# Exploring Traditional Approaches
# for the Helping Profession:
# The Sufi Model

## Zulkarnain Ahmad Hatta

**ABSTRACT:** *The main aim of the helping profession such as counseling, psychology and social work is to promote well-being and quality of life. In helping alleviate human miseries that manifest in various types, these professions' duty is to improve human and social conditions. Meanwhile, the models of personality and psychotherapy depict spirituality in oversimplified, stereotypical terms. Sufism finds modern psychoanalytical thoughts to be agnostic. This paper is to present Sufism as a model in helping to alleviate human miseries. As the instability, contradictions, and stress of the socio-economic structure create a frantic search for relevant modes of treatment, the theories and methods espoused in Sufism can be an alternative approach to be taken up in the interest of more effective practice, especially in the field of social work, psychology and counselling. Existing measurement tools that can test the stress level will be used in order to present Sufism compatible to the mode of scientific inquiry. This paper will show that by clinging to the traditionally practices such as psychoanalytic, behavioral, transactional analysis, to name a few, would be limiting the avenues of help to those that are need. Human service workers and agencies have to work in collaboration with spiritual entities and other religious institutions in order to better serve the population.*
**KEY WORDS:** *spirituality, stress, sufism, counselling, psychology, and social work.*

## INTRODUCTION

The main aim of the helping profession such as counseling, psychology and social work is to promote well-being and quality of life. In helping alleviate human miseries that manifest in various types, these professions' duty is to improve human and social conditions. While these professions have been relatively established in the West, in countries such as Indonesia, Brunei and Malaysia, they are relatively new. Most professionals in the

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above mentioned countries received their education and training from the West, invariably their approach is heavily influenced by their educational and training background. Attracted to and shaped by forces of positivism and models of personality and psychotherapy, modern practitioners of psychotherapy have become in some important respects quite different from those they serve and in some ways unprepared to help them (Pargament, 2007).

In a study conducted in the United States by Shafranske (2001), his findings showed a difference between the religious beliefs and practices of psychologists with those of the general public. While over 90% of the United States (U.S.) population reports belief in a personal God, only 24% of clinical and counseling psychologists do so. Therefore, these statistics suggest that when it comes to religion, therapists and their clients come from different worlds.

If the aim of the helping professions is meant to assist clients in healing from their difficult life experiences, then all possible healing resources need to be explored, including the spiritual dimension. Although treating the person through counseling and modern psychotherapeutic intervention may enhance their coping and adaptive capacities, it does not necessarily resolve the complex personal problems that bear on the individual's situation (Farley, Smith & Boyle, 2000).

Problems that most of counselors, psychologists, psychiatrists and social workers faced from individuals are psychological in nature. Psychological despair, problems and disturbances are not the phenomenon of the modern individual; they have existed as long as human existence. Without trying to over simplify the causes; suffice for the purpose of discussion that the reasons are due to the tormented and depressed state of the soul.

The influences of modern psychology and psychoanalysis on the body of knowledge of the above mentioned professions cannot be underestimated (Miller, 2003). All if not most of the curriculum in the respective programs that offer courses in counseling, human behavior, and individual and family practice still refer and rely on those modern psychology and psychoanalysis. The influence of Western psychology and psychoanalysis, combined with an atheistic and nihilistic point of view are still a major recourse for the troubled modern individual in Eastern societies. There are studies (Larson, Swyers & McCullough, 1997; and Simmons, 2001) that have found a positive relationship between spirituality with mental health. The researchers found that patients who reported spiritual struggles, such as not feeling connected to God, showed a higher risk of dying. Miller and Thoresen (1999) state that understanding clients' spiritual and religious views may assist the

counselor in understanding the client's problem(s) and positively impact treatment. In recent past, even professional organizations in the West such as the American Psychological Association and American Counseling Association (ACA) have increasingly focused on the importance of the spiritual dimensions in helping the clients. In 2001, the ACA expanded its multicultural training requirements to include spirituality in its accreditation program. The time has come for curriculums and training methodologies in Eastern countries be modified to better suit the culture and values of the locals.

