seek a balance between cultural expectation and their own needs. While it may not be necessary for immediate family to recognise the validity of the same-sex attraction of the individual, the data pointed out that management of the change in cultural expectation is possible.

In this, it can be seen that the coming out of ethnic Chinese Malaysian gay men in the sample repeated what was posited by Khng (2001) and Wang, Bih and Brennan (2009). Moderation in terms of taking a slow approach and taking into consideration the needs of the family and society at large was practised by the respondents when coming out. This created the congruence mentioned in self-identity theory by Waterman (2011) as well as the steps of development of sexual identity by

Savin-Williams (2011). This suggests that there is some affinity between *sophrosyne* and Asian cultures.

What can be seen also from the data presented is that in finding the moderation of *sophrosyne*, respondents also gained relational and behavioural patterns with significant family members and peers. They also were cognisant of their own needs, or came to accept their own needs that rested on same-sex attraction (Berzonsky, 2011; Kroger & Marcia, 2011) while being cognisant of the societal challenges to being same-sex attracted (Smith, 2011; Jensen, Arnett & McKenzie, 2011). The overarching theme is one of seeking balance and not of extremism with total seclusion of self or exclusion of significant others; rather, it is one of seeking a balance between self needs and respect for the needs of others while maintaining openness in relationships.

### Self-Mastery and Control of Self

Self-mastery and control of self, as pointed out in the data, require self-realisation. While the data supported the assertion that certain steps need to be taken in identity formation, it is up to the individual to develop self-realisation so that the identity may continue to develop beyond the point of coming out. A suggested thought would be to focus on this continued development instead of merely on the coming-out process. *Sophrosyne* allows for the continuation of the development of self-mastery and control of self throughout the individual's lifetime. It would then be

possible for men of Chinese ethnicity who are same-sex attracted to have permutations of their same-sex attracted identities at different stages of their life, if self-realisation were employed (Smith, 2011; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2011; Savin-Williams, 2011). This self-realisation means knowing the eudaimonic self, which is necessary to identity formation among same-sex attracted men (Smith, 2011; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2011; Vignoles, 2011; Waterman, 2011; Savin-Williams, 2011). *Sophrosyne* then, when coupled with identity and cultural theory, is more than self-mastery and self-control. It is about mastering and controlling oneself through deeper knowledge and understanding of the self, and not merely acknowledging and fulfilling the desires of the self.

### Freedom

The concept of freedom in *sophrosyne* has deeper meaning when viewed from the standpoint of the collected data. It is not merely freedom to express same-sex attraction, but the ability to form individuality as a man with same-sex attraction. In other words, there is no need to clone or replicate the individuality of the experience of another man who also has same-sex attraction. While men who have same-sex attraction who are of Chinese ethnicity may face specific barriers in terms of ethno-cultural expectation, the concept of freedom according to *sophrosyne* would allow them to express their individuality at a personal level. Freedom, again, is not for replication, but for individualisation

(McAdams, 2011; Oyserman & James, 2011). This individualisation may take different paths, and changes can be made as that path progresses (Waterman, 2011).

The findings also challenge what has been posited about cognisance of societal needs by Berzonsky (2011), Khng (2011) and Wang, Bih and Brennan (2009), suggesting that while society does play a function in cultural and individual identity formation as well as in the tenet of freedom expressed by *sophrosyne*, there is an end point to the function of society. They also suggest that at some point in the coming-out process, same-sex attracted men go into knowing themselves (Waterman, 2011) without societal influence.

### Pros and Cons of Coming Out

In terms of positive outcomes of coming out, the respondents shared that they have closer family ties and are able to affirm themselves and define and redefine their identity as gay men. There was also acceptance by family and peers, self-realisation that self-delusion through immersion in religion was not the answer and moving forward in life. This realisation brought maturity to the respondents as they were able to accept what is fact and what is not. They were able to make a place for themselves in their families and community and came to be taken seriously as adults. Additionally, they were able to appreciate their freedom and to know what they wanted to do with that freedom both professionally and at a personal level. It also brought balance to the individual

respondents as they were able to firstly, know themselves as individuals and how they fit into the greater whole of society; secondly, to know how they fit into their families; and thirdly, to know how they fit in among their peers. It also brought balance to them to realise that they were able to be who they were and pursue their professional aspirations while managing possible negative reactions to their coming out to their family and society. Coming out also brought balance to the respondents as they were able to manage their interpersonal relationships with family and peers better.

On the negative side of things, the data indicated that there was still fear of negative repercussions from family members and society and that the process of coming out can be uncomfortable. The list of negative outcomes is not extensive, but it would be imprudent to assume that there are only a few negatives associated with coming out among Malaysian same-sex attracted men of Chinese ethnicity, and this forms a limitation of this research. More research into the negative outcomes of coming out are needed in the future within the context of Malaysia and the different ethnic groups in the country.

## CONCLUSION

The findings and the positions taken by scholars of the 20th and 21st century on the coming-out process bear some resemblance to the structure of regulating identity and cultural identity formation and the enjoyment of sexual identity in ancient Greek society. Arguably, *sophrosyne* in

ancient Greek society played a much larger role in society in terms of regulating identity formation, but, for minority populations such as men who have same-sex attraction, the concept of *sophrosyne* is also applicable.

Identity as a personal invention is necessary for men who are same-sex attracted. This is because same-sex attracted men of Chinese ethnicity who formed the research sample did not have the social markers of adulthood that opposite-sex attracted men of Chinese ethnicity have, such as marriage and parenthood. To fill this gap, the coming-out process and the use of the concept of *sophrosyne* as presented in this research would assist same-sex attracted men in building an identity that benefits both them and society. As the data pointed out, there is no end point in the journey of identity formation. While parental and societal judgement may initially cause issues for same-sex attracted men of Chinese ethnicity, it is part of that journey towards freedom and individuality. This author argues that despite deeply entrenched ethnic expectation, based on the data, the respondents have been able to find freedom and expression of their same-sex attracted identity.

*Sophrosyne* as a concept does not explicitly state how a same-sex attracted man may have developed an identity in ancient Greece, but the basic premise of *sophrosyne* as a body of regulations is applicable to the coming-out process of same-sex attracted men. While scholars have attempted to describe the experiential

steps of the coming-out process of same-sex attracted males, there is room for expansion upon the concepts of moderation, self-mastery, control of self and freedom in the coming-out process. Specifically, these concepts may be used in the context of conservative ethnic groups such as the Chinese.

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