Counseling Values and Objectives: A Comparison of Western and Islamic Perspectives

Mumtaz F. Jafari

Counseling has established itself as a helping profession with an academic base. Its development has been influenced largely by the socio-economic, occupational, and technical changes found in western society as well as the various personal and social problems germane to its societal organization. Although emerging as a profession only during the twentieth century, its origins can be traced back to the post-Renaissance era. It therefore has a distinct orientation, identity, and focus. The existing body of knowledge and the relevant repertoire of counseling techniques and practices address the demands of western society within its socio-moral value structure. The question then arises as to whether adding the term "Islamic" to the available discipline of counseling carries any legitimacy at this stage.

This paper is an attempt to examine critically the evolutionary context of counseling, the value system in which it is immersed, and the objectives it endeavors to address. The framework used for this examination is the Islamic outlook on life and the associated objectives and values that Islam regards as determinants of human behavior. It is assumed that this comparative approach to the underlying perspectives, objectives, and values will explain the congruence or incongruence between the existing model(s) of counseling and any alternative Islamic model(s).

It must be realized that Islamizing the prevalent secular-materialistic counseling theories and practices cannot be accomplished by merely affixing the label "Islamic." Thus this paper should not be seen as an attempt

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to present an alternative framework for contemporary counseling based on Islamic teachings, although such a model might be long overdue. It rather aspires to provide a critical examination of western counseling parameters in order to illustrate the contrast with the fundamental premises of Islamic ideology and practice. Counseling objectives, skills, and strategies need to be redefined through systematic research and theorization based on Islamic perspectives.

Antecedents of Counseling

The existing body of knowledge in western counseling and psychotherapy is secular, empirical, and parochial in nature. These three factors need to be evaluated critically before outlining the Islamic perspectives.

Secularism. Contemporary counseling may be traced back to the Renaissance, an era characterized by a severely negative reaction to the church, faith, and spiritualism that culminated in the separation of physical and spiritual phenomena and the erection of a solid wall between the church and the state. Anything related to spiritualism was associated with rigidity, backwardness, and illogical thinking. A sense of spiritual hollowness, psychic confusion, and identity crisis permeated society, leading to the application of parapsychology and occultism. The diminished role of the church prompted the search for alternative emotional and psychic support. Counseling was perceived as an alternative emanating from church-related doctrines of pity and help (Barzun 1959) and their manifestations in the therapeutic models of persuasion and healing (Frank 1973).

It is difficult to maintain, as secularism does, that God exists but is not concerned with material existence. Islam, as a way of life, regulates an individual's spiritual, psychological, and physical needs and those of society as a whole. The pursuit of physical and spiritual knowledge is encouraged, and God's purposeful creation of the universe and humanity is recognized. Oblivion is caused when humanity loses touch with this fundamental truth: "And be not like those who forgot God and He caused them to be oblivious of their own selves or souls" (Qur'an 49:19).

Spiritual elevation in Islam is caused by submission to God. As a result, God-consciousness and self-awareness are interdependent. Integration of the material and the spiritual life brings about an internal harmony that is the source of mental health and emotional stability. This consciousness leads to the remembrance of God, which is central to the Qur'anic concept of satisfaction and well-being: "Those who believe and whose hearts have rest in the remembrance of Allah. Verily in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest" (Qur'an 13:28).

Islamic epistemology is based on the same concept of integration. The search for truth and the use of empirical methods are consistent with the Qur'anic provisions. Adherence to the Islamic faith enhances trust in oneself while engaged in the pursuit of physical or spiritual realities. The difference of the Islamic approach is strikingly evident when compared to the western perspective. The former is based on the conviction of the integrity of the spiritual and the physical life emanating from the absolute truth of monotheism (*tawḥīd*), while the latter is based on the duality of faith and material life.

Empiricism. Secularism provided the philosophical base for natural realism, a school that regards only the evidence of the senses as relevant to proving or disproving the existence of an external reality. This explains the emphasis on empirical methodology for ascertaining the validity of propositions concerning sociocultural and behavioral phenomena.

