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# The Experience of Islamic Religious Education in the Formation and Meaning-Making of Self-Concept Among Muslim Men with Same-Sex Orientation: A Case Study from the Perspective of Islamic Educational Psychology in Cirebon

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examines how experiences of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) in the family and school relate to self-concept formation and meaning-making among Muslim men with same-sex orientation, from the perspective of Islamic educational psychology. A qualitative case study was conducted in Cirebon, Indonesia, in 2026. Two participants, pseudonymized as Raka and Arya, were selected purposively and interviewed twice using a semi-structured guide. Data were analyzed thematically, and source triangulation compared the experiences of both participants. Five themes emerged: IRE experiences in the family and school, the social environment in self-concept formation, meaning-making of self-concept, tension between religious understanding and personal experience, and the meaning of IRE and participants' expectations. Both participants continued to regard Islam as a guide for life and maintained religious practices, while experiencing personal struggles that were not easily reconciled with their religious understanding. Self-concept formation involved family relationships, peers, emotional experiences, and life journeys, not a single factor. The study does not claim a causal relationship between religious education and sexual orientation. The findings suggest that IRE needs a contextual, dialogical approach that includes communication, emotional support, and reflection.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Self-concept is an important part of individual development because it is related to how a person understands, evaluates, and gives meaning to themselves. Self-concept is not formed separately from the environment but develops through interactions among personal experiences, social relationships, and reflection processes throughout life. Research on identity development shows that the meaning individuals attach to themselves may change

along with social experiences and individual development [1], [2]. Adolescence is an important period because individuals begin to explore their identity, social relationships, values, and place in their environment.

In the context of Islamic education, self-concept formation is not only related to psychological dimensions but also to spiritual dimensions and religious values. Islamic Religious Education provides knowledge about faith, worship, morality, responsibility, and values that serve as guidelines for life. Ideally, the educational process does not stop at mastering knowledge but continues toward internalizing values in attitudes and everyday life. Therefore, a person's experience in receiving religious education can become part of how the individual understands themselves and gives meaning to their life experiences [3], [4].

The issue becomes more complex when religious values that have been received by an individual encounter personal experiences that are not easily explained through a simple framework. These situations may arise when a person tries to understand the relationship between religious beliefs, family expectations, social experiences, and personal experiences. In the study of the psychology of religion, religion can function not only as a source of norms but also as a source of meaning, reflection, and coping when individuals face difficult experiences [5]. Thus, the relationship between religious education and self-concept needs to be viewed as a dynamic process rather than merely as a relationship between religious knowledge and behavior.

This context is relevant to examine among Muslim men with same-sex orientation. Several studies have shown that the relationship between religious identity and experiences of sexual orientation can be complex. Jaspal and Cinnirella [6], for example, showed that gay Muslim men may experience a need to develop coherence between their religious identity and sexual experiences. Other research on queer Muslims has also identified experiences of conflict, social pressure, coping strategies, and efforts to maintain relationships with religion.

In the Indonesian context, Ramadhan [7] showed that the experiences of Muslims with same-sex attraction can be understood through the relationship between beliefs, personal experiences, religious authority, and interpretations of God's will. Research on bisexual Muslim men in Indonesia has also shown that religious experiences are not always understood negatively; some participants continue to view Islam and spirituality as important aspects of their lives, despite experiences of receiving limited support from Muslim environments. Other research on LGBT Muslims in Indonesia has indicated the existence of a negotiation process when individuals attempt to understand the relationship between religious identity and experiences of sexual orientation [8].

These studies provide a basis for understanding that religious experiences and experiences of sexual orientation should not be viewed as two completely separate aspects. However, research on Muslims with same-sex orientation has focused more on identity, negotiations between religion and sexuality, value conflicts, or coping strategies. Research that specifically positions the experience of Islamic Religious Education within the family and school as part of the process of self-concept formation and meaning-making remains relatively limited. Therefore, there is room to connect studies of self-concept, religious

education experiences, religious identity, and personal experiences from the perspective of Islamic educational psychology [9].

This study uses a contextual case study approach, positioning participants' experiences as the primary source of understanding. This approach is not intended to judge the participants' sexual orientation, but rather to understand how experiences of religious education, family, peers, and life journeys emerge in the process of understanding and making meaning of the self. This position matters because it prevents the research from reducing participants' experiences to a matter of right or wrong, instead viewing them as complex educational, psychological, social, and spiritual experiences [10].

Based on this background, this study is guided by three research questions: (1) How do participants experience Islamic Religious Education through the family and school?; (2) How are these experiences related to the formation of participants' self-concepts?; and (3) How do participants make meaning of the relationship between religious understanding and personal experiences in their lives?

