Integration of Sufism in Islamic Psychology: A Conceptual Review and Therapeutic Implications

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Abstract. This paper discusses the interrelationship between Sufism and Islamic psychology as two complementary disciplines in understanding and addressing the human psyche. The main objective of this paper is to outline how Sufistic principles, such as *tazkiyatun nafs* (purification of the soul), dhikr, and *ma'rifatullah*, contribute to the development of Islamic psychology, particularly in the context of mental health and spiritual healing. The method used is qualitative with a literature study approach, which involves analyzing classical works of Sufism, concepts of Islamic psychology, as well as relevant contemporary research. The results show that Sufism not only acts as a spiritual teaching, but also offers a holistic and transcendental model of therapy. Concepts such as *muhasabah*, patience, and gratitude have strong therapeutic value in shaping the emotional and spiritual stability of individuals. In addition, the role of spiritual mentors in Sufism can be aligned with the function of psychologists in modern therapy. This paper concludes that the integration of Sufism in Islamic psychology is an important step to develop a psychotherapeutic approach that is in accordance with Islamic values and the needs of the human soul as a whole.

Keywords: Tasawwuf, Islamic Psychology, *Tazkiyatun Nafs*, Mental Health, Spirituality Therapy

1. Introduction

Mental health is a crucial issue in modern society characterized by a crisis of meaning, existential angst and spiritual alienation. In the Islamic perspective, the human soul (nafs) is not just a psychological entity, but also a spiritual one. Therefore, handling psychological problems needs to integrate transcendental aspects. Al-Ghazali in The Alchemy of Happiness asserts that "true happiness is only obtained when the soul recognizes its Creator and cleanses itself from the impulses of lust" [1]. This suggests that purification of the soul (tazkiyatun nafs) is central to inner well-being in Islam.

In the Sufism tradition, the approach to the soul is holistic. Chittick states that Sufism is the path to "inner transformation through divine love and knowledge" [2]. As such, Sufism offers not only spiritual experiences, but also concrete methods that can be applied to care for the human soul. Schimmel [3, p. 7] even mentions that Sufism has a "highly structured mystical dimension," making it a profound and therapeutic spiritual system.

However, the secular and positivistic dominance of Western psychology is often incompatible with the Islamic perspective on human beings. Badri strongly criticized Muslim psychologists' reliance on Western theories that ignore the spiritual aspect, and called for a psychology that stands on the Islamic worldview [4]. In another of his works, Badri emphasized the importance of contemplation (tafakkur) and dhikr as forms of spiritual therapy that can calm the restless soul [5, p. 45].

Al-Attas [6] supports this idea by elaborating that education and science in Islam must start from the concept of humans as intelligent spiritual beings. On this basis, the Islamic psychological approach places the qalb (heart) as the centre of spiritual awareness, not just the ratio or instinct, as in Western psychology.

Nasr [7, p. 35] in The Garden of Truth states that "Sufism is the path to inner perfection, which connects man to the source of his eternal nature and tranquility." This is in line with the concept of self-actualization in psychology, but with a vertical orientation towards God. Lings [8] also describes

Sufism as a structured spiritual discipline, emphasizing inner practice and the guidance of a murshid as the key to healing the soul.

In the local and contemporary context, Sufistic principles are very effective in the treatment of psychological problems such as stress, depression, and anxiety. He notes that dhikr and muhasabah-based therapies have shown a positive impact on patients' inner peace.

Practically speaking, Hidayat [9] states that humans not only fear physical death, but also experience existential fears that can be addressed through spiritual approaches. Sufism, in this case, becomes a profound path of healing. Rumi [10] through his poetry describes the suffering of the soul as a longing for the Creator, which can only be healed through divine love.

Faruqi [11] and Rahman [12] emphasize the importance of Islamizing science, including psychology, to be in harmony with the values of revelation. Without this, psychiatric therapies will lose the essential dimension of humans, namely the spirit. Meanwhile, Sardar [13] reminds us that the dominance of the Western paradigm in social science has created a form of "epistemological imperialism" that undermines Muslim values and local wisdom.

Thus, this paper aims to explore the interrelationship between Sufism and Islamic psychology, and how they can be integrated in the development of a more holistic, contextualized psychotherapeutic approach that is in accordance with human nature according to Islam. This study uses a qualitative approach through a review of classical and contemporary literature, in order to formulate a framework for a complete understanding of the soul, its healing, and its vertical relationship with God.

2. Finding and Discussion

This study shows that the integration between Sufism and Islamic psychology opens up a new space in understanding the inner dimension of human beings and its application in the context of psychological therapy. The results of the literature analysis show that Sufism concepts such as tazkiyatun nafs (purification of the soul), muraqabah (self-surveillance by God), khalwah (being alone for contemplation), and dhikr (reminder of God) are spiritual tools that can effectively reduce anxiety, stress, and depression, as well as increase self-awareness and inner calm [14].

