Conceptual Model of Religious and Spiritual Struggles in Iran: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Introduction: This study aimed to explore the conceptual model of religious and spiritual struggles among a Muslim sample by using qualitative method.

Method: The current study was carried out by using the grounded theory. The purposive sampling method was applied and sampling continued until data saturation. Via In-depth, semi-structured phenomenological interview, 14 individuals with religious and spiritual problems were interviewed. Based on the standards of in-depth interview, with each individual, four 90-minute sessions were held to identify different dimensions of their experiences. Open-ended questions were used to accomplish the purpose of the interview. In addition, "clinical exercises" were used to elicit clients' religious and spiritual struggles.

Results: Based on the findings of this study, religious and spiritual struggles have been divided into six categories: divine struggles, intrapersonal struggles, interpersonal struggles, supernatural struggles, struggle with some teachings of religion, and struggle with the effectiveness of religious institutions.

Conclusion: There are different types of religious and spiritual struggles among Iranians. It is necessary to address religious and spiritual struggles, as many studies have reported a negative relationship between spiritual struggles and mental health. One practical implication of the present study is the necessity of constructing psychological interventions for spiritual and religious struggles in the Iranian society in order to improve well-being and mental health, especially among religious people.

Keywords: Religious and Spiritual Struggles, Qualitative Study, Health and Well-being

Introduction

Religion and spirituality are major domains of life for many people across the world. The past three decades have evidenced a growing attention in the intersection of religion and well-being [1]. This body of research has demonstrated positive links between religion and well-being. For example, religion and spirituality may provide a source of attachment security [2], comfort [3], social support [4], meaning or purpose in life [5], hope, [6], self-control [7], and coping strategy with divorce [8].

A constantly growing body of empirical studies suggests that some forms of religiousness and spirituality have problematic implications for health and well-being. Topics such as religious conflict [9], negative religious coping [10], unreflective and immature religiosity [11], and spiritual struggles and concerns [12] imply detrimental facet of religiousness and spirituality.

Conceptual models of religious and spiritual problems and struggles have been provided by psychodynamic perspective [13], existential approach [14], transpersonal psychology [15],

sociobiological perspective [16], psychopathology [17], and spiritually integrated psychotherapy [18]. For example, Murray-Swank and Murray-Swank [19], based on an integration of the religious coping framework and existential psychotherapy, proposed four types of spiritual struggles: (1) spiritual meaning, (2) spiritual control and responsibility, (3) spiritual isolation and disconnection, and (4) death and impermanence.

A recent research has consistently linked these struggles to a vast range of negative emotional and physical well-being [20]. Many studies [21] found links between religious and spiritual struggles and anxiety, depression, and stress. Some research [22] have documented links between religious and spiritual struggles and physical health.

Although promising, this body of research has been criticized because it focuses primarily on Western, Christian populations. With respect to this limitation, questions could be raised about whether members of different religious groups experience similar kinds of struggles and whether religious and spiritual struggles hold similar implications for different religious groups.

In response to this limitation, Abu-Raiya et al. [23] have proposed some kinds of religious and spiritual struggles among Muslims. They suggest that signs of doubting the existence of Allah, finding some aspects of Islam to be unfair, thinking that Islam does not fit the modern time, doubting that the Holy Quran is the exact words of Allah, and feeling that Islam makes people intolerant, may exist among Muslims. The current study aims to explore the conceptual model of religious and spiritual struggles among a Muslim sample by using qualitative method. It is assumed that although there is common religious and spiritual struggles between Christians and Muslims, there are also religious and spiritual problems that are specific to the Muslim community.

Method

The current study was carried out by using the grounded theory. The sample of this study was chosen through purposive sampling and sampling continued until data saturation. Via in-depth, semi-structured, phenomenological interviews, 14 individuals with religious and spiritual problems were interviewed. The authors of this research talked to them about different aspects of their experiences regarding religious and spiritual struggles.

