

## **Beyond the Classroom: Religious Stressors and Adjustment Among Indonesian Muslim Graduate Students in an American Graduate School**

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### **Abstract**

This paper was to report some of findings from a larger phenomenological study on the lived experience of Indonesian graduate students in a US higher education. Particularly, this paper was to discuss the Indonesian Muslim graduate students' religious life experiences attending an American graduate school. The primary data sources were a demographic survey and in-depth interviews. The demographic data were analyzed descriptively. The interviews were analyzed by using within-case and cross-case displays and analyses. The theoretical framework of acculturation stress model was used to guide this study. Utilizing the acculturation stress model to describe Indonesian Muslim graduate students' cross-culture experiences, we organized our analysis and discussion around their perspectives and the contexts in which challenges they encountered emerge. An analysis of the text revealed that major themes related to religious beliefs and life experiences were unanticipated praying difficulties, longer fasting days, no holiday for Ramadan (the holy month of Muslims) celebration, no taraweeh (Muslim prayer peculiar to the holy month of Ramadan) prayers in mosque during Ramadan, and rare halal food, and decreasing religious stressors. Future higher education research and policy implications are also discussed.

**Keywords:** *Lived experience; Muslim graduate students; Indonesia; acculturation; religious stressors*

### **Introduction**

This report drew on a larger research study (see Mukminin, 2012) which was to describe and understand the lived experiences of the acculturative process of Indonesian graduate students at an American public research university. Particularly, the larger study focused on to what extent acculturative stressors or culture shock challenge Indonesian graduate students academically and socially during their first term and throughout their studies at a US institution. However, an issue related to Indonesian Muslim graduate students' religious life experiences emerged as the data were analyzed. This issue was significant in the data for Indonesian Muslims students during their acculturation processes at a US institution. This issue was one of the important findings because

there is a lack of research and literature on Muslim students in US higher education, and particularly a lack when it comes to Indonesian Muslim graduate students. Therefore, the purpose of this paper was to report some of findings on Indonesian Muslim graduate students' religious life experiences during their acculturative processes during their first term and throughout their studies at a US institution. Particularly, the current study was to report the religious stressors that challenged four Indonesian Muslim graduate students during attending an American graduate school. Additionally, although the participants of the current study were limited to four Indonesian Muslim graduate students and the findings of the study might not be generalized to other Muslims students at other public or private institutions in the US, this study is significant by targeting and documenting religious life experiences in international students in the US. The findings of the current study might also be the sort of evidence for other religious believers who want to continue their education in US higher education.

### **Background of the Study**

US institutions of higher education have been an important destination for international students from Asia for a quite long time although newspapers and magazines reported a dramatic decline in the enrollment of international students after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. For example, the number of Chinese students increased from 127,628 in the 2009/2010 academic year to 157,558 in the 2010/2011 academic year while the number of Indian students attending US universities slightly decreased from 104,897 in the 2009/2010 academic year to 103,895 in the 2010/2011 academic year (Institute of International Education, [IIE] 2011). Additionally, the number of students from Malaysia in the same academic years slightly increased from 6,190 to 6,735. However, as the world's fourth most populous country and being the largest majority-Muslim country in the world, according to the current data, the number of Indonesian students in the US dropped from 13,282 in the 1997/1998 academic year (Marklein, 2011) to 6, 942 the 2010/2011 academic year (IIE, 2011). The most extreme decline of Indonesian students came after the horrific tragedy of September 11, 2001, when there was a widespread perception that international Muslim students were no longer welcome in the United States. In the name of national security, the US government and countries in Europe set specific policies for individuals who are Muslims or Arabs, which might impact the decrease of Indonesian students' enrollment at US higher education due to the tight immigration regulations or the difficulties of getting a visa to the US.

