How and why Muslim counsellors integrate spiritual and religious elements implicitly into counselling practices in Malaysia: A qualitative exploration

Mazita Ahmad*, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi 43600, Malaysia.
Norhayati Mohd Noor, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi 43600, Malaysia.
Salleh Amat, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi 43600, Malaysia.

Abstract

Implicit incorporation of spiritual and religious elements in counselling has turned into a practice among several counsellors, but issues may arise when clients demand it in an explicit manner. As such, this study investigated how and why counsellors integrate spiritual and religious elements implicitly into counselling practices. For this study, 13 registered counsellors were selected as participants. They were interviewed and the data gathered were analysed by using the constant comparative analysis. The results revealed that counsellors avoided highlighting the aspects of spiritual and religion at the initial part of their counselling session, but embedded them slowly and obscurely so as to prevent unprepared clients from being resistant, feeling uncomfortable, getting confused, as well as to hinder any sensitive issue related to spiritual and religious elements. Furthermore, the study points out that the central implications are the need to create a culture of openness and to boost confidence among counsellors to integrate the spiritual and religious aspects in an explicit manner. In addition, competence among counsellors can be further enhanced with appropriate theoretical considerations and personal challenges. This does not only improves the effectiveness of treatment, but also protects the clients and enables consistency in work.

Keywords: Spiritual and religion, integration, counselling, implicit.

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* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Mazita Ahmad**, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Bangi 43600, Malaysia.
E-mail address: mazrie71@yahoo.com / Tel.: +603 8921 5555.

1. Introduction

In general, human life cannot be segregated from spiritual and religious elements. Those who adhere to the teachings of religion make the beliefs and principles of the religion as a way of life. Through religion, man has developed a system of belief and spiritual with the dimension of superior experience involving belief and practice (Walsh, 2009). Counselling based on the spiritual and religious approach is growing and has become popular since the 1990s (Aten, O'Grady & Worthington, 2012). Such development has been publicised in journals, books and presentations at conferences (Carlson & Kirkpatrick, 2002) so as to depict the emergence of hundreds of related publications pertaining to religion, mental health, spirituality and psychotherapy in professional-grade journals (Richards & Bergin, 2006).

Hence, attempts to integrate spiritual and religion aspects into practice are not new (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2000). The significance of integrating spiritual and religious elements into counselling practices has been thoroughly elaborated in many prior studies (Ameiha, Rohaizan & Shahril, 2013; Carlson, Kirkpatrick, Hecker & Killmer, 2002; Cashwell et al., 2013; Corey, 2006; Dailey, Curry, Harper, Moorhead & Gill, 2011; Khalif, 2012; Othman & Sipon, 2012; Kilmer, 2012; Dagang, Ibrahim & Bakar, 2015; Paukert et al., 2009; Perdani, Farhana & Khairi, 2002; Plumb, 2011; Sapora, Khatijah & Al-Amin, 2012; Sipon & Hassan, 2015; Wolf & Stevens, 2001) especially regarding the effectiveness and the benefits to clients upon implementing this approach.

1.1. Definition of spiritual and religion

Western scholars have long discussed a viable definition of spiritual and religion from the light of their studies. For instance, Aten and Leach (2009) defined 'spiritual' as the inner values and beliefs of a person bearing awareness, subjectivity, experience, direction and effort towards something greater and meaningful. Meanwhile, 'religion' is defined as an external institution that contains activities that are static and substantive (Richards & Bergin, 2007). The Western societies define spiritual and religious rather separately. As such, some claim spiritual as non-religious and vice versa while only a fraction associates spiritual with religious (Cashwell & Young, 2011).

As for the case in Malaysia, spiritual and religion have slightly varying insights from the context of Western society understanding. The society in Malaysia understands and offers a different definition for 'spiritual' and 'religious' terms, especially among the Malay Muslims (Yusoff, 2011). Generally, spiritual and religion are related to the aspects of belief that greatly affect the human life. Spiritual refers to the belief in an extraordinary power, while religion is an institution-shaped holding that has religious rituals that adhere to those beliefs (Sarmani & Ninggal, 2011). These two concepts are interconnected with an overlap in the meaning of the spiritual element in religion, but not necessarily for otherwise (Sumari, Tharbe, Khalid & Nor, 2014). Taking into account the subject discussed in this study, spiritual is linked to spirituality, spirit and soul of one's life in the pursuit of continuity of life. On the other hand, religion denotes a set of beliefs associated to God, as well as all forms of practice and rituals contained therein.

