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Identity experience among progressive gay Muslims in North America: A qualitative study within Al-Fatiha

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Abstract

This qualitative study aims to document the identity experience of progressive gay Muslim men in a North American context. Six in-depth interviews, supplemented with participant observation, were conducted of gay Muslim men who attended an international conference for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning (LGBTQ) Muslims. For progressive gay Muslims such as these, a Muslim identity appears three-dimensional (religious, ethno-cultural, and color) when integrated with a gay identity. As a religious identity, gay Muslim's relationship to *Allah* (God) and a reinterpretation of the Qur'an and traditional condemnation of homosexuality appears necessary. As a cultural identity, East–West ethno-cultural differences that impact on homo-sociality and gay identity construction, marriage and the impact of coming out on the Eastern family and siblings emerged as critical issues. As a color identity, internalized racism, dating relationships and social dynamics within gay subculture as Muslims of color in a white dominant context appear key challenges.

Keywords: *Gay, Muslim, religious identity, homosexuality, Al-Fatiha*

Introduction

Homosexuality is a controversial issue in many religious traditions. Religious arguments are frequently used to justify punitive and rejecting policies regarding homosexuality and, in reaction, many men turn away from traditional religion on their journey toward homosexual identity formation (Rosser 1992, Rey 1997). For some gay persons, however, the experience of being exiled from family, church and mainstream society can give rise to a deeper sense of spirituality (Fortunato 1982, Rey 1997). Rosser (1992), for example, noted that in the early stages of coming out (i.e., acceptance of one's sexual orientation), rejection of religious tradition is common; but in later stages, when identity acceptance and pride are reached, the need to integrate one's homosexual and religious identities can become paramount. Fortunato (1982) asserts that sexuality and spirituality are intricately linked and that a positive appreciation of one's sexual orientation is essential to spiritual and psychosocial development.

The intersection of gay and religious identities is an emerging area of social science research. Most prior work conducted in a North American context has focused on Jewish and Christian traditions (Nugent 1986, Cooper 1989, Kahn 1989, Dynes and Donaldson 1992, Rosser 1992) and a few studies of Native American Two-Spirit traditions (Williams 1986). Khan's (1997b) personal narrative, which describes the experience of being gay and Muslim in the context of Pakistan and Toronto, as well as selections in Ratti's (1993) collection of writings by queer South Asians, describe elements of the gay Muslim experience. However, aside from such poems, essays, and personal narratives (Dossani 1997, Lake 1999), we could find no academic studies addressing the experience of integrating a gay identity with a Muslim identity.

This does not mean that homosexuality is unknown to Islam. Despite contemporary perceptions that homosexuality is a Western phenomenon (AbuKhalil 1997), same-sex dynamics of many varieties are an integral part of Islamic history and culture (Murray and Roscoe 1997). In their seminal analysis of historical, anthropological, and literary studies and texts, Murray and Roscoe (1997) identified consistent patterns of Islamic homosexualities that can be traced over centuries. Furthermore, Schmitt and Sofer (1992) have documented sexuality and eroticism between males in contemporary Muslim societies. These accounts, however, are mainly travel writings by anglo/white sex tourists to Arab lands, and reveal the problematic scarcity of scholarly documentation of Muslim men describing their own experiences (AbuKhalil 1997). Although scholarship has also been devoted to examining homosexuality in Eastern and Western contexts (Harda 2001, Keogh *et al.* 2004), and to understanding the phenomenon of being men of color who have sex with men in white America (Gonzalez and Espin 1996, Jones and Hill 1996), we could find no studies specifically of homosexuality among Muslim men in the West, nor of gay Muslim identity integration.

In this ethnographic study, we explored the dual identity experience of a highly specific and relatively rare sample: gay Muslim men who are part of Al-Fatiha, a movement within Islam that validates the experience of and advocates for the voices of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and questioning Muslims. Al-Fatiha is an Internet-based organization that does not contain regional offices but consists of local chapters in various cities in the US and abroad that hold local, national and international gatherings. As background, we first summarize interpretations of homosexuality in Islam and the progressive movement of Al-Fatiha. This is followed by a description of our qualitative methods, results, and discussion of our findings.

Interpretations of homosexuality in Islam

Contemporary Muslim scholars contend that all humans are 'naturally' heterosexual; accordingly, homosexuality is considered a sinful and a perverse deviation from a person's true nature (Abu-Saud 1990). All Islamic schools of thought and jurisprudence consider homosexual acts to be unlawful, but each differ in terms of penalty—from severe punishment, including death (Hanabalites), to no punishment warranted (Hanafite).

