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Exploring school counsellors' knowledge of Islamic counselling

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the knowledge of Muslim school counsellors regarding Islamic counselling. A qualitative research design based on a multiple case study method was employed, with a sample of 19 Muslim counsellors selected using purposive sampling. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The findings reveal that counsellors possess a clear understanding of Islamic counselling, encompassing two main themes: (1) the counselling process based on human nature and oriented towards the hereafter, and (2) the modification of Western counselling. Within the first theme, counsellors emphasise the importance of understanding human nature and the concepts of *al-nafs*, *al-qalb*, *al-'aql*, and *al-ruh*. They adhere to the goal of guiding individuals back to their innate nature (*fitrah*) and utilising the Quran and Sunnah as the primary sources of guidance. Moreover, counsellors perceive their role as preachers, guiding clients in maintaining religious practices and upholding noble character. The second theme illustrates counsellors' integration of Islamic elements into Western counselling processes, where Western theories serve as the framework while Islamic elements—such as Quranic verses, Hadith, and moral values—are incorporated as complementary components. This study provides an overview of participants' awareness of the importance of applying Islamic values in counselling sessions and their efforts to infuse Islamic elements into the counselling process to align with clients' needs. However, counsellors must continually enhance their knowledge and skills in Islamic counselling through ongoing training and education, as well as the development of more comprehensive Islamic counselling models and modules to further strengthen their roles.

INTRODUCTION

Islamic counselling in Malaysia has experienced promising development since its emergence in the early 1980s. Numerous studies have been conducted to develop models, theories, and approaches for Islamic-based counselling. However, the actual practice of Islamic counselling among Muslim counsellors, especially in schools, is not yet fully established (Saper, 2018; Omar, 2018). Previous studies have proven

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that the integration of Islamic elements in counselling has a positive impact on counsellors and students (Hassan et al., 2020; Omar & Nuroddin, 2020; Zahir et al., 2019; Nor et al., 2019; Saper et al., 2016; Abd Halim & Ismail, 2015). Nevertheless, most studies related to counselling in school settings only focus on the input dimension, while research on the counselling process is still lacking (Natesan, 2017).

The researchers' preliminary study found that a significant number of school counsellors acknowledge practising Islamic counselling, either consistently or inconsistently. This finding challenges the assumption that Islamic counselling is not practised among school counsellors and is supported by previous studies (Abd Halim & Ismail, 2015; Sarmani, 2005; Rahman, 1998; Bachok, 2002). However, Muslim counsellors face challenges in practising Islamic counselling, including limitations in the training provided (Baharudin et al., 2016; Dagang et al., 2014; Zakaria & Awang, 2022). Therefore, the primary objective of this research is to explore and critically examine the depth and breadth of understanding that school counsellors possess regarding the principles, practices, and application of Islamic counselling within their professional context. The findings of this study are crucial for improving competency-based counsellor training and empowering the practice of Islamic counselling at the school level in Malaysia.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The lack of knowledge resources on Islamic counselling has been highlighted by several researchers, including Zakaria & Awang (2022) and Dagang et al. (2014). This scarcity raises critical questions about the adequacy of training provided to counsellors and the reality of their practices in schools. If formal training is limited, it remains uncertain whether counsellors seek alternative means to enhance their competence in Islamic counselling. Without clear guidance, counsellors risk applying Islamic counselling in a manner that may violate ethical standards, potentially harming students' well-being and compromising the integrity of the counselling profession.

Despite these concerns, studies conducted by Abd Halim and Ismail (2015), Sarmani (2005), Rahman (1998), and Bachok (2002) support the notion that Islamic counselling is practised by school counsellors, affirming its long-standing existence among counsellors in Malaysia, albeit not in the form of a specific theory. However, the knowledge base for Islamic counselling remains underdeveloped, leaving counsellors to navigate without a well-defined theoretical framework. This represents a significant gap in the literature, as a comprehensive understanding of counsellors' knowledge is crucial for enhancing training programmes and improving the quality of Islamic counselling services in schools.

Moreover, while existing studies have focused on the input dimensions of Islamic counselling, such as the development of models and modules (Saper et al., 2016; Nor et al., 2019), the process aspects, particularly counsellors' knowledge, remain underexplored. This lack of research on counsellors' actual understanding and application of Islamic counselling principles in school settings is a critical oversight that needs to be addressed.

