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Islamic Psychology: Towards a 21st Century Definition and Conceptual Framework

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Abstract

In this article the author attempts to give a brief summary and critique of the various ways Islamic Psychology is conceptualized and defined. She then proposes and discusses a conceptual model, the Multilevel Interdisciplinary Paradigm (MIP), as a potential theoretical unifier for the emerging field, which also serves as a methodology for defining it. Recommendations for ways forward in the domain of Islamic Psychology are also provided.

Keywords

Islamic Psychology – Multilevel Interdisciplinary Paradigm (MIP) – Psychology of Religion and Spirituality – Psychology – Islamic Studies

1 Introduction

Most of the contemporary scholarship that has been somewhat indiscriminately characterized as Islamic Psychology might better be referred to as ‘Islam *and* Psychology’ (Kaplick & Skinner, 2017), partly due to the lack of an agreed upon definition or theoretical model (some definitions may be found in: Hamid, 1977; Vahab, 1996; Khan, 1996; Abdul Razaq & Hashim, 2012) 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 name a few. To elaborate, there are numerous publications that discuss 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, and jihad al-nafs for example. Many publications have also examined Islamic conceptualizations of the self such as ruh, qalb, aql, nafs, ihsas, irada etc. (Abu Raiya, 2012, 2014; Keshavarzi and Haque, 2013; Haque and Keshavarzi, 2014; Keshavarzi and Khan, 2018; Rothman & Coyle, 2018) 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 (see *Islamically Integrated Psychotherapy: Uniting Faith and Professional Practice*, edited by York Al-Karam, Templeton Press, 2018). 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 the above scholarly activities may be and as much as they have contributed to the knowledge economy, none of it 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 (qalb) or nafs the only type of disorders that it addresses (e.g. Al-Mawlud/Yusuf, 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; 2018; Rothman, 2018)? What about the work of contemporary Muslim psychologists who come up with their own modalities such as Sabr Therapy (e.g. Qasqas, 2016), Jihad

Therapy (e.g. Saritoprak, 2016), or The HEART Method (e.g. Lodi, 2018)—are these Islamic psychology? Although there is some overlap, many people conflate the field of Islamic Psychology with Muslim Mental Health (ММН), which has been a growing area of scholarship over the past decade (see Introduction in York Al-Karam, 2018). ММН's main focus has been to understand the mental health needs of Muslims, primarily living in the West and in the wake of a 9/11 world, and to have a collective voice in addressing them (see p. 9 in York Al-Karam, 2018). Mental health concerns often discussed within this context range from Islamophobia, war and forced migration, substance abuse, domestic violence, radicalization, and coping and help seeking behaviors—a wholly different animal than Islamic psychology.

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 which is usually based on his or her own work. Given this challenge, if an Islamic Psychology (IP) discipline has any hope of flourishing and contributing to the broader knowledge economy, 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.

2 Foundational Components of a Discipline

Every academic discipline has or should have certain standard components to it such as a definition of the discipline, a conceptual or theoretical framework in which scholarship can be rooted and that connects it to other work in the field, philosophical assumptions upon which the discipline is based, the nature of the discipline, research methods used in the discipline, as well as main subject(s) or theme(s) of the discipline. This chapter will outline and discuss the first two components, namely a.) a proposed definition for Islamic Psychology and the methodology used to come up with that definition and b.) a conceptual framework to ground the discipline and unite scholarship.

3 Islamic Psychology: Not Quite Defined

Defining terms or discussing methods used to come up with new ones are essential components of basic scholarship. A review of a number of publications that have the term “Islamic Psychology” in the title reveals two basic trends: scholars either talk about IP without defining it, as if the reader is

supposed to know what the author means by the term or as if it some clearly defined and well-understood concept, or they define it, but provide no discussion of the methodology used to come up with the definition. Both trends are problematic.