The theological justification for Islam's rejection of homosexuality appears in the story of Lut ('Lot' in Hebrew scriptures), which is referenced seven times in the Qur'an (Wafer 1997), the sacred text of Islam. God sends two angels to Lut, who offers them shelter. The neighboring people surround Lut's house and demand that he release the visitors so that they 'might know them', suggesting gang rape of the men (de la Huerta 1999). The subsequent destruction of the people of Lut has traditionally been interpreted as a

condemnation of their sexual practices, i.e., homosexuality (Jamal 2001). However, many contemporary Muslim, Jewish and Christian scholars and theologians question this traditional interpretation. Jamal (2001) asserts that in the Lut narrative, the people's sins are numerous and that the Qur'an does not state that destruction fell upon the people for a specific sin. Scholars suggest that inhospitality to strangers, for example—not homosexuality as we understand it today—was among the intended transgressions (Kahn 1989, Jung and Smith 1993, de la Huerta 1999). Furthermore, Jamal (2001) points out that the *hadith*, which are collections of sayings separate from the Qur'an but attributed to the prophet Muhammad, have connected the story of Lut and same-sex sexuality exclusively, thus influencing interpretations of the Qur'an. While the *hadith* are more explicit in condemning homosexual acts, the *hadith* themselves are controversial. Many liberal Muslims challenge their authenticity, whereas traditionalist orthodox Muslims contend that the *hadith* contain the authentic sayings of Muhammad.

As in other major religions, divergent understandings and interpretations of Islam's position toward homosexuality exist. Conservatives view the Qur'an as being 'very explicit in its condemnation of homosexuality, leaving scarcely any loophole for a theological accommodation of homosexuals in Islam' (Duran 1993: 181). Others who have analysed the issue via semantic analysis of Qur'anic passages, contend that same-sex indiscretions are not one 'of the most dangerous crimes' as is believed by certain traditional Muslims, and that the Qur'an's objections towards same-sex actions are on par with objections toward opposite-sex and non-sexual indiscretions alike (Jamal 2001). Furthermore, such analysis asserts that the Qur'an is not clear about the position of same-sex sexuality, especially about exclusive homosexuality or the queer lifestyle as is understood in the West (Jamal 2001). Liberals contend that the Qur'an neither mentions the type of punishment for homosexual acts, nor portrays a strongly negative attitude against such acts. Dossani (1997: 236) asserts, 'The roots of gay intolerance seem to be more sociological and cultural than religious'. Certainly, contemporary mainstream Islam officially condemns homosexuality, but there is a growing movement of progressive-minded Muslims, especially in the Western world, who view Islam as an evolving religion that must adapt to modern-day society (Al-Fatiha Foundation 2002). This study focused on the experience of progressive gay Muslims who are part of this emerging subculture and movement called Al-Fatiha.

The Al-Fatiha context

The Al-Fatiha Foundation is an international grassroots organization for Muslims and their friends who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, or questioning their sexual orientation and gender identity (LGBTQ). The organization's stated goals are 'to provide a safe space and a forum for LGBTQ Muslims to address issues of common concern, share individual experiences and institutional resources … [and] to support LGBTQ Muslims in reconciling their sexual orientation or gender identity with Islam' (Al-Fatiha Foundation 2002). The name Al-Fatiha is taken from the Qur'an and means 'the opening'. The foundation, a USA-based non-profit, non-governmental organization, was founded by a queer Muslim activist in 1997 via an internet list-serve and has since grown to include over 700 members, with chapters in the USA, Canada, the UK and South Africa. Its activities include establishing local support and discussion groups within the various chapters, holding meetings and providing outreach to other Muslims via the Internet.

Al-Fatiha's presence is controversial and even unimaginable to many Muslims. A British Muslim group, *Al-Muhajiroun*, issued a *fatwa* (an official legal opinion or decree issued by an Islamic religious leader) on July 16, 2001 stating:

> The very existence of Al-Fatiha is illegitimate and the members of this organization are apostates. Never will such an organization be tolerated in Islam, and never will the disease that it calls for be affiliated with a true Islamic society or individual. The Islamic ruling for such acts is death. It is a duty of all Muslims to prevent such evil conceptions from being voiced in the public or private arena. (Al-Muhajiroun 2002)

Notably, Al-Fatiha's goals extend beyond LBGTQ issues. Its members also seek to promote 'Islamic notions of social justice, peace, and tolerance, to bring all closer to a world that is free from prejudice, injustice, and discrimination' (Al-Fatiha Foundation 2002). Thus, Al-Fatiha can be considered part of a broader contemporary agenda and social movement referred to as Progressive Islam. Progressive Muslims define themselves in ways that are feminist, anti-racist, anti-violent and are committed to the greater movement for liberation and equality within the faith and within society.