Another important finding is that the Sufistic approach treats the soul not merely as a psychological entity, but as a spiritual substance that has the potential to develop towards perfection through the process of purification [15]. This is in line with Al-Ghazali's classical view of the structure of the human soul, which includes qalb, nafs, and ruh, where each has a role in the dynamics of psychology and spirituality.

In Islamic psychotherapy practice, Sufistic methods such as therapeutic dhikr and spiritual meditation have been shown to be effective in enhancing spiritual resilience and meaning in life. For example, research by Syafii and Azhari [16] showed that the integration of Sufistic practices in therapy resulted in significant improvements in the psychological well-being of Muslim clients, especially those experiencing spiritual emptiness.

Furthermore, Sufism values such as tawakkal, patience, and gratitude can strengthen cognitive-based therapeutic frameworks by giving spiritual meaning to difficult life experiences. In this context, psychotherapy not only aims at symptom relief, but also leads individuals towards spiritual enlightenment and a deeper connection with God.

This research also emphasizes the need for an interdisciplinary approach, where Sufism is not positioned as a passive object of psychology, but rather as an active knowledge system that can enrich contemporary psychological theory and practice [17]. This integration must be done by considering the epistemological integrity of both fields in order to avoid the reduction of spirituality to mere psychological techniques.

Finally, the readings show that Sufism contributes not only in the therapeutic aspects of individuals, but also in shaping a healthy society through its emphasis on ethics, honesty, empathy, and love as manifestations of high spiritual awareness [7].

2.1. Sufism and the Transcendental Dimension of Psychology

One of the main findings of this study is that Sufism is not only a spiritual practice, but also contains a deep and structured psychological framework. In this sense, Sufism can be understood as a system of self-development that places the soul (nafs) at the center of moral and spiritual improvement [18]. This concept is very relevant in the development of Islamic psychology, which criticizes the reductionism in modern Western psychology. Western psychology tends to emphasize the cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of humans, but often neglects the spiritual dimension as the center of human identity and motivation.

In Sufism, the process of spiritual journey (suluk) emphasizes the importance of purifying the soul from destructive traits (e.g. riya', ujub, hasad) through practices such as dhikr, muhasabah, and khalwat. These concepts are in line with the goal of psychotherapy, which is to free individuals from inner conflicts, but with a different approach to values. Western psychotherapy seeks to restore the individual to "normal functioning", while Sufism directs the soul to a higher spiritual station, namely closeness to Allah (taqarrub ilallah). This makes Sufism a form of therapy that is not only curative, but also transformational.

2.2. The Conceptual Construct of Soul in Sufism and Islamic Psychology

The discussion also highlighted the importance of reconstructing the concept of the soul within the framework of Islamic psychology. In Sufism, the human soul is categorized into three levels: al-nafs al-ammarah (the soul that commands evil), al-nafs al-lawwamah (the reproachful soul), and al-nafs al-muthmainnah (the calm soul), as mentioned in the Qur'an (QS. Yusuf: 53, Al-Qiyamah: 2, and Al-Fajr: 27-30). This construct reflects a multilevel understanding of the human psychological condition, which also describes the inner dynamics on the way to healing [19].

In the context of Islamic psychology, this construct provides a spiritual dimension to the understanding of mental disorders. For example, a person overwhelmed by al-nafs al-ammarah may experience anxiety, restlessness, or spiritual depression due to the dominance of lustful urges. The healing process is not enough just with cognitive or pharmacological therapy, but needs an approach of dhikr, tazkiyah, and contemplation so that the soul returns to a state of muthmainnah. This makes Islamic psychology an integrative system that combines clinical methods and spiritual approaches.

From a theoretical perspective, this is in line with the transpersonal psychology approach developed by Abraham Maslow and Stanislav Grof. Although sourced from the Western paradigm, transpersonal psychology recognizes the importance of the spiritual dimension in human self-actualization [20], [21]. However, the difference is that in Islam, self-actualization culminates in ma'rifatullah (recognition of God), not just self-awareness. Sufism, then, can be considered an authentic Islamic form of transpersonal psychology, as it developed spiritual theories and practices long before the advent of modern psychology.

2.3. Sufism as a Psychospiritual Therapy

Other findings show that Sufistic practices such as dhikr, tafakur, muraqabah and muhasabah have high therapeutic value. Dhikr, for example, is not only a dimension of ritual worship, but also a form of Islamic meditation that is proven to reduce blood pressure, anxiety, and depression as assessed in various empirical studies. Dhikr therapy can also improve sleep patterns, strengthen inner resilience, and increase the sense of meaning in life [22].