In relatively conservative societies such in Indonesia, Brunei and Malaysia, to name three, religion is an important component of life. Therefore, by relying on present practices, those options cannot be seen as exhaustive. There are alternatives, one of which is in Islamic psychology – Islamic psychology and psychotherapy contained mostly within Sufism. Apart from offering an alternative in confronting the psychological problems, this paper is a critique of how contemporary individual views his/her existence, problems and agent of change via the Western psychoanalyst and psychotherapist. Before proceeding any further, next will be a discussion on the premise of Sufism towards human existence and a picture of the traditional man.

**SUFI PARADIGM**

Sufism is the Islamic scientific and spiritual methodology of self-purification and self-realization. Sufism and other esoteric schools whether it originates from Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism or Hinduism, express a common origin in man's intuitive modes of thought. It existed as a reality for centuries before the word did (Spiegelman, Khan & Fernandez, 1991). There is a commonality among the esoteric teachings of these religions – the need to transcend the self, to liberate the self from what Freud termed as the "id". Das (1989) notes the difference between spiritual perspectives and humanistic psychology. Humanistic psychology only deals with the phenomenal self, not the spiritual self. It prescribes only the development of one's individuality rather than a specific path. It emphasizes spontaneous self-actualization rather than a discipline. Morality, on the other hand, is perceived to evolve more naturally than through training. The Eastern views add a spiritual dimension and more responsibility on the individual to develop.

Much of Sufism core doctrine and practice are found in the basic sources of Islam: the Quran and the canonical Traditions (*Hadiths*) that record the acts and sayings of Prophet Muhammad. One of the first Divine Command

revealed to the Prophet Muhammad was "Invoke (or remember) the Name of your Lord, and devote yourself to Him with complete devotion" (Al-Quran, 73:8). This revelation sanctions, indeed demands the practice, central to Sufism, of invocation of God (*zikirullah*). Through constant devotion to and selfless remembrance of God, *zikirullah*, the Sufi disciple's attention to the self falls away, and in turning to God, his/her heart and soul slowly are transformed by Divine Attributes (Kabbani, 1995). During the process, spiritually one becomes calmer, and with that calmness life vicissitudes become palatable because one understands and accepts life events, albeit stressful or otherwise. *Zikir* is a combination of meditation and chanting the names and attributes of God. The philosophy behind the technique is to annihilate one's consciousness into an inner reality, a reality that is badly forgotten and neglected by many (Nazim, 2002).

The etiological assumption of stress according to Sufism is that human's soul is restless. To remedy a problem one has to know the root source. According to the Sufi model, the Creator already predetermines everything in life. Some of us have forgotten the source of every action and reaction in this life. In trying to cope and deal with the daily problems, to the Sufis, they truly accept that everything is from God – good and bad (Nazim, 2002). To begin the process of managing problems, one starts by simply accepting those events and try not to complain. Since one of the beliefs in Islam is in predestination, logically one therefore has to accept both the sweetness and bitterness in life (Nazim, 2002).

One of the primary aims of Sufism is to train the body, soul and mind not to complain about life. When one stops complaining, life becomes calm, and stressful life events are bearable. This is the greatest merit of the Sufi model. However, that does not mean that one does not do anything to alleviate stress should it sets in. This is when *zikirullah* (invocation the names of God), the intervention, becomes therapeutic. The merit of *zikirullah* is that one develops the capacity to discriminate internal stimuli, such as stress, memories, fears, anger, depression, to name a few, and provides measures of enhanced self-awareness useful in emphatic relating and communicating of one's responses in social situations. The effect of *zikirullah* is such that it forms a force shield – a shield that is able to absorb and/or repel stressful events.

Generally speaking, the results of *zikirullah* are in the form of relaxation, desensitization of charged stimuli, enhanced discrimination, concentration of attention, self-awareness, intentional present centeredness, and augmented perceptual modes (Spiegelman, Khan & Fernandez, 1991). Arising from a tradition that is unhampered by notions of health and illness

110

in relation to human behavior, *zikirullah* has been used in the personal growth and consciousness development of both the average lay person and the select initiates of particular Sufi orders (Schimmel, 1975). Used as a tool to extend the potential of its practitioners, *zikirullah* has been oriented toward the possible rather than the merely adequate or healthy in human functioning.