While the effects of the horrific tragedy of September 11, 2001 on the declining number of Indonesian students at US higher education sound like a plausible reason, previous research that has been done since 9/11 to study campus climate and attitudes toward Muslim students on campus has suggested that although many American campuses claim to value diversity and multiculturalism, Muslim students face many challenges related to their religious beliefs. For example, Nasir and Al-Amin's (2006) study indicated that Muslim students reported that uneasiness in performing Islamic duties, decisions to wear or not to wear hijab, a lack of accommodation for religious practices, or stereotypes and misunderstandings were among challenging issues that they faced. Meanwhile, Cole and Ahmadi (2003) identified interrelated issues such as being a good Muslim, a Muslim identity, stereotypes and misconceptions, social reinforcement, modesty without the veil, and religious obligation that influenced seven Muslim women's academic and non-academic experiences.

Studies focusing the acculturative experiences of Indonesian Muslim graduate students, specifically challenges or issues related to their religious beliefs and its potential effects on their educational and social life have not been much explored. Most studies on Indonesian Muslim students (Zhai, 2002; Trice, 2004; Fritz, Chin & DeMarinis, 2008; Sumer, Poyrazli & Grahame, 2008) are embedded in data on international or Asian students and are likely to group Indonesian students in one group with other

Asian students. While, these studies are very useful to see international students, particularly Asian students' experience, but might not be able to see Indonesian Muslim students' unique and individual acculturative experiences, thus might mask our understanding of Indonesian Muslim students' challenges or issues related to their religious beliefs during their acculturative processes at US higher education. Indonesian Muslim students who have come to America in search of better knowledge and skills and who may spend years at an American institution pursuing their educational degrees carry with them their own cultural and social rules, norms, traditions, and values. They expect to receive a much higher quality of education at their host university. However, upon coming to America, their expectation might not be easily satisfied, they might encounter some acculturative stressors since they will encounter change events at their host university, including educational setting, linguistics, rules, norms, routines, physical, and socio-cultural environments. These changes might become problems for their acculturation to American academic and social life and might lead to "acculturative stress", which is "a stress reaction in response to life events that are rooted in the experience of acculturation" (Berry, 2006, p. 294). Hence, this study was an attempt to fill a gap in the international student acculturation literature and to fill the lack of literature and information on international Muslim graduate students' acculturative experiences. The purpose of this paper was to report some of findings on Indonesian Muslim graduate students' religious life experiences during their acculturative processes during their first term and throughout their studies at a US institution. My larger research questions center on; (1) What have Indonesian graduate students from diverse backgrounds and experiences experienced academically and socially during their acculturative process resulting from continuous, first hand contact with a different culture? (2) What are the major sources of acculturative problems or stressors, or the major causes of culture shock leading to acculturative stress experienced by Indonesian graduate students? (3) How have Indonesian graduate students from diverse backgrounds and experiences dealt with those acculturative stressors or major causes of culture shock during the first term and over time at their institutions?

### **Theoretical Framework**

An analysis of the lived experience of Muslim graduate students from Indonesia attending a graduate school in the US requires a theoretical framework that helps to better understand and describe their academic and social experience during their acculturative process during the first term and over time at their institution. Berry and his colleagues' (1987) and Berry's (2006) acculturation stress model was used to guide the study. Acculturative stress refers to general and cultural stress reactions associated with transitioning to a new culture. The notion of acculturation stress was initially introduced by the Canadian psychologist Berry (1970). Berry argued (2006) that at the individual level, when acculturation experiences cause problems, one of the acculturation outcomes was "acculturative stress" which happens as "a stress reaction in response to life events that are rooted in the experience of acculturation" (p. 294). From the perspective of this theory, the acculturating individuals are facing problems (stressors) as a result of intercultural and continuous contacts that cannot be solved easily and quickly by simply adjusting or adapting to the new cultures (Berry, Kim, Minde & Mok, 1987). However, the relationships among the acculturative experience, stressors (the sources of difficulties), and acculturative stress "are probabilistic rather than deterministic" (Berry, et al., 1987, p. 494) and depend on a number of moderating factors, including nature of the larger society (whether the society has a pluralists/multicultural ideology or a single cultural standard), type of acculturating group (e.g., immigrants, refugees, natives, ethnic groups, or students sojourners), modes (strategies) of acculturation (assimilation, separation, integration, and marginalization), demographic, psychological, and social characteristics of individuals (e.g., educational background, maturity, gender, length of stay in the host culture, socio-economic status, cognitive style, previous cross-cultural experiences, and contact experiences) (Berry, et al., 1987).

