

Spirituality vis-a-vis Islam as Prerequisite to Arab American Well Being: the Implications of Eurocentrism for Mainstream Psychology

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Due to the historical preponderance of racial and/or intellectual homogeneity in the field of psychology, Eurocentrism set the “gold standard” for its method of intervention. As such, it might be argued that psychology remains a bastion of Eurocentric thought despite the globalization of knowledge and the influx of racially and ethnically diverse scientists into the research endeavor.

At the same time and the significant increase in the immigrant Arab population, Arab Americans remain a less familiar component of society. Among the various Arab populations, spirituality through Islam is fundamental. Thus, psychologists would be remiss to exclude a critical aspect of Arab American life from intervention when it is essential to well-being.

KEYWORDS: spirituality; Islam; Arab American, Eurocentrism; mainstream psychology

INTRODUCTION

Due to the historical preponderance of racial and/or intellectual homogeneity in the field of psychology, Eurocentrism set the “gold standard” for its methods of intervention (Stinson, 1979). Recent studies in related fields, including psychiatry and medicine, suggest the existence of Eurocentrism in journals such that authors only cite and attend to the work of their fellow compatriots (Stephenson, 1997). Eurocentrism includes assumptions that have been methodically challenged by a cadre of scholars who, in the early 1970s, established the aggressive push toward inclusiveness

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about issues apart from the mainstream of psychology. Though noteworthy strides have been achieved in the last 40 years, significant issues published in the leading psychology journals have generally remained a recapitulation of the Eurocentric perspective. Such a perspective assumes loyalty to a Western (i.e. American) intellectual ideal. As such, it might be argued that psychology remains a bastion of Eurocentric thought despite the globalization of knowledge and the influx of racially and ethnically diverse scientists into the research endeavor (Mathis, 2002). Failure to acknowledge issues such as spirituality in the psychology literature is likely a manifestation of the impercipience of an empowered homogeneous majority of psychologists whose range of experience is limited. In essence, psychology, like its relatives, psychiatry and medicine is an outgrowth of a Western Eurocentric approach to understanding human well-being. Since science was advanced by Western scientists over hundreds of years, it is unsurprising that until recently spirituality has played an insignificant role in the fact of intervention.

Psychology as a field is not immune to the criticisms leveled against other fields of intellectual endeavor. In recent years, developments in the areas of cultural diversity and ethnic inclusion have supported the assumption of scientific bias by suggesting that no person exists outside a cultural milieu, and that even the most well-intentioned among us falls victim to our (and our colleagues) socialized prejudices (Macintosh, 1989). These prejudices, though masked, are often manifested in the continued teaching and researching of noninclusive psychological theories and limited inclusion of alternative research in the top tier psychology journals (Ritchie, 1994). As an example, note the work of Carl Jung, whose theories are widely used in psychology. Jung is identified as having quite controversial and negative (many would say racist) views of African Americans (Tinsley-Jones, 2001), yet Jungian theory remains a staple of the psychological education canon. The same is true for many of the theories that are universally applied and taught in psychology (Pedersen, 1987; Usher, 1989). Application of this Eurocentric frame necessitates utilization of spirituality through Islam as a critical resource pertaining to the well-being of Arab Americans.

As symbolized by a fervent appreciation for Islam, it has become apparent that spirituality is germane to the well-being of Arab Americans (Kilpatrick & Holland, 1990). Failure by psychologists to acknowledge spirituality's significance will facilitate ignorance exacerbated by political viewpoints. Resultant repercussions vis-à-vis conservative political viewpoints will dampen the willingness of Arab Americans to seek psycholo-

gists for intervention services. Thus Arab immigrants to America may find their well-being dictated by the traditions of Western society. Islam is a quality-of-life necessity without which the well-being of Arab Americans is significantly diminished (Hodge, 2000). Yet, as per society—and in spite of Jungian rhetoric to the contrary—Islam, for many within the Eurocentric mainstream of psychology, remains trivial. Although the literature acknowledges religion and spirituality among the list of intervention resources, amidst augmentation of Eurocentric focused-therapies it has been all but nonexistent (Solomon, 1992). Greater focus on spirituality will enable psychologists to assist Arab Americans more efficiently. Instead, psychologists rely too heavily upon less relevant but more conventional methodologies. Rather than asking how they might incorporate Islamic spirituality, psychologists pose nebulous questions such as: “What are the deficits of Arab Americans?” “In what ways can Arab Americans adjust to the American cultural ideal to enhance their quality of life, hence well-being.”

