

Islamic Counselling & Psychotherapy Trends in Theory Development

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Islamic counselling and psychotherapy is a discipline that is vaguely defined. Information that is available on this topic is often limited in quantity and perspective to form the theoretical basis necessary to constitute a model of intervention for Islamic Counselling. Indeed in discussions with social service practitioners this lack of a coherent Islamic counselling methodology is frequently expressed.

It is not unusual to find that counselling professionals find themselves at a loss to intervene effectively with clients who adhere to an Islamic value system especially when it is at variance with their own. For the client this situation is commonly experienced as an inability on the side of the practitioner to fully understand him/her. Given that Islamic counselling is not yet in a form where its actual implementation can be monitored, it first requires guidelines that can be integrated into a theoretical framework, a purpose to which this article is directed.

Islamic counselling is not a new concept. When studying its historical location, a distinction may be made between cultural and professional modes of Islamic counselling. In the former, counselling is not an explicit exercise, but alluded to in the religio-cultural rituals of Muslim communities. In the case of the latter, we set Islamic counselling as a formal discourse, comparable with mainstream, predominantly western counselling paradigms. Islamic Counselling.

If counselling is to be equated with giving advice and guidance then it dates back to the beginning of time, having an array of practitioners including shamans and sangomas, friends and family, prophets, priests and soothsayers. Islamic counselling in a cultural mode is not an explicit process. It manifests as part of ritual healing practices. While these practices do not constitute formal counselling, it has been shown to hold the same therapeutic value as mainstream counselling approaches. This has been attested to by case studies drawn from the Negev, India and Morocco all in the psychotherapeutic validity and healing capacity of such practices.¹ Islamic counselling and psychotherapy from a professional perspective is of recent origin. Few scholars have addressed this area of study in a significant way, beyond assertions that Islamic counselling needs to be developed into a well structured discourse that captures the breath and spirit of Islam in helping people. These contributions are usually directed at the presence of mainstream western counselling paradigms as a dominant force in counselling

and social intervention.

Professional counselling and psychotherapy are two separate but closely linked disciplines that are for most part treated equivalently. They are generally understood as disciplines that involve help and healing, and by which counsellors interact with clients to assist them to learn about themselves, deal with their environments, and understand the roles and responsibilities inherent in these relations. The role of emotions in causing psychological and emotional disturbances is central to understanding and helping clients. Individuals are thus aided to recognise their potential, learn how to utilise this potential, and work towards removing obstacles that block full realisation of their capabilities.

In professional terms, Islamic counselling would be a confluence of counselling and psychotherapy with the central tenets of Islam. This is acceptable in as far as it provides a broad purpose for Islamic counselling by linking it with an overarching intent of helping clients attain positive change in their lives. However, as counselling theories take on various philosophical positions such an analysis can become quite problematic. This is especially so given the nature and scope of Islam as a religious worldview, and debates on Islamic counselling that call for the rejection of western counselling theories. Application of Islamic principles to theories outside the realm of Islam or using concepts from mainstream counselling to inform an Islamic approach is therefore discouraged.

In such arguments it is often asserted that Western psychology is devoid of religion and foster distorted concepts of humankind that are rooted in materialism. Counselling that is based on Islam is then forwarded as a feasible alternative. Writers of such positions do simultaneously concede that western psychotherapy and psychiatry has its merits in dealing with psychological suffering and behaviour modification. What is proposed then is that Muslims use the positive aspects of western counselling, integrate it with the spiritual, and develop Islamic psycho-spiritual counselling methodologies that would facilitate positive change in Muslim clients. Exploring the Qur'an, the Sirah of the Prophet and his traditions, as well as the biographies of the Prophet's companions, will provide detailed instructions for implementing successful therapy. In the main, though, it is Sufism (tasawwuf), the mystical tradition of Islam, which is credited with providing the basis for Islamic psychology. It is forwarded as the main frame of reference from which to develop a professional Islamic counselling approach.

Islamic Counselling Practices in the Western Cape The practical manifestation of Islamic service delivery by Muslim organisations is very different from the cultural and professional tenets indicated above. While counselling may reflect on some of the aforementioned assumptions, it is not the overarching focus. Many Muslim organisations are involved in

Islamic counselling service delivery based on approaches that integrates Islam with general counselling techniques. Here the Shariah provides directives in how Muslims are to conduct themselves on various socio-legal matters and techniques from the overall disciplines of counselling and psychotherapy. This is particularly the case where professional social workers are employed at Muslim agencies. Alternatively a purely Shariah based approach is implemented in an instructive manner. In this latter instance Imams and Shaykhs (pl.) are more commonly involved in such counselling. In the Western Cape the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC) is the largest provider of Islamic counselling services in the form of marital counselling. It has a Social Welfare Department where clients are seen from Monday to Wednesday, and where urgent cases are attended to on Friday mornings as well. Shariah Court hearings are held on Thursdays to make decisions on the status of certain cases for talaq or fasakh. An estimated total caseload of 150 cases per week have been indicated. The Muslim Assembly likewise offers marital counselling together with structured ongoing counselling sessions and follow-up to clients. This service is conducted by a professional social worker and a judiciary consisting of four Imams and Shaykhs who make decisions on divorces. Counselling may also extend to affected persons e.g. children in cases of marital discord or divorce. Additional services offered are behavioural counselling, stress management and drug counselling and support.

The Islamic Dawah Movement of Southern Africa offers drug counselling as well. Marital counselling is the focus of the Islamic Social and Welfare Association (ISWA). ISWA provides professional social services to communities of the Western Cape in general and to Muslim communities in particular. The organisation started in 1986 to seek solutions for an alarming increase in the divorce rates amongst Muslim people, as well as to respond to an overwhelming need for structured social services for Muslim clients. It has since developed into a fully fledged social welfare agency and includes in its services, general psycho-social counselling, specialised marital counselling, training of community workers, family reconstruction programmes, setting up of self-help projects, and childcare awareness programmes. A counselling service is also provided by the Mustadafin Foundation. However, here counselling is restricted to the presenting problem stage only and clients are referred to other appropriate agencies. It is important to note that all these agencies work closely with other state or private social welfare agencies. This is especially the case where presenting problems are beyond their field of expertise.

The above constitutes the main counselling service provision agencies for Muslim in the Western Cape. Counselling is not however limited to these agencies and many other Muslim

agencies may be involved in counselling. The Islamic Unity Convention is generally acknowledged as a counselling service provider for Muslim clients, details of which still need to be verified. Usually most Muslim organisations or leaders do interact at the level of counselling with clients as a referral agency or as a first contact. In essence counselling is an active available social service that exists for Muslim clients. The extent to which it is implemented along Islamic lines are varied but essentially an integrative approach of Islam and general models is the preferred, and under the circumstances, the most workable and unavoidable model for now.

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