## Methods

### Design of the Study

In this study, a qualitative design in the phenomenological tradition was used for addressing the purpose of this study since the main issue in a phenomenological study is to search for understanding how one or more individuals experience a phenomenon and to explore in-depth accounts of experiences from participants' personal reflections and perspectives on the phenomenon (Merriam, 1998; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 1990). Phenomenology as a philosophical tradition first came from Edmund H. Husserl (1859-1938), a German mathematician and philosopher. According to Patton (1990), a phenomenological perspective can mean either (1) "a focus on what people experience and how they interpret the world (one can use interviews without actually experiencing the phenomenon oneself) or (2) a methodological mandate to actually experience the phenomenon being investigated (participant observation would be necessary)." (p.70). In this study, Indonesian graduate students were interviewed to get their in-depth accounts of experiences and the meanings from participants' words, descriptions, reflections, and perspectives on the phenomenon during their acculturative processes at their host university, especially, the actual life as an Indonesian international graduate students in the US post 9/11.

### Research Site and Participants

This study was conducted at one public research university in the Southeastern part of America with more than 1250 international students from over 100 different countries and regions. At the time of the study, there were 16 Indonesian graduate students pursuing a graduate degree. Of the 16 Indonesian graduate students, four participants were Muslims. Submission to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was made in order to protect the rights of human participants. The names of people, places, and research site were masked through the use of pseudonyms for the participants, places, and sites. Participants' decision to take part in this study was entirely voluntary. The participants were (pseudonyms) Zulkifli, Sujono, Adriani and Hamdani

**Zulkifli** is male and forty-four years old. He is a lecturer at one of the public universities in Indonesia and he is on leave. He earned his bachelor's degree in English Education in Indonesia. He has been exposed to various cultures prior to coming to the US. He earned his master's degree in applied linguistics from one of the European countries with a full scholarship from the Indonesian government. He took an intensive English training as part of his scholarship. He also received short-term trainings in Singapore in 2008 and in Australia in 2009. He came to his host university in fall 2010 after winning a very competitive scholarship awarded by the United States and Indonesian governments to pursue his doctoral degree in Education at his current university. All of his tuition, fees, insurance, housing, plane tickets, and living allowance are paid by the scholarship. Prior to coming to the United States, he knew about American academic and social life from books, and he also received a one week academic training on American academic culture. What he knew about American academic culture is, "Before coming here, I was told that in the States, Americans have individualism as their philosophy. That is their belief and how they run their education."

**Sujono** came to the US in spring 2011. He is male and single. He is twenty-seven years old. He did his bachelor's and master's degrees in communication in Indonesia. He participated in a short-course in Australia. He was a young teaching staff at one of the private universities in Indonesia before studying in the United States. He never received any English training before and after studying in the US. He won a very competitive scholarship awarded by the US government to pursue his masters' degree in social sciences at his current university in the US. His scholarship covers everything such as

tuition, fees, insurance, housing, ticket, and living allowance for his success in studying in the US. He went online to find information related to American academic and social culture.

**Adriani** is female and married. She is forty-nine years old. Adriani is a lecturer at one of the public universities in Indonesia and is on leave. She earned her bachelor's degree in agriculture in Indonesia. Before coming to the US, she pursued her master's degree in sociology at one of the universities in Australia. She won a full scholarship from the Australian government. As part of her scholarship, she was offered an intensive English training for six months in Jakarta before studying in Australia. She also attended several international conferences in China, Japan, and Malaysia. She also received a two-hour English training during working days for six months at her home university. Adriani came to her host university in fall 2008. She won a very competitive scholarship awarded by her government to pursue her doctoral degree in education at her current university in the US. Her scholarship covers everything including tuition, fees, insurance, housing, plane tickets, and living allowance for her success in studying in the US.

