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## Factors and Challenges in Discussing the Aspect of Worship in Counseling

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### Abstract

The discussion on Islamic teachings such as worship (*ibadah*) in counseling is essential to improve counseling efficacy as religion and human life are inseparable. Separating the religious aspect from human life will cause various crises such as suicide, mental illness and various behavioral problems. This research seeks to identify the factors which drive a counselor to discuss the *ibadah* aspect in counseling process and analyze the challenges in its implementation. This research is designed as a study survey with questionnaire as research instrument. Research respondents were selected by convenience method (N=50). Data gathered from questionnaire was analyzed using Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 22. Research results found that the factors driving a counselor to discuss the *ibadah* aspect in counseling are: that the client's problem is related to *ibadah*, the client does not perform *ibadah* at all, and the client has only little understanding of it. Research also found that the challenges in applying *ibadah* in counseling are: that the client is not co-operating, feels uncomfortable, is not interested, is not ready and client considers discussing *ibadah* a sensitive issue. These findings show that the counselors endeavor to discuss the *ibadah* aspect in counseling despite various challenges faced in its implementation.

**Keywords:** Worship, Driving Factors, Islam, Counseling, Challenges

### Introduction

The early history of counseling shows that the counselor was not allowed to apply religious and values elements in counseling. This was stated by the American Counseling Association (1995) that counselors should be aware of their own values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors and how these apply in a diverse society, and avoid imposing their values on clients. However, many counselors begin to realize the need for discussing religious or spiritual values in counseling in order to effectively help the client overcome his problem. Corey (2003) in this

regard asserted that successful counseling attends to matters relating to the body, mind and spirit.

Al-Qasimi (1990) in his book explained that religious values and counseling cannot be separated. The reason is that clear values of faith will strengthen the human psyche/soul to direct the mind and body toward goodness. If the psyche/soul is damaged or broken, then all is lost. This principle is cited from al-Quran in surah al-Baqarah verse 10 which is translated as "In their hearts is a disease and Allah has increased their disease". This means that among humans are those whose hearts are diseased and the disease will worsen if it is not cured by the right remedy. Based on this principle, many Muslim world renowned exegetes such as al-Qurtubi (1967) hold the opinion that human morals cannot be separated from the religious element because the latter is an important factor to remedy the inner issue of problematic humans. For that reason, it is not strange that, prior to this, an expert such as Corey (2003), agreed that humans who have souls or psyche laden with noble values will always be inspired to do good besides seeking tranquility from time to time. For Muslims, this momentum can, without fail, only be born from having consistent religious values (Rahman, 2019).

Even though the application of spiritual and religious element in counseling is now allowed, some matters have to be taken into account by the counselor before he does it. Among these matters are: As a professional counselor, he should be able to explain the similarities and differences between spirituality and religion; The professional counselor acknowledges that the client's spiritual or religious beliefs are central to his worldview capable of influencing his psycho-social functions; The professional counselor can pinpoint the limits of his understanding of the client's spiritual and religious perspective and knows spiritual and religious resources and leaders that he can refer to or consult; The professional counselor can also explain and apply various models of spiritual and religious development relating to human development. The professional counselor can identify spiritual and religious themes in the client's communication which are relevant to therapy and he is able to tackle these with the client (Cashwell & Young 2011).

Hence, application of religious or spiritual element in counseling is currently not unethical because many past studies proved the need to apply religious or spiritual aspects in counseling (Corey, 2003; Cornish et al., 2012; Burke et al., 1999; Smith, 2006; Horfman & Walach, 2011; Sapora, 2009; Nurul Ain, 2006; Benjamin & Lobby, 1998; Day, 2010; Souza, 2002; Hamjah et al., 2020). This situation has developed due to the fact that religion or spirituality is frequently inseparable from life and may play a role as a method of overcoming the client's problem. This is in line with the view of Corey (2003) who found that religion and spirituality frequently form part of the client's problem as well as its solution. As spiritual and religious values play a major part in human life, these should not be ignored but instead be utilized as potential therapeutic resource.