Therefore, this study aims to bridge this gap by conducting an in-depth exploration of school counsellors' knowledge regarding Islamic counselling, specifically in the context of Malaysian schools. By examining what counsellors know and how they apply this knowledge, the study seeks to illuminate the current state of Islamic counselling in schools and identify areas for improvement in training and resource development. This research is essential to ensure that counsellors are equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to provide effective and ethical Islamic counselling services to students, thereby addressing concerns raised by the lack of knowledge resources and the potential for ethical violations in practice (Wan Muhammad, 2024). Furthermore, the findings will contribute to the advancement of Islamic counselling literature and provide valuable insights for policymakers and educational stakeholders in Malaysia to enhance the quality of counselling services in schools.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Counselling in Malaysia began as early as the British colonial era in 1938, with an emphasis on preparing students for the working world (Cheeseman, 1938). In 1939, the book *Careers in Malaya: A Guide for Parents, Teachers and Pupils* was published as a guide for teachers to conduct counselling services in schools (Malaya Tribune, 1939). Officially, school counselling began in 1963 (Natesan, 2017; Low et al., 2013; Pope et al., 2002; Dom, 1988).

The development of Islamic counselling in Malaysia has been identified as having started around the early 1980s (Zakaria & Mat Akhir, 2017), driven by several key factors. First, the role of prominent figures such as Malik Badri (Malik Badri, 2010; Iqbal, 1981; Haque et al., 2016) and Hassan Langgulung (Hamjah, 2010; Zakaria & Mat Akhir, 2017), who advocated for an Islamic approach in counselling through their works. Second, the emergence of studies by researchers such as Hamzah (1983), Salleh (1993), Kadir (1994), and Manaf (1995, 1996, 2000), who made significant contributions in developing Islamic counselling (Zakaria & Mat Akhir, 2017). Third, the international movement to integrate religion into counselling (Corey, 2017; Robertson, 2010; Walz & Benjamin, 1983; Dailey et al., 2011, 2015; Miller, 1999; Briggs & Rayle, 2005), which also influenced Muslim researchers in Malaysia (Dagang et al., 2014; Zakaria & Mat Akhir, 2017). Fourth, legal recognition, such as the Code of Ethics of the Malaysian Board of Counsellors, emphasises the importance of considering religious factors in counselling.

Although there is no exact date for the introduction of Islamic counselling in schools, Professional Circular Letter No. 9A/1976, which highlighted the need for religious guidance for Muslim students, is regarded as an early foundation for integrating Islamic values into education, including counselling in schools. The growing awareness of the significance of Islam in daily life during the 1970s and 1980s (Camroux, 1996; Barr & Govindasamy, 2010) also contributed to the development of Islamic counselling in schools.

Islamic counselling is an approach that integrates Islamic values and spirituality into the therapeutic and treatment process (Sudan, 2017). It focuses on spiritual devotion to Allah while also emphasising the balance between an individual's physical and spiritual needs (Wan Muhammad, 2024; Baharudin et al., 2017). Islamic counselling aims to help clients solve problems following religious teachings (Zakaria & Mat Akhir, 2017) and guide them towards happiness in this world and the Hereafter (Hanin Hamjah & Mat Akhir, 2014). Islamic counselling differs from conventional Western counselling, which primarily emphasises cognitive and behavioural aspects. In contrast, Islamic counselling integrates spiritual elements alongside these aspects (Md Yusoff, 2011). It is rooted in the Quran, Hadith, and the thoughts of Islamic scholars (Hamjah, 2010), whereas conventional counselling is based on Western psychological theories. In terms of objectives, conventional counselling focuses predominantly on resolving worldly problems, while Islamic counselling also prioritises attaining happiness in the Hereafter (Saper, 2018).

Islamic counselling has been found to have a positive impact on students (Zainal & Hassan, 2009; Abd Halim & Ismail, 2015). The preventive approach in Islamic counselling within schools is implemented through various programmes that emphasise the relationship with Allah, human interactions, and the environment (Abd Halim & Ismail, 2015). Counsellors also actively strive to integrate Islamic elements in addressing student misconduct issues (Abd Halim & Ismail, 2015). However, challenges persist in the implementation of Islamic counselling, including the lack of comprehensive manuals and guidelines and the need for more in-depth training for counsellors (Zakaria & Awang, 2022). Additionally, there are concerns about the limited research on Islamic counselling within school settings (Ahmad et al., 2008) and the need to integrate various approaches, including Islamic counselling, into school counselling practices (Yaacob et al., 2019).