This study is theoretically important because it can broaden the field of Islamic educational psychology by incorporating personal and social experiences as part of the educational process. Practically, this study can inform IRE teachers, families, and counselors in developing more contextual religious communication that considers students' social, emotional, and spiritual dimensions. Ethically, this study emphasizes the importance of an educational space that allows individuals to speak, reflect, and receive support without diminishing the religious principles that form part of the context of Islamic education.

## 2. METHOD

### 2.1. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative approach with a case study design. A case study was selected because the research focuses on complex and contextual experiences concerning the relationship between Islamic Religious Education, self-concept formation, social experiences, and religious meaning-making. This approach allows participants' experiences to be understood within real-life contexts, rather than separated from their family, school, peer, and life-course environments [11].

The study was conducted in Cirebon, Indonesia, in 2026. The study did not aim to determine a causal relationship between Islamic Religious Education and sexual orientation, but rather to understand how religious education experiences emerge in the process of self-concept formation and meaning-making.

### 2.2. Research Participants

Participants were purposively selected based on their suitability for the study's focus. The participants consisted of two Muslim men with personal experiences related to same-sex orientation who were willing to share their experiences of Islamic Religious Education and their self-understanding. To protect their confidentiality, the pseudonyms Raka and Arya were used [12].

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

| Participant | Gender | Religion | Age | Identity in the Study | Domicile | Education | Occupation |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Raka | Male | Islam | 27 | Pseudonym | Cirebon | Senior High School | Private employee |
| Arya | Male | Islam | 42 | Pseudonym | Cirebon | Junior High School | Driver |

The selection of two male participants followed the characteristics of the participants available in the study. Because the study was not designed to represent all Muslims with same-sex orientation, the findings are understood as contextual case experiences.

### 2.3. Data Collection Technique

The researcher collected research data through in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide. The researcher interviewed each participant twice, with each session lasting approximately 30–40 minutes. The researcher conducted the interviews face-to-face at each participant's home in a relaxed atmosphere to help participants express their experiences and perspectives more openly. The researcher conducted the interviews in Indonesian and recorded them on a mobile phone to facilitate transcription and data analysis. The interview recordings were used solely for research purposes and were not distributed to other parties [13].

### 2.4. Research Ethics Procedure

Before the interviews, the researcher explained the study's purpose, the interview process, data use, and the confidentiality of participants' identities and interview results. Participants were given the opportunity to agree to or refuse the recording of the interviews and to decline to answer questions they considered uncomfortable. The participants' identities were concealed through the use of the pseudonyms Raka and Arya. Interview recordings and data were stored by the researcher and used only for academic purposes and were not distributed to other parties [14].

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The analysis stages included repeated readings of the interview transcripts, identifying relevant data, initial coding, grouping codes by meaning, developing themes, comparing Raka's and Arya's experiences, and interpreting the findings from the perspective of Islamic educational psychology.

The analysis maintained the differences between each participant's experiences so that one participant's experience was not overused to explain the other's. The researcher also considered the possibility of subjective interpretation by distinguishing between statements made by the participants and the researcher's interpretation of the data [15].

The researcher conducted source triangulation by comparing information from the two participants. Triangulation was used to identify similarities, differences, and distinctive experiences emerging from the interview data.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study involved two participants, Raka and Arya, who had different experiences of Islamic Religious Education within their families and schools as well as different social experiences. The interview findings revealed similarities and differences in the two participants' experiences, particularly regarding religious education, social environments, self-concept formation, religious meaning-making, and expectations regarding religious education. Based on the thematic analysis of the interview data, five main themes related to the research focus were identified: experiences of IRE in the family and school, the social environment in self-concept formation, experiences and meaning-making of self-concept, the tension between religious understanding and personal experience, and the meaning of IRE and participants' expectations regarding education.

Table 2. Comparison of Interview Findings from Raka and Arya

| No. | Aspect | Findings for Raka | Findings for Arya |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Experience of IRE in the family | Since childhood, received habituation in prayer, Qur'an recitation, manners, morality, and reminders from the family. | Limited experience with parents; later spent more time with siblings but continued to receive habituation in prayer. |
| 2 | Experience of IRE at school | Participated well in IRE lessons and understood religious material. | Considered his experience of IRE at school good, although some of the material was no longer well remembered. |
| 3 | Social environment | Since childhood, interacted more frequently with girls and later found friends who provided support. | During childhood, interacted more frequently with boys and later found a peer environment with similar experiences. |
| 4 | Self-concept formation | Influenced by friendships, family experiences, emotional experiences, and life journey. | Stated that the peer environment influenced the way he viewed himself. |
| 5 | Meaning of religion | Islam continued to be viewed as a guide for life, and religious practices continued to be performed. | Islam continued to be viewed as a guide for life, and religious practices continued to be performed. |
| 6 | Personal and religious struggle | Experienced difficulty integrating religious understanding with personal experiences and had previously wished to change. | Sometimes reflected on his condition but tended to be more limited in sharing personal experiences. |
| 7 | Expectations regarding education and family | Expected the family to provide more attention and IRE, involving not only theory but also support. | Expected family and religious teachers to provide attention, guidance, and moral reinforcement. |

Based on Table 2, several similarities and differences can be identified between Raka's and Arya's experiences. Similarities were particularly evident in their experiences of receiving Islamic Religious Education, the influence of peer environments on their self-understanding, the continued maintenance of their religious identities, and the continuation of religious practices. Differences were evident in their family experiences, their level of openness in sharing personal experiences, and the ways in which each participant interpreted the condition they experienced.