Fortunately, in recent decades, increasing numbers of psychologists have begun to focus on spirituality overlooked by the mainstream (Phan, 2000). These psychologists seek incorporation of religion and other manifestations of spirituality that heretofore have been dismissed as inappropriate for science. In fact, Islam has been proven to be invaluable to psychologists who serve Arab American clientele. Furthermore, Islam allows for the development of comprehensive interventions not identified within the mainstream of Western psychology. Thus, the conscientious among psychologists would be remiss to exclude a critical aspect of Arab American life, when it is essential. Spirituality may enhance the therapeutic potential of family values, family belief systems, and family traditions otherwise inaccessible by nonsectarian, unspiritual traditional methods. Additionally, spirituality for Arab Americans may contain coping mechanisms that enable them to confront and overcome the many challenges of daily life and adjustment to a new culture. In an effort to educate practitioners and contribute to the potential of psychology, this paper will have four objectives: (1) to provide an introduction to history of the Arab population; (2) to provide a brief, definitive account of Islamic spirituality; (3) to provide a brief account of Islam; and (4) to discuss the implications of spirituality for psychological well-being.

HISTORY OF THE ARAB POPULATION

Despite a significant increase in the immigrant Arab population, Arab Americans remain a less familiar component of society (Al-Krenawi &

Graham, 2000). The origin of the Arab population is associated with Semitic peoples from what is referred to as the Arabian Peninsula. The term Arab more often than not includes those who regard their mother language as Arabic. Arab countries include Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Iran* (see next paragraph), Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, the West Bank and Yemen.

There is disagreement as to how the term Arab came to be. Scholars who study the subject have, on more than one occasion, redefined its meaning. Some have associated origin of the term with an ancient patriarch Qahtan whose tribal group was thought to have originated in Saudi Arabia (Glubb, 1969). Others equate the origin of Arab peoples with nomads who resided in parts of the Arabian Peninsula (Glubb, 1969). Subsequently, the local population in the same area was not considered Arab. *Still, others applied the term to residents of the entire Arabian Peninsula and the desert areas of the Middle-East, which has complicated the perception of Iran as Arab.

Arab people may form significant communities elsewhere in the world including the U.S. Non-Arab immigrants who reside in Arab countries are often assumed Arab but in fact are separate and apart from the true Arab population. These populations include Jews in North Africa who speak Arabic, Kurds, Berbers, Copts, and Druze. Christians who speak Arabic and reside in countries such as Syria, Lebanon, Israel, and Jordan are counted among the number of those regarded as Arab (Glubb, 1969).

There has been an ongoing effort on the part of Arab leaders in the 20th century to form an Arab nation (Wien, 2011). If successful it would consist of Morocco on the west, and cross the Middle East to the borders of Iran and Turkey. That not possible, the various Arab nations have joined to form the Arab League. The purpose of the Arab League is to garner unity around issues of Arab interest, such as oil prices, Western colonialism, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Today the Arab League is composed of 22 member states. Their ownership of two-thirds of the world's oil reserves has made them a formidable social, economic, and political force. In the aftermath of World War II, much of their energy and resources have been devoted to relations with Israel. Their belief that the state of Israel was brought about by confiscation of Arab land resulted in four Arab-Israeli wars. Violence associated with that issue has remained a primary factor in the perpetration of terrorism not irrelevant to the intervention potential of psychology (Hall, 2003).

SPIRITUALITY

Among the various Arab populations spirituality is fundamental. Any attempts on the part of psychologists to define the concept of "spirituality" will be fraught with formidable challenges. However, an appropriate genesis is contained in the root words for spirit. In Latin the term *spiritus* conveys breath, courage, vigor, or life. As per Sheldrake (1992), *spiritus* was an effort to translate a Greek noun *pneuma* (which appeared in the Pauline letters of the Bible) into English. Similar to its Hebrew counterpart *ruach*, *pneuma* means "wind," "breath," "life," and "spirit" (Delbane & Montgomery, 1981; Roth, 1990). The fact that spirit is so intimately associated with life is reflected in a definition contained in the Tenth Edition of Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (1993): "an animating or vital principle held to give life to physical organisms" (p. 1134). While the term spirit implies physical vitality in "breath," it is, in fact, essential to much more than respiration. According to Rudolph Otto (1958) spirit also pertains to "the holy." In such a context spirituality refers to the human search for purpose and meaning in life. Much to the dismay of some, the aforementioned concept of spirituality does not necessarily pertain to the existence of a supreme being or a higher source of power.

