

# MUSLIM LGBTQ PEOPLE

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The social sciences has long been concerned with how human beings interact with, and make sense of, their social environments; indeed, social psychology seeks to integrate the societal and psychological levels of analysis and provides the tools for understanding how the social world, and the social changes inherent to it, can impact a person's sense of identity and psychological wellbeing, as well as the individual's response to change. Drawing upon the body of available social psychological evidence that has emerged in recent years, this entry focuses upon the identities, experiences and wellbeing of LGB Muslims. Much of this research has centered around gay/ bisexual Muslim men but some has also focused upon Muslim lesbians. This entry will provide (i) brief insights into the theological, legal and social representations of homosexuality in Islamic societies, (ii) empirical insights into the identities, experiences and wellbeing of LGB Muslims, and (iii) recommendations for further research, and policy and practice.

## **Islamic Positions on Homosexuality**

In attempting to define “the Islamic position” on homosexuality, it is important to remember that Islam is a diverse faith group with some 1.6 billion followers on six continents. They adhere to distinct branches of Islam – Sunni, Shiite, Sufi and others – and religious identities are often entwined with local ethno-cultural norms and customs. Moreover, the legal position on homosexuality in one's country (of origin) may shape one's stance on homosexuality, especially if that country is regarded as adhering to Islamic law. Many Muslim countries that claim to adhere to Sharia (Islamic) law criminalize homosexuality but penalties vary – while homosexual acts in Pakistan can carry a prison sentence of 2-10 years, the Islamic Republic of Iran metes out the death penalty to men “convicted” of engaging in anal intercourse.

On the whole, scholars are in agreement that mainstream Islam is opposed to any theological accommodation of homosexuality. Mainstream Islamic scholars tend to invoke the Story of Lut in Islamic Holy Scripture (the Koran), which recounts the destruction of the Tribe of Lut allegedly due to their engagement in homosexual acts, as “evidence” for Allah's condemnation of homosexuality. They also point to the verbal teachings attributed to the Prophet Mohammed (the Ahadith), which appear to condemn homosexuality. There are some Muslim groups and individuals that have attempted to promote a “reverse discourse” concerning the Islamic position on homosexuality, arguing that there is scope for the accommodation and acceptance of homosexuality within Islam. Scott Kugle, an associate professor of Islamic Studies at Emory College of Arts and Sciences, has argued that the dominant interpretation of the Story of Lut may be erroneous and that the destruction of the Tribe of Lut can be attributed to the tribe's infidelity and inhospitality, rather than to their homosexuality. Although there are some support groups for LGB Muslims, such reverse discourse is in its infancy and has faced opposition from mainstream Islamic groups.

Theological, legal, and social condemnation of homosexuality in Muslim communities serves to create cultural representations that homosexuality is immoral, sinful and dangerous to society. Many LGB Muslims themselves are embedded within these homophobic societies and are compelled to construct their identities against this cultural backdrop, which can result in threats to their sense of self, negative emotional experiences

and poor psychological wellbeing. These issues have fruitfully been examined through the lens of social psychological theory.

### **The LGB Individual: Threats to Identity**

In a series of qualitative empirical studies, Rusi Jaspal, a social psychologist at De Montfort University in the UK, has examined the identities and experiences of Muslim gay/bisexual men in the UK, and the strategies they employ for coping with threats to their sense of self (henceforth “identity threat”). The exploration of this population as a case study for examining LGB Muslim identity has also provided some insight into how acculturative processes can serve both as an additional threat to identity. For instance, homosexuality has increasingly gained social acceptance in the UK, while it has remained highly stigmatized and even illegal in most Muslim-majority countries. Some Muslim gay men reportedly feel that they are viewed by other Muslims as being “too British” (that is, as having taken on the norms and values of British society) due to their sexual identity. On the other hand, British national identity can sometimes act as a buffer against threat. For instance, some individuals may reject the perceived “Islamic stance” on their sexual identity and, conversely, embrace the “British stance”, which is perceived as more readily accommodating sexual diversity.

On the whole, Muslim gay/bisexual men face severe psychological challenges in managing their sexual, religious and ethnic identities, which in turn can problematize the construction of a psychologically satisfying sexual identity. Crucially, evidence suggests that Muslim gay/bisexual men perceive the norms, values, and representations associated with their religious and sexual identities, respectively, as being incompatible. This can lead to a decreased sense of *psychological coherence*. More specifically, they may feel that, because their sexual identity is at odds with what God intended and with what their religion teaches, they are either not “proper” Muslims or are engaged in highly sinful behavior that will lead to divine retribution. Individuals may feel that two identities, which are socially represented as being “inter-connected” (because Islam appears to have a stance on homosexuality), are fundamentally incompatible.

It is easy to see how these perceptions can challenge gay/bisexual Muslim men’s sense of *self-esteem*. Many feel unable to derive a positive self-conception on the basis of their sexual identity, because they are exposed to homophobic representations associated with a group membership that they value, namely their religion. Group memberships that matter to an individual will have clout in shaping their personal beliefs and representations – people use their group memberships – and particularly valued group memberships - as sources of knowledge about the world. Consequently, it is no surprise that Muslim gay/bisexual men may exhibit signs of internalized homophobia, that is, the internalization of negative social attitudes towards their sexual identity. There is evidence that some LGB Muslims experience guilt, shame, and self-hatred, potentially leading to mental distress and suicidal thoughts. They may come to the conclusion that their sexual identity is wrong and that it must and, with God’s help, *will* change.

