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Spirtual First Responders: The Experiences Of Imams In Their Mosques During Their Personalized Interactions With The Congregants They Serve

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SPIRITUAL FIRST RESPONDERS: THE EXPERIENCES OF IMAMS IN THEIR MOSQUES

DURING THEIR PERSONALIZED INTERACTIONS WITH THE CONGREGANTS

THEY SERVE

A Dissertation

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Doctor of Philosophy

By

Leila Khalid Warraich

March 2021

SPIRITUAL FIRST RESPONDERS: THE EXPERIENCES OF IMAMS IN THEIR MOSQUES

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother. If it was not for her patience, love, and many sacrifices - I would not be here.

This dissertation is also dedicated to my participants. Thank you for letting me in on a glimpse of the selfless work you do every single day.

Table of Contents

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Verily, with hardship there is ease [94.6]. And now Alhamdulillah (Thank Allah) there is ease.

List of Tables

SPIRITUAL FIRST RESPONDERS: THE EXPERIENCES OF IMAMS IN THEIR MOSQUES DURING THEIR PERSONALIZED INTERACTIONS WITH THE CONGREGANTS THEY SERVE

Abstract

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of Imams in their mosques during their personalized interactions with the congregants they serve. A review of the literature was conducted, and the theoretical framework of the study was social constructivism. Eight Imams were identified as meeting criteria for the study. Data collection consisted of a demographic questionnaire, a semi-structured interview, and artifact collection. A hermeneutic phenomenological method was used to analyze the data which resulted in five themes around Imam's experience with their congregants. Additional findings are also discussed, along with implications, limitations, and future research.

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SPIRITUAL FIRST RESPONDERS: THE EXPERIENCES OF IMAMS IN THEIR MOSQUES

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In the Holy Quran, there is a verse that reads "Whoever kills a soul, it is as if he had slain all of mankind. And whoever saves one - it is as if he had saved all of mankind" (Quran, 5:32). Service to others has always been an underlying value of the Islamic faith tradition. There is no higher calling of service to the *Ummah*, Muslim community, than becoming a faith leader as an Iman. An Imam is not only a role model for those in the community (Barton, 2009), but also acts as the motivator and developer of faith (Plante, 2008). While Imams navigate and juggle many responsibilities to their congregants and communities, there is a gap in our understanding of the role they play in the promotion of positive Muslim mental health and their approach to honoring spirituality and faith-based practices in their work.

This chapter is an introduction to the study on the experiences of Imams in their mosques and their personalized interactions with the congregants they serve. The chapter will explore the overview of the problem of the study and the theoretical framework applicable. Additionally, the chapter will discuss the purpose of the study, the research question. The chapter will end with definitions of key terminology used in this study.

Background and Context

Spirituality, religion and faith continue to be incredibly important to people and a guiding source of comfort in their life. And despite overall trends revealing a decline in religion and spirituality in the general population it is still extremely relevant to individuals and their lives. In the US, 83% of Americans believe in some form of higher being or God with either absolute certainty or mostly certainty (Pew Research Center, 2014). Additionally, 53% of them say that religion is important to their life. When clients emerge in the counseling room they are carrying this identity with them and it can be used as a means to help their treatment. It is true that often

clients are looking for integration of spirituality in their counseling work (Harris et al., 2016), and usually they are looking to the counselor to do so. Integrating spirituality is also shown to be better for treatment outcomes as well (Koenig, et al., 2012), increasing overall client wellbeing and mental health. Yet, there is still a gap in our profession on how to help integrate this work more seamlessly. The only area of counseling that has looked into this is pastoral work, and yet that is still limited often by a Christian lens (Bergin, 1980; Zinnbauer & Pargment, 2000). This study looks to hopefully take that a step further.

As of 2010, there were 1.6 billion Muslims around the world, representing 23% of all people worldwide (PEW Research Center, 2020). This growth would make Islam the second-largest religion in the world. The Pew Research Center (2018) estimates there are 3.45 million Muslims living in the US and projects that 8.1 million Muslims will live here by the year 2050. As the population of Muslims is growing in the US, their needs in relation to practice unclear referent, mental, and spiritual health concerns are growing as well.

With the increase in the population of Muslims in the US, so does the number of mosques and places of worship. Mosques in the US are on the younger side, with 62% of them established since the 1980's (Bagby et al., 2001). Most mosques are considered to be active and healthy with 69% of them holding all five daily prayers on a regular basis (Bagby et al., 2001). Most mosques are either led by an Imam or a board of directors to run the daily operations. In their study on the landscape of mosques in the US, Bagby et al., (2001) found that for the majority of mosques, final decisions are made by the board of directors, but Imam's played an important role. Imam's roles include leading prayers, sermons on Friday, community engagement, Sunday schools, fundraising for the mosque, and meeting with individuals for personalized support.

For many Muslims in the US, mental health challenges are a major difficulty. 58% of Muslims in American are Immigrants (PEW Research Center, 2018). Immigrants often have pre-migration and migration stressors, acculturation issues and access concerns when it comes to mental health (Pumariega et al., 2005). Additionally, media attitudes, stereotypes, and stigmatization, especially after 9/11 this event may need a more formal introduction here, have embedded a system known as Islamophobia. Reports of Muslims facing hate crimes and discrimination were higher post 9/11 (Sheridan, 2006). Also, perceived discrimination has also led to more paranoia among Muslims in the US (Rippy & Newman, 2007). Muslim Americans not only deal with unique challenges in mental health but also social stigma and mistrust (Amri & Bemak, 2012). Individuals who may have mental health concerns are seen as someone who have lost faith (Vogal et al., 2007). Those individuals might feel pressure to hide or just deal with problems on their own without professional help (Cauce et al., 2002). These individuals may feel more comfortable going to their local Imam to gain spiritual guidance on their mental health concerns from someone who knows them.

Statement of Problem

Spirituality and religion are often the lens from which the clients view their life and are helpful and a source of comfort in finding meaning, thus critical to address in the counseling setting (Miller, 1999). From early on in our profession there has been an understanding around the roles that values play in counseling and to the therapeutic process (Beutler & Bergan, 1991). And yet it is not just on the therapist to explore their own values but also to understand the client's religious and spiritual values as well, especially this focus on values and the intersection from the client and counselors side leads to positive outcomes in treatment (Worthington, 1998).

Despite counselor's acknowledgement of its importance and developed competencies

(Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling; ASERVIC, 2009; Reiner & Dobmeier, 2014), spirituality and religion have often been neglected in the counseling space (Bergin, 1980; Zinnbauer & Pargment, 2000). As clients continue to navigate their concerns, through their worldview, there is still a lack of integration in the clinical space. Clients are often looking to the counselor to initiate conversation around spirituality in the counseling room (Post & Wade, 2014; Post et al., 2011) and yet despite clinicians understanding the need to do so there is still difficulty in going about bringing such topics into the room in a culturally responsive manner.

As Muslims in American continue to rely on their spiritual and religious background to make sense of the world around them, now more than ever, the Imam is in a crucial role. Though there is a developing understanding of other clergy members from other faith traditions with regard to mental health care, research is missing this understanding in the Muslim community. For example, other faith traditions show that congregants seek mental health help from their clergy leaders (Ali, 2016). Additionally, Clergy members continue to be the first or second source of assistance for many individuals (Ellison et al., 2006). Clergy are important when it comes to mental health support among minority communities as they are often a liaison between professional mental health and community-based services (Milstein et al., 1999). As with other clergy across many religious traditions, Imams also may not distinguish between mental and spiritual problems, and therefore see the burden of care for their congregant resting on themselves alone (McMinn & Dominguez, 2005; Milstein et al., 2008). Lastly, clergy rarely make sufficient use of mental health professionals to relieve the burden of responding to serious mental disorders (Wang et al., 2003).

Current research on Imams experiences managing the mental health of their congregants is very limited and thus highlights a need for this proposed study. Most importantly, 50% of Imam's reported spending 1-5 hours a week on counseling activities and 30% report 6-10 hours. Only 5% said they do not have such interactions (Ali et al., 2005). Yet, there is a lack of understanding what that counseling looks like and how Imams perceived it to be. Often Western modalities of psychotherapy may leave faith based or indigenous practices out of practice. It is argued that one of the ways to decolonize counseling practices is to reclaim the indigenous roots of counseling and healing (Singh et al., 2020), which in some cases can be faith-based practices as well. This study will aim to explore this problem further and provide a deeper understanding of the phenomena at hand.

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework serves as the foundation for the study's methodology, analysis, and approach (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). For this study a social constructivist framework was utilized. A social constructivist framework is a postmodern perspective that believes that knowledge is not objective, but rather the result of intersubjective communication (Rudes & Guterman, 2007). This is often experienced in the form of dialogue and language (Guterman and Rudes, 2008). A social constructivist lens would take away from an individualized perspective and shift to an understanding of how events and experiences between individuals are based in the context around them (Rudes & Guterman, 2007). Social constructivism suggests that there are multiple truths and reality is co-constructed between the individuals at that moment (Hayes & Singh, 2012). Additionally, social constructivism focuses on how meaning is placed on the participant's view of the phenomenon (Hayes & Singh, 2012).

Taking a social constructivist lens for this new inquiry was incredibly imperative as it helped take away from an individualized view and shift to the experience being co-constructed by the researcher and the participants. The focus was placed on the participant's view of the phenomenon honoring and amplifying the missing voices of Imams from the literature and general narrative. As Imam's practice Islam in the United States and are seen as a minority, it provided a deeper perspective into their experiences and stories that was missing in our scholarship and literature. Additionally, it honored the multiple perspectives of the different participants as their truths to be co-constructed with the researcher.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological hermeneutic qualitative study was to understand the experiences of Imams in their mosques during their personalized interactions with the congregants that they serve. In this study, the researcher wished to explore Imam's perceptions of their individual interactions and their role in providing services to their congregants. Additionally, the researcher wanted to understand their perspectives on mental health and counseling and their relation to that role. She also wished to gain a deeper understanding of faith-based practices to be applied into counseling. The results of this study help contribute to a strengths-based perspective on the work that Imams are doing in their communities, to address mental health needs. Additionally, it is to build community connectedness as a model for which the counseling profession can learn from to provide better suited and more culturally competent services. This included understanding the role of Imams in the community's lives, exploring faith based and indigenous healing practices, understanding Imam's perspectives on their training and self-efficacy, learning more about their perspectives on healing and integrating spirituality in their work. All of this was done by focusing on the phenomena around their

personalized interactions that Imams have with their congregants. Additionally, this study aimed to uplift their absent voices and perspectives from our counseling literature.

Role of Researcher

The researcher proposes using hermeneutic phenomenology (Laverty, 2003; Dowling, 2007; Gadaner, 2004) as the methodology for this study. A vital element of such was the hermeneutic circle in which the participant and researcher co-construct meanings related to the phenomena (Dowling, 2007; Laverty, 2003). Gadamer (2004) emphasized that the researcher's views are part of how the experience is understood and should not bracket their approach. Dahlberg (2006) recommended the concept of bridling, in which the researcher reflects on their relationship with the experience while studying the experience. However, the researcher acknowledges their own experiences and remains humble and open to honoring their participants' voices (Vagle, 2018). Gadamer (2004) emphasized that interpretation was ongoing in a cycle as the researcher and participants influenced each other to get to the phenomena' depth. The researcher in this study maintained a bridling journal throughout the experience to reflect upon her personal feelings, thoughts, and views of the phenomena. More details around the role of the researcher are highlighted in chapter 3 in the "Researcher Positionality" section.

Research Question

The guiding research question for this study was: *What are the experiences of Imams in their mosques during their personalized interactions with the congregants they serve?*

Research Design and Method

The researcher used a hermeneutic phenomenological research design based on a theoretical framework of social constructivism to understand the experiences Imams have in terms of their personalized interactions with their congregants. The informal counseling and

interactions that happen on the individual level was the phenomena explored and understood for this study. The researcher used purposive criterion sampling to recruit Imams in the US to learn from their experiences. The researcher also used snowball sampling. The researcher collected data through a demographic's questionnaire, a semi-structured individual interview, and an artifact to triangulate data. The researcher employed the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method used in phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994) for the individual interviews.

Definition of Terms

This section defines the terms used in this study and provides context for their use. Many of these terms are translations for common words used in the Muslim community or Islamic faith and are based on the researchers own knowledge and understanding of these terms.

Muslims

The term Muslim is used in this study to define a person who follows the Islamic faith and tradition. Muslims are not a race or gender specific cultural group but instead a diverse group of individuals who share the same faith and beliefs.

Imam

In this study, an Imam is an individual who is a male leader in the Mosque. Imams are individuals who provide guidance to the community but also lead Islamic worship services and serve as leaders.

Masjid

A masjid, also known as a mosque, is the Islamic term for a house of worship for Muslims and followers of Islam. Masjids are mostly one physical place where the community gathers for acts of worship and can serve as a cultural hub for Muslims as well.

Allah

Allah is the Arabic world referring to God in the Abrahamic religions. When spoken in English it often makes reference to God in Islam.

Quran

A Quran, also spelled Koran, is the Islamic sacred book believed to be the word of God as dictated to the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be Upon Him). The Quran, in Arabic, has 114 units and are recited as part of ritual prayer.

Sunnah

Sunnah, also spelled Sunna, are traditional and legal customs that are practice of the Muslim community. They are often based on sayings or teachings by the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him).

Salat

Salat is the ritual prayer of Muslims that is performed five times daily in a set form. Often Salat occurs in congregation at the Masjid with the Imam leading the prayer.

Ethical Considerations

For this study it was important to follow procedures to protect the participants and conduct ethical research. The researcher gained permission to conduct the study through the William & Mary Educational Institutional Review Board (EDIRC) to protect the participants from harm and explain risk. The participants also were provided information about the study, recruitment, and methodology being employed. Additionally, the researcher obtained consent to the audio or video recordings of all of the interviews.

Summary

In this chapter, the researcher shared the background and context of the study. The research question and methodology were discussed. Key terms were defined, and ethical considerations were discussed.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this phenomenological hermeneutic qualitative study is to understand the experiences of Imams in their mosques in relation to their personalized interactions with the congregants that they serve. In this study, the researcher wishes to explore Imam's perceptions of their individual interactions and their role in providing services to their congregants. Additionally, she wants to understand their perspectives on mental health and counseling and their relation to that role. She also wishes to gain a deeper understanding of faith-based practices to be applied into counseling. Therefore, this chapter provides an overview of the literature to develop a rationale for the study. The chapter begins with an overview of Islam's and Muslims in the US. It then dives into our professions understanding of Multicultural and Spiritual Competence with specific attention to religious and spiritual values in counseling, spiritual competency, and existing psychotherapy models incorporating Islam. It will then dive healing and Mental Health in Islam, exploring Faith Based Healing Practices as well. And lastly it will explore Imams, their role in the mosque and their leadership style as well as dive into clergy members' experiences of counseling and discuss connectedness theory.

Islam and Muslims

Islam, the second-largest religion in the world, is an Abrahamic faith following a tradition that believes in a Monolithic God, often referred to as *Allah* (Esposito, 2004). Muslims, followers of Islam, believe that there is only one God and that the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be Upon Him) is the last messenger and Prophet send to mankind (Esposito, 2004). The five main pillars of Islam are *Shahada*, *Salat*, *Sawam*, *Zakat*, and *Hajj* (Esposito, 2004). *Shahada* is the declaration of the belief in the One God and the Prophet as His Messenger. Next, *Salat* is a commitment to the five daily ritual prayers. *Sawam* is fasting during the Islamic calendar month

of *Ramadan*. Additionally, Muslims are required yearly to give 2.5% of their wealth to a charity which is known as *Zakat*. And lastly, all Muslims are expected, if possible, to go on pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia once in their life known as *Hajj*. These five pillars are the main obligations Muslims have in practicing their faith (Esposito, 2004).

There are currently an estimated 1.6 billion Muslims around the world, representing around 23% of the global population and making Islam the world's second-largest faith tradition (Pew Research Center, 2020). It has been projected that by 2050 there will be nearly 2.8 billion Muslims worldwide (Pew Research Center, 2020). In the United States, Pew Research Center (2018) estimates that there are 3.45 million Muslims and project by 2050 this number will increase to 8.1 million. As Islam is the fastest-growing religion in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2018), so are the needs of the Muslim community.

Mental Health in the Muslim Community

Like with any group mental health challenges are being faced in the Muslim community. Yet there is a specific focus on two major avenues: Immigration and Islamophobia. When focusing on challenges in the Muslim community, 58% of Muslims in America are immigrants who come mostly from South Asia and the Middle East (Pew Research Center, 2018). Muslims born in the US are mostly Black or Hispanic (Pew Research Center, 2018). As a majority of Muslims are either first or second-generation immigrants, some specific strengths and challenges come with that. Muslim Immigrants not sure this should be capitalized are more likely to have higher household incomes and college degrees compared to other immigrants in the US (Pew Research Center, 2018). Yet this might not be the same for the US-born Muslims who report more financial difficulties and stressors. Additionally, Immigrants often have pre-migration and migration stressors when moving to a new country (Pumariega et al., 2005; Chung

et al., 2008). These acculturation issues and access concerns are often tied to specific challenges concerning mental health that can be part of the Muslim Immigrant experience. Also, these unique experiences may influence relationships such as family. As children learn the language of the host country faster, there may be role confusion and family dynamics to manage as well (Bemak et al., 2003). All of these unique challenges can lead to isolation and marginalization (Ahmed & Reddy, 2007). Of course, it is to be noted that not all Muslims in America have to navigate challenges around immigration as many Muslims have been living in the US for multiple generations. But the majority of Muslims are first- or second-generation immigrants (Pew Research Center, 2018).

Along with specific immigration struggles, especially in a post 9/11 world, two of the specific challenges that Muslims have to deal with is discrimination and Islamophobia. In the US, media attitudes, stereotypes, and stigmatization are embedded in a system created and known as Islamophobia (Allen, 2010). This intense fear, hatred, and prejudice against Islam and Muslims is a form of xenophobia and racism that has been on the rise globally and particularly in the US (Allen, 2010). This has also been seen in the rise of hate crimes against Muslims and discrimination reports being higher post 9/11 (Sheridan, 2006). Since 2012, there have been 178 incidents reported regarding hate crimes against mosques and Islamic Centers (New America, 2020). This does not include Anti-Muslim violence and crimes, Anti-Muslim actions, and statements by elected officials or anti-sharia legislation (New America, 2020). This perceived discrimination also led to more paranoia among Muslims who live in the US and fear for their safety (Rippy & Newman, 2006). The most common mental health concerns around this include fear of hate crimes, anxiety about the future, threats to safety, loss of community, isolation, and stigmatization (Abu-Ras & Abu-Badr, 2008).

Muslim Americans not only deal with unique challenges in mental health but also social stigma and mistrust (Amri & Bemak, 2012). Often immigrants are reluctant to seek out mental health services due to social stigma and fear (Ali et al., 2005). Individuals who may have mental health concerns are seen as someone who has lost faith (Vogal et al., 2007). There is an attitude to hide or just deal with problems on one's own without professional help (Cauce et al., 2002). Due to this stigma, many often go without treatment that could be resolved with professional help (Aloud & Rathur, 2009). Additionally, Muslims do not feel like they will get adequate and culturally competent care and may feel a sense of mistrust among professional counselors (Erickson & El-Tamimi, 2001). Muslim immigrants may doubt their counselor's ability to understanding all the religious and cultural nuances of their experience and thus avoid seeking help as well (Inayat, 2007). This is often where individuals may feel more comfortable going to their local Imam to gain spiritual guidance on their mental health concerns from someone who knows them.