Methodology

This study employed ethnographic methods to explore the dual identity experience of gay Muslim men who are part of Al-Fatiha. Data were collected primarily from in-depth interviews of six self-identified gay Muslim men who attended one of two annual Al-Fatiha conferences for LGBTQ Muslims, one held in the USA and one in Canada. This particular segment of gay Muslims can be defined as engaged in an active and conscious process of identity exploration within a Western-based, socio-political context. All participants had reached at least a sufficient level of identity development to self-identify as gay and as Muslim and were willing to talk about these issues with a researcher.

Setting

Data collection took place at the third and fourth annual international gatherings of Al-Fatiha, held respectively in May 2002 in Washington, DC and June 2003 in Toronto, Canada. Both conferences addressed issues of gender equality, reconciling identity and spirituality, the Qur'an and homosexuality, coming out, and social reform.

For the safety and security of conference attendees, all were required to register prior to the conference. The exact conference location was not publicly announced, but rather disclosed only to pre-registrants. Approximately 70–80 people attended each conference. Most lived in the USA or Canada, but others resided in the UK, Morocco, and Indonesia. The gender ratio was approximately 3:1 (M:F). Most of the 2002 attendees were between 18 and 30 years of age; the 2003 attendees were more heterogeneous in age.

Study participants

Following a brief announcement of the study, interested participants voluntarily contacted the senior author to be interviewed. Participants were limited to self-identified gay males (excluding females) to narrow the scope of analysis, given the small number of total participants. Of eight volunteers, six resulted in interviews due to time and

scheduling constraints. Informed consent was obtained prior to the interview. Of the six gay Muslim men interviewed for this study, five were in attendance at the 2003 Al-Fatiha conference in Toronto; the sixth, the first pilot interviewee, attended the 2002 Washington meeting. All were residing in North America at the time of the interview. All spoke fluent English and were interviewed in English.

Study participants ranged in age from 18 to 48. Three were born in Pakistan and one in the Asian Peninsula; all four were raised from birth as Muslim. The fifth and sixth participants, African-American and Anglo-American, were both American-born and raised Christian before converting to Islam as adults.

Participant observation and creation of template interview

Participant observation was conducted at the Washington conference for the purpose of generating a template interview (subsequently utilized for the pilot interview). From both conferences, field notes were taken of the various lectures, workshops, small group discussions, panels and video presentations to validate the data from the interviews.

In-depth interviews

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted to generate narratives that elucidated the internal psychological processes involved in identity experience. Each interview lasted approximately two hours. The constant comparative method of Glaser and Strauss (1967) was used, such that issues raised in earlier interviews were formulated as questions for subsequent interviewees.

The interviews were structured do as to explore five domains: (1) historical religious/spiritual identity formation, (2) current religious/spiritual identity, (3) historical sexual identity formation, (4) current sexual identity, and (5) the intersection of both religious/spiritual and sexual identities. These domains were examined using the following leading questions or statements: How did your Muslim identity develop over time? Describe your current Muslim identity. How did your sexual identity develop over time? Describe your current sexual identity. How do you experience both identities together now? Open-ended questioning permitted each participant to actively direct the interview. This maximized the ability of participants to describe his subjective identity experience.

Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and used as the primary data source. Emergent themes were generated for each transcript from a line-by-line microanalysis using a coding approach (open, axial, and selective) characteristic of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin 1990). These themes were generated across domains and were not structured according to the interview domains. Thematic categories were compared across transcripts and refined. Relationships between categories were analysed. Field notes from the participant observation were used to further ground the results of the primary analysis, by confirming and giving validation to the emergent themes.

Results

Three prominent themes related to the intersection of gay and Muslim identities emerged from our dataset: (i) Religion, specifically one's relationship to Allah (e.g., as partner, betrayer) and different ways of coping with traditional interpretations of the Qur'an's condemnation of homosexuality; (ii) East-West ethno-cultural comparisons, such as homo-sociality and construction of a gay identity, marriage expectations and impact on sisters marriage potential; and (iii) color dynamics, such as internalized racism, validation theory and the impact on dating and sexuality. These themes are summarized below using illustrative examples from the interview transcripts.

Theme 1: Religion

Relationship to Allah. Among progressive Muslims of Al-Fatiha, relationship to Allah was a salient issue and frequent topic of discussion. Some men perceived Allah as a partner, turning to him for guidance and comfort as they sought to reconcile a perceived conflict between their gay and Muslim identities.

> Because I didn't know what was happening in the other [gay] world, I was struggling deep within myself … I didn't talk about my struggle with my religious friends. Internally, I was sharing my struggles with God.