In addition, many studies in the West proved that religion plays an effective role in helping clients to face their problem because their religious beliefs motivated them to develop themselves and achieve self-actualization (Benjamin & Lobby, 1998), life satisfaction, sense of personal efficacy, effective coping, and self-esteem (Day, 2010). Applying the religious element in counseling is currently accepted by most counselors and accords with the

demand for diversity in counseling and the importance of understanding the religious aspect as one aspect of client diversity (Souza, 2002; Horfman & Walach, 2011).

One of the religious aspects which may be applied in counseling to help the client overcome his problem is *ibadah*. *Ibadah* is one of the essential components in Islamic teachings other than *aqidah* and *akhlaq*. Ibnu Taymiyyah defined *ibadah* as to submit and obey with the purpose of exalting Allah and it indicates the highest level of a slave's devotion to his Creator. In addition, Kashim et al. (2015) asserted that worship or acts of devotion (*ibadah*) not only pertains to purely spiritual acts, but also all physical behaviour in life. This includes prayer (*solat*), fasting (*sawm*), charity tax (*zakat*), pilgrimage (*hajj*), eating and drinking, mutual respect and much more that are classified as worship (*ibadah*) if the intention is worship (al-Suyuti 2001). In terminology, it means everything done by a slave in the form of words or practice, whether inner or external, which is loved by Allah SWT (Ibn Taymiyyah 1995). Some examples of *ibadah* are prayers (*solah*), fasting (*sawm*), pilgrimage (*hajj*), supplication to Allah (*doa*), reading al-Quran, respecting parents, earning a livelihood and so on.

There are various purposes for which *ibadah* is enjoined, all of which serve to complete the ultimate purpose of human creation, that is, to worship Allah. *Ibadah* is commanded by Allah for Muslims to implement because it gives a positive effect on human life for example the practice of *zikr* or remembrance of Allah may bring peace of mind (Chapter:13, verse: 28), *solat* or prayers prevent humans from doing evil (Chapter:29, verse:45), *doa* or supplication brings one closer to Allah (Chapter:2, verse:186) and so on. A study by Mohd Sabri et al. (2009) proved that *ibadah* practices such as *zikir*, *doa*, *solat* and reading al-Quran contributed to an increase in self-awareness, self-regulation and self-motivation. Another study by Hathaway & Pargament (1992) found that religious aspects such as prayers (*solah*), faith in God and guidance from religious leaders help a person in facing stress. In addition, the application of the spiritual aspect in counseling may help the client overcome anxiety problems (Pandya, 2018; Maree, 2017).

The findings of these past studies show that *ibadah* has a positive effect on human life. It is very closely related to counseling because in counseling, the counselor will endeavour to help the client overcome stress, get closer to Allah, motivate and achieve insight and self-awareness to overcome problems in life. Hence, the *ibadah* element is considered appropriate to be discussed in counseling to help the client achieve his goal. Realizing the importance of the *ibadah* aspect in counseling, this study is conducted to identify the factors which drive a counselor to apply the *ibadah* aspect in counseling as well as the challenges or problems faced in doing so. Knowledge on this matter may serve as guidance for Muslim counselors on the best approach for discussing the *ibadah* aspect in counseling.

### Research Method

This is a quantitative research designed as a survey study. 50 respondents were selected among counselors through purposive sampling, namely by pre-determined characteristics, such as those who are qualified with a bachelor, master's degree or doctorate in counseling, counselors registered with the Malaysian Board of Counselors and practising counselors in Selangor and Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Research respondents comprised of 25 males (50.0%) whereas the other 25 were females. 22% (11 persons) respondents were aged within 27-39 years and only 4% (2 persons) were within 47-50 years in age. Most of them had their highest education in the field of counseling at Master's degree level (26 persons, 52.0%), followed by respondents with a bachelor's degree education (15 persons, 30.0%) and 3 persons (6.0%) possessed a PhD., diploma and certificate respectively. Most research respondents had two years experience in counseling service (12 persons, 24%), followed by 5 years' experience (11 persons, 22%), and then 4 years' experience (9 persons, 18%). The longest experience in service was 11 years (6 persons, 12%).

