

Islamic Counselling and Psychotherapy in South Africa

Research Analysis and findings

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This article is a brief overview of recent research conducted on Islamic counselling and psychotherapy (hereafter referred to as Islamic counselling) in South Africa. The information is based on a fieldwork project undertaken in Cape Town as part of a dissertation which explored the role of Islamic counselling in nation-building in South Africa. In post-apartheid South Africa, nation-building was defined by human, socio-economic and moral reconstruction in the country. The study examined the role of Islamic counselling to contribute to this process and asserted that Islamic counselling was in fact central to nation-building in South Africa. The assertions were in turn evaluated in the Muslim community which assessed attitudes on Islamic counselling and its feasibility as a state service and hence nation building in South Africa.

The Islamic counselling approach identified in this research is *sharī'ah* counselling. In *sharī'ah* counselling clients are advised on principles of Islamic Law (*sharī'ah*), in particular those related to Muslim Personal law that regulate family relations. *Sharī'ah* counselling is the main approach of *'ulamā* and the main Islamic counselling service in South Africa.

The Research Process

The research of this study was based on a public questionnaire and a client survey. Respondents were asked to assess standards of Islamic counselling in the Muslim community as well as its prospects as a state service. Following an initial pilot study, two hundred and fifty questionnaires were distributed to Muslim members of the public in different areas of Cape Town. The areas covered were Mitchell's Plain, Bo-Kaap, Rylands Estate, Kenilworth and Claremont. The questionnaire was also circulated for comment on three e-mail lists.

Eighty-eight people responded to the questionnaire. Most respondents, however, did not have personal experience of Islamic counselling. To obtain an account of actual client experiences, an additional survey was conducted with clients who were in the process of using an Islam counselling service. Two organisations, the Muslim Judicial Council (MJC) and the Islamic Social and Welfare Association (ISWA) were selected for the process. In total, one hundred and ninety two persons responded to the public questionnaire and client survey. The overall research covered fifty-six areas with women being the main respondents except for the Internet responses where more men completed the questionnaire.

During the course of the research, it became increasingly apparent that the MJC would substantially reflect the position of clients in relation to Islamic counselling in South Africa. As the main Islamic organisation in the Cape, a majority of Muslim clients visit the organisation as a first option for Islamic counselling. The MJC also represents mainstream Islamic counselling practised in South Africa based on the *sharī'ah* model. A

focused analysis of counselling at the MJC was therefore thought appropriate to ensure a representative study of client attitudes on Islamic counselling. The organisation was then concentrated on and provides the primary data for the analysis of this research.

Based on the work of ISWA and the MJC, the following is a broad context within which Muslim clients seek Islamic counselling. The focus of Islamic counselling in South Africa is marital counselling. Extramarital affairs, polygamy and violence against women are the most common presenting problems. The majority of clients are women. Men only attend counselling late in the process often to avert proceedings when divorce is imminent or else in cases that require agreements on custody of children. Extra-marital affairs and polygamous marriages are also commonly allied to a range of other problems like violence against women and children, desertion, neglect, lack of maintenance and family disintegration. Substance abuse, financial difficulties and unemployment are other common related problems and cases that present for Islamic counselling.

Client Profile

The following is a profile of clients who seek Islamic counselling services. One hundred and one people, the majority of whom were women, completed the MJC survey. The survey covered thirty-nine areas with the highest response rate viz. twenty-three from Mitchell's Plain and the second highest response rate from the adjacent area, Strandfontein. Sixteen of the thirty-nine areas were identifiable as townships where communities were relocated under Apartheid forced removals. The impact of this dispossession is generally reflected in high levels of crime and violence, a lack of and

inaccessibility to resources, unemployment and communal instability in the townships. Most of the other areas listed in the survey were 'working class' suburbs with six areas more affluent suburbs.

Seventy-five women and twenty-six men were recorded in the study. Most clients were married, fell within the 31-50 age group and had a primary or secondary school education. Most clients also earned a monthly household income of less than R4000pm. In a gender analysis of the data, forty-two of forty-four clients earning less than R500pm were women. The majority of these women were either unemployed or homemakers and financially dependent on a spouse. None of the women had an income exceeding R4000pm. In contrast, male clients fell within the 'higher' income groups. Two men earned less than R500pm, four earned between R500-1000pm and nineteen earned incomes from R1000pm upwards.

The majority of clients who sought Islamic counselling then are from lower socio-economic strata of society who are generally more exposed and vulnerable to social problems and deprivation. On average, clients are women in stages of young or middle adulthood with a primary or secondary level of education. They seek assistance for problems of marital discord and are emotionally and socio-economically disempowered.

The above circumstances held other serious implications for Muslim women as Islamic counselling clients. In counselling encounters, finances are often the cause of intense marital strife. Frequently, men do not support or are reluctant to financially support a

family or do so by giving minimal amounts of money. In polygamous marriages problems escalate where different families have to be supported.

A lack of appropriate community Islamic counselling services and a consequent need to travel long distances to such services reinforces this critical situation. Travelling may require cutting on a food budget that in certain instances is the same amount as feeding a family for a day. To attend counselling, clients often also have to borrow money from relatives or friends. Debt further incapacitates women financially and instils feelings of shame. For women with no income and economically dependant it is difficult to leave abusive relationships and to return to family. The result is that problems that require counselling are delayed until a point of crisis.