We know from decades of empirical research that LGB youth can experience challenges in developing a sexual identity due to the initial confusion that arises upon recognition of difference from the dominant heterosexual majority. Change is inherent to the developmental journey. A number of coming out models have been proposed, which highlight the changes in self-definition that arise amid social developmental processes and more general social change. Research clearly indicates the grave threats of coming out to LGB Muslims’ sense of *continuity*, which may be considerably more traumatic than those normally experienced by non-Muslims. LGB Muslims tend to be socialized in a theological,

social, and familial environment that appends hegemony to heterosexuality and, in many cases, to arranged (heterosexual) marriage. LGB Muslims themselves may aspire to fulfil this religious and cultural expectation of an arranged heterosexual marriage due to religious/cultural pressures. This can create a rupture between past, present, and future, as individuals fail to construct a coherent temporal narrative. They may feel unable to get married and, thus, see no “acceptable” future for themselves as LGB individuals, thereby threatening continuity.

### **The LGB Social Group Member: Stigma and Exclusion**

LGB Muslims face a number of social challenges that are experienced as threatening at a psychological level. These social challenges concern the LGB Muslim’s position within relevant social groups and categories, which can inhibit feelings of acceptance and inclusion from significant others.

Family identity is central to many Muslims, who generally adhere to a collectivist cultural orientation and adhere to patriarchal hierarchy. Family and cultural honor are key for many Muslims, and premarital chastity and an arranged (heterosexual) marriage are widely perceived as central to maintaining honor. LGB Muslims often feel compelled to behave and to construct their identities in ways that are conducive to family honor. Typically, many conceal their sexual identities from their families, which can lead to decreased sense of identity authenticity. This can become socially challenging when their parents obviously encourage their children to get married. LGB Muslims have reported problems in interpersonal relations with parents and other family members, as they feel unable to disclose their sexual identities, on the one hand, and are unwilling to enter into an arranged heterosexual marriage, on the other. Moreover, some LGB Muslims may decide to come out to family members, which can result in ostracization, disownment, and even psychological/physical abuse.

Given the perception of incompatibility between Islam and homosexuality among many LGB Muslims themselves and the theologically-based homophobia that many are exposed to, they may themselves begin to question the *authenticity* of their Muslim identity. This may lead them to seek strategies for affirming their Muslim identity, often at the expense of their de-valued sexual identity, which, for many LGB Muslims, is an identity that they wish to shed. There is some evidence of a “hyper-affiliation” to the religious group, as a means of compensating for any potential doubts surrounding their identity authenticity. Some have reported using Ramadan (a Muslim festival of fasting) as a symbolic opportunity for asserting their piety and for dispelling accusations of inauthenticity, while others may espouse what they regard as prototypically “Muslim attitudes” concerning society, such as anti-Zionism and even overt homophobia.

The late British social psychologist Henri Tajfel, who developed Social Identity Theory, described the exit option, that is, the individual’s self-removal from a threatening social group identity. The process of self-removal from a group may not be so simple, given that for many Muslims their faith constitutes a meaning system and an overarching “superordinate” identity that is entwined with other components of the self, such as family identity. Departure from a valued social group requires modification to the structure of identity, such as loss of other identity components. Some LGB Muslims have, however, reported distancing themselves from their religious/ethnic ingroups in order to align themselves with sexual ingroup members, that is, other (largely non-Muslim) LGB individuals. Interview data indicate that LGB Muslims may feel otherized and discriminated against on the (predominantly White) “gay scene”, due to rising Islamophobia and racism, in general. Crucially, racism is said to occur not only on the gay scene but also in online

settings, such as on the gay social media, where messages like “no Asians” or “no Muslims” are often interpreted as rejection from the mainstream LGB community. In short, LGB Muslims may feel rejected and excluded from the sexual ingroup, which can challenge their sense of *belonging* and lead to feelings to isolation.

Social support is known to buffer threats to identity and wellbeing, but LGB Muslims may feel that they simply have no access to social support – from neither their families nor sexual ingroup - which can aggravate their threatening position. This has been compellingly demonstrated in research into how LGB Muslims cope with relationship dissolution. Due to the general lack of social support, individuals may deploy deflection strategies for coping with associated threats, such as denial and depersonalization, and further minimize contact with others (from whom they anticipate little or no support) which can be conducive to further isolation and psychological stress.

### **Conclusion**

LGB Muslims can experience considerable individual and social challenges in attempting to manage their sexual and religious/ethnic identities. The principles of self-esteem, continuity and psychological coherence appear to be most susceptible to threat. Individuals may experience feelings of identity inauthenticity, and perceive ostracization from relevant social groups due to homophobia and racism. This can impede access to social support networks, rendering experiences such as relationship dissolution particularly challenging at a psychological level. The research studies summarized in this entry has been conducted among LGB Muslims – there is a need to examine the identities and experiences of transgender Muslims. On a practical level, policymakers should focus their attention on attempting to engage Muslim communities in order to improve attitudes towards sexual diversity, but also mainstream LGB communities in order to facilitate more positive relations between them and ethno-religious minority LGB individuals.

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#### **See also:**

Catholic LGBTQ People  
Christian LGBTQ People  
Coming Out, Disclosure, and Passing  
Cost of Discrimination Against LGBTQ People  
Homophobia  
Internalized Homophobia  
Jewish LGBTQ People  
LGBTQ People of Color  
Religious Identity and Sexuality, Reconciliation of  
Religious LGBTQ Youth

#### **Further Readings:**

Jaspal, R., & Cinnirella, M. (2010). Coping with potentially incompatible identities: accounts of religious, ethnic and sexual identities from British Pakistani men who identify as Muslim and gay. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 49(4), 849-870.

Kugle, S.S.A. (2010). *Homosexuality in Islam: critical reflection on gay, lesbian, and transgender Muslims*. Oxford: Oneworld Publications.

Murray, S. O., & Roscoe, W. (1997). *Islamic homosexualities: culture, history and literature*. New York: New York University Press.