Consequently, there are several ramifications for the human services. *Zikirullah* requires no predisposing diagnosis for its use – although there are definite contra indicators. It has potential for use with individuals, families, groups, and in community settings. The effectiveness of the Sufi ways have been proven in Muslim countries like Morocco, Egypt, Pakistan, Indonesia and even in non-Muslim India, people with stress would flock to see a Sufi *sheikh/pir* or his authorized deputy, who is functionally a psychologist/counselor/social worker/psychiatrist (Spiegelman, Khan & Fernandez, 1991).

*First,* **Intake and Engagement**. During intake and engagement the worker/spiritualist will: (1) determine the nature of the problem; (2) frees himself from any bias in regards as to whether the clients are religiously inclined or not, and as to their religious affiliations; (3) telling the clients that to see positive changes, the key ingredient that the client has to contribute is his/her patience to stick to the treatment; (4) assign a specific set of spiritual exercises to the individual; and (5) reporting of any spiritual states one is experiencing only to the worker/spiritualist.

*Second,* **Intervention Process**. Sufism approach deals with the interior aspects of human – the soul, heart and mind. Stress attacks those three elements in human. Stress is a symptom of a restless soul, a soul that is heedless and needs infusion with Divine grace (Hatta, 2006). In strategizing the intervention process for the individual, first and foremost the Muslim helping professional (counselor, psychologist, social worker) will introduce the client to a Sufi *sheikh* (intake and engagement process). The first order of the *sheikh* is to set the rules and expectations (the contract). He/she would be given a set of exercises. The individual is also to live out the maxim of, "do not expect to receive respect if you do not how to give" – in short; chivalry is the role that has to be played (the task). This maxim is so relevant because it can be expanded to the process of reducing stress and tension. With Sufism one is expected to be fluid, a kind of fluidity that will enable one to function harmoniously with the environment.

In turn the sheikh will assess the spiritual progress of the individual. On the part of the Muslim helping professional, he/she will be gathering baseline data of the clients prior to meeting the *sheikh*. Data collection

on the stress level of the clients will be measured by using the Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression Scale (CES-D), Gough's, Seligman's and/or Shuessler's scales (Shuessler, 1982). A pre-test and a post-test will be conducted on the clients. Most of the changes will be experientially, thus, it is necessary to report to the *sheikh* any changes detected, including dreams. As opposed to some intervention strategy, the target of change with this approach is the self and not so much the environment.

The goal of the intervention is to reduce the stress level. But more importantly is in making the individual truly be cognizant of the nature of events. In religious terms, especially to the Sufis, God's will is wise, regardless of the appearances to the contrary (Kabbani, 1995). Stress is generally seen as a negative state, but God in His infinite wisdom has made it. A Sufi does not question God's will. What He chooses is always better than what he/she chooses. In learning to accept paradoxes the client will slowly begin to view with a degree of objectivity and nonattachment that allows enhanced performance in complex behavior.

Since an authentic *sheikh* would not incur a fee, the individual can proceed according to his/her pace, depending on his/her aspiration (*himma*) and capability. Invariably a time will come when the capacity to embrace stress through the building capacity of the spirit will be experienced by the individual. At that moment he/she will see the wisdom and causation of those stresses, and at that time he/she will no longer feel the burden of the stress, nor the need to complain or feel laden. If the individual is given to take the CES-D or any other scales, the assumption is that he/she will score low on the scale this time around (the evaluation).

In Sufism one can practice the *zikirullah* individually and also there is a group session. Going through several sessions collectively, the therapeutic effect will have positive result. A unison chanting of the words during *zikirullah* such as *Hu, Haq* and *Hayy* evokes a sense of group unity and feeling with lessening of feelings of isolation and egocentrism by individual members. A group meditation sets the atmosphere for constructive interaction, a support of solidarity and identity within the group.