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research design using a multiple case study method or multiple field site study (Saunders et al., 2024; Yin, 2018). The philosophical stance adopted is constructivism-interpretivism, following an inductive approach (Creswell, 2022). Data collection is conducted primarily through semi-structured interviews. The study sample is selected using purposive sampling, involving 19 Muslim counsellors who are registered with the Malaysian Board of Counsellors, have served for more than five years, and practise the Islamic counselling approach in schools. For data analysis, the study follows Creswell's (2022) qualitative data analysis model, which comprises six main steps: (1) organising and preparing data for analysis; (2) reading and examining all collected data; (3) initiating the data coding process; (4) generating background descriptions or categories/themes based on the coding process; (5) presenting themes through qualitative narrative; and (6) making interpretations or drawing lessons from the data. To facilitate data coding and categorisation, NVivo 14 software is utilised (Yin, 2018). Additionally, the analysis process incorporates member checking to enhance the reliability of the study (Tisdell et al., 2025).

FINDINGS

In general, the findings indicate that participants have a clear understanding of Islamic counselling. However, variations exist in the specific aspects of knowledge they possess. The findings are categorised into two main themes: (1) counselling process based on human nature and oriented towards the hereafter, and (2) modification of Western counselling.

(1) Counselling process based on human nature and oriented towards the hereafter

The first theme reflects the participants' knowledge of the foundations of Islamic counselling based on Islamic teachings and values. Participants emphasise the importance of understanding human nature and the concepts of *al-nafs*, *al-qalb*, *al-'aql*, and *al-ruh*. They adhere to the goal of returning individuals to their original nature and making the Quran and Sunnah their main guidance. In addition, counsellors view their role as preachers who guide clients to maintain worship and develop good character. This theme consists of three categories/sub-themes:

a) Perspective on human nature

The findings show that the participants have a clear perspective on the concept of human nature in Islamic counselling. They emphasize the importance of understanding human nature and the concepts of *al-nafs*, *al-qalb*, *al-'aql*, and *al-ruh*. Participants state that the foundation of Islamic counselling lies in understanding these human attributes. Among the participants' quotes are:

“Islamic counselling, its fundamental or basic, how it explains about *nafs*. Why humans have problems in terms of *nafs*, *qalb*, and *aql*, that's its basic, once we understand.” (PK01/63-65)

“While in terms of Islamic counselling or the setting of Islamic counselling, it considers that humans are born in a state of fitrah, and the occurrence of problems in this world is a problem for the clients themselves or humans, based on the mistakes or sins experienced. (PK03/86-89) Because for me, when humans are clear about why they exist, why humans are created by God, it becomes easy for us to help them and guide them to gain insight.” (PK04/73-74)

b) Counselling based on the Quran and Sunnah and oriented towards the hereafter

The participants agree that the goal of Islamic counselling differs from Western counselling. It is based on the Quran and Sunnah and is oriented towards the hereafter. They emphasise that Islamic counselling not only addresses worldly problems but also prepares individuals for the life of the hereafter. Among the participants' quotes are:

“Islamic counselling is based on the Quran and Sunnah. So, the complementary guide for Islamic counselling is more directed; we only use the guidance of the Quran and Sunnah in the setting for guidance and counselling services.” (PK03/90-96)

“The basics of Islamic counselling are that it begins with giving *salam*, starts with Surah Al-Fatihah, and starts with a prayer. After that, it relates to the quotes from hadith and verses from the Quran in the counselling session.” (PK04/94-96)

“Islamic counselling emphasizes more on the things... good, according to the Quran and Sunnah. Its goal is to bring our clients to be more pious of Allah SWT.” (PK16/81-84)

c) Muslim counsellor as a preacher

The findings show that the participants view Muslim counsellors as preachers who play a role in guiding and advising clients. They emphasise the concept of giving advice in Islamic counselling and guide clients to maintain their worship and uphold Islamic character. Among the participants' quotes are