For some, turning to Allah and developing a stronger religious identity served to deflect heterosexist pressures and assumptions by family, including the pressure to marry. It was also used to distance oneself from and/or deny one's sexuality:

> When I was probably 17 or 18, I was struggling because I was attracted to men. There was a sense of guilt … I found a mosque in the neighborhood that I would go to every Friday, and I found a group of people that were pretty religious, … that was for me an escape from feeling guilty … because I didn't know who to talk to about my feelings so I kind of concealed them, stored them away … So, at 17, 18, and 19, that's when I was kind of very religious. Escape from socializing from my cousins, even with my parents, because each time we met as an extended family, there was talk about girls or marriage—it was just too much for me. That was a good escape from those pressures.

Others spoke of initially feeling betrayed or rejected by Allah as their understanding of their sexuality grew. In the earlier stages of sexual identity formation, some chose their sexual identity over their relationship with Allah or religious identity.

> As I started becoming more aware of Islam, learning about religion, I became more and more aware that it wasn't permissible to be queer and Muslim at the same time. There was a sense of conflict. I remember I would cry when I would read the Qur'an, because I felt that God is not going to permit me to be who I am, and I didn't feel that I'm doing anything wrong … I feelthat this is instinctual to have desires towards men. I don't feel I have any control over it, but it's against Islam and I don't know what to do … I felt betrayed, completely betrayed. It was like why is it that my brothers and sisters can look up to you, can pray to you, and you receive their prayers, but you won't receive mine? What is the difference between me and them?

Some comments reflected an intellectual challenging of Allah and a movement towards adopting more universal spiritual principles rather than religious doctrine.

I think that it's more important to be a good human being than a good Muslim, Christian or Jew. Because if being a good Muslim is not like being a good human being, than I'd rather be a good human being … those things shouldn't conflict with each other.

The Qur'an and homosexuality. When discussing religion during the interviews, participants often made reference to the Qur'an, reflecting its prominence in Muslim discourse. Progressive gay Muslims have diverse ways of coping with the traditional view that the Qur'an explicitly prohibits homosexuality.

Some men questioned outright the idea that the Qur'an condemns homosexuality.

I can't see anything in the Qur'an that says homosexuality is wrong … The Qur'an says many things are a sin … All it needed to do was have one line that says it is a sin, and it doesn't do that.

Similarly, some participants disagreed with traditional interpretations of the story of Lut, or otherwise note the scholarly debate on this topic.

I came to the conclusion that the story was about straight men who were abusing or raping other men, like in war. It was shaming rituals. The intent behind it was rape, violence and oppression.

[In coming out to my family], I told them: I'm gay, and I'm Muslim, and I don't believe this is against Islam. I feel that there needs to be a reinterpretation of the story of Lut … Some day I will prove to you that it's not the way everybody believes it is. The story has been misinterpreted.

Some men reinterpreted the authority of the Qur'an. They distinguished between the inspired word of Allah and the human aspects, such as Mohammed's transcription of it.

So much has happened through history, that I don't see how we can say that every single word in the Qur'an is true. And then there's the fact that he (Mohammed) is human … The only thing that can't make mistakes is supposed to be God so how can it be possible that he didn't make a mistake?

Some men, early in the coming out process when they felt betrayed by Allah (see above), also reported distancing themselves from Islam and rejecting the Qur'an.

Realizing that there was a part of me that I cannot express to anybody and that it is forbidden in Islam and so it was a sense of not belonging to the religion because it does not allow for people like myself to exist or … do what they find natural. My reaction to that initially was sorrow and despair, but after that I guess I made a choice that I'm just going to close the Qur'an and not … read it anymore. There's no point. There's no room for me in it, in Islam. I cannot suppress my desires. If one of the things has to be jettison, then it's Islam. So, I just stopped participating.

Another way of coping expressed by participants was to reclaim the Qur'an, challenge misconceptions of it, and use it to help resolve the internal struggle between sexuality and religion.

You must read the Qur'an for yourself … that's true surrender to Allah, and Allah will then respond to you. Until you do that, you really don't know … We as homosexual men and women need to deal with the issue. If you're Muslim, then you need to read the Qur'an. By reading the Qur'an, you know it for yourself so that you will deal with your own demons.

Finally, the impact of cultural biases and cultural traditions on interpretations of the Qur'an were emphasized as distorting Islam the religion and the actual doctrine of the Qur'an.

> I think it's more of a social and traditional and cultural thing right now, rather than religion condemning it. Just the social values that people have.

Theme 2: East-West cultural comparisons

As an ethno-cultural identity, being Muslim and coming out as gay in the West are complicated by cultural differences. The key challenge is coming out and constructing a gay identity, and the impact of those decisions on intimacy, marriage, family and personal safety.