Multicultural and Spiritual Competence in Counseling

The following section explores the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies as well as the need for Spiritual Competence and Spiritual Integration in Counseling. Additionally, this section will explore the importance of religious values in counseling, spiritual competence in the field, and existing Islamic psychotherapy models.

Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies

As there continues to be an increase in diverse groups, so is the importance to meet their clinical needs in a culturally competent manner (Sue et al., 2009). Multicultural competent care is not just imperative to meet the needs of all clients but an ethical responsibility of the profession as well as by our American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics (2014).

15

The Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC; Ratts et al., 2015) were established to provide counselors with a conceptual framework to incorporate the multicultural and social justice competencies into theory and practice. The framework focuses on considering and attending to power and privilege in the counseling relationship. There are four domains of focus: counselor self-awareness, client worldview, counseling relationships, and counseling and advocacy (Ratts et al., 2015). Under each domain is a focus on attitude/ beliefs, knowledge, skills, and action. All of these domains are focused on counseling and advocacy interventions.

The MSJCC, and its predecessor Multicultural Counseling Competencies (MCC; Sue et al., 1982), have been around and established for quite some time as part of the counseling profession. Their focus and evaluation were involved to be more inclusive to differing views around diversity and focus on social justice (Ratts et al., 2015). As there continues to be an increase in research around the competencies and its application for clinical practice (Worthington et al., 2007) there is still a need to grow the professions understanding of this work, particularly when it comes to spirituality. Though the multicultural umbrella includes many areas of focus, religion and spirituality has often been neglected in practice and training (Mintert et al., 2020; Scott Richards et al., 2006).

Religious and Spiritual Competence

Spirituality, religion and faith continue to be incredibly important to people and a guiding source of comfort in their life. And despite overall trends revealing a decline in religion and spirituality in the general population it is still extremely relevant to individuals and their lives. In the US, 83% of Americans believe in some form of higher being or God with either absolute certainty or mostly certainty (Pew Research Center, 2014). Additionally, 53% of them say that religion is important to their life. When clients emerge in the counseling room, they are carrying

this identity with them and it can be used as a means to help their treatment. It is true that often

clients are looking for integration of spirituality in their counseling work (Harris et al., 2016),

and usually they are looking to the counselor to do so. Integrating spirituality is also shown to be

better for treatment outcomes as well (Koenig et al., 2012), increasing overall client wellbeing

and mental health.

Religious and Spiritual Values in Counseling

When it comes to addressing spirituality in counseling, there is an imperative

conversation around religious and spiritual values that must be discussed. It is important to

explore values and perspectives in counseling, as it shows the clients that their beliefs and

identity is valid (Richards & Bergin, 2000, Watts, 2001). Additionally, spirituality and religion

are often the lens from which the clients view their life and are helpful and a source of comfort in

finding meaning, thus critical to address in the counseling setting (Miller, 1999). From early on

in our profession there has been an understanding around the roles that values play in counseling

and to the therapeutic process (Beutler & Bergan, 1991). And yet it is not just on the therapist to

explore their own values but also to understand the client's religious and spiritual values as well,

especially this focus on values and the intersection from the client and counselors side leads to

positive outcomes in treatment (Worthington, 1998). Though these perspectives have been in the

field for a while, this theory and importance has been tested more recently, particularly among

marginalized groups. Some examples of the importance around spiritual and religious values can

be seen for Mexican American Women (Choi et al., 2019), in the Black Church (Plunkett, 2014),

with LGBTQ+ individuals (Bowers et al., 2010), and even in the Muslim population (Hamjah &

Akhir, 2014). Religious and spiritual values matter and important to understand to help the client

with their treatment. The issues start to arise when counselors fail to address it in the counseling room despite the established guidance from our profession.

Competencies for Addressing Spiritual and Religious Issues in Counseling

As the MSJCC (Ratts et al., 2015) lay out competencies to provide multicultural and social justice-oriented counseling, it can be taken a step further to consider the differences around spirituality and religion in counseling. There are clear competencies around clinical work, laid out by the Association for Spiritual, Ethical and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC; 2009) that address counselors' role and attention to engaging religion and spirituality in counseling. Spiritually competent care is not just imperative to meet the needs of all our clients but also an ethical responsibility of the profession by our ACA Code of Ethics (2014). The ASERVIC Competencies (2009) were established as a framework to attend to the needs of clients in this area. The competencies provide a framework for specific attention to client's worldview, counselor self-awareness, human and spiritual development, communication, assessment, diagnosis, and treatment. Each area described provides specific guidelines to clinicians on how to incorporate and attend to spiritual, ethical, and religious values in each domain.

The ASERVIC Competencies (2009), and its predecessor (Miller, 1999) have been around and established for some time in the counseling profession working to further support spirituality and religion in the counseling process (Cashwell & Watts, 2010). And not just in counseling, but additionally, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs (CACREP; 2016) also encouraged the integration of spirituality in counselor education. As there continues to be an increase in research around the competencies and its application for clinical practice (Reiner & Dobmeier, 2014; Dailey et al., 2015; Brelsford &

Ciarrocchi, 2013) there is still a need to grow the professions understanding of this work, particularly when it comes to spiritual integration. Perhaps a new fresh perspective on clergy and the integration of their work shall serve as a useful model for the counseling profession.

Spiritual Integration in Counseling

Aside from a focus on pastoral counseling, spirituality and religion have often been neglected in the counseling space (Bergin, 1980; Zinnbauer & Pargment, 2000). As clients continue to navigate their concerns, through their worldview, there is still a lack of integration in the clinical space. Clients are often looking to the counselor to initiate conversation around spirituality in the counseling room (Post & Wade, 2014; Post et al., 2011) and yet despite clinicians understanding the need to do so there is still difficulty in going about bringing such topics into the room in a culturally responsive manner. There are clear competencies around clinical work, laid out by the ASERVIC (2009) yet despite these competencies counselors continue to report challenges in addressing and utilizing spirituality in the counseling space. In a study connected to ACA members it was found that although many were aware of ASERVIC, most were unaware of the ASERVIC competencies (Reiner & Dobmeier, 2014). In the same study counselors reported focusing more on their own spirituality over the client's worldview (Reiner & Dobmeier, 2014). When considering implications for counselor working with Muslim clients there is an empathize that a culturally competent counselor works to understand the client's religious beliefs into the healing process as well (Ibrahim & Dykeman, 2011).

Additionally, there appears to be a lack of formal training around spiritual competence (Kelly, 1994). In another study conducted surveying ACA members around spiritual competence, the researchers found that there was a need for more formalized training around these topics as well as more research around the integration of spirituality and religion in

counseling (Young et al., 2007), a gap this research project is hoping to help fill. Though there is an increase in scholarly work around spirituality and counseling, there continues to be gaps in the professions understanding (Powers, 2005). There are brief discussions around how to integrate religious and spiritual interventions in psychotherapy such as prayer, scripture, and meditation (Fame, 2003) but there continues to be a lack of deeper understanding of the best way to approach this.

In addition to this, Frame (2000) in addressing ethical codes mentions that a huge aspect of them is to respect diversity in client, which includes spiritual and religious diversity as well. To not address or bring up such matters is otherwise unethical (Frame, 2000). And yet there is still a gap in our profession on how to help integrate this work more seamlessly, despite the guidance to do so. The only area of counseling that has looked into this is pastoral work, and yet that is still limited often by a Christian lens (Bergin, 1980; Zinnbauer & Pargment, 2000). This study looks to hopefully take that a step further.

Psychotherapy Models Incorporating Islam

As the counseling profession and clinicians consider their work with Muslim clients there are two kinds of models that they are able to turn to for guidance. The first, and most common, are existing psychotherapy models that have been adapted to incorporate Islam. These are established models that have added components that address the unique needs of Muslim clients. There are countless of these models in existing literature yet some to highlight are Islamically modified cognitive behavioral therapy (Husain & Hodge, 2016). In the model, the authors modify traditional CBT statements to emphasize Islamic values over Western values (Husain & Hodge, 2016). Another example of this includes adapting acceptance and commitment therapy to address Muslim mental health issues (Tanhan, 2019) as there is congruence in the therapy's

values with Islamic values. A multitude of other models that adapt or incorporate Islamic values into the therapy exists for clinicians to use in their work with Muslims, particularly in the past 10 years (Haque et al., 2016). Yet simply modifying western psychotherapies is limited in its ability to provide a deep holistic engagement (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2011) for Muslims.

The other kinds of models created are psychotherapy models pulled directly from Islamic values specifically only for Muslim clients. These models are rooted from Islamic theology, ethics, and guidance in a way that honors clients within their religious framework (Rothman & Coyle, 2020). Due to the need for a thoughtful and collaborative focus from scholars (Elmessiri, 2006) there have only been a few created frameworks and models in this manner. Keshavarzi and Haque (2013) created a model focused on the four dimensions of the soul, based in Islamic knowledge, and skillful interventions in targeting each area. Additionally, Abu-Raiya (2012) also outlined a model that incorporates the aspects of the soul as well as three stages from the Quran, that lead to natural progression and growth. Rothman and Coyle (2018) also created a theoretical framework focused on the nature of the soul, the structure of the soul, stages of the soul, and development of the soul. They further this framework into an iceberg model of Islamic psychotherapy to keep focus on depth when it comes to the notion of the soul (Rothman & Coyle, 2020). Aside from these limited Islamic psychotherapy models, most therapeutic approaches continue to take western modalities and incorporate Islamic values.

Healing and Mental Health in Islam

The following section explores Healing and Mental Health in Islam. It starts with a focus on Counseling and Mental Health in Islam and then explores Faith Based and Indigenous Healing Practices, with an emphasis on Faith Based and Healing Practices in Islam.

Counseling and Mental Health in Islam

To gain a better understanding of the current approaches to dealing with mental health in the Muslim community, it is important to explore the view of Counseling and Mental Health in Islam. Islam and Muslims are not a monolith at all - as Muslims come from very diverse backgrounds, especially in the US. Pew Research Center (2018) found that Muslim Americans came from no one majority country and that US Muslims name 75 different countries of origin. Additionally, the majority of Muslims in the US support a pluralistic approach to their faith, maintaining that there are multiple true ways to interpret Islam (Pew Research Center, 2018). Due to this diversity and intersection among culture, faith, and backgrounds the interpretations and understandings around the role of mental health and counseling in Islam may vary. This paper will focus on consensus and understanding, recognizing that it is not able to encompass all perspectives in this view.

Generally, Muslims are guided by the *Quran*, scripture, and *Hadith*. *Hadith* are the teachings and guiding principles presented by the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be Upon Him; Esposito, 2004). Most beliefs around mental health in both the *Quran* and *Hadith* reveal that spiritual and mental health difficulties are part of God's test for humans and that the solution is often in faith. The Quran says "Do the people think that they will be left to say: We believe, and they will not be tried? But we have certainly tried those before them, and Allah will surely make evident those who are truthful, and He will surely make evident the liars" (Quran, 29:2-3). The guiding principles of Islam are that some difficulties and stressors are meant to be brought upon individuals and that guidance comes from the faith on how to deal with them. Additionally, the Quran also says "So, verily, with every difficulty, there is relief" (Quran, 94: 5). This verse speaks to this notion that Muslims believe that with each hardship or challenge not only is there a

purpose but also potential solutions as well. Often that relief can be in the remembrance of faith in one's life but also resources around them such as family or community members.

The belief is not just to trust God, but that Muslims must also do their part in the solution. There is a very popular *Hadith* that "Anas ibn Malik reported: A man said, "O Messenger of Allah, should I tie my camel and trust in Allah, or should I untie her and trust in Allah?" The Messenger of Allah said, "Tie her and trust in Allah" (Tirmidhi, 2517). The interpretation of this saying is often that Muslims should have a belief in God but that they also have a responsibility to do their part in solving or answering problems. Additionally, there is another *Hadith* that says, "There is no disease that Allah has created, except that He also has created it's treatment" (Sahih al-Bukhari, 5678), alluding to the fact that even with a mental health concern, there are solutions, spiritual or not, that exist for its treatment.

All of these *Quran* and *Hadith* guidance is shared to make the case that generally Muslims agree that when it comes to difficulties and challenges in life, often what could be reasons for one to seek counseling, that the solution is not just in blind faith and leaving it to God but also in taking actions and steps guided by religion to learn and make sense of it. This is where Imams often play a big role in helping those dealing with difficulties. Clergy members, like Imams, continue to be the first or second source of assistance when it comes to congregants' mental health concerns (Ellison et al., 2006). Imams are no different and though they are less likely than other clergies to have formal counseling training (Ali et al., 2005) they are on the front lines in the Muslim community often being sought out for guidance and assistance. Muslims believe that Imams fit that role of helping them find spiritual solutions for their concerns and often go to them first for their needs (Sa'ad et al., 2017).

Faith Based and Indigenous Healing Practices

According to the World Health Organization (WHO; 2003) combining Western and indigenous healing practices produce better therapeutic outcomes for patients and clients. In the Multiphase Model when working with refugee clients (Bemak and Chung, 2017) one of the phases includes attention to faith based and indigenous healing elements as a culturally responsive approach in counseling. Faith based practices and indigenous healing practices are beliefs and strategies that originate within a culture of society to help treating members of that group (Sue and Sue, 1999). Often Western modalities of psychotherapy may leave faith based or indigenous practices out of practice. It is argued that one of the ways to decolonize counseling practices is to reclaim the indigenous roots of counseling and healing (Singh et al., 2020), which in some cases can be faith-based practices as well. In some cultures, such as indigenous folk, there is use of herbs, pipe ceremonies, and dances in alleviating mental health problems (Garett & Wilbur, 1999). Additionally, coming from Native American tradition, prayer circles have been used in connection with spirituality and healing and now have even been adapted for restorative justice practices as well (Mehl-Madrona & Mainguy, 2014). Also, African and Caribbean cultures sometimes view mental health concerns as related to spirits or demons for which there are specific faith practices associated to help in healing (Waldron, 2003; Vontress, 2005). Practices such as yoga and astrology also started as faith-based practices in South and East Asian, that overtime changed and fused in with Western healing modalities (Moodly & Sutherland, 2010). And lastly, in the Christian tradition, prayer is a huge element in faith-based practices (Linvall, 2014). In a study looking at healing, prayer was found to be a prominent theme (South & McDowell, 2018) and common practice to be complementary with psychotherapy (Parachin, 2011). In addition, 55% of American adults say that they pray at least one daily (Pew Research Center, 2017). These many differing faiths based, and indigenous

healing practices produce better therapeutic outcomes for patients and clients (WHO, 2003) and yet are underutilized and underreached.

Faith Based and Indigenous Healing Practices in Islam

There is not much exploration in the literature around faith based and indigenous healing practices in Islam, but like other faith traditions there are traditions that are to be utilized in therapy. With western modalities of counseling, language may be a barrier for many non-English or English as a second language speaking individual when seeking mental health services (Spector, 1991). Some of this has to do with the ability to fully communicate and make informed decisions in another language (Warda, 2000), but faith-based practices can continue to help close this gap. As most Islamic traditions are in the Arabic language, there are many non-English traditions around this that utilize indigenous healing practices. Additionally, such practices can be less stigmatizing often for people of color that help them feel more comfortable when speaking to Pastors (Consantine et al., 2000) which mostly likely applied to Imams as well.

Some of the known Islamic faith-based practices include reading scripture, prescribed five daily prayers known as *salat*, invoking blessings known as *dhikr*, and informal prayer known as *dua* (Haque & Keshavarzi, 2014). Many of these practices also align with the five pillars of Islam (Esposito, 2004) which are the basis for Muslim's beliefs about the Islamic faith. Scripture in this case can be both the Quran and Sunnah, which many Muslims do during prescribed prayer but also do on their own time as well. In Islam there are two types of prayers, one is the prescribed five daily prayers called salat that happen in a ritualized manner (Haque & Keshavarzi, 2014) and the second is more informal known as *dua*, in which the individual speaks to God directly and it can be done at any time in any form. And lastly, is dhikr, in which the

individual in a repetitive mindful manner recalls blessings or uses God's names to praise him. Often this is done with a *tasbeeh*, prayer beads (Haque & Keshavarzi, 2014).

Imams and The Mosque

The following section starts with an introduction to Imams and The Mosque. It then explores Mosques in the USA and Imams roles in the Mosque. Additionally, it explores Training for Imams and Organization and Leadership in the Mosque, with specific attention to Leadership Theory. And lastly, it concludes with an exploration of Clergy and Mental Health specifacally focusing on Imams and Mental Health. The chapter ends with an exploration of Connectedness theory.

Imams are individuals known as leaders in the Muslim community. There are many terms for leaders, so it is important to differentiate among them. Muftis are individuals who have specialized education in Islamic jurisprudence and law (Esposito, 2004). Sheikh's, which is more of an honorary title, can be individuals considered in high esteem but also could be Islamic scholars. This word is often used more in Arabic traditions (Esposito, 2004). Imams are often considered to be leaders who are affiliated with a Mosque. When prayers are being led in a congregation, the person leading the prayer at that time is also known as the Imam, even if they are a community member. For this paper, Imams are referred to as individuals who have a leadership role in the mosque beyond leading prayers.

Imams, in the case of this study and generally, in the community are male leaders only. For the most part, when it comes to top leadership roles, particularly around leading prayers and sermons, this role is traditionally held for men (Katz, 2014). Islam has a place for female leaders in the mosque such as Alimahs, but the roles are limited to leading women only (Hammer, 2012). Whereas an Imam will lead everyone in their congregation, men and women. Alimahs

lead women's groups and provide personalized support to women but they do not lead prayers and provide sermons to the whole community (Hammer, 2012). In the US, there are developing perspectives around gender in the mosque such as a mosque in California where men and women not only pray together side by side, but women also lead prayers (Women's Mosque of America, 2020). Though these perspectives are growing in Western countries, they are overall a minority and are looked down upon from mainstream practicing Muslims. Women are likely to serve on a mosque board in some form, but men still outnumber women in these positions too (Hammer, 2012).

There is a noticeable absence in the literature on the specific demographics of Imams globally, but there is a picture starting to emerge about Imams in the US. Imams come from all age ranges, racial backgrounds and are almost all exclusively men (Geaves, 2008). Though there is a lack of general data there is some information on the racial background such as ⅔ of Imams who are also leaders in their mosque are African American but for those Imams who are not leaders exclusively, they are majority Arab or South Asian (Bagby et al., 2001). Noticeably missing from this dataset was Hispanic and Latino Imams (Bagby et al., 2001). Majority Imam's have some sort of college or graduate degree (Bagby et al., 2001). Aside from this information, there are still substantial gaps in a more thorough and comprehensive view of what the group of Imams looks like.

Mosques in the USA

Mosques, also known as *Masjids*, are not just places for worship for Muslims but in the United States, they also serve as cultural centers and gathering places for social connection in the Muslim community (Khalidi, 2008). Mosques in the United States range from small apartment buildings rented by the community to large buildings developed for the sole purpose

of being a mosque. Some display traditional designs and structures with Muslim architecture and some are disguised in a more modern sense, depending on the location and the size of the community (Khalidi, 2008).

