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**SHORT COMMUNICATION**

# Psychological analysis of gay musicians in Turkey

FAHRAD SHIDFAR

*Istanbul Technique University, Istanbul, Turkey*

**Abstract**

In order to launch research into gays and the music they perform in various bars and night clubs in Istanbul, Turkey, I managed to arrange a few interviews with some gay musicians, analyzing their life characteristics and their relationship with music, providing a spotlight on their performance and stage characteristics, and finally analyzing their private lives, searching for the leading effects and causes, which had been derived from their psychology and eventually their behaviors. During this analysis, I took advantage of Freud's theory and tried to make a connection between the gay music in Turkey and the discussions of "id", "ego", "superego" and "defense mechanisms" in Sigmund Freud's theory, focusing on the gay musicians' musical performance and looking for the roots of the differences and distinctions in their performance, in their inner worlds and in what actually made them successful in performing music when compared with non-gay singers in the music markets of Istanbul. I tried to uncover the role of Turkish culture and traditions, and the religion of Islam, in shaping the gay musicians' mental reactions and the function of their defense mechanisms, and finally to elucidate the possible explanations for the popularization of gay musicians in Turkey.

**Key words:** *gays in Turkey, defense mechanisms, jealousness, escapism*

## The performance of gay musicians

In my research I, observed that more than 90 per cent of the singers in the bars and nightclubs of Regatta Bar complex in Bakirkoy, Istanbul, were gay. Among the male homosexuals in Turkey – gays, transvestites, bisexuals and transsexuals – I focused on gays[1] and the music they performed.

Freud suggests that human beings are governed by their instincts, among which sex is the most important factor affecting human behaviour. I will therefore go directly into details of Freud's personality theory and his definition of the id, ego and superego.

## Id

The id translates the organism's needs into motivational forces, which have been termed 'instincts' or 'drives'. The id works in keeping with the pleasure principle, which can be understood as a demand to satisfy needs immediately. Picture the hungry infant, screaming itself blue. It does not "know" what it wants in any adult sense; it just knows that it wants it, and it wants it now. The infant is pure or nearly pure, id. And the id is nothing but the psychic representative of biology.

## Ego

During the first year of a child's life, some part of the id becomes ego. The ego relates the organism to reality by means of its consciousness, and it searches for objects to satisfy the wishes that the id creates to represent the organism's needs.

The ego, unlike the id, functions according to the reality principle, which says, "take care of a need as soon as an appropriate object is found". It represents reality and, to a considerable extent, reason.

## Superego

As, however, the ego struggles to keep the id (and ultimately the organism) happy, it meets with obstacles in the world as well as – occasionally – objects

[1] 'Gay' literally means people (especially men) who are sexually attracted to people of the same sex.

Correspondence: Fahrad Shidfar, Istanbul Technique University (ITU), Istanbul, Turkey. E-mail: farhadshidfar@mail.com

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that actually assist it in attaining its goals. It keeps a record of these obstacles and aids. In particular, the record of things to avoid and strategies to take becomes the superego. This is not usually completed until about seven years of age, although in some people, it is never finished.

Here, I intend to evaluate the "id" of gay people as their instinctive homosexual desires, which are blamed by their own ego and superego. By this, I mean what they learn from the outside society and family, as ethical issues, like Freud's definition of "reason" and rationality, which prevents and controls human desires and activities.

There is a conflict in the gay person's psyche as a result of the struggle between the "id" and the "ego". We can easily investigate the roots of their music as a result of this conflict, in terms of performance characteristics, their aggression, their frank speech and dialogues, and their inclination towards feminine attitudes both in music and in *Zenne*[2] oriental dancing.

## What are defense mechanisms?

The ego sits at the centre of some pretty powerful forces: reality; society, as represented by the superego; and biology, as represented by the id. When these make conflicting demands on the poor ego, it is understandable if "you" feel threatened, overwhelmed, as if about to collapse under the weight of it all. This feeling is called anxiety, and it serves as a signal to the ego that its survival, and with it the survival of the whole organism, is in jeopardy.

The ego deals with the demands of reality, the id and the superego as best as it can. But when the anxiety becomes overwhelming, the ego must defend itself. It does so by unconsciously blocking the impulses or distorting them into a more acceptable, less threatening form. These techniques are called ego defense mechanisms. I will briefly describe several of these defense mechanisms before proceeding to my discussion of gay musicians' reactions to the inside (id) and outside impulses as environmental, social and cultural forces over them in Turkey.

### *Death instinct and escapism*

First, I look at the death instinct and everyone's unconscious desire to die. Life can be a painful and exhausting process. There is easily, for the great majority of people in the world, more pain than pleasure in life, something we are extremely reluctant to admit! Death promises a release from the struggle.