Homo-sociality and gay identity. Several men described East-West cultural differences in how homo-sociality is constructed, expressed, and understood.

> Here [in North America] I knew about gayness, but I think in Pakistan there's really no concept of gay. You can be really intimate with another guy. I saw a lot of men holding hands and doing all sorts of stuff. But it was never seen as being something wrong. Here, you can't kiss a man in public, can you? I mean, it's allowed, but who does it? In Pakistan, there's a lot of intimacy allowed between men. It's not labeled and has nothing to do with a gay identity. It's fine there.

> Because [in the East] you are allowed to say, 'You look beautiful'. Adoring another male's body is okay, not like here [in the West].

Coming out as gay. As migrants to the West (or North America), some men had some initial resistance to, and difficulty with, the Western process of constructing a gay identity. Particularly difficult was understanding and accepting the Western practice of putting labels on homo-social expression.

> In the West things are labeled. Here you have to pick a box that you're in. To get in that box, it took a long time to come to terms and say, 'Ok, I'm gay'. Eventually I came to terms, got in the box. They [in the East] don't really do this box. You're you.

Marriage expectations. In the East, marriage is seen as a cultural and traditional imperative, connected to reproductive obligation and the creation of family. Because of this, gay Muslim men can experience great pressure from their families to marry (heterosexually), regardless of their sexual orientation.

> They knew I think all along that I wasn't like the rest of the boys and that I was gay, but they hadalways assumed that even if that were the case I would eventually get married.

> There is pressure from the family to get married and all that. I keep pushing back saying, 'I'm busy or I'm at school or I just got this job and can't afford to get married'. It got to be so overwhelming … It came to a point where I broke down … I was in the psychiatric ward for almost 2 days.

Impact on sisters' marriage potential. Several participants described the impact of coming out on their sisters' potential for marriage.

[My parent's response when I came out was,] Fine, we believe you and that you can't change, but why do you have to advertise this in public? Why do you have to tell everybody about it? If you do this, who will marry your sisters? This is a common concern for any [Eastern] family. If our family is dishonored or socially stigmatized, we won't get any marriage for our daughters.

Physical danger of coming out. Finally, the danger of coming out as gay within a Muslim family should not be underestimated.

When I came out, I had a lot of threats of being killed. Right now [my family] don't think anyone else is going to find out. But if they thought I was going to come out and all, they probably would kick me out. There is so much I have to hide, but it's necessary for my safety. You have to make sure that being true to yourself doesn't mean getting killed.

Theme 3: Color dynamics

Five participants were not only gay and Muslim, but also men of color. For all six, color dynamics was a dominant topic. Their comments suggest that the color dimension of a gay Muslim identity plays an important role in social dynamics within the larger, predominantly white gay subculture of the West; internal dynamics (e.g., internalized racism, validation theory); dating preferences; sex behaviors.

Social dynamics within white gay culture. Participants clearly perceived that gay culture in the West is white dominated. Some expressed a sense that color can exclude them from gay social dynamics, or that their color identity is somehow separate from their gay identity.

White males were the majority, and so they were everywhere in high school. We lived in a small [Canadian] town. Everybody's white there. The attraction [to white males] was reinforced through media, through high school being surrounded by white guys, and also the gay model that most gay men are white … I thought that if I'm going to be part of that, I'm obviously going to be with a white guy. I thought that there were no South Asian queers. I didn't see any images of South Asian queers. The few images that I did see were a few Black queers that were all drag queens, or they were negative images. I didn't feel attraction to them. Maybe my attraction [to white men] was what I was socialized with.

Several comments made reference to a developmental progression of identity formation. Simply identifying as gay, even if as part of white culture, may meet certain identity needs at an earlier stage of gay development. However, as one integrates a gay identity, color dynamics and the whiteness of gay culture can become an issue of concern.

Most of my friends at that point were white queer males. It didn't feel unnatural. I didn't feel like I was missing anything at that point, because I was happy to have finally met gay people. That was more than I could have asked for. But I think that slowly over time I became conscious of the fact that this is not enough. I can't go to gay bars and listen to Desai music. I can't go to Church Street [a street in the gay ghetto]and eat Indian food or anything like that. There is this separation between my South Asian identity and my queer identity.

I want to have my own community that recognizes my sexuality too, and I don't know if that's possible. I don't have a problem telling my gay friends of my Muslim background, but it somehow doesn't really feel like you connect on that dimension with them.

Some participants reported that within their circle of other gay men of color, there is a stigma associated with dating white gay men or assimilating into gay white culture.