The superimposition of empirical methodology on the study of social and human phenomena has done more to create numerous fallacies than it has to develop viable and tenable propositions about human intellect, consciousness, behavior, and interpersonal influences. The materialistic approach of reducing the complex study of various human behaviors to tangible and measurable entities does not offer much help when it comes to understanding the spiritual, emotional, mental, and behavioral dimensions. While the scientific paradigm might be adequate for explaining scientific phenomena in physics and chemistry, it is too limiting for the social sciences (Langgulung 1989). Empirical methods treat human behavior artificially, for they strip the variables of their real meaning for the sake of operationalization (Moten 1990). In this process, the variables are unduly distorted and restructured in order to fit the empirical model at hand. This attempt of approximating an otherwise innately human science with physical science is an incommensurate approach.

The Islamic study of any phenomena is not limited to physical observation under human-controlled situations. Human limits are acknowledged before proceeding with any inquiry rooted in the Islamic viewpoint. The inadequacy of human perception and instrumentation is offset by the absolute source of divine knowledge. This divine knowledge—revelation— is interpreted with adequate judgment and the human ability to reason. From this divine source, the concepts of *rūḥ* (soul), *qalb* (heart), *nafs* (self), and *'aql* (intellect) have emanated. These concepts have been interpreted by Muslim scholars (i.e., al Rāzī, al Ghazālī, Ibn Sīnā, Ibn 'Arabī, and Ibn Miskawayh) as providing a basic understanding of the human psyche (Ansari 1992).

Human consciousness, interpersonal and social relations, and mental health have all been studied by using the Qur'anic framework, which provides insightful perspectives for the study of human behavior (ibid.; Rizvi 1989). In order to develop theories, techniques, and models of Islamic counseling, the scholar needs to take divine revelations and their scholarly interpretations into full cognizance. This signals a drastic departure from western counseling, which is solely dependent on empirical methodology.

Parochialism. Western counseling has evolved from the peculiarities of the American profile in the social, political, and economic domains (Parsons 1909; Shertzer and Stone 1980). The industrial revolution, urbanization, the need for rehabilitative skills to deal with changing occupational technologies, demographic dynamics, social problems engendered by an aging society, women's emancipation and concomitant movements, and the disintegration of the family and other social institutions are among the primary factors that have provided the impetus for counseling theorization and research.

The most recent psychological and social problems occupying the attention of western researchers include the high rates of suicide, alienation, cognitive dissonance, chronic depression, extramarital relations, broken families, single parenting, unwed mothers, juvenile delinquency, vandalism, drug addiction, and AIDS. The assumptions and generalizations adopted by most of the resulting studies are locale-specific and may not be tenable in other cultural settings. As societal metaphysics vary from one setting to another (Ajmal 1968), the proposed counseling treatment should correspond to the conditions of a particular situation.

Research for the most effective therapeutic treatment is based on an understanding of who is providing the treatment to whom, under what conditions, and for what specific problem. It implies that the results of research conducted in a particular environment may not be applicable to another environment. Unlike western counseling, Islamic counseling is based upon commonly held ideological beliefs and value systems and is therefore universal. Contextual variables may, and do, impinge upon individual problems, and a counselor has to relate them to the overall frame in order to develop a well-integrated and balanced personality. Applying western theories of counseling in an Islamic environment would be like assembling a jigsaw puzzle from the pieces of two different puzzles.

Counseling Values

The divergent characteristics of counseling outlined above are tied to their respective value systems. Values, as regulators of conduct, are types

of beliefs that are centrally located within one's total belief system and that inform the individual how he/she ought or ought not to behave (Rokeach 1968). Values are an inevitable and pervasive part of psychotherapy, for they determine the direction of the counseling process (Bergin 1980). The counselor influences the value system of the individual being counseled in many explicit and implied ways. Research findings available on the impact of values indicate that clients who improve the most during therapy are those who revise their values in the direction of those of the counselor, while the values of the unimproved clients become less like those of the therapist (Rosenthal 1955; Schrier 1953).