1.2. Integration of spiritual and religion

Integration of spiritual and religious approaches refers to the counsellors' practice of embedding spiritual and religious beliefs, values and methods of religious intervention during the counselling process; hence, affecting the counsellors in the process of understanding clients and the way the counselling sessions are conducted (Dagang, 2013). In the context of this study, the spiritual and religious integration refers to a counsellor's practice of incorporating certain rules and techniques based on religious and spiritual resources while conducting counselling sessions. This method embeds or unifies spiritual and religious practices and strategies in the therapeutic counselling process without waiving the existing theories. Therefore, these spiritual and religious elements are included as a

component assessed in the counselling process, aside from other aspects that are taken into account, such as physical, social and emotional aspects of the client. In fact, two main strategies have been outlined in integrating both spiritual and religious elements, which are: implicit and explicit strategies. Implicit integration denotes obscured and implied approaches, whereas explicit integration refers to an approach that is used more clearly, organised and openly in dealing with spiritual and religious issues in counselling. Several instances of spiritual sources and religious practices are praying, worshipping (e.g., *du'a and salah*) and reading religious books (Tan, 1996). Nonetheless, the context of this study is focused on the discussion of implicit integration practiced by counsellors in dealing with spiritual and religious issues during the counselling session.

1.3. Implicit integration

Implicit integration of the spiritual and religious approaches in counselling practices reflects the hidden approach of not expressing or discussing the issues in an open or explicit manner. According to Tan (1996), counsellors who practice implicit strategies are still regarded as those who are religious by showing respect for clients while maintaining values and beliefs, including certitude in their own religion. Implicit integration practices commonly involve the incorporation of spirituality and religiosity upheld by the counsellor. One method that can be applied by counsellors is to involve their own spirituality by listening, paying attention and reflecting on the issues and processes of counselling that they conduct (Anderson & Worthen, 1997). Additionally, Wolf and Stevens (2001) expressed implicit integration as an indirect integration of not introducing religious or spiritual issues into the counselling process. As such, religious practices or resources, such as prayer or act of worship (*du'a and salah*), carried out during the treatment of counselling are not made explicit.

Furthermore, the quantitative studies conducted by Dagang (2013), as well as Dagang, Ibrahim and Bakar (2014) revealed that counsellors in Malaysia tend to integrate their spiritual and religious elements in an implicit manner. Nonetheless, Ching (2014), in employing qualitative designs, found that clients had the tendency to express a problem explicitly. In precise, counsellors tend to practice the integration of counselling implicitly while clients explicitly unspin issues. Moreover, the researcher discovered a contradiction between demands of clients and the aid offered by counsellors. The disagreement in outcomes found between these studies has encouraged the investigation on the methods applied by counsellors in integrating spiritual and religious approaches in their counselling practices, as well as their reasons for incorporating these approaches in an implicit manner.

2. Methodology

Primarily, this particular study explored how counsellors integrate the spiritual and religious aspects in counselling, and the reasons for doing so in an implicit manner. Therefore, the qualitative approach via case study design was selected as the method of this study (Yin, 2014). This study involved 13 registered counsellors, which comprised of 3 males and 10 females from three government agencies offering family and marriage counselling services in Malaysia. The study location reflects six states, namely, Perlis, Kedah, Penang, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Kelantan. The selected participants were between 32 and 46 years old with vast experiences in conducting counselling services from 8 to 18 years. Initially, the participants were briefed about the objectives, the procedures and the course of this study, apart from highlighting that participation in this study is voluntary. Furthermore, an informed consent form was signed by the participants prior to the interview. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Profile of respondents

Characteristics	No of participants (*n* = 13)
Age (years)	
32–40	9
41–46	4
Gender	
Male	3
Female	10
Marital status	
Single	1
Married	12
Education level	
First degree	2
Masters	11
Experience (years)	
8–12	8
13–20	5
Total	13

