

Islamic Psychology: Defining a Discipline

Background Paper

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In November 2014, the Research Center for Islamic Legislation and Ethics (CILE) held its first seminar on psychology entitled ‘Islamic Ethics and Psychology’. To read a short report of what was discussed at that seminar, click [here](#). Although notions of what Islamic psychology might be were briefly discussed during that seminar, until now, there is no agreed upon definition nor is there any conceptual model or framework to house, organize, or link the disparate parts of scholarship into a comprehensive or cohesive whole. Until that happens, Islamic Psychology has no foundation in which scholarship can take root and grow. It also leaves those of us who do work in this area somewhat at a loss in being able to clearly articulate our subject and domain of study, and how that work relates to other work being done in the field. Given that values and ethics are foundational components in the development of theories and concepts, which in turn are the building blocks of scientific disciplines, developing a psychology that is based on Islamic values and ethics is imperative and why a seminar, hosted by CILE, on the topic of defining the field of Islamic Psychology is compelling.

The Problem

Most of the contemporary scholarship that has been somewhat indiscriminately characterized as Islamic Psychology might better be referred to as ‘Islam and Psychology’ (see Kaplick & Skinner, in press), partly due to the lack of an agreed upon definition (some definitions may be found in: Hamid, 1977; Vahab, 1996; Khan, 1996; Abdul Razaq & Hashim, 2012) or a theoretical model, and partly because the work is coming from a broad array of disconnected disciplines including psychology, theology, Arabic literature, philosophy, history, and mental health. To elaborate on this body of work, there are countless publications that discuss key concepts that are proposed to constitute the building blocks of Islamic psychology such as fitra (Mohamed, 1995, 2009), reliance and attachment to god (Bonab & Kooshar, 2011; Bonab, Miner, & Proctor, 2013), rida (Khalil, 2014), action (Koshravi & Bagheri, 2006), tawheed, taqwa, tawba, jihad al-nafs, etc. However, much of the scholarship published on the Islamic concepts tends to be philosophical in nature (see: Mohamed, 1995) and often somewhat unusable partly because the terminology has not been translated or operationalized into psychological nomenclature. Numerous publications have also examined Islamic conceptualizations of the self (ruh, qalb, aql, nafs, ihsas, irada etc.) (Abu Raiya, 2012; Keshavarzi & Haque, 2013; Haque & Keshavarzi, 2014), sometimes discussing how these ideas equate to western conceptions (such as Freud’s) or labeling them as some sort

of Islamic personality theory. Other publications discuss incorporating Islamic concepts or spiritual therapies such as dhikr, ruqya etc. into psychotherapy (Keshavarzi & Haque, 2013; York Al-Karam, 2015), pointing towards the potential of Islamically integrated psychotherapy. Some scholars have discussed converging and diverging concepts between Western psychology and Islamic theology (e.g. Utz, 2012; Badri, 2000). Others have suggested that Islamic Psychology is simply tasawwuf (e.g. Shafii, 1985). Still others claim that the work of early Muslims scholars such as al-Ghazali, al-Balkhi, Ibn Sina, and al-Razi is Islamic Psychology (Haque, 2004; Badri, 2013). Part of al-Balkhi's work in the 9th century was on phobias and obsessional disorders and his classification system is nearly identical to that found in the DSM-V (Awaad & Ali, 2014, 2015). Does that mean that the DSM is Islamic as it relates to these disorders?