Western counseling claims to be value-neutral, and counselors are urged not to impose their values on their clients. The commonality professed by western theorists is that values must not be imposed by the counselors, though counseling cannot be valueless (Williamson 1950). In practice, this is an impossible and unrealistic expectation (Sprinthall 1971) for values are, either knowingly or unknowingly, an integral part of the counseling process. The western value system has a profound impact upon counseling approaches, techniques, and processes, for it reinforces what is considered good according to the prevalent social standards, values, and norms. Counselors have been urged to acquire a true understanding of the society. The quest for identity on the part of clients is in reality a search for meaning and significance, which is always value-laden (Peterson 1976). The same values are even expressed as the desired behavioral outcomes of the therapeutic process. An examination of this value system indicates that western counseling is both value-bound as well as value-dependent. Some basic values of western society have shaped the present body of counseling and therefore need to be critically probed in relation to the Islamic value system.

Self-Fulfilling Life-Style vs. Righteous Benevolence. Western counseling is perceived to be an individual-based and individual-focused process. An individual is considered to be individualistic, competitive, and motivated by self-interest to maximize profit. As the western mode of living is targeted at personal achievement and satisfaction, counseling also addresses these values. It thus becomes instrumental in enhancing an individual's assertiveness, so that he/she can be more competitive, and striving for personal achievement. Counselors in the West, regardless of work setting or theoretical orientation, are linked by the common belief that a person has both the capacity and the right to choose the most satisfying direction or activity (Engelkes and Vandergoot 1982).

Islam, in contrast, is not concerned with the welfare of the individual only; it seeks to achieve the wider social well-being. While ensuring the

individual's freedom, it places equal stress on the principle of mutual responsibility. This principle is two-dimensional: the individual achieves balance between thought and action (internal) while caring for the collective welfare of society (external). This internal consonance is best realized through total submission to the will and pleasure of God. As stated in the Qur'an: "My worship and my sacrifice and my living and my dying are all for Allah, Lord of Worlds" (6:163).

The concept of mutual responsibility is depicted clearly in the prophetic hadith: "Every one of you is a shepherd and each one of you is responsible for his flock" (al Bukhārī n.d.). This sense of collective responsibility is linked with the concept of brotherhood, and the ummatic bond is an extension of the same at a global level. Achieving social peace is the collective obligation of individuals and the community: "Help each other in the acts of goodness and piety and do not extend help to each other in sinful acts or transgressing behaviors" (Qur'an 5:2).

The same Islamic principle is the regulating force for mutual advice and counseling. The Prophet said: "The right way of life (dīn) is sincere advice." This act of advice is free of undue complacence, and the enforcement of good is binding on the individual and the society. The Prophet advised: "Help your brother whether he is the oppressor or the oppressed." When asked how to help him if he is the oppressor, he answered: "Hold his hand from oppression" (al Bukhārī n.d.). He urged "Whosoever sees evil with his eyes should stop it with his hand; if this is not possible, then with his mouth; and if even this is not possible (at least) hate it heartily; this is the weakest state of faith" (Muslim 1972).

This clear contrast indicates that Islamic counseling may not be bound by "ego-strengthening," "assertiveness-promoting," and "growth-gendering" western therapies. Islamic counseling, on the other hand, should promote selflessness, healthy altruism, perfection of oneself, and happiness for others.

Materialistic vs. Holistic Outlook. In the western value system, the criteria of individual success are based on materialistic accomplishments. The pursuit of excellence, physical fitness, attainment of high social status, and material rewards are the ultimate life goals for a common western individual. Counseling is a means of achieving the same end. Reward is the primary focus of Skinner's behavioral paradigm (Skinner 1938). However, in their quest for the maximization of human potential, some other fundamentally important aspects of human development are ignored.

Conversely, Islam encourages its adherents to seek holistic growth in both the physical and spiritual domains. But spiritualism and materialistic

activities are not compartmentalized, for Islam urges its followers to base pattern their activity after the concept of *'ibādah* (worship). The creation of human beings is conceived as purposeful (Qur'an 23:115), which is to submit to God (Qur'an 51:56).

