

Constructing the 'Self' in Islamic Psychology: Challenges and Opportunities

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ABSTRACT

The Self is one of the core concepts in Islamic psychology. However, the concept of the Self found in recent Islamic psychology discourse is still quite unclear since its understanding of the soul remains debatable. A deeper study on the concept of the Self should be carried out to refine the essence of the Self in Islamic psychology and straighten the problematic and reductive understanding on these issues. This paper will give brief review on the studies of the Self in Islamic psychology, then provide some views about the challenges and opportunities to develop this concept. Further discussions about this issue are also discussed in this article.

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INTRODUCTION

Many studies have been found to take the nature of the Self as the core of psychology (Baumeister, 1987). According to PsycNet APA database in 2023, more than 39,000 studies have been conducted relating to self, as the core issue in the development of psychology studies. Many studies perceived self as various psychological constructs, such as self-concept (H. Markus & Wurf, 1986), self-esteem (Rosenberg et al., 1989), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), self-awareness (Wicklund, 1976), and other relevant concepts.

The discourses of self in psychology have been developed since classical era of psychology, concerning about the nature of man and the understanding of the soul, and it still becomes a great discussion in recent years. In the course of its historical development, the conception of the Self has become problematic, since there is great reduction in the view of self, from a unity concept of human life, until become a devaluation of self and an extremely belief to individual uniqueness, which is influenced by the secular concept of human potential and fulfillment (Baumeister, 1987). This excessive view of personal uniqueness is problematic, because it does not accommodate a holistic understanding of the Self and there is lack of coherencies, such as in the form of conflict between personal and social self (Baumeister, 1987), even as a characteristic of some mental problems (van Doeselaar et al., 2018). This ununified concept of self also received great criticism, like other discourses in common psychology, since it is deeply rooted on the philosophical and fundamental problems on psychology (Henriques, 2011).

The problematic history of the Self

Some studies captured the history on the development of the Self. One of the studies is conducted by Baumeister (1987). This study categorized the development of that discourse into seven eras, those are late medieval era, early modern era, puritan era, romantic late era, Victorian era, early 20th century era, and recent 20th century era. Each era has kind of different conceptualization of the Self. In late medieval era, the understanding of the Self could not be separated from a unity view of life, morality principles, and virtues. The self-knowledge was not become problematic. Later, in early modern era, there was a doubt in society that the real self of a person (inner true self) could be different from the way it is seen (outer self). In the puritan era, society tended to make themselves believe that in their inner self, there was favorable signs of becoming the Elected one, until they are found to do self-deception. This tendency, somehow, promoted self-awareness, but in other side, also became obstacles to have the real self-awareness. Then, in romantic era, people needed to discover their own destiny and fulfill it, because they believed that everyone is unique and obliged by some cosmic duty. The way they discover about the Self became expanded. The task of self-knowledge was increased, and the discussion expanded into personality discourse. Personality then was regarded as the central aspect of the Self. In Victorian era, when the hidden parts of the Self were extended, and the social norms were full of impossibly high moral standards, thus the self-deception habits and hypocrisy were more common developed. Then in 20th century era, the Self has become impossibly to be fully known and the crisis in defining the Self were more common. People tended to highly, even extremely, valued their only personal uniqueness and separate themselves from the society, which then lead the sense of being alienated.

From this history, Baumeister (1987) viewed that there were two major conditions that influenced this development on the discourse of the Self. The first notion is there was increasing abandonment of religious faith which deprived society to have answers in interpreting the Self. The second reason was the influences of individualistic patterns on the interest in exploring the Self. Align with this, Markus & Kitayama (1991) stated that the emphasize on the personal side of self is influenced by the perspective that humans are independent beings, and only determined by their unique internal attributes.

A long discussion also emerged on the issues which is rooted on the incoherencies between the inner or real self and the outer one. Strohminger et al. (2017) noted several terms have emerged regarding on this issue, such as the 'real self', the 'ideal self', the 'authentic self', the 'intrinsic self', the 'essential self', the 'deep self', and the 'true self'. Basically, all of those terms concerns on the notion that some parts of the Self are the authentic ones, and some meanings of the Self are more true ones. The definition of the Self should represent the authentic, real, and true meaning of the Self, not only the reduced one, or the superficial one, which has been influenced by the sociohistorical factors on society. This definition of self which is cross-culturally stable, also should give holistic and coherent view of the Self.