To select the sample group, we used flyers to recruit participants. Thirty two individuals called for more information. After initial telephonic explanations about the goals, content, and procedure of interview, 21 individuals came to the interview setting. In this stage, they were asked to fill in the religious and spiritual struggles scale. The authors interviewed them in order to be sure that they all fitted the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Finally, the requirements of the performance of interview, such as necessity of recording of sessions, confidentiality of records, and necessity of orderly presence in sessions were explained to them. Eventually, 14 individuals were assigned to participate in the interview. The inclusion and exclusion criteria consisted of:

1) to have orientation toward religiosity (positive or negative); 2) to have at least a specific religious and spiritual struggle; 3) to be at least 18 years old; and 4) to totally agree for participating in the interview.

All of participants were female. Ages ranged from 19 to 50. The mean age was 33.50. Most participants (10 individuals) were married. Three of them had Seminary education, and nine of them had University education, and the rest of them had high school education.

Four participants were employed, and the rest were homemakers. Three reported to belong to low economic and social class, nine reported to belong to moderate economic and social class, and two reported to belong to high economic and social class.

Based on the standards of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing, 90-minute format was used for each of the four interviews. The purpose of in-depth interviewing is understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience.

The model of in-depth, phenomenological interviewing involves conducting at least a series of three separate interviews with each participant. The purpose of these series is to concentrate on the context of participants' experiences, the concrete details of the participants' present lived experience, and the meaning of their experience. Primarily, open-ended questions were used in this study in order to accomplish the purpose of the interview. In addition, "clinical exercises" were used to elicit clients' religious and spiritual struggles [24]. Exercises such as spiritual genogram, spiritual eco-map, and spiritual autobiography were used [25]. These provide clients the opportunity to reflect on the spiritual experiences, questions, ideas, beliefs, practices, relationships, and events that have been important in their religious and spiritual struggles.

In the first session, initial works were done such as evaluating the inclusion and exclusion criteria, talking about goals and the length of sessions, and confirming informed consent by participants. In the second session, the interviewer tried to put participant's experience within the context of the social setting. The interviewees were asked to talk about their relationships with their family members, parents, friends, mentors, and the wider community. In the third session, participants were asked to reconstruct details of lived experiences regarding religious and spiritual struggles. The interviewer may have asked them to reconstruct concerning religious and spiritual struggles which they face from the moment they wake up to the time they fall asleep. In the fourth session, participants were elicited to reflect on the meaning of their experience. It addresses the intellectual and emotional connections between participants' religious and spiritual struggles and the history of their life.

In order to obtain trustworthiness (equal to validity and reliability in quantitative method) the Lincoln and Guba criteria [26] were used. For obtaining credibility criterion (paralleled by internal validity), the results of each interview was given to participants in order to confirm the accuracy of the results. In addition, the different aspects of participants' lived experiences were involved within the

period of five months. In order to obtain conformability criterion (paralleled by objectivity), we tried not to involve our presuppositions in gathering data, as far as possible. To make sure about the dependability of the data (paralleled by reliability), 10 experts were asked to evaluate and confirm the text of interviews, codes, categories, themes, and theoretical model that was extracted from data. For the transferability of data (paralleled by external validity), the authors to select participants from various groups according to their social status, education, and culture. Also, all of the interviewees' statements were recorded so that we could have a description of the interview process. This contributes to the transferability of data.

Results

As stated, the grounded theory was used to analyze data. The grounded theory is a systematic method of data analysis and theory development [27]. To this purpose, grounded theory uses the coding process. Coding is a procedure that disaggregates the data, breaks them down into manageable segments, and identifies or names those segments [28]. Data analysis consists of three types of coding: initial (open) coding, axial coding, and selective coding. In the initial coding of text, meaningful units are identified, highlighted and labelled. These units may be words, phrases or longer segments of text. In the axial coding, numerous categories are generated. Axial coding is the process of relating codes (categories and concepts) to each other. The analytic work required during axial coding involves examination of each category to discover linkages, relationships, redundancy and new patterns [29]. Selective coding is a fundamental step in the grounded theory in which researchers construct a theoretical model based on open and axial coding.