As important as all of the above scholarly activities may be and as much as they have contributed to the knowledge economy, none of this activity has brought about a comprehensive answer to the pervasive and nagging question 'What is Islamic Psychology'? Is Islamic Psychology just Sufism (tasawwuf; e.g. Skinner, 1989; Haeri, 1989)? If so, which kind? Is Islamic Psychology simply 'Psychology from an Islamic Perspective' (e.g. Badri, 1979; Utz, 2011)? Is it psychology with a little bit of Islam (which Islam? Sunni? Shia? Whose interpretation?)? Or, is it Islam with a little bit of psychology (which psychology? Clinical, organization, social, neuro? And with which Islam?) Is it the Islamization of psychology whereby Islamic theological explanations are given for psychological phenomenon such as motivation or perception (e.g. Safi, 1998)? Is Islamic Psychology only interested in the spiritual aspect of a person? Are diseases of the heart the only type of disorders that Islamic Psychology addresses (e.g. Al-Mawlud, 2000)? Is it using an Islamic model of the self in psychotherapy and then incorporating prayer, dhikr, ruqya, or other spiritual therapies into the mix (Keshavarzi & Haque, 2013; Haque & Keshavarzi, 2014; York Al-Karam, 2015)? What about the work of contemporary Muslim psychologists who come up with their own modalities such as Sabr Therapy (e.g. Qasqas, 2015), Jihad Therapy (e.g. Saritoprak, 2016), or The Prophetic Model (e.g. Lodi, 2016), which is a therapeutic approach where clients incorporate the cognitive, emotional, and psychological schemas and techniques used by Prophet Mohammed – are these Islamic psychology?

Although there is some overlap, many people also often conflate Islamic Psychology with Muslim Mental Health (MMH), which has been a growing area of scholarship over the past decade. MMH is mainly the application of Western psychological frameworks and research methods on Muslim populations, which is a wholly different animal than a psychology system whose philosophical and theoretical orientation is extracted from a religious tradition and is distinct from Western frameworks.

Based on this broad array of fragmented scholarship, it appears that at present, Islamic Psychology is defined and/or conceptualized according to however a particular scholar understands it based on his or her own work. Given this challenge, if an Islamic Psychology discipline has any hope of being established, a definition of what the field is as well as a conceptual framework that links scholarship is needed so that researchers can think, integrate material, and identify ways forward.

What We Propose

To address the problem of having neither an agreed upon definition nor theoretical framework that unifies the scholarship, we propose a ‘multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm’ (MIP), a concept in the domain of psychology of religion and spirituality that was originally put forth by Emmons & Paloutzian (2003), later articulated by Paloutzian and Park (2005, 2013), and that mirrors the Islamic concept of tawheed. The application of this paradigm to Islamic Psychology is extremely preliminary, and the aim of the seminar would be to evaluate its utility, suggest modifications, and/or to propose other models or paradigms.

The purpose of the MIP is to ‘serve as an overall framework to guide research, debate, and thinking and to serve as an overarching umbrella within which research in various areas and subareas relate to each other (Paloutzian & Park, 2013). It also includes the assumptions that enable such interrelationships among diverse lines of research to develop and flourish (Paloutzian & Park, 2013). We believe that using the MIP might help to address the current conceptual issue with the fragmented ‘Islam and Psychology’ body of scholarship. It might also address the issue of defining the field, even if only in broad terms.

Islamic Psychology is ideally a domain in which scholars and practitioners from a number of basic and applied disciplines are engaged including but not limited to psychologists, psychiatrists, religious studies scholars, theologians, chaplains, imams, philosophers, historians, anthropologists and others and they all think about Islamic Psychology in different ways and have specialized knowledge and expertise that they can share through collaboration. Within these broad disciplines, subdisciplines are also a part of the paradigm. Subdisciplines in the psychological sciences include clinical/counseling, social, health, forensic, organizational/industrial, developmental, and neuropsychology to name a few. In the religious and theological disciplines, subdisciplines include Sunni and Shia Islam, the various branches of the Islamic Sciences including fiqh, aqeedah, hadith, tafsir, tasawwuf and their various schools of thought etc. Other disciplines (and their subdisciplines) include philosophy, history, anthropology, medicine, and others. Also included in this paradigm are the methodological tools that are used in the various disciplines ranging from randomized control trials on the extreme end of the quantitative spectrum to qualitative methods such as phenomenology, case studies, ethnographies, historical methods and others.

Levels can be micro (individual), mid (family), or macro (societal) and can address any number of issues including human health, pathology, epistemology, ontology, or any topic with which psychology is concerned. In short, levels, disciplines, and methods dance around a topic or research question. The type of answer any given question gets depends on the topic, the level at which the question is being asked, from which discipline the scholar is asking it, and what research methodologies are being used. In that regard, the MIP is a dynamic model in which various (sub)disciplines engage with multiple levels of inquiry using a variety of methodological tools.