**Hamdani** is the youngest participant in this research. He is twenty-four years old. He is single and Muslim. He is the oldest in his family. He did not have any job experience in Indonesia before coming to the US. He earned his undergraduate degree in physics from one of the prestigious universities in Indonesia. He came to the US in fall 2009. He is currently seeking master's and doctoral degrees in physics at his current university and financially supported by his department. He has become a teaching assistant [TA] since his first semester. He never received any English training previously. As a TA and due to his limited English ability, he was required to take English improvement training by his university for three semesters. He had never gone to any other countries. So, coming to the US for studying is his first experience away from his family and country. He seems to be a shy person.

### **Data Collection, Analysis, and Trustworthiness**

For this study, a demographic background survey and in-depth interviews with Indonesian graduate students were the techniques for data collection. All participants completed the demographic survey. Although in the larger study, focus group discussions were used, most of the data on Muslim students' challenges and issues related their religious beliefs emerged from the individual semi-structured interview. Early in the interview, the participants were provided with oral information of the purpose of the study and the interview process and informed them that they had rights not to answer the questions and what was said by the interviewees would be treated confidentially. Moreover, because English is a second language for all participants, the participants were given a flexibility to respond to interview questions in either Indonesian or English. All elected to use English. As a result, any grammatical errors will appear in the quotations. Each interview lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. During the individual interviews, all of them shared their challenges and issues related their religious beliefs during their acculturative processes at their host institution. Interviewing is a preferred data collection method when researchers want to examine past events, which are not possible to repeat (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Merriam, 1998).

The demographic data were analyzed descriptively. For the data of a qualitative study, Miles & Huberman (1994) wrote, "Qualitative data ...are a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes in identifiable local contexts..." (p.1). Additionally, Marshall & Rossman (1999) stated that data analysis was "a messy, ambiguous, time-consuming, creative, and fascinating process" (p. 150) and "Undoubtedly, no consensus exists for the analysis of the forms of qualitative data" (Creswell, 1997, p.140). For the interview data of this study, after the audiotaped interviews were transcribed, the transcripts were reread line-by-line in order to find regularities, patterns, and emerging topics. The transcripts were reread with the interim lists of codes that had been created. These codes were used as a guide to develop inductive codes and themes. Additionally, within-case

and cross-case displays (Miles & Huberman, 1994) were used to: (1) scatter interviews data so as to list every important statement relevant to the topic and to deepen understanding of my data among the cases (participants) and among the emergent themes, (2) to generate clusters of meanings by organizing, grouping, or clustering the significant statements among the cases into themes or meaning units, and (3) to remove repetitive data.

Various perspectives have been proposed regarding the need of verification or trustworthiness in qualitative research including the definition and the procedures for establishing it. The terms "credibility," "transferability," "dependability," and "conformability" have been suggested in qualitative research to substitute for the terms "internal validity," "external validity," "reliability," and "objectivity" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 300). To establish the trustworthiness or to verify the accuracy of data and interpretations (Creswell, 1998, 2007), the data, interpretations, and conclusions were shared with the respondents to get their feedback on the accuracy and credibility of the data, and interpretations, and conclusions. In the words of Lincoln and Guba (1985), this is "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (p.314). Additionally, rich and thick descriptions (Merriam, 1998) and narratives of Indonesian Muslim graduate students' acculturative experiences were provided. This included verbatim examples from the transcribed interviews data.

## Results

Coming and studying in the US shows that the Indonesian Muslim graduate students in this study do not fear to live in the Western cultures with an identity as Muslims. They also do not fear to lose their faith by living in the West. They still want to practice their religions because it shows that although they are not in a Muslim country, they are still responsible Muslims regardless of where they live. However, due to the unexpected differences in cultural encounters and their continuous contacts with the host culture, participants reported that during the first semester as a Muslim, they were shocked and they had difficulties to practice their religious activities in a new culture. Several interrelated challenges and issues related to Indonesian Muslim students' difficulties to practice their religious activities during their acculturation processes at a US institution emerged from the within-case and cross-case data analyses. The major recurrent and important issues were unanticipated praying difficulties, longer fasting days, no holiday for Ramadan celebration, no taraweeh prayers in mosque during Ramadan, rare halal food, and decreasing religious stressors.