After transcription of audio recordings into written texts, initial (open) coding was done, and 280 codes were extracted. Then, based on the statements of the participants, research team comments, and the literature and theories in the psychology of religion, the axial and selective coding was implemented. These findings were presented to 10 experts in order to evaluate them. After reviewing the experts' opinions and making the necessary corrections, 21 categories were reduced to 16. The three existing themes did not change, and according to them, the ultimate pattern of religious and spiritual struggles was reached.

The main themes of people's lived experiences of religious and spiritual struggles have been classified into three themes: 1) The structure of religious and spiritual struggles; 2) Factors causing religious and spiritual struggles; 3) Consequences of religious and spiritual struggles. All the categories, and codes can also be categorized under these three themes. In the following, we will only report on the structure of the religious and spiritual struggles.

Under the structure of religious and spiritual struggles, there are six main categories which include divine struggles, intra-personal struggles, interpersonal struggles, supernatural struggles, struggle with some

teachings of religion, and the struggle with the effectiveness of religious institutions. Divine struggles is related to distress or conflict about beliefs about God, or the type of person's perceived relationship with God. This category includes things like fear, rejection, anger or despair of God. One of the interviewees said in this regard:

"I feel that God will not forgive us even after repentance. Sometimes I feel like God ignores me; I feel like God doesn't love me; I feel like God has abandoned me. I do not understand God's justice in sufferings that are not one's own fault. I am displeased with God because of my family's circumstances (interviewee 10).

"Intrapersonal struggles" have an internal focus on religious and spiritual thoughts and actions. They can be categorized as moral struggles, doubt-related struggles, ultimate-meaning-related struggles, and doomsday-related struggles. In this regard, one of the interviewees said:

I'm angry with myself and blame myself for not being morally as I should be; I do not know what will happen to me on the Day of Judgment; I have doubts about the correctness of some of the apparent commands of religion; I don't know why we came into this world and now that we are in this world, what does God expect of us; I still don't know what God's purpose was for our creation (interview 3).

"Interpersonal struggles" include negative experiences with religious individuals or religious organizations, or struggles with others on religious matters. In this regard, one interviewee said:

The discrepancy in the behavior and speech of the religious people makes me sad; some go to seminary to learn the tricky ways of religion. When I see my father is a religious person but he has no morality, I wish he was not a prayer but his morality was appropriate. My parents' behavior was very harsh, I was forced to pray (interviewee 7).

"Supernatural struggles" is related to the concern that supernatural factors such as devil or evil spirits, evil eye, and so on are causing negative events in one's life. In this regard, one interviewee said:

When I get angry, I feel the devil coming into my body and making me angry. We had a great life, but people cast an evil eye on my son. I'm so scared of sorcery and witchcraft (interviewee 5).

"The struggle with the effectiveness of religious institutions" is concerned with the question of the effectiveness of religious institutions in the economic, cultural, and political management of society in the modern world. In this regard, one interviewee said:

What bothers me is the bad conditions in our country. When you compare with other countries you see they have no religion but they do their job better than us; other countries are non-religious, but they do not have the problems we have, and their humanity is greater than us Muslims (interviewee 12).

"The struggle with some teachings of religion" is related to doubt about correctness of some gender and apparent religious teachings. In this regard, one interviewee said:

If it wasn't for God's punishment, I would have taken off

my veil. I do not accept this teaching that 'God's consent depends on the husband's consent'. In my opinion, some of the teachings of religion about women are unfair (interviewee 8).

