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The Practitioners' Predicament – Challenges in Counselling Clients on the Shia-LGB Nexus

Recent years have witnessed a gradual emergence of discussions surrounding sexuality and mental health within Muslim communities, including among Twelver Shī'a Muslims in Western diasporic contexts. This paper builds upon the author's earlier qualitative research, which explored the lived experiences of Shī'a Muslims, who experience same-sex attraction, and the tensions they encounter in negotiating religious belonging alongside non-heteronormativity. That study highlighted the complex psychological and spiritual struggles faced by religiously invested individuals attempting to reconcile deeply held faith commitments with personal experiences of sexuality. The present research shifts the analytical focus to the other side of this encounter: Muslim practitioners - imams, chaplains, therapists, and pastoral workers - who are approached by such individuals seeking guidance and support.

Drawing on ongoing qualitative fieldwork employing semi-structured interviews, purposive sampling, and snowball recruitment, this study examines the perspectives of fifteen Shī'a Muslim practitioners engaged in care-providing roles within community and clinical settings. Participants include traditionally trained theologians, Muslim chaplains, qualified psychological therapists, and community mentors involved in pastoral care. The research explores the ethical, spiritual, and professional dilemmas practitioners face when navigating cases involving sexuality, mental health, and religious commitment. Particular attention is given to tensions between the Islamic ethical obligation of *nahy'an al-munkar* (discouraging wrongdoing) and the pastoral responsibility to safeguard the psychological wellbeing of vulnerable individuals.

Preliminary findings suggest that many community-based scholars and practitioners experience a pronounced sense of moral and professional uncertainty when confronted with such cases. While chaplaincy and psychotherapy operate within regulated frameworks, religious leaders - particularly imams - often lack formal training in counselling or mental-health practice, despite frequently serving as first points of contact. Consequently, responses are often improvised or shaped by personal experience rather than structured pastoral frameworks. Participants reported sympathy toward clients alongside a sense of helplessness in addressing complex psychological needs, reflecting a broader gap between traditional religious training and contemporary therapeutic approaches.

The paper argues that this "practitioners' predicament" reveals structural and institutional shortcomings within Shī'a Muslim communal infrastructures for mental-health support, highlighting the need for formalised training, improved safeguarding procedures, and stronger collaboration between religious scholars and mental-health professionals to ensure ethically responsible and psychologically informed care.



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Dr Muhammed R. Tajri is a sociologist of religion and Lecturer in Arabic at the Al-Mahdi Institute in Birmingham, where he also serves as Research Lead for the study of Muslims, Societies, and Cultures. He completed his PhD at Lancaster University (2023), examining evolving perceptions of Shī'i religious authority among British university students. His broader academic interests include contemporary Shī'ism, Muslim communities in Western contexts, and the intersections of religion, gender, and social change.

Dr Tajri's work combines sociological approaches with a background in traditional Islamic scholarship, having undertaken seminary training within Shī'i *hawza* institutions and advanced Arabic study in Damascus. This dual formation enables him to engage both academically and theologically with questions affecting Muslim communities.

He is also a member of the Advisory Board of the Centre for the Study of Islam in the UK at Cardiff University, where he previously completed an MA in *Islam in Contemporary Britain* prior to undertaking his doctoral research.