### 3.1. Experiences of Islamic Religious Education in the Family and School

The experience of Islamic Religious Education (IRE) within the family became an important part of the life experiences of both participants from childhood, although its form and intensity differed. Raka explained that from childhood he received religious habituation through prayer, Qur'an recitation, manners, and morality. His family also reminded him of religious obligations. Meanwhile, Arya's religious education from his parents was relatively limited because he lived with them for a short time and spent most of his later life with his siblings. Nevertheless, Arya continued to receive religious habituation, particularly through prayer. Raka also explained that since childhood, he had experienced several things that he considered different from most boys, such as his preferences for certain play activities. These experiences later became part of a longer process of self-understanding.

From the perspective of Islamic education, the family is one of the earliest environments for introducing and forming religious values. Religious education involves not only transmitting knowledge but also habituation, role modeling, and internalizing values in everyday life. Marsh and Shavelson [16] position Islamic education as an important part of developing a personality based on faith and morality. Rosenberg [17] and Santrock [18] emphasize that religious education has an internalization dimension involving cognitive, affective, and spiritual aspects. Thus, Raka and Arya's experiences indicate that the family is not only where religious knowledge is acquired but also an environment that shapes individuals' habits and early experiences in making meaning of religion.

For Raka, the influence of family religious education remains visible in his religious life today. He stated that he still performs the five daily prayers, gives zakat, and fulfills other obligations as a Muslim. He also said his family's attention and reminders continue to influence his religious life. However, Raka realized that religious knowledge and habituation were not always easy to apply across all aspects of his life. He described himself as "just an ordinary human being" and stated that sometimes something he believed should not be done was "not controllable." He also associated this condition with his feeling that his "taqwa is lacking." This experience shows a process of reflection between the religious values he received since childhood and the personal experiences he is currently undergoing.

These findings can be understood through [19], [20], which argue that religious education does not stop at mastering knowledge but requires internalizing values in individual life. In Raka's case, religious knowledge and practice remain present in his life, but their application becomes complex when confronted with personal experiences. Thus, the existence of religious knowledge cannot automatically be understood as an indication that all of these values have been fully internalized in every aspect of an individual's life.

Unlike Raka, Arya chose not to explain his religious practices openly. He viewed such matters as private matters between himself and God. This attitude indicates that religious experiences are not always expressed in the same way by every individual. Although information regarding Arya's religious practices was limited, the experiences he

shared indicate that religious education remains part of his life journey. The difference in openness between the two participants also demonstrates that religious meaning-making is personal and can be influenced by each individual's life experiences.

The experience of IRE was also obtained by both participants through the school environment. Raka stated that he participated in IRE lessons quite well. Arya also described his experience of IRE at school as "good," but because of the considerable passage of time, he acknowledged that he no longer remembered much of the material he had learned. Neither participant identified a particular religious teacher who had left a strong impression on them. Raka instead more strongly remembered the experience of Qur'an recitation with friends when he was young. This finding indicates that religious education at school is not always remembered through a particular teacher or learning material, but may remain meaningful through social experiences and habituation that accompany the educational process.

In understanding IRE materials related to morality, the identities of men and women, and human relationships, Raka stated that he understood the material relatively well. He even continued to communicate certain values to his sisters and nieces, such as the importance of wearing the hijab and covering the aurah. However, at the same time, he acknowledged a difference between the theoretical understanding he had acquired and the reality of his personal life. He could understand the religious material but found it difficult to apply that understanding to his own life. This condition illustrates a gap between the participant's religious knowledge and personal experience.

In relation to value internalization in Islamic education, these findings suggest that religious education is more complex than simply transmitting knowledge. Bandura [21] emphasizes the role of Islamic education in shaping personality and morality, while [22] and [23] view religious education as a process involving knowledge, attitudes, and appreciation of values. In Raka's experience, the cognitive aspect in the form of understanding IRE materials appears relatively strong, but the application and meaning-making of those values encounter personal experiences that are not simple. Therefore, these findings do not indicate that religious education has no influence, but rather demonstrate that the relationship between religious knowledge, value appreciation, and personal experience can develop dynamically.