In recent understanding of the Self, which is majorly discussed on the topic of self-identity, seems to be greatly influenced by this problematic reductive view on the Self. Erikson (1956, 1968) as the most influential theorist on self-identity also emphasizes on the personal uniqueness of the Self, and tends to abandon the more universal entity of human beings according to his view on humanity as the pseudospecies. This understanding is quite incoherent, because to actively construct the understanding

of the Self, human beings should have similarities on the universal pre-condition level (Hofstede, 2001). Apart from this perspective, there is also a growing understanding of the Self as the social self, such as from Tajfel (1979). Although those are quite opposite, these kinds of view on the Self have some commonalities, priorly in lack of holistic view on the Self and has tendencies to understand the Self reductively (van Doeselaar et al., 2018).

This problematic understanding of the Self shows that further studies should be conducted in order to construct a more holistic and fundamental understanding on the Self. The more comprehensive view on the Self will make great contributions, especially in the act on developing a healthy identity. Recent data shows that there is growing cases on identity crisis problems, in the form of quarter-life crisis, gender confusion, career indecision, and other problems. Some social problems also emerge as the consequence on lacking comprehensive understanding of the Self, such as stereotype and discrimination. A study with this kind of concern has been conducted by Fachrunisa & Riyono (2023).

Self in Islamic psychology

The discussion about self has been a major concern on Islamic psychology. As Islamic psychology views soul as the core topic in psychology, many of the Moslem scholars also give deep concern about the Self, according to the Quran and Sunnah. One of the most influential Moslem scholars is Imam al-Ghazali. Recent studies from Fachrunisa and Chizanah (2020, 2021) constructed the model of self, according to the explanation of self (*nafs*) from Imam al-Ghazali. To understand the essence of the Self, it is necessary to understand the *nafs* as the whole concept. *Nafs* is a subtle, nonmaterial, and spiritual substance (*lathifah*) which was diffused with human body then works as the core of human, supplies the essence of human, forms the identity of self, and becomes the center of all human behaviors. When many scholars are discussing about the soul, the psyche, or the Self, basically they are referring to the existence of the *nafs*. *Nafs* as the concept of the Self is the identity of a person which differentiates himself from others.

The view on the Self which is based on Islam is not a simplistic and reductive way of view. Self is a multidimensional, complex, and comprehensive entity of human being. It needs a deep and philosophical discussion about the meaning of the soul, with great understanding on the nature of man based on Islamic worldview. As the consequence of its complex nature of self, there are also many thoughts on this topic. Many of those thoughts have some commonalities, such as that the concept of self is strongly related to God. On the other hand, some debates on this topic also emerge. One of the issues is about the structures of the soul. Studies from some scholars, such as Rothman (2020), views *ruh*, *qalb*, *'aql*, and *nafs* as the structures of the soul, while study from Fachrunisa and Chizanah (2020) states that those are the same substance, not the structures of the soul, and the different terminologies were used to describe different functions of the soul. Another emerging issue is whether it is appropriate or not to compare Islamic concept of self and Western concept of the Self or personality, such as in the study from Aydin (2010) whose took *nafs ammarah* as equal to Freud's *id*, *nafs* as equal to *ego*, and *nafs lawwamah* as equal to *superego*.

The comprehensive understanding of the soul in Islamic psychology remains debatable. Therefore, the concept of the Self is still quite unclear. Although some contemporary studies have conducted studies

on the Self based on Islamic teachings, such as the concept of Perspective of Islamic Self (PIS) (Briki & Amara, 2018), but those concepts are still not enough to represent how Islam defines the Self due to its complexity. Another deeper studies should be carried out to refine the essence of the Self in Islamic psychology, developed based on Quran and Sunnah using accurate methods, and straighten the inconsistencies on the related issues.

DISCUSSION

Recent discussion about the Self in Islamic psychology shows that there has been a widely concern regarding its concept. Opportunities to develop this concept are so broad, while some challenges are also there to be faced.

Challenges on developing the Self in Islamic psychology

One of major challenges to develop conceptual framework of Self in Islamic psychology is that there is no clear prerequisite or basic competencies to conduct those kinds of studies. A good Islamic psychology study should be conducted with right understanding on the worldview of Islam, deep exploration on the existing studies on relevant topics, and the researcher should have theoretical sensitivity to critically analyze, distinguish, and put those studies on their appropriate place. As mentioned by (Malik Badri, 1979), the father of modern Islamic psychology, on his monumental book, conducting an Islamic psychology study is like saving a baby from the mud pool, which needs ability to recognizing the baby, distinguishing the baby from the mud, and lifting up the baby out of the mud pool. This needs something as the filter of what to keep, and what to get rid of. And the most reliable guide to enhance this critical ability is the Quran, because Quran itself is the *furqan* or the decisive authority of right and wrong (QS. Al-Furqan (25): 1). From this explanation, the most important requirement for researchers in conducting the study of the Self in Islamic psychology is that willing to continuously learn from Quran, so the findings are derived and guided by the Quran. When the researchers have theoretical sensitivity based on Quran, then they will not be easily stunned on the existing theories or findings about the Self from different worldviews.