### Unexpected Praying Difficulties

Praying five times a day is one of the five pillars in Islam. As a Muslim, participants had to do prayers five times a day. However, at their host university, it was not easy for them to do that because of their academic activities or when they wanted to do a prayer, they had to attend a class. Therefore, they sometimes did not do their obligatory activities in their new culture. Participants felt bad and sinful because they could not practice their religion in the host culture regularly during their first term. Zulkifli, a male doctoral student majoring in education said, "This is not a Muslim country. So, I have difficulties to do prayers in an appropriate place, particularly during semesters." Facilities for praying such as a silence room on campus or at department level is not available for participants in this study. The lack of praying facilities for Muslim students on campus has also become concerns for other participants. They reported,

*"I came here in the fall.... I have no clear information about the mosque or places to do prayers on campus from the beginning. But, when I did my prayers in my office, people around me looked at me strangely. But, I think they behaved like that because they may*

*not be used to seeing a Muslim praying in my room, but, it is fine as long as they do not disturb me”[Hamdani]*

*“I just think that why this university or my department with various international students has no special places for praying for all religions. It is just my thought. I sometimes combine my prayers at home. I never do that in Indonesia, you know” [Sujono]*

*“My first semester was terrible. I was not only dealing with academic activities but also dealing with my religious issues. I felt bad every time I had classes that conflicted with my praying time”[Adriani]*

For male students who need to do a prayer in the mosque every Friday, they reported that they had difficulties to do Friday’s prayers because the mosque is outside the city and campus and they had no cars to go there although there is one mosque on campus. But it is never used for Friday’s prayers. One of the students, Sujono reported, “I seldom go to the mosque every Friday. It is far away and no bus goes there. I sometimes join other Muslim students from other countries, but I feel reluctant to do it every Friday.” Other male student also expressed, “Well, to do Friday’s prayers is not easy here, especially during my first semester. I have no car; other Indonesian students who have cars are not Muslims.” (Hamdani)

The data above indicated that Indonesian Muslim graduate students encountered the difficulties to practice their religious activities because the time to do prayers conflicted with their academic activities like attending classes. In addition, they encountered the difficulties to find an appropriate place to do prayers because at their department level, there is no clear information where they could use a room for praying. This should not happen at a university that keeps receiving international students from various backgrounds. However, the data above also indicated that although participants in this study had difficulties in praying, no one wanted to discuss if they tried to, for example, ask their department to provide them with a silence room. This might be due to their number is not many and they were scattered at different departments. In addition, their reluctance to complain about the difficulties to practice their religious activities with faculty members or campus authorities suggested that participants of this study tended to solve their own difficulties by themselves. They might think that religion is a sensitive issue to complain about.

### **Longer Fasting Days**

Living in a non-Muslim country like the US is challenging for Indonesian Muslim graduate students in this study. They had to deal with various things that might influence their quality of life. They must follow Muslim laws irrespective of where they live. As a Muslim, one of the obligations is to do fasting days or Ramadan. During Ramadan, Muslims experience hunger and thirst. Participants came to their host university at the end of July or in the middle of August, which coincides with fasting days. Some of them, even, came to their host university when Ramadan started. They reported that doing Ramadan in Indonesia is shorter than doing it in the US. Due to the time difference, doing Ramadan or fasting days in the US. could take 15 or even 16 hours. They started stopping eating or drinking anything at about 4.30 am and they were allowed to eat and drink again at about 8.30 pm. This difference made them difficult to adjust, especially when they had to attend classes at night. They reported;

*“Well, it was difficult time for me to do fasting days here in the US., the time difference is so much different. It was longer here and I had to come to classes. The classes usually started at 7.00 pm and ended at 10.00 pm . I brought my own food and water to*

*the class. But, I felt it was strange because everybody was studying while I ate. I enjoyed my fasting days. But it was difficult for me”[Zulkifli]*