For example, in his article *Mandate for Muslim Mental Health Professionals: An Islamic Psychology*, Hamid (1977) does not provide a definition of IP but he does provide a 6-point outline of what it is not. Skinner (1989) also does not provide a definition of IP although the title of his article is *Traditions, Paradigms, and Basic Concepts in Islamic Psychology*. He does make reference to Badri's definition of it being "essentially sound empirical psychology used morally" (p. 4) although there is no further elaboration on that. Similarly, Khosravi and Bagheri (2006), in their article *Towards an Islamic Psychology*, discuss IP at length without any mention of what they mean by it. Siddiqui and Malek (1996), in their book chapter *Islamic Psychology: Definition and Scope*, assert that Islamic psychology is "the study of persons who have complete surrender and submission and obey the laws of God". It is totally unclear how they arrived at that definition nor is it clear how useful this definition might be within the domain of modern psychological science. Vahab (2004), in his book *An Introduction to Islamic Psychology* defines IP as "the study of the manifestation of God in nature as reflected in the behavioral patterns of all living and non-living organisms in all walks of their lives using the Islamic paradigms". Like Siddiqui and Malek, he provides no discussion on the methodology used to come up with that definition. In perhaps the most recent book on the topic, Younos (2017), in his *Principles of Islamic Psychology*, states that he's going to define IP, but then never does. The content of his book seems more in line with an Islamization approach and what the Quran and hadith have to say about a variety of psychology topics. Lastly, Ward (2017) in her *Elucidating the Psychospiritual Conflict of Worldviews and Moving Towards an Indigenous Islamic Psychology*, provides a potential ecological framework in which the discipline could be couched, but does not attempt to define IP. Other articles, (see Abdul Razak and Hisham, 2012) discuss certain qualities of the discipline or what the discipline is about. Although this is by no means an exhaustive review or meta-analysis of the field nor is it meant to criticize the important contributions these scholars have made, it simply highlights some of what is available in the literature that pertains specifically to defining IP to further contextualize the current discussion.

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 of organized or comprehensive way. It is within this context that a definition of IP is proposed. In order to present that definition, it is essential to first understand the conceptual framework that is also being proposed because it is the nature and structure of the framework itself that serves as the methodology for defining the discipline.

4 The Multilevel Interdisciplinary Paradigm—A Conceptual Framework and Methodology

The Multilevel Interdisciplinary Paradigm (MIP) is 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 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).

The MIP is essentially a conceptual structure that is comprised of a number of components including disciplines, subdisciplines, levels, topics, and methods that all engage with each other (see Figure 1). This structure serves as a template for how to think about complex and multidimensional disciplines, such as Islamic Psychology, that are inherently interdisciplinary. The template then serves as a methodology for defining the discipline because it is the structure of the model itself that provides it. In that regard, the MIP could serve as a conceptual framework for any discipline that is inherently interdisciplinary (which many are).

In terms of how the model 'works', it is simply a dynamic and flexible model in which an area of knowledge in one domain is engaging an area of knowledge in another domain about a particular topic and at a particular level using certain research methods. Given the nature of the paradigm, the definition of Islamic Psychology that it generates is:

An interdisciplinary science where psychology subdisciplines and/or related disciplines engage scientifically about a particular topic and at

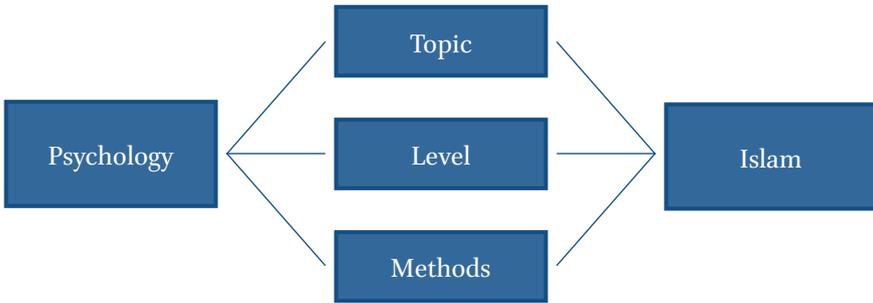


FIGURE 1 The Multi-level Interdisciplinary Paradigm (MIP) for Islamic Psychology

a particular level with various Islamic sects, sources, sciences, and/or schools of thought using a variety of methodological tools.