In a comprehensive and the only report on Mosques in America (Bagby et al., 2001) by the Council on American-Islamic Relations, it was found that most mosques in the US were created in the 1980s and beyond, falling on the younger side. Additionally, geographically most mosques exist in the East, South, and Midwest of the USA (Bagby et al., 2001). Mosques in the US provide services to the Muslim community around them by providing a space for prayers, community events, and Friday prayers and sermons, known as *Jummah*. They also work to provide social support based on the needs of the community.

Mosques in the US are often active daily and almost 70% of mosques hold all five prayers daily. Additionally, 70% of mosques are involved in outreach assisting in the needy (Bagby et al., 2001). Despite being involved and active in the community Mosques are understaffed. 55% of mosques don't have full-time staff, are mostly volunteer-run, and only 10% have more than two individuals who are paid as staff (Bagby et al., 2001). The burden to fill that gap often ends up falling on the leadership in the mosque which can include an executive committee, board of directors, or an Imam.

When it comes to space in the mosque there has always been a conversation around women in the mosque as well. Historically when mosques were built, the Muslim community in the US was growing but consisted more of Immigrant men who were transition to life in the US (Hammer, 2012). As time has gone by and the community has grown, it has become a space for families as well, particularly space for Islamic Education for children (Hammer, 2012). As Mosques are often gender segregated for prayers, the spaces continue to be segregated even

beyond that (Katz, 2014). Men and Women may have separate entrances to the Mosque and often women's spaces are smaller, darker, and sometimes separated by a one-way mirror where women can see into the men's side, but men cannot see into the women's side (Katz; 2014; Hammer, 2012). In nearly 66% of mosques in America, women pray behind a curtain or partition or in another room (Bagby et al., 2001). All of this context is to share the unique challenges in the mosque in addition to challenges around gender in leadership. Since Imams engage with all their congregants in the Mosque, including women, this culture of separation also plays into the dynamics around their interactions.

Imams Roles in the Mosque

For the majority of mosques in the US, their structural background reveals that leadership is split into a few categories. There is either an executive committee or a board of directors who make the decisions solely, or an Imam makes the decisions solely, or both works together (Bagby et al., 2001). For the majority of mosques in the US, the final decision-making rests with their executive committee or board of directors (Bagby et al., 2001). Imams often rarely have sole decision-making power in a mosque but despite the structural makeup, they still have many roles and duties around the community's religious and spiritual guidance (Al-Islam, 2006). An Imam is not only a role model for those in the community (Barton, 2009) but also acts as the motivator and developer of faith in the mosque community (Plante, 2008).

For those Imams who are a part of a mosque, they have particular roles and duties to maintain. These include faith-oriented roles such as leading the five daily prayers, leading sermons on Friday congregation, helping organize community events through the mosque, often teaching in Sunday Schools, and helping fundraise for the mosque as well (Ather & Sobhani, 2007). Imams engage with the broader community, with other faith leaders or city and local

government officials as well. Imams also conduct marriages, along with premarital and marital counseling, as well as funerals (Al-Islam, 2006). They also provide support to members in the community who are sick or needy as well (Al-Islam, 2006) by organizing charitable events or praying with individuals in hospitals. And lastly, Imams provide help to individuals who are experiencing personal problems and social concerns, including mental health-related concerns (Ali et al., 2005; Abu-Ras et al., 2008). All of these are part of the many roles and responsibilities Imam's juggle on a day-to-day basis.

Training for Imam

Imams are often trained at a graduate level to learn more about specific tasks and knowledge that they need to lead others. Imams' responsibilities in the mosque vary thus it warrants an observation into their training and preparation as well. There is a lack of standardized training format among different Imams. This is because 80-90% of Imams are trained overseas in different countries (Callahan, 2013; Bagby et al., 2001). The majority of Imams are trained either in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, India, and Pakistan (Callahan, 2013). The most common and prestigious institutions overseas are Al-Azhar in Egypt and Islamic University of Madinah in Saudi Arabia (Callahan, 2013). Of the Imams trained overseas, not all are immigrants themselves, but due to the lack of institutions in the US, individuals will go overseas to train and return to their communities. Yet there is a shift and more institutions in the US are being set up to help train Imams here. Right now, there are mostly?? four identified institutions that include Hartford Seminary, International Institute for Islamic Thought, Zaytuna Institute, and Clermont School of Theology (Callahan, 2013). Yet, these types of programs only make about 10-20% of the trained Imams in the US (Callahan, 2013; Bagby et al., 2001). A noticeable problem, along with a lack of standardized training for Imams, is the lack of focus on knowledge

outside of theology, Islamic history, Islamic law, and the Arabic language (Geaves, 2004, Bobrovnikov, 2001, Zaytuna College, 2020). As Imams are expected to be leaders and also support individuals in the community, there is a noticeable gap in their training around such roles and responsibilities.

Organization and Leadership in the Mosque

As mosques continue to grow in the United States, there are many varying organizational structures of leadership as well, in particular with Imams. Around 81% of mosques have an Imam and in half of them, the Imam is also the leader in the mosque (Bagby et al., 2001). When an Imam is a leader in a mosque, he is not only the religious leader who leads prayers or sermons, but he also is an organizational leader (Bagby et al., 2001). There is a lot of differentiation between Imams who are leaders, Imams who are not leaders, and leaders who are not Imams (i.e., board members). In 40% of mosques, the Imam might have the most say in the decisions that the mosque makes. It was found that 41% of mosque leaders are Imams and 38% are Presidents, who are often elected to a board by the congregants (Bagby et al., 2001). Additionally, larger mosques are more likely to have an Imam than smaller mosques but in larger mosques, the Imam is less likely to be the leader, since there might be a board in place (Bagby et al., 2001).

It was additionally found in the 'Mosques in America' report that 43% of mosques employ a full-time paid Imam and about a third have a volunteer Imam (Bagby et al., 2001). So, some Imams are getting paid for their work, though often grossly underpaid, some are not even making money and maybe acting as an Imam in a second unpaid position. Imams might be working a full-time job elsewhere and stepping in to fill the community's need (Bagby et al., 2001). All of this could happen while Imams may also have a family and children to care for as

well. Most of the research around organization and leadership in mosques has come from the comprehensive but solo report by Bagby and colleagues (2001) which lends the need for more recent work and deeper understanding.

Leadership Theory

There is much literature when it comes to differing leadership theories, but for now this paper will focus on the more salient elements that apply to Imams as they continue to serve as leaders in the mosque and Muslim community. Leaders work to influence and support individuals towards their goals, despite the level of formality their leadership is given (Weihrich & Koontz, 2005). There is growing literature on personality traits and mannerisms of effective leaders (Avolio et al., 2009), but Rowold (2008) found a strong relationship between transformational leadership and organizational outcomes such as job satisfaction and leader effectiveness. Transformational leadership most researched type of leadership styles (Avolio et al., 2009). In this type of style, leaders are working to align followers by inspiring them internally (Wright et al., 2012). Transformation leaders often focus energy on individuals and on cultivating the relationships (Burns, 1978). The four main characteristics of the transformational style include individualized consideration, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation (Bass & Avolio, 1990). Imams often work to focus on these characteristics, with particular attention in this study on individualized consideration, there is growing literature on clergy leadership styles and its effects on outcomes for congregants (Eisenbeiss et al., 2008). Elseginy (2005) found leadership styles of Islamic school principles often reflected transformation and transactional styles. As Imam act as leaders in their community (Barton, 2009) but also as the motivator and developer of faith (Plante, 2008) there is a need to explore this dynamic further.

Clergy and Mental Health

Since there is a lack of research on Imams and mental health it is best to take a step back and look at the experiences of other clergy members from different faith traditions and observe patterns in their work. Even in other faith traditions, there is a pull that congregants are more likely to seek mental health help from their clergy leaders over a mental health provider (Ali, 2016). Clergy members continue to be the first or second source of assistance for individuals (Ellison et al., 2006) thus putting them in a unique position to have to adapt to the emerging needs of their congregants who could often be in crisis. Clergy are important when it comes to mental health support, but especially among minority communities. They will often act as a liaison between professional mental health and community-based services (Milstein et al., 1999). Hohmann and Larson (1993) also found that congregants who met criteria for the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) were more likely to approach clergy members for guidance and help rather than a psychologist and psychiatrist combined. All of this informs how clergy members are often on the front lines and the first person to interact with individuals who need additional mental health support. Their interactions with their congregants can help individuals navigate difficulties in their lives.

Once clergy members encounter congregants, many clergies across different religious traditions may not be able to effectively distinguish between mental health and spiritual health problems (McMinn & Dominguez, 2005; Milstein et al., 2008). Though there is often overlap between these and clergy members, therefore, see the burden of care for their congregants resting on themselves alone (McMinn & Dominguez, 2005; Milstein et al., 2008). It is also found that frequently clergy members make insufficient use of mental health professionals to relieve the

burden of responding to serious mental health disorders among their congregants (Wang et al., 2003).

Clergy members from other traditions often have the opportunity and ability to learn and specialize in Pastoral Counseling. Though such a model does not exist yet for the Muslim community or Imams, it does for other clergy members. Pastoral Counseling is now an established field on its own and continues to train and certify clergy members in programs across the US to help clergy members meet the mental health needs of their congregants (Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, 2020).

Imams and Mental Health

Experiences of other clergy members can be illuminating to the experiences that Imams might be having as well. Yet Islam is a minority faith in the United States so resources and access might be limiting. It is known that Imams are less likely than other clergies to have formal training around counseling topics (Ali et al., 2005) which may create difficulties in their ability to serve. Additionally, a study looking at perceptions of the roles Imams played in community health found 4 central themes (a) encouraging health behavior through scripture in sermons; (b) performing religious rituals around life events and illnesses; (c) advocating for Muslim patients in the hospital; and (d) assisting in healthcare decisions (Padela et al., 2010). Imams use their platform at the community level but also the individual level to make the case for their congregants. It was also found that in a study by Ali and Milstein (2012) that looked at if Imam's could recognize mental illnesses and make referrals, and those who had previous consultation practices correlated with a greater willingness to collaborate with outside providers. Though Imam's may lack formal counseling training and ability, that does not mean they do not engage in informal counseling. 50% of Imam's report spending 1-5 hours a week on counseling-

related activities and 30% reported 6-10 hours (Ali et al., 2005). Only 5% reported that they do not have such interactions, which means around 95% of Imam's are engaging in some sort of counseling like activities (Ali et al., 2005). Of those who did, common problems they dealt with were matters of religious/ spiritual guidance and relationship or marital concerns (Ali et al., 2005). Additionally, post 9/11 there was a 68% increase in the need for counseling due to fears related to discrimination and 62% increase due to actual discrimination faced by congregants (Ali et al., 2005).

In a study conducted with focus groups from mosques in southeast Michigan (Padela et al., 2012) found that all groups discussed the importance of Imams in the healing process of Muslim patients. Majority of the participants said the Imams' attitude not only affected the community but that they also saw the Imam as a counselor of some sort and moral support (Padela et al., 2012). Imams are not only on the front lines of support for Muslims when it comes to health and mental health outcomes, but they are expected to advocate in the community as well.

Connectedness Theory

When considering learning more about Imams but also their congregants, who are part of the Muslim community in the US, the importance of connectedness theory comes to mind. Connectedness Theory is defined in multiple ways but simply put it is the notion of relatedness to others in relation to identity development (Lee and Robbins, 2000; Rude and Burham, 1995). Connectedness theory has multiple dimensions to it but the aspects that relate most to the group this study will be looking at include the cultural (Daneshpour, 1998) and community (Maton et al., 1998) dimensions. The cultural dimensions focus on how specific groups culture is around the value system that the group shares and how it builds connectedness within the group

(Daneshpour, 1998). Daneshpour (1998) explores this further as there is a significant difference between value systems in Muslim families as opposed to the mainstream western values. The author argues that there is greater connectedness when families felt they were working towards their unique values despite being around a different culture (Daneshpour, 1998). Additionally, when it comes to community connectedness there are five main areas of focus which include family, religious environment, extracurricular activity, peers, and teachers (Maton et al., 1998). Given our understanding and knowledge around specific needs of the Muslim community, these dimensions align with the needs of this group that can lead to more connectedness. Often the mosque serves as the cultural hub for many of these dimensions (Khalidi, 2008) and as Imams are the leaders of the mosque, they play a huge role in facilitating this space.

When considering connectedness, it is important to also consider social connectedness as well (Lee & Robbins, 1998; Lee & Robbins, 2000). Social connectedness speaks to the sense of belonging the members of the group have, based on their experiences. There is a notion in Islam known as the *ummah*, which translates to community, but really is more about the social connection the large group has. It is known that Islam and Muslims are not a monolith at all - as Muslims come from very diverse backgrounds, especially US. Pew Research Center (2018) found that Muslim Americans came from no one majority country and that US Muslims name 75 different countries of origin. Additionally, the majority of Muslims in the US support a pluralistic approach to their faith, maintaining that there are multiple true ways to interpret Islam (Pew Research Center, 2018). Yet the notion of *ummah*, socially binds this incredibly diverse group together despite the many differences. And as Muslim live in the US, the mosque continues to be served as cultural centers and gathering places for social connection in the Muslim community (Khalidi, 2008). Thus, it would be irresponsible when studying this group,

not to focus attention on the leaders of the mosque and the role they play in providing support to this group. Though there is an understanding that different cultures and genders have an effect on the level of perceived connectedness (Townsend & McWhiter, 2005), the overall consensus is that connectedness also relates to positive mental health and well-being which can lead to a host of clinical implications for our work as counselors.

Our profession works towards establishing a multicultural framework that honors the experiences and backgrounds of all of our clients. We have established theories, models, and competencies to meet the needs of our diverse clients and our profession encourages their use to honor our clients. As counselors continue to work to enhance our understanding of multicultural competence, we as a profession have never looked at Imams and their work as healers in the Muslim population. This study will explore the phenomena of Imams individual work with their congregants and consider its implications as we continue to grow our understanding of how best to serve all our clients This study aims to take a strengths-based perspective on the work that Imams are doing in their communities, to address mental health needs and build community connectedness, as a model for which the counseling profession can learn from to provide better suited and more culturally competent services. This includes understanding the role of Imams in the community's lives, exploring faith based and indigenous healing practices, understanding Imam's perspectives on their training and self-efficacy, learning more about their perspectives on healing and integrating spirituality in their work. All of this will be done by focusing on the phenomena around the personalized interactions that Imams have with their congregants. As Imams work in the helping profession as counselors, there is much we can learn from them. Additionally, this study aims to uplift their absent voices and perspectives from our counseling literature.

Summary

This chapter focused on an overview of the literature for this study. It introduced Islam and Muslim and Mental Health in the community. It then explored Multicultural and Spiritual Competence in Counseling with specific focus on Religious and Spiritual Values in Counseling, Spiritual Integration, and Psychotherapy Models Incorporating Islam. It then dived into Healing and Mental health in Islam with specific focus on Counseling and Faith Based Healing Practices. Additionally, it dove into Imams in the Mosque, diving deeper into Mosques in the USA, Imams Roles, Imams Training, Organization and Leadership, and Clergy and Mental Health.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to explore Imams'

experiences when it comes to providing personalized support in their one-on-one interactions

with their congregants. The counseling profession struggles to meet the Muslim community's

mental health needs and continues to apply Western focused psychotherapy models that lack

spiritual competence. This study aimed to take a strengths-based perspective on the work that

Imams are doing in their communities to address mental health needs and build community

connectedness as a model for which the counseling profession can learn to provide better suited

and more culturally competent services. Additionally, this study gave voice to Imams, who serve

the Muslim community in many different facets and roles but continue to be excluded from the

literature. This study planned to be one of the first of its kind to understand the phenomena

around informal counseling Imams provide and their integration of techniques and theories based

on Islamic teachings when it comes to providing support (Sa'ad et al., 2017). The following

research question helped to explore the phenomenon: *What are Imams experiences in their*

mosques during their personalized interactions with the congregants that they serve?

Given this study's exploratory nature, as it has not been looked at before, a qualitative

approach was applied to help understand the experience and help make meaning of it (Denzin &

Lincoln, 2011). Furthermore, a hermeneutic phenomenological approach was used to understand

the experiences of Imams. This chapter will introduce the proposed methodology for the study.

After exploring the theoretical framework and rationale for qualitative research, the research

design and research question will be presented. Additionally, the researcher's reflexive statement

will be shared. Lastly, the chapter will further discuss the data collection and data analysis

process and explore ethical considerations.

Theoretical Framework: Social Constructivism

A Social Constructivist framework is a postmodern perspective that believes knowledge is not objective but rather the result of intersubjective communication (Rudes & Guterman, 2007). Social Constructivism is often understood and developed in the form of dialogue and language (Guterman & Rudes, 2008). A social constructivist lens would take away from an individualized view and perspective and shift to a better understanding of how events and experiences between individuals are based in the context around them (Rudes & Guterman, 2007). A Social Constructivist paradigm believes that there are multiple truths and reality is co-constructed between the individuals at that moment (Hayes & Singh, 2012). Additionally, social constructivism focuses on how meaning is placed on the participant's view of the phenomenon (Hayes & Singh, 2012).

There are five areas to focus on when considering Social Constructivism's assumptions: Ontology, Epistemology, Axiology, Rhetoric, and Methodology (Phillips et al., 2000; Hayes & Singh, 2012; Pontorotto, 2005). A social constructivist approach assumes the truth is real when it comes to Ontology, but only to the people who construct it (Hayes & Singh, 2012; Pontorotto, 2005). Epistemology assumes that knowledge is unlimited (Hayes & Singh, 2012; Pontorotto, 2005), and thus there is no one correct answer. Considering the axiology, the framework would argue that the researcher's values play a huge part in understanding the data (Hayes & Singh, 2012; Pontorotto, 2005). Additionally, when it comes to rhetoric, the researcher should use the participants' voice to highlight the truth and understanding (Hayes & Singh, 2012; Pontorotto, 2005). Lastly, a qualitative approach would use words and images to reveal the results (Hayes & Singh, 2012; Pontorotto, 2005).

Taking a social constructivist lens to understand this new perspective was incredibly imperative. It helped take away from an individualized view and shift to the experience being co-constructed by the researcher and the participants. Nevertheless, the main focus was on the participant's view of the phenomenon honoring and amplifying Imams' lost voices from the literature and general narrative. As Imams practice Islam in the United States, they are seen as a minority. This theoretical framework provided a more in-depth perspective into their experiences and stories. Additionally, it honored the different participants' multiple perspectives as their truths and was co-constructed with the researcher herself.

Qualitative Research Design: Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Along with sharing similar philosophical assumptions as social constructivism, there is some specific attention given to qualitative research design. Qualitative research works to collect, analyze, and understand individuals' meanings and experiences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Fraenkel et al., 2015). In qualitative studies, theory shapes the types of questions asked, but the approach's essence focuses on the phenomena at hand (Moustakas, 1994). Qualitative research often focuses on topics and areas that have been limited in their previous exploration (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative approaches offer flexibility in the process to learn more about the issue at hand and focus on finding patterns to understand the phenomenon at hand (Hayes & Singh, 2012; Polkinghorne, 2005).

