

Integrating Spirituality Into Counseling: An Insight

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Abstract

Religious beliefs, spirituality and coping by turning to God. All are a struggle both for us who counsel and those whom we counsel. Currently, there is little evidence that concepts of spirituality are consistently being integrated into counseling. This paper illustrates the importance of integrating spirituality into counseling in the context of Malaysia as well as issues and challenges that may be faced by counselors. Suggestions and recommendations is provided. It is hoped that such recommendations will help in maximizing the effectiveness of counseling and draw the attention to necessary changes to be implemented.

Background

Counseling and spirituality are very closely related. Therapy originates from the word 'theraieia' which means 'soul healing' (Burke & Miranti, 1995; Frankl, 2000; Koch, 1998; Moore & Meckel, 1990. Hart (2002) stated that by identifying the Greek word 'therapeuiein' as meaning 'to heal', 'therapy is the art of healing'. According to Leech (1980), the goal of psychoteraphy is to heal the soul. Plato recognized the prime need for curing the soul in order to find real healing of the body. Thus, psychoteraphy or counseling essentially means 'soul healing'. In Islam, soul refers to immaterial spiritual essence located in the core of the spiritual heart in man's body. The evil soul will cause badness. The prophet said, "*Indeed in your body a flesh, If it good, it causes good to the*

body, if it is bad, it causes all body bad. In fact, It is the heart". Purification of soul from ill, blameworthy qualities is compulsory and one of the mediums that could be applied to the cleanse of the soul is by counseling approach.

In Islam, the term counseling could be translated into Arabic word as *al-nasihah*. It means to give, sincere advice, counseling, guidance, true, faithful, loyal, exhortation, consultation, friendly admonition, and friendly reminder (Cowan, 1976). The ideas to solve it is already mentioned in Islam and recorded in Muslim's books. *Al-Nasihah* is derived from the hadith. The Prophet said, "*Religion is an advice*". For example, *one asked the Prophet what is the best deed in Islam. He replied, Say I believe to Allah and steadfast to Allah' rules. He was asked what is the worst thing. He shows his finger to his mouth. It means to keep the mouth from bad deeds like backbiting and lying* (al-Tirmidhi, al Nasai, Ibn Majah).

Islam in fact is a religion known as advice, which provides a comprehensive guidance for all aspect of man's life in this world, and hereafter. Even though many counselors today practice almost exclusively Western theories and modules in their activities, the pivotal role of Islam is to expose its approach and values into the contents of counseling in order to make its function is more comprehensively. The inclusion covers emotion, intellect, behavior and soul which is based on tawhidic orientation

Nevertheless, there is no exact definition of counseling in Islam; it can be regarded as art and skill dealing systematically with man's crises of his intellectual, emotional, behavior and soul and providing him guidelines to manage them properly based on the approach derived from revelation which directs him to know his actual function and responsibility to God and man.

Whatever the perspectives are, in counseling it is vital to understand that the various dimension of a human being namely the physical, intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual are all interconnected. The spiritual element is the most important part that integrates and unites all the other parts, bringing meaning and depth in human's life. A counselor who does not address all these dimensions, especially the spiritual element, may be omitting an essential part of his/her client's life.

Spirituality or religion?

Research suggest that one of common interest for both spiritual and religious persons are that they are both acknowledge a higher power and have specific beliefs about their relationship to that higher power. Islam sees no separation between the two concepts, i.e. religion and spirituality. Islam views the spiritual element as the most dominant aspect in shaping the humans' life. The spiritual element here refers to *al-Qalb* (the heart). It can be defined as a spiritual substance that can be conceive and accept the truth revealed to it. It is a locus to recognition of the Creator. This role played by heart will shape one's behavior, emotional and physical development. Religion directs people to adopt certain behaviors, and rewards those who learn to organize their world and act in an integrated way that is centered on the religious beliefs and practices. Thus, religion is the representative of spirituality.

This is different from the secular views that define spirituality and religion as two separate entities. Gilchrist (1992) differentiated spirituality from religion by stating that for some people spirituality incorporates a religious system; for others; it is a highly unstructured orientation. This suggests that religion encompasses a belief in a higher power in addition to the endorsement of a specific set of credal beliefs. On the other

hand, spirituality seems to encompass a much broader focus on the relationship between the individual and a transcendent force (Armstrong, 1996). Hinterkopf (1994) corroborates this differentiation between spirituality and religion along with Faiver, Ingersoll, O'Brien, & McNally (2000), who contended that religiosity is the public component that is displayed in the context of a religious institution; whereas spirituality is more private, may or may not be expressed publicly.