5 Unpacking the Definition

Psychology is not one thing and neither is Islam. Rather, these two terms are very general and broad and don't have much meaning when it comes to delineating a specific scope of scholarship so they need to be broken down. In line with the MIP as a conceptual guidepost, psychology subdisciplines could include clinical, social, neuro, developmental, health, I/O, forensic, or school psychology to name a few. Related disciplines could be psychiatry, social work, mental health counseling, or marriage and family therapy for example.

Islam could be broken down into the sect (Sunni/Shia), the particular source such as Quran, hadith, or an early scholar (al-Ghazali etc.), what particular branch of the Islamic Sciences such as tafsir, fiqh, aqeedah, tasawwuf etc. or according to what school of thought or *madhab*. The expression 'in Islam' or 'Islam says' is quite common but is a somewhat problematic modern construct (Khalidi, course lecture at AUB, 2002). Pre-modern discourse used more precise constructs such as 'according to so and so's tafsir of such and such topic' etc. (Khalidi, course lecture at AUB, 2002).

In terms of topics, this could include almost anything in which psychology is concerned and addressed at any level including the individual (micro), the familial (mid), or the societal (macro) using a variety of methods 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.

In that regard, whatever Islamic Psychology scholarship one wants to engage in, the MIP can be used to conceptually root it and connect it to other

work being done in the field. The scholar simply identifies what *part* of psychology and what *part* of Islam are engaging with what topic, at what level, and using what research methods, which will most likely be dictated by the profession or discipline in which the scholar is primarily based. Conceptualized in this way, Islamic Psychology remains broad and diverse yet unified and whole.

6 Discussion

Defining terms and setting parameters for a discipline or particular scope of scholarship is not unique to Islamic psychology. Scholars in the domain of psychology of religion and spirituality have long struggled to define the terms 'religion' and 'spirituality', how these terms overlap, how they are different, and of course it is debated how one can study something that is not even properly defined (see Harris, Howell, & Spurgeon, 2018). In such cases, scholars end up having to rely on operationalized definitions of terms as opposed to generally agreed upon ones, with both scenarios having pros and cons. Moreover, other religious or spiritual psychology traditions such as Christian Psychology, Buddhist Psychology, or even Transpersonal Psychology have faced similar issues in defining what is meant by those terms and what the parameters are of those fields. In that regard, having no consensus as to what Islamic Psychology 'is' is not a unique predicament. What is new is that until now, such questions have not been raised in the literature about IP specifically in an attempt to move things forward.

Another aspect of a discussion on the parameters of an Islamic Psychology discipline is how 'Islamic' is defined. Much has been written about this topic both historically and contemporaneously. For example, some argue that in order for something to be Islamic, it must be rooted in the Quran and/or Sunnah. Others argue that it could also simply be something done by a Muslim or congruent with Islamic teachings or philosophy etc. However, there is no universal agreement. To demonstrate this complexity, consider the following example. In two important publications, Awaad and Ali (2015; 2016) present different aspects of al-Balkhi's *Sustenance of the Body and Soul*. In them they demonstrate that al-Balkhi's classification of phobias and obsessional disorder are nearly identical to the classifications found today in the DSM. I think most would agree that there is nothing particularly Islamic about his classification. However, many people conceptualize Islamic Psychology as being synonymous with the work of these early Muslim scholars. So this begs the question, was al-Balkhi practicing what we today call psychology or was it Islamic psychology simply because it stems from an early Islamic culture and a Muslim?

Another issue that needs highlighting is calling Islamic Psychology ‘Islamic’ Psychology at all. On the one hand, it is certainly helpful to be clear about the distinct nature of something. On the other hand, it could be considered colonizing language in that it ‘others’ the discipline in relation to Western psychology, as if Western or American psychology is *the* psychology or gold standard and other psychologies are something else. It is precisely within this context that the Indigenous psychology movement has grown (for example see Marsella, 2013)—*All Psychology is Indigenous Psychology* i.e. Latino/a Psychology, Asian Psychology, Native America Psychology, Black Psychology, Western Psychology, American Psychology etc.). This raises the question, what would contemporary psychology look like if it had developed in the Islamic world and whose primary scholars were practicing Muslims as opposed to it having emerged from a Western secular context—would it be called *Islamic Psychology*?