A phenomenological approach describes the ordinary meaning for the participants' experiences of the phenomenon and focuses on making meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, Hans-Georg Gadamer use of hermeneutics was incorporated in the research methodology (Laverty, 2003). A vital element of such was the hermeneutic circle in which the participant and researcher co-construct meanings and related to the phenomenon (Dowling,

2007; Laverty, 2003). From this notion, hermeneutic phenomenology was developed in which the experiences are understood by the researcher and participants together (Dowling, 2007). Gadamer (2004) emphasized that the researcher's views are part of how the experience is understood and they should not bracket their approach. Instead, Dahlberg (2006) recommended the concept of bridling, in which the researcher reflects on their relationship with the experience while studying the experience. However, the researcher acknowledges their own experiences and remains humble and open to honoring their participants' voices (Vagle, 2018). Gadamer (2004) emphasized that interpretation was ongoing in a cycle as the researcher and participants influenced each other to get to the phenomenon's depth. The researcher in this study maintained a bridling journal throughout the experience to reflect upon her personal feelings, thoughts, and views of the phenomena.

Research Question

The research question in a qualitative study should focus on making meaning of the experience, and the question should be open-ended (Creswell & Guterman, 2019). This study's research question was: *What are Imams' experiences in their mosques during their personalized interactions with the congregants that they serve?*

Researcher Positionality

In qualitative research, the researcher is personally and directly involved in the study. Due to this process, their personal beliefs will likely impact the data collection and analysis process. In the hermeneutic tradition, this is encouraged and part of the process as the positionality influences interaction with the phenomenon (Dowling, 2007; Laverty, 2003). My lived experiences as a Muslim woman in the US are very much a part of my understanding of Imam's experiences with their congregants.

As a practicing Muslim and someone who grew up surrounded by the Muslim community, the mosque was my second home. When my family lived in the US, our connection to our culture was through the lens of religion and faith. When I was younger, my parents were actively involved in the mosque, teaching in Sunday schools, and helping with volunteering in the community for those in need. We would go to the mosque multiple times a week for prayers. In the holy month of Ramadan, we would open our fast in the mosque with the local community. All of our family friends growing up were connected to us through the mosque, and so that area became a very special place for me with many memories.

Even though I lived overseas for my teenage years, I moved back to the US to the same community and the same mosque during my college years. As an emerging adult who was back again living in a non-Muslim country and far away from her family, I craved my sense of community. My experience with my faith was changing, and it started to develop a new meaning for me. I got involved in the Muslim Students' Association, which worked closely with the community mosque to provide Muslim students' services and spaces. During that time, I got close to the Imam and found him to be someone I could share personal struggles with, such as adjustment to college life. He eventually left that position, and to fill that space, I finally sought out counseling on campus, but he played an instrumental role in helping me vocalize some of the day-to-day concerns I had. He created a space for me to engage in those conversations.

Since becoming a mental health counselor, I have noticed the need for services in the Muslim community. Growing up, from individuals in our community, the younger generation heard many phrases like "this is a tough time but pray to Allah it will be fixed" and "Don't feel sad or anxious, this is just Allah's test" and sometimes even "Counseling is for crazy people." As a practicing Muslim, I believe that tough times are tests from God and that there are many solace

and healing in remembering Him, but that does not mean that individuals can't also seek mental health services. There is a generational shift emerging where Muslims are more vocal about their mental health and seeking counseling. Countless of my friends have reached out to me, knowing I am a counselor, to ask more about where to get connected to services or speak more freely about specific challenges they are experiencing. And more and more people are vocalizing their experiences in therapy. Yet this change is slow, and the older generation still carries stigma around seeking help in a professional capacity. Since most Muslims believe that mental health issues are a test from God, often Imams become the intermediate step, the same way it was for me, where people feel comfortable sharing their problems but see it through the lens of spirituality and faith.

Firstly, I need to observe my own biases that these concerns are generational and perhaps do not apply to younger individuals. Secondly, people feel comfortable sharing their concerns with an Imam over a mental health provider. And third, Imams are not fully prepared to deal with the kinds of worries others may bring. Imams may lack training on paper around personal problems and concerns, but they work in a helping profession and could be equipped to deal with the issues their congregants bring forth. And as a counselor, my own bias around this may get in the way.

By reflecting on my relationship with the phenomena, I acknowledge that my positionality influences interaction with the phenomena (Dowling, 2007; Laverty, 2003), which is part of the research process. I continue to explore my perspective through my bridling journal to continue my interpretation of the data (Dalhberg, 2006). See Appendix A for Excerpts from Bridling Journal.

Data Collection Procedures

The following section describes the sampling, recruitment, and participants for the research study. Additionally, the types of data collection methods for the study will also be discussed.

Sampling

For this qualitative study, the researcher spent some time considering how she might collect and recruit participants for the study. Particularly when it comes to sampling, Hayes and Singh (2012) focus on three main aspects of qualitative sampling. The representativeness of the sample, the presentation, and theory development. Focusing first on the representativeness, due to a lack of depth on this population, the researcher decided to go for purposive criterion sampling (Polkinghorne, 2005; Hayes & Singh, 2012). It was otherwise difficult to recruit since there is a lack of network to tap into to get the depth one would need for the study. Additionally, having purposive sampling meant the researcher could personally seek out information-rich cases for their research (Polkinghorne, 2005). Secondly, concerning the presentation of the sample, since the researcher was looking to see the general experiences of this population, a typical sample was best suited (Hayes & Singh, 2012). The presentation was a little hard when considering what mainly makes a typical sample when the Imam population is not a monolith. Still, the laid criteria helped ensure a more general understanding of the phenomena was gained. For theory development, given this was a hard sample to recruit for, snowball sampling was used. Participants may know or be connected to other Imams and thus were willing to share their stories and perspectives (Hayes & Singh, 2012). Though this may not qualify as the most rigorous methodology for sampling, the researcher believes given the population and challenges in recruitment; these sampling techniques worked best.

Participants were eligible to participate if they met the following criteria:

(a) Are at least 18 years of age

(b) Self-Identify as Muslim

(c) Self-Identify as Asian or Middle Eastern

(d) Are affiliated and currently serving as an Imam in a mosque in the US

(e) At least three years of experience serving congregants as an Imam. It could be at other mosques but three years total.

These specific criteria were to ensure to tap into the depth of Imam's stories and perspectives. In addition to this, no other criteria were set. This criterion came after much discussion. Although Islam and Muslims are not a monolith (Pew Research Center, 2018), given the lack of literature around the topic, a more generalized view appeared to be an excellent foundation to develop an initial understanding. This was particularly important when it came to the racial demographics of the sample.

There are multiple views on the sample size in phenomenological research in a phenomenological inquiry, but it could range from as low as 3 to as high as 25 (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Polkinghorne, 1989). The researcher for this study aimed for between 7-12 participants (Hayes & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). Since the phenomenological inquiry is not focused on generalizability (Finlay, 2011), smaller sample sizes are appropriate.

Recruitment

Given the population's hidden nature and difficulty in access due to a central network, recruitment primarily happened in two ways. The first was focused on purposive sampling by purposely reaching out to Imams, mostly via email, with specific knowledge who fit the criteria (Palinkas et al., 2015). The researcher worked closely with her mentor, an academic who is well

connected with the Muslim population due to his professional experiences with the Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) and the Muslim Students' Association (MSA) national leadership such as Imams. The researcher actively recruited Imams who fit the criteria and covered differing diverse experiences in the Muslim community. Sometimes this involved actively emailing Imams of Mosques that had larger congregations, knowing it was likely then that they had an Imam who may fit the study criteria. The second type of recruitment was snowball sampling, as the participants were asked who they think will be a good fit for the study. As this is a small, tight-knit community, the researcher could hear unique perspectives and voices from this way. The researcher also decided not to offer any incentive to the participants as culturally, it would be insensitive and could potentially be seen as disrespect to the participants.

Participants

A total of 8 Imams participated in the study ($N = 8$) and were individually interviewed. All participants identified as male. All participants also identified Islam as their religion. 6 Identified their religious denomination as Sunni, and 2 did not identify with any denomination. 6 participants identified as Arab, of which 3 further identified as Egyptian, 1 as Syrian, and 1 as North African. 2 participants identified as Asian, of which 1 also identified as Pakistani. There was a range of ages of participants from as young as 29 to as old as 67, with the mean age being 43. 5 Imams were practicing in Texas, 1 in New York, 1 in Iowa, and 1 in California. All participants identified their title as Imam, and 2 further identified themselves as teachers and 1 as a Dean of Student Affairs. Participants also had a wide range of years being an Imam in the US from as little as 8 years to as much as 25. The average age of experience being an Imam in the US was 16 years. All Imams described their congregations as diverse, with sizes ranging from as small as 300 people for Friday prayers to 4,000 people. And lastly, Imams also expressed a range

of formal training. 2 Imams had no formal training, 1 was training in seminary, 3 had Bachelors, 2 had a Masters, and 1 had a Ph.D. Table 1 further details the demographic descriptions of each participant.

Table 1

Participants Demographics

Name	Age	Race	Gender	Religion/ Denominations/ School of Thought	US State of Practice	Years of Experience in US	Title	Formal Training	Congregation Size
Abdullah	44	Middle Eastern – Egyptian	Male	Islam – Sunni – Hanafi/ Shafai	Texas	14	Imam / Teacher	Seminary Training in US	1500 for Jummah
Imam S	33	Middle Eastern - Egyptian	Male	Islam - Sunni	Iowa	8	Imam	Al-Azhar University + Bachelors in US	400 for Jummah
Imam H	29	Asian - Pakistani	Male	Islam-Sunni	Texas	10	Imam / Dean of Student Affairs	No Formal Training	3000-4000 for Jummah
Mahmoud	36	Middle Eastern - Egyptian	Male	Islam - Sunni	Texas	11	Imam	Al-Azhar University – Certified Chaplain	2000 for Jummah
Br. DS	67	Arab	Male	Islam - Sunni	New York	25	Imam	No Formal Training	1000 for Jummah
Imam A	41	Asian	Male	Islam	Texas	18	Imam	Masters in Islamic	3000-4000 for Jummah

								Studies - UK	
Imam Muhammad	41	Arab – Syrian	Male	Islam	Texas	25	Imam / Teacher	Ph.D. in Islamic Studies - Syria	300 for Jummah
Imam T	51	Arab – North African	Male	Islam - Sunni	California	19	Imam	Bachelors Islamic Studies Algeria – Masters in Islamic Studies US	1000-2000 for Jummah

Types of Data Collection

Since the researcher was conducting a hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry, it would be essential to consider the guidelines and recommendations laid out by Moustakas (1994) and Cohen et al. (2000). The first step in collecting data was to seek approval from the William & Mary Educational Institutional Review Board (EDIRC) to ensure that ethical considerations were being taken. Once the IRB was approved, the researcher recruited participants from the sampling methods described above (Polkinghorne, 2005; Hayes & Singh, 2012). Once a participant agreed to participate, they would be sent a consent form to review and sign, and a time would be set to conduct the interview online via zoom or by phone. Additionally, the participant was told to consider bringing the artifact, their favorite scripture verse, to the interview. The interview followed a semi-structured format, in which questions came from the interview protocol developed by the literature that sought to understand the experience, feelings, and thoughts of the participants regarding their experiences (Hayes & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and sent back for member checking (Hayes & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). When it comes to data collection, a key element of qualitative studies includes capturing thick descriptions and rich data of the participants' experiences (Hayes & Singh, 2012). The following data collection methods were used in this study: (a) demographics questionnaire, (b) semi-structured individual interviews, and (c) an artifact.

Demographics Questionnaire

Demographic data can serve as a great means to learn more contextual information about the participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). For Imams who express an interest in the study, a time was scheduled to interview them. Before beginning the interview, the participants were

asked to share demographic data that was not only to check their eligibility for the study but also to help gain a deeper understanding of their background and experiences. The questionnaire asked participants the following: (a) age, (b) race/ ethnicity, (c) gender, (d) how they identified religiously, (e) US state they live and serve in, (f) their title or current position, (g) years of experience as an Imam, (h) the makeup of the congregation they serve, (i) if there was any formal training, and (j) pseudonym selection. See Appendix B for copy of Demographics Questionnaire.

Semi-Structured Individual Interviews

The primary method of data collection for this qualitative phenomenological research study was individual interviews. The purpose of these interviews was to gain a more in-depth, rich understanding of the phenomena (Hayes & Singh, 2012; Polkinghorne, 2005). Though there was a developed interview protocol based on the literature, the questions were interactive and open-ended (Moustakas, 1999). The researcher needed to maintain flexibility o be able to give space for the participants to share their perspectives openly and acknowledge the multiple realities and truths being expressed (Moustakas, 1999).

Considering the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 and the emerging gaps, some of the types of questions asked included asking participants to describe their experiences in providing personalized support with their congregants, including how they decided to see them individually. Additionally, the researcher asked Imams to share what they think their role as leaders is in the mosque. Imams were asked to describe their perceptions of their training, as well as their strengths and gaps during their time serving. Imams were also asked how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced their work given that data collection occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lastly, the researcher asked participants to share their artifacts and describe their

meaning. By focusing on these questions, the researcher hoped to get a more detailed understanding of the phenomena at hand. See Appendix C for copy of the Interview Protocol.

Artifact

In qualitative research studies, artifacts can be used to add additional depth and understanding to the phenomenon at hand (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Hayes and Sigh (2012) noted that this can also include documents, texts, and artifacts. For this study, the researcher asked participants to bring their favorite guiding scripture verse, *Quran* or *Sunnah*, for their approach to their role as an Imam to the interview. This could have been a philosophy they follow or scripture that gives them hope or strength. As scripture continues to be the most significant source of guidance for Muslims and Imams (Esposito, 2004), the researcher wished to learn more about the Imams' understanding of their work and their interactions with their congregation through an Islamic lens. Before the interview, the researcher asked participants to consider their guiding scripture and bring it to the interview for which there would be discussion around it. By allowing participants to bring it to the interview and speak more about their interpretation of the artifact helped to let them share their unique experiences (Banks, 2007). There was no limit on the amount or length of the artifact, the scripture, brought into the interview, nor was it a requirement for participation in the study. But the additional perspective it brought was valuable to focus on the participants' Islamic view of the phenomenon. The researcher analyzed the artifact in the form of a question in the protocol to the participants asking them to share their artifact and described its relevance to them and the phenomenon. The researcher coded the artifacts on their own, separate from the rest of the data and then incorporated them into the findings in the horizontalization chart. The artifacts were used as a way to triangulate the data to ensure trustworthiness (Hayes & Singh, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Analysis

Phenomenology aims to reveal the participants' unified experiences regarding contextual factors (Polkinghorne, 1989). This study's data were analyzed using the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method in phenomenological studies (Moustakas, 1994). Due to hermeneutic phenomenology's nature, the process was slightly modified to encourage bridling instead of bracketing (Dahlberg, 2006). The procedures for this hermeneutic phenomenological study included: (a) *bridling*, reflecting on personal experiences and their relation to phenomena; (b) phenomenological reduction, developing a textural description of the essence of the phenomenon; (c) imaginative variation, presenting a picture of the complexities that make up an experience; and (d) synthesizing the data to develop a comprehensive statement of the whole phenomenon.

First, the researcher engaged in bridling, in which the researcher explored and described her experiences with the phenomena, such as in the 'Researcher Positionality" section in this chapter. The researcher reflected on her interactions with Imams and her view of their role as helping professionals. Additionally, the researcher kept a bridling journal to continue to explore her thoughts and feelings each time she came in contact with the data. This was a space to focus on personal judgments and emotions but also emerging themes from the data. The researcher also consulted and worked with a peer debriefer to explore and bridle her own experiences, judgments, assumptions, and understandings. The peer debriefer was an experiences qualitative researcher who has engaged in many phenomenological studies during her career. The journal used pseudonyms and no identifying information to protect participant information.

Second, after the data was transcribed and member checked, the next step was analyzing the data. During the analysis, the transcriptions were coded for salient ideas. Using the participant's words and research's words, both emic and etic were used (Hayes & Singh, 2012;

Moustakas, 1994). An a priori codebook was developed based on the literature to analyze the data. Data were coded and reviewed by the peer debriefer and then moved forward in the analysis.

Next, the codes were added to the horizontalization chart (Moustakas, 1994). The complexities of the experience were presented in this chart. They were then reduced, grouped, categorized, and built into salient themes of the experience (Hayes & Singh, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). During this time, the researcher will work with the peer debriefer to ensure validation of the data.

Lastly, after themes emerged, the researcher provided a structural description that reflected the setting and context of the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). These findings were then presented then as the results of the study.

Trustworthiness

Validity and Credibility are also known as Trustworthiness in qualitative research. Trustworthiness is an essential aspect of the qualitative approach (Hayes & Singh, 2012). There are many criteria for research being trustworthy, but some to highlight are that the findings are authentic, transferable, and credible (Hayes & Singh, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The following strategies were used for ensuring trustworthiness for this study (Moustakas, 1994; Hayes & Singh, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Creswell & Creswell, 2018):

a. audit trail, which involved keeping a record of significant decisions made throughout the process of the study.

b. bridling journal, so every time the researcher came in contact with the research, she shared their thoughts and experiences and noticed any trends or instincts.

c. triangulation of data sources, which includes multiple data collection methods, in this case, was the demographics questionnaire, the semi-structured interviews, and the artifact.

d. member checking will be used to ensure that participants' experiences were understood accurately. This was done by sending transcripts back to the participants to see if they wish to add or change any of the information shared.

e. thick and rich descriptions were used to get to the depth of the phenomena to be able to consider transferability of the data.

f. use of peer debriefer, another individual who helped as an external check with the analysis process.

All of these strategies were be used to ensure trustworthiness in the analysis process.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure the well-being of the participants, ethical considerations were explored. The researcher obtained permission from the William & Mary Educational Institutional Review Board (EDIRC) to protect participants from harm and potential risks. This included the rationale for the study, participant recruitment, and research methodology. Additionally, participants were informed about procedures to maximize confidentiality in the informed consent document shared before the data collection. This document laid out the study's purpose, efforts to maintain confidentiality, risk and benefits for participating, and contact information for the researcher and committee members (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). It included consent for audio and video recording as well. See Appendix D for copy of Informed Consent. Another consideration was for identifying information to be removed from transcripts, as pseudonyms were used. Any identifying information was kept secure and destroyed after analysis. Participants were also

notified that the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Summary

This chapter focused on identifying the social constructivist framework, the qualitative approach, and the hermeneutic phenomenological design for the study. The chapter also detailed the research question, the positionality statement, the data collection, and analysis methods for this phenomenological design.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

It's so hard because you have to take in the pain of the community. If you're invested in the

community, their pain is your pain.

(Imam A, Participant and Imam)

Using a social constructivist framework, the researcher employed hermeneutic

phenomenology to understand the experiences of Imams, in their mosques, with their

congregants. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of Imams and their

personalized interactions with their congregants. The following research question guided the

qualitative phenomenological exploration of the phenomenon: *What are Imams' experiences in*

their mosques during their personalized interactions with the congregants that they serve? The

individual semi-structured interviews provided participants with the opportunity to share their

experiences. In this chapter, participant sketches will be explored, the five identified themes will

be discussed, and the data will be synthesized with textural and structural descriptions.