The main research instrument is the questionnaire. Questionnaire items were constructed based on doctoral research by Hanin Hamjah (2008) entitled, *Pendekatan Dakwah Kaunseling menurut al-Ghazali, Satu Kajian di Pusat Kaunseling Majelis Agama Islam Negeri Sembilan* (Preaching Counseling Approach according to al-Ghazali, a Case Study at Counseling Centre of Negeri Sembilan Religious Council). These items were also formed based on literature review relating to spirituality and religion in counseling (Benjamin & Looby, 1998; Rose et al., 2001; Stanard, 2000; Souza, 2002; Richards & Bergin, 2005; Smith, 2006; Nurul Ain, 2006; Oakes & Raphel, 2008; Day, 2010; Cornish & Wade, 2010; Stanley, 2011; Cashwell et al. 2011; Cashwell & Young, 2011; Hofmann & Walach, 2011; Hanin Hamjah & Mat Akhir, 2014; Harris, 2016; Flasch, 2016; Maree, 2017; Hanin Hamjah et al., 2017; Damari, 2018; Matise et al., 2018; Pandya, 2018; Sajadi, 2018).

Questionnaire items are divided into eight sections: Section A on respondent background, Section B on client's religious education background, Section C on client's understanding and practice of ibadah, Section D on the relationship between client's problem with ibadah, Section E on the factor of applying ibadah in counseling session, Section F on challenges experienced while applying ibadah in counseling, Section G on the importance of applying ibadah in counseling and Section H on changes in client after applying ibadah in counseling. However, this article only discusses Sections E and F.

Prior to conducting the actual research, a pilot test was done to check the reliability of the research instrument. Data obtained from the pilot study used SPSS to obtain the alpha cronbach value. By this method, every research variable was tested for its alpha cronbach value. The alpha cronbach value for the overall research variables is 0.972. As the value exceeds 0.6, the research instrument has acceptable consistency and reliability (Sekaran, 2003)

## Results and Discussion

Research results find that there are some factors which drive respondents to discuss the *ibadah* aspect in counseling (Table 1). Based on mean analysis, the item with the highest mean value is the item 'When assessment of client's problem shows it is related to *ibadah*' (mean=4.14), followed by the second highest item, 'When my client says that he does not perform *ibadah*' (mean=3.86) and the item 'When the client shows little understanding of *ibadah*' (mean=3.84). The item with the lowest mean value is 'When the client does not understand *ibadah* at all' (mean=3.42).

Table 1: Factors Driving Application of *Ibadah* in Counseling

Factors driving application of <i>ibadah</i> in counseling	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly Agree	Mean
When assessment shows client's problem is related to <i>ibadah</i>	2 (4.0%)	3 (6.0%)	4 (8.0%)	18 (36.0%)	23 (46.0%)	4.14
When client does not perform <i>ibadah</i>	4 (8.0%)	1 (2.0%)	8 (16.0%)	22 (44.0%)	15 (30.0%)	3.86
When the client has only a little understanding of <i>ibadah</i>	1 (2.0%)	5 (10.0%)	7 (14.0%)	25 (50.0%)	12 (24.0%)	3.84
When client truly understands <i>ibadah</i> and only needs to be reminded	4 (8.0%)	1 (2.0%)	8 (16.0%)	24 (48.0%)	13 (26.0%)	3.82
When I assess the client as lacking in performing <i>ibadah</i>	3 (6.0%)	4 (8.0%)	8 (16.0%)	20 (40.0%)	15 (30.0%)	3.80
When client does not understand <i>ibadah</i> at all	4 (8.0%)	7 (14.0%)	13 (26.0%)	16 (32.2%)	10 (20.0%)	3.42

Research results show that counselors discuss the *ibadah* aspect in counseling after making the assessment that the problem faced by the client is related to *ibadah*. This assessment is done usually on the client who does not perform *ibadah* at all, whose psyche is always restless and this anxiety makes it difficult for the client to find a solution for his problem because his mind is not at peace and is confused. The counselor believes that by performing *ibadah* such as prayers (*solat*), remembrance (*zikr*) of Allah, supplications (*doa*) and so on, the client's psyche becomes peaceful and this peace of mind helps the client to solve his problem more effectively. This accords with a study by Nor Azah (2011) which found that prayers will reduce or alleviate stress. Prayers were also found to help reduce anxiety (Ahmad Hisham & Che Zarrina 2009).

Assessment of client's religious and spiritual practice in counseling is not a strange task. In fact, the benefit of making such assessment has been proven in a study by Stanard, Sandhu, & Painter (2000) which found that assessment can help both client and counselor to better understand the role of spirituality in coping with the client's problem and determine how interventions can be suitably designed to solve it.

