


The Religious Struggle Framework: Religious Experience from Struggle to Transformation

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Abstract

The phenomenon of young individuals struggling with their religious beliefs can lead to wide-ranging consequences. Existing studies are dominantly Western in context, which may not be applicable in other settings. Therefore, as contextualized and rationalized through an Islamic perspective, the present study aims to build a framework to explore religious struggle. Through a qualitative research design, multiple methods were employed: responses from six Muslim interviewees were reconstructed into a single monologue using composite narrative method, and then narrative analysis was done, followed by method theory and domain theory analyses being conducted. Constructs were identified and discussed, theories as lenses to view the phenomenon were employed, and further evaluations of the phenomenon and relevant constructs were done. A discussion was integrated with each analysis. Through synthesizing the findings, I propose a framework called the religious struggle framework (RSF). With the RSF's flexible, adaptable, and modifiable nature, the framework can be used beyond the present study's population. It can be utilized in both quantitative and qualitative research designs. Limitations and recommendations for further research were also presented.

INTRODUCTION

The importance and implications of religious struggle have been reviewed extensively (see Bockrath et al., 2021). It has implications toward health and wellbeing, including depression (Park, Wortmann, & Edmondson, 2011) and life satisfaction (Szcześniak & Timoszyk-Tomczak, 2020). There is also association with religious transformation (Bryant & Astin, 2008). The consequences of religious struggle can be mediated by attributing meaning to the struggle, as well as by the states of growth and decline individuals are experiencing during the struggle (Zarzycka & Zietek, 2019). Furthermore, the perception an individual has on religious struggle—whether the person views the struggle positively or negatively—can predict well-being, even after considering religiousness and personality (Wilt, Grubbs, Exline, & Pargament, 2016).

Religious struggle can be defined as a struggle of conflict or tension concerning the sacred (Exline, 2013). The construct itself is multidimensional. Among the dimensions are divine struggle, demonic struggle, interpersonal struggle, moral struggle, doubt struggle, and ultimate meaning struggle (Exline, Pargament, Grubbs, & Yali, 2014). The construct being multidimensional is significant because this notion acknowledges its richness, depth, and complexity. A person's experience on religious struggle can vary according to types and number of struggles including links with perceived religiousness and personality (Wilt et al., 2016). To assess religious struggle, instruments had been developed, for example, the Religious and Spiritual Struggles scale (Exline et al., 2014). This scale had been used with a

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Muslim sample (Abu-Raiya, Exline, Pargament, & Agbaria, 2015). However, pertaining to this scale and many others, the demographics used in developing them tend to be Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (WEIRD). Hence, there is a plausible issue of cross-cultural validity when using these instruments to assess religious struggle. Due to how these instruments were constructed, questions may appear to doubt the appropriateness of such measuring tools in a Muslim or a non-WEIRD context.

Furthermore, despite the growth of interest, studies on religious struggle among Muslims are still limited. Until 2003, no empirical research on religious struggle among Muslims had been conducted (Abu-Raiya, Ayten, Agbaria, & Tekke, 2018). Existing studies focused too much on Christian samples, as well as on specific facets of religious struggle, i.e., divine struggle; even though there are other facets (Abu-Raiya et al., 2015). Today, researchers are still actively examining religious struggle in the context of Christians (e.g., Carter, 2019; Szcześniak & Timoszyk-Tomczak, 2020).

Taking all these into perspective, in comparison not much is known concerning the religious struggle of Muslims. It is inappropriate to use findings that are not based on Muslim respondents. The same argument is also argued on studies concerning Muslims that used instruments constructed based on other religious populations. There is still much to be explored in the research area of religious struggle among Muslims, especially young Muslims today.

Context and Rationale of the Current Study

Every aspect in a Muslim's life needs to be confined within an Islamic worldview, guided by the Qur'ān and the Prophetic Sunnah (for in-depth details on Islamic worldview, see Choudhury, 2019; Rassool, 2021). Going beyond this worldview and transgressing the Shari'ah parameters, such as viewing certain values as secularistically defined, are why and where issues will arise. Many of the religious struggles that Muslims experience are not simply due to the lack of understanding on *aqidah* (creeds or tenets), but it is due to these individuals partially or fully grounding their perspectives with a non-Islamic worldview. Such conflicts between Islamic and non-Islamic worldviews can cause a cognitive dissonance. This can lead to individuals claiming Islam to be incompatible with modernity and progress. However, this is an erroneous claim (Moten, 2011). The Islamic worldview's significance can be seen throughout history, being a driving force for progress (Badawi, 2002).