The day-to-day evidence of the death instinct lies in our desire for peace, for escape from stimulation, in our attraction to alcohol and narcotics, in our penchant for escapist activity, such as losing ourselves in books or movies, and in our craving for rest and sleep. Sometimes, it presents itself openly as suicide and suicidal wishes. As Freud theorized, we sometimes direct it away from ourselves, in the form of aggression, cruelty, murder and destructiveness. This kind of destructiveness and cruelty is reflected in our language and turns it into a frank, yet somehow rude, discourse.

At the same time, music plays a role in escapism: by losing themselves in music, gay people can get rid of powerful social and superego impulses over their egos and their 'gay' identity. Escapism can be detected in the choice of the music repertoires of gays as well as in generously uttered curses such as *yasa gitsin*, *bos ver artik*, *kahr olsun bu dunya*, *içelim arkadaslar*, *batsin bu dunya*, *ölümlü dünya*, *yalanci dunya*, *anasini satiyim*, *satmisim anasini*, *koy ver gitsin*, *kahbe dunya*, *kahbe felek*, etc., which can almost be translated as "live it off", "let it go", "fuck it", "damn it", "damn this world", "I don't give a fuck", "let this world sink", "this world is not worth it", "a world of lies", "it is worthless".

Escapism acting as a defense mechanism helps gays to forget or avoid the unpleasant or suffocating aspects of Turkish culture, such as the strict traditions and religious regulations, that threaten their "gay " identity. Most of them have been abandoned by their religious families and have begun to hate Islam, which defines the homosexual relationship as *Levat*, a strictly prohibited act, which may even lead to the death penalty.

### *Displacement*

Displacement is the redirection of an impulse on to a substitute target. If the impulse, the desire, is okay with you, but the person towards whom you direct that desire is too threatening, you can displace it on to someone or something that can serve as a symbolic substitute. Someone who hates his or her mother may repress that hatred but direct it instead towards, say, women in general. Someone who has not had the chance to love someone else may substitute a cat or dog for a human being. Someone who feels uncomfortable with his or her sexual desire for a real person may substitute a fetish. Someone who is frustrated with his or her superiors may go home and kick the dog, beat up a family member or engage in cross-burning.

[2] In Turkish culture and history, *Zenne* refers to a male dancer in female dress performing oriental dances.

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Here, I am not looking for the roots of displacement in gay musicians. Instead, I wish to criticize the television spectators and audiences of gay music, and the reasons behind the popularity of such programs. Among the music shows broadcasting on Turkish television channels, there are some programs produced by gay musicians that are becoming increasingly popular in Eastern Turkey, surprisingly so among women viewers.

Eastern Turkey is known for its masculine and male-dominated culture. The most common cultural term in Turkey – *Dogu küllturü*, i.e. "Eastern culture" – conveys the same concept in literal terms. Women are in general looked down upon by their husbands. As a result, women feeling contemptuous unconsciously substitute their husbands' disgusting masculine power as an unacceptable impulse, with the gay musicians on television, performing in a tender and gentle manner, being an acceptable signal. The disliked masculine figure therefore begins to shatter in the psyche of women through the non-stop watching of the programs and episodes on television that provide mental satisfaction.

### *Projection and altruistic surrender*

In this section, I refer to the male population who listen to and follow gay musicians. This is a kind of outward displacement that is almost the complete opposite of turning against the self. It involves the tendency to see your own unacceptable desires in other people. Here, the person attempts to fulfil his or her own needs vicariously, through other people. These are the gays who conceal their gayness, as a social group pretending to be non-gay, in order to comply with the strict social regulations, and pretending to be thoroughly immersed in their social obligations, but who, being overwhelmed by their initial desire for their own sex as a dominant id force, attempt to fulfil their own needs vicariously.

### *Introjections and identification*

Introjection, sometimes called identification, involves taking into one's own personality the characteristics of someone else; in doing this, one solves some emotional difficulties. For example, a child who is frequently left alone may in some way try to become "mom" in order to lessen his or her fears. You can sometimes catch these children telling their dolls or animals not to be afraid. Similarly, we find the older child or teenager imitating his or her favourite star, musician or sports hero in an effort to establish an identity.

A more unusual example is the case of the woman who lived next to my grandparents. Her husband had died and she began to dress in his clothes, albeit neatly tailored to her figure. She began to take up several of his habits, such as smoking a pipe. Although the neighbours found it strange and referred to her as "the man-woman", she was not suffering from any confusion about her sexual identity. In fact, she later remarried, retaining her men's suits and pipe till the end of her life!