It can be concluded that religiosity refers to “the degree of participation in, or adherence to, the beliefs and practices of a religion”. Koubek (1984) described four activities as the most powerful predictors of various degrees of religious commitment. They are (a) being involved in congregational and personal religious activities, (b) praying to seek God’s help, (c) seeking God’s help in deciding right and wrong behavior, and (d) having a strong interest in help provided by the congregation. In contrast, religiosity in Islam is not measured only through the external component (physical action) but also built on the soundness and purity of heart, devoid of any corruption.

Allah Almighty says:

“So set thy purpose (O Muhammad) for religion as a man by nature upright the nature (framed) of Allah, in which He hath created man. There is no altering (the laws of) Allah's creation. That is the right religion, but most men know not.” (Ar-Rum: 30).

In other words, a person can not be described as being religious if the nature of his or her heart and mind has been corrupted by whims.

The importance of integrating spirituality and religion into counseling

Since spirituality and counseling are very much closed to one another, it is only reasonable to integrate spirituality and religion into counseling. Below are the rationales for incorporating spirituality and religion into counseling together:

- 1) The importance of spirituality in peoples' life has historically been ignored within the mental health fields (Haque, 2001). This may be due to the utilization of scientific approaches or positivism in the mental health field. Questions of the soul and spirit are categorically rejected as religious and therefore unscientific question within this paradigm of science. There is notable absence in research and teaching of spirituality and religion in the mental health realm. For example, religion was not mentioned as a variable in human behavior and functioning in textbooks (Faller, 2001). It has to be stressed that overemphasis on the rational elements of human experience and overlooking the emotional and existential dimension that give life most of its meaning may lead therapists to neglect an important part of human experience that has direct relevance for the helping relationship.
- 2) There is an association (positive, negative or no relationship) between religion, spirituality and mental health. Studies have shown conflicting results as to the relationship between religion, spirituality and mental health (Hackney & Sanders, 2003). Research that found positive correlation include how religion/spirituality provide coping resources with people with physical or psychological illness, assist with pain management, improve surgeries outcomes, protective factors in relation

to depression and addiction and source of strength in ceasing the use of alcohol and drugs (Koenig, 1998; Larson & Larson, 2003; Morjria & Orford, 2002).

There have also been studies that yielded different results (Calicchia & Graham, 2006; Krejci, Thompson, Simonich, Crosby, Donaldson, Wonderlich & Mitchell, 2000). The recognition of the role spirituality and religion play in mental health makes it relevant to be integrated together.

- 3) Integrating spirituality into work with clients is being multicultural competent. Spirituality and religion are part of one's culture and of the human experience (Sue et al., 1999). Many traditional values found in societies are either directly established from or supported by religion and group identities may be founded on religious or cultural values (Hall, 1996). Pate & Bondi (1992) make a strong argument for the inclusion of religion/spirituality in multicultural competencies when they say, "What is possible, is for counselors to learn that part of the cultural development of many of their clients has involved religion, thus, to omit this aspect of their clients' lives from counseling is to omit a significant part of the identity of those they are attempting to serve" (p.110). In the Malaysian context, it is of utmost importance to consider the multicultural aspect of the clients, especially in relation to their religion/spirituality as Malaysia is comprised of diverse population where different race or ethnicity represents different cultural and religious background.

- 4) Many people look to their spirituality in times of stress (Pargament, 1997).

Religious and spiritual is often a source of guidance and support and it is a natural coping mechanism that could affect clients' reaction to and perception of an event. It may affect them both positively and negatively. Not to integrate this important aspect of support into therapy seems to run counter to counseling's tradition of focusing on clients' strengths. Hill (2000) asserts that integration is critical because spirituality is often a source of connection, shared values and strength within a community.

- 5) As religion and spirituality are considered as important by a large number of people, there is a possibility that clients may prefer that their spiritual and/or religious beliefs are integrated into their therapy sessions (Hall & Hall, 1997).

Studies suggest that many clients view spirituality as a part of human development and as an important variable in personal growth (Benjamin & Looby, 1998; Corey, Corey & Callanan, 2003; Ivey, Ivey, Meyers & Sweeney, 2005; Miller, 1999, Myers & Truluck, 1998). If this is what is important to the client, then, it should be brought up in therapy sessions and this upheld the view that there is need for integration of spirituality into counseling.

- 6) Spirituality on its own promotes wellness and health. It also acts as protective factor as well as a tool for intervention. Prayer, forgiveness, meditation – all are spiritually-infused interventions.

