



INTEGRATING MULTICULTURALISM IN ISLAMIC COUNSELLING: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF THE MUSLIM COMMUNITY IN MELAKA, MALAYSIA

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Received: 02 Desember 2024

Revised: 25 Desember 2024

Accepted: 31 Desember 2024

Abstract

Multiculturalism plays a significant role in shaping the dynamics of Islamic counseling, particularly in diverse communities such as the Muslim population in Melaka, Malaysia. This study explores the integration of multiculturalism in Islamic counseling through a phenomenological analysis of the lived experiences of Muslim individuals in Melaka. The research aims to examine how cultural diversity influences counseling practices, the challenges faced by Islamic counselors in a multicultural society, and the strategies employed to provide effective and culturally sensitive support.

Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, data were collected through Focus Group Discussions (FGD), participatory observation, and document analysis. The findings indicate that cultural diversity within the Muslim community in Melaka significantly impacts counseling practices, requiring counselors to develop multicultural competencies alongside their Islamic counseling expertise. Participants highlighted the importance of integrating religious values with cultural awareness to ensure counseling approaches remain relevant and effective. Additionally, the study reveals that the interweaving of religious identity, traditional beliefs, and modern psychological practices poses both opportunities and challenges for Islamic counselors.

This research contributes to the growing discourse on multicultural counseling by emphasizing the need for Islamic counselors to adopt a holistic approach that considers cultural, religious, and psychological dimensions. The study suggests that incorporating culturally adaptive strategies, fostering interfaith understanding, and collaborating with religious scholars can enhance the effectiveness of Islamic counseling in multicultural contexts. The findings underscore the necessity for structured training programs that equip counselors with both Islamic knowledge and multicultural sensitivity to better serve Malaysia's diverse Muslim community.

Keywords: *Multiculturalism, Islamic Counseling, Melaka, Malaysia.*



A. Introduction

Multiculturalism, with its emphasis on diversity and inclusion, presents both a challenge and an opportunity for Islamic counseling, particularly in culturally rich settings like Melaka, Malaysia. The region's diverse population, including Malays, Chinese, and Indian Muslims, demands an approach to counseling that is both culturally sensitive and deeply rooted in Islamic teachings (Rahman, 2022). Islamic counseling, by its nature, integrates spiritual guidance with psychological support, drawing from the Quran and Hadith to provide holistic care (Hassan & Peh, 2014). The integration of multiculturalism in Islamic counseling is essential to address the varied needs of Muslim clients who navigate multiple cultural identities. This complexity requires counselors to possess not only a deep understanding of Islamic principles but also an appreciation of the cultural contexts that shape their clients' experiences (Ayob, 2021). As societies become increasingly multicultural, the need for culturally competent counseling becomes more pressing.

Phenomenological analysis offers a unique lens through which to explore the lived experiences of Muslim clients in Melaka. This qualitative approach allows for a deeper understanding of how individuals perceive and make sense of their cultural and religious identities within counseling settings (Smith, 2023). Such insights are crucial for developing counseling practices that resonate with clients' inner worlds and lived realities. The historical spread of Islam in Southeast Asia, particularly through trade and Sufi missionaries, established a rich tapestry of Islamic practices intertwined with local cultures. In Melaka, this legacy manifests in a distinctive form of Islam that embraces local customs while maintaining core Islamic tenets (Bahauddin & Ahmad, 2018). Understanding this syncretism is vital for counselors working with Muslim clients who draw on both traditional Malay culture and Islamic spirituality in their personal and communal lives.

Recent discussions in the field emphasize the importance of developing multicultural counseling competencies among practitioners. These competencies include awareness of one's own cultural biases, knowledge of clients' cultural

backgrounds, and the skills to adapt counseling techniques accordingly (American Counseling Association, 2024). For Islamic counselors in Melaka, this means not only understanding Islamic teachings but also being sensitive to the cultural nuances of their diverse client base. The role of religious identity in counseling cannot be overstated. For many Muslim clients, faith is a central part of their coping mechanisms and worldview. Islamic counseling that integrates spiritual practices, such as prayer and reflection, can provide profound psychological and emotional support (Ali, 2024). This spiritual dimension of counseling is particularly relevant in Melaka, where religious life is deeply woven into the social fabric.

