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Psychological Effects of Religious Guilt in Muslim Communities: A Study of Guilt, Shame, and Social Acceptance from an Islamic and Sociological Perspective

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Abstract

This study examines religious guilt, shame and social acceptance from a psychological perspective within Muslim communities, specifically in Pakistan. The data was collected and analyzed using thematic analysis. The results illustrate how religious doctrine and social notions of what is "acceptable" overlap in defining individuals' emotional experiences in terms of guilt and shame and how these emotions are related to mental well-being. The results revealed that guilt of religious origin, and often perceived as intentional and systematic guilt through faith (iman) and a course of repentance (tawbah), can be used as a positive tool of personal growth and correction. Precise social meanings regarding outward religious expectations and gendered expectations, contributed to individual level guilt and shame especially for women. Furthermore, the findings reveal the importance of hope in God's mercy and having family support to carry the emotional load associated with guilt. The need for safe means to discuss emotional experiences and potentially avert feelings of shame and guilt and the call for more agency about the involvements of religious activity from both promoting justice, and mercy were evident in the study. Ultimately, the findings highlight the need for achieving mental well-being with ties to Islamic principles and these interventions should seek to target youth development of mental health.

Keywords: *Religious Guilt, Shame, Social Acceptance, Islamic Faith, Repentance (Tawbah)*

Introduction

Religious guilt is a complex psychological and sociological phenomenon that has lasting consequences for personal behavior, individual emotional well-being, and social relations, particularly in religious cultures. In Muslim communities, religion encompasses not only a framework for personal ethical behavior, but also seeps into the social and cultural structure of society and sets normative standards around issues of morality, honour, sexual practice, and familial obligation (Haque, 2004). This research will introduce a critical examination of the psychological consequences of religious guilt and its social dynamics, especially the experience and internalization of guilt and shame and the possibility of social acceptance within the discourse around Islamic morality and community practice.

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Islamic teachings stress personal responsibility and God's mercy. The Qur'an advises that a believer should reflect on their role (muhasabah), seek forgiveness (istighfar), and practice God-awareness (taqwa). As the Qur'an promises: *"Indeed, Allah is ever Accepting of repentance"* (Qur'an 4:16). There is a spiritual purpose behind this teaching: guiding the believer towards moral development. However, this structure can ultimately lead to psychological harm, as some practitioners may interpret not living rightly under Islam as a life of failures and personal distress. Negative feelings can transform into religious guilt when they are realized through a connection to moral agency. Religious guilt is connected to self-conscious emotions linked to perceived violations of moral codes. Furthermore, the psychological literature provides definitions for guilt and shame as self-conscious emotions. Guilt is a feature of a moral transgression towards a specific behavior *("I did something wrong")* while shame targets a person's self-concept ("I am bad"). The result is diminished self-concept, and eventually social withdrawal (Tangney & Dearing, 2002).

However, in Muslim contexts, guilt and shame often intersect in ways that take on added significance with the communal values of collective honor (izzat), reputation of the family, and behavioral compliance with religious dictates, thus enhancing psychological pain particularly with the potential for public exposure or ostracizing (Ahmed, 2014). For example, sexual transgressions, apostasy, and failure to fulfill obligatory religious duties are experienced not only as sinning in the eyes of God but also failures in conformity with normative social code. As Goffman theorized (1963) in his work on stigma, these violations lead to spoilage of identity as the individual is rendered disgraceful and left to re-established morality in silence, relegation, or excessive pious behavior.

Religiously, sociologically guilt functions as a means of social control in maintaining domination of normative morality and collective solidarity (Durkheim, 1912). To be sure these sentiments of control can circumscribe social cohesion and ethical responsibility, but they can also repress individuality and lead to internalized guilt for those individuals who are questioning or nonconforming. This is particularly prevalent in patriarchal Muslim societies with gender roles subsuming piety and obedience (Mahmood, 2005). In these cases, women often experience a heightened sense of guilt for not adhering to ideals of chastity/ modesty, or not preserving family honor which can result in chronic anxiety and diminished self-esteem.

In addition, Muslim youth in the moral conflict sometimes have what Abu-Raiya et al. (2015) refer to as “spiritual struggles” which involve a clash between inherited religious values and mainstream liberal values. Muslim youth in the moral conflict often feel caught in the middle between traditional expectations of themselves where they have to act according to the teachings of Islam while also feeling a strong desire for autonomy and independence. As a result, this may leave them alienated from their religious community, and even secular society leading to disputes in their minds, frustrations with their identity, and disengagement from religious beliefs. Overall, these spiritual struggles bring together multiple frustrations: because of differing interpretations related to Islamic theologies which are often marked by

ideas of punishment instead of mercy, fear instead of love, and perfection instead of falseness.