*”I still did my fasting days and came to classes that I took during Ramadan. I just felt uncomfortable with what I experienced. You know it was not easy to attend classes when your energy was not enough. Afternoon classes were hard to follow during Ramadan because attendance was also graded”[Adriani]*

In the southern part of America, particularly at the end of summer or in the fall, the weather is still hot with high humidity. This kind of weather even makes participants feel more difficult to do their Ramadan. For example, one male student reported,

*”I wish I could have classes in the morning or I wanted not to attend the classes during Ramadan. It is very hot here during Ramadan. You know it was difficult, really. But, not coming to school was not good because I might lose some great information. I just felt lack of energy”[Hamdani]*

Other participant, Sujono shared similar experiences regarding doing Ramadan at his host country. Sujono said, “It was definitely challenging. Hot weather, longer time for doing Ramadan, and attending afternoon classes are among the challenges.” The data indicated that challenges like hot weather and longer fasting days during Ramadan did not prevent Indonesian Muslim graduate students from participating in academic activities and from doing Ramadan.

### **No Taraweeh Prayers in Mosque during Ramadan**

When Ramadan begins, Muslims around the world engage in a period of discipline and worship. They do fasting during the day and during the night they do special evening prayers, which are known as taraweeh. Muslims for both men and women are recommended to attend the taraweeh prayers in the mosque, which is conducted after the last evening prayer to pray in congregation. In Indonesia during Ramadan, all mosques are full of Muslims who are doing taraweeh prayers. For participants in this study, after they came to their host country, they could not do taraweeh prayers in the mosque as they did when they were at their home country. They reflected,

*”We have taraweeh once a year, but when I came here, I could not do it at mosque like in my country because it is far away. I felt bad, you know. But, this is not a big city; mosques are away from my place. I am also afraid of going out at night. It takes like 20 minutes to go to the mosque by car”[Hamdani]*

*”Taraweeh is always done in group at mosque. I always do it when I was in my country. It is difficult do it here. Mosque is far away and transportation is rare at night. I also afraid of going out because I need to be careful in a new place”[Zulkifli]*

*”You know, doing taraweeh is not about prayers, but we meet other Muslims at mosque. Muslims from Indonesian is few here and seldom meet each other because of our activities. I expected we could meet during taraweeh”[Sujono]*

Adriani, also reported that she did not do taraweeh at most for several reasons such as they were afraid of going out to the mosque, they were doing their assignments, or taraweeh finished late night. For example, “My problem to do taraweeh here was because I was scared of going out at night and I had no car to go and my assignments were a lot. So, I just did it at home alone.”

## **No Holiday for the Ramadan Celebration, No Happy Eid**

Another important issue facing participants in this study is no holiday for the Ramadan celebration or no Happy Eid in their host country. Happy Eid is a big day for all Muslims. It is one of the gladdest moments in the year for every Muslim. It is a day of rejoicing after a month of nonstop fasting. In Indonesia, as the biggest Muslim country in the world, Indonesian government provides a long holiday for celebrating it. Every Muslim is looking forward to celebrating the Happy Eid. It is very religious to mark the end of Ramadan. However, when all participants came to their host university, they were surprised with the facts that no holiday for Ramadan or no happy Eid day. They reported that Ramadan and the celebration of Ramadan that marks the end of Ramadan were not officially recognized on calendar. The following quotes reflect some of their feelings and thoughts,

*"In our country, every religious day of every religion is officially marked on calendar and our government also gives holiday to celebrate every religious day like Christmas day or the celebration of Ramadan. This does not happen in the U.S... I still had to go to class after praying for the celebration of Ramadan. I felt really sad about it"*[Zulkifli]

*"Nobody on campus said Happy Eid to me. Nobody knows that it is the end of Ramadan. I mean American people, not Indonesian people. I was not really sad because of that. But, I was surprised...in our country, I even know the dates of every religious day because they are on calendar. Here, it seems impossible or maybe it is only in this part of America. I don't know"*[Hamdani]

However, although participants felt sad that Happy Eid is not officially recognized in the US., no one wanted to talk about it more. They seemed to avoid talking about it. They expressed that they still celebrated it with other Indonesian students who are Muslims and they also invited other Indonesian non-Muslim students to come to their house. "We celebrate the end of Ramadan at home and invite our friends" (Zulkifli). This suggested that since participants in this study were minorities at their host university and were few in number, they established solidarity among them.