Muslims today are negotiating their religious identity through various ways (Kumar, Seay, & Karabenick, 2015). They do this without dismissing the importance of religion (Rizzo, Miglietta, Gattino, & Fedi, 2020). For Muslims who live in a society where secular values are a norm, they view secularism as a threat toward their identity (Mahmut, 2021). They opted for faith-based schools for their children to preserve and protect their religious values through the education system (Shah, 2012). These Muslims worry that when such things are subtly normalized, their children will potentially integrate secular values into their lives, as one of the building blocks of their worldview, without even realizing it goes against Islam. Their worldview will be besmirched by religiously contradicting ideas going as far as supporting these ideas, including the notion of separating religion from the various facets of life, such as negotiating Islam as merely symbolic and cultural (Rizzo et al., 2020). They turn Islam into purely personal, private, and individualistic in nature. It may even reach the point of tailoring and altering religious beliefs to suit one's beliefs and needs and making concessions to align *aqidah* with their secularistic worldview. An individualistic religious belief system is made to suit an individual's life, rather than religion framing and guiding a person's life.

This brings the context back to religious struggle where having an Islamic worldview is an important factor, argued to be acquired through education. The way knowledge is

transmitted is through formal and informal education. If either is lacking, then it will affect the individual's acquired knowledge. This can be detrimental. With regards to religious education, if it is inadequate, young Muslims will not be able to rationalize properly, come to terms with, or even address their experiences with religious struggles. With educational systems around the world conventionally being secular in nature, it is only some Muslims who had Islamic or religious education at the institutional level. An example in Southeast Asia is Brunei Darussalam with its two education systems. In the morning, students will undergo secular learning at public schools; in the afternoon, it is compulsory for them to attend religious public schools. Other countries such as Singapore (Mohd Nor, Senin, Mohd Khambali Hambali, & Ab Halim, 2017) and Indonesia (Syar'i, Akrim, & Hamdanah, 2020) have their Muslim populations turning toward specialized religious schools—i.e., *madrasah*—integrating secular education into their dominantly religious curriculum or one that is guided by a religious framework. In the west, faith-based schools are gaining more attention and are growing. Scholars have been advocating for Islamic schools in the West, as well as to improve and adapt their existing education system to suit contemporary needs through Islamic pedagogy, in achieving an Islamic worldview as the end outcome (Abdalla, Chown, & Abdullah, 2018). Regardless of where and how people implement Islamic-based education, the existence of an Islamic education curriculum helps to mitigate the impact of non-Islamic ideas and values by providing these young Muslims with essential knowledge concerning Islam (Shah, 2012). This can further solidify and strengthen their Islamic worldview.

In an ideal scenario, educational issues can be mitigated by providing young Muslims with adequate knowledge on Islam since childhood and then throughout their developmental stage in life. But what if Muslim parents can only provide limited education, especially in countries where Muslims are the minority? This is their concern (Shah, 2012). Even when minorities are confined within their own diasporas, individuals will still be influenced by peers, colleagues, and other groups in one's society, as well as other various aspects in life (Kumar et al., 2015). Even if they are living in Muslim majority countries, it is still not feasible to shield their children from being exposed to non-Islamic ideas and values. These issues of influence and exposure are particularly true, especially for young individuals. Taking one study as an example, undergraduates at universities are observed to be highly affected by religious struggles, and this may even affect their psychological wellbeing and religious growth (Bryant & Astin, 2008). At this stage, undergraduates are being exposed to various dialogues, ideas, and values capable of causing religious struggles and transforming their worldview (Bryant, 2011). Although in the mentioned study the participants were not Muslims, parallel assumptions on the demographic profiles can be made at this point. Young people or young Muslims are highly at risk to experience religious struggles.

Most importantly, the impact of religious struggle can be detrimental due to the doubts, questions, contradicting beliefs, and expectations of self and others. Understanding the construct of religious struggle specifically within the context of Muslims is necessary to address the issue properly (Abu Raiya & Pargament, 2010). Young Muslims are highly at risk to experience struggles of religious nature. This is particularly true in their struggle to maintain their religious beliefs and the lack of support available for them (Ahmed & Ezzeddine, 2009).