It is also important to keep in mind that the theological tradition of Islam acknowledges that there is hope (raja') and fear (khawf), however, these ideals can shift to guilt-inducing cultural messages. Many Muslim scholars have noted that repenting (tawbah) is always available to Muslims and that according to Islam, no act constitutes a sin that cannot be forgiven (Qur'an 39:53), but this halal (permissible) message gets buried in cultural discourses on sin and shame from family/community/religious institutions (Khan, 2019). This misrepresentation of Islamic theology can lead believers to internalize a warped image of God an entity of anger instead of a being of compassion only intensifying their mental turmoil and feeling of worthlessness.

In light of these complexities, this study intends to investigate the lived experiences of Muslims experiencing religious guilt; to examine how such guilt relates to aspects of their mental health, self-identity, and social life; and to investigate the theological and sociological frameworks that consistently produce guilt and shame and to consider how compassionate, inclusive religious narratives can help to alleviate some of the harm.

Objectives

1. To investigate how Muslims describe their personal experiences of religious guilt and shame, and the consistent emotional and behavioral sequences involved.
2. To examine the ways people apply interpretations of Islamic teachings (for example, sin, repentance, divine mercy) in personal and social discourse.
3. To identify the sociocultural logic (for example, familial expectations, community practices, gender behavior) that shape the experience and development of guilt and shame.

Literature Review

Religious Guilt and Psychological Well-Being

Religious guilt as a moral emotion, in terms of violations of divinely prescribed behaviors, shapes believers' psychological experience. In Islamic societies, where religion plays a prominent role in orienting daily living and in providing norms for social behavior, guilt over missing prayer, not fasting, or engaging in suspect moral behavior will often be deeply embedded. While guilt can facilitate moral behavior and motivate repentance (Tangney & Dearing, 2002), excessive or chronic guilt can cause psychological distress such as anxiety or depression, and fragile self-esteem (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2015).

Islamic theology endorses a balance between hope (raja') and fear (khawf), with an emphasis on God's mercy, as the Qur'an insists: *"my mercies encompasses all things"* (Qur'an 7:156). While that aspirational balance is advisable, research suggests that more conservative cultures expose individuals to more fear or punishment based messaging, with less attention to the opportunity for forgiveness (Haque, 2004). Furthermore, denying or unbalanced hope could lead to a pathological form of religiosity described as scrupulosity the form of obsessive thinking about sin, ritual purity, and ritual performance as in obsessive-compulsive symptoms found in some devout Muslims (Abdel-Khalek, 2011).

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Reframing Sin, Repentance and Divine Compassion

The Islamic tradition is clear; believers should confess their sins and seek forgiveness from God through sincere repentance (tawbah). Repentance is not viewed in Islam as humiliation but rather as returning to the mercy of God. The Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) is reported to have said, "*Every child of Adam sins, and the best of those who sin is the one who repents*" (Tirmidhi, Hadith 2499), but the way this framework is interpreted could be influenced by diverse factors, all of which revolve around religious education, sectarianism, and familial upbringing.

Some scholars have argued that when people's guilt from religion has been cultivated within a framework that is primarily performative. In this way, it is not the doctrine itself, but simply its selective, or cultural, interpretation that is inherently distressing.

Social Norms, Shame and Community Expectations

From a sociological perspective, guilt and shame do not only exist as individual experiences but they are used as forms of social regulation. Many Muslim majority societies (especially honor-based cultures) are steeped in Arabic notions of shame (ʿayb) which means that social acceptance, family reputation, and perhaps the worst outcome (i.e. social ostracization) are linked together (Ahmed, 2014). For example, when young Muslims carry out actions judged by family and/or community as morally or culturally hazardous (for example, premarital relationships, public questioning of faith), they may feel guilt in two ways: the act may be viewed as sinful to Allah, but beyond that, they may feel guilt socially for the fear of shame for their family and/or community exclusion.

Using Goffman's (1963) work on stigma may be useful regarding spoiled identities. When guilt becomes public knowledge, or leads to social ostracization, it may lead to shame which has implications on one's self-concept and ultimately mental wellness. Here, guilt in the sense of collective responsibility becomes not simply being accountable before Allah, but it also includes managing their image within a collective moral community.

Coping Mechanisms and Spiritual Resilience

Notwithstanding religious guilt, many Muslims use spiritual coping mechanisms that arise from their Islamic identity. Performances such as prayer (salat), reciting the Qur'an, and dhikr (the remembrance of Allah) are not only forms of worship but also ways of managing emotions and confronting issues (Abu-Raiya et al., 2015). Individuals may also obtain social support from religious mentors or religious community leaders who can help them resolve guilt in constructive support by highlighting Allah's compassion.

Islamic psychologists and scholars have further indicated developing strategies to reframe guilt by fostering more balanced religious education to be accompanied by experiences that increase emotional intelligence while learning spiritual knowledge processes. Haque (2004) also argues for faith based counseling approaches that are culturally sensitive and theologically sound in helping believers manage mental states or distressing processes while embracing their religious identity.