## **Rare Halal Food**

Halal food is important for every Muslim. For example, if the chicken is cut by the proper Islamic way or if food is clean by Islamic standards. Another important religious issue facing participants in this study is the scarcity or rarity of halal food or the lack of stores selling halal food. One of the participants reported,

*"I was surprised that halal food is difficult to find here. I do not know where I can buy halal meat or chicken. I want to buy bread buy, I was afraid it was not allowed to eat by Islamic standards"*[Hamdani]

*"One of my concerns during my life here is halal food like meat, chicken, bread, even milk. I am sure if I am allowed to consume them. This is difficult for me because...you know, stores that sell halal food are not common here, I think"*[Zulkifli]

The difficulty to find halal food for Muslims students in study is caused by several reasons for example, their place is not a big city and the number of Muslims is not many. One female participant, Adriani also reported that buying chicken or bread with Islamic standards was not easy in her place because it is a small city. "Well, I understand this is a small city, so it is not like New York or Chicago that has many stores." As a Muslim, they also had problems when they attended a party with no guarantee that the served food was halal. They could not eat any food provided by other people or they could not drink any kind of drinks.

## **Decreasing Religious Stressors after the First Semester or Year**

The data indicated as Muslim, participants in this study encountered unanticipated difficulties in practicing religious activities, including unexpected praying difficulties, longer fasting days, no taraweeh prayers in mosque, no holiday for the Ramadan celebration, and the scarcity to find halal food during their first term or first year. However, participants in this study indicated that after spending one semester or one year at their host university, they felt more adjusted to their new life in their new culture related to religious issues although they were still challenging. For praying difficulties, two of the participants commented,

*"I know it is impossible to ask a special room for prayers at my department but, I have a shared office with other students. I ask their permission to do my prayers in the office and they allow me to do that and they get used to my praying time"*[Hamdani]

*"I have a space in a graduate room and I always pray in the graduate room during my semesters. So, after my first year, I have no problems to find a place to take prayers."* [Zulkifli]

For longer fasting days, a female participant reported, "I feel more adjusted with the weather here, although it makes me tired easily" (Adriani). To do taraweeh during Ramadan, participants in this study had their own solution. They did it at home alone although they still felt different when they did it together in their home country. "I just do it by myself at home, I think that is the best way, but you know the feeling is different" (Sujono).

Indonesian Muslim graduate participants also reported that to celebrate Happy Eid, they went to the mosque by carpooling and celebrated together with other Muslims from other countries and they cooked at home to invite other Indonesian students. "Well, we make an appointment with Muslim students who have cars and go together to the mosques for Happy Eid" (Hamdani). "We cook Indonesian food and celebrate with other Indonesian students here" (Zulkifli). Additionally, the scarcity of halal food is not a big problem for participants since everyone has his or her own way. For example, Adriani, had her own way, "I don't care anymore, especially for chicken, and I just buy it at any stores here. As long as it is chicken, I feel fine."

## **Discussion, Future Research, and Policy Implications**

### **Discussion**

When international students, particularly Muslim students at their host university are not well-supported, they may be forced to make decisions to survive that home students do not have to make, for example whether or not to continue practicing religious activities at their host university where those religious activities are not supported (e.g., doing fasting, eating halal food, praying five times a day). This paper was to report some of findings from a larger phenomenological study on the lived experience of Indonesian graduate students in a US higher education. Particularly, this paper was to report the four Indonesian Muslim graduate students' religious life experiences attending an American graduate school. The acculturative experiences of four Indonesian Muslim graduate students at an American public research university were described and interpreted from participants' personal reflections and perspectives. The findings of this study shed light on our understanding of international Muslim students' acculturative processes in US higher education and described what aspects of the international Muslim students' acculturative experiences are being unnoticed. As indicated in the acculturative stress model (Berry, et al., 1987; Berry, 2006), an acculturating individual may face stressors from many to a few as a result of varying acculturative experiences in