However, how can scholars explore the phenomenon among Muslims comprehensively? What framework can be used that had been developed based on a Muslim context? Existing literature cannot provide answers to these questions. There is a void in literature that needs to be filled first before the research area can be expanded further. Therefore, as a rationale of the current study, the presented discourse pointed toward the

necessity to develop a comprehensive framework in exploring the phenomenon of religious struggle among Muslims.

Research Aims and Questions of the Current Study

This study aims to expand the research area of religious struggle—and the broader area of religious experience—emphasizing on Muslims, especially young Muslims. In parallel to this general aim, the current study’s specific aim is to develop a comprehensive framework that can be used to explore in-depth the religious struggle phenomenon. This study will be guided by three research questions. Firstly, what is religious struggle as experienced by young Muslims? Secondly, how can we explain religious struggle? Thirdly, what do we know about the phenomenon of religious struggle and other relevant constructs? Consequently, through addressing the three research questions, findings will be synthesized, leading to a new framework. Albeit being acknowledged to be at its nascent stage, the framework can help to better explore and explain religious struggle, allowing a structurally better understanding of the phenomenon.

METHODS

Research Design

This empirical research was designed to be qualitative in nature. This study was conducted in accordance with generally accepted ethical principles, especially on informed consent, privacy, and confidentiality. There were several stages, which were detailed further later in the research analysis plan. Firstly, data collection was done through interviews conducted in Brunei Darussalam. The interviews were conducted with interviewees’ consents, and these were done periodically in the second quarter of 2021. Through a composite narrative, narrative analysis was done to identify relevant constructs, addressing the first research question. Secondly, existing literature was analyzed using method theory and domain theory analyses, respectively addressing the second and third research questions. Overall, the research design was developed to achieve both the general aim and the specific aim of this study as guided by the three research questions.

Interview Procedure

Informal interviews were conducted to elicit responses from six Malay Muslim interviewees in Brunei Darussalam, identified through a non-random convenience sampling. Individuals were randomly approached in a public setting and asked if they were willing to participate. Several of them were willing to be included in the study on the condition of their personal information being anonymous and confidential. Due to the nature of the study being on religious struggle—a very personal experience—data collection was done with minimal sociodemographic information being collected, i.e., only age range and gender. All interviewees affirmed that they are between the age of 20 and 29, with three identifying themselves as male and the others as female. Reaching the fourth interviewee, responses were noticeably saturated, with similar ideas being shared. During the fifth and sixth interview sessions, there was no new distinct addition to data.

Data Transformation

Interview-based qualitative data can be regarded as a researcher constructed narrative (McAlpine, 2016). In this present study, the interviewees’ responses were reconstructed into a single monologue using the composite narrative method (see Willis, 2019). This helped to create consistency, conciseness, and a good flow in understanding narratives of multiple individuals’ religious struggles. In a narrative, there is the issue of what makes it a real, true story as experienced by an interviewee (Moen, 2006). However, as there had been numerous

overlaps in key ideas in the stories told by the interviewees, it was deemed appropriate to reconstruct the information as a composite narrative, creating a single monologue hypothetically being told from the perspective of an individual; this individual was assigned the initial M. The monologue was then shared with consent among the interviewees for them to judge if this is their story. They were also asked if they had experienced any of the additional information in the reconstructed narrative they had not mentioned during the interview. All interviewees agreed they had experienced all, even if they had not mentioned some of them. They affirmed the monologue is their life story concerning religious struggle.

Research Analysis Plan

Multiple methods and analyses with discussion were done (see [Figure 1](#)). The research analysis plan was structured in the following manner: composite narrative, narrative analysis, method theory analysis, domain theory analysis, and synthesis.

With the data collected, a composite narrative in the form of a monologue was presented to provide insight into the phenomenon of religious struggle among young Muslims. Following the monologue, the story was contextualized through a narrative analysis. Constructs were identified during this analysis. A narrative analysis allows researchers to be informed through the stories or experiences as told by the interviewees. These stories or narratives typically have elements of temporal, meaning, and social. This method helps to contextualize the story, allowing analysis to then identify constructs present in the narrative.