> All my friends [gay Muslim South Asians] share the same perspective in terms of being very much against assimilating into gay white culture and going out with gay white men as well. They're all opposed to it. The other assumption would be from my South Asian friends that I'm uncomfortable being with other men of colour and therefore I've chosen to be with a white man because I'm internalizing my racism.

Internalized racism: The coconut syndrome. As people of color living in a white-dominant context, participants commented on the role of internalized racism—adopting negative and inferior thoughts and feelings around being a person of color. For example, one man described how he initially rejected his Islamic identity in attempts to assimilate into White culture. The following quote not only illustrates this process, but also demonstrates the evolution of accepting and integrating a color identity:

> I had this suspicion about Islam, and actually in my first years of living in England I stayed away from anything that had to do with Islam. I didn't even want Arabic friends. I was literally of the coconut syndrome, brown on the outside, white on the inside. I wanted to be white on the outside. I was in my late teens. That was almost 20 years ago. As you get older, you learn that these are your roots. Trying to pretend that you're not, it's so pathetic. It's about who you are and being honest and getting that peace within. (Arabic Muslim)

Validation theory. Some participants, mostly those of South Asian background, commented on the phenomenon whereby gay Muslim men of color are attracted exclusively to white men. This was framed in terms of validation theory, a term used to describe how being white—or to be in relation to that which is white—involves a gain in currency, power, or validation. Whereas some participants saw this phenomenon as highly prevalent, others questioned its legitimacy.

> One thing that I do know about gay Muslims is that they almost always have a white boyfriend. It's very funny at times. They live in that world of validation to have a white boyfriend. It's that thing where you don't find people who look like you attractive and … What is that? … I was at a banquet the other day, and I was with two other Muslims … One of the guys here was the most WASP-ish, most average looking white guy. You have all these cute Arab boys and [they were] obsessed with this white guy … I was at the dinner table with him, and he was one of the dullest people I have ever met. But he's white, and I guess you have more currency.

> If you and I had talked 5 years ago, I probably would have agreed with that [validation theory]. I don't know. Is there always a validation thing when you see a gay Muslim with a white guy? I don't have an answer to this. But now that I'm older, I just think let them be. Maybe they are genuinely in love with each other. That I don't know. But I know from my two friends here. I took them to a party, and they were gravitating towards every white guy, etc. That's their thing. I think in the gay culture it's pretty old, actually.

Color and dating. Many participants were conscious of color and its impact on the men they chose to date or with whom they form intimate relationships.

> I don't know what happened, but for some reason I completely lost my attraction to white men, completely … it came to the point where I was exclusionary of white men. I thought that I

was expanding my horizons, but I was focused entirely on men of color in terms of physical attraction and in terms of my desire to be in a relationship. I think that part of it has to do with my level of analysis and also because I've become more critical … more aware of society structures … and so that internal awareness became internalized. It just sort of changed my orientation in terms of sexual attractions to men. I had to intellectualize it before feeling it as just a raw desire. It had to be something that I consciously chose.

Some discussed the comfort and affirmation they experience in dating or being in a relationship with another man of color of similar ethnic background.

> We are both gay and Muslim, a Muslim Arabic couple. Dating someone from the Middle East was so comforting. It's kind of fun to just be who you are.

> Being with him only affirmed all those feelings that this is what I feel comfortable with, being with a brown Muslim.

Boy-toy. Participants frequently mentioned the boy-toy concept—a derogatory term used to describe a (younger) man of color in a sexual or romantic partnership with a (older) white man.

> A former roommate had told me that he had a crush on me … I was 22 and he was 40, and I was really offended by it. It made me feel like I don't really want to be your South Asian boy-toy. I really don't want to be in a position where you have complete power over me. You're White, you're relatively well off economically, and you're older than me. You command a lot more authority in society in general and in the queer community. I don't want to be with somebody who has that much power, where there's that much of a power differential betweenmyself and my partner. When I told him, he was totally shocked. He was offended that I could think of our friendship in terms of power structures instead of being in a friend ship based on love that could blossom into a relationship. I was like, I have to think that way, I can't think otherwise. (South Asian Muslim).

Color and sexuality. A conscious awareness of power dynamics and color also impacted some men's sexuality.

> Before this change happened [becoming more aware of color power differentials], I wasn't as conscious of the power differential within the sex that I would have. I would be a top and a bottom, I was totally versatile. After I became conscious of it, if I was at a club and I was horny that night and I met a guy and he happened to be white, I would not let him fuck me. I would only be the top. If it was person of color, I would allow myself to be the bottom or I would be versatile. With men of color, I was being more true to myself. I was allowing myself to be either/or, but with white men, I wouldn't allow them to fuck me. I was so conscious of that power differential that I didn't want to be placed in that position where somebody is dominating me within a sexual act position.

Discussion

This study is among the first to document gay Muslim identity experience of progressive gay Muslim men in a North American context. For this particular group, the gay-Muslim dual-identity appears to be at least three-dimensional, consisting of a religious identity, an ethno-cultural identity, and a color identity. On a more fundamental level, our research provides evidence that gay Muslims do indeed exist. When working with Muslim men

struggling with sexual identity issues, health professionals should not assume that Islam and homosexuality are irreconcilable; our work demonstrates that at least some men experience their identities otherwise and are discovering ways to integrate them.

In this study, several men appeared to resolve their Muslim-gay identity conflicts by reinterpreting doctrine and emphasizing aspects of Islam that promote inclusion, peace, tolerance, and justice. Similar to research on gay religious identity development in Jews and Christians (Coyle and Rafalin 2000, Rosser 1992) a rejection of or distancing from religious identity often occurred in the earlier stages of sexual identity development. Others, however, strengthened their religious identity and turned to the Qur'an or Allah as they negotiated the initial stages of sexual identity development. Eventually, all reached a point of reclaiming and redefining their conceptualizations of what it means to be Muslim in a religious context.

For Muslim men, coming out as gay in North America can be complicated by cultural differences. For example, given the collective identity of family in many Eastern cultures (Abu-Saud 1990, Khan 1997a, b, Daneshpour 1998) it is important to consider the impact of coming out on the larger family unit, particularly female siblings and their potential for marriage. Additionally, respondents indicated that in Muslim society, same-sex attraction does not by definition nullify the cultural imperative for heterosexual marriage. This has been documented previously in South Asian and Eastern cultures, where the pattern of being heterosexually married and having sex with men is not necessarily contradictory (Khan 1997a, Seabrook, 1999).

Participants described their Eastern cultures as more permissive of homo-sociality, particularly expressions of physical intimacy and emotional closeness. In many Eastern cultures, intimate expressions between men are not constructed as sexual or feminine. Therefore, these behaviors are not internalized or perceived in a context of homosexuality, shame or stigma as they are in the West. Instead they are often internalized as part of cultural brotherhood, deep friendship and masculinity, similar to the Mediterranean pedagogical-Socratic love ideal (Khan 1997a). Notably, in our study, Muslim men from Eastern cultures appeared to have a heightened awareness that the process of constructing of a gay identity—that is, constructing homo-social expression into an internal and social identity—is more of a Western process. This may be why some respondents seemed to struggle with and resist the construct of gay, perceiving it as a confining label or a box—a resistance to cultural assimilation.

It is an interesting paradox that Eastern cultures, while more permissive of homo-social expression than Western cultures, are more repressive and hostile to a gay identity. Eastern culture reacts to and restricts one's freedom to assert a sexual and social identity based on same-sex attraction, yet it allows men more freedom to express intimacy and love, particularly when it comes to such expression in public and without shame. This challenges the Eurocentric assumption that Eastern culture is more repressive, restrictive and hostile towards intimacy between men. This also pushes the understanding of gay liberation in the West and how rights are constructed. For example, if the West were to emulate the permissiveness of Eastern culture, it is interesting to consider the possibility of gay rights including the right of men, both heterosexual and homosexual, to hold hands or put their arms around each other in public, without shame and without the threat of persecution or sexualization.

Being men of color in North America represents a third dimension of this multifaceted Muslim identity experience. As a color identity, being Muslim appeared most salient to the gay identity process in terms of gay dating relationships as well as social and political

dynamics related to the gay community. These men were conscious of living in a white-dominant culture and the power dynamics inherent in this context. Thus, gay Muslims of color experience similar dynamics of exclusion, marginalization and oppression to that documented among other gay men of color (Gonzalez and Epsin 1996, Jones and Hill 1996). For example, terms such as coconut syndrome and boy-toy resonate with terms documented among African-American gay men such as snow queen or dinge queen (Hemphill and Beam 1991) and among East Asians such as rice queen or sticky rice (Cho 1998). Such terms illustrate the common challenges experienced around racism, dating and identity development by gay men of color in a North American context.