“Islamic counselling emphasizes what is it, *qalb*, heart or *nafs*. That's it. So, most of the time, it is the mind that cannot guide the *qalb* and *nafs* towards a better direction. So, we will trigger their mind because usually, we are the ones who have techniques on how to trigger their mind, right? Usually, we just give advice.” (PK01/264-271)

“So, whether we like it or not, in terms of Islamic counselling, it will somehow be related to worship. I will ask, do you perform prayers sufficiently? Because that's it for me. Do you perform prayers sufficiently? Because that's what will bring them... if they want to be safe forever, they need to pray. So, Islamic counselling emphasizes guidance in worship.” (PK01/105-119)

“Something like that. But as a Muslim, we know, right, breaking ties of kinship is not good character. We tried, I tried to advise my student, 'Okay. You have issues with your friend, but it's not necessarily that you must not be friends with your friend, right?' That's what it means. I will try to have a win-win situation. Yes. So that they don't break ties of kinship and remain friends. At the same time, they don't stress what happens in their relationship. Something like that. Islamic counselling also emphasizes good character.” (PK10/112-117)

(2) Modification of Western counselling

The second theme illustrates the participants' approach of integrating Islamic elements into the western counseling process. They do not completely reject western counseling theories but instead use them as a framework for the counseling process. However, Islamic elements such as quranic verses, hadith, and moral values are inserted as complementary components in the counseling session. This theme is derived from two categories/sub-themes:

a) Western theory as a framework for the counselling process

The second theme illustrates the participants' approach to integrating Islamic elements into the Western counselling process. They do not completely reject Western counselling theories but rather use them as a framework for the counselling process. However, Islamic elements, such as Quranic verses, Hadith, and

moral values, are incorporated as complementary components in counselling sessions. This theme is derived from two categories/sub-themes

“As I said earlier. It's like there is no clear line. Oh, I use Islamic counselling. I don't use Western counselling. Because I mix and match and adapt the knowledge I have learned. As long as Western counselling is contradictory, I don't use it because, for example, in counselling sessions, I still use Adler's family constellation. So, for me, Islamic counselling is its content, while Western counselling is the framework of the counselling process.” (PK01/218-222)

“We don't completely reject Western counselling. There are several techniques or methods. Like I use integration, what... modification, I also use CBT theory. It is the framework. Islamic counselling is the content.” (PK03/312-313)

“No, even that theory, even Westerners get inspiration from Allah. So, back to Allah. Something like that. Islam complements what the West brings.” (PK04/545-546)

b) Islamic elements as complementary to Western counselling

The findings also show that the participants integrate Islamic elements to complement the counselling process based on Western theories. Islamic elements, such as Quranic verses, Hadith, and Islamic moral values, are incorporated into counselling sessions. Among the participants' quotes are

“Like in Islamic counselling, in the end, whether we like it or not, we bring our students back to God. That's what's missing. That's the deficiency, right, in the West. Because they look at the here and now. Look at the present. Whether we like it or not, in Islamic counselling, the hereafter is forever. It complements the void in Western counselling.” (PK01/98-116)

“Islamic counselling is more focused on the course of the counselling session being based on the Islamic concept; the process is directed towards religion, and the client's world is only for Allah SWT. But in Western counselling, it's like the counselling sessions conducted by the counsellor are more focused on the client in relation to the client's problems with the surrounding environment that causes the client to have problems. Islam complements what the West brings.” (PK05/46-51)

“Okay. For me, if I follow, if it's western, I adhere to reality theory. So, if it's reality theory, what is it, being aware of what's happening? They have to be responsible for what's happening; they also have to be responsible for everything. So, for me, in Islam, there are also concepts like that. We look at past matters. We are responsible for the choices we make. We are aware of what we want and how our dreams contradict. So, for me, in Islam, there are also those concepts. So, it fits in like that. Islam complements that.” (PK09/181-187)

These findings reflect the participants' understanding of the need to integrate Islamic values into counselling practices in schools. While Western theories serve as a foundation, participants strive to infuse the counselling process with Islamic elements to better align with the needs and expectations of predominantly Muslim clients.

Overall, this study provides a clear picture of school counsellors' knowledge of Islamic counselling. It highlights their awareness of the importance of incorporating Islamic values into counselling sessions, whether directly or by integrating them within Western approaches. This effort is seen as a means of addressing clients' spiritual needs while providing a more holistic approach to problem-solving.