Next, discussions of method theory and domain theory of the phenomenon were conducted. Method theory is the lens used in viewing a phenomenon or the relationship between variables ([Jaakkola, 2020; Lukka & Vinnari, 2014](#)). These include existing theories and perspectives, from within and beyond the field. Domain theory is the knowledge concerning the phenomenon itself or relevant constructs ([Jaakkola, 2020; Lukka & Vinnari, 2014](#)), or a collection of constructs relevant to the phenomenon ([Andreasen, Howard, & Bruun, 2014](#)). Finally, findings were synthesized and discussed.



Figure 1. Research analysis plan

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A Monologue on Religious Struggle

My name is M. I am a Muslim, a young Muslim in my 20s. From the day I was born to my teenage years, I've been a Muslim. My God is Allahﷻ, Prophet Muḥammadﷺ is His Messenger, and Islam is my religion. I never doubt my religion during that period of growing up. But things start to change ever since entering university. I begin to meet different, interesting people. I listen to various ideas from peers, encountering myriad values. I debated against countless intellectuals, scholars, and academics. I am exposed to new values such as individualism, liberalism, and hedonism. It is not that we do not have them in our culture, but we put groups, society, and collectivism above them. We prioritize the latter over the former. Life is not about an individual, but it is about a group of us.

I start to rebel. I question things. Take this as an example. People in the West don't really have to pray. Even if they do and they go to a congregation, they only do it once a week. But for Muslims, we do a congregation every Friday, and we still need to pray daily. I doubted the need for praying five times a day. If they can do it weekly, why must I do it daily? Even more so, five times a day? If I must pray to God, I want to do it because I want to. I don't want to do it just because my parents are telling me to, or what society expects me to. I believe praying should only be done if we are sincere to do it. That is what I thought. Even if I want to, sometimes I forget because of day-to-day things. Sometimes I even pray throughout the day several times with only a single ablution. All these do make me feel guilty. Am I a bad Muslim? Can I still call myself as one?

It is not just on prayer. It is also about my attire. I am taught to cover my *'awrah*, to dress modestly. If I go out without covering up properly, my parents are going to reprimand me. But I disagree on this. I've known people saying they will do so when they are ready. They don't want to do it out of external expectation or being instructed to do so. I do get what they are saying. Even so, I feel guilty no matter how I try to justify my decision or rationalize my situation.

This also applies to when bad things happen to me. When I don't cover my *'awrah*, and then something bad happens to me, I attribute it to my sin. But when more bad things happen to me, even when I wear modestly and I pray, it makes me confused. I always question this. Why can't good things happen when I follow the rules? Why do bad things still happen? Am I beyond saving, and that God does not love me? I am not sure.

Another struggle I have is in having doubts. I can't seem to comprehend the concept of God, His nature, and His intention. How can God allow pain and suffering if He loves us? Am I being punished? Has God abandoned me? With all these suffering and despair, how can I still believe in Him? At times, I question why women cannot be an imam. I ask the rationale behind inequality with regards to the husband's income being part of the wife's income, but not the other way around. Sometimes I gave up and just tell myself that maybe I just don't understand things properly. All these doubts make me feel distant not only from God, but also from other Muslims. I feel I am not a good fit to be with them, because I feel inferior. I feel small. I feel like I am the black sheep among all these good Muslims. I'm not saying they excluded me. They did not abandon me. But I feel I am unworthy to be among them.

I also feel religion should be a personal thing. Regardless of what people do, why should we care? But Islam has so many restrictions, such as on the prohibition of drinking alcohol and getting intoxicated, covering the *'awrah*, and being physically intimate with others. Personally, I believe there is nothing wrong if they don't hurt other people. But the religion says differently. Hence, I've always struggled—and still are struggling—on these. The contradiction makes me feel disconnected from Islam and other Muslims. Even so, I try to be a good person, because I think that is the right thing to do.

In the long run, I feel bad. I try to be a good person. I want to be a good Muslim, even if I still sinned. I know I am not a perfect Muslim. I am trying, but it is difficult. Even though I say I believe it is enough to be a good person, I still do not know where I really stand on this. I'm still not sure. Every day, I am still struggling on religious matters and my own Muslim identity.

Constructs Identified through a Narrative Analysis

The fictional character M told a story of religious struggle. M began by providing an introductory childhood background, growing up, and life in university. The individual claimed the importance of Allahﷻ, the Prophetﷺ, and Islam in life. M never did doubt the religion and its teaching. This remained true until M went to university. All sorts of people, values, and ideas entered M's life. This seems to cause doubts of religious nature. M started to have religious struggles. This is concurrent with past studies on Christians where those who entered universities are more susceptible and highly at risk of experiencing this (Bryant & Astin, 2008). Religious struggle is the key construct that this narrative analysis is examining.