Overall, IRE experiences in the family and school remained part of both participants' religious lives. The family provided habituation and reminders concerning religious obligations, while the school provided learning experiences and religious knowledge. However, each participant later reinterpreted these experiences in light of broader life events. For Raka, this process was evident through reflection on the relationship between religious knowledge, religious practice, and personal experience. Meanwhile, Arya communicated religious meaning-making more cautiously because he viewed some aspects of his religious experience as private matters. Thus, these findings reinforce the understanding that religious education should be viewed not merely as a process of delivering material but also as an ongoing process of meaning-making through interactions among family, school, social environment, and individual life experiences.

### 3.2. The Social Environment in Self-Concept Formation

Beyond family and school, the social environment emerged as an important context in both participants' experiences. The interview findings show that friendship experiences and social environments also provided spaces for participants to understand and make meaning of themselves. Raka explained that since childhood he had played and interacted more frequently with girls than with boys. In adolescence, he met a friend he considered to have similar experiences, who provided a sense of support. Arya, meanwhile, had a different childhood experience because he played with boys more often. In adulthood, he joined a peer environment where others had similar experiences.

Both participants stated that their peer environment significantly influenced how they viewed themselves. They felt supported by their current social environment. This acceptance provided both participants with a sense of comfort in living their lives. In this context, the social environment can be understood as an interactional space that provides individuals with social and emotional experiences that shape how they understand themselves.

Raka's experience shows that his meaning-making of himself was not only shaped by his peer environment but also by family experiences and his life journey as a whole. When asked how his life experiences had shaped the way he understood himself, Raka explained:

"For me, from childhood until now, what has shaped me like this is that I feel I have lost the role of my family; although I was continually reminded to worship, I felt that it was not warm enough. In addition, I feel that my older siblings have become busy with their own lives, my parents have grown old, I have to take care of my daily life myself, I feel burdened, while I feel that I have no place to return to, and I feel that my feminine side wants to be cared for again. So far, I feel comfortable with the person I am now because I feel alive and loved." (Raka, interview, 2026).

This statement shows that Raka understands the formation of himself through experiences occurring in various social environments. He mentioned not only friendships but also experiences with his family, his parents' condition, relationships with siblings, daily life burdens, and his need to receive attention and affection. Thus, Raka's social experience in self-concept formation is complex and cannot be separated from relational experiences that have occurred since childhood.

Meanwhile, Arya's experience shows that his social environment also changed throughout his life. During childhood, he more frequently played with boys. However, in adulthood, he encountered a peer environment of people with similar experiences. In that environment, Arya found space to interact with people whom he perceived as having similar experiences. Nevertheless, Arya tended to share his personal experiences more cautiously. When asked how his life experiences had shaped his self-understanding, he only smiled and did not answer. This response was retained as part of the research data and indicates that each participant had a different level of openness in sharing personal experiences.

The findings on the influence of peer environments are consistent with [23] and [24], who explain that self-concept develops dynamically through individuals'

psychological and social experiences. Individuals understand themselves through various experiences and interactions occurring within their social environments. Fowler [25] also positions the social environment as an important part of the process through which individuals understand and develop identity because interactions with others can provide responses, acceptance, and social experiences that are subsequently interpreted by individuals.

In this study, the social environment cannot be understood as the only factor shaping participants' self-concepts. The interview data instead show connections among family experiences, education, friendships, emotional experiences, and life journeys. In Raka's case, for example, the peer environment provided support and a sense of acceptance, but when explaining the experiences that shaped him, he also emphasized his experience of a lack of warmth within the family and his need to feel cared for and loved. Therefore, the social environment is more appropriately understood as one of the contexts that provides experiences in the process of self-concept formation and meaning-making.

This can also be seen in Arya's experience. His adult peer environment provided a social space that, according to him, consisted of people with similar experiences. However, the research data are insufficient to conclude that this environment caused Arya's personal experiences. What can be demonstrated from the findings is that the peer environment provided a social context involving interaction, support, and acceptance that subsequently became part of the individual's experience in viewing himself.

Thus, the social environment in both participants' experiences functioned as a space for interaction and acceptance that contributed context to the formation and meaning-making of self-concept. Self-concept does not develop separately from the environment but develops through individuals' experiences in relationships with family, friends, and the broader social environment. From the perspective of Islamic educational psychology, this finding shows that education does not occur only through family and school but also through everyday social experiences. The social environment can become a learning space in which individuals understand themselves, develop relationships with others, and make meaning of values acquired through religious education.

### 3.3. Participants' Experiences and Meaning-Making of Their Self-Concepts

Both participants experienced awareness of their attraction to the same sex during adolescence. Raka stated that he became aware of it while attending senior high school, while Arya stated that he became aware of it during adolescence, although he could not specify the exact age. When they first became aware of these experiences, both described feelings of confusion, restlessness, and feeling strange because they did not fully understand what they were experiencing. Raka described this initial experience as feeling "confused, restless, felt strange but could not control it." This statement shows that Raka's initial experience was not immediately interpreted in a simple manner but became part of the process of understanding and making meaning of himself.

