

IS CLIENT-CENTERED THERAPY CONGRUENT WITH ISLĀMIC BELIEFS AND PRACTICES?

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ABSTRACT

This paper sets out to provide some modifications to Client-centered therapy to make it congruent with Islāmic beliefs and practices. The purpose of this paper is to explore how Client-centered therapy can be useful for counselling Muslim clients. These modifications include an alteration in the usage of unconditional positive regard, focus on present and non-directive approaches. It also modifies the meaning and implications of self-actualization and mentions some Islāmic concepts which can be useful when integrated with Client-centered therapy. To conclude, it states that these modifications must be adjusted according to client needs and their religious inclination.

KEYWORDS: Client-Centered Therapy, Islām, Modifications, Self-actualization

1. INTRODUCTION

Client-centered therapy was an approach developed by Carl Rogers and has some striking similarities with Islāmic concepts. The belief in the innate goodness of humans, unlike other theories, is similar to the Islāmic concept of “*fitrah*” (innate sound disposition). Other similarities include being active to bring about change, being responsible and accountable for yourself, a focus on the present, and lastly, the concept of self-actualization. Due to these similarities, the client-centered approach is deemed to be “the closest approach to Islāmic counselling” (Al-Shennawy, 2001). However, as explained by Afrasibi and Fattahi (2017) psychological theories and approaches must be attuned in accordance with the culture and religion of each region because psychology is highly interconnected with the local religion and culture. Thus, client-centered therapy should also be modified to make it congruent with Islāmic beliefs and practices so that it may be as effective for Muslims as their non-Muslim counterparts.

2. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The three core conditions that are essential to make client-centered therapy successful are empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard. Empathy and congruence are very much congruent with the ways of Prophet ﷺ when counselling people. However, unconditional positive regard is somewhat controversial. A Muslim practitioner cannot be truly genuine to the client if he lets him practice things which will ultimately lead to destruction, this implies that he cannot show absolute unconditional positive regard. However, this core condition can be modified so that the client benefits in this world as well as the Hereafter. In the initial sessions, the therapist must show unconditional positive regard towards the client and listen patiently and empathetically. When the client is ensured of a safe and accepting environment, the therapist must subtly point out problem behaviors. According to Feryad (2013), it is extremely important for the client to identify their negative behaviors especially if they include immoral and prohibited acts. If we do not enjoin good and forbid evil we will become like the people that were cursed and destroyed by Allāh ﷻ, and for whom Allāh ﷻ says in the Qur’ān: ***“They used not to prevent one another from wrongdoing that they did.”*** (Sūrah Al-Mā’idah 5:78). Thus, it is equally important to guide people towards goodness as it is to show unconditional positive regard.

Another concept of client-centered therapy which overlaps Islām is its focus on the present. According to Rogers (1961), “the process which for me is the good life is that which involves an increasing tendency to live fully in each moment”. Similarly, the Prophet ﷺ also stated *“Strive for that which will benefit you and seek the help of Allāh ﷻ, and do not be helpless. If anything (bad) happens to you, do not say, ‘If only I had done such-and-such, then such-and-such would have happened.’”* (Muslim). However, this concept must be modified to incorporate the Islāmic goal which is to have a close relationship with the Creator. Thus, the individual should be encouraged to live in the present and enjoy life “while maintaining a good relationship with Allāh ﷻ.” (Al-Thani, 2010).

The concept of self-actualization which is the heart of this theory is perhaps the most controversial among Muslim practitioners. According to Dwairy (2006) a concept like self-actualization is considered selfish and a threat to collectivism. However, self-actualization can be modified to make it congruent with Islām and its collectivistic system. By definition, self-actualization is “the need for personal growth and discovery that is present throughout a person’s life” (Maslow, 1961). A self-actualized person is one who realizes his purpose in life and strives actively to fulfil it. For Muslims it is to worship Allāh ﷻ, as stated in the Qur’ān: ***“And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me”*** (Sūrah Ath-Thāriyāt 51:56).

Furthermore, from an Islāmic perspective, a self-actualized person is someone who has “flourished by purifying their soul” (Afrasibi & Zakieh, 2017). As stated by Allāh ﷻ: **“He has succeeded who purifies it”** (Sūrah Ash-Shams 91:9). Thus, from the Islāmic perspective, self-actualization is a process to reach *“Nafs-Mutmainnah”* (the purified soul). A soul that is content with what it has (which is emphasized both by Islām and client-centered therapy), and who constantly strives to purify itself. Allāh ﷻ. says in the Qur’ān regarding them: **“[To the righteous it will be said], “O reassured soul, return to your Lord, well-pleased and pleasing [to Him],”** (Sūrah Al-Fajr 89:27-28). Thus, the clients should be informed of this modified meaning of self-actualization because not only is it congruent with Islām, it is also very useful to become a better version of yourself. Lastly, those who consider it to be a threat to the collective society should understand that this modified approach will only improve the society because “while self-actualized individuals are free, they feel responsible towards themselves and others” (Afrasibi & Zakieh, 2017) and actively strive to become better.

Another aspect of this therapy that needs modification is its non-directive nature. In client-centered therapy the therapist does not direct or guide the client in any way. The implication of directive approach is that clients from indigenous cultures may be disappointed and may not benefit from such approach. Poyrazli suggested that “In a counselling session, the client from this culture expects the counsellor (i.e., the authority) to guide, probe, and provide structure” (p. 107). Thus, it is important that some direct techniques may also be used for Muslim clients especially in the initial sessions to prevent them from getting disappointed and quitting therapy. According to Rassool (2016, p.133), these include “spiritual direction; guiding and advising; making suggestions and disclosing thoughts and feelings”. This is also evident from the life of Prophet Muhammad ﷺ who used both direct and indirect approaches when guiding people. Finally, apart from modifying the existing concepts some new Islāmic concepts must also be incorporated into client-centered therapy. These include the mercy and forgiveness of Allāh ﷻ, the temporary nature of this world, the importance of patience, trials and tribulations and the reward for the hardships in this world. All these will not only strengthen the faith of the client but will also work as a catalyst on the road to self-improvement and purification of the self. (*Nafs*).

3. CONCLUSION

Since client-centered therapy was developed in the West it “has an individualistic cultural orientation.” (Campbell, 2018, p.13). Therefore, it needs to be modified before using it with Muslim clients who live in collectivistic cultures and value religion greatly. This can be done by modifying existing concepts like unconditional positive regard, self-actualization, focus on the present, and non-directedness and by incorporating some basic Islāmic concepts. An important point that the therapist must bear in mind is to modify and tailor this approach according to the religiosity and level of faith of each client.

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