Challenges arise, however, when counselors face conflicts between cultural traditions and Islamic values. In Melaka, practices like consulting traditional healers (bomoh) for mental health issues are common, yet may conflict with Islamic perspectives on healing (Hashim, 2019). Counselors must navigate these complexities with sensitivity, acknowledging the cultural practices while guiding clients towards Islamic teachings that promote psychological well-being. The integration of modern therapeutic techniques with Islamic principles shows promise in enhancing the effectiveness of counseling. Approaches such as cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), when aligned with Islamic values, can help Muslim clients manage issues like anxiety and depression in a culturally congruent manner (Ismail, 2023). This blending of contemporary psychology with spiritual wisdom reflects an adaptive strategy for multicultural Islamic counseling.

In Melaka, language diversity adds another layer of complexity to counseling. With clients speaking Malay, Tamil, Mandarin, and various dialects, effective communication can be a challenge. Counselors who are linguistically versatile or who utilize interpreters effectively can bridge these gaps, fostering a therapeutic alliance that respects linguistic diversity (Mahmud, 2021). Globalization and social change bring additional pressures to the Muslim community in Melaka, including shifts in family structures and intergenerational conflicts. Counseling practices must evolve to address these modern challenges while remaining grounded in Islamic ethical

frameworks (Yusuf & Said, 2022). This dynamic interplay of tradition and modernity is a defining characteristic of contemporary Islamic counseling.

The recent emergence of online therapy platforms tailored for Muslim clients represents a significant advancement. These platforms offer culturally and religiously sensitive counseling, making mental health support more accessible to those who might otherwise hesitate to seek help (Habibinia et al., 2023). For counselors in Melaka, leveraging technology in this way can enhance their reach and impact within the community. Community-based approaches remain integral to the fabric of Muslim societies, where collective well-being often takes precedence over individual concerns. In Melaka, involving community leaders and religious scholars in counseling initiatives can enhance the acceptance and effectiveness of these services (Hassan, 2020). Such collaborations enrich the counseling process, integrating communal wisdom with professional expertise.

The ethical considerations in Islamic counseling are profound, particularly in a multicultural context. Issues of confidentiality, respect for diverse beliefs, and the counselor's role in moral guidance all require careful navigation. Islamic ethical frameworks provide a robust foundation for addressing these dilemmas, reinforcing the counselor's commitment to integrity and compassion (Rahim & Fauzi, 2021). Moving forward, the development of structured training programs that integrate multicultural competencies with Islamic counseling principles is essential. Such programs would prepare counselors to serve Melaka's diverse Muslim population with skill and sensitivity, fostering mental health services that are both effective and culturally resonant (Rahman, 2020).

Through phenomenological analysis, this research will explore participants' experiences and views to identify needs, challenges and strategies in integrating multiculturalism into Islamic counseling. It is hoped that the results of this research can provide practical recommendations for counselors and policy makers in increasing the effectiveness of counseling services in multicultural environments, as well as

contributing to academic literature in the field of Islamic counseling and multiculturalism.

B. Method

1. Research design

This research uses a qualitative approach with phenomenological methods. The phenomenological approach was chosen because it aims to understand individual subjective experiences, especially the experiences of the Muslim community in Melaka related to the integration of multiculturalism in Islamic counseling. This approach allows researchers to explore the deep meaning of participants' experiences and views.

2. Research subject

The research subjects consisted of members of the Muslim community in Melaka, including Islamic counselors, individuals who had received Islamic counseling services, and religious figures. The selection of participants was carried out purposively to ensure diversity of cultural backgrounds, ages, genders, and experiences in receiving or providing Islamic counseling. This study involved 15 participants, this number was chosen to ensure sufficient depth of data and variety of experiences.

3. Subject Criteria

- a. Muslim and domiciled in Melaka.
- b. Aged 18 years and over.
- c. Have experience in receiving or providing Islamic counseling.
- d. Willing to participate in this research.