Prior to entering university, M never questioned anything about religion. M obediently fulfilled religious obligations in the past as a result of experiencing religious socialization throughout life. Using the lens of sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1980), it can be posited that growing up, M had learned religion from family and peers. This learning process also creates a sort of social religious expectation from people for M to act accordingly. Whatever that M believes in, as part of the acquired knowledge, M's personal religious beliefs did not contradict with social religious expectations. This was possible due to the highly restrictive nature of the pre-university life of M.

Through the contextualization of the monologue, particularly the learning process during M's developmental stage in life, two constructs are identified. M is being affected by 1) social religious expectations and 2) personal religious beliefs (or simply personal beliefs). When both are congruent with one another, as observed during M's pre-university life, there is no religious struggle. M did not doubt Islam or God at all. There are no unmet expectations of religious nature.

However, the situation changed once M had been exposed to contradictory beliefs and ideas at the university level. With various people coming from different backgrounds, coupled with unrestricted access to digital media and social media that are dominantly western, it becomes an issue. New beliefs, novel ideas, and non-conforming values are becoming more accessible; they are everywhere and unavoidable. As such, M started to socially acquire new contradictory knowledge, resulting in a change of personal beliefs, be it religious or non-religious. This is supported by current literature, although using Christian samples (Bryant, 2011).

It was then M started to question things. Such acts of questioning and debating can lead to religious struggle and religious transformation (Bryant, 2011). M began to experience a mismatch between what society expects in terms of religion and what M personally believes in. Cognitive dissonance theory argues that this discrepancy will create mental discomfort (Festinger, 1957), and in this context, it is a state of religious struggle. At the same time, M still viewed Islam as important, not dismissing it entirely. The notion that religion is still being viewed as significant by Muslims even when they are negotiating their religious identity in a secular society is supported by existing literature (Rizzo et al., 2020); although in this case, M was in a religious society.

In the monologue, this struggle was apparent. M brought up several issues that contradict social religious expectations. It causes M extreme mental discomfort. The emotions M felt included feeling guilty, bad, and even to the point of questioning M's own Muslim identity. These negative consequences are not foreign, as they had been observed in studies

using Christian samples (Bryant & Astin, 2008; Szcześniak & Timoszyk-Tomczak, 2020). Studies using Muslim samples also noted the link between religious struggle and wellbeing (Abu-Raiya et al., 2018; Abu Raiya & Pargament, 2010). Some of the identified struggle constructs M was experiencing were on rituals and practices such as prayer and covering 'awrah. Other struggles were theological in nature, and some concerned morality and the supernatural. For example, M was questioning God's nature and existence, reflecting a doubt struggle, and His motive for allowing hardship, pain, and suffering in this world, signifying a moral struggle. Additionally, M experienced a feeling of inferiority and unworthiness to be part of the religious community, indicating a belonging struggle.

There was also the construct of reward-punishment struggle in the monologue. M had this notion that good deeds should be rewarded with good rewards, while sinful actions should be punished. However, social religious expectations—as perceived by M—dictate Muslims need to be accepting even if bad things happen. Hence, M was experiencing mental distress due to a mismatch between social religious expectations and personal religious beliefs. While there are some truths in this notion, it is far more complex. Many concepts in religion are not properly comprehended. For example, proportionality and immanent justice biases are not something foreign or unique; theological incorrectness can be seen in Muslim societies concerning the concept of *Mizan* (literal translation: balance) (see Al-Issa, Krauss, Roslan, & Abdullah, 2021), which needs to be addressed, as part of an Islamic worldview.

Another identified construct was an existential or ultimate meaning struggle. M questioned the meaning behind life, and if there was a greater purpose and meaning in it. This shows M's personal beliefs may have not been solid and stable enough, and are contradictory, compared to social religious expectations that argue the material life or the worldly life is simply a precursor to the afterlife. M may also not have a strong anchoring on purpose and meaning in life. Hence, meaning-making (Zarzycka & Zietek, 2019) is identified as one of the key constructs in exploring religious struggle. If the meaning-making construct can lead to an Islamic meaning of life, this can minimize the risk of having a struggle.