The data were gathered from the semi-structured interview sessions held with the selected participants. The transcribed and coded outcomes of the interview sessions were categorised based on the gender (M/F) and the number of participants (P1–P13). Next, the findings were analysed by using the interpretative phenomenological analysis (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012; Smith & Osborn, 2007). The analysis was performed so as to answer the following questions: i) 'how counsellors integrate spiritual and religious elements into counselling?' and ii) 'why are the elements integrated implicitly'? The results of the survey data answered the first question on the integration of spiritual and religious approaches by highlighting four themes, which are: i) religion is not stated at the beginning of the session, ii) counsellors incorporate spiritual and religious aspects slowly, iii) counsellors embed the elements obscurely and iv) counsellors help clients to probe into their spiritual realm. On the other hand, the question of why counsellors integrate spiritual and religious elements implicitly unravelled five themes, as follows: i) to prevent resistance in clients, ii) to avoid clients from feeling uncomfortable, iii) to avert confusion among clients, iv) to tackle unprepared clients as well as v) to hinder the sensitive issues that revolve around spiritual and religious topics.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. How counsellors integrate spiritual and religious approaches during counselling sessions?

The effort to integrate spiritual and religious aspects in counselling practice is done implicitly. The findings showed that counsellors integrate spiritual and religious elements by not expressing religion at the initial stage of the session, but these elements are embedded slowly and obscurely.

3.1.1. Religion is not stated at the beginning of the session

MP1 claimed that although his agency is under the religious department, the counsellor need not necessarily exhibit and disclose religious features at the beginning of the session. He emphasised that the counsellor can highlight the beauty of morality and courtesy first, and then, followed by religion. He explained: 'Although we work under the religious department, we do not necessarily reveal the aspect of religion at the beginning of our session, but let the topic of religion come naturally so as to be slowly absorbed into human hearts, as we have our way, our approach, our character and our courtesy with them'.

3.1.2. Counsellors incorporate the aspects of spiritual and religious slowly

Incorporating spiritual and religious approaches without haste during a counselling session appeared to be an option for FP2, FP4, FP6, FP9 and FP12. According to FP4, while conducting counselling sessions, she employed the Western approaches that she had learned during training. Hence, she practiced that particular approach as a base in identifying and understanding problems faced by clients while at the same time, slowly incorporating both spiritual and religious approaches in combination with the existing approaches. FP4 hopes that her clients leave the counselling session with some enlightenment in their religious life.

> 'We still apply the approach or the basic approaches that we first learned in the university so that we can slowly, slowly, insert the spiritual elements. That is why I slowly inject these elements in the hope that when they get out of their counselling room they get something, though not much, but I hope they get a little picture of the whole meaning of life in Islam, what is taught in Islam' (FP4).

In addition, FP6 is in agreement with FP4 as the same approach is employed that combines conventional theory as a basic framework with Islamic approaches in counselling practice. The counsellor acknowledged that she does not completely implement the spiritual and religious approaches, but only includes them at certain stages. Nevertheless, at the end of the session, the counsellor would try to embed some religious elements by inviting the clients to examine their religious practices. This method is performed when the counsellor, from the process of exploration, detects negligence of religious practice by the client. Hence, the counsellor is of the view that the clients would be aware of and reflect upon their weaknesses and lacking so as to help them improve their behaviour and thoughts.

> 'I combine conventional and Islam approaches, as I mentioned before, for me, I will use them at a particular time that I think is appropriate. It is not used as a whole, usually that is the way I use it. I incorporate these elements at certain stages and definitely at the end, we will discuss by asking the clients to reflect on their religious practice' (FP6).

In fact, the findings obtained in this study are consistent with those of Lewis (2001), who asserted that counsellors should discuss the views of clients regarding spiritual and religious elements, even before starting the review for the purpose of evaluating the readiness in clients.

FP9 claimed: 'I think we need to do it slowly'. Similarly, FP12 explained that she incorporates it slowly and tries to embed spiritual and religious elements bit-by-bit after the clients undergo several counselling sessions: 'I'm just incorporating it a little, especially after we have had a few sessions and the client is willingly see me, then I can open this topic by a fraction'. Similarly, FP2 stated that she tries to infuse these elements slowly: 'Try to instil a bit of that religious knowledge'.