The *sheikh* plays an important role. He teaches, facilitates, guides and prompts the clients. Although internal experience differs with one individual to the other, there is however that collective experience, the Jungian archetypical. Thus, it becomes necessary for the clients to share experiences with one another and also to the *sheikh*. Like in the socialization model, contagion theory is very real in the Sufi orders (Roberts & Northen, 1976). A positive experience by several members tends to generate an aura to the rest.

*Third,* **Measurement**. Some consequences of *zikir* are directly observable; others can be indirectly inferred. Though the workings of the inner mind can never be measured in the scientific quantitative mode, the emotional and physical state cause by stress can be measured by using the CES-D, or through the checklist that has been designed such as by Gough's, Seligman's or Schuessler's. Meditation and *zikir* do not refer to the mind's wandering and floating fantasy, or to the mind's laboring along a tight line of logic toward a solution. Keefe (1986) mentioned that in contradistinction to these Western notions, meditation and *zikirullah* are the deliberate cultivation of a state of mind exclusive of both fantasy and logic. While there are varieties of meditation and *zikirullah*, they all share common characteristics. They are the deliberate cultivation of a mental state conducive to intuition. *Zikirullah* specifically directs the focus of the participants to the greatness and omnipresence of the Energy/Power in one's being, thus, reducing one's identity to a "nothingness". The capacity to focus attention on a single "thing" enhances. When carried over into everyday life, tasks undertaken with this state of mind are completed with less distraction and with expenditure of less wasted energy. The Sufis call it *muraqabah*, a state of God's consciousness constantly (Kabbani, 1998). Therefore, whatever temporal problems faced by humans will be seen in a new and different perspective, as a result of the new mind set. Gradually, the capacity to discriminate thoughts and feelings from any focus of attention develops. The individual will begin to cultivate a present centeredness.

Psychology technically defined is the study of the soul. Sufism specifically prioritizes the soul as its target of intervention (Spiegelman, Khan & Fernandez, 1991). Hence, to reiterate a point made earlier, it only benefits the helping profession to incorporate the path of spiritualism in its array of intervention approaches. Specifically for the Muslims, there are numerous verses in the Holy Koran testifying to the healing effect of *zikirullah* on stress and its ilk. God said, "Those who believe, and whose hearts find their rest in the remembrance of God – for, verily, in the remembrance of God hearts do find their rest" (Al-Quran, 13:28). And again, "Remember Me and I will remember you" (Al-Quran, 2:152).

Stress is related to the heart and soul of mankind – the soul is in distress and needs nourishment. *Zikir* is the nourishment of the soul; a restful soul will not complain as much as a restless one because the former recognizes the source of problems. *Zikir*, vis-à-vis, Sufism polishes the heart and is the source of the Divine breath that revives the dead spirits by filling them with the blessings of God, decorating them with His Attributes and bringing them from a state of heedlessness to a state of complete wakefulness (Kabbani,

1995). As long one busies oneself with *zikirullah*, management of stress can be attainable.

Unlike "band-aid" treatment, *zikir* attempts to get to the root of the problem – these are the merits asserted by the spiritual theory as spelled out in Sufism. At first glance the approach taken by Sufism would be labeled as idiographic in focus (Monte, 1995), but since it has proven its effectiveness throughout the Muslim land, one can safely consider it to be nomothethic too. The buffering effect of the Sufism approach is definitely universal.

## CRITIQUE ON WESTERN PSYCHOTHERAPY

Islam can be spoken as a tradition in the same way as one speaks of Christianity or Buddhism, whereas Sufism must be understood as a dimension of the Islamic tradition. This rather obvious point needs to be labored because today in certain circles Sufism is taken out of its Islamic context with particular motives in mind then discussed along with other Oriental or Occidental traditions. Conversely, there are circles within the Muslim community that do not recognize Sufism as part of the Islamic tradition (Nyang, 1999; and Hatta, 2003).