However, it is essential for counsellors to continuously enhance their knowledge and skills in practising Islamic counselling more effectively. This can be achieved through ongoing training, further education, and

the development of comprehensive Islamic counselling models and modules. With strong expertise, counsellors can further strengthen their role in supporting students' development across physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions.

DISCUSSION

This study provides an in-depth understanding of participants' knowledge of Islamic school-based counselling in Malaysia. The findings reveal that participants possess a strong grasp of the fundamental principles of Islamic counselling, which are deeply rooted in Islamic teachings and values. They emphasise the importance of understanding human nature and the concepts of *al-nafs*, *al-qalb*, *al-aql*, and *al-ruh* in the counselling process. Participants firmly adhere to the goal of guiding individuals back to their original nature, with the Quran and Sunnah as primary references. Moreover, participants also perceive their role as preachers who advise clients to maintain their worship and noble character, in addition to addressing worldly issues. This reflects their comprehensive understanding of the foundations of Islamic counselling and highlights the importance of applying this approach in counselling practice.

Although participants have a clear understanding of Islamic counselling, the findings also indicate that they do not entirely reject Western counselling theories. Instead, they strive to apply Islamic elements within the Western counselling process. Western theories are used as a framework for the counselling process, while Islamic elements such as Quranic verses, hadith, and moral values are incorporated as complementary components in counselling sessions. This approach allows counsellors to leverage the expertise and techniques found in Western counselling theories while addressing their limitations by integrating Islamic values. Through this method, the counselling process can be conducted more effectively, ensuring that spiritual aspects are considered alongside the resolution of clients' issues.

IMPLICATION

This study has significant implications for the training and professional development of school counsellors. The findings highlight the need to further strengthen counsellors' training and exposure in the field of Islamic counselling, even though they possess basic knowledge. This is crucial to ensure that counsellors develop a deeper understanding of the concepts and applications of Islamic counselling and can effectively integrate them into their practice. Therefore, stakeholders must design comprehensive training and professional development programmes in Islamic counselling.

Furthermore, this study has implications for the development of more comprehensive and effective Islamic counselling models. The findings reveal participants' inclination to integrate Islamic elements into Western counselling theories. However, there remains a need to explore and develop more robust and structured Islamic counselling models. These models should systematically and holistically incorporate Western counselling theories that align with Islamic values to ensure that the Islamic counselling process is conducted more effectively and comprehensively.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the stated implications, the researchers recommend that the Ministry of Education Malaysia enhance training and exposure for counsellors in Islamic counselling through continuous courses, workshops, and professional development programmes. The training content should encompass the fundamental concepts of Islamic counselling, its application in practice, and the integration of Islamic values within the counselling process. Adequate exposure will enable counsellors to understand and implement Islamic counselling more effectively.

Additionally, research and development of Islamic counselling models that systematically integrate Western theories and Islamic values should be encouraged. Educational authorities and higher education institutions can provide funding and support for research in this field. A comprehensive and effective Islamic counselling model will make a significant contribution to the field and help improve the quality of counselling services in schools.

CONCLUSION

This study provides a comprehensive overview of participants' knowledge of Islamic counselling. The findings indicate that participants possess a deep understanding of the fundamental principles of Islamic counselling, which are firmly rooted in Islamic teachings and values. They emphasise the importance of understanding human nature, including the concepts of *al-nafs*, *al-qalb*, *al-aql*, and *al-ruh*, and strongly adhere to the goal of restoring individuals to their original nature by making the Quran and Sunnah their primary references. Participants also perceive their role as preachers who guide clients in maintaining their worship and noble character and assist in resolving worldly issues. While they do not entirely reject Western counselling theories, they strive to integrate Islamic elements—such as Quranic verses, hadith, and moral values—into the counselling process as complementary components.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors agree that this research was conducted in the absence of any self-benefits, commercial or financial conflicts and declare the absence of conflicting interests with the funders.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The conceptualization of the central research idea, provision of the theoretical framework, design of the research, and supervision of the research progress were undertaken by Md Noor Saper. Mohd Khir Johari Abas was responsible for conducting the research, writing the article, and incorporating revisions. Nurul Ain Mohd Daud spearheaded the review process, revisions, and approval of the article submission.

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