adapting to a new culture. The findings of this study indicated that during their first semester and the first year, the four participants encountered major religious stressors including unanticipated praying difficulties, longer fasting days, no holiday for Ramadan celebration, no taraweeh prayers in mosque during Ramadan, and rare halal food. Consequently, these major religious stressors led them to have difficulties to practice their religious activities at their host university. The findings of this study also support previous literature (Cole & Ahmadi, 2003; Nasir & Al-Amin, 2006) which suggests that Muslim students experience many challenges related to their religious beliefs and practices.

In addition, Berry & Kim (1988) and Berry, et al. (1987) concluded that the acculturative problems or stressors would depend on factors or variables (e.g., individual's demographic characteristics, acculturation strategies) that moderate the relationship between acculturation and stress. Although participants encountered stressful life events that arose from religious stressors, the findings of this study indicated that after spending one semester or one year at their host university, participants felt more adjusted to their new culture related to religious stressors. No one left the country, suggesting the stressors gradually disappeared and reduced after the first semester or after one year. Participants' quick adjustment related to religious stressors might be influenced by their high expectations for their own academic achievements, which forced them to encounter any challenges during their hard times. Additionally, their quick adjustment might be related to the supportive social network and relationships that they had from other Indonesian Muslim or other international Muslim students, which facilitated them to have capacity to manage the stressors. More importantly, the findings of this study suggested that participants in this study realized that the goal of their coming to their host university is to study and achieve high level knowledge and bring it back to their country. So, religious stressors that they experienced during their first term or first year led them to be stronger Muslims and students. It indicated that although they experienced a demanding condition, they still wanted to become responsible students at their host university and become responsible Muslims in a non-Muslim country.

### **Future Research and Policy Implications**

Using a qualitative phenomenological study and acculturative stress model, this study adds to the body of knowledge on international students' acculturative experiences and helps to describe Muslim graduate students' acculturative processes in US higher education, including unanticipated praying difficulties, longer fasting days, no holiday for Ramadan celebration, no taraweeh prayers in mosque during Ramadan, and rare halal food. While this study will potentially contribute the sort of evidence necessary for providing support of international students' adjustment to their new academic and social culture, participants may not be representative of all Indonesian Muslim graduate students in the US. There may be differences between the acculturative experience faced by Indonesian Muslim students who are enrolled in different programs, non-degree to post-doctoral programs and who are self-financing students. Future research may focus on a comparative study of Indonesian Muslim graduate students from different universities and programs in the US.

Implications for higher education policies and programs can be drawn from the findings of this study. The findings from this study indicated that the quality of religious life during the first semester or the first year of participants at their new academic culture was challenged due to a variety of religious stressors. For example, facilities for praying such as a silence room at department level are not available. This should not happen at a university that keeps receiving international students from various backgrounds. So, providing international students with a silence room and information on religious facilities upon arrival and during the first semester will reduce their religious stressors. The result of this study revealed that participants encountered some difficulties to practice their religious activities because the time to do prayers conflicted with their academic activities. Faculty members or

advisers should advise international Muslim students not to take classes that result in conflicts with their praying time during their first semester. The findings of this study also indicated that participants encountered the difficulties to find halal food and to do Friday's prayers. International office should work with Muslim student associations and co-national student associations to provide new Muslim students with information on halal food, mosque, and transportation. These kinds of policies and programs will facilitate Indonesian or other international Muslim students' acculturation to their new academic and social culture in the US.

**Note:**

This manuscript is part of the first author's dissertation, entitled, "From East to West: A Phenomenological Study of Indonesian graduate students' Experiences on the acculturative process at an American public research university" and partly has been published on, *Excellence in Higher Education Journal*, entitled, "Acculturative experiences among Indonesian graduate students in US higher education: academic shock, adjustment, crisis, and resolution."

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