In order for progress to occur in a scientific discipline, there should be a minimum of consensus concerning the meaning of core issues such as definitions. Achieving some degree of definitional clarity is desirable, though obviously not completely essential for progress and the establishment of a cumulative knowledge base. Many disciplines have failed to provide a core consensual definition and have flourished despite definitional lacunae (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003). This certainly seems to be the case with Islamic Psychology because scholarship *is* happening, it's just not happening in any sort organized or comprehensive way. Indeed it is in a pre-defined and pre-paradigmatic state. The multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm might have the potential to organize the field and move it forward. Exploring this question will be part of the focus of the proposed seminar.

Issues of definition, conceptual framework, values, and ethics aside, there are other reasons why the development of an Islamic Psychology discipline is important.

In an April 2016 *Monitor on Psychology* article entitled "Looking East", American Psychological Association (APA) president Dr. Susan McDaniel emphasized that Western psychology can learn a lot from Eastern psychologies that often have a religious or spiritual underpinning. Reflecting on conferences she attended in Egypt and India, she spoke of a commitment to develop a psychology that incorporates Western science and Eastern thought. The importance of this perspective by a person in such an influential leadership role in Western psychology cannot be understated given the antagonistic historical relationship in the West between psychology and religion. Indeed it is a complete evolution of thought a long time in the making. Early Western psychologists, such as William James, were deeply interested in religion, but the psychoanalysts and behaviorists later argued that it had no place within the realm of psychology as a science. We seem to be coming full circle, with a major figure in the discipline recognizing the importance of religion and spirituality in psychology. Indeed it has been a robust area of psychological scholarship for the past few decades, particularly in the area of psychology of religion and spirituality and especially in the applied domain of psychotherapy, although many outside this subdiscipline are unfamiliar with its body of work. We are now at a point where the West is not only open to Eastern perspectives, but is actually calling for them. There is no doubt that Muslims have begun work in this area, but it's time to bring this scholarship to the next level in a way that has 21st century relevance.

Relatedly, much can be learned from the experience of Buddhist Psychology. An enormous amount of data has been collected on Buddhist thought and its therapeutic application, particularly as it relates to mindfulness, meditation, and yoga. It has been argued that these practices, to the dismay of many, have been secularized and unceremoniously extracted from the spiritual tradition from which they come. Be that as it may, they are now pervasive, with Westerners en masse having been exposed to the values and ethical principles that are embedded in these Buddhist and Hindu traditions, even if at only a superficial level. Islamic Psychology has within it concepts, practices and therapies that 'parallel' this. Imagine the potential transformative power on the negative perceptions people have about Islam if they had an opportunity to use and

benefit from a concept, therapy, or practice that is embedded in an Islamic Psychology body of knowledge, even if it had to be in a somewhat secularized format.

Also of great import is having a Muslim voice at the table and an Islamic perspective contributing to the knowledge economy. Given the contemporary socio-political climate where the Muslim and Islamic perspective is often silent or muffled (for a variety of reasons), the significance of heeding the call to speak up while simultaneously polishing and perfecting that which one wants to say is self-evident. This voice and perspective contributes to *structural pluralism* (Smith, 2003), which recognizes the existence, validity, and potential civic value of the ideas, ethics, and values of religious individuals, beliefs, and communities in public space.

Given the pressing issues at hand, this seminar shall be strategic and intentional. It will focus on defining Islamic Psychology and developing its conceptual framework. Moreover, it shall seek to heed the recommendations of the previous seminar, namely, articulating and giving a platform for the Muslim voice in psychology and other disciplines, attempting to formulate a psychology that is human in aim yet divine in origins, and proposing a concrete plan of action that will support the development and flourishing of the emerging discipline of Islamic Psychology.

Most references available at the **Islamic Association of Social and Educational Professions database (Germany). www.iase-ev.de Contact paul.kaplick@gmail.com*