'Ibādah permeates all spheres of human activity, material or spiritual, mental or physical, individual or collective. Islam strives for a holistic consonance of a person with God and seeks to develop the total human personality in all manifestations, be they intellectual, emotional, behavioral, or spiritual. The ultimate objective is to seek the pleasure of God, for human beings experience their fullest actualization (*ma'rifah*) once they align their thought and action with God's divine will. Mental and spiritual well-being are inseparable, for the psyche's totality can never be grasped by intellect alone.

The concepts related to pleasure, satisfaction, and actualization are also governed by the two contrasting belief systems. A materialist finds pleasure when worldly targets are achieved. Counseling becomes instrumental in enhancing goal-oriented ambitions by instilling achievement-oriented behaviors. Islam introduces the concept of salvation, which brings eternal contentment even if the individual is destitute in material terms, for material gains are only a means of subsistence. A wholehearted effort for advancement is encouraged by a matching commitment for spiritual purification.

Unlimited vs. Bounded Freedom. The western value of freedom has a profound impact on personality development. The worldview of counseling theorists has a common factor in that an individual can pursue personal objectives without any religious constraint. As religion and morality are considered personal or private matters, an individual can choose a course of action within the confines of this freedom. Extramarital relations, abortion, and alcoholism are just some of the symptomatic expressions of this freedom. Changes of loyalty, lack of commitment, and evasion of responsibility are some of the commonly displayed behaviors. Such behaviors naturally have an effect on family and community life. A whole generation is now being raised without any sense of identity or fundamental parenting rights in the name of this self-proclaimed freedom.

This unbounded freedom becomes more evident when the lives of role models (i.e., celebrities, leaders in different walks of life, and educationists) are given protection on the pretext of privacy. These models influence behavior throughout the social strata. Counseling theories and practices also reflect the same western values.

Islam, on the contrary, provides a freedom that is bound within the confines of the Shari'ah. Limits are clearly prescribed for both private

and public behavior. The consciousness that one is being observed constantly and is accountable for every action regulates thought and action in such a way that the distinction between private and public life becomes irrelevant. The concepts of virtue (*khayr*) and vice (*sharr*) have been explained explicitly, and the institutions of right (*ma'rūf*) and wrong (*munkar*) are effected through a system of accountability (*ḥisbah*). The savage urges and animal instincts of individuals are tamed, and only their positive drives and desires are gratified. The Prophet said: "None of you can claim faith unless his/her desires become subservient to what I have brought forth" (al Bukhārī n.d.). Allah makes it clear that: "Anyone who transgresses the limits of Allah, does verily wrong with his own soul" (Qur'an 65:1).

Guilt Rationalization vs. Repentance. The western value of overcoming wrong-doing provides a rationalization for undesired behavior in order to facilitate rehabilitation. Unconditional positive regard and acceptance are treated as being among the core conditions for psychotherapy (Rogers 1951, 1959, 1987; Carkhuff 1969). Support, nonpossessive warmth, and empathic understanding are recommended as counseling strategies for overcoming feelings of guilt (Boy and Pine 1982; Schofield 1967).

Islam accords an entirely different treatment to sin and sinful conduct. The therapy of repentance (*tawbah*) is a means of correcting and modifying behavior. Repentance is promised to everyone who is committed to fulfilling its conditions: "He is the one that accepts repentance from His servants and forgives sins and He knows all that ye do" (Qur'an 42:25).

Guilt-rationalization seems to be the driving value behind western counseling. Islam does not give the authority to condone sinful conduct to any human being. However, it has a corrective institution that checks the repetition of sinful conduct while providing an opportunity for the offender to obtain the feeling of spiritual purification.

Counseling Objectives

Counseling has been developed in response to specific objectives in the West. It is worth examining to what extent these objectives match the Islamic perspectives, for they are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, one can even see a certain degree of overlap. These have been advanced by some famous psychotherapists who are considered pioneers. These statements of objectives are expressions of definite paradigms developed or used by these pioneers. Brief definitions are given to provide an essence of the primary thrust of each. A short critique is also provided concerning their usefulness and applicability.