Participant Summaries

This section explores brief participant summaries, with pseudonyms, of each participant.

It also includes the researcher's impressions of the interview.

Abdullah

Abdullah was a 44-year-old Male Imam practicing in Texas. He identified as Middle

Eastern, specifically Egyptian. He also identified as Muslim and mentioned he followed the

Hanafi and *Shafai* Schools of Thought. Along with being an Imam, he also identified as a

teacher. Abdullah has 14 years of experience as an Imam. He received his training from

seminary after he changed his focus of career and study from being an engineer. He reported he

serves a diverse congregation with around 1500 individuals for Friday prayers alone.

As an Imam of a large congregation, he had many experiences to draw from to be able to paint a picture of his personalized interactions with his congregation. Abdullah was conscious of providing direct advice while maintaining a non-judgmental attitude. In our time together I was stuck by the ease two helpers had in speaking about the topic at hand.

Imam S

Imam S was a 33-year-old Male Imam practicing in Iowa. Imam S also identified as Middle Eastern, specifically Egyptian. He expressed that he was a Sunni Muslim. Imam S had 8 years of experience being an Imam in the US. He started his bachelor's overseas yet moved to the United States and completed his studies here. Imam S also served a diverse congregation with about 400 individuals coming for Friday prayers.

Imam S was an incredibly reflective and thoughtful participant. Coming from a smaller community, Imam S was mindful of his role in multiple avenues. He also wanted to ensure that he had all the Islamic and Psychological tools to help his congregants. I appreciated the depth and reflection Imam S brought our interview and the time he took to provide many details about his experience.

Imam H

Imam H was a 29-year-old Male Imam practicing in Texas. Imam H identified as Asian, specifically Pakistani. He also identified as a Sunni Muslim. Along with being an Imam of a mosque, he was also the Dean of Student Affairs for an institution. He has been an Imam for 10 years. He had no formal training as he had learned from mentors and scholars. He served a large diverse congregation with around three to four thousand congregants for Friday prayers.

As the youngest Imam I spoke to, Imam H provided a very matter of fact and candid perspective on his role. Imam H was one of the Imams to speak more openly about the role that

culture, and faith play in individuals' perspectives and how he had to navigate that as an Imam. During our interview I was mindful and struck by Imam H's approach to a work life balance.

Mahmoud

Mahmoud was a 36-year-old Male Imam practicing in Texas as well. He identified as Middle Eastern, specifically Egyptian. He reported being Sunni Muslim. Mahmoud had 11 years of experience as an Imam in the US. He graduated from University overseas in Islamic studies and also was a Certified Chaplain in the US. Mahmoud also served a diverse congregation that saw around two thousand people for Friday prayers.

Upon first meeting Mahmoud, I was in awe of his openness and willingness to share. Mahmoud brought a great sense of humor to our interview and continued to share his experiences openly. Mahmoud emphasized that a lack of communication was the primary reason why congregants sought out his help and he felt it was his duty to meet their needs.

Br. DS

Br. DS was a 67-year-old Male Imam practicing in New York State. He identified as Arab and a Sunni Muslim. Br. DS has 25 years of official experience and 40 years of unofficial experience as an Imam. He also had no formal training to become an Imam as he had a secular educational background. Br. DS described his congregation as diverse "as the United Nations" seeing about a thousand people for Friday prayers.

As the oldest Imam I interviewed, Br. DS had many years of incredible experience as an Imam. Despite no formal training, he was able to share with great insight the concerns he saw the Muslim community go through. What struck me was the recommendations Br. DS has for the community to work to make ourselves a part of American society. I felt a great sense of comfort speaking to Br. DS and enjoyed his perspectives.

Imam A

Imam A was a 41-year-old Male Imam practicing in Texas. He identified as Asian and Muslim. He did not report any denominations or schools of thought. Imam A has 18 years of experience as an Imam. He received his formal training, a Masters in Islamic Studies, overseas. Imam A also described his congregation as diverse seeing about three to four thousand congregants for Friday prayers.

Imam A provided a thoughtful and detail-oriented interview. I was extremely impressed with Imam A's system of keeping track and logging his roles and responsibilities as an Imam. Imam A was passionate about the role data can play in making decisions and how the community needs that information to improve. Imam A had a very strategic approach to his work that brought a new perspective of his experience to the interview.

Imam Muhammad

Imam Muhammad was also a 41-year-old Male Imam practicing in Texas. He identified as Arab, specifically Syrian. Imam Muhammad also identified as Muslim and did not report any denominations or schools of thought. Imam Muhammad has had 25 years of experience as an Imam. Along with being an Imam, he also identified as a teacher. Imam Muhammad had a Ph.D. in Islamic Studies from overseas. He reports serving a diverse congregation with about 300 individuals for Friday prayers.

Imam Muhammad was a kind and open Imam to interview. Though he has the most formal education, he was humble and open to learning from his congregants. Imam Muhammad was focused on incorporating as much Quran and Sunnah in his work as possible and provided tangible examples of how he did so in his work. I appreciated Imam Muhammad willingness to share with me.

Imam T

Imam T was a 51-year-old Male Imam practicing in California. He identified as Arab, specifically North African. He also identified as a Sunni Muslim. Imam T had 19 years of experience as an Imam. He received his bachelor's overseas and got his Masters in Islamic Studies in the US. He also described serving a diverse congregation seeing around one to two thousand people for Friday prayers.

Imam T was the last participant I interviewed. He was thoughtful in his answers and emphasized the importance of collaboration. Imam T was involved in projects with other professional helpers and emphasized the need for us to learn from one another. He respected counselors and the expertise they brought and wanted to learn more from them.

Themes

The following section described the five themes that emerged from the analysis of the data collected. The research question asked was *What are Imams' experiences in their mosques during their personalized interactions with the congregants that they serve?* The experiences of Imams included: (1) Intentional Communication and Engagement, (2) Incorporating *Deen*, (3) Contextualizing Congregants, (4) Conceptualizing Their Identity, and (5) Encouraging Collaboration with Professional Helpers. These themes reflected the experiences of Imams in mosques and their personalized interactions with their congregants.

Theme One: Intentional Communication and Engagement

All participants shared perspectives around engaging with their congregants during their personalized interactions. An important aspect of their experience included not only engaging but being intentional in their communication to meet the needs of the individuals they were helping. Imams expressed their openness and guiding practices in these interactions as well as

how they set expectations for those interactions. Imams shared focus under four areas in this theme: Presenting with Openness, Supportive Guiding Practices by Imams, Setting Structure and Expectation for Interactions, and Documentation with Discretion. Participants began their focus on their inviting nature to congregants, which lead to guiding practices. Additionally, Participants also shared the importance of setting structure before interactions and documentation after.

Presenting with Openness

All participants shared different ways that they communicated when they met with congregants personally. Those interactions revealed Imams to be presenting themselves with openness as they were willing to learn and build connections with their congregants. The first focus area included listening to congregants. Mahmoud shared:

> So, this is what we do, a lot of times people just want to come to let it out, just want to talk. The Imams, you know what they say, speak like a politician and listen like a therapist. So basically, we listen like therapists, we just listen to people, let people speak.

Imam A added to the idea of focusing on listening to the congregant by sharing:

> So of course, I think you would agree, the best counselor is the one who has the best ears, not the best mouth. You know, if you're going to start spitting out what you think before you can understand, you're missing the boat here.

Along with listening, Imams also work to build the relationship with their congregants as well presenting themselves in an open manner. Participants shared about building a personal connection and being non-judgmental. Mahmoud, who has a "judgement free zone" sign hanging in his office, shared:

The quality of a successful imam, I would say is, to be able to build this personal

connection with a congregation. If this personal connection doesn't happen, the Imam

will never be successful. So, I always say, and this is basically my philosophy, I never

start throwing some knowledge right and left on people just like that. I try to build the

personal connection with them first, because I do believe that unless you have the

personal connection with people, people will not listen to you.

Abdullah also expressed that when serving people with complex family situations "Just starting

off for example, with the daughter, letting her know that I'm not going to judge her." Imam

Muhammad shared that he works to present himself as non-judgmental due to the notions around

his view as a faith leader. He mentioned "Yeah, people they look at Imam. He is judge. He is

Imam. He is counselor. He is faith leader."

Some participants also shared the importance of being accessible to congregants at all

times as well as part of the way they present with openness. Imam S mentioned:

I understand that as much as I would like to have a very fixed schedule, nine to five or

whatever, and then be able to have the rest of the time for myself, but that's not my line of

work, it's not a luxury I have.

Imams described being as available as possible for congregants to meet them. Imam H

mentioned "I sit in the main area, so if anyone comes in, they see someone" and Imam A echoed

this by saying "I am very much accessible. People call me, people meet with me outside and they

say, 'Would like to talk to you'".

Some participants described another way to build that connection is to approach

congregants with humility. Imam T explained "I would say that the key thing here is

humbleness, to humble myself, and try to seek knowledge, and acquire the skills wherever they

are." For participants, they wanted their congregants to know that they did not know anything. Imam Muhammad described the importance of humility with limits:

> So brother, sister, youth, all of them they ask Imam. The point is Imam should be humble and should be... He should know his limit, as well. He should know, also, his knowledge. He should also have some skills to deal with all of these kinds of issues. And to separate them.

Imam S also shared his perspective on remaining humble:

> I know when people come and they are in my presence here in my office, talking to me about an issue or seeking my help and guidance. I am not really looking down at them, as that guy who knows everything and is going to tell them the truth. I have gained that kind of intellectual humility.

This notion of humility, as well as being non-judgmental, being accessible, and listening to congregants are part of the participants' experiences presenting themselves with openness. Participants present themselves this way as part of their intentional communication and engagement with their congregants.

Supportive Guiding Practices by Imams

Along with presenting with openness, all Imams shared about supportive guiding practices that they engaged with in their interactions with their congregants. Participants shared what they particularly did in sessions to help congregants. One area of focus was for helping congregants build insight and awareness. Br. DS described his role in building awareness:

> So hopefully if this is made in a systematic way, in a way that the person is aware of it in every moment in his or her life that, 'I am seeking happiness. I would like to be happy.' And, 'I would like to project happiness in my relationship.'

Br. DS additionally describes his focus on building awareness on congregants was "To get them from that level where they are complaining about the other, to the level where maybe they will be able to see their contribution to the problem and be able to do something about it. Imam S's take on building insight came from promoting reflection "But when I'm thinking loud with them, I feel like there is a big gap and lack of insight and reflection, self-reflection on their behalf." Additionally, sometimes that awareness comes from taking other perspectives as Br. DS stated:

> You would say, "This is happening because of this. Why do you keep pointing to your wife that she's not doing this? She's not doing that? How about you? Have you really asked yourself why these things are not happening?" And, from that perspective, sometimes, people wake up.

Imams described helping congregants by promoting reflection as well. Imam S shared more about this as he states one of his guiding philosophies with congregants it requires a little self-reflection, actually, healing requires a lot of self-reflection". Imam Muhammad had a more action-oriented approach to reflection by sharing he tells congregants "That will help. Go walk while you remember Allah. See the trees, they are doing *tasbee* and *dikhr*. That will help you encourage reflection".

Along with building awareness and reflection, participants also described working on motivating congregants to take charge of their issues. Imam Muhammad told his congregants "You can solve it, the solution, the key in your hand. Use it. You have few keys, find the right key and you can solve your problem." Sometimes the motivation was to keep congregants engaged longer term in spirituality. Mahmoud explained this problem:

> People are not consistent, people lack especially when it comes to spirituality, they're very excited, they do a lot of good deeds, day and night. Then, after that, slowly, slowly,

slowly, things start dying out. So we tell them just to be consistent, do a little thing, but

be consistent.

Participants also shared they felt they were helpful to their congregants when they were

motivated to begin with in seeking the Imam. Imam T described he finds success in his work

"when people come to me with an open mind, and heart, with a good intention, a good will that

the Imam is going to help us"

Imams also engaged in digging deeper to learn more about their congregants and the

issues that brought them to the Imam. Imam T stated, "I assess the situation, I listen to my

community members". Imam H described that along with just listening he also ask questions to

gain more information:

You just dive into the problem and say, "What's bothering you? What do you think? Is it

really, really affecting you or bothering you?" I think I just start talking about it, have

some questions to see where they really fall or what they really are.

Br. DS also described this notion of assessment "I first need to understand where is the wound,

what is really hurting and sometimes that takes time"

And lastly, Imams focused on empowering clients and following up with them as a focus

on their interactions. Abdullah described empowering his clients as he stated:

I think my role is to get them on the right path as much as I can, where they will take the

steps and take the initiative on their own that they want to do it. I see it as a motivator, as

an influencer on them in their life, but they have to take the mantle into their own hands

and carry that forward.

Along with motivating congregants, Imams also focused on following up with them after

their interactions. Imam S shared that he tells his congregants "If I don't get ahold of you, you

should get ahold of me, and let me know how things are going". Imam T described the importance of follow up "Sometimes when I'm successful in solving the total problem, of course they're happy, and I receive from them a feedback later on, either through a phone call, message, or an email, thanking me for that follow up." All these practices by Imams in their interactions were meant to be supportive and guiding as Imams worked to provide intentional communication and engagement.

Setting Structure and Expectations for Interactions

A majority of participants also described their communication and engagement with congregants in the context of setting expectations and structure inside and outside their personalized interactions. Participants described having to set ground rules for expectations especially when working couples. Imam A stated:

> And what we try to do is if the case is a contentious case, based on the emails or the phone calls or text messages between a husband and wife and myself, I have to set ground rules because we're not here to see who is wrong and who is right, and what did, who did what, and what did, when ... none of that stuff...no blaming.

Imam S also described the importance of setting expectations around time as he said:

> And usually, I've learned that if you don't tell people that, here's my availability and here's how much time I can give you, usually people can just sit there and take your entire day and think that they are the only people with an issue, the only people that matter.

Imam T emphasized being clear and communicating structure to congregants before meeting them, which he learned from counselors he collaborated with. He stated, "They taught me that,

you have the right to tell the person, or the couple that, "Now, we're going to have one hour meeting, or an hour and a half".

The need to set expectations around time came from participants feeling that congregants did not respect their time. Imam Muhammad shared:

Sometimes you have to drive one hour to reach that place and come back. Wedding events also take half a day, three, four, five hours. Bring Imam, wait for the bride and groom to come and get ready. Okay. And they brought you one, two hours ahead. And that appointment at five, you go at five but they will start at seven.

Mahmoud shared a similar sentiment "Some cases, that's why sometimes one session takes four hours, after *Isha* prayer, sometimes we leave at midnight because we want to end on good terms". Imam Muhammad continued to describe congregants needs as he elaborate:

Some of them [reach out] at 12 midnight. "I have some issue. Please help us." "I can't wait; please." Some people they need Imam to come visit them at house or hospital, or because their parent or someone he is like in the last moment of his life, maybe to give them *Kalimah*, do *dua*, recite the *Quran*

Due to these last-minute needs and often long sessions, participants described also setting expectations by scheduling their interactions. Mahmoud shared "So basically, I have a number of office hours, this is when people can actually schedule an appointment with the Imam". Imam A described his system "Whenever a person comes to me, first of all, they email me or they call them to reach out for a session, I schedule an appointment immediately". Br. DS echoed the same notion "Then I arrange for them to meet with me. But most of the time people call by phone, people send emails, and we arrange meetings with them". Not only did participants set

those expectations and structure in interactions but they also set them outside of interactions too. Setting those expectations was part of their intentional communication and engagement.

Documentation with Discretion

A majority of participants also described their communication in the form of documentation of their interactions with clients. Participants shared that along with balancing documentation they also focused on protecting privacy and confidentiality of their congregants. Imam T described that "Within my community, and I guess maybe this is all over the Muslim community, always there is this issue of confidentiality, or trust". That worry around privacy was a concern for many congregants as participants shared that they still felt the need to document the experiences. Mahmoud shared that he explains to congregants earlier on " Hey, this is the issue that we are facing and then we agree to certain things, a lot of times I like to document everything, to write them down".

When it came to documentation participants had differing styles of how to go about doing so in their practice. Imam A was very detail oriented and shared he had been documenting his work for a long time. He shared "I log my prayer, my hours, my counseling, by December of 2019, I had conducted 300 pastoral counseling". He also showed the google document he used. He described his system:

> During that time, I log the data of whom I'm speaking to, and have a whole sheet of
> issues, and I just check mark what those issues are. Then I write a synopsis of the case,
> and I also log the time I spent on it.

Mahmoud described that when working with couples, documentation often was important for separation proceedings:

They come to the Imam for they decide to divorce, but they don't want to go through

lawyers, they just want to end on good terms and peacefully. This is what we encourage

people to do all the time. I tell them, this is what Islam says about her rights, and finance,

and the kids, and all of these things. Then we come to an agreement, both of them sign,

we record the whole session, and after that, whatever we agreed on, they take it to the

lawyer for the legal terms.

Participants expressed the need to implore intentional communication in their documentation

while also working to respect their client's privacy and confidentiality with discretion.

Theme Two: Incorporating Deen

All participants shared that their experiences with their congregants personalized

interactions included incorporating *Deen* [Faith] into their interactions. For Imams in particular,

this was a part of their specific role, as faith leaders, when working with their congregants. There

are two areas of focus that emerged from this theme: Scripture as *Hidayah* which included the

artifacts submitted by participants and Traditional Islamic Healing Practices.

Scripture as Hidayah [هداية: Guidance]

One major emerging category around incorporating *Deen* in personalized interactions

included Imams using scripture as guidance for congregants. Many participants spoke about

using scripture, both *Quran* and *Sunnah*, as a guide to help congregants with their concerns.

Imam T described the importance of scripture in particular:

Our heritage, from our faith also, we have a lot of stuff, either from the *Quran*, or the

Sunnah of the Prophet, or from Muslim scholars. They left for us a great legacy when it

comes to dealing with our community members as leaders serving our community.

For participants scripture was the ultimate divine guidance that Imams and Congregants strived towards. As Islamic teaching focus on motivating individuals to present their best self, scripture serves as the guide and means by which to do so. Imam Muhammad elaborated:

> The best people those who, they have knowledge. And the best knowledge is knowledge of *Quran*, the knowledge of heavens, the vantage about God, about Prophet Muhammad. Because their knowledge or the instructions from *Quran*, is like pure, pure knowledge. And that will help human being to be good, to be better on this earth.

Imams strived to share scripture in their interactions since it contained that divine guidance for all. Additionally, Br. DS described how *Quran* played an important role in how he approached his work with congregants:

> I don't necessarily have specific theories, but I can tell you for example, as a Muslim when I really go and study the *Quran*. And I find all those beautiful descriptions of how a Muslim should be in terms of character.

Quranic stories and messages ended up being a roadmap to how to deal with concerns that congregants faced. As Quran is part of divide knowledge, on the other side, Abdullah revealed how *Sunnah* helped guide his work as well:

> To be able to step back and say, "Wait a minute, let me hear both sides." We're not a judge and jury as an Imam but we do want to give recommendations based on what we see in terms of areas of weakness or failure and evil between both spouses, whether it's from one or the other or both at the same time… that's from the *Sunnah* of the Prophet to hear both sides and to be just so we try to do that as much as possible.