Oakes & Raphael (2008) held the view that it is essential for the counselor to assess the client's spirituality. The authors presented a practical discussion to raise the general awareness and skills in this crucial area of spiritual assessment amongst counselors. They also

discussed the therapeutic benefit of the counselor-client values and beliefs and the need to integrate cultural and developmental influences in spiritual assessment.

In the process of uptake and spiritual and religious assessment of the client, the professional counselor is reminded to endeavour to understand the client's perspective by gathering information from the client or other sources. In identifying the nature of the problem, the counselor acknowledges that the client's religious or spiritual perspective may add to his well-being or lead to further problems and aggravate symptoms (Cashwell & Young, 2011).

Hence it is better for the counselor to do a little assessment of the client's religious practice by using a certain measuring instrument or method of questioning. The counselor may ask questions such as "Can you tell about the religious practice that you usually do?" or "In your opinion, is daily religious practice important to be done in life?" This indirect questioning may help the counselor to assess the client's understanding of religious observance and his worldview, and assist in deciding the most appropriate approach to apply religion to help the client overcome his problem.

This study also found that counselors apply the *ibadah* aspect in counseling when the client admits to not performing any *ibadah* at all (mean=3.86). This matter shows the client's open-mindedness and honesty and his readiness to discuss his religious practice. It also shows that the counselor manages to build a good rapport to the extent that the client is willing to disclose his personal weaknesses. Client's readiness to discuss spiritual and religious aspect in counseling is supported in a study by Rose et al. (2001) which found that 55% of respondents wished to discuss religious or spiritual issues because they believed religion and spirituality were vital for therapy and development.

This finding also shows that some counselors discuss the *ibadah* aspect even though the client did not perform *ibadah* at all (mean=3.86). It is done based on their awareness to preach and motivate the client to perform *ibadah* and return to the religious path in order to achieve tranquillity in life. According to Flasch (2016), however, the counselor needs to do this task wisely. The counselor may only suggest to the client to perform *ibadah* and not impose on him, besides explaining the role of *ibadah*, that it may give tranquillity to the soul and serves as proof of a slave's obedience to Allah SWT.

Table 2: Challenges experienced in discussion on *ibadah* aspect

Difficulties experienced in application of <i>ibadah</i> aspect	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Not Sure	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean
I feel client does not want to cooperate in discussing <i>ibadah</i> aspect in counseling session	2 (4.0%)	24 (48.0%)	13 (26.0%)	10 (20.0%)	1 (2.0%)	3.32
I feel client feels uncomfortable in discussing <i>ibadah</i> aspect in counseling session.	0 (0.0%)	14 (28.0%)	16 (32.0%)	18 (36.0%)	2 (4.0%)	3.16
I feel client is not interested to discuss <i>ibadah</i> in counseling session.	1 (2.0%)	20 (40.0%)	14 (28.0%)	14 (28.0%)	1 (2.0%)	3.12
I feel client is not ready to discuss <i>ibadah</i> aspect in counseling session.	1 (2.0%)	18 (36.0%)	15 (30.0%)	16 (32.0%)	0 (0.0%)	3.08
My opinion is that <i>ibadah</i> is a sensitive issue	5 (10.0%)	17 (34.0%)	7 (14.0%)	15 (30.0%)	6 (12.0%)	3.00
I experience difficulty in discussing the <i>ibadah</i> aspect during the counseling session.	2 (4.0%)	27 (54.0%)	7 (14.0%)	14 (28.0%)	0 (0.0%)	2.66

In addition, this research finds that 58.0% of counselors (29 persons) stated that they did not experience difficulty in discussing the *ibadah* aspect in counseling while 28.0% of counselors (14 persons) experienced difficulty. This shows that more counselors do not find difficulty in discussing *ibadah* aspect in counseling session and that discussing the *ibadah* aspect in counseling session is currently acceptable to most clients.