1. *To Love and To Work* (Freud 1943): This implies treating a patient for realistic recovery by restoring his/her ability and capacity for enjoyment and an active life. Freud explained enjoyment and life activity only through sexual behavior, which is interpreted as quite an inhibiting definition.

2. *Self-Actualization* (Maslow 1971; Rogers 1961): Self-actualization is seen as the most healthy, productive, integrated, and self-directing behavior. Though the definition might be well-encompassing, it fails to account for the vital spiritual aspect of behavior.

3. *Self-Efficacy* (Bandura 1982): This paradigm is based on intentionality and stresses growth through the feeling of mastery over one's destiny. Since this concept is situation-specific, there is no possibility that it can be generalized.

4. *Development* (Moser and Sprinthall 1971): This theory directs one towards grappling successfully with the tangible and intangible aspects of real life. If standards are ill-defined, these would render development out of context.

5. *Okayness* (Berne 1964; Harris 1967): This paradigm seeks to rebuild effective ego boundaries in order to inculcate a feeling of okayness. It has been criticized as superficial, trivial, and perfunctory.

6. *Clarified Values* (Simon, Howe, and Kirschenbaum 1972): Values and their meanings in life are injected through this therapy. If the value system is faulty, ill-founded, or amiss as regards reality, the technique would be superfluous.

7. *Effectiveness* (Carkhuff 1969, 1982; Gordon 1970): Self-acceptance, self-understanding, and awareness of self-potential are projected in order to attain effectiveness in behavior. Determining effectiveness is relative and may be limited to a given work setting or situation.

8. *Increased Behavioral Repertoire* (Albert and Emmons 1973; Wolpe 1973): This theory, which is more action-oriented than insightful, seeks to end maladaptive behavior and strengthen adaptive behavior.

9. *I and Thou Relationship* (Buber 1970; Sullivan 1953): The theory focuses on relationship enhancement in a family setting. It is heavily value-laden, as it emphasizes what is right and what is wrong.

If this profile of objectives is reviewed together, it appears to have one fundamental objective: preparing the individual for effective living with the aim of attaining positive relationships with other individuals. None of these paradigms is considered comprehensive and all-embracing. In addition, they have been developed over the last several decades in an attempt to address the social malaise of western society. One real test of their effectiveness would be to examine the incidence rate of mental disturbance and personality disorder problems in the West. The prevalent maladjustment in western society establishes the fact that these, as a whole, have failed to achieve the expected results. As these models fail, it becomes all the more important that an Islamic model is developed with an eclectic outlook.

Islamic Principles for Objective Formulation

While western counseling aims at achieving individual well-being within the confines of this world, Islam defines well-being from an entirely different viewpoint. A Muslim is directed to seek this well-being as stated in the Qur'an: "Our Lord, give us good in this world and good in the hereafter" (2:201). This is the primary difference in the worldview of Muslims and non-Muslims. The concepts of well-being, satisfaction, salvation, self-realization, and achievement are linked with the belief that an individual's performance in this life determines the ultimate outcome in the hereafter: "What is cultivated in this world is to be harvested in the hereafter" (al Bukhārī n.d.). This basic assumption determines the fundamental goals of any therapeutic program. These cardinal principles are seen as the cornerstone of any attempt to formulate an Islamic theory:

1. An individual is born with an innate innocence that needs to be preserved and enhanced. It is society's obligation to provide conducive conditions for such an upbringing.

2. Material and spiritual well-being is achievable through a profound submission to the will of God. Those who fail to submit are in a state of conflict and their personalities begin to disintegrate. According to the Qur'an, a life without faith is a state of spiritual non-being in which one loses touch with his/her true self (49:19). Religion provides guidance and cultivates mental health. Faith is seen as an essential prerequisite for the treatment of mental, emotional, or behavioral disorders. A consensus on the therapeutic value of faith is evident from the writings of Ibn Sīnā, al Ghazālī, Ibn Miskawayh, al Rāzī, Shāh Walīy Allāh, and many other Muslim thinkers (Rizvi 1989).

