STUDIES OF SAME-SEX ATTRACTED MUSLIM MEN IN MALAYSIA:
THE NEEDS FOR RESEARCH ON THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF CONFLICT
BETWEEN RELIGIOUS AND SEXUAL IDENTITY AMONG SAME-SEX ATTRACTED
MUSLIM MEN IN THE CONTEXT OF MUSLIM MAJORITY COUNTRY

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ABSTRACT

Many studies on the experience of conflict between religious and sexual identity among same sex
attracted men have been carried out but focusing mainly on whites samples coming from Judeo-
Christian background living in the west. Fewer studies have been done on same-sex attracted men
coming from Muslim background. Should there be any, most of them were conducted on samples of
ethnic minority Muslims living in the west. This could lead to potential bias either to Islam or Muslims
in general as experiences of conflict from such samples could be the product of multiple factors
experienced by the sexual minority Muslims under study. This paper discusses the needs to conduct
studies on same-sex attracted Muslim males in a rather majority Muslim populated countries.
Malaysia is one of a perfect Muslim majority ground to fill this loophole. Issues pertaining to the
needs of such researches are further conceptualized.

Keywords: same-sex attracted Muslim men, conflict, religious identity, sexual identity.

1. Introduction

There are plenty of studies exploring the conflict between religious and sexual identity among same-
sex attracted males across the globe. Many of these studies, however, were conducted mainly on
Whites samples (Degges-White, Rice, & Myers, 2000; Guittar, 2013) coming from Judeo-Christian
background (Anderton, Pender, & Asner-Self, 2011; Hamblin & Gross 2014). Studies on the topic of
conflict between religious and sexual identity are rarely conducted on Muslim samples. If there are
any, most of them are studies done on Muslim coming from ethnic minority (Pakistani, Bangladeshi,
India, Iraq and Iran) living in western countries (Akbarzadeh & Roose, 2011; Annonymous, 2015;
Jaspal, 2012; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010; Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2014; Jaspal & Siraj, 2011; Meladze &
Brown, 2015; Minwalla, Simon Rosser, Feldman & Verga, 2005; Yip, 2004). Very few studies on the
same topic could be found on samples coming from Muslim majority countries (Anderton, Pender, &
Asner-Self, 2011; Rahman 2015). To name some of the few studies in Muslim majority countries;
Turkey (Bakacak & Oktem, 2014; Bereket & Adam, 2008); Indonesia (Boellstorffs, 2005) and Malaysia
(Jerome, 2013; Md. Yusof, Abdul Kadir, Ibrahim, & Tengku Puji, T.I.Z., 2014). Malaysia is one the
Muslim majority country deemed fit to fill up the lack of academic work dealing with the issue of
conflict between religious and sexual identity among Muslim men who are same-sex attracted.
Before detailing the reason why do we need to have such studies, it is wise firstly to take a look at the critiques against previous models of sexual identity development to elucidate the upcoming point I am about to develop.

2. Critiques Against The Previous Models Of Sexual Identity Development

This part will focus on the critiques against sexual identity development models with special emphasis on “coming out” as it is the biggest maker of one’s sexual identity that has always been perceived to be in conflict with some cultures. Since religions make up the biggest dominance on some cultures (e.g., Malaysia, Indonesia, and Brunei) religion it is religion that is now perceived to be the major source of conflict between religion and sexuality (Anonymous, 2015). Previous models of sexual identity development for example that of Cass (1979) and Troiden (1989) were developed based on the essentialist paradigm. Essentialists, in the discussion of sexuality, “view that sexual orientation as a real thing, an essence that is universal in that we can see it throughout history and across cultures” (Kohm & Yarhouse, 2002, p. 251). Various sexual identity models propose that a person’s sexual identity development progress through particular fixed stages in order to achieve a fulfilled sexual identity development or what is called as identity synthesis. In other words, essentialists view sexual orientation as an ahistorical and acultural construct (Eliason, 1996; Miville & Ferguson, 2004; Rahman, 2000), and a universal reality that binds all people equally regardless of their subjective attributions to what it means to be attracted to a particular sex. That means, previous sexual identity development models were ‘forced’ on other same-sex attracted people coming from non-Whites, non-western, non-secular, and non-Judeo-Christian background. Such ‘enforcement’ will lead to misunderstanding and negative perception within academic works and psychological services against other people’s culture to be discriminating and psychologically oppressing against people of same-sex attraction. There are many other critiques made against sexual identity development but that is not the main interest of this paper. See for example, Degges-White, Rice, & Myers (2000) and Eliason (1996) for more details on the critiques.

