

## Book review

***Counseling Muslims: Handbook of Mental Health Issues and Intervention*, Sameera Ahmed & Mona M. Amer (eds.) (2011), New York, Routledge. (416 pp).**

The aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy has triggered varying degrees of prejudice, discrimination, oppression, Islamophobia, and other types of injustice for many Muslims in the USA, and other Western countries. This has taken a heavy toll on their psychological wellbeing, especially in terms of their mental health. Yet, due to a lack of general understanding and awareness of Islam and Muslims, efforts by Western mental health professionals to address the mental health needs of Muslims have been rather scarce, if not completely absent. Although there are many contributing factors, these deficiencies are due, largely, to a pervasive lack of cultural sensitivity and awareness of Muslim cultural realities in Western mental health professionals. In addition, it is commonplace for mental health practitioners to avoid discussing issues related to clients' cultural and/or religious identities, within a clinical setting. While this may be due to a fear of offending the client, the consequence of this is to also ignore a significant part of their client's reality and identity. As a result, delivering culturally competent mental health services to Muslims in the USA has been limited, if not completely lacking.

The recently published book, *Counseling Muslims: Handbook of Mental Health Issues and Interventions*, edited by Sameera Ahmed and Mona Amer, is perhaps the most

comprehensive handbook on the mental health of Muslims written thus far. It paves the road for Western mental health professionals to become culturally sensitive, and to offer culturally competent psychological care and services to their Muslim clients. It sensitises and provides mental health professionals with a wide array of topics pertaining to the mental health of Muslims in the USA, and other Western countries. It is a highly sophisticated, well researched and well written book, with contributions by experts and professionals in the mental health field who have had a chance to work with Muslim clients. Although there have been other books published, after 9/11, on the mental health of Arabs and Muslims, this particular book primarily focuses on counselling issues pertaining to Muslim clients through in-depth descriptions of Muslims' view of mental health, their help seeking attitudes, and sheds a light on the daily realities encountered in Western cultures, particularly in the USA.

Although the book is designed to primarily to sensitise the Western mental health professional to the plight of Muslims' psychological wellbeing, it is also of great help to non-western mental health professionals who provide psychological and counselling services to Muslims in other parts of the world. Aside from the specific contextual issues, such as effects of racism, oppression, and other injustices, many specific and culturally sensitive clinical approaches and techniques offered by the authors could also easily be employed by

Middle Eastern therapists, counsellors, and other mental health professionals working with Muslim clients.

The handbook is unique in many ways. The authors provide meaningful clinical vignettes, which offer specific guidelines on how to avoid making gross diagnostic errors when working with Muslim clients, conducting psychological assessment and providing evidence-based treatment. They also discuss how to address topics and clinical issues that may seem taboo, or difficult to tackle, when working with Muslim clients in a highly culturally sensitive manner. In addition, the authors offer a comprehensive overview of a variety of therapeutic settings, namely: individual therapy, family therapy, in-patient psychiatric, home based, and university counselling centres.

The book is organised into five major parts. The first part addresses how Muslims view mental health and illness within a religious/cultural context. In addition, Muslims' help-seeking attitudes and traditional coping methods are discussed.

The second part provides information on different models of interventions, including how to conduct a culturally sensitive clinical interview and psychological assessment, how to provide individual and family therapy, as well as covering community based interventions with Muslim clients. This section also provides a valuable discussion on Islamic based counselling.

The third part describes, in detail, different clinical settings where Muslims may come in contact with mental health practitioners, including in-patient, home based social services, and college counselling centres.

Section four provides an extensive overview of culturally sensitive approaches in working with specific Muslim populations, such as those individuals who have converted to

Islam, Muslim adolescents, as well as refugees.

In the fifth and final part of the book, the authors provide a thorough discussion of difficult issues facing Muslim clients, such as domestic violence, sexual dysfunction and sexuality, and substance abuse.

Each chapter provides useful guidelines and meaningful sociocultural and religious/cultural contextual information on how mental health is conceptualised within an Islamic perspective. This is accomplished by frequently referencing verses of the Quran, in an effort to elucidate a deeper understanding for Western mental health professionals, and to illustrate existing parallels pertaining to psychological conceptualisations. Additionally, through inclusion of clinical vignettes in each chapter, the authors hope to demonstrate how to avoid major clinical and cultural faux pas in working with Muslim clients, while at the same time increasing their cultural and religious sensitivity in order to better understand their Muslim clients.

Despite relevant, and often strong points, offered throughout the book and the ability of the authors to construct a well-rounded framework to support mental health professionals, there are a few shortcomings in my view that may potentially cause simplistic over-generalisations. One of the major goals of this book is to sensitise Western clinicians and mental health professionals to the realities of Muslim clients by focusing on themes and tenets that are typically found among Muslims. Although the authors emphasise that there is a significant diversity within Muslim communities, in relation to their religious identity, the degree to which Islam is practiced, and the socio-political history of Muslims originating from different Muslim countries, it seems that for the most part, the authors primarily refer to

Muslims as Arabic Muslims. Whereas this particular group of Muslims comprise only one third of the Muslim population globally (Muslims comprise 23% of the global population and one third are Arabic). By focusing primarily on Arabic Muslims, and describing the Muslim identity primarily from an Arabic Muslim perspective, the implied message conveyed (although not intended) is that *'all Muslims are Arabs'*. This will, in turn, increase the risk of developing stereotypes and simplifying the complexity of the Muslim population. Additionally, this does not take into account the vast diversity and complexity that exists among Muslims from different ethnic backgrounds, under a variety of cultures, spread over more than 75 countries across the globe. For example, Arab Muslims and Muslims from Iran and Afghanistan share different commonalities in terms of Islam, world views and other realities encountered daily within their diverse socio-cultural settings. Therefore, it would be counterproductive if Western mental health professionals start looking at all Muslims based primarily on an Arabic Muslim lens.

Another important point not directly addressed in the book relates to those individuals who were socialised in Muslim society, community, and/or family, without

practising Islam in the traditional sense, yet carrying an identity that is very much influenced by their early socialisation. In other words, there are many Muslims who are deeply influenced by Islamic principles, value systems and Islamic world views, however, they are non-practising Muslims, as they do not follow strict religious daily activities. It seems that many individuals identify themselves as such, and therefore, it would be rather misleading to assume that they do not belong to the category of Muslims, endowed with similar belief systems. This is a significant population with religious, ethnic and socio-cultural characteristics deserving the same level of study, understanding, attention and clinical focus. Despite the aforementioned missing points, the book is comprehensive and offers a great deal of valuable information on Muslims' mental health. The publication of this book is timely, especially as many misconceptions and myths continue to exist among mental health professionals regarding Muslim clients.

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