Adolescence is an important period in identity development because individuals begin to reflect more deeply on themselves, social relationships, and their position within their environment. De Lise et al. [2] and Potterton et al. [11], used in the theoretical

foundation of this study, indicate that identity development involves exploration and changes in self-meaning. Therefore, the confusion expressed by the participants should be understood within the context of developmental processes and personal experiences rather than immediately being regarded as a pathological condition. Such experiences are better understood as part of the process through which individuals make sense of their experiences and give meaning to their developing identities.

For Raka, this process of self-understanding occurred over a relatively long period. He explained that since childhood, there had been certain experiences that he considered different from those of other boys. He felt that he played more frequently with girls and was interested in self-care activities. When he entered adolescence, he became aware of his attraction to the same sex. He also once attempted to establish a relationship with a woman he liked, but the relationship did not continue because the woman married someone else. These experiences later became part of Raka's journey to understand and make meaning of himself.

In understanding himself, Raka saw himself as an ordinary human being, but also as someone with a difference he found difficult to control. This process did not happen suddenly; it developed through various social and emotional experiences. Raka also related his self-understanding to family experiences that he considered meaningful in his life journey. He stated that he felt he had lost some of his family's role and warmth as he entered adolescence and adulthood. According to him, his parents continued to remind him of religious obligations, but these reminders were mostly verbal instructions, such as reminding him to pray, without the emotional support that he felt was sufficient.

Raka also explained that his older siblings had become busy with their respective lives, while his parents had grown older and his daily life had become his own responsibility. He described this as an experience that left him feeling burdened and without a place to return to. He stated, "I feel that I have lost the role of my family, although I was continually reminded to worship, I felt that it was not warm enough." This statement shows how Raka connects his family experiences to how he understands himself. He then emphasized, "I feel burdened while I feel that I have no place to return to."

At another point, Raka stated that "my feminine side wants to be cared for again." This statement indicates that in his self-meaning-making, the need for attention and acceptance also became part of his experience. Nevertheless, he eventually stated that he felt comfortable with the person he was because he felt alive and loved. Thus, Raka's meaning-making of self-concept related not only to how he understood his identity but also to how he interpreted family experiences, his need for attention, emotional experiences, his social environment, and his life journey as a whole.

These experiences indicate that Raka's self-concept formed through a complex process and cannot be explained by a single experience. Raka himself described various interconnected experiences, ranging from family relationships, friendships, and emotional experiences to his life circumstances as an adult. Therefore, family experiences or particular environments cannot be positioned as the sole causes of the participant's sexual orientation. The research data show only how Raka interpreted these experiences as part of his life journey and the development of his self-understanding.

This aligns with [1] and [3], who position self-concept as something that develops through social and psychological experiences. Self-concept is not merely a representation of who someone is but also results from the individual's process of interpreting various experiences throughout life. In Raka's context, his self-understanding developed through interactions among childhood experiences, family relationships, social environments, emotional experiences, and reflection on his life.

Meanwhile, Arya also stated that he became aware of his attraction to the same sex when he entered adolescence. He described this initial experience as something that generated confusion, restlessness, and a feeling of being different. However, when asked more deeply about how life experiences shaped the way he understood himself, Arya did not provide an answer. He only smiled and did not explain further. This response was retained as part of the research data because it shows a difference in openness between the two participants in sharing personal experiences.

The absence of an answer from Arya cannot be used to conclude anything about his inner experience or to provide an interpretation of the reasons behind his response. Instead, the data demonstrate that the process of self-meaning-making is not always verbally expressed with the same level of openness by every individual. In qualitative research, such differences in responses are important to preserve so that each participant's experience is not forced into the same pattern.

Thus, both participants' experiences show that self-concept is a developing, dynamic process. Awareness of same-sex attraction emerged during adolescence and was subsequently interpreted through each participant's life journey. For Raka, this meaning-making process was more openly expressed and associated with family experiences, social environments, emotional experiences, and the need for attention and acceptance. Meanwhile, Arya showed less openness when asked to explain his self-understanding in depth. These differences show that self-concept is not formed by a single factor but by an individual's process of interpreting various life experiences, social relationships, and psychological experiences.

### *3.3.1. The Tension between Religious Understanding and Personal Experience*

The tension between religious understanding and personal experience emerged as one of the study's key findings. Both participants continued to position Islam as an important part of their lives. They understood religion as a guide for life and continued to practice their religion. At the same time, however, both experienced personal experiences that, according to them, were not easy to reconcile with the religious understanding they had acquired. Thus, the tension did not indicate that the participants had abandoned religion; rather, it reflected a complex process of meaning-making between the religious values they understood and the life experiences they were undergoing.