Sufism is like the flower of the tree of Islam (Nazim, 2002). Taken out of context of Islam, Sufism cannot be understood, and its methods, of course, can never be practiced efficaciously (Lings, 1981). As for the question of the present needs of modern *man* which the message of sacred tradition in general and Sufism in particular can fulfill, it is essential to analyze fully its context and meaning, considering the cloud of illusion which surrounds modern *man* and makes the clear discernment of his/her environment and living space, both exterior and interior.

A lot has been talked about the needs of man in the horizon of modern anthropology and philosophy. These two disciplines in the teeth of rapidly accumulating evidence concerning the essentially unchanged nature of human during the many millennia that have passed since his entering upon the stage of terrestrial history, has made it impossible for those who adhere to it to understand who *man* is (Nasr, 1975). Nasr (1975) asserted that the permanent nature of human having been forgotten, the needs of human are reduced to the sphere of accidental changes which affect only the outer crust of human's being. Nasr has eloquently articulated the condition of the modern man in his well-read book, *Islam and the Plight of Modern Man*. When people speak of human needs today, most often they mean the human who is confined to the rim and cut off from the Center, the human who is only accidentally human and essentially animal, the human

who no longer fulfills his/her primordial mandate as God's vicegerent (*khalifah*) on earth.

In reality, the needs of human, as far as the total nature of human is concerned, remain forever the same, precisely because of his/her unchanging nature (Schuon, 1973). The situation of human in the universal hierarchy of being, his standing between the two unknowns which comprise his/her state before terrestrial life and his/her state of death, his/her need for shelter in the vast stretches of cosmic existence and his/her deep need for certainty (*Yaqin* – in the vocabulary of Sufism) remain unchanged. As the Tao-Te Ching (XIX) states, "Realize thy Simple Self – Embrace thy Original Nature". For the goal of human cannot but be the knowledge of oneself, of who he/she is. "He who knows himself is enlightened" – Tao-Te Ching (XXXIII). This statement is similar to a statement by the Prophet Muhammad.

It is this human, obliterated temporarily by the progressive and evolutionary theories of the past few centuries in the West (especially originating from the secularist), to whom tradition itself and it is this inner *man* whom tradition (Sufi masters) seek to liberate from the imprisonment of the ego and the suffocating influence of the purely externalized and forgetful aspect of the human. It is traditional knowledge which possess the means for human's liberation, and not the pseudo-religions and psychotherapies so prevalent today, which seeing the resurgence of the needs of the inner *man*, try to entice those with a less discerning eye by means of parodies of the teachings of the sacred traditions (Nyang, 1999). Often they invariably add something of the evolutionary pseudo-philosophy to make sure that *man* does not discover who he really is. Nonetheless, the inner *man* continues to abide within all human and to make its demand upon *man* no matter how far he/she seeks to escape from his/own Creator, and no matter what means he/she uses to obliterate the traces of the inner being upon what he/she calls "oneself."

Unfortunately, where human now lives in descralized milieu divorced from principles, where the psyche is separated from the Spirit which is its own source of life, human is completely confused in regards to his/her sense of existence and needs. Precisely because of the changed external circumstances, many do not understand the conditions or are not willing to undergo the necessary sacrifices to become worthy of receiving guidance from the Center.

Both the Western and the Eastern *man* who are detached from traditions are tired of finite psychic experiences of everyday life no matter how materially comfortable that life maybe (Nasr, 1975; and Nazim, 2002).

Having no access to authentic spiritual experience which in traditional societies provides the natural means of breaking the limits of finite existence, they turn to psychic experiences of all kinds which open for them new worlds and horizons, even if they be infernal. All these psychic experiences and the like, are deeply related to this inner urge to break from the suffocating and limited world of everyday life in a civilization which has no purpose beyond moving with accelerated speed toward an illusory ideal state of material well-being that is always just around the corner.

The unitive character of Sufism, both in its own methods and in its relation to *man's* outward life in society, offers obvious advantages living in the modern world, where inner withdrawal is usually more of a possibility than the outward separation from the world. Also the unitive nature of Sufism is a powerful remedy for the disintegrated life from which so many people in the modern world suffer.