Another challenges to be faced is the lack of mastery on methodology issues. Abu-Raiya and Pargament (2011) states that common studies on Islamic psychology were conducted using survey design, while there is a need for more varied research methods, particularly using qualitative approach. Such qualitative studies on the Self have been conducted, for example the study from Riyono et al. (2012) who used meta-ethnography as one of his methods to build the theory of human motivation and personality, Rothman (2020) who used grounded research to develop the model of the soul, Fachrunisa and Chizanah (2020) who used discourse analysis to develop the dynamics model of *nafs*, and Fachrunisa and Riyono (2023) who used meta-ethnography to construct the model of self-identity. Further consideration of this qualitative approach is about finding the fittest philosophical foundations of each method to dig the latent concept of the Self in Islam. While in quantitative studies, it is necessary to clarify the appropriate method to conduct measurement on the concept of the Self in Islam, despite its growing debates on it.

The third challenge is the increasing demands on the applied Islamic psychology, while its theoretical foundation about the Self is still not robust. This is quite problematic, because this work still tends to rely

on the theoretical underpinnings which are rooted on Western secular paradigm, not the pure Islamic one, even sometimes are not aligned with the worldview of Islam (Rothman, 2018). Other studies also applied Islam-based therapy, but could not provide clear theoretical foundation of its practice, such as the application of Islamic Self-Healing from Cita et al. (2016). Practically, anything derived from the Islamic teachings will be beneficial, but when this comes to theoretical discussion about the essence of Islamic intervention, this will bring up another fundamental issues. Further applied studies on Islamic psychology should be developed from strong theoretical basis and proper understanding on the concept of the Self in Islam.

Opportunities on developing the Self in Islamic psychology

Islamic psychology is facing great challenges to develop the concept of the Self based on the worldview of Islam. However, the opportunity to conduct this kind of study is widely open. Recent psychological studies are discussing the universal characteristic of human beings (Fachrunisa & Riyono, 2023; Henriques, 2011) due to many existing humanity problems on society which are influenced by the belief that human being is unique, have no universalities, and some beings are better than others, such as in the form of war, discrimination, ethnic cleansing, violence, and other similar problems. The universal characteristic of human being is also stated in Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) (United Nations, 2015). However, the discussion about the universal characteristics of human being should be guided by the worldview of Islam, because some studies like from Hofstede (2010) and Erikson (1985) only acknowledge the genetic universalities of human beings, but ignore the more spiritually characteristics of human beings. As a holistic approach, Islamic psychology should provide reference on the concept of self, derived from how Islam views the Self fundamentally.

Another opportunity is that Islamic psychology has become a greatly known topic in psychology field. Since its emergence in late 1970s, now the discussion about Islamic psychology is getting wider. Many psychology researches are conducted with the spirit in understanding Islam, especially in the topics of the soul. This condition makes the dissemination of Islamic psychology studies becomes wider, access to intellectual collaboration becomes easier, research fundings are growing, as this movement becomes formally supported by many organizations and universities around the world. Some universities also have provided formal degree on Islamic psychology, not only in Moslem majority countries, but also in Western countries. This is clearly a great opportunity to formally bridging Islamic teachings and contemporary psychology discourse, facilitating many Moslem scholars to conduct more researches on Islamic psychology, and developing its fundamental theoretical framework on many fundamental issues on Islamic psychology, especially in the discourse of the Self. When these endeavors are conducted systematically and collaboratively, then Islamic psychology will become a really fascinating major mainstream in psychology.

CONCLUSION

Although the concept of the Self in Islamic psychology is still quite unclear, but many opportunities are provided to establish a more robust theoretical framework on it. These opportunities should be noticed by Moslem scholars in developing Islamic psychology collectively. On the other hand, there are also some challenges that should be anticipated. Islamic psychology scholars should find strategies to face

those challenges, mainly in establishing Islamic psychology education to enhance basic competencies on conducting Islamic psychology studies, to accommodate the needs for methodological mastery, and to respond practical demands on Islamic psychology.

Ethics statement

This study was conducted based on ethical standard.

Authors contribution

RAF contributes in the whole process of the study.

Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest in this study.

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