3. An individual has the ability to reason and the freedom of choice. The right path has been shown by revelation (divine books) granted to individuals of the highest spiritual standing (prophets). These gifts, according to the Qur'an, are to be used to choose the way of life: "We showed him the way: whether he be grateful or ungrateful" (76:3); "And we have shown him the two ways" (90:10); "By the soul and the proportion and order given to it, it has been enlightened to opt for the wrong provided therein or the right revealed to it. Truly he succeeds that purifies it and he fails that corrupts it" (91:7-10).

While human beings are free to select their own path(s), there is an associated sense of accountability. As humanity has been declared the vicegerent of God (2:30), it is held accountable for its options, efforts, and behavior. Every soul is held accountable in pledge for its deeds (74:38), and an individual can only have what he/she strives for (53:39-41).

4. Islam requires a community that has a social function, for it is not confined to the individual-God relationship, but rather seeks to create a strong, healthy, and well-organized social life. The fabric of social life is the doctrine that Muslim communal brotherhood is a vehicle for social welfare, wider peace, and the attainment of harmony in social bonds. This system of social health must be maintained by establishing the institutions of advice, discipline, and welfare for the benefit of all. This ummatic concept is based on a system of social relations that seeks to maximize the enjoinment of good on earth within the divine plan: "There may spring from you a community (ummah) who invite to goodness and enjoin good conduct and forbid indecency. Such are they who are successful" (3:104). This is a trust (*amānah*) bestowed upon Muslims that needs to be realized as one of the aims of the Shari'ah. In order to integrate the Muslim community, the institution of sincere advice is perceived as a fundamental obligation: "You are the best ummah that has been raised up for mankind. You enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency and you believe in Allah" (3:110).

On the basis of these principles, the ultimate goal of Islamic counseling would be to develop an Islamic personality. This personality needs to be healthy, balanced, and well-integrated and have all of its drives, emotions, and cognitive operations directed towards a pursuit for the pleasure of God. This type of personality is successful in overpowering the evil-prone self (*al nafs al ammārah*). Deviant pathological behavior is cor-

rected by an inducement of the reproaching self (*al nafs al lawwāmah*). The ultimate target is the attainment of absolute and constant contentment (*al nafs al muṭma'innah*), which is possible through a consonance of the human psyche with God. This is the stage of the constant contentment of psyche (*al nafs al muṭma'innah*).

If the ultimate objective of Islamic counseling is this contentment, the needed instruments for its realization include the constant remembrance of God (*dhikr*), truthfulness (*ṣidq*), and sincerity (*ikhlāṣ*).

Conclusion

At the present time, there is no discipline or field of practice known as Islamic counseling. This paper has pointed out some fundamental inadequacies in the existing body of counseling knowledge that has been developed in the western social context. It has also highlighted its contrasts with the belief system, value structure, and objectives of Islam. The need for a critical study of western counseling is quite evident. As there is no short-term or easy panacea for Islamizing the inherently secular field of western counseling, we need to take the initiative in making a start. This process would entail the following stages of development:

1. Western empirical methods per se are inappropriate from an Islamic viewpoint. In line with the methodological efforts for other branches of human sciences, a set of principles and methodological directions need to be derived from the study of behavioral phenomena by combining revelation, reason, and empiricism.

2. All of the currently available behavioral and psychotherapeutic paradigms must be examined critically by an appropriate methodology. The contributions of Muslim pioneers also need to be recast in relation to contemporary life and social conditions.

3. Once developed, the new field of Islamic counseling would be based on a set of core conditions, therapeutic strategies, counselor training programs, and use of models. The Islamic value system will provide guidelines for model development. As the most perfect and effective model for behavior modification is the Prophet's person and personality, a systematic study of his life and example may reveal the most effective behavioral therapies. Such an effort, which requires the concerted and long-term effort of a large team of committed psychotherapists, may result in a field of knowledge than can be called "Islamic counseling," as is the case with Islamic economics at this stage.

4. We have our own peculiar ethical issues in the area of counseling, and these need to be addressed. The concept of privacy ought to be reexamined in the light of Islamic injunctions. Another problem is providing counseling services to women. There are many similar issues which need to be thrashed out by a body of Muslim professionals in line with the provisions of the Shari'ah.

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