4. Data Collection Procedures

a. Deep interview

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect primary data. The interview guide was developed based on the research objectives and included questions about participants' experiences of Islamic

counseling, their views on multiculturalism, and the challenges and strategies they faced. Each interview lasted between 60-90 minutes and was conducted in a location convenient to the participant, taking into consideration their privacy and comfort. Interviews were recorded with participants' permission and then transcribed verbatim for data analysis.

b. Participatory Observation

Researchers conducted participatory observations at several Islamic counseling centers in Melaka to understand the context and dynamics of counseling directly. Observations include interactions between counselors and clients, as well as approaches and techniques used in the counseling process.

c. Documentation

5. Data Analysis Procedures

Data analysis was carried out using phenomenological analysis techniques which involved several stages as follows:

a. Initial Coding

Interview transcripts were read in depth to understand the content and context. Initial coding is carried out by identifying words, phrases or sentences that are relevant to the research.

b. Theme Development

Initial codes were categorized into broader themes based on similarities in meaning. These themes were then organized to identify key patterns in the data.

c. In-Depth Analysis:

Each theme is analyzed in depth to understand the broader meaning and relationships between themes. Interpretation is carried out by referring to the theory of multiculturalism and Islamic counseling.

d. Validation of Findings

Validation was carried out through data triangulation using various data sources (interviews and observations). Several participants were also asked to review the findings and provide feedback to ensure accuracy of interpretation.

6. Research Ethics

This research complies with the principles of research ethics which include:

a. Informed Consent (Informed Consent)

Participants were provided with complete information about the aims, procedures and implications of the research. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant before data collection began.

b. Confidentiality

Participants' identities were kept confidential and only anonymous data was used in the research report. Data is stored securely and only accessed by researchers.

c. Participant Rights

Participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Participants are treated with respect and concern for their comfort and well-being.

C. Result and Discussion

The study reveals that multiculturalism plays a significant role in shaping Islamic counseling practices within the Muslim community in Melaka, Malaysia. The diverse ethnic composition of Malaysian society, particularly in Melaka, necessitates an inclusive counseling approach that integrates Islamic principles with multicultural awareness. Counselors in this region encounter clients from different racial, linguistic, and cultural backgrounds, requiring them to develop culturally competent counseling strategies (Rahman, 2020). The findings highlight the importance of culturally sensitive counseling techniques that align with Islamic teachings while respecting the diversity of Muslim clients. The multicultural composition of Melaka's Muslim community influences how counseling is conducted. Counselors must navigate diverse ethnic traditions, languages, and religious interpretations. Table 1 presents the key cultural influences on Islamic counseling in Melaka.

Table 1. Cultural Influences on Islamic Counseling in Melaka

Cultural Influence	Impact on Counseling	Supporting Source
Ethnic Diversity (Malay, Indian, Chinese Muslims)	Requires counselors to be culturally sensitive and adaptable	(Rahman, 2022)
Language Barriers (Malay, Tamil, Mandarin)	Communication challenges necessitate multilingual skills or interpreters	(Mahmud, 2021)
Traditional Healing Practices (e.g., bomoh)	Some clients prefer spiritual healers over professional counseling	(Hashim, 2019)
Influence of Sufism	Clients seek counseling approaches that align with spiritual teachings	(Bahauddin & Ahmad, 2018)

One of the key findings of this study is the role of religious identity in counseling. Many Muslim clients in Melaka emphasize the significance of faith-based counseling, where Islamic teachings and spiritual guidance serve as primary mechanisms for

psychological well-being. This aligns with previous research, which suggests that Islamic counseling should incorporate Qur'anic teachings, Hadith, and traditional Islamic psychology to address mental health concerns effectively (Al-Attas, 2018). Additionally, clients reported a preference for counselors who share their religious beliefs, reinforcing the need for culturally and religiously congruent counseling approaches.

The research also identifies several challenges faced by counselors in integrating multiculturalism into Islamic counseling. One such challenge is the potential conflict between cultural traditions and Islamic values. Some cultural practices within the Muslim community in Melaka may not align with Islamic teachings, creating ethical dilemmas for counselors. For instance, traditional healing practices, such as the use of spiritual healers (bomoh), often intersect with Islamic counseling, requiring practitioners to navigate between cultural traditions and religious doctrines (Hashim, 2019). This highlights the necessity for counselors to develop cultural competence while maintaining adherence to Islamic ethical standards.