Imams continued to describe how they used scripture as a roadmap for congregants and for

Imams. From scripture being *Hidayah* for both Imam and their congregants, Br. DS explains the

reason scripture is so powerful and effective to use as a guide for Muslims:

> And, people can't argue with you when it comes to that, because you present them the
>
> model. You present them the model. From that perspective, this is once we have a clear
>
> reference that we are referring to, then that makes things easier.

Scripture continues to be a model and guide for Imams in their work with congregants.

Artifacts. During the interview process Imams were invited to share scripture that guided

their approach to working with their congregants. From these artifacts, three guiding areas

emerged: Service as Duty to God and Others, Honoring all Congregants, and Encouraged Shift in

Focus on *Deen* Over *Duniya*.

Service as Duty to God and Others. Four participants shared artifacts that spoke to

scripture guiding them to their duty to serve others and Allah. These verses kept focus on how

service to others, including congregants, was a duty to God.

Abdullah's artifact was a Quran verse:

قُلْ هَٰذِهِۦ سَبِيلِىٓ أَدْعُوٓا۟ إِلَى ٱللَّهِ عَلَىٰ بَصِيرَةٍ أَنَا۠ وَمَنِ ٱتَّبَعَنِى وَسُبْحَٰنَ ٱللَّهِ وَمَآ أَنَا۠ مِنَ ٱلْمُشْرِكِينَ (١٠٨)

Say, "This is my way; I invite to God, based on clear knowledge—I and whoever follows

me. Glory be to God; and I am not of the polytheists." (12:108)

He elaborated:

> The idea of me taking my personal experience, my personal path, and realizing that
>
> people are also on a path and we're on this path together if you will but maybe at different
>
> stages or different legs of the track but we're inviting.

For Abdulliah, though his life's path did not always intersect with others, when it did through his work as an Imam, scripture guided him to join others in service to meet their needs. Mahmoud's artifact was also a Quran verse:

فَبِمَا رَحْمَةٍ مِّنَ ٱللَّهِ لِنتَ لَهُمْ وَلَوْ كُنتَ فَظًّا غَلِيظَ ٱلْقَلْبِ لَٱنفَضُّوا۟ مِنْ حَوْلِكَ فَٱعْفُ عَنْهُمْ وَٱسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُمْ وَشَاوِرْهُمْ فِى ٱلْأَمْرِ فَإِذَا عَزَمْتَ فَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى ٱللَّهِ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يُحِبُّ ٱلْمُتَوَكِّلِينَ (١٥٩)

It is by of grace from God that you were gentle with them. Had you been harsh, hardhearted, they would have dispersed from around you. So pardon them, and ask forgiveness for them, and consult them in the conduct of affairs. And when you make a decision, put your trust in God; God loves the trusting (3:159).

Mahmoud expanded on the verse:

> This is when I have one-on-one session, I always have this in my mind. To be lenient to people, to put yourself in their shoes, try to help them. Get out of your way to help them and make sure that they're being served.

Mahmoud shared that scripture guided him that service was a duty to others that he strived towards. Imam Muhammad presented the following artifact:

ٱدْعُ إِلَىٰ سَبِيلِ رَبِّكَ بِٱلْحِكْمَةِ وَٱلْمَوْعِظَةِ ٱلْحَسَنَةِ وَجَٰدِلْهُم بِٱلَّتِى هِىَ أَحْسَنُ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ هُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِمَن ضَلَّ عَن سَبِيلِهِۦ وَهُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِٱلْمُهْتَدِينَ (١٢٥)

Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good advice, and debate with them in the most dignified manner. Your Lord is aware of those who stray from His path, and He is aware of those who are guided (16:125).

Imam Muhammad described:

> This ayah, give me like big responsibility. I have to have wisdom all the time to deal with others and to increase that wisdom. Increase it, read more, and learn more from all

scholars, Muslim and non-Muslim. You can find wisdom in everywhere. So, learn how to

be wise person, to be wise teacher, to be wise Imam, wise leader. And that will help you

to help your community.

Imam Muhammad expands on how this scripture verse encouraged him to seek wisdom to be

able to share it with others in his role as an Imam. For him, seeking wisdom became his means of

serving others. And lastly, Imam H shared a Sunnah of the Prophet (PBUH):

حَدَّثَنَا الْعَبَّاسُ بْنُ عُثْمَانَ الدِّمَشْقِيُّ، حَدَّثَنَا الْوَلِيدُ بْنُ مُسْلِمٍ، حَدَّثَنَا ابْنُ لَهِيعَةَ، حَدَّثَنَا عَبْدُ الرَّحْمَنِ الأَعْرَجِ، سَمِعْتُ أَبَا هُرَيْرَةَ، يَقُولُ

قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ ـ صلى الله عليه وسلم ـ ‏:‏ ‏"‏ اكْلَفُوا مِنَ الْعَمَلِ مَا تُطِيقُونَ فَإِنَّ خَيْرَ الْعَمَلِ أَدْوَمُهُ وَإِنْ قَلَّ ‏"‏ ‏.‏

Abu Hurairah narrated that the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) said: "Take on only as much as you can

do of good deeds, for the best of deeds is that which is done consistently, even if it is little."

(Sunan Ibn Mājah 4240)

He explained:

I actually like to remind myself of that it's more reward for you to listen to someone talk

than for you to worship a Allah in the last seven days of Ramadan in the house of

Prophet. That kind of hits home because sometimes you feel like you don't get enough

time for yourself but then you remember that helping others is... It goes a long way.

Imam H builds on the notion that service does not have to be grand gestures but can be small acts

done in small interactions that go a long way. All four Imams shared on the differing ways that

scripture guided them to the service of others as a duty to God.

Honoring All Congregants. Two participants shared artifacts that spoke to honoring all

congregants, despite their background, and accepting their congregant's diversity as a strength.

Imam S's artifact was a Quran verse:

يَٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلنَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَٰكُم مِّن ذَكَرٍ وَأُنثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَٰكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَآئِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوٓا۟ إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِندَ ٱللَّهِ أَتْقَىٰكُمْ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ (١٣)

O people! We created you from a male and a female, and made you races and tribes, that you may know one another. The best among you in the sight of God is the most righteous. God is All-Knowing, Well-Experienced (49:13).

He elaborated:

> And it couldn't have been more perfect than this for me, as I lead a very diverse congregation, like people who are very different from each other and everyone is bringing in a different story and have different struggle. And just everyone's journey in life is totally different. And I appreciate that this *ayah* always reminds me of that, that I'm not an Imam that just has these really answers… No. I have to realize people are different, and they see things differently and they experience their faith and their religion differently in their lives for many different reasons. And I think that this ayah is always a reminder for me to remember this diversity, and it's not like a work of the globalized new era, no. It's just work of God, God created us different, and from the time of the beginning of humanity we're being that different.

Imam S revealed how scripture guided him to consider and honor all of his congregants. Imam T's artifact builds on respecting and honoring congregants and seeing their full potential:

﴿۞ وَلَقَدْ كَرَّمْنَا بَنِىٓ ءَادَمَ وَحَمَلْنَـٰهُمْ فِى ٱلْبَرِّ وَٱلْبَحْرِ وَرَزَقْنَـٰهُم مِّنَ ٱلطَّيِّبَـٰتِ وَفَضَّلْنَـٰهُمْ عَلَىٰ كَثِيرٍ مِّمَّنْ خَلَقْنَا تَفْضِيلًا (۷۰)

We have honored the Children of Adam, and carried them on land and sea, and provided them with good things, and greatly favored them over many of those We created (17:70)

Imam T explained:

> Honoring people. People are honored by Allah. When we meet with them, when we talk to them, when we serve them, we have to keep that into consideration. We have to keep that in mind, that by honoring people we are honoring ourselves as believers....respecting

the intelligence of people is extremely important when we deal with our community members. Yes, I might have somebody heartbroken coming to me, going through a situation in his or her life, but in reality these people are great people, and very intellectual, are very smart people. When I deal with my community members, I always keep in mind that, "Hey, I might be dealing with a Genius right here in front of me." If it was not for my status as an Imam, he would not speak to me at all. I have to make an appointment, and wait for several weeks in order to speak to him. This is the reality.

When we deal with our community members, we have to keep all these factors in mind. Imam T shared how scripture guided him to interact with different congregants. Both Imams leaned into the focus and importance of honoring all congregants and celebrating their diversity as a strength.

Help to Shift Focus on Deen Over Duniya. And lastly, some participants shared artifacts that spoke to helping congregants focus on Deen [faith] over Duniya [World]. As a common Islamic teaching, there is a focus that issues in this life as a worldly test and the focus should be on the longer-term focus of faith values. Br. DS shared these two verses:

وَلَا تَسْتَوِى ٱلْحَسَنَةُ وَلَا ٱلسَّيِّئَةُ ٱدْفَعْ بِٱلَّتِى هِىَ أَحْسَنُ فَإِذَا ٱلَّذِى بَيْنَكَ وَبَيْنَهُ عَدَٰوَةٌ كَأَنَّهُ وَلِىٌّ حَمِيمٌ (٣٤) وَمَا يُلَقَّىٰهَآ إِلَّا ٱلَّذِينَ

(٣٥) صَبَرُواْ وَمَا يُلَقَّىٰهَآ إِلَّا ذُو حَظٍّ عَظِيم

Good and evil are not equal. Repel evil with good, and the person who was your enemy becomes like an intimate friend. But none will attain it except those who persevere, and none will attain it except the very fortunate (41: 34-35).

He elaborated:

So, when you really look at this thing and how Allah (SWT) through his holy book, the Quran, is motivating that good intention inside of us to change. The power of change is

very important. We have a lot of power inside of us to change if we really would like to do so. So, bringing that motivation for a higher goal, sometimes we don't aspire for that higher goal, we end up being caught into day to day issues and our selfishness becomes an obstacle. So rather than that let's get out of that and start looking for a higher goal and that higher goal is to please Allah, please God. And by doing that actually we end up solving our immediate problems.

Br. DS used scripture as a guide for his congregants to keep focus on the larger goals and focus in life, which happens to be faith and God. Imam A also shared a verse as his artifact:

إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ ٱشْتَرَىٰ مِنَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ أَنفُسَهُمْ وَأَمْوَالَهُم بِأَنَّ لَهُمُ ٱلْجَنَّةَ يُقَٰتِلُونَ فِى سَبِيلِ ٱللَّهِ فَيَقْتُلُونَ وَيُقْتَلُونَ وَعْدًا عَلَيْهِ حَقًّا فِى ٱلتَّوْرَٰةِ وَٱلْإِنجِيلِ وَٱلْقُرْءَانِ وَمَنْ أَوْفَىٰ بِعَهْدِهِ مِنَ ٱللَّهِ فَٱسْتَبْشِرُواْ بِبَيْعِكُمُ ٱلَّذِى بَايَعْتُم بِهِۦ وَذَٰلِكَ هُوَ ٱلْفَوْزُ ٱلْعَظِيمُ (١١١)

God has purchased from the believers their lives and their properties in exchange for Paradise. They fight in God's way, and they kill and get killed. It is a promise binding on Him in the Torah, and the Gospel, and the Quran. And who is more true to his promise than God? So rejoice in making such an exchange—that is the supreme triumph (9:111).

He described:

> So one of the things that motivates me is that knowing that I don't belong to myself, my talents, my abilities, my wealth, my positions don't belong to me. They're a loss. So why not use it in a way that serves beneficial to that relationship with Allah? To that transaction that unless says, it's done. It's not a transaction that is pending, nor is it an offer, a less making is done… I realized that our masjid and our community centers are constantly failing and we better fix it because that's the only place people go, right? When they have problems, they go to the masjid. So why can't we create a model of fixing?

For Imam A, who came back into his role as an Imam, scripture guided him that the bigger focus was always the community and it's need. Both Imams shared that scripture guided them to help keep their congregants focus on larger term goals of *Deen* over short time concerns in the *Duniya*.

Traditional Islamic Healing Practices

All Imams shared traditional Islamic healing practices, outside of guiding scripture, they included in their personalized Interactions. These were particular healing practices that Imams incorporated faith in their work. Some Imams shared that they prayed, made *dua*, with their congregants together. Mahmoud shared that some congregants ask directly for *dua*:

> They want to hear from the Imam, especially also when they've been going through some difficulties in life, they're going through financial difficulties, or something so they come to the Imam all the time. They come to me all the time and say, "Imam, are there any dua that I can make that Allah helps me to get a job, or helps me through my health".

Abdullah explained that he finds dua to help provide calm and balance for his congregants "I think it's important to make Dua as well and this is very helpful for people who are internally in turmoil, the Dua and Quran will begin to calm that down." Br. DS described that Dua can be a source of healing as well "Let's work together [with congregant] and see what can be done to do the healing. So then it depends on what is the issue, sometimes the healing is asking people to make Dua". Imam Muhammad summed up the importance of Dua by sharing "So, as a Muslim community, like any other community, like any other person, we have all issues there are people, they have it. We pray for all people to, that Allah would give them comfort and peace, inshallah."

Along with making *Dua*, some Imams encourage congregants to work on their *Salat*, the five obligatory prayers or Read Quran. Imam Muhammad shared with this congregant "Wake up early. Deep prayers. Remember Allah. Pray. That prayer, morning, early morning prayer, that will help you, That will help". Mahmoud commented that *Salat* and *Quran* are parts of healing "You just follow up with them, how was your Salat doing, usually Salat is the most important thing. How is your Quran? How is coming to the Masjid? Make sure to come to the Masjid. So this is a spiritual [healing]." While some Imams focus on using *Salat* and *Quran* as a means of reminder other stated it meant taking it a step further to remind others of Deen. Imam S shared:

> I have gained that kind of intellectual humility where I might be wrong, I might not understand, I know the Quran, I know the *Sunnah* of the Prophet, I know the *Firq*, I know what we're supposed to do but it doesn't always mean that I know everything, or I can offer all the different insights that they need. So, I just encourage them to reflect on it deeper.

Participants also revealed they worked to reminding congregants that God was with them and that they are not alone. Imam Muhammad told his congregants "Allah's taking care of you all the time. Allah loves you. Allah loves you. Because people look for love sometimes. Allah loves you. The Prophet loves you." Imam S described the power he felt in the comfort of faith and knowing he's not alone:

> If you don't take the time to reflect on your life, on yourself, on whatever you're going through. And not really saying that we have the power necessarily to change or to heal ourselves but as faithful people, at the end of the day, I'm a religious person, I'm a faithful person. Whether we agree or disagree, whether I consider myself liberal or conservative,

I am a faithful person, I'm a man of faith. And that requires that I believe that I'm not

alone in that kind of suffering.

Though most Imams agree that often individuals are facing mental health issues, there

has to be space to consider the influence of Evil Eye and Magic on an individual. Mahmoud

walked through the process congregants come to him with:

 Of course, we have to rule out this *Hasad* [Envy] because, as Muslims, we'll be living

with Evil Eye. We do believe in that. I see a lot of cases, they go to therapists, there is

nothing, they rule out anything medically, there's nothing. So what is left? *Rouqya*

[Exorcism] *Shriya* [Islamic Law], I make the blessing to Quran, and Selected Ayah

[verses]. Then, they become, *Alhamdulliah* much better. The more extreme cases that

they think someone done black magic on them, they're possessed or something, people

believe in this. We're not denying that, either, but 98% of the time, it's more

psychological problems. So I refer them back to a therapist.

Abdullah also shared more about this:

Then we also get, it seems even more recently a lot of issues when it comes to the overlap

between things such as *Jinn* and magic and *Jinn* and undiagnosed mental illness that

could be bipolar or schizophrenia or any host of number of things or the intersection of

magic between both a mental health condition as well as it's very possible some other, I

don't want to use the word paranormal, but I mean, it is part of the understanding in Islam

that there can be effects of evil and so on, on people. And so as an Imam, the counseling

part, but also I do some *Ruqya* [Exorcism] as well for people who are going to things.

And so my approach is to tell them, "Okay, we can do the *Ruqya* but also seek

professional help", make sure that it's no mental health or mental illness that is also

leading to this behavior or these thought patterns.

These traditional Islamic healing practices, along with using scripture as a guide, became part of

participants' experiences of incorporating *Deen* into their interactions with their congregants.

Theme Three: Contextualizing Congregants

A third emerging theme was that the experiences of Imams include contextualizing their

congregants. All participants shared that their interactions with their congregants were based on

the context around them. Imams expressed that they had to understand their congregants and

contextualize them to be able to gage their interactions with them one on one. Imams experiences

resulted in two sub themes which described two areas of focus: (a) Congregants as Fiber of The

Community and (b) Congregants Focus on Individual Freedom. Imams not only described how

they contextualized congregants in their communities but also at the individual level.

Subtheme One: Congregants as Fiber of The Community

Many participants shared that in order to understand their congregants and meet their

needs one on one, they had to take a step back and understand and contextualize the community

the congregant was a part of and coming from. For many Imams, the community was often

connected to the mosque community for which they were faith leaders. This contextualization

included examining and understanding four areas of focus in the community: The *Masjid*

Environment, The COVID 19 Pandemic, Community Needs, and the Role of Spiritual Healing in

Mental Ailments. The areas lend for participants to contextualize community aspects related to

the individuals they met with for their personalized interactions and how their congregant fit into

the fiber of their community.

Masjid Environment. Many participants reported and spoke about their *Masjid's* environment when working with congregants individually. As the environment and the basis for these interactions was often the Mosque, the Masjid environment played an important role in Imams' experiences. Br. DS explained that ideally "We would like our mosques, our centers to be inclusive" yet participants shared their experiences around *masjid* politics playing a role in the *masjid* environment. These politics were often negative experiences between different members involved in the mosque's leadership structure. Imam A shared:

> The reason I came back into *masjid* because truth be told I'm sick and tired of *masjids* and their politics. I hung up the boots in 2015, I finished my contract, I was like, "You know what? I'm not doing this anymore because we have Islamophobia on the rise. We have issues on the rise. We have our youngsters in University who are sort of deprived. I'd rather spend my life helping them, than to just sit in four walls and do what the four walls tells me.

For Imam A, a big push to come back as an Imam was the new *masjid* environment allowed him more freedoms. Abdullah continued by elaborating the tension between Imams and board members:

> I think most *Masajids* in America are set up where there's a board and there's an executive committee and then there's an Imam so Imams are not as powerful as people may think because they're usually reporting to another committee and which actually causes tension sometimes between Imams and committees because people see the Imam as an authority and the committee is the legal, constitutional authority of the *Masjid*.

These differing perspectives of tension could often lead to challenges in the mosque environment. This sentiment is described by Mahmoud around the environment it creates in the mosques that congregants pick up on:

> You know there are always issues and misunderstanding, and miscommunication between the Imams, the religious leaders, and the board members. Board members, of course, are the most partly coming from just regular professions, corporate world. And the Masjid dynamic is a little different from the corporate world, of course, so that clash happens.

Imam A shared that that clash leads to difficulty in what exactly Imams can or can not do with their congregants which in turn effects their work. He described a time when he was told by board members to change the title of an event in the mosque for youths:

> They're like, 'Imam, we have a problem.' I said, 'What's the problem?' 'The title is very provocative.' I said, 'That's what it's supposed to be.' And they're like, 'No. No. No. But some board members don't like it.' I said, 'That's good they don't like it.' I said, 'Did anyone from the youth complain?' They said, 'No.' I said, 'Well, that's what it's for. If you're going to put something negative, who's going to come?' And they never listened to me.