McLean (2007) stated that coming out or non-disclosure is one of the crucial aspects in a healthy sexual identity development thus rendering sexual identity development to also be known as coming out process (Rosario et al., 2001). It is so important that McLean (2007) stated it as good and non-disclosure as not. There are various models of sexual identity development models if we are to go through one by one but that is not the concern of this paper. Although the frameworks upon which each model operates are different, all of them agree on what constitute to be a complete sexual identity development; equalizing coming out to identity synthesis (Kohm & Yarhouse, 2002). In other words, without arriving at coming out stage as proposed by those models, one can be said not to have arrived at the complete or fulfilled identity. Some studies even pathologize those whose sexual identity were not characterized by the presence of coming out (Cole, Kemeny, Taylor, Visscher, & John, 1996; Juster, Smith, Ouellet, Sindi, & Lupien, 2013) for the sake of their religious beliefs (Dialmy, 2010; Meladze & Brown, 2015; Sowe, Brown, & Taylor, 2014; Wilkerson, 2012).

Coming out consists of two features. The first one is acknowledging one’s own self same sex attraction the second one is coming out to others. Acknowledgment of one’s own self as having attraction towards members of the same sex can be considered a universal experience of consciousness among sex-sex attracted people across various cultures (Yarhouse, 2004). Acknowledgment as such however, does not mean that one subscribes to a particular label like gay or bisexual or in the case of same-sex attracted females, lesbian (Guitar, 2013; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2007). Worthy of note, dis-identification with a particular label is another side of the lived
experience of some same-sex attracted people worth researching. This is because it deviates from the traditionally understood form of coming out. An example to illuminate the above point is an alternative metaphysical construal by Yarhouse (2004) in which he started his construal by narrating “Jerry’s” non-traditional coming out. In that narrative, Jerry did not associate himself with label like “gay” despite his acknowledgment of his own same-sex attraction. The same experience can be found in another study by Yarhouse, Nowacki-Butzen, & Brooks (2009) on 26 African Americans who refuse to be identified by their same-sex attraction. What drives Jerry and those African American to dis-identify themselves with their sexual orientation will be discussed later as we go through the sequence of my proposal in this paper.

The second feature of coming out is disclosing one’s sexual identity to other people. Decision to do this may require a big cognitive and emotional investment and may be influenced by factors like one’s own culture (Miville & Ferguson, 2004) that is unique to each country from which study samples are selected from. Coming out to public which logically is more taxing than acknowledging of one’s own same-sex attraction should thus be explored even subjectively. It should be examined as subjective phenomenon unique to a particular same-sex attracted people coming from various countries with diverse cultural and religious upbringing. This subjectivity was further illustrated in a study conducted by Guittar (2013) in his study on 30 lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer (LGBQ) individuals where he discovered that coming out has no universal meaning. This uniqueness is driven by the fact that social environment, life surroundings, and personal beliefs differ of LGBQ people from one another. Thus, a definite and fixed interpretation of coming out cannot be pronounced due to the broad variation seen across participants in his study.