Numerous scholars have attempted to define the term spirituality in an effort to simplify its myriad, complex meanings. Among the noted are Cervantes and Ramirez (1992) who suggest that spirituality includes the pursuit of universal accord and completeness. Tillich (1959) who maintained that spirituality pertains to humanity's utmost concerns relative to the meaning—giving aspect of culture. Booth (1992), in a more tangible explanation, refers to spirituality as an "inner attitude that emphasizes energy, creative choice, and a powerful force for living" (p. 25). Similarly Elkins, Hedstrom, Hughes, Leaf, and Saunders (1988) suggested that spirituality included an admiration for the holiness of life and a harmonious regard for the material, an attitude of altruism toward one's fellow man, hope for a better world, and the acknowledgement that life has a tragic dimension. Furthermore, according to Chandler, Holden, and Kollander (1992) spirituality includes "any experience of transcendence of one's former frame of reference that result in greater knowledge and love" (p. 170). Subsequently, Hinterkopf (1994) referred to spirituality as something felt in one's body. Such a feeling then precipitates comprehension of new meanings in life that enhances growth. Finally, Holifield (1983) contended that spirituality is "less a method than an attitude, a posture of one's very being that allows seeing not different things but everything

differently" (p. 88). However spirituality is defined, relative to Arab Americans it necessitates that psychologists be informed of Islam as its vehicle.

ISLAM

In a way similar to defining the term spirituality, it is necessary to define the term Islam. Originally, the term Islam was derived from the Arabic root S-L-M. Among other things, the root S-L-M means peace, purity, submission, and obedience (Abdulati, 2002). In a more succinct reference, Islam, simply put, is submission to the "Will of God" and obedience to His law. The relevancy between the literal and religious context of Islam illustrates a salient connection. Hence it is only by submission to God's will and obedience to His law can believers achieve peace, and everlasting purity manifested via Islam (Abdulati, 2002).

No other than God Himself, according to believers, is the founder of Islam. Those believers, including Arabs, who follow Islam refer to themselves as Muslims. According to Muslims, the existence of Islam dates back to the era of Adam and before. It is a religion that has no beginning and has no end. Thus for all intents and purposes, Islam and religion are assumed one and the same. Converse to stereotypical assumptions, Muslims who submit to the "Will of God" and obedience to His law do not forfeit personal freedom or give in to fatalism. The fact that God is believed by Muslims to be the "Most Merciful and Gracious" assures the well-being of His creatures. Therefore, His will is one of benevolence and goodness, which Muslims contend, will be ultimately in the best interest of humanity. Subsequently, submission to God's will does not terminate personal freedom. In fact to the contrary, Muslims believe that it sustains personal freedom. It relieves the mind of superstitions and replaces it with truth. It relieves the soul of sin and replaces it with purity. It relieves the self of vanity, greed, envy, and similar human frailties and replaces them with the excellence of optimum goodness.

The primary literature of Islam for the well-being of mankind is found in the Koran. The Koran contains the exact words of God as revealed to the Angel Gabriel and conveyed to the prophet Muhammad. Muslims believe that Muhammad, upon learning of the Koran, then memorized its words and instructed his companions. During the life of Muhammad, scribes recorded the words as revealed to them by Muhammad. Believers contend that the Koran is a compilation of verbatim quotes that have not changed over centuries. It serves as a guide on how Muslims should live their lives and provides a reference for faith and practice. The issues

addressed are assumed critical for all of humanity, including wisdom, beliefs, worship, and law. Most important for those who follow Islam, the Koran pertains to the relationship between God and His creatures. It imparts directives for a just society, proper human relationships, and equal divisions of power in sustaining well-being (Abdulati, 2002).