The crises nature of Islamic counselling encounters also impact on the process of *sharī'ah* counselling to effectively intervene in the lives of clients. By the time clients seek Islamic counselling they are often so distressed that they seek services with a view to obtaining an almost immediate divorce. The central approach of the *sharī'ah* model, however, is to reconcile couples in order to maintain the stability of the family unit. Given the intensity of problems when clients first seek help though, clients do not always deem reconciliation desirable. Reconciliation at this point may also add to clients' distress by compelling them to remain in situations of ongoing family conflict.

The above circumstances of Muslim clients highlights a need for greater synchronicity between Islamic counselling methods in relation to post-apartheid social circumstances to ensure that intervention does not further disadvantage clients and their families.

Client attitudes on Islamic counselling

Despite a number of problems highlighted with current Islamic counselling services as provided by *'ulamā*, most clients noted that they found the service either very helpful or helpful, observing that they would use the same service again if needed. A *shaykh* or Imam was identified as a first choice for Islamic Counselling followed by an Islamic organisation.

While there was a general acceptance of *'ulamā* as Islamic counsellors this acceptance was not unconditional. The majority of respondents (sixty-six) noted that to qualify as an Islamic counsellor, a person should be trained in both Islam and counselling. Comments were also made on the qualities that a counsellor should display in dealing with clients. Most clients stated that counsellors should be fair between couples, understanding, and honest. Generally, a sense of being professional and supportive was emphasised with many clients indicating that counsellors should not attempt to reconcile couples against their will. In this regard, clients felt that Islamic counsellors should undertake home visits in order to understand the intensity of client problems and intervene accordingly. With this were requests for follow-up services as well as practical guidelines on how to deal with problems in addition to advice that is given on the *sharī'ah*.

In general, research participants stressed a need for professional standards and confidentiality in Islamic counselling. Many expressed reservations about using an Islamic service as they feared that talking about their problems would result in the whole community eventually coming to know about it. In this respect, Islamic counselling services were strongly perceived as prone to breach of codes of confidentiality and professionalism. An understanding of the Muslim community as interconnected and having a tendency to talk about others problems reinforced such fears. Social welfare practitioners likewise expressed concern about professional standards of Islamic counselling which they felt were especially compromised in the absence of mechanisms to ensure effective services in the Muslim community.

Commenting on Islamic counselling and the state, the majority of clients agreed that Islamic counselling should be part of the government's Social Development Department. Most agreed though that this arrangement had to be based on Islamic counselling remaining an independent community service but aligned to the state through either registration or training service provision.

Clients commented on factors that could make it difficult for Islamic counselling to be a state service. The main response was that government did not consider religion, particularly Islam, and was reluctant to accommodate the Muslim community. Stereotyping of Muslims, through associations with Islamic militancy and anti-Islamic sentiments, were highlighted as other concerns. Most clients felt, though, that an integrated system would alleviate the problems Muslims experience in seeking Islamic

counselling services. Here financial difficulties and having to go to different agencies to deal with problems, as in attending Islamic services for counselling and ‘secular’ courts for maintenance cases for example, could be reduced through an integrated and more relevant area-based counselling services for Muslim clients.

In assessing the position of the Muslim community in post-Apartheid South Africa, the general sentiment was negative. While the highest score of thirty-two people indicated the position of Muslims had improved, cumulatively, clients felt that the position of Muslims had not improved. Indications were that circumstances were either the same as in the Apartheid era or else worse.

Finally, clients had to indicate their opinions on the importance of Islamic counselling, on a scale of 1-10, in four different areas of life. ‘Muslim community building’ rated most important followed by ‘Family life’, ‘Individual Personal Development’ and ‘Nation-building in South Africa’. Here though all categories were generally considered important and rated above average scores.

Assessment

Throughout the course of the research, it was clear that Muslim clients were keen to conduct individual, family and social relations in accordance with Islam. As such, a preferred option in dealing with problems was services that integrated Islam in problem resolution. For this reason, clients were comfortable with Islamic counselling services of the *‘ulamā*. At the same time though, these services also came under criticism from

participants. This criticism was directed mainly at standards of practice rather than the practitioners themselves. Thus while an Imam, for example, was recognised as important to Islamic counselling, this role was not automatically accepted by virtue of his position of Imam in the community. Instead, where the Imam was the Islamic counsellor the call was that he provides effective, accountable, and professional Islamic counselling that is integrated into his role as an advisor on the *sharī'ah*.

Clients also showed overall support for Islamic counselling as a wider state initiative. The survey expressed this relationship as an autonomous community that simultaneously connects with the larger society in social transformation through service provision. In this respect, the research finding supported a role for Islamic counselling in nation building in South Africa. Here, *sharī'ah* counselling provided an ideal for change in this process. However the implementation of *sharī'ah* counselling in the context of dire social circumstances that continually disadvantage clients, as in the case of Muslim women, would need to be reconsidered in ways that synchronises *sharī'ah* counselling within South Africa's unique post-apartheid society.

To conclude, this study is part of a debate that requires ongoing input to ensure effective Islamic services to Muslims. In this regard, *'ulamā*, scholars, practitioners and community members can all make valuable contributions to this effect. The participants in this research have no doubt been instrumental in the process and I am grateful for their contribution and thank them sincerely for all their efforts. It is hoped that the research will further benefit the community especially those who may want to pursue similar or

related research...rather than be like the comments of a Mitchell's Plain man, who when asked to complete a questionnaire on Islamic counselling replied in Afrikaans: “ nay man...is it al weer die council...die council doen niks vir ons nie” [no man...is it the council again...the council does nothing for us].