Up to this point we have seen some critiques made on the previous models of sexual identity development on the basis of their lack of sensitivity to people’s subjectivity. This subjectivity may come from many factors like dominance of religion, level of discreteness to the discussion of sexuality, compartmentalization between private and public realms, social attribution of gender roles and whether the culture is individualistic or collectivistic (Anonymous, 2015). These and others are some aspects of life that drive many same-sex attracted people to wanting to pursue an alternative version of identity development. This brings us back to the narrative of Jerry in Yarhouse (2004) and the 26 African Americans in Yarhouse, Nowacki-Butzen, & Brooks (2009). Jerry’s refusal to take up any label like “gay” despite of his awareness of his same-sex attraction should never be look at as sign of psychological disturbance and as a precursor to pursue sexual re-orientation therapy. In fact, Jerry did not want to pursue sexual re-orientation therapy. Rather, he just wants to be attentive towards how his beliefs, emotions, attitudes, and behaviors facilitate one identity over the other. For Jerry his decision as to what his identity is going to be is defined by his religious beliefs and values about human sexuality and expression. Likewise, in the study of 26 African Americans respondents who identified themselves to be Christians, Yarhouse, Nowacki-Butzen, & Brooks (2009) found out that 11 of them prefer to identify themselves with being Christians rather than with their sexual orientation. Jerry and the 26 African American participants whose identity undertaking is motivated by religion/culture are a few of many similar examples we can find in other works (eg., Petchauer, Yarhouse, & Gallien, 2008; Yarhouse, 2010).

Islam have always been viewed to be hostile against homosexuality (Annonyous, 2015) though not as much as Christianity. For one simple reason, many academic works that look into conflict between religion and sexuality or between religious and sexual identity occurs in countries where majority of the people identify themselves with Christianity. Studies that were conducted on Muslims were very scarce and many of them were studies on minority Muslim samples. Where there
are, the same fate befalls Islam and Muslims. I do believe the intention of the researchers is not to
demonize Islam and its followers but the overall tone somehow creates the opposite impression. I
would here present few scrutinizing points that need to be considered prior to making such
impression which will lead to the understanding for the needs of studies that explore the conflict
between Islamic faith and same-sex attraction within same-sex attracted Muslims men in a Muslim
majority context. That will be the thesis of this paper.

3. Consideration for Issues of Ethnicity

Many studies have been conducted to demonstrate the conflict between one’s Islamic and sexual
identity in an opposing (Jaspal, 2012; Yip, 2004) and glaringly negative (e.g., Annonymous, 2015)
tone that may lead many to view religion, in particular, Islam negatively. The first note to begin with
is that, most samples of these studies were minority Muslims living in the western countries. There
are many aspects of their lives, apart than the religion itself that promotes sense of conflict within
themselves. In a study by Yarhouse, Nowacki-Butzen, & Brooks (2009), which was mentioned earlier,
on a group of African American samples, one Christian participant shared that he felt dirty because
he was gay and Black, felt that Black people should not have this problem and that
same-sex attraction should be taboo in the Black church. This is one example of one’s ethnicity and religious
interplay in the conflict usually perceived to be the product of religious beliefs solely. Another one
worth noting is a study by Jaspal & Siraj (2011) on perceptions of coming out among 10 British-born
self-identified Muslim gay men of Pakistani heritage. In that study, Jaspal and Siraj mentioned about
‘Izzat’, an ethnoreligious construct that inhibits the participants from revealing their sexual identity.
It is a “personal and cultural honor” which will result in excommunication by one’s ethnic group as
well as psychological and physical abuse (Jaspal, 2012, p.3). Of an interesting point, Jaspal did
mentioned about ‘Izzat’ as a distinctly Pakistani culture which is homophobic. This is another
example of how one’s ethnic or cultural aspect intermingles in the formation of sexual identity along
with other aspect like religion that produces negative consequences.