Those who follow Islam believe that submission and obedience to the Will of God insures a quality of life filled with peace and harmony. Following the Koran accommodates peace among men and women and peace between mankind and God. It also facilitates a harmonious connection between mankind and nature. As per Islam, all worldly phenomena, including humans are subject to God's law. Accordingly, the entirety of physical existence is then subject to God's law, which, Muslims believe, is in a state of service to God. Therefore, the physical universe does not exist of its own accord. It has no inherent will of its own other than the "Will of God" to which it is inclined to submit. Man on the other hand is unique. As an intelligent being he alone is endowed with the ability of making choices. The ability to make choices via intelligence means that humans can submit to or stray from the Will of God. When a human chooses submission, he will be in harmony with all elements of the universe. When he chooses to stray, he will be out of synch with the Will of God and suffer the consequences in various pathologies to his well-being. Subsequently, any successful intervention with traditional Arab Americans is impossible without application of a spiritual dimension in the form of Islam.

IMPLICATIONS OF SPIRITUALITY FOR PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING

According to Lasser, Himmelstein, Woolhandler, McCormick and Bor (2002) 15 per 1,000 Americans seeking psychotherapy in the United States are minorities vis-à-vis Arab Americans (as members of the minority community). The implications of spirituality for Arab American psychological well-being include the need for psychologists to acknowledge and, when appropriate, apply values, belief systems, and other culture-specific criteria. This provides the psychologist with alternatives to bring about the desired change or coping-mechanism. It is not compulsory that psychologists endorse Arab American belief systems or other aspects of their spirituality, but therapists should acknowledge said systems as a critical point in the Arab American patient's frame of reference. Especially where Islam is the spiritual tradition, reverence for the patriarch, as well as concern for the family's status, provides a strong sense of solidarity and loyalty (Wasfi, 1964, p. 44). Hence, psychologists must know that the Arab American family member is not free to live and/or conduct him- or herself

independently but is required to consider family in each critical life decision as prescribed by the Koran. The Koran, being the direct instruction from God, means that family members are expected to fulfill rules of behavior and family roles, such as husband, wife, child, etc., without the opportunity for personal input or preference. An individual's ability to adhere to spiritual directives reflects not so much upon him or her personally, but upon the family and its kinship network. In the Islamic tradition among Arab Americans, males are then more valued than females, which may cause conflict in Western settings. However, unless influenced by Western norms, anxiety levels from this secondary status may not increase for women in traditional Arab American families.

The importance of spirituality is evident in the extreme reluctance of individual Arab Americans to yield to conversion (p. 49). Christian missionaries of the last century are well aware of this reluctance. The number of Arab believers, including Americans, who have converted from Islam to Christianity is very small. For the individual Arab American, however family is not irrelevant to that small number who do convert as the family role in the existence of the community is crucial. Accordingly, those who migrate to the U.S. more often send for their Arab relatives in the "old country." Once abroad in the country to which they immigrate, there are few who do not have blood ties there. Arab Americans who do not have blood ties in their new surroundings are obvious by their difficulty in finding jobs or in otherwise sustaining themselves. Frustrated, such individuals without family frequently return to the "old country," where normal family ties are a way of life. This significance of family is evident by the fact that whole Arab American communities may contain a small number of patrilineages (p. 22). Consequently, there is considerable overlap between family and spirituality within the Arab community. However, while family is an important social structure, spirituality, as pertains to Islam, guides life and the family belief system. Psychologists who do not acknowledge this will be at a severe disadvantage in their intervention attempts.

Psychologists who see Arab Americans would be advised to cultivate working relationships with Islamic clergy. These relationships might prove useful in the clarification of Arab norms, the facilitation of referrals, and the effective application of treatment strategies. Such relationships are mutually beneficial to the extent that both community and service provider are enabled by the information exchanged. While some Arab Americans may prefer assistance from Islamic personnel such as therapists, specialists, nonprofessional pastoral counselors, others may be uncomfortable or

self-conscious about expressing psychological concerns to members of a tight-knit Islamic community. Under such circumstances, the availability of professional psychologists might prove invaluable. What is more, the availability of psychologists will be particularly helpful if in fact the spiritual system, i.e. Islam, is the focus of the client's dysfunction. The psychologist will enable the client to explore spiritual alternatives within the context of a spiritually neutral environment.

CONCLUSION

Because of Eurocentrism, diverse perspectives on the well-being of Arab Americans are considered relevant only to the extent that they accrue mainstream validation. In other words, as long as Arab Americans adhere to Eurocentric means for improving their quality of life well-being, the information provided is viewed as useful to the field. As such, unless research on Arab Americans falls within the purview of comparison studies to a Eurocentric norm, or prescribes means of amelioration for their negative condition, research on issues of spirituality will be viewed as meaningless.