3.1.3. The counsellor incorporates the aspects of spiritual and religious obscurely

Apart from slow incorporation, the participants stated that they included the spiritual and religious approaches in an obscure manner. FP4, FP6 and FP7 claimed that spiritual and religious approaches are incorporated obscurely and impliedly. This obscure and implied method means the counsellors integrate these elements without the clients being aware of it. The counsellors use this method so that the clients would not realise that their issues are being tackled via spiritual and religious methods. FP7 explains: 'There is no other thing, in fact, just to help their internal strength (spiritual) for them to be stronger... but I would not say it in the beginning, I would go 100 km first, then I would say it is actually that, that's my process'. Meanwhile, FP4 explains, in order to achieve the purpose of incorporating spiritual and religious approaches: 'I use an obscure approach to incorporate the religious approach into the session, where we ask slowly after several sessions, how is their religious practice like and their submission to the Almighty's will'. In a similar vein, FP6 also claimed: 'I indirectly insert it, furtively and vaguely'.

3.2. Why do counsellors tend to use implicit integration?

The above discussion presents the approaches used by counsellors in integrating spiritual and religious elements implicitly into counselling session by not declaring religion at the beginning of the session, but by incorporating these aspects slowly and obscurely. Hence, there must be one or several reason(s) for the counsellors to do such in incorporating spiritual and religious approaches. The findings from the interview sessions revealed that counsellors opted for the implicit method, instead of explicit strategies, primarily to prevent their clients from being resistant, to avert client's discomfort, to avoid confusion among clients, to deal with clients who are still unprepared, and last but not least, to hinder the sensitive issue that revolve around spiritual and religious elements. With that, the following unfolds the reasons why counsellors integrate spiritual and religious aspects implicitly.

3.2.1. To prevent clients from being resistant
The counsellors incorporate both spiritual and religious approaches implicitly, mainly to prevent the clients from being resistant towards the counselling session. The counsellors acknowledged that they are worried if the spiritual and religious approaches are incorporated explicitly, the clients would rebel, run away and feel challenged, instead of returning for more counselling sessions.

3.2.2. Rebellious clients
FP7 asserted that she uses the spiritual and religious approaches at the final stage of conducting the counselling sessions. Her experience in conducting counselling sessions found that some clients acted in a rebellious manner when spiritual and religious approaches are introduced outright at the beginning of the session. This situation may occur because the clients feel forced and perhaps, according to their views and perceptions, they are labelled by the counsellor, as depicted in her statement: 'Spiritual, I always do it later, not at the initial stage, because if done at first, sometimes, clients rebel for they are surprised, while some feel that we push and label them'.

3.2.3. Withdrawal from clients
The implicit approach is adopted so as to maintain assurance among clients that the counselling sessions are conducted harmoniously. MP1, FP7, FP10 and FP12 explained that they do not discuss clearly and openly about spiritual and religious approaches because they are worried that clients may withdraw from the counselling sessions. MP1 insisted: 'I cannot do that because I'm afraid that they'll disappear'. Likewise, FP7 stated: 'I do not go into religion yet, because if I discuss religious matters, the clients will run away'. Next, FP10 added: 'If I use the religious approach, I cannot ask 'do you pray?', because my clients will then reject me'. FP12 also claimed: 'If I asked them about prayer first, they would run away'.

On top of that, MP3 stated that the spiritual and religious approaches are only expressed in the third, fourth or fifth sessions, but not at the initial phase. This view is in line with those opined by MP1 and FP7. MP3 explained: 'Not during the first or the second session, but usually the third, fourth, fifth... the earliest is in the third session, while the latest is in the fifth. The first and the second sessions are ruled out for we have yet to know them and a rapport has to be built so that they will not be taken aback'. Therefore, this study revealed that good rapport is required at the beginning of the session as this greatly assists the counsellors in integrating spiritual and religious aspects. This is mainly to build trust and ensure comfort among clients, and far from being threatened while undergoing counselling sessions with spiritual and religious approaches embedded.

3.2.4. Clients feel challenged
In order to prevent the clients from being challenged, FP13 stated that she does not disclose the spiritual and religious approaches in a vivid manner so as to respect individual sensitivities. She believes that spiritual and religious issues are sensitive as some would feel uncomfortable and

challenged with such an approach, as depicted in her statement: 'It's normal. When they are grown-ups, they would feel rather perturbed with this issue, perturbed and challenged'.