## CONCLUSION

Models of personality and psychotherapy depict spirituality in oversimplified, stereotypical terms. Sufism finds modern psychoanalytical thoughts to be agnostic. B.F. Skinner, the founder of behaviorism, rejected the fundamentalism of the religion that he grew up with. According to him, "God is the archetype pattern of an explanatory fiction" (Skinner, 1971:201). In the same demeanor, psychoanalysts like Freud claim to know about the nature of human psyche. Freud said that human's behavior is usually motivated by the unconscious and also on the insistence on the role of sexuality to every human's action (in Weiner, 1978; and Monte, 1995). Jung on the other hand, deals with the scared and the noumenal world (Monte, 1995).

According to the Sufis, Jung's deforming the image of the scared by confusing the spiritual and psychological domains and subverting the luminous and transcendent source of archetypes into a collective unconscious which is no more than the dumping ground for the collective psyche of various peoples and cultures. The Freudian, Skinnerian and Jungian views try to reduce all the higher elements of one's being to the level of the psyche, and reduce the psyche itself to nothing more than that which can be studied through modern psychological and psychoanalytic methods. In short, their findings about human nature and psyche are piecemeal and thus not holistic.

Fragmented knowledge of human behavior espoused by the likes of Freud, Skinner and Jung, even based solely on external observation, could aid an individual to become at least indirectly aware of other dimension of human

nature. However, fragmented knowledge provided by the likes of Freud and Jung cannot be achieved except through a knowledge of the gnosis, which also contains the external peripheries. A famous saying of Prophet Muhammad states, "He who knows himself knows his Lord". Precisely because "himself" implies the Self which resides at the Center of the human being, from another point of view this statement can also be reversed. An individual can know him/herself completely on in the light of God, for the relative cannot be known save with respect to the Absolute (Nasr, 1975).

The profession's clients come from different religious and/or spiritual cultures; hence, the professionals also need to find the idiosyncratic aspects of each client's religious or spiritual culture. Bishop (1992) states that all cultures have a value system, shared ideas and patterns of behavior. Therefore, for any counselor, psychologist and social worker to work effectively with client's values, they need to understand the cultural context of those values. In this respect it is hoped that human service agencies in the three aforesaid countries work in collaboration with religious institutions and other spiritual organizations in order to better serve the population. While this paper contents that Sufism should be viewed as an alternative to the helping profession, it must also be qualified that it is best suited specifically for the Muslims. Similarly, adherents of other religion should seek the richness in the esoteric teachings of their particular religion. Sticking to the traditionally practices such as psychoanalytic, behavioral, transactional analysis, to name a few, would be limiting the avenues of help to the profession's clients. In quoting Turner (1986:657), "There is not to date, nor indeed will there be, a single theory of social work practice. There are, and will continue to be, a range of understandings and tested findings about effective and planned change".

It is with the above quote in mind that Eastern human services helpers should attempt at, i.e., to blend the "unscientific" Eastern spiritualism with that of Western "positivism". During these days of economic depression, humankind is in need of tranquility in their lives, and the roles of the helping professionals are needed more so than ever. The strength and uniqueness of any helping profession is and will always be in its electiveness. Hence, emphasis is needed to probe into the esoteric teachings of not only Islam, but other mainstream religions of the East. While the spiritual model is doing a lot of intervention work (in pockets) without much fanfare, more research in the South-East Asian region has to be conducted looking into the effectiveness and methodologies of the spiritual models so as they can be incorporated into the scientific community (Hatta, 2006).
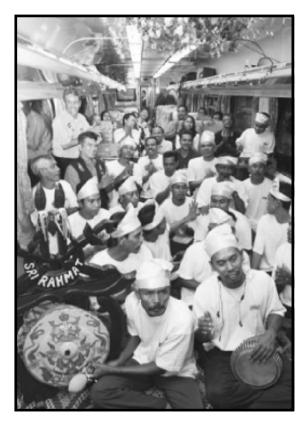
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