Raka stated that he understood Islamic teachings and continued to fulfill his religious obligations. He continued to pray and fulfill other religious obligations. At the same time, however, he felt unable to control the personal experiences he was facing fully fully. Raka stated that he had previously wanted to change because he wanted to

experience a life that he considered “normal like other men.” This desire arose because he felt that he could not experience attraction toward women as he expected.

Raka also explained that he had previously attempted to seek help to change the condition he was experiencing. Based on the interview findings, he had tried to seek treatment and had wanted to continue the effort by seeing a psychiatrist, but this had not been possible because of financial constraints and his personal condition after an accident. This experience is part of Raka’s personal struggle and shows his efforts to understand or cope with the condition he experienced. In this study, his statement concerning his desire to change is positioned as Raka’s personal experience and meaning-making, rather than as a basis for concluding that sexual orientation is a condition that must or can be changed through religious education.

This experience demonstrates tension between the ideal values he understood and the life experiences he underwent. On the one hand, Raka understood religious values through family and school. On the other hand, he faced personal circumstances he felt he could not control. This kept religion central to his reflection and self-meaning-making. When asked how he dealt with this experience, Raka stated:

“From what I have experienced so far, I can only lament it and hold firmly to the belief that this is part of destiny that must be lived.”

This statement shows that Raka continued to use religion as a way to make meaning of his life experiences. The meaning he attached to destiny became one way he understood the condition he was facing. Thus, Raka’s struggle did not mean that he abandoned religion. Instead, religious belief remained one of the sources he used to reflect upon his life, although this reflection did not completely resolve his personal struggle.

These findings relate to the discussion in the introduction about the possibility of a gap between the ideal values an individual understands and the life experiences they undergo. Hidayat et al. [5] and Wahib and Nafi'ah [6] emphasize that religious education involves internalizing values at cognitive, affective, and spiritual levels. In Raka’s case, his knowledge of religious values remains visible in how he speaks about life and in his religious practices. However, applying and appreciating these values in personal experiences is more complex. This shows that mastery of religious knowledge does not always translate into an individual’s ability to deal with all life problems simply.

Raka also explained that religious learning at school sometimes led him to reflect on his condition. This indicates that Islamic Religious Education was not completely separate from his process of self-reflection. Religious learning remained one source he used to understand life experiences, although the resulting reflection did not always lead to the change he desired. Thus, in Raka’s experience, IRE was not only knowledge about religious teachings but also a source of meaning when he faced complex personal experiences.

Meanwhile, Arya also stated that he sometimes reflected on his condition. He explained that his family had previously reprimanded him, but he continued with his life. This experience suggests a negotiation between the values he learned from family and religion and the social experiences he underwent. However, compared with Raka, Arya provided relatively limited responses when asked to explain his inner experiences more

deeply. Therefore, interpretations of Arya's experience need to be made carefully and cannot be used to conclude psychological experiences that he did not directly express.

In this context, the discussion by [7] regarding religiosity as one source for dealing with psychological pressure and life experiences can help explain these findings. Religion is not only understood as a set of rules but can also become a source of meaning when individuals face difficult life situations. This is evident in both participants, who continued to maintain their beliefs and religious practices despite personal struggles. However, using religion as a source of meaning does not mean that all personal conflicts are automatically resolved. In Raka's case, for example, the struggle continued even though he maintained his religious practices and beliefs.

Thus, the relationship between religious understanding and personal experience in this study cannot be understood in black-and-white terms. Participants did not abandon religion when facing personal struggles. Instead, religion remained part of their process of understanding life, although each participant integrated religious values with personal experiences differently. For Raka, this process was evident through reflection on religious teachings, religious practices, personal experiences, and his interpretation of destiny. Meanwhile, for Arya, the process appeared more limited through personal reflection and responses to family reprimands. These findings show that religious education plays an important role in self-meaning-making, but the internalization of religious values is dynamic and shaped by an individual's full life experiences.

### *3.3.2. The Meaning of Islamic Religious Education and Participants' Expectations*

For both participants, Islam continued to hold an important position and meaning in their lives. When asked about the meaning of Islam at present, both viewed religion as a guide for living their lives. One participant described this meaning: "Religion is religion, the guide for life that I hold onto." This statement shows that complex personal experiences do not automatically eliminate the religious identity the participants hold. Instead, religion continues to be positioned as one of the foundations for understanding and living life.

Both participants also stated that they continued to practice religious activities such as prayer, Friday prayer, and fasting. Thus, the personal experiences they described did not cause them to abandon all religious practices. Religion remained part of their identities and everyday lives. For Raka, religion also became a source of understanding for the difficult experiences he faced. He tried to hold onto the belief that these experiences were part of a life journey that had to be lived. Meanwhile, Arya continued to position religion as a guide for life and emphasized the importance of maintaining faith and drawing closer to God. This shows that spiritual experiences continued to play a role in both participants' processes of making meaning of life.