7 Final Remarks

It remains to be seen if the MIP will be a useful tool to define and unite Islamic Psychology. It would seem that in the very least, even if we can’t arrive at a definitional agreement, one could use the MIP to operationalize a particular scope of work. In that regard, we have something in hand that we didn’t have before.

In terms of criticisms of the MIP, one could argue the problem of using a ‘non-Islamic’ conceptual paradigm to define and root scholarship in an ‘Islamic’ discipline. It is precisely this criticism that highlights the importance of needing to further explore how the MIP and tawheed might mirror each other—or rather are possibly different terms for a similar concept. To elaborate, tawheed, in its most basic form, means oneness or unity of God. On the one hand, the human mind is not capable of understanding the nature of God in His unity/wholeness but we can come to know something about Him through his various qualities, as in his 99 names, or through nature, or by knowing ourselves. It is by understanding *parts* of the whole as well as the *relationship* between parts that give insight into the whole itself. In that regard, it could be argued that tawheed, like the MIP, is also a template or model for how to think about the nature of something, whether it be God, a person, an apple, or a scientific discipline. As such, it’s possible that the MIP is inherently ‘Islamic’ via the quality of congruence. It might also be possible to develop our thinking on the MIP through exploring the concept of tawheed more thoroughly. Depending on the results of these explorations, the potential exists of having an ‘Islamic’ paradigm define and root scholarship in an ‘Islamic’ discipline, regardless of what

it's called (the MIP or the Tawheedic paradigm). We might also have something in hand to offer back to mainstream psychology, which has always been in need of a unifying paradigm.

Related to the discussion of having Islamic thought contributing to the knowledge economy, consider the following. 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. 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. There is no doubt that work has begun 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.

8 Looking Forward

As the discipline of Islamic Psychology establishes itself, it would be my strong recommendation that scholarship be conducted by multidisciplinary teams, especially in these early days. Psychologists and professionals in related disciplines don’t usually have depth of theological knowledge and theologians or religious studies scholars aren’t schooled in psychology. Certainly Islamic Psychology scholarship will look somewhat different depending on the primary field in which one is situated. IP for a theologian, religious studies scholar, or medical anthropologist might look different than IP conducted by a psychologist or a historian because these scholars usually use different research methods. That said, by working in multidisciplinary teams, work being produced by them has the potential to be broad, deep, rich, and being of great importance in a variety of scholarly contexts.

My second recommendation would be that a school or institute dedicated to Islamic Psychology be established. Various schools exist, in most cases for decades, that house scholarship on Transpersonal Psychology (Sofia University—previously known as the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology—founded in Palo Alto, CA in 1975), Buddhist Psychology (Naropa University in Boulder, CO founded in 1974), and Christian Psychology (one of many institutions is Fuller Seminary, which has an APA accredited graduate School of Psychology that offers a variety of degrees). My personal goal in this regard is to establish a research and educational nonprofit Institute for Islamic Psychology that would serve as an international clearinghouse for Islamic Psychology research and advocacy and to eventually offer the first APA accredited graduate degree in (Islamic) psychology. Whether this Institute will be an independent entity or be attached to a larger degree-granting college or university remains to be seen.

Other recommendations would be to establish a cohesive body of scholarly entities such as an international professional association that focuses on the development of the discipline globally (and not in just one geographic location—although that could be an option as well), an annual conference and a

peer-reviewed scientific journal, with both being connected to the association. Since the time this article was initially written in the summer of 2017, such developments have come to fruition. The International Association of Islamic Psychology was legally established and will host its inaugural conference in Turkey in October 2018. IAIP will also house the *Journal of Islamic Psychology*.

The Islamization of psychology has been underway for the past few decades. With the establishment of these professional entities as well as forthcoming degree programs in IP, now is the time to give this interdisciplinary science the attention it deserves.

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