Therefore, based on the monologue, several constructs had been identified in relation to religious struggle. These constructs are rituals and practices struggle, doubt struggle, moral struggle, belonging struggle, reward-punishment struggle, and existential or ultimate meaning struggle. Although these constructs or facets of religious struggle are still at the preliminary identification phase, the outcome of having a mismatch between social religious expectations and personal religious beliefs (or simply personal beliefs) is determined to be a state of unmet religious expectations, leading to having one or more religious struggles.

Method Theory Analysis

Method theory is an approach or method of employing lens or lenses to be used in viewing a phenomenon or the relationship between variables, including explaining them through theories within and outside the field (Jaakkola, 2020; Lukka & Vinnari, 2014). As part of the method theory analysis, two theories are identified, employed, and then discussed to explain religious struggle: the sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1980) and the cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957). These two theories formed the basis of method theory analysis, framing the framework of this discussion.

Firstly, social interaction and society itself contribute to the development of individuals, being the basis of the sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1980). Unlike many theories, sociocultural theory acknowledges the diversity and richness of cultural variances. Everything a person learns, they learn it socially; this comes in the form of knowledge development and transfers from parents and peers, and education at schools, as well as generated through interactional experiences (Argyle, 2000). This social learning will vary according to society's cultural norms and learning methods. Within the lens of the theory, this proposition asserts the

importance of understanding religious struggle stemming from social interaction, learning, and acquired knowledge within a Muslim context, without trying to assume universality, acknowledging cultural variances.

Secondly, an unmet expectation is a trigger, as can be explained by the cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957). An unmet expectation can lead to and is the reason behind a person experiencing conflict, strain, and tension at the cognitive level. It causes mental discomfort. This assertion is not novel. The cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) argues the reason behind the state of mental discomfort is due to conflict caused by two opposing beliefs. This theory, although over half a century old, is still widely discussed, applied, and being improved further (Vaidis & Bran, 2019). Using the theory for its explanatory functionality, this paper asserts a proposition where the reason for experiencing religious struggle is because of unmet expectations. Unmet expectations come into existence due to the conflict between social religious expectations and personal religious beliefs (or simply personal beliefs). Therefore, it is posited that unmet religious expectations act as a catalyst for religious struggle.

Following the explanatory contextualization of religious struggle, it is argued a Muslim's cognition will be affected due to the discrepancy and contradiction between expectation and reality. Framing this using the cognitive dissonance theory, the situation results in a state of mental discomfort; in this context, the situation triggers religious struggle. Furthermore, while religious expectation comes externally, reality is who the person is and what the person believes in. Both 'who' and 'what' are developed throughout a Muslim's life, from childhood to the present, with knowledge acquired through social interaction and society—including formal education—being the 'how' aspect. This is where the sociocultural theory can frame the social learning aspect and cultural variances resulting in individual development.

Domain Theory Analysis

Although the method theory in the previous discussion can act as the lens on the phenomenon of religious struggle, domain theory is an approach of examining the substantial knowledge in the field (Lukka & Vinnari, 2014). Domain theory concerns discussing the key elements of the phenomenon and constructs relevant to it (Jaakkola, 2020). After exploring the phenomenon through the narrative earlier, resulting in preliminary identification of facets of religious struggle and other relevant constructs— i.e., constructs leading to unmet religious expectation and then to religious struggle—one question arises. What do we know about the phenomenon of religious struggle and other relevant constructs?

Following a religious struggle, there can be a religious transformation (Bryant, 2011; Bryant & Astin, 2008). A proposition is made. There can be two outcomes, either growth or decline in religiousness. Presently, the two constructs are respectively labeled as religious awakening and religious degradation. Similar to how religious struggle can be one or more, an individual may also experience either one of the two, or be viewed as a net balance of the two constructs resulting in a net change of religiousness transformation. The state can also oscillate, going back and forth. Fluctuating religiousness of the person can also have consequences. The influence may be in terms of moderation or mediation (Szcześniak & Timoszyk-Tomczak, 2020).