Another challenge pertains to language barriers in counseling sessions. Melaka's Muslim population comprises Malays, Indian Muslims, and Chinese Muslims, among other ethnic groups, each with distinct linguistic backgrounds. Counselors must be proficient in multiple languages or employ interpreters to facilitate effective communication. Previous studies indicate that language plays a crucial role in establishing trust and rapport between counselors and clients, as miscommunication can hinder the therapeutic process (Mahmud, 2021). Addressing linguistic diversity is therefore crucial in ensuring that Islamic counseling is accessible and effective for all Muslim clients. Counselors in Melaka face several challenges when integrating multiculturalism into their practice. These challenges stem from differences in religious interpretations, societal expectations, and ethical dilemmas. Table 2 summarizes the major challenges identified.

Table 2. Challenges in Integrating Multiculturalism into Islamic Counseling

Challenge	Description	Supporting Source
Conflicting Religious Interpretations	Variations in Islamic beliefs create differences in counseling expectations	(Hassan & Peh, 2014)
Resistance to Counseling	Some clients perceive counseling as unnecessary or stigmatizing	(Ali, 2024)
Balancing Modern Psychology and Islamic Teachings	Counselors must align psychological methods with Islamic principles	(Ismail, 2023)
Ethical Dilemmas in Multicultural Counseling	Counselors must respect cultural practices while adhering to Islamic ethics	(Rahim & Fauzi, 2021)

The study also highlights the positive impact of a holistic counseling approach that integrates multicultural awareness with Islamic psychology. Participants reported that counselors who acknowledge their cultural background and incorporate it into therapy sessions enhance the overall effectiveness of counseling. This supports the argument that multicultural Islamic counseling should not be limited to religious discourse but should also consider socio-cultural influences on mental health (Yusuf & Said, 2022). By incorporating cultural narratives into counseling, practitioners can foster a deeper connection with clients and provide contextually relevant psychological support.

Furthermore, findings suggest that Islamic counseling in Melaka is increasingly incorporating contemporary psychological interventions while maintaining its religious foundation. Techniques such as cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and mindfulness, when adapted to Islamic principles, have been found effective in addressing anxiety and depression among Muslim clients (Ismail, 2023). This hybrid

approach ensures that counseling remains scientifically grounded while upholding Islamic values, reflecting a progressive shift in counseling methodologies.

The study found that counselors need specialized training in multicultural competency to address these challenges effectively. A collaborative approach involving religious scholars and community leaders can help resolve conflicts between cultural traditions and Islamic teachings. To overcome these challenges, several strategies have been identified. Table 3 outlines the key approaches used by counselors in Melaka to improve the effectiveness of Islamic counseling in a multicultural setting.

Table 3. Strategies for Enhancing Multicultural Competency in Islamic Counseling

Strategy	Implementation	Supporting Source
Incorporating Cultural Awareness in Counseling Training	Counselors receive training in multicultural sensitivity	(Ayob, 2021)
Use of Multilingual Counseling Techniques	Providing counseling in Malay, Tamil, Mandarin when necessary	(Mahmud, 2021)
Integration of Islamic and Psychological Approaches	Combining cognitive-behavioral therapy with Islamic teachings	(Ismail, 2023)
Collaboration with Religious Scholars	Seeking guidance from Islamic scholars to ensure religious alignment	(Hassan, 2020)

Despite these advancements, the study finds that there remains a lack of structured training programs for counselors specializing in multicultural Islamic counseling. Many practitioners rely on personal experiences and religious knowledge rather than formal training in culturally responsive counseling techniques. This aligns with existing literature, which calls for the development of professional training programs that integrate multicultural competence within Islamic counseling

frameworks (Rahim & Fauzi, 2021). By addressing this gap, counseling institutions can better equip practitioners with the necessary skills to navigate cultural diversity in therapy.