He shared that they ended up changing the title that felt more appropriate to them. Imam A shared that he felt it did not reach the youth he wanted to.

Though this was not a concern was most participants, Imam S shared that as safety became imperative for his work with congregants, he described what can happen when the mosque is not a safe space anymore:

> Once we step into our masjid, we don't feel it's safe, it's not safe spaces for us anymore. No matter where we are, whether we're women, specifically, women, specifically

84

minorities, specifically young people, converts do not feel safe, they don't feel connected

with people.

All these factors around the *masjid* and the *masjid's* environment became part of the community

context that Imams had to attend to when working with their congregants.

      The COVID-19 Pandemic. Additionally, all participants shared how the COVID-19

global pandemic impacted and influenced their communities and how it changed the way they

contextualized congregants in their personalized interactions. As this study was conducted in the

COVID-19 Pandemic it very much had an influence on Imams and their work with congregants.

Imams spoke about the increased challenges their communities had to face in the pandemic.

Imam S described:

      I have seen it. And to my surprise, I'm always trying to follow up with the impact of the

      pandemic, and the financial crisis on people. So I'm not surprised, in the sense that I

      understand. I understand why this is happening. So yeah, I am seeing a lot of stress, I'm

      seeing a lot of anxiety among all different groups of people, religious or non-religious,

      young or old, doesn't matter.

Mahmoud explaining this feeling of stress by sharing "People, of course, when they care about

their health, and they care about their wealth, and they care about their jobs, and all of these

things; there was uncertainty about everything." A key notion participants talked about was

added uncertainty and turning to Imams for guidance. Abdullah shared on the added isolation in

the pandemic:

      I think just the general feeling that people talk about of being isolated and being cut off

      and the psychological and mental wellness type of situation of being stuck in your house

      all day isolation. We see that some of that in the community, some relationships being

tried and tested because they have to adapt where both spouses are there 24/7, children have to be taken care of because they're online schooling and all this, additional stresses because of the change and the new way or what they're calling the new normal. Yeah, we see that stress as well and the people coming to talk to us.

Imam H also spoke about congregants needing more from faith leaders in this time "There's been more than before. More people who need help. More people who have anxiety. More people who are going through things." Not only did participants report additional stressors but challenges in overcoming them. Imam A described worrying that issues are harder to handle:

I'm confident there's so many problems happening out there. But the volume of it is still under wraps, which means that every day that passes the chances of trying to salvage a marriage, to salvage a family, is depreciated. It's depleting. And the chances of the knee-jerk results, which are divorce, running away from home, infidelity, whatever else is up there. And at that time when they [congregants] pull you in.

Along with participants sharing the difficulties and added stresses of the pandemic, they also spoke about pivoting to online spaces to be accessible and meet congregants. Mahmoud described "I had a lot of sessions via Zoom, as well. It became an option, I haven't done that before. I still like the in-person sessions, but this is the only option, we go for it." Imam Muhammad spoke about moving all services online "We started to have other strategies to reach out our community members to deliver our lectures, our speech. So we started online, classes online, lectures. Online meetings online with individuals, online everything." With the pivot to virtual, Br. DS described challenges in the online interactions:

One of the negative issues is the fact that we are not able to see each other face to face.

And therefore, these kinds of issues, especially when it gets to counseling, talking to

people over the phone or talking to people over Zoom is completely different.

Yet despite challenges, participants also shared that the pandemic was an avenue to remind and

guide people as well. Mahmoud reflected:

For basically, people were taking, us included, were taking a lot of blessings for granted.

That's the topic that I focused on so many times, we took a lot of things for granted, and

now we realize that 'hey we have to wake up', don't take anything for granted.

For participants the COVID-19 global pandemic changed the way they contextualized

congregants and their communities to meet their individual needs.

Community Needs. Participants spoke about their experiences contextualizing the

communities needs in order to adapt their approach working with their congregants individually.

A few participants spoke about the community's need for training Imams in psychology as there

was a gap missing in meeting the needs of the community members. Imam S described this

community need "We need Imams who are trained in responding... Almost being first

responders, like emotional or mental first responders, because they are the ones on the ground,

and then hopefully they take the person to the counselor." Imam A also explained how the lack

of training for Imams made their ability to connect with the community difficult:

But when you get into the fiber of your own community, that's a whole different ball

game. And if you understand that, that's the game changer. And since our Islamic

scholars are not trained to go into that,, there is a failure.

In addition to the need for trained Imams, participants also described conflict in the

community to lean into a collectivist or individualistic mindset. Imams described the community

as one family and yet congregants living in the US had to deal with individual perspectives. Imam S described his personal experience back in Egypt in which the collectivist mindset, which is lacking in the US, was contextuality important to the community. He mentioned:

> I went out to the streets and there are thousands of people and you interact, at least with 10, 15, 20 people. You go sit in a cafe somewhere and you have a conversation with someone about something that's happening, that's a healing that's happening. You go to the masjid and the masjid is packed with people, that's healing that's happening.

By contrast, Br. DS described that having a collectivist view often could lead to challenges in the United States for congregants:

> Definitely there is a difference, because people who grow up in the West most likely there is a lot of freedom. There is a lot of individual freedom and their expectations are different. And people coming from certain backgrounds, they expect the wives to subdue, they expect the wives just to listen, they expect the wives to just say, "Yes, sir." And things like that. And so you deal with all that and then how to relate to that.

For Br. DS there is a nuisance an Imam has to contextualize and make sense of for his community. Abdullah summed this conflict up by stating "I think the biggest thing is that we're [Muslims] not in a bubble and we are part and parcel for better or for worse of American culture and society." That despite the differing views on what the community needs, the Muslim community is part of America and thus is striving to find its balance. Making sense and identifying the community needs is part of Imams experiences in contextualizing their communities they are a part of, and this is an important aspect of their interactions with their congregants.

The Role of Spiritual Healing in Mental Ailments. And lastly, participants dove into the community views on the role of spiritual healing in mental ailments. These perceptions and perspectives contextualized the community to Imams which in turn influenced their individual work with congregants. As Imams worked to provide support to congregants, understanding the community's view of these roles was imperative. Multiple participants described the notion that spirituality helped mental health. Imam T described:

> Spirituality can make a big difference. Especially when somebody is spiritually down, they are despaired from Allah, nothing makes sense to them in this world, and all that stuff. Spirituality makes a big difference, in this case spirituality helps mental health.

Imam Muhammad shared specific spiritual practices he implored to help congregants "Allah (SAW) created us. And Allah created us in the best shape. If we practice Quran well, practice his pure instructions, we will not have any issues, individual, in family level or community level." Additionally, participants continued to draw connections that strengthen in the spiritual perspectives on mental health. Br. DS explained:

> Well, for all these years actually, I really find it very, very fascinating how our Islamic knowledge and what are facts of psychology or sociology that actually they don't necessarily conflict. They don't necessarily contradict as long as they are facts, as long as they are objective.

Some participants also spoke about reframing concerns with a faith perspective. Imam S shared:

> And we're trying to do is try to, we were trying to redefine what a problem is. And if you understand a problem in the context of what [the] problem is, then you would understand what healing is and you'd understand the outlook of a problem. [The] problem isn't there to put you down. Problems are to raise you up.

Yet not all participants felt that healing had to be compatible with western perspectives. Abdullah builds on this:

> And so another approach to healing I think, Imam Ghazali's work and his idea of spiritual diseases of the heart and treating those. And I know there is a little bit of intersectionality between Western psychology… but some people are maybe forcing it.

Participants also spoke about the context of healing as a long term. Imam H focused on "We see it every day… At least, we hope to see it. We hope to see when people come to the Mosque, they benefit. They get that out of the way, they go home. It happens daily." These differences in the role of spirituality in healing mental ailments came down to the complexity of mental health itself. Abdullah described issues in gradations by saying:

> I do see mental health as not on and off but there's some gradations so it may be a person is particularly anxious at a particular phase in their life or particular situation of their life but then that subsides. And it changes.

Having a community contextualization of spiritual healing and the role it plays was part of Imams experiences in providing congregants individualized support.

Subtheme Two: Congregant Focus on Individual Freedom

Many participants also shared that in order to understand their congregants and meet their individual needs and freedoms, they had to take a step back and understand and contextualize the individual themselves and where they were coming from. For many Imams, the congregants were not just part of their community but had their own individual considerations as well. This included examining and understanding four areas of focus in the individual: Congregant Needs, Reason for Seeking the Imam, Stigma for Seeking Help, and Challenges Between the

Congregant and Imam. These areas lend Imams to conceptualize individuals and their individual freedoms when they met with them one on one.

Congregants Needs. Participants spoke about their experiences contextualizing the individual's needs in order to focus their approach working with that congregant. Participants focused on what congregants expressed they needed from their Imam. Many participants shared about congregants needing specific pre-selected answers to their questions. Imam S revealed:

> People come, they seek my help and guidance, even religious questions. And I tell them,
> 'Here is what the answer is according to my training and the best of my understanding.'
> And they still come back and say, 'No, I'm not really happy with that.'

Imam S also shared about this immediate need for answers "They come with this wound, they come with this issue, they come with this problem or the suffering, they tell me about it, and they wait for me to solve it for them". For Imam S, he reported this pressure to resolve issues as well. He also elaborated "And then there is a percentage of people who are feeling lost, so they're seeking some sort of a compass, guidance." Participants focused on this need from congregants to be their guide. Additionally, Imam Muhammad elaborated that congregants often want direct advice:

> They have questions. Sometimes between community members. That person he did that.
> He said that. What I should do to solve this issue? He bothered me. Should I answer?
> Should I face him? Should I touch him? Should I ignore him? What I should do? What do
> you advise? Sometimes I have answer, yes. Sometime I don't have answer.

Imams recognized that congregants hung on to their guidance as that added complexity in their work. Imam T described this need congregants have and his own approach toward it:

It seems that the first person they think about to reach out to to solve the problem is the imam. This is how I feel. This gives me a great pride that I am a person that people look up to when they are in a situation seeking help, seeking guidance, seeking assistance.

Along with needing advice and an answer to their problem, congregants also needed Islamic knowledge on matters related to them. When Mahmoud described what brought congregants in he said "lack of communication, no patience, and of course, lack of Islamic knowledge." Imam Muhammad expands on his role saying, "If not, so I will provide him some knowledge, some information, some roles, some values because I believe every single issue there is some answers in *Quran* and in *Sunnah.*" Most Imams explained their role to be providers of answers to Islamic questions. Imam H described helping provide an Islamic perspective as he shared:

> Sometimes if someone comes to you in the *Masjid*, you have to report. Just sitting with people on... Or responding to or learning about situations in Islam or... I always tell them how Islam actually deals with this and what are the rulings and support of it.

Abdullah explained that as his congregants seek Islamic guidance, "I would tell them, "I'm not judging you as a person, but this is what Islam teaches about this type of behaviors or whatever it may be and we encourage you to reform and so on." Mahmoud shared that based on congregants' needs he "like to teach goodness, to help people and to be with them, to guide them throughout their whole lives, from the spiritual perspective, of course." Making sense and identifying individual needs was part of Imams experience when contextualizing individuals in their personalized interactions.

Reasons for Seeking Imam. Participants also shared that part of their experience was contextualizing congregants in relation to the reasons they were seeking the Imam. Imams

revealed many varying reasons and concerns that congregants were facing. Imams shared trying

to keep focus of their interactions on helping assist with those reasons. Imam A laid out the

breath of reasons that individuals came in for by sharing "Just give you an understanding, I've

been doing pastoral counseling since 2003. From managing people's family affairs, marital

issues, personal issues." Imam T focused on varying reasons all somewhat related to social

conflicts:

> Most of the issues that I receive from my community members are related to family
>
> conflicts, social conflicts. Sometimes businesses, when two Muslims for example
>
> partners in a business, they go into a situation. Or an employee with his employer,
>
> employer with his employee for example. parents-kids, kids-parents, spouses. I would say
>
> that the vast majority of the cases I get are social and family cases.

Imams revealed a lot of varying reasons. Some like Abdullah even called them in clinical terms

such as counseling "In terms of the one-on-one counseling formats, it's a very varied so

premarital counseling, marital counseling, youth counseling, parents who have problems with

their youth either with pregnancy or drugs." Participants revealed a main focus to seek help

related to families or couples. Imam Muhammad shared "The relation between them

[congregants] and their children. Relation between them, in general, their family relation, family

members, their father, mother, sisters, brothers." Br. DS also echoed a focus on marital concerns

since there is often a religious aspect to it:

> This is probably top priority. Most of the people as they come to my office is basically
>
> when there will be conflict in their marriage and they need, if they need that to get
>
> resolved in an Islamic way, Muslim way.

Mahmoud provided context for why marriage concerns was a big reason to seek Imams:

A lot of other reasons causes for marital conflicts. I can tell you my observations, my top four or five observations from me. Number one is infidelity. That includes the physical, emotional, and financial, that's what I see in our communities. Number two is the in-laws, 100%. The in-laws and their involvement. Then, the financial situation. Number four is high expectations.

All these various reasons for seeking the Imam provided a means for Imams to contextualize their congregants at the individual level as they prepared for their personalized work.

Stigma for Seeking Help. When it came to contextualizing congregants individually, Imams reported having to understand stigma for seeking help. Based on how congregants viewed and made sense of that stigma, participants had to adapt their approach to the individual. Participants spoke about the stigma individual congregants expressed. Br. DS shared "They don't want to be labeled that they have a psychological issue because in some places having a mental health problem means you are crazy." Imam A continued to elaborate on the notion of being 'crazy' as he said:

And so again, how do I see mental health, a problem that's being ignored in our society... When we put off mental health, when we put it in the back burner, we created a culture where mental health means your faith is weak, or you're truly, as the Arabic word, *Majnoon*.. You're crazy. Or you know what? You're someone that my family doesn't need to interact with because we don't want to become lunatics like you. It's a systemic effect. And so, for me to break that stigma, that's one thing I feel my role is.

This worry congregants have of being labeled as having a problem is something participants shared that married couples also experienced. Imam T shared:

Especially when it's an issue of a couple, married couple confidentiality in married

couples. Because they think that if people see them, both of them walking to my office.

People might think that there is something wrong going on between them.

Along with sharing congregants' views of seeking help, participants also described that

individuals worried about bringing up controversial or taboo topics into their interactions. Imam

A elaborated on challenges parents might have around corporal punishment and discipline for

their children "Or they'll say, 'We can come to you because they [professionals] doesn't know

our culture and maybe understand *dantna duptna* [physical discipline]." Imam S shared that

conversations around sexuality continue to be taboo for congregants and challenging for Imams

to address. He said:

I was asked the same question that I was asked yesterday by people of almost the same

age, people asking me about issues that relate to transgender and LGBTQ communities.

These are questions that people are saying, "How do I reconcile my faith and the

teachings with the reality that is our life now?" I have people suffering from actual

mental and emotional trauma.

Along with contextualizing individuals in relation to stigma and taboo topics, participants also

reported that some congregants were in denial of their issues. Br. DS shared about this challenge

"The point which is tricky is, people who are coming and they are in denial, that they don't have

that mental health problem. That is a problem.". Imam A also leaned into this denial:

If you come in and say, "I'm a mental health counselor", they'll say, "well, crazy people

go to you. We're not crazy." That's the denial in our culture, right? They're like, "we don't

go to mental health professionals because we're perfectly fine. And we don't take

medications because we're perfectly fine. And then we could go get maybe a *Roukiya*

[Exorcism] because maybe *Sheytan* [The Devil] is on the person, but the person's not

mentally ill.

Understanding this stigma and denial for individuals became an important aspect for Imams to

contextualizing congregants in order to understand how best to provide support for them in their

personalized interactions.

Challenges Between Congregants and Imams. And lastly, participants shared that

when individually contextualizing their congregants they also had to specifically consider unique

challenges being faced between congregants and Imams. These challenges changed Imam's

approach to their work. Participants often spoke about being called in at the last minute to help

fix the problems, through that was not always possible. Imam A stated, "We're pulled into the

11th hour and 59 minutes" and he also shared "You're bringing me in the last strand you're

literally falling and I'm here 160 pounds and you're like 500 pounds of weight problems." Along

with this, congregants often wanted a quick fix to their issue. Br. DS explained:

> It's not only one sided. So most of the time that's what people are looking for, but if that
>
> is done and then the healing needs time. Sometimes people are coming and they're
>
> looking for quick fixes, those quick fixes don't last.

Imams expressed worry around not being able to properly address concerns in this hurry. Imam

H also commented "I mean, I can give them the typical book answers that you learn through the

process but not really helping the individual". In addition to being pulled in at the last minute,

Imams also shared that lack of insight and understanding on the congregant's behalf caused

difficulties for them. Imam S shared:

> And so, the one thing I always, almost... And I'm not blaming victims or anything but the
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> one thing I find difficult to understand is, when people reach out to me asking me to

maybe solve their problem or relieve their suffering, but I see a lot of lack of insight and reflection on their part.

Imams also spoke about getting caught in the middle of family or relational dynamics as well. Br. DS described being stuck in the middle of a couple "And, maybe they are expecting the Imam to side with them, and maybe see the issue the way that we see it." Imam S also elaborated on the challenges for him to be in the middle:

I have a couple that's going through divorce and they are bringing me into the fight or the separation. It's a battle, to be more accurate. But I keep being brought back to this, whether it is, either side or they want me to talk to their kids. And it's been going on for like three years now, and I'm in the middle of all of that.

Lastly, a common challenge Imams had to face with congregants included helping congregants navigate culture versus their faith. Imam reported finding difficulty in keeping focus around faith over culture Br. DS described this about congregants he worked with:

And what he is understanding is basically culture. That's a culture, it's not a religion. So to draw the line between the two is a big issue and many people they are imposing that on their own children. For example, someone may tell his daughter, "You have to marry so and so. You have no choice." I say, that's wrong. This is not your Islam, this is your Culture.

Imam H explained how balancing the line between culture and faith often was a challenge for congregants:

I see that people are going through a lot when it comes to culture versus religion. I see a lot of people not understanding each other. I see that, in general, people have a good

heart. They want to please everyone in their household, but you kind of have to pick

between helping or using everyone's heart versus your own.

All of these challenges between congregants and Imams were important for participants to

contextualize at the individual level in regard to their personalized work.

Theme Four: Conceptualizing Their Identity

A fourth emerging theme came from participants sharing that their experiences included

from them conceptualizing their professional and personal identity. Imams shared that

developing their multifaceted identity as an Imam, influenced their understanding of their

interactions with their congregants. This idea included understanding four areas of focus:

Expectations as Leaders in the Masjid, Formal and Informal Training, Civic and Civil Duties as

an Imam, and Influence of Personal Experiences. Participants described the role these areas

played in their conceptualization of their professional identity. Their view of their job as an

Imam continued to evolve to meet the needs of all their congregants.

Expectations as Leaders in the Masjid

All participants conceptualized their identity through the lens of leadership in the *masjid*.