In exploring the lived experience of conflict between one’s religious faith and sexuality it is
critical to understand how the conflict between the two are very much ingrained in one’s
experiences as a cultural being (Miville & Ferguson, 2004). Applying this principle to the experiences
of the same-sex attracted men from ethnic minority population of Africa and Pakistani descent
professing Christian and Islamic faith respectively that I have shown earlier really point out that the
experiences of conflict between religious and sexual identity are greatly eclipsed by one’s need to
preserve their cultural/racial values. Not purely the single work of religion. Although Jaspal and Siraj
(2011) made a claim by stating that it is the religion of Islam that is deeply rooted in the Pakistani
culture (that has somehow contributed to the conflict of faith and sexuality), this may be relevant to
only Pakistanis especially among those who live as ethnic minorities in many western countries. In
contrast to what Jaspal and Siraj have claimed, Gallup Coexist Index 2009 (which they both had
themselves quoting) had two years earlier revealed the non-hostile attitude towards homosexuality
among more than one third of Muslims living in France (Green, 2009). Thus, the influence of other
factors that has linked itself to the function of religion in contributing to the conflict of religious and
sexual identity is preliminary established. In the interest of producing an honest exploration of the
said conflict among the same-sex attracted Muslim men, future research should explore the
experience of such population from samples of clients who live up identity that is marginalized
(same-sex attraction/homosexual/gay) while being in a majority group whose privileges are very
much equally enjoyed.
4. Consideration for the Political and Legal Issue

Studies concerning conflict between religious and sexual identity have been conducted in many western countries with Judeo-Christian background (Hamblin & Gross, 2011). These studies however, should be understood in the political light of each and every countries from which the same-sex attracted people are sampled. Most western countries operates on secular systems that allows freedom of speech and advocate various human rights including right to practice homosexuality. Although historically very much influenced by Judeo-Christian cultures, most western countries like the United States of America, England, Britain, Holland, Canada and France, to name a few, give in to rejecting homosexuality over the political sanction that generally permits and celebrate the practice of homosexuality which includes same-sex marriage. In other words, rejection against homosexuality in such countries is capable of operating only within one’s personal and community religious capacity without any power to further push it to policy making level. Such rejection, or what is famously termed nowadays as homophobia, runs within the society on personal religious beliefs. Politically speaking, the practice of homosexuality is vaingloriously progressing in those western countries without any laws to prohibit them. Religious sanctions against the practice of homosexuality have no authority whatsoever on state laws or public policy. Same sex marriage is legalized and churches and educators are threatened with the withdrawal of tax exemption and removal from their office should they refuse to solemnize same-sex wedding or propagating traditional Christian values on marriage (Denison, 2013).

The scenario described earlier is very much different in a country where Muslims make up the majority of the population. A very good example to demonstrate this difference would be Malaysia. Based on the statistics of population by states and ethnic groups 2015, Malays (as compared to Indian and Chinese) who are constitutionally Muslims, make up the majority of Malaysian population of about 51% according to population statistics by states and ethnic 2015 (Penerangan, 2015). Islam as argued by many scholars, functions not only as a representation of Malayness but has become a fundamental feature of Malaysian Malay identity (Jerome, 2013; Stapa, Yusuf, & Shaharudin, 2012). Thus, giving the impression that a Malay-Muslim identity revolves around the combination of these two identities rather than around the other aspect like one’s sexuality.

Unlike most western countries, the religious influence in Malaysia can obviously be observed especially that of the Islamic faith. The influence of Islamic faith in Malaysia can be seen through the establishment of Islamic religious institutions like mosques, religious schools, shari’ah legal system, various national and state religious departments, and Islamic NGOs. The Federal Constitution even establishes the status of Islam in its Article 3(1) that states Islam as the religion of the federation (Fernando, 2006). The influence of Islamic faith in Malaysia can also be seen via the inclusion of Islamic education subject in public schools. In fact, the national philosophy of education in Malaysia has outlined the belief in God as the basis upon which all educational activities (Salleh 2003) and development of Islamic identity (Mat Tuah, Stapa, & Munawar, 2012) are supposed to be pointing to.