Regarding the universality of Eurocentric traditions, bias within this framework may best be described as "advocacy" or "the selective use and emphasis of evidence to promote a hypothesis, without outright concealment or fabrication" (MacCoun, 1998 p. 268). MacCoun suggests that this bias occurs quite unintentionally by a combination of "hot" (i.e. affective) and "cold" cognitive mechanisms (MacCoun, 1998). Both types of bias are defined as unintentional and may occur commensurate with efforts of searching for accuracy. Unfortunately, the net effect of these biases is to produce a particular outcome via the norms or traditions associated with Eurocentrism. It is possible that the "hot" bias is operative in enabling the exclusion and limitation of spirituality in top-tier psychology journals.

The evolution of psychology as a field is contingent upon the ability of those trained to disseminate accurate and objective information (Ponterotto, 1988). Journals play a significant role in that effort. While serving as vehicle by which faculties become cognizant of varied perspectives, journals also control the means by which psychologists acquire prestige and recognition for their work (Hargens, 1988). Commensurate with these means, authors are then afforded an opportunity to advance their careers and dictate their rates of compensation (Diamond, 1986). Ideally, the objective of journals is to make information available that will enable the evolution of an accurate and relevant knowledge base. Via its history and professional mandate, psychology is at greatest liberty to choose when and

how to enable that evolution. It is, therefore, imperative that the gatekeepers of the field discourage any facet of the journal process that will inhibit this liberty.

There are several reasons why psychologists might consider the incorporation of spirituality into treatment planning as pertains to Arab Americans. First, the effects of spirituality are well known and are likely to enable intervention with such persons (Mattson, 2005). Second, the term "spirituality", for most, conjures up images of legal conflicts with the potential to charge emotions; when it is associated with stereotypes, it encourages knee-jerk condemnation of an entire race of people, their social structure, lifestyle, and other aspects of their quality of life well-being (Bar-Tal & Labin, 2001). The outcome may impair the ability of such persons to sustain him- or herself in the human social environment unless more rational factions prevail. Third, spirituality must be viewed as separate and apart from the legal process: that is most agencies which operate by federal funding are required by law to do so independent of religious influence. To do otherwise will bias any intervention with Arab Americans, rendering psychology less potent in its ability to accommodate them.

The most efficient means of intervention with Arab Americans is for psychologists to become more educated about Arab American spirituality as critical to their quality of life and well-being. Education of the therapist pertaining to Islam will enable Arab American well-being (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000). Psychologists duly educated will be in a better position to learn and assist Arab Americans in sustaining themselves. Furthermore, psychologists who help reinforce respect for Arab populations build the self-esteem of Arab American youth, which will assist the group's ability to survive the challenges of assimilation into a Western cultural environment (Ajrouch & Jamal, 2007). Equally important is the impact of being informed of spirituality upon the society at large. One approach to being informed is to create tolerant environments by the building of bridges to Arab communities beyond what is professionally necessary. The focus in such communities should be on language, history, cultures, etc. rather than attempts to fashion a Western Arab counterpart. Community action groups and youth projects, which familiarize the otherwise unfamiliar, have the potential to validate psychology as a helpful profession by Arab Americans who might otherwise not seek intervention (Santamour, 2007).

Last, the ability of psychologists to perceive accurately, conceptualize, and interact with Arab Americans is a necessity in a rapidly changing and complex world. In order to enhance harmony and reduce the limitations of

Eurocentrism, psychologists and other concerned citizens must acknowledge that all groups have assets, capacities, and strengths that should be reinforced (Sontag, 2001). Since many of these assets, such as cultural technologies, are derived from cultural legacies, psychologists are compelled to increase their knowledge base considerably. Otherwise, their lack of education could contribute to the extinction of an irreplaceable component of mankind that might prove antidotal to the various social dysfunctions of American society. Furthermore, at a time of increased contacts between the world's populations, psychologists are confronted by issues and perspectives which did not require their intellectual consideration in the past (Shatz, 2001). Accordingly, therapists are challenged to develop creative intervention strategies less confined to Western bias. Additionally, journal editors, book publishers, and other affiliates of the information distribution industry must seek alternative views and show consideration for these views. This consideration must be consistent, viable, and uninterrupted so that we may sustain the integrity and prestige of psychology intervention.

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