Most studies on group differences and outcomes tend to be focusing on religious struggle of Christians. Even so, there are still studies on Muslims, albeit limited. In terms of demographics, one study observed men having a higher level of religious struggle compared to women (Abu-Raiya, Pargament, Mahoney, & Stein, 2008). However, another study did not find any gender differences (Ai, Peterson, & Huang, 2003). Researchers also observed the link of religious struggle with consequences in life. For example, a high level of religious

struggle can predict not only anxiety but also a low level of life satisfaction; however, this varies regionally (Abu-Raiya et al., 2018). When individuals practice religious positive coping style, struggles and traumas experienced in life can be mitigated, as positive coping is associated with hope and optimism (Ai et al., 2003). Islamically-based therapy can also be integrated as part of an intervention (Uyun, Jaufalaily, Witruk, & Kurniawan, 2020). Overall, at this point, existing literature on Muslims and the consequences of religious struggle in life is still limited. More studies need to be done within the context of Muslims. Hence, there is a need for a framework that can be used in exploring the phenomenon and relevant construct further.

Synthesis of Findings: The Religious Struggle Framework (RSF)

Through synthesizing the narrative analysis, as well as method theory and domain theory analyses pertaining to the phenomenon, a framework is developed. I am proposing the religious struggle framework (RSF) (see Figure 2).

The framework begins with two constructs: social religious expectations and personal religious beliefs (or simply personal beliefs). Through an interaction of the two constructs, specifically resulting in a mismatch or a discrepancy, the outcome is termed as unmet religious expectations. This further leads to the construct of religious struggle, characterized by a mental discomfort or tension for the individual due to the unmet religious expectations. This religious struggle will have an influence over an individual's life. At this stage, the struggle will create a state of increase or decrease in a person's religiousness, respectively termed as religious awakening and religious degradation. The two states of religiousness may act as direct predictors toward life consequences or one's Muslim identity, as well as possibly having moderation or mediation influence. A meaning-making construct is also proposed here. It acts as a common link between religious struggle, religious awakening, religious degradation, and life consequences. Another counterpart of the meaning-making construct is potentially a religious meaning in life or an Islamic meaning in life; this is not included in the framework, in order to characterize the construct of meaning-making as an enabling construct i.e., how an individual creates meaning. However, depending on the research design, either one or both meaning-making—as an enabler and having attributive mechanism—and religious meaning in life—as a contributor or predictor—can be used in the RSF.

With how links between variables may or may not exist—weak or strong—due to individual, societal, cultural, and contextual variances, the proposed framework should be treated as a flexible, adaptable, and modifiable general framework. The RSF can be employed as it is or used selectively in terms of constructs researchers are interested in. At the same time, the framework can be adapted to suit specific contexts. There is also a possibility for RSF to be adapted within the spiritual context, instead of religious context. In terms of operationalization and measurements, no instruments are constructed or prescribed in this current study to be used specifically in the RSF.

Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

Several limitations and recommendations are presented. The data collection of this study was done with interviewees from the demographic of young Muslims in Brunei. This may limit the identification power on determining the facets of religious struggle only within this demographic. People from different age groups may have different struggles; these struggles may not be observed in the demographic of this present study's participants. Furthermore, findings are more to the framework aspect rather than conceptualizing and operationalizing religious struggle and other identified relevant constructs. Researchers can address all these limitations in future studies. Researchers can design their studies with a more representative sampling of the Muslim population in Brunei, along with conceptualizing and