These findings are consistent with [4] 's view of Islamic education's role in shaping life orientations based on the values of faith and morality. In this context, religious education is not only learning material received at school but also an experience individuals carry into life after completing formal education. In both participants' experiences, the religious values and knowledge they acquired through family and school

remained part of how they viewed life, though they later reinterpreted them based on their personal experiences.

In this context, the concept of religiosity as a coping mechanism, as discussed by [7], can help explain the participants' experiences. Religion is not only a set of rules but can also provide meaning when individuals face difficult life situations. However, using religion as a source of meaning does not mean that all personal conflicts are automatically resolved. In Raka's case, for example, the struggle continued even though he maintained his religious practices and beliefs. This shows that religious commitment and personal struggles can coexist within an individual's experience.

Beyond viewing religion as a guide for life, both participants also expressed expectations for educational environments, particularly from family and IRE teachers. The findings show that Raka hoped families would be more aware of their children's conditions, especially as they enter adolescence. He felt that reminders to perform religious obligations alone were insufficient if they were not accompanied by greater attention, closeness, and comprehensive support. According to Raka's experience, religious advice was mostly provided verbally, such as reminders to pray, but was not always accompanied by emotional support and attention to the child's overall life.

This expectation relates to Raka's experience of needing to feel cared for, heard, and to have a place to receive support. Therefore, according to him, religious education within the family should not consist only of instructions concerning religious obligations but should also involve communication and closeness that enable children to express the experiences they are facing. Arya also provided a similar response regarding the importance of family attention, although he did not explain his experience in as much detail as Raka.

Raka also shared his view on how to respond to individuals experiencing personal struggles. He emphasized that people should not be judged or blamed immediately. He stated:

"Actually, we do not need to be judged or blamed because what is happening now is not something that comes from within our own wishes."

Raka also added that the approach needed was gentle reminders because "we are all sinful human beings." Regarding the possibility of change, he said he could not determine whether it could happen quickly. This statement shows Raka's hope that religious education and support would be carried out not through a judgmental approach but through reminders, communication, and support, while still maintaining religious values.

This expectation aligns with Islamic education, which positions the family as one of the primary educational environments. Religious education becomes more meaningful when the values being conveyed are paired with relationships that help children feel supported and heard. Thus, religious education within the family should not merely involve communicating obligations; it should also include communication, role modeling, attention, and support in everyday life. From an educational perspective, this matters because value internalization occurs not only through what is communicated but also through relational experiences learners have within the family environment.

Regarding IRE teachers, Raka hoped that religious learning would not stop at theory. He expected evaluation of the learning process and coordination with families or guardians concerning habits at home and the students' social environment. According to him, religious education needs to consider students' conditions more holistically so that it does not focus solely on mastery of material. This expectation suggests that, in Raka's experience, IRE learning needs to be more closely connected to students' real lives.

Meanwhile, Arya hoped that religious teachers could provide better guidance and return to emphasizing morality. This expectation shows that although the two participants had different experiences of religious education, both continued to view teachers and religious education as important sources of life direction. In this context, IRE teachers are not only viewed as transmitters of religious material but also as individuals who can provide guidance and strengthen moral values.

Both participants' expectations align with [5] and [6], which position religious education as a process of value internalization rather than merely the transmission of knowledge. More recent research on Islamic Religious Education and adolescent identity formation also indicates that IRE can contribute to identity formation by cultivating faith, worship, and moral values while also requiring support from families, schools, and the broader environment. Thus, religious education becomes more meaningful when the values learned do not stop at the cognitive level but are also connected to students' experiences and lives.

Overall, Raka and Arya's experiences show that Islamic Religious Education continues to hold an important place in their lives. Religious education provides a foundation of religious knowledge and values that both participants continue to carry into their lives, but these experiences are subsequently reinterpreted through their respective life journeys. Self-concept forms not only through religious education but also through interactions among personal experiences, family, school, social environment, emotional experiences, and religious meaning-making.

From the perspective of Islamic educational psychology, these findings reinforce the importance of an educational approach that is not only oriented toward cognitive aspects but also considers individuals' emotional, social, and spiritual dimensions. Religious education can become a space in which individuals reflect on their life experiences, understand the values they believe in, and receive humane support. Thus, a contextual and dialogical approach to Islamic Religious Education can create an educational process that better reflects the complexity of students' experiences without eliminating the Islamic values that form the foundation of education.

### *3.3.3. Synthesis of Research Findings*

Overall, the findings show that IRE continues to hold an important place in both participants' lives, particularly as a source of knowledge, values, and religious guidance. However, self-concept formation and meaning-making are more complex because they also involve family experiences, social environments, emotional experiences, and life journeys.

The participants' experiences also show a difference between their religious understanding and the life experiences they perceive. On the one hand, both continue to practice religion and view Islam as a guide for life. On the other hand, some personal experiences are not always easy to reconcile with their religious understanding. In such circumstances, religious education not only provides normative knowledge but also creates space for individuals to reflect on and make meaning of their life experiences.