Reviewing the lists of gay singers in Turkey, one can easily come across two famous singers who are considered to be pioneers in this regard: Zeki Müren and Bülent Ersoy. In my research, I realized that most of the gay musicians in the Istanbul music market try to imitate and follow them, not just in the hope of becoming famous, but also in order to adopt their clothes, ways and trends, shaping out their identity in such a way that it would be socially acceptable. The identification and introjection can be observed in their dressing style, way of talking, body movements, choice of repertoires, etc.

## Gays on the stage and their performance

There are several major features in the music performance of gays.

### *Self-confidence*

The main feature that distinguishes gay from non-gay singers lies in the self-confidence they exhibit, which can be easily observed in their performance. I believe that this approach is not a normal one as it seems somehow to be exaggerated in their music and most likely has its roots in the musicians' gayness. In my opinion, it has to do with their lives and may be the result of being isolated in the society, as well as reflecting their childhood and family environment.

Most gays admitted to having suffered from the attitudes of their family and friends, initially in school and then in their social lives and careers, being looked down upon. This is evident in the following statement by Hakan, who is a gay singer and works in "Yesilyurt Spor-club" in Istanbul: "I used to be called Top[3] Hakan by my classmates." Subsequently, a feeling of isolation prevailed in his personality.

As these children grow up and take part in social activities, they come to respond to their pre-established mental conflict; trying to come to terms with the fact that they also exist in this world. The only public forum for gays to prove themselves and to convince society of their existence is gay bars and

[3] "Top" is a slang word used in Turkish culture for a person of the male sex, especially a child, who has been exposed to sexual abuse by members of the same sex.

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nightclubs, as I found in my research; here, they can not only perform, but also fulfil the shaping of their social characters and meanwhile meet their needs.

Forming a new character would certainly result in self-confidence and eventually also in a good performance. It has been suggested that gays have the idea about the stage, "Let me be myself", and the stage is where they can in fact be themselves. Self-confidence in their performance consolidates the idea of taking a special place in society, while they are spiritually satisfied by being able to express their gayness.

### *Gays suppress men's jealousy*

The other fact that plays an important role in gay performance in Istanbul is that gays are free to circulate to every corner of the bar, amusing and making a direct relationship with both men and women, without having to make an effort to overcome the fear of facing any kind of jealousy on the part of the men, which is otherwise common everywhere in the world. As everyone knows, it is a common fear among men that their wives will be attracted to other males, and in the same way women show jealousy towards their husbands when they see a beautiful lady attracting their husband's attention.

A typical Turkish family will feel quite at ease and enjoy their recreation and entertainment when they are aware of the fact that a gay singer does not evoke any sense of jealousy in either men or women. When a non-gay singer performs, however, men's jealousy is evoked, especially if the singer is handsome.

Gay artists feel quite free in making contact with ladies, even embracing them and dancing with them, while their husbands are talking and entertaining themselves at the table. This freedom on the stage on part of the gays results in a successful performance and makes them highly popular, whereas non-gay artists have to restrict their relationship with the opposite-sex audience, which is reflected in a weakening of their performance.

As we know, one way to put on a successful performance is to establish a rapport with the audience. This involves making eye contact, establishing a dialogue between singer and audience in the intermissions between performances, and the audience's cooperation in the performance by singing along: the singer approaches a table and embraces a person, and together they sing parts of the song. Gay singers behave in their own authority in this field, as Hakan continuously did in Yesilyurt Spor-club.

#### *The frank and rude speech style of gays*

One of the main characteristics of gays in Turkey, besides their great interest in music, is their frank and rude way of speaking. This is such a common and typical behaviour of gays in Istanbul that you can easily observe it if you stroll in the Taksim, Tarlabasi, Harbiye and Istiklal caddesi areas of Istanbul at any time of the day, especially in the afternoons and at night.

The rudeness of their language has been generalized and is a privileged part of the social lives of gays, even in music performances, especially in dialogues on stage, and in television programmes. This makes their performances more informal, and as a result gay music and television programmes gain popularity and are highly successful.

#### *Zenne oriental dancing*

During my interview at Regatta Bar complex, I came across a *Zenne* by the name of Erdem, who was gay. He disclosed some details of his private life and his childhood. Erdem told me that, when he was a child, he had learned female-type dancing from his grandmother, who was a famous Egyptian dancer living in Istanbul. He told me how his inside female feelings influenced his learning to dance. Erdem believed that neither non-gay dancers nor women would ever be able to accomplish this task, since he believed that he was worshipping during the dance. Dancing turns into a kind of ritual so that *Zennes* are able to leave spectators feeling astonished.

Erdem mentioned that oriental dancing is not something that can be taught from outside one should feel it, blending the female feelings with the body movements and exposing some parts of the nude body to the spectators, while acting within the framework of a lady.

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