From the perspective of modern psychology, this can be related to the concept of mindfulness that is widely used in mindfulness-based cognitive behavioral therapy (MBCT). However, the fundamental

difference is that dhikr is not just a neutral awareness activity, but contains spiritual content that connects humans to God. In this case, dhikr has two effects: first, it calms the mind (relaxation response); second, it strengthens the existential bond with God as the source of value and meaning in life.

Muraqabah and muhasabah also serve as techniques for self-reflection and strengthening moral awareness [23]. In psychology, self-reflection is known as self-observation and self-regulation, which are important in the process of behavior change. However, in Sufism, self-reflection is done not only to control behavior, but to assess the integrity of the heart and the extent to which one is close to his or her God. This makes Sufistic practice a system of self-development that blends the moral, emotional and spiritual.

2.4. The Role of Spiritual Teacher and Its Therapeutical Relation

The discussion also underscored the important role of a murshid or spiritual teacher in the process of soul development. In the Sufism tradition, the murshid functions as a spiritual guide who not only gives advice, but also guides the student psychologically through a process of spiritual discipline [24]. This relationship mirrors the structure of the therapist-patient relationship in clinical psychology. However, the Sufistic relationship has a sacred content as it is based on an inner bond and spiritual example.

In the context of modern psychology, the therapeutic relationship is considered as one of the determining factors for the effectiveness of therapy, as explained in Carl Rogers' theory of unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding [25]. However, in Sufistic relationships, the guru is not only present as a facilitator of change, but as an intermediary in the inner journey towards God. This shows that Sufism has a strong relational dimension, which includes simultaneous moral, emotional and spiritual guidance.

The role of the murshid also prevents deviations in spiritual experience, which in psychology can be equated with psychotic disorders or spiritual emergencies. With a mentor, the spiritual journey remains within the corridors of sharia and common sense, so that it does not become a source of mental illness.

2.5. The Integration of Islamic Values within Modern Therapy

This discussion supports the view that Islamic psychology needs to be developed not just as an alternative, but as a separate paradigm that integrates the values of revelation. This has been developed by figures such as Malik Badri, al-Attas, and Faruqi, who encouraged the Islamization of social science. In this regard, Sufism can be a source of values, principles and techniques underpinning Islamic psychotherapy [5], [11], [26].

For example, therapies that focus on tawakkal, patience and gratitude not only aim to reduce anxiety symptoms, but teach an Islamic cognitive frame for dealing with life's trials [27]. This is in accordance with the principle of cognitive restructuring in cognitive psychotherapy, but with a theistic orientation. That is, cognitive restructuring does not only form positive thoughts, but forms the correct divine interpretation of the reality of life.

This is also relevant in the context of trauma and existential crisis. Many individuals experience the emptiness of life, loss of meaning, and value disorientation, especially in the fast-paced and materialistic modern era. Tasawwuf offers existential healing by introducing a meaning to life rooted in a vertical relationship with Allah SWT [28]. This is the foundation of a distinctive Islamic psychotherapy-based on the value of tawhid.

2.6. Challenges and Opportunities in Developing the Sufi-Based Therapy

Despite its great potential, the integration of Sufism in psychotherapy practice is not free from challenges. One of them is the gap between symbolic and traditional Sufistic concepts and the clinical world that requires a systematic and measurable approach [29]. Therefore, further methodological studies are needed so that the principles of Sufism can be translated into applicable and evidence-based therapy protocols, without losing its spiritual essence.

Several integrative models have been developed by contemporary Muslim psychologists, such as Islamic Cognitive Therapy, Spiritual Counseling, and dhikr-based relaxation approaches. However, these approaches still need empirical validation and clear ethical-professional guidelines. This is an important challenge for the future development of Islamic psychology.

In addition, the diversity of Sufistic traditions must also be considered. Not all Sufism approaches are suitable for all patients or all sectarian backgrounds. Therefore, this integration should be done contextually and based on universally recognized Islamic principles, such as sincerity, self-awareness, and love of God.

3. Conclusion

This paper shows that Sufism has a significant contribution to the development of Islamic psychology, especially in understanding the structure and dynamics of the human soul. Sufistic concepts such as tazkiyatun nafs, dhikr, muraqabah, and khalwah provide a therapeutic approach that touches on the deepest aspects of human existence, making spirituality an important dimension in healing and self-development.

The findings of this study show that Sufism is not just a mystical tradition separate from psychological life, but an overarching framework in guiding individuals towards inner tranquility (nafs al-mutma'innah) and mental well-being. The use of Sufistic approaches in psychotherapy has been shown to be effective in increasing spiritual resilience, reducing stress and depression, and helping individuals find a deeper meaning in life.

By integrating Sufism in the practice of contemporary Islamic psychology, mental health approaches can become more contextualized, transcendental, and rooted in the religious values of Muslim culture. The contribution of this paper is expected to be the basis for the development of a more inclusive and spirituality-oriented model of Islamic psychotherapy.

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