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of participants

No.	Age	Marital Status	Education Status	Economic Status	Job	Place of Residence before the age of 18
1	30	Married	Religious education	Average	Housewife	Tehran
2	32	Married	Bachelor	Average	Housewife	Yazd
3	35	Married	Bachelor	Average	Housewife	Isfahan
4	50	Married	Primary education	Low	Housewife	Qom
5	33	Married	Religious education	Average	Housewife	Kermanshah
6	47	Married	Bachelor	High	Housewife	Qom
7	19	Single	Diploma	Average	Student	Tehran
8	41	Married	Religious education	High	Housewife	Qom
9	38	Single	Masters	Low	Teacher	Kerman
10	31	Married	Bachelor	Average	Housewife	Qom
11	34	Married	Diploma	Average	Housewife	Qom
12	32	Married	Masters	Average	Student	Qom
13	27	Married	Bachelor	Average	Student	Qom
14	21	Single	Bachelor	Average	Student	Qom

Table 2. Initial coding and categories

Examples of initial codes	Categories
Feeling disliked by God; Feeling abandoned by God; Not feeling the presence of God; Complain to God for causing many problems in life; Conflict with the problem of evil and lack of understanding of the wisdom of God in some matters; The desire to have God more involved in some things; The unfairness of some divine acts; Fear of God; No response from God; Anger at God for hindering progress; Captivator God; restrictive God; Feeling not divine support; Feeling not divine forgiveness.	Divine struggles
The negative impact of religious father's bad character on child religiosity; Dissatisfaction with the religious imposition of others; Discomfort with the discrepancy in the behavior and speech of religious people; Annoying definition of religion by some missionaries; Being humiliated by religious people.	Interpersonal struggles
Religious guilt; Religious perfectionism; Religious doubt; Fear of destiny and divine examinations; Confusion in beliefs; Feeling desperate for religious actions; Ambiguity in my position in this world; Confusion about the purpose and meaning of life.	Intrapersonal struggles
Fear of casting an evil eye; Fear of sorcery and witchcraft; High fear of jinni; Feeling in control of an unknown force.	Supernatural struggles
Doubt about some of the religious teachings; Doubt about the teaching of "obedience of husband equals obedience to God"; Problem about the teaching of "God's consent depends on the consent of the husband".	Struggle with some teachings of religion
Contradiction of religion and morality in the current situation of the country; Feeling ineffectiveness of religion in improving humans; Doubt about the social efficiency of religion; The bad economic and cultural situation of Iranian religious community.	Struggle with the effectiveness of religious institutions

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Muslims in the field of religious and spiritual struggles. The results showed that there are different types of religious and spiritual struggles. Each of them can be separately considered by spiritual researchers and therapists.

Based on the findings of this study, religious and spiritual struggles can be divided into six categories: divine struggles, intrapersonal struggles, interpersonal struggles, supernatural struggles, struggle with some teachings of religion, and struggle with the effectiveness of religious institutions.

All human beings face many sufferings in their lives. In the face of suffering, people are usually looking for the cause of their problems. In other words, humans conduct an attributional search. Attributional search means attempting to find the source of suffering and the reasons behind it [30]. Some people believe that God has caused or allowed the suffering to happen. That is, they attribute responsibility to God. The attribution of suffering to God can be of two types: "benevolent views of the role of God in suffering" and "non-benevolent views of the role of God in suffering" [31]. When people give positive attributions to God and regard him as a loving being, they may see the suffering as part of a good plan by God. But when people give negative attributions to God and regard God's role in suffering as weak, malevolent and punitive, they may develop divine struggles [30].

There is another part of religious struggles that does not directly relate to God, but have an inward focus (intrapersonal struggles). Religious systems play an important role in human health and well-being by inviting them to religious and moral virtues and avoiding religious

and moral vices. In other words, religions provide a system of self-control for humans. However, the religious do not always succeed in following this system of regulation. During this facing moral imperfection, some people may experience conflict and tension. Some scholars refer to these experiences as moral spiritual struggles [32]. We can use the self-discrepancy theory to conceptualize and explain moral spiritual struggles. Self-discrepancy occurs when there is an inconsistency between self-concept and self-guidance. In fact, the inconsistencies between the actual selves and the ideal selves produces distress. In the spiritual context, we refer to these distresses as intrapersonal struggles [32].