This finding is in line with a study by Sagaser et al. (2016) which found that 67% of clients are very comfortable with discussing their faith relating to their pregnancy. This finding is also in line with a study by Sajadi et al (2018) which found that counselors did not experience difficulty in discussing the spiritual element in counseling and applying the spiritual element contributes to enhanced well-being of women cancer patients. This finding shows that counselors do not experience problems in discussing the spiritual or religious aspect of an issue in counseling if the client feels that spirituality or religion is a useful mechanism to overcome his problem.



Table 2 shows that there are counselors who experience difficulty in discussing the *ibadah* aspect in counseling. Some of the reasons for this are: client does not co-operate (mean=3.32), followed by client feels uncomfortable (mean=3.16), client is not interested (mean=3.12), client is not ready (mean=3.08) and client considers discussing *ibadah* as a sensitive issue (mean =3.00). The most frequent challenge experienced is that the counselor feels the client does not cooperate (mean=3.32) to discuss *ibadah* in counseling. This finding is in line with a study by Harris, Randolph & Gordon (2016) which found that the client was unwilling to discuss spiritual issues in counseling at all. One of the reasons for this unwillingness to co-operate in discussing the *ibadah* aspect is that it is not an easy matter to freely discuss religious beliefs (Ain 2006).

The second highest cause of the problem faced by counselors is that the client feels uncomfortable (mean=3.16) discussing *ibadah* in counseling. This finding is in line with a study by Rose et al. (2001) which found that 18% of clients were reluctant to discuss religion and spirituality during therapy sessions with counselors and prefer to discuss it with people who are highly knowledgeable about religion such as scholars or religious leaders, not with counselors. This finding directly shows that counselors need to study their own religion and other religions in preparation for clients of diverse ethnic, racial and ancestral backgrounds before they can apply the religious element in counseling, in order to build the client's trust that they are qualified to discuss religious matters (Damari et al., 2018; Matise et al. 2018; Johns, 2017). Mastering religious knowledge is important to enhance the counselor's competency because many clients will have confidence in a counselor who is staunchly religious (Cashwell et al., 2011).

Research findings also show that there are clients who are not ready (mean=3.08) to discuss spiritual and religious issues in counseling. This finding accords with research results of the study by Rose et al. (2001) which found that actually fear that the counselor will influence their religious beliefs (Cornish & Wade, 2010; Richards & Bergin, 2005).

In addition, research results find that another challenge counselors face in discussing the *ibadah* aspect in counseling is caused by clients who consider discussing *ibadah* a sensitive issue (mean =3.00). This is acknowledged by Mizock et al. (2012). As a professional, the counselor needs to be aware that it is indeed true that the spiritual and religious issues are sensitive and very personal. Hence, Cashwell & Young (2011) reminded the counselor to communicate with the client on such issues with acceptance and sensitivity. Basically, spiritual and religious issues are considered very sensitive and personal, more so by clients with a shallow religious background and not practising religious teachings. They feel very sensitive about discussing such issues with the counselor because it would expose their weakness in not practising religious teachings.

## Conclusion

This research found that counselors in this research are driven by various factors to discuss the *ibadah* aspect in the counseling process such as when the counselor assesses the client's problem as having to do with *ibadah*, when client admits to not practising *ibadah* at all and when client has only a little knowledge of *ibadah*. In addition, this research also found that there are challenges to the counselor in discussing the *ibadah* aspect in the counseling process. The problems faced by the counselor such as the counselor feels that the client is unwilling to cooperate (mean=3.32), followed by the client feels uncomfortable (mean=3.16),

is uninterested (mean=3.12 ), is not ready (mean=3.08 ) and considers discussing *ibadah* a sensitive issue (mean =3.00). Even though there are various challenges in discussing the *ibadah* aspect in counseling, the counselors in this research do not despair but still strive to discuss the *ibadah* aspect in counseling for the sake of helping the client to achieve their happiness in life based on the positive impact *ibadah* has on human life.

In general, this research contributes to a new knowledge related to the method of applying the elements of worship in counseling. Information on the factors that motivate counselors to implement the element of worship in counseling can be a guide for Muslim counselors to choose the appropriate approach and timing to talk about worship in counseling. Knowledge of the challenges can make the counselors more prepared when dealing with clients who refuse to discuss the elements of worship in counseling and choose a more appropriate approach so as not to cause discomfort on the part of the clients. In short, this research contributes to the development of counseling knowledge as it explores the application of elements of worship in counseling where no study has been done before.

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