Methodology

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A purposive sampling strategy was used in this study and data was collected from 15 respondents on the semi structured, in depth interviews.

Thematic Analysis

Theme	Description	Participant Response
1. Guilt as a Sign of Iman	Guilt was considered a testament to their moral character and their relationship with Allah; participants interpreted guilt as a sign that your heart is alive.	*"Whenever I missed my prayers, I felt a deep sadness, it reminded me that I still cared and that my faith is alive."*
2. Internal Reflection and Tawbah	Guilt was often the impetus for participants' sincere repentance and personal spiritual development in accordance with Islamic principles.	*"After realizing my mistake, I turned to Allah and prayed more regularly. Guilt brought me back to the right path."*
3. Hope in Divine Mercy	Participants drew comfort and emotional healing from verses and Hadiths that emphasized Allah's mercy and forgiveness.	*"When I read about Allah's mercy being greater than His wrath, it gave me hope that I was not beyond redemption."*
4. Supportive Family Guidance	Multiple participants cited a compassionate parent or sibling who helped them with their mistakes and did not judge them harshly.	*"My mother gently advised me when I was drifting away. She reminded me of Allah's love, not just His punishment."*
5. Spiritual Coping Practices	Participants involved du'a, dhikr, and reading the Qur'an in their coping and sense of peace with guilt.	*"Reciting Surah Yaseen in the morning helped calm my mind. It reminded me that no matter what I've done, Allah listens."*

Guilt as an Indicator of Iman

For many participants, guilt did not equate to psychological weakness; instead, it represented inner spiritual strength a kind of faith (iman) barometer. If participants experienced remorse for failing to pray or for minor wrongdoings, they viewed it as an example of a "living heart" (qalb)that was still spiritually aware. This was consistent with what is taught in Islam; regret is important to faith since it was the first step toward sincere repentance (tawbah). Rather than feeling like they were losing their connection to faith, participants indicated that guilt confirmed their moral awareness.

Internal reflection and tawbah (repentance)

Participants often expressed that guilt propelled them toward tawbah rather than despair. Their emotional unease often resulted, instead, in an increased practice of prayer, self-examination and closeness to Allah. This thematic statement reflects how their understanding

of Allah's attributes of forgiveness influenced their behavior for the better, and ameliorated how they experienced guilt in the context of tawbah.

Trust in Divine Mercy

All participants highlighted the comfort given by Islamic teachings regarding rahmah (divine mercy). The Qur'an verse "My mercy encompasses all things" (Qur'an 7:156) assured participants in times of guilt. This theme demonstrates how belief in Allah's mercy ameliorated feelings of punishment and helped the participants emotionally process their mistakes. Mercy is a key theological construct providing a psychological buffer for participants to be protected from hopelessness and a potential pathway to healing.

Encouragement From Family

The role of family, particularly mothers, older siblings, and religiously observant caregivers emerged as a protective factor. Participants reported those family members provided gentle reminders about the faith and used emotional intelligence to aid their decision making around feelings of guilt without shame. Familial support offered a sense of connection and positive coping strategies. Faith-based family support was crucial in strengthening Islamic principles while allowing individuals to maintain their emotional health. It provided healthy moral responsibility without undue emotional distress.

Spiritual Coping Mechanisms

Participants regularly engaged in acts of worship (like du'a (supplication), dhikr (remembrance of Allah), and recitation of the Qur'an) as methods to cope with guilt and foster peace of mind. They were not simply religious acts but were therapeutic in nature. Religious coping was helpful and culturally appropriate. However, emotionally intelligent processes of coping with guilt can also be provided by social or health psychology, it should have a better relationship to the business of well-being in society.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to investigate the psychological implications of religious guilt, shame and social acceptance in Muslim contexts, specifically Pakistan. Thematic analysis provided clear themes that reflect Islamic teachings and sociocultural expectations. The study demonstrates the interplay between religious teachings, individual guilt, and social circumstances to highlight how religious guilt generally falls under the categories of faith, community, and individual morality.

The first main theme- guilt as an indicator of iman (faith) was shown to be an important part of participants' experiences. The idea of guilt, when it comes to religious practice, was considered not to be a negative feeling; rather, it served as evidence of a heart attached to Allah. This is supported by Islamic teachings which highlight that guilt represents awareness of moral transgression, and the intention or desire for repentance (tawbah) (Al-Qaradawi, 2006). Guilt is also recognized in Islam as a spiritual cue; this connects people back to morality (Qur'an, 9:104). Hence, it was evident that for the participants, their feelings of guilt after performing a transgressive act, such as missing prayers, were not feelings of distress, but rather evidence of their faith and a sincere action in seeking tawbah. This confirms the

perspective of Khan et al. (2015) who argue that feelings of guilt within Islamic contexts can be a positive emotional experience to allow for spiritual renewal and moral redressing.