Another type of religious struggles may arise in the context of communication with other people (interpersonal struggles). For example, a young person may feel pressured by his or her parents to perform religious rituals, or he feels religiously different from his parents and can no longer accept all their traditions, thoughts and beliefs. This phenomenon, known as the "generation gap" among social scientists, also manifests itself in religious issues. Although recent research in the psychology of religion [33] confirms agreement on religious attitudes between parents and children, factors such as the developmental characteristics of adolescence, and the type of parental religious internalization can cause struggles between parents and children.

There is another type of religious struggle that goes back to one's perception of supernatural forces. Although diabolical attributions are prevalent among psychotic individuals [34] and people with other psychological disorders [35], they are not limited to them. Many people believe that supernatural forces are active in the world. Some attribute their suffering and problems to these supernatural forces. The Muslim belief in the influence of supernatural forces is of Quranic origin. The Quran mentions creatures that, although we do not see as human beings, affect us. Satan and Jinn are in this category [36]. Some people see the evil effects as the sign of divine retribution, and they ask God to remove the evil forces as a result of divine forgiveness. Some people believe that they are possessed by the devil (demonic possession) and have a particular belief in the "evil eye" and adopt very sophisticated techniques to escape it. They believe that many of the problems of their lives return to the influence of supernatural forces such as the evil eye, sorcery, and witchcraft.

Another part of the struggles that some religious people face is the challenge of living by the standards of the modern world and living by the standards of religion. This challenge makes some religious people doubt the validity of some religious teachings in today's world. According to social psychologists of religion [37], secularization is one of the roots of these struggles. Although some studies [38] demonstrated the positive links between religiosity and attitudes towards science, conflicts between religious and scientific worldviews have also challenged the commitment to some religious teachings in a group of religious people [37].

In societies where their government is religious, another struggle that involves some religious people is the degree to which the religious government has been able to meet the material and spiritual needs (security, morality, peace, etc.) of the community. These judgments can be right or wrong, but the important thing is that some people experience struggle over the right or wrong way of governing religious authorities.

These findings are in line with those of other researchers. For example, some scholars [18] have placed religious struggles into three categories: supernatural, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. In another study [39], researchers identified six domains of religious and spiritual struggle: divine, demonic, interpersonal, moral, doubt, and ultimate meaning. According to the present study, two other areas can be considered for religious and spiritual struggles: struggle with some teachings of religion, and struggle with the effectiveness of religious institutions.

A limitation of this study was that all participants were female. Another limitation was that the study was conducted solely through qualitative methodology and that other methods of data collection were not used. It is to replicate this research in other communities in order to increase the generalizability of the findings.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the conceptual model of religious and spiritual struggles among a Muslim sample by using qualitative method. This study showed that under the structure of religious and spiritual struggles, there are six main categories among Muslim people in Iran which include: divine struggles, intra-personal struggles, interpersonal struggles, supernatural struggles, struggle with some teachings of religion, and struggle with the effectiveness of religious institutions. This research is the first work that has studied the conceptual model of religious and spiritual struggles by qualitative method in the Iranian society. With the increasing attention to religious and spiritual phenomena in the empirical literature and the growing sensitivity to integrated religious and spiritual therapies, psychological interventions have emerged that have clearly considered religious struggles as the core of treatment [32]. However, these interventions are extremely limited. One of the practical implications of the present study is the necessity of constructing scales and psychological interventions for spiritual and religious struggles in the Iranian society in order to empirically test spiritual and religious struggles this society and to improve the mental health of individuals, especially religious people.

Acknowledgement

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