3.2.5. To avert discomfort among clients

The counsellors appear to be extremely concerned about the comfort of their clients when providing counselling services. According to MP1 and FP11, spiritual and religious approaches are performed implicitly so as to avoid the clients from feeling uncomfortable. The discomfort that arises may affect and interfere with the treatment of counselling sessions. Uncomfortable circumstances can also spark conflicts on the client's side; hence result in discontinuation of counselling sessions. MP1 added: 'This indirect approach may facilitate a client to accept. However, if the spiritual and religious approaches are administered directly, a sense of discomfort may begin to brew among the clients'. FP11 also stated: 'When we use spiritual and religious elements, some clients display their resentment, especially when reminded about prayer, religion and responsibility, thus they become more resistant'. This finding is consistent with Sollod's (1993) recommendation, which emphasises the fact that counsellors need to ensure a client's comfort, especially with the intent to embed spiritual and religious approaches. He further noted that readiness among clients to accept contributes to their comfort in further discussion pertaining to spiritual and religious aspects.

3.2.6. To avoid confusion among clients

Confusions may arise if a counsellor vividly enforces spiritual and religious elements at the initial phase of the counselling session. According to FP8, implementation of the spiritual and religious approaches is made obscure and unclear to retain comfort as a counsellor. She believes that this can prevent a client from getting confused about her role. Clients are likely to think that she is a religious teacher (*ustazah*) when she speaks of religious matters at the beginning of the session in an explicit manner. Hence, she has adopted the indirect approach when incorporating spiritual and religious elements. In her view, if the spiritual and religious approaches are clearly stated, it can cause the clients to feel confused about her role; either a counsellor or a religious teacher. Her explanation is as follows: 'I think it is more comfortable because otherwise, it may give a picture to the clients that I am *ustazah* etc. or they might think that it is just another religious lecture and so forth. Therefore, going indirectly may facilitate the clients to accept such additional elements'.

3.2.7. Clients are still unprepared

Readiness among clients is also taken into account when integrating spiritual and religious approaches into counselling. Besides, as proposed by Lewis (2001), some limitations have to be weighed in prior to unfolding a discussion on spiritual and religious issues, such as the clients' willingness to discuss their spiritual and religious history, as well as their practices, in the counselling treatment process. For example, MP1 and FP4 adopt the implicit strategy mainly because, according to a counsellor's judgment, a client is usually not ready to accept the spiritual and religious approach. FP4 stated: 'Not all clients are quite willing to talk about their religious appreciation'. Meanwhile, MP1 explained: 'I'm worried that the clients would return to their old habits if their level of readiness is very low. Hence, I'll usually give the clients more space to explore until they display some willingness in sharing spiritual experiences.

3.2.8. Spiritual and religion are sensitive issues

For some people amongst the society, spiritual and religious identities are sensitive issues to be discussed openly. According to FP4 and FP11, they are of the same view that the spiritual and religious elements are sensitive issues for some individuals. FP4 explained: 'looking in their context, it is one of the many things that involve sensitivity of the community, this religious element'. Likewise, FP11 stated: 'Religion, no matter what, is sometimes an issue that is too sensitive for some people', thus making the implicit strategy an effective and a viable move.

4. Conclusion

Richards and Bergin (2006) asserted that many of the earlier theories and studies have focused on Christianity and Western culture. With that, a pressing need arises to bridge the existing knowledge gap pertaining to the arena of spiritual and religious integration in counselling practices, especially that practiced by Muslim counsellors in Malaysia.

The methods employed by counsellors in their attempt to integrate spiritual and religious aspects into counselling practices have been explored in this article, in which it had been found that implications of such integration allowed the clients to feel comfortable and at ease during the process of counselling treatment. It also helps to create a safe climate and builds a high sense of trust towards the counsellor, as well as the counselling process itself, in the course of exploring the spiritual and religious aspects of the clients. Furthermore, this method appears to assist the counsellors to continue to be open and far from being judgmental or evaluative towards the client's spiritual and religious experiences.

Nevertheless, one aspect that has to be taken rather seriously is the competency among counsellors in integrating spiritual and religious elements. Competent counsellors should be able to effectively apply integration in an implicit manner, apart from having the ability to use explicit integration in confidence. Nonetheless, the barriers faced by counsellors to integrate spiritual and religious approaches are mostly due to lack of information (specific training) and lack of interest among the counsellors (Adams, Puig, Baggs & Wolf, 2015).

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