The implementation of shari’ah law has its root in Malaysia since the establishment of the first Islamic Sultanate in the Malay Peninsula (Shuaib, 2012). The finding of Terengganu inscription (batu bersurat) dated back to 1303 C.E. (Abd Rahim, Ismail, Abd Majid, & Md Dahlal, 2010; Inscribed Stone of Terengganu, 2008) has indicated the implementation of Islamic jurisprudence in the Malay Peninsula. The implementation of Islamic legal system in Malaysia continues until these days with the establishment of Shari’ah legal systems. Religious authorities have their share of power and are
not alone in combating shari’ah misconducts. Legal provision of Shari’ah law is at disposal to have actions be taken against those who involve in shari’ah misconducts (Ismail, Mohd Kasrin, & Mat Zain, 2012). Cooperation between the police force and religious departments in curbing immoral behaviors like cohabitation between unmarried Muslim partners and same-sex misconducts is another hallmark of the authority of Islam in Malaysia that shape its judicial landscape. These and others are some of the prime examples of how the Islamic tenets have been enforced in the Malaysian politics and legal system and not just a matter of personal beliefs.

All the above facts should have given us some insights about the lived experience of Muslim living in Malaysia, in particular the same-sex attracted men. They are the people who have been living and raised in a country where Muslims are the majority and where the influence of Islam can be felt at the constitutional and political level. They are also the people who have been educated with Islamic moral values at schools that include the prohibition of homosexuality in their Islamic faith and living in a culture where discussion about homosexuality is a taboo and practicing it is shameful and to be shunned. This is strikingly different from many western countries where freedom of sexuality is progressive and celebrated openly via the establishment of various gay rights movement, legal provision is made available for the protection of gay rights, personal autonomy is valued positively, and religious tenets play no legal and political part in criminalizing sexual behavior that is out of religious norm. Given this setting, it can be logically induced that religious experience lived by the same-sex attracted Muslims in Malaysia, to some extent, will be different from that of their Muslim counterparts living in western non-Muslim majority countries. Thus, suggesting the experience of conflict between religious and sexual identity of both population to also be different.

This difference can be visualized by picturing two different groups of same-sex attracted Muslim men living in two different countries; one that promotes freedom of sexuality and the other one lives in a country that issues certain authoritative religious or legal provision as to how one’s sexuality should be regulated and expressed. A fact that should not be ignored is that both groups have needs, to some degree I supposed, to express their sexuality either by coming out or by some other means that enable them to behave according to what they believe to be their sexual orientation but are either restricted or liberated by the environment in which both populations dwell in. Same-sex attracted Muslim men living in western countries that offers freedom of sexuality expression but is limited by their religious values will face, hypothetically but logically, a tough time regulating the expression of their sexuality as compared to their counterparts from Muslim majority countries. The clash between wanting to express one’s sexuality via the availability of freedom to do so versus religious values that prohibit it, can potentially contributes to greater degree of conflict between religious and sexual identity. Such could be the experience of same-sex attracted Muslim men living in western countries that promotes freedom of sexuality and pride for LGBT community.

In a majority Muslim countries, for example in Malaysia, where Islamic influence have been accustomed to various realms of life (personal, institutional, legal and political), freedom such as free expression of sexuality enjoyed by LGBT community in western countries may not be of any equal experience here. Despite a few attempts to model after the practice of free expression of sexuality enjoyed in the western and some South East Asian countries (e.g., Singapore and Thailand) like Seksualiti Merdeka (Zurairi, 2013), open Malaysian gay Christian pastor (Yuan, 2011 CNN), and gay affirmative church (The Query, 2008), Malaysia has been maintaining and enforcing its traditional Islamic values that does not recognize non-traditional expression of sexuality. Thus, bringing such movements to no effect as to become an opportunity to tempt same-sex attracted Muslim men in Malaysia into. Absence of such opportunity in majority Muslim country like Malaysia...
set a different environment from that of the environment in which ethnic minority Muslim men with same-sex attraction live in. Hypothetically speaking, same-sex attracted Muslim men living in Muslim majority culture experience less conflict between religious and sexual identity compared to their Muslim counterparts living in majority western culture.