Imams spoke of their experience as leaders and the expectations and obligations they felt as

leaders in their community. Imams are considered faith leaders, and for the participants in this

study, that even meant leaders in their masjid. Some participants highlighted how they viewed

their leadership role was actually an act of service. That service was often towards God but also

towards their congregants. Imam T mentioned that a way to serve God was to serve the creation

in this leadership role:

Little by little, I started developing this feeling within myself to be someone who can help others in their spirituality, in committing themselves better to their faith, and to serving Allah, and the community, and the Ummah.

Imam Muhammad reflected on the prestige of his role as a leader "We are proud of ourselves that Allah put us in this position to help serve his servants, and to help our community members. I'm so happy to do it. I'm not complaining." For some Imams leadership was not just about serving but was about a responsibility to the community. Imam T also said:

My wife taught me leadership is serving. Leadership is not a privilege. Leadership is serving. And we have to learn how to serve people with dignity and honor. This is what I tell the employees here at the Islamic center, because we receive all kinds of people. We receive good people, and we receive bad people. We receive polite people, and we receive aggressive people.

For others there was a sense of urgency and commitment as a leader. Mahmoud described:

That's actually, that's my mission statement. To nurture their spiritual growth and to lead with excellence, that's my role. I personally don't take it as a job, it's much more than that. Serving the community, if they consider it a job, they just care about the paycheck, they will never be successful. Again, people would sense that. So me, personally, I really, really try my best to go above and beyond the hours and everything, and to make sure that, *Alhamdulliah*, people are being served, that the book of Allah is being taught to people, that manners are being taught to people, trying to be as a role model myself.

This notion of being a good role model for others was part of participants' experiences as a leader. Additionally, for some participants that aspect of leadership came with the ability to make good decisions. Abdullah explained this:

But I think it's important for Imams to step up and to lead. They don't have to be administrators, but I think they should try to meet the expectations as much as possible of being a sound leader who's making good decisions and judgment and so on.

He also elaborated the importance of transformation "Imam is one who leads by example, so I think it comes hand in hand with being an Imam is to lead through transformation of others but also... empowering others to be leaders." For participants leadership was not just about being a role model for congregants but also inspiring change, even in the individual context. Imam A speaks about this personal connection a little differently. He described:

There's a lot of great scholars here, but most of them are not people-friendly scholars. With all respect, they're crowd speakers. They'll speak in the crowds, they'll engage, but they're not the people who will walk into the people and speak with them, right? Because it takes time and energy. Also, and granted, they're not built for that. They're built for that high cloud and which is good. And I work with all of them too. So there are very few counselors and that's one of the things that I realized, the community is deprived of connection with their spiritual leaders.

For Imam A this depravity was part of how he saw his role as a leader to be able to connect with congregants for their personalized work. Along with this worry of lack of connection as a leader, some Imams also described other areas leadership still needed to grow. Abdullah said:

A lot of thinkers think that the problem with the Ummah today is a crisis of leadership. I would probably tend to agree that we don't have too many leaders to be emulated in the Muslim world and so yeah, I would say there is a crisis of leadership.

All of these perspectives on being a leader in the masjid was part of how Imams conceptualized their identity and their role with their congregants.

Formal and Informal Training

A majority of participants also described their conceptualization of their identity and role as an Imam through their formal and informal training and how it prepared them for their job with congregants. Participants reported formal training to be formalized educational experiences Imams had in Islamic education. Informal training often included other ways outside of that Imams kept up with knowledge and skills for their role. The Imams interviewed had varying formal and informal training experiences. Imams described differing opinions on how formal training helped prepare them for their personalized interactions. Some Imams felt it didn't not prepare them for this particular work. Imam A had a few formal experiences and yet reported:

And so you're in such a sheltered environment, when you come out from there, your judgment is so flawed. Islamically, you have original understanding. But if you want to stay in that cocoon, you become ever more so irrelevant in society. And that doesn't mean you water down your religion [for society].

Others like Br. DS did not have any formal training and he felt he was missing out. He expressed:

There are certain things missing, for example, by not going through a formal training definitely there are certain things going to be missing. Where I may be doing my best to learn them informally on my own, but it's not going to be the same as going through a formal training, whether both for secular, as well as religious.

For those who felt their formal training was helpful they emphasized it's focus on Islamic tenets and knowledge. Imam Muhammad who had the most formal training of all participants described the focus of his studies "we studied, of course, many subjects like *Fikr*, *Tafseer*, *Hadith*, the

traditions of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), *Quran*, the meaning of *Quran*. Reciting *Quran*."

Imam Muhammad had the most formal training of all participants, up to the doctorate level.

Though participants had varying views of their formal training, many participants spoke

of the importance to continue their learning informally. All participants expressed engaging in

informal learning. These included differing ways, but many participants shared how their

experience was their best informal training. As Imam T said, "our experience plays a big role."

Br. DS who had the most experience as an Imam mentioned "Hopefully, all that experience

prepared me to deal with people from different backgrounds." Mahmoud helped tie the

connection from formal education to informal experience as he stated:

> Well, to get the foundation of the Islamic knowledge, absolutely. You cannot be an Imam
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> without fully learning *Quran*, understanding what *Quran* is all about, understand the
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> different sciences of Islam, these are the foundation. And after that, basically, experience
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> is the most important factor, not just the education. Education's very important to give
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> you the foundation and you build on that. It's a journey that never stops.

Aside from Imams experience, some participants shared conferences and workshops as a means

to learn more informally. Imam Muhammad described paying out of his own pocket for a

customer service training to help his individual work:

> I attend many, many training. Customer service, I attend the customer service training
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> for three days in Dallas one day. And I paid for it from my own pocket just to practice
>
> well and to have skills pay for trainings. How to deal with others. How to have good
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> customer service as an Imam.

For many Imams the informal training was sought to fill gaps in their own skills and knowledge.

Imam T also spoke about learning at conferences and seminars:

At the beginning I didn't have a clear picture about these kind of meetings [interactions

with congregants]. So, I used to have open-end meetings. People sometimes they used to

keep me for hours. Honestly, I started learning. I started attending some workshops, and

seminars, about this kind of stuff. Especially when it comes to counseling and advising.

Abdullah described that those workshops were not just about their individual work with

congregants but more general to their role as an Imam:

We haven't had an AMJA [Assembly of Muslim Jurists of America] because of the

pandemic but I always look forward to those specific workshops that they have whether

it's they have a workshop on fundraising or on counseling or on areas that Imams are

engaged in already.

Another means of informal training was learning from mentors and teachers. Imam H described:

The informal training has necessarily helped, like sitting with your teachers, and the few

times in the beginning when people ask you questions, you tell them you'll get back to

them and then you learn from your own mentor and teachers, of how you would respond

or what's the best advice you can give.

Imam A also revealed the influence his mentor had on his work with individual congregants:

Our teacher sent us to go through some training with other scholars, and to understand the

ins and outs. 2002, I spent a great chunk of that year under the mentorship of my Imam

where I learned how to not just lead the prayers, but then interact with people and so on

and so forth.

For Imams, learning from teachers informally was very valuable. Many participants identified as

teachers in their role to congregants as well. Additionally, when it came to Imam's training,

formal and informal, some Imam S shared a desire for more psychological knowledge to meet the needs of their congregants:

> And my job as an Imam will require that I do a really intense amount. It's not any more reassurance and it's not any more just comforting people, I will need to seriously understand, What is stress? What is anxiety? And how can I help guide someone out, navigate them. What is depression?

Abdullah described that he is considering learning more psychological knowledge to meet his congregants needs "I think I will in the future go into life coaching because it's like what you're doing already but I think trying to find avenues where I'm trained in that discipline and where it's not a crisis situation." Br. DS brought his own perspective that Islamic knowledge has held psychological understandings, but the Muslim community is still lacking in how to bring it mainstream:

> Our Muslim scholars talked about this probably a thousand years ago. It's not something in you. I mean, there are many things that you discover in psychology and as well as individuation that they are talking about as if it's new discovery. Actually, you will find some books that spoke about that almost a thousand years ago. We Muslims were ignorant of them. We don't know, and we are not sharing them.

These multifaceted experiences of formal and informal training and their sense of preparedness was part of Imams experiences in conceptualizing their identity in relation to working with congregants individually.

Civic and Civil Duties as an Imam

Participants also shared that their individual interactions with congregants were influenced by how they conceptualized their identity, which included their civic and civil duties

as an Imam. Congregants often encountered Imams in those duties first before they would meet with them individually. Thus, for Imams, how they viewed themselves in those roles influenced their work with congregants. Additionally, Imams were not only responsible for their personalized meetings but also a host of other roles and responsibilities. Imam S described this motivation for being involved:

> I'm kind of a person that, you know, if I see a movement to make a change, and if I see something wrong, especially in my society, I will try my very best to be part of the solution. And when I came to America, I found this, like this opportunity that came up, that I can become an Imam, like an incredible vehicle of change that I can use.

Imam A felt compelled to log all his work as he revealed a chart that kept track of all his duties. He shared:

> *Alhamdulliah* as you said, many have said, I have shared this with Imams across the country, they're baffled that the type of work we do and the type of detail with which I do things. From my classes, meeting, work with the community, interfaith events, civic engagement. Everything is there.

> A common area of focus for Imams had to do with relations with the broader outside community. This often-included interfaith collaborations as well. Abdullah said this about his roles:

> Sometimes I have smaller meetings or one-on-one meetings with known Pastors or Rabbis and whether it's going for lunch to plan an event or whether it's just connecting with one another so it's a very diverse palette.

For some Imams these duties aligned with their broader goals for the community and congregants. Mahmoud elaborated on his role as an Imam in uniting all people:

It's the most important thing, to get people together. Not to divide people, but to unite

people. People from all faith, it's not just Islam. That's why we do a lot of interfaith

programs, with our fellow rabbis, and priests, and pastors.

Additionally, participants shared it was not just about interfaith work but also about advocacy

and social justice. Imams expressed the importance of engaging their congregants on all issues

around them. Imam T spoke passionately about this:

Yes, we have seen some improvement in terms of political and civic right involvement,

engagement in the community, especially after George Floyd. I've seen a lot of young

people in the community getting involved in social justice, and racial justice, the social

justice movement. We have seen in the last election a good number of Muslims running

for offices, and many of them were elected.

Even with the outside duties, for participants it came down to being able to provide services for

their congregants. Mahmoud elaborated:

My role is to comfort people, people work the whole, entire day, like I lead *Salat Al-Fajr*

[dawn prayer]. Okay, and then I wish everyone a wonderful day because I know that

they're going to come back in the evening. So I feel like, *Subhanallah*, been working so

hard, they've been struggling with their jobs, and all of these things. Then, they're coming

now, again, for the spiritual guidance and for the comfort.

Though these duties were not directly related to Imams and the support they provided for

congregants, for participants their other duties were how congregants were often introduced to

them or interacted with them outside the individual space. These duties helped participants

conceptualize their own professional identity as Imams.

Influence of Personal Experiences

In conceptualizing their identities and roles as an Imam, participants also reflected on their personal experiences and its influence on their professional identity. Participants had emotional and personal deep connections to their work as an Imam. Many Imams shared how they grew up involved in the mosque or around Islamic studies and how their families influenced their path to become an Imam. Mahmoud shared his personal connection to his work:

> It all started from my mother, may *Allah* bless her. When I was born, few months after I was born, my father passed away so my mother, she thought that if she teach me *Quran* and put me through that, the *Sheikh* route, that will basically help her pay back for my father because making *dua* my late father now is what she was looking for.

Imam Muhammad had a similar experience as he shared the influence his father had on him:

> When I was in 7th grade, I used to go to a masjid in our city. My father, may *Allah* bless him , he took me there. And he introduced me to the Imam there, the teacher. That teacher, that Imam was a very, very nice, kind person. And I love him.

For some their family was not the only influence, but also the environment around them. Imam S shared:

> So it wasn't really in my mind that I would become an Imam. And then when the Egyptian revolution (Arab Spring), you know, uprooted kind life in Egypt, and I took part in this, I wanted to get into maybe something that has to do with politics and like even sociology.

Additionally, for Abdullah, a big event like 9/11 was part of his catalyst for becoming an Imam:

> 9/11 definitely impacted me. I didn't become an Imam in 2001 but the experience from that in terms of speaking to a non-Muslim, western audience about Islam became a part of what I was doing even though I wasn't an Imam. There were so many requests from

churches and universities and schools to speak on Islam. I noticed a huge gap in terms of

scholarship in the English language and leadership from the American context, Islamic

American context or Muslim American context. I would say that influenced me a lot, it

made me reconsider a lot of my priorities.

Along with career influences, many Imams spoke of how their work now involved finding a

work life balance. That personal need for balance yet the demands of their job, was hard to

navigate. Mahmoud shared more on this:

But a lot of times, to be honest, as Imams, we need to learn how to balance between our

personal lives and our work. The most part, it doesn't happen and that's why a lot of

Imams have issues in their homes. It's hard.

Imam Muhammad spoke about the right his family has on him to be available and the need to

find a better balance:

For myself, I'm talking about myself. Maybe some of the Imams they have what we call

some strategies or some policies. For myself so far, I didn't put that policies. I am still

open. But maybe one day, yes, I have to be a little bit. Because my family they have right

on me. Myself has right, I have to take care of myself. I have time. This time for my

community, this time for my family, this time for myself.

Through this experience of finding a balance was difficult for most participants, Imam H had a

different perspective:

I think for majority of the people, no, because it depends on how you are around people. I

don't consider myself to be one of those typical Imams that don't go out, don't have social

media. I post. I enjoy my time with my family. I go out. I do at-night things.

As participants shared their need to find a balance in their work and personal life, some Imams did not shy away from sharing their own personal mental health needs as well. They expressed their personal needs influenced how they approached their work. Mahmoud found learning on his wife was helpful for him:

> We really do need counseling, and that's why my wife, May *Allah* bless her, she's been very patient with me. And all the Imams, we talk, and our wives are here, they take a lot. My wife, she's my personal counselor. When I'm coming with all of the issues and very negative energy, it really affects a person. You know that for sure. So when I talk to my wife, *Subhanallah*, she helps me a lot and she understands that I'm serving the community.

Imam S even shared more deeply of his experience:

> Ah, mental health concerns. I'm going to be totally open with you since my name is not going to be on this thing. But I, myself, struggled and still have remanence of some mental health issues Whether it is depression or an anxiety or something like this or loneliness too.

Imam S expressed that he often tried to relate to congregants through his personal experience. Overall, reflecting on their personal experiences and its influence on their professional identity was part of Imams conceptualization of their identity.

Theme Five: Encourage Collaboration with Professional Help

The last and fifth theme to emerge was that participants' experiences of their personalized interactions included encouragement around collaboration with professional help. Imams spoke of their experience referring congregants for professional help but also a desire for more collaboration among Imams and clinicians. This idea included understanding two areas of focus:

Referring Beyond Their Scope and Building Alliances and Collaboration. Participants said their role and space included meeting the needs of congregants, but they also shared their process of referring to others. Imams mentioned how their duties should include collaborating with professional helpers to help their congregants.

Referring Beyond Their Scope

Though participants felt it was their role and provided support to congregants individually, all participants recognized that certain individuals needed help that was beyond their ability to handle as an Imam. Br. DS described:

> If I detect that the person really is suffering from something that is beyond me, then I'm not a doctor, I'm an Imam and a counselor. But from that perspective, if it is really clear it needs professional help, then definitely I ask these people to address this professionally and be able to check with their doctors.

Br. DS saw himself as a counselor as well, not all Imams used that term, but he had distinctions for what he felt that role could or could not do. This focus on referring for medical help also came from Abdullah:

> Certain conditions which are chronic conditions, which again have been diagnosed by a professional... I think as an Imam, that's to be honored and respected that this is a professional diagnosis and it can't just be discounted or discarded as being part of the equation. But I do think it is part of an equation so there's something that we can treat as Imams and there are other things that are beyond our scope maybe. I don't try to prescribe any medication, don't worry.

Honoring diagnosis and previous experiences with other helpers was important to participants. Mahmoud spoke more specifically to issues that he felt were beyond what support he could provide to congregants:

> Drug addiction and alcohol, and all of these things. To be very honest, these ones, I don't deal with them too much, I always refer them to a counselor, a therapist. For alcoholics at that point, yes, they want to hear about what Allah says about alcohol, or the Prophet says about alcohol, but that's the farthest I can go with them. I say no [to an] addict, I refer them to a therapist

Referring to others did not only include counselors but also law enforcement as well. Imam T adds on to this notion "If it requires for example law enforcement may need someone else. I don't mind referring them to law enforcement. If it requires a certified professional family therapist, family counselor, I refer them to a family counselor in the community." Additionally, he adds "I prefer someone else who is more qualified, and I don't mind saying more qualified than me". Most participants expressed that when they referred to others, they saw those individuals as experts in their field.

Even through all participants would refer their congregants they had differing views on if they should refer individuals to a Muslim or Non-Muslim counselor. Imam H shared his viewpoint:

> I have a list of seven or eight people. Five of them are Muslim and three of them are not, so I can tell them that if you're looking for someone that will give you a religious perspective as well, you should go there. But if it's someone who it has nothing to do with that issue and do with religion… Then I can encourage to go see someone who will give

them better advice... it doesn't matter if the person is Muslim or not when they can probably give them some good advice.

Additionally, Abdullah also focused on which counselor can provide the best solution:

I try to refer them to Muslim counselors first but I'd say any counselor and you can also come to me as an Imam but you should also see a therapist and there's no shame in that and there's no problem Islamically to do that.

Along with referring congregants to professional help, Imams made a point to encourage them from an Islamic perspective. Br. DS believed that it did not matter who he referred to, Muslim or Non-Muslim, because the most important aspect would be if the congregant had trust in the person:

At least the people whom I am in touch with [professional counselors], few of them happened to be Muslims and happened to be part of our community. These are the people who are accessible, and usually, if I refer them to them, I tell them, "Please just do some screening." That means because you [professional Muslim counselors] are trusted, most likely these people will hear from you before they can hear from someone else [Non-Muslim counselors].

For Br. DS he expressed the power an Imam or Muslim counselor had due to the build in trust they had with congregants by sharing the same faith. Unlike some participants, Imam Muhammad did not send congregants a specific professional counselor from a list but just encouraged them to seek professional help. He said "I told them just pick any one, a specialist, and contact them. I don't deal with the specialist."

Participants varying views on who to refer to illuminated additional complexities as Imam A laid out to the researcher:

You see, the biggest problem is if the mental health professionals like yourself,

Mashallah, the plus is that you are a female. You are in *Muslima*, you know your

religion, and you're a counselor. This is so amazing. But the thing is that a lot of our

people will still not come to you. Right? Truth be told that like, "We're not going to go to

her. We'll go to a white lady. Why because she doesn't know us, and she won't talk about

us."

All these perspectives around referring congregants to professionals were part of Imams

experiences to encourage more collaboration when working with congregants.

Building Alliances and Collaboration

All participants expressed the need to refer congregants to professional help and

additionally many of them also shared the need to continue building alliances and collaborating

with those individuals. Some Imams were already consulting with professionals to learn more

about their role and how they could build partnerships. Imam T described his collaboration

sometimes was in the form of a seminar for the community "I even presented with a sister here

when we did some Imam seminars on domestic violence issues." Imam T also added at the start

of the COVID 19 pandemic he "invited some of the therapists from my community to talk to

them [congregants], to give them some tips, how to