USING FEMINIST PSYCHOTHERAPY WITH MUSLIM WOMEN

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Abstract

Feminist psychotherapy focuses on empowerment and advocacy of under represented groups. Muslim women represent a diverse group of women who have received little attention in the psychological literature. The purpose of the present article was to discuss the application of feminist psychotherapy to Muslim women with a particular emphasis on the cultural context of Muslim women's experiences and Muslim women's relationship to feminism. A case vignette describes the actual use of feminist psychotherapy with a Muslim woman.

Keywords: Muslim women, feminist psychotherapy, Islam and women.

Muslim women are a diverse group, who have received quite a bit of attention in the media in recent years. However, they have often been depicted in a uniform way. For example, Muslim women have been portrayed as disempowered, subordinate to men, and veiled. This characterization has failed to take into account the heterogeneity of experiences and the diversity among Muslim women. Given that the religion of Islam is the fastest growing religion in the United States (U.S. State Department, 2001), it is likely that psychologists and counselors will be in the role of counselor or therapist for a Muslim woman at some point in their practice. Yet, there is very little research and literature on the types of therapy that would be most effective in working with diverse Muslim women. The current article proposes a feminist framework for working with Muslim women and will address: (a) current issues that Muslim women face in the United States, (b) a brief overview of the relationship of Muslim women's relationship with feminism; (c) a discussion of the application of feminist psychotherapy to diverse Muslim women and (d) a case example illustrating the use of feminist psychotherapy with Muslim women.

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CURRENT ISSUES FOR MUSLIM WOMEN IN THE UNITED STATES

Muslim Values and Mental Health

Islamic values and beliefs are obviously paramount in the lives of many Muslim women and can have an influence on how a Muslim woman deals with issues related to mental health. Attempting to define a single set of Islamic beliefs and values that characterize the lives of Muslim women can be challenging due to the significant ethnic and racial pluralism within the Muslim community (Halim, 2006). For example, in the United States Muslims have been categorized into two distinct categories, immigrant and non-immigrant, and considerable ethnic and racial diversity exists within these groups. Within the immigrant groups, Muslims are primarily represented within the following ethnicities and nationalities: South Asian (33%); Arab (25%); African (3%); and East Asian (2%); included within the non-immigrant groups are: African Americans (30%); European Americans (2% U.S. State Department 2001). National origin, politics, and community affiliation greatly impact the ways in which Muslim women choose to practice Islam, how they are treated within Islamic communities in the United States, and ultimately how they choose to deal with interpersonal difficulties and mental health issues. The complexity of Muslims women’s lives is often embedded within these different religious and cultural contexts and yet, there are some researchers and scholars who have attempted to define a common set of beliefs and values that are shared among Muslims.

Ali, Liu, and Humedian (2004) acknowledge that most Muslims, regardless of sect or national origin, accept the Qur’an and Hadith as the guides for religious prescriptions and duties. The five pillars of Islam are also accepted among most Muslims as the foundational principles and practices of Islam. These include: iman (faith in one God), salat (five daily prayers), zakat (charity), sawm (fasting), and hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime). Research suggests that in general Muslims use these religious practices as a coping mechanism for dealing with life struggles and mental health issues (Hassouneh-Phillips, 2003; Lowenthal, Ginnirella, Evdoka, & Murphy, 2001). In particular, Hassouneh-Phillips (2003) found that Muslim women dealing with partner violence reported using religious coping mechanisms such as listening to Qur’anic recitation and praying the five daily prayers to deal with ongoing violence.

Ali et al. (2004) described the majority of Muslim families in the United States as collectivistic in nature with individual members of