Integrating spirituality in counseling: Issues and challenges

With the emergence of new technologies and various shifts in the societal values that posed new challenges, traditional or secular counseling approaches adopted from the West derived from modernism should be reconsidered to incorporate elements of spirituality. It may be possible that Malaysian counselors have already integrate spirituality into practice, however, to what extent this is true is questionable as there have not been any research in relation to this. Spirituality is vital to be integrated into counseling.

Among the challenges in understanding religion and spirituality in counseling Muslims clients are (i) the differences in reconciling cultural exposure in Malaysia; (ii) the lack of full understanding among Muslims themselves about counseling; (iii) the misrepresentation of Islam by the international environment which leads to wrong perception by Muslim of a true Islamic identity.

The starting point of Muslim counseling is to have a clear picture of the true Islamic identity. It is a counselor job to show what Islamic identity is. The conflict of Islamic principles and lifestyle poses a real problem. In Malaysia, difficulties exist in reconciling the cultural exposure that we have. Cultural exposure such as the Western shows on television may result in some Muslims having confusion of identity and thus it may be difficult to be a 'proper Muslim'. Over the last 30 years, American culture has had a strong influence factor, not surprising given that 70% of Malaysian television programs are from the United States, and now with the advent of Satellite TV almost 80% of Malaysians viewing time is spent watching American programming.

Religiosity and spirituality causes the person to understand their identity, ability and strength. By understanding self, it will gives confident and allow clients to manage and overcome their problems. Counselors may acknowledge the significance of religion and spirituality in their clients' lives but unable to integrate it into therapy due to lack of confidence in handling spirituality-related issues. Counselors may also have the view that there are people who are more qualified and have better expertise in this area and may prefer to refer their clients to them instead. This may be result from the lack of confidence among counselors and the lack of necessary training to feel competent addressing spirituality and religion in sessions with clients.

In addition, the Malaysian society is not very open to the idea of counseling, what more to discuss spiritual or religious issue with a counselor. They may not be convinced that counselors have the ability to handle their issues and may prefer to consult their religious leader (*ustaz*, priests etc.) or spiritual healers (witch-doctor, *bomoh* etc.) instead.

Recommendations and suggestions

Only in recent years has there been an increased recognition of the need for counselors to consider the role of spiritual and religious issues in the lives of their clients, particularly racial and ethnic minority clients (Constantine, Lewis, Conner & Sanchez, 2000). To illustrate the importance of religion and spirituality in counseling, the following nine competencies have been selected for review by the Counsel Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) for the purpose of incorporating them into their revised standards:

“In order to be competent to help clients address the spiritual dimension of their lives, a counselor needs to be able to: 1) explain the relationship between religion and

spirituality, including similarities and differences, 2) describe religious and spiritual beliefs and practices in particular context, 3) engage in self-exploration of his/her religious and/or spiritual beliefs in order to increase sensitivity, understanding and acceptance of his/her belief system, 4) describe one's religious and/or spiritual belief system and explain various models of religious/spiritual developmental across the life span, 5) demonstrate sensitivity to and acceptance of a variety of religious and/or spiritual expressions in the client's communication, 6) identify the limits of one's understanding of a client's spiritual expressions, and demonstrate appropriate referral skills and general possible referral sources, 7) assess the relevance of the spiritual domains in the client's therapeutic issue, 8) be sensitive to and respectful of the spiritual themes in the counseling process as befits each client's expressed preference, and 9) use a client's spiritual beliefs in the pursuit of the client's therapeutic goals as befits the client's expressed preference."

Recommendations to counselors are as follows:

- Evaluate the client's religiosity.
- Assess the client's understanding of the nature of the problem.
- Examine the client's perception of mental health.
- Collaborate with experts from local and (if needed) national Islamic organizations in conducting seminars and workshops to inform Muslims about the professions and their procedures and advantages.
- Gain further training on religiosity, spirituality and multiculturalism in order to better equip counselors to deal with clients.

Conclusion

We have learned that there is no separation between the concept of religion and spirituality in Islam. It also highlights the definitional concept of spirituality, the importance of integrating spirituality in counseling, issues and challenges as well as the recommendations and suggestions. It is hoped that this paper will inspire further investigation into how spirituality and religion can be incorporated into counseling to provide a more effective and holistic service to clients. Perspectives on integration of spirituality in counseling practices should be investigated from the perspectives of clients, counselors, and counselor educators. Future research is recommended on spiritual development of counselors, multicultural competency that includes spirituality and its effect on counseling processes and adoption of a sound model or guideline to institute spirituality in counseling practices.

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