The findings of this study are not intended to justify or condemn the personal experiences of the participants, but rather to understand how experiences of Islamic Religious Education relate to the process of self-concept formation and meaning-making. Therefore, this study's perspective on Islamic educational psychology focuses on understanding individual experiences contextually, dialogically, and humanely while maintaining the fundamental values of Islamic education.

Thus, IRE can be understood not merely as a process of delivering religious theory but also as an educational process involving family, school, social environment, communication, support, and individual reflection in facing life experiences.

## 4. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to understand the experience of Islamic Religious Education in the formation and meaning-making of self-concept among Muslim men with same-sex orientation from the perspective of Islamic educational psychology. Based on the case study of Raka and Arya, it was found that experiences of IRE within the family and school became part of both participants' processes of making meaning of their religious lives. The family provided habituation in prayer, Qur'an recitation, manners, and morality, while the school provided knowledge and understanding of religious values. However, these experiences did not stand alone, as self-concept formation and meaning-making also occurred through family relationships, peer environments, emotional experiences, and each participant's life journey.

First, experiences of IRE within the family and school continued to matter in both participants' lives. Both maintained their identities as Muslims and continued religious practices such as prayer, Friday prayer, and fasting. However, Raka's experience demonstrates that cognitive religious understanding was not always easy to apply when confronted with complex personal experiences. Meanwhile, Arya demonstrated more limited openness in explaining his religious experiences. This finding shows that religious education involves not only the transfer of knowledge but also the process of internalizing values and making meaning in individual life.

Second, self-concept formation occurs dynamically and cannot be explained through a single factor. Family experiences, social environments, friendships, emotional experiences, and life journeys became part of the contexts that participants used to understand themselves. In Raka's case, this process was evident in his more open reflection on family experiences, his need for attention and acceptance, and his life journey. Meanwhile, Arya was more limited in expressing his personal experiences. Therefore, this study does not conclude that family, social environment, or religious

education caused the participants' sexual orientation, but rather demonstrates how such experiences were interpreted by the participants as part of their life journeys.

Third, tension emerged between religious understanding and personal experience. Both participants continued to view Islam as a guide for life, but the personal experiences they underwent were not always easy to reconcile with their religious understanding. For Raka, this tension was evident in his reflection on religious teachings, religious practices, his desire to change, and the meaning he attached to destiny. For Arya, the tension appeared more through personal reflection and responses to family reprimands. Thus, religious commitment and personal struggle do not necessarily occupy two mutually exclusive positions but may coexist in the process of meaning-making.

### 4.1. Implications

Theoretically, this study contributes to Islamic educational psychology by showing that experiences of religious education must be understood alongside individuals' social, emotional, and personal contexts. From this perspective, self-concept relates not only to an individual's understanding of themselves but also to how educational experiences, family, social relationships, and religious values are interpreted throughout the life journey. The findings show that internalizing religious values does not occur linearly and may be interpreted differently by each individual.

Practically, the findings provide input for IRE teachers and families so that religious education is not only oriented toward delivering material and reminding individuals of religious obligations but also provides space for communication, reflection, and support. In the participants' experiences, family attention, emotional closeness, peer environments, and the relationship between IRE materials and real life were considered important. IRE teachers can strengthen contextual learning by creating space for dialogue about life issues and moral development without turning students' personal experiences into objects of judgment.

Ethically, this study emphasizes the importance of maintaining confidentiality, respecting personal experiences, and providing a safe space for individuals to communicate sensitive experiences. A humane educational approach does not mean eliminating Islamic values but can be implemented through respectful communication, support, and opportunities for students to reflect on the values they learn. In the context of Islamic education, such an approach can help build a more dialogical educational relationship while remaining grounded in the values of faith and morality.

### 4.2. Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. First, the study involved only two Muslim male participants in Cirebon, and therefore the findings are not intended to represent the experiences of all Muslims with same-sex orientation. Second, the research data were primarily obtained through interviews, meaning that the depth of the findings depended greatly on each participant's openness in sharing personal experiences. This was evident in the different levels of openness between Raka and Arya. Third, the study focused on experiences of IRE within the family and school and the process of self-meaning-making

and did not include the perspectives of IRE teachers, family members, peers, or other individuals within the participants' environments. Consider these limitations when interpreting and using the study's findings.

### 4.3. Recommendations for Future Research

Future research may expand the number and characteristics of participants while maintaining an approach that is sensitive to the context of personal experiences. Further research may also include the perspectives of IRE teachers, families, or social environments to obtain a more diverse understanding of religious education experiences and self-concept formation. In addition, future studies may examine more deeply how IRE learning strategies, family communication, teacher support, and social environments shape religious experiences and students' self-meaning-making. Comparative studies across different educational environments may also be conducted to examine how family, school, and cultural contexts influence religious education experiences more broadly.

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