The presence or absence of opportunity to come out as a hypothetical source of conflict between religious and sexual identity could be enhanced by other assisting factors. For Muslim immigrants who live in non-Muslim majority society, immigration itself is a religious experience. For immigrants, especially among those who come from a society where they were part of the religious majority, religious identity can suddenly be a very important aspect of their lives in a society where they are the religious minority even though religion was previously taken for granted in their homelands (Peek, 2005) especially, post 9/11 (Nagra, 2010). Plus, being a minority increase the need to be close to one’s ethnic community especially in the rise of racism (Minwalla et al., 2005) which requires a same-sex attracted men to reconstruct their sexual identity to be at par with the norm of their ethnic group (Jaspal, 2012; Jaspal & Siraj, 2011).

It is suggestible that the conflict between religious and sexual identity among same-sex attracted Muslim men living as religious minority in western society are the product of not only the religion itself but the interplay of other factors such challenges to resist the temptations to express themselves in the name of freedom and human rights enjoyed by their progressive counterparts living on the same land, the need to remain close to one’s ethnic group, and the need to maintain and enhance their Islamic religious identity. The experience of conflict between religious and sexual identity of this magnitude may not be of any equal among same-sex attracted men living in Muslim majority country like Malaysia for the reasons discussed earlier. Based on those reasons, it can be hypothetically said that same-sex attracted Muslim men living as religious minority experience higher level of conflict between religious and sexual identity and that religious tenets is not the sole contributor to such conflict but rather was facilitated by other aspects like ethnicity, presence or absence of temptation, and the need to maintain and enhance one’s Islamic identity.

Although this suggestion is yet to be proven via empirical studies, the path leading to it is reasonable. After all, the aim of this paper is to suggest the needs for more studies that is lacking on same-sex attracted Muslim men living in Muslim majority countries. After all, any hypothesis or tentative suggestions stemming from the discussion above is what the topic originally intends to present.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the need for more research that tap into the conflict between religious and sexual identity among same-sex attracted men living in Muslim majority country. Previous studies have been focusing on same-sex attracted Muslim men living as religious minority in western countries. As academic as those studies may have sound in serving the field of psychology, they may have unintentionally created a biased outlook against religion. In particular, that of Islam. This unintentional bias (I supposed) may have occurred due to the imbalance of origin from which study samples were taken. Findings concerning conflict between religious and sexual identity among Muslims which are primarily originated from samples of minority Muslim living in western countries have often created the impression that it was all the belief in Islamic faith that has contributed to the psychological conflict between religious and sexual identity while ignoring the interplay of other factors in the sample under study. To overcome this problem, I would suggest the
increase of studies of conflict between religious and sexual identity among same-sex attracted Muslim men living in Muslim majority countries. This will help us see the various trends, patterns and complexities of experiences of such conflict which were previously dominated by a single type; the minority Muslim type. Malaysia, as I have shown earlier, is clearly one of the best choices to balance out the said imbalance.

This paper as stated in the title, is calling for the increase of studies on same-sex attracted Muslim men. How about same-sex attracted Muslim women? Same-sex attracted men have always been the most covered topic of LGBT issues (Bennett, 1998) and viewed more negatively compared to same-sex attracted female (Kerns and Fine, 1994). In Malaysia, the most targeted LGBT people in mass media are the male effeminate and male homosexuals (e.g., Amirul, 2015; Anon, 2014; Jaafar, 2003; Man & Bachok, 2001; Mohammed, Malik, Japre, & Kamaruzaman, 2016; Shirat, 2003). Negative portrayal of same-sex attracted men as presented in the mass media coupled with homonegative attitude within the Muslim society itself are able to communicate a great magnitude of internalized homonegative stigma within the same-sex attracted Muslim men. This is very potential to lead them to experience the conflict between their religious and sexual identity in a greater hype than that experienced by the same-sex attracted Muslim women. This is further supported in a study conducted by Henrickson (2007) on 2,246 lesbian, gay, and bisexual people in which he revealed that male homosexuals are more susceptible to perceiving religion as a difficulty compared to lesbians. Thus, in any case where the experience of conflict between religious and sexual identity is significant, it can reasonably be said to be among the same-sex attracted men. Well, this tentative conclusion too, opens for empirical scrutiny. For the moment let us considers it to be a reasonable hypothesis worthy of studying.

References


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