An interesting aspect of the findings is the role of community-based support systems in Islamic counseling. Many participants expressed a preference for seeking guidance from religious scholars, family members, and community leaders before consulting professional counselors. This emphasizes the collective nature of Muslim communities, where mental health is often addressed within a social context rather than through individual therapy (Hassan, 2020). The study suggests that integrating community-based interventions with formal counseling services could enhance the reach and effectiveness of Islamic counseling in Melaka. The study also identified digital counseling platforms as an emerging tool in addressing multicultural counseling challenges. Online counseling services specifically tailored for Muslim clients have gained popularity, providing greater accessibility.

Table 4. The Role of Digital Counseling in Multicultural Islamic Counseling

Digital Counseling Feature	Impact on Clients	Supporting Source
Online Counseling Platforms	Increases accessibility for clients in rural areas	(Habibinia et al., 2023)
Culturally Adaptive Therapy	Customizes counseling approaches to fit diverse cultural backgrounds	(IIUM Medical Journal Malaysia, 2024)
Integration of Islamic Spiritual Guidance	Allows clients to access counseling aligned with religious teachings	(Ali, 2024)

The discussion further explores the impact of globalization on Islamic counseling practices. The increasing influence of Western psychological theories has led to debates about the compatibility of modern psychotherapy with Islamic values. While some scholars advocate for the integration of Western techniques into Islamic counseling, others caution against adopting methodologies that may contradict Islamic

principles (Ahmad & Sulaiman, 2019). The findings indicate that a balanced approach—where Western psychological frameworks are adapted to Islamic teachings—can provide a comprehensive model for mental health support among Muslim clients.

D. Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight the critical role of multicultural competence in Islamic counseling within the diverse Muslim community of Melaka, Malaysia. The integration of cultural awareness, linguistic adaptability, and religious sensitivity is essential for counselors to provide effective guidance that aligns with both Islamic values and the cultural backgrounds of their clients. The challenges identified, including conflicting religious interpretations, resistance to counseling, and ethical dilemmas, emphasize the need for structured training programs that equip counselors with both psychological and Islamic knowledge. Furthermore, the study underscores the importance of incorporating modern psychological approaches, such as cognitive-behavioral therapy, within an Islamic framework to address mental health issues in a culturally relevant manner. The role of digital counseling has also emerged as a significant tool in enhancing accessibility and providing tailored support to diverse Muslim clients, particularly in overcoming language barriers and social stigma associated with seeking mental health assistance. Collaboration with religious scholars, the use of multilingual counseling techniques, and the adaptation of counseling strategies to cultural norms have been identified as key strategies to enhance the effectiveness of Islamic counseling in multicultural settings. Therefore, this study concludes that an integrated and adaptive approach, combining Islamic teachings with multicultural counseling techniques, is crucial in addressing the psychological and spiritual needs of Muslim individuals in Melaka. Future research should further explore the long-term impact of these strategies on mental well-being and examine the evolving role of technology in multicultural Islamic counseling practices.

Limitations of the Study

This study, while providing valuable insights into the integration of multiculturalism in Islamic counseling within the Muslim community of Melaka, has several limitations that should be acknowledged. Firstly, the research relies on qualitative methods, including Focus Group Discussions (FGD), participatory observation, and document analysis, which, while effective in capturing deep personal experiences, may not provide the generalizability that quantitative approaches could offer. The sample size, although sufficient for phenomenological analysis, remains limited to specific groups within the Melaka Muslim community, potentially excluding perspectives from other regions or minority Muslim groups with distinct cultural influences. Additionally, linguistic diversity posed a challenge, as some participants expressed their experiences in languages other than Malay or English, requiring interpretation that might have influenced the nuances of their responses. Another limitation is the reliance on self-reported data, which can be affected by social desirability bias, particularly in discussions involving religious and cultural sensitivities. Moreover, while this study explored the integration of Islamic teachings with multicultural counseling approaches, it did not extensively examine the effectiveness of specific intervention models, which could be a valuable direction for future research. Lastly, the study did not account for the impact of rapidly evolving socio-political and technological changes that may influence counseling practices over time. Future research should consider expanding the sample size, incorporating mixed-method approaches, and exploring longitudinal studies to assess the long-term impact of multicultural Islamic counseling interventions on mental health outcomes in diverse Muslim communities.

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