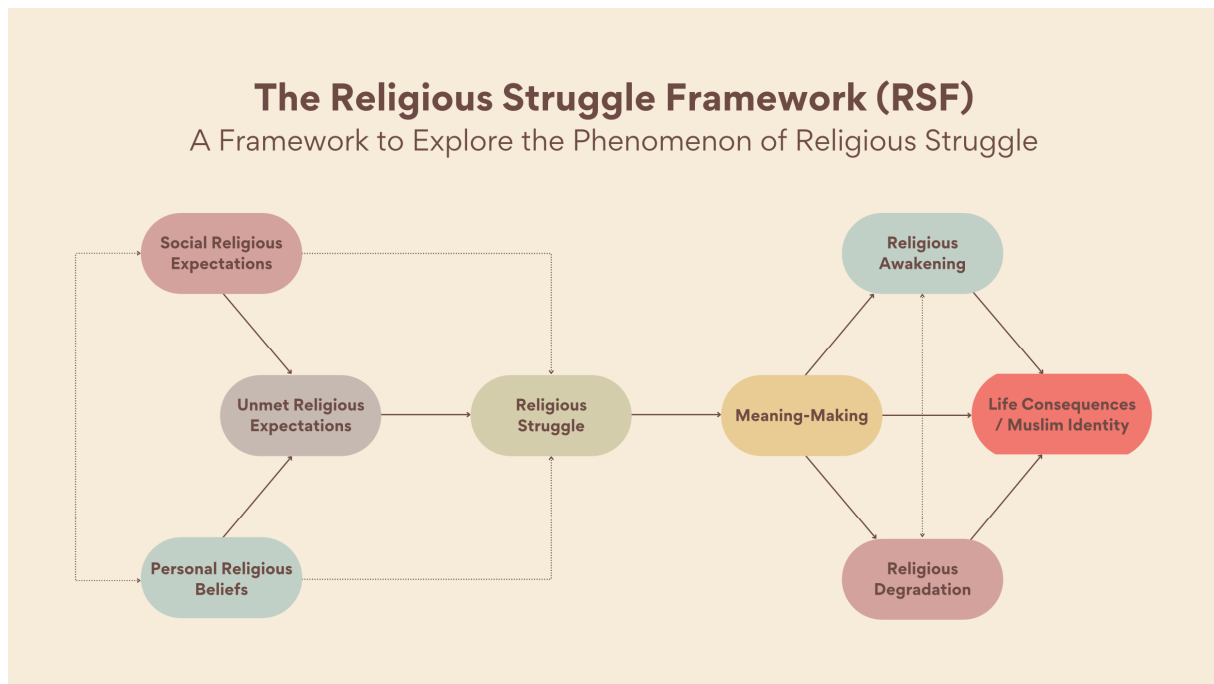


Figure 2. The religious struggle framework (RSF)

operationalizing the variables thoroughly. This can also be done globally to determine the various types of religious struggle experienced by Muslims regionally, if there are any differences. Researchers can also further advance the field of study by developing instruments for each construct for empirical assessments.

Although the RSF is currently still in its nascent stage, it has its merits. Researchers are advised to use the framework in its entirety. However, this also depends on the needs of researchers. This paper acknowledges the dynamicity and evolutionary nature of the framework, being adaptive and flexible. The RSF can be adapted with the inclusion of other relevant variables if the act is deemed to be suitable and necessary to improve the design. This flexibility is pertinent in exploring the phenomenon of religious struggle because the nature and dynamicity of Muslim societies and individuals are intricate, complex, and convoluted. Muslims in Brunei may be different from Muslims in the United States. Muslims in Indonesia may be different from the ones in Malaysia. The struggles can also vary according to other demographic characteristics. However, with the RSF being flexible without having any specific instruments attached—aside from constructs—this means that it is possible to use any instruments relevant to the framework if they can be assessed in tandem, with good reliability and validity. Additionally, individual differences such as personality traits are an area of interest and have potential for researchers to delve into. Other differences that can be examined include gender, age, region, and ideological beliefs.

The RSF's applicability is not restricted by the sample population interviewed. It can also be employed without being confined geographically, such as using the framework on Muslims outside the context of Brunei. It is also possible to be employed in research sampling non-Muslims. Furthermore, by comprehending the pathways of religious struggle and its antecedents and consequences, it provides a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. Because of this, individuals may use the RSF to understand their own personal situation. Additionally, religious struggle can be predicted and modeled based on collected data. By understanding religious struggle comprehensively, it can provide valuable data to relevant parties, be it for further research, practice, or policymaking. Having such information can allow detrimental issues arising from Muslims experiencing religious struggles to be mitigated, and even be addressed and prevented before it even arises.

CONCLUSION

A new framework to explore the phenomenon of religious struggle is proposed: the religious struggle framework, which is abbreviated as the RSF. The synthesis of data in this study—based on findings through narrative, method theory, and domain theory analyses—led to the development of the RSF. Although the RSF can be used with various demographics, the framework is highly useful in understanding the younger demographics who are greatly at risk of experiencing doubt struggle, moral struggle, and many other facets of religious struggle. Presently, studies on religious struggle among Muslims are considerably limited. Therefore, this framework provides a novel addition to existing literature and as a means or a tool to be used. Researchers can employ the RSF with either quantitative approach or qualitative approach or both approaches in a single research design. The framing of this study explicitly concerned Muslims as the population of interest, with emphasis on young Muslims. Nonetheless, the findings of this research, especially the RSF, are theorized to be applicable beyond this population and may even be cross-culturally valid, due to its flexible, adaptable, and modifiable nature.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS STATEMENT

Nur Amali Aminnuddin was responsible for all aspects of this research, from the design and implementation of the research to the data collection and analysis, and the writing of the manuscript.

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