At the same time, cultural variables may influence gay Muslim men in the North American context in ways that are unique to them. For example, the unease reported among participants with being a boy-toy for an older Anglo-American partner may not simply be due to color power differentials that exist in North America, but also to the pervasiveness of pederastic relationships as the predominant idiom of male-male sexual relations in Muslim societies in which the older uses the younger, who then often becomes identified and stigmatized as fair game to be penetrated by others (Murray 1997). Furthermore, this study is among the first to note how color impacts sexual behaviors such as being the active or passive partner during anal intercourse for gay Muslims. This distinction also has prominent significance among Muslim same-sex dynamics, both historically and in Muslim countries today (Schmitt and Sofer 1992, Tapinc 1992, Murray and Roscoe 1997). Men who have sex with men in a Muslim context typically distinguish themselves as either active or passive, with the active partner experiencing little if any stigma, while the passive partner is considered effeminate and highly stigmatized (Schmitt and Sofer 1992, Tapinc 1992). In fact, based on this distinction of active and passive, both gender and sexual identity is formulated—the active understood as masculine and heterosexual, while the passive is understood as feminine and homosexual (Tapinc 1992). Thus, status differentiation based on age and sexual position have implications for gay Muslim men who are aware of power differentials and who contend with pressures to assimilate, internalized racism and exclusion within the gay community. Future research may further explore how color dynamics influence sexual behavior and psychology among gay Muslim men of color who live in a white-dominant context and within the predominantly white gay subculture.

This study is limited in that it only explores the experience of progressive gay Muslim men in the context of Al-Fatiha. Because Al-Fatiha is a new and politically liberal movement, there are most likely significant differences between these men and other Muslim men who either do not openly identify as gay or have rejected their Muslim identity. Even within the context of Al-Fatiha, there was an undercurrent of suspicion among some men when they learned of this research being conducted. This further limited our sample, in that it includes only those Al-Fatiha participants who were willing to be interviewed. A second limitation is the small sample size. All findings should be considered preliminary in understanding the experience of this group of men, and clearly more research is needed to confirm or refute our findings. Finally, this research is limited to gay men. Future research should consider the experience of female, lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals within the context of progressive Islam in North America and beyond. Other promising areas of study include examining the impact of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the USA on gay Muslims in North America, which was a predominant topic of discussion at the conferences, and the perceptions of HIV/AIDS risk

among gay Muslim men, HIV prevention strategies for this population, and indeed, the physical, mental and emotional needs of this population.

Acknowledgements

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Résumé

Cette étude qualitative vise à documenter l'expérience identitaire d'hommes musulmans, gays et progressistes, dans un contexte nord américain. Six entretiens en profondeurs, complétés par de l'observation participante, ont été réalisés avec des hommes musulmans et gays qui assistaient à une conférence internationale rassemblant des lesbiennes, des gays, des bisexuel(le)s, des transgenres, musulmans et en questionnement sur leur religion. Il semble que pour les musulmans gays et progressistes comme les participants à cette conférence, l'identité musulmane soit tridimensionnelle (religieuse, ethno-culturelle et raciale) lorsqu'elle est intégrée à une identité gay. Dans sa dimension religieuse, cette identité musulmane fait que la relation des musulmans gays à Allah (Dieu), ainsi qu'une ré-interprétation du Coran et de la condamnation traditionnelle de l'homosexualité semblent nécessaires. Dans sa dimension culturelle, elle fait émerger les différences ehtno-culturelles entre Est et Ouest qui ont un impact sur l'homo-socialité et sur la construction de l'identité gay, le mariage et l'impact du *coming out* sur la famille orientale et les frères et sœurs, en tant que problèmes critiques. Dans sa dimension raciale, le racisme intériorisé, les relations amoureuses et la dynamique sociale au sein de la sous-culture gay, semblent représenter des défis majeurs pour les musulmans de couleur dans un contexte d'homme blanc dominant.

Resumen

La finalidad de este estudio cualitativo es documentar las diferentes identidades experimentadas por homosexuales musulmanes progresistas en la sociedad norteamericana. Se llevaron a cabo seis entrevistas exhaustivas, complementadas con la observación de participantes, con musulmanes homosexuales que asistieron a una conferencia internacional para la comunidad de lesbianas, gays, bisexuales, transexuales y personas con dudas (LGBTQ) de religión musulmana. Para estos homosexuales musulmanes progresistas, aparece una identidad musulmana tridimensional (religiosa, etnocultural y de color) cuando se integra en una identidad homosexual. Como identidad religiosa, parecen necesarias las relaciones de los homosexuales musulmanes con Allah (Dios) y una reinterpretación de la Qur'an y la tradicional condena de la homosexualidad. Como identidad cultural, parece ser que los retos clave son los problemas críticos que surgen en

las diferencias etnoculturales este-oeste que influyen en la homosocialidad y la construcción de la identidad *gay*, el matrimonio y el impacto de salir del armario en una familia de zonas del este, especialmente en el caso de los hermanos. Como identidad del color de la piel, los desafíos básicos son el racismo interiorizado, relaciones de parejas y las dinámicas sociales en la subcultura homosexual de musulmanes de color en una sociedad predominantemente blanca.