The theme of contemplation and tawbah highlights the moralizing influence of guilt. Islamic teachings underscore tawbah (repentance) as a means of alleviating guilt. The participants explained that they were using guilt as a way of returning to Allah, reflecting the concept of tawbah nasuha (truthful tawbah), and tawbah nasuha is one of the themes in Islamic spirituality (Qur'an, 66:8). This suggests guilt, from an Islamic context, may have pushed and or cultivated introspection and growth (Ibn Taymiyyah, 1996). The participants viewed guilt as a form of spiritual purification and therefore framed guilt as a process of healing morally and emotionally, rather than debilitating. The current study corroborates previous research from Rabbani et al. (2017), who noted how Islamic tawbah tends to foster emotional relief by reframing Allah's mercy as prioritized over Allah's wrath.

Hope in divine mercy proved to be an enduring source of psychological comfort for participants. Reportedly, many participants stated that believing in Allah's mercy was a way to relieve the psychological weight of guilt. The Qur'anic concept of mercy (rahmah) is fundamental to Islamic theology and implies a middle ground between accountability and mercy (Qur'an, 39:53). Participants stated that remembering Allah's mercy supported emotional relief and helped stave off feelings of hopelessness and despair, illustrating the therapeutic value of Islamic teachings on divine mercy. This echoes Khan and Ahmad's (2013) research finding that hope in religion may buffer against emotions of guilt and shame, particularly those related to Allah's mercy. Furthermore, it reiterates the place of hope in Islamic coping strategies, as mentioned by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) in their work on stress and coping strategies.

The issue of family support and guidance was an important way to lessen feelings of guilt. Participants showed that family gratifiers were an important part of a family member correcting their behavior without underlining any harsh criticism or emotional abandonment. Family support and mothers, specifically, were crucial in helping participants regain confidence as they dealt with guilt issues. This was consistent with Naveed's (2016) study, which described family as a fundamental avenue to sustain emotional well-being for Muslims.

In summary, the theme of spiritual coping practices suggested that participants used worship (du'a and dhikr-ounting Allah) to cope with feelings of guilt. These acts of worship were used as an emotionally grounding strategy that helped participants reacquire peace and inner equilibrium. This finding supports Sufi recommendations of thoughtfulness towards remembrance of Allah as a means for calming the soul and moving past psychological distress (Nasr, 2007). The coping mechanisms were culturally congruent, allowing participants to reconcile their spiritual beliefs and emotional needs.

Conclusion

As much of the research on the psychological implications of religious guilt, shame and social acceptance can be context-specific, our study investigated the psychological

implications of guilt, shame and social acceptance among Muslims, with a primary focus on Muslims living in Pakistan. Using thematic analysis, we described several themes which detail how religious guilt, an emotion which is normatively experienced within the discourse of Islam, intersects with larger sociocultural influences to shape psychological well-being. Overall, the findings of our study demonstrated that while guilt in the discussion of Islamic religion can bring on spiritual growth, it can also be emotionally taxing, based on social norms, gendered dynamics, and conceptions of safe space for emotionally nudging whilst dealing with guilt, shame and social acceptance.

We described how the participants generally viewed guilt, to be a sign of iman (faith), and participants believed that their emotional discomfort, was a reflection of their spirituality, and to Allah. Guilt is viewed as reflective of the soul, not despised of it; rather it serves reflective integrity and was a sign of spiritual awareness. Within the teachings of Islam, one can view guilt as a prompt for self-reflection (tawbah). Most participants endorsed the view of guilt as something positive that can drive individuals toward moral correction, place their soul at ease, and renew their commitment to faith. Instead of raising despair, guilt raised curiosity and aided hopefulness.

One of the standout results was hope in divine mercy. Participants derived comfort from knowing that Allah's mercy surpasses His anger and provided them with a means of emotional healing. This idea of mercy was the central buffer for psychological distress, enabling participants to cope with guilt without descending into despair. Supportive family counseling also helped to alleviate guilt and offer emotional relief. Mothers and families were sources of spiritual and emotional support, affirming the humane elements of Islamic teachings.

In summary, the research highlights the intricate interconnection between religious guilt, social expectation, and psychological well-being within Muslim societies. Although guilt is a useful motivator for personal spiritual development and moral reform, it is vital to appreciate the psychological toll of social coercion and gendered roles. Through encouraging open discussion and supportive settings, Muslim communities can more effectively cope with the emotional difficulties of religious guilt and develop a healthier, more empathetic approach to mental and spiritual health. This study supports Sufi recommendations of thoughtfulness towards remembrance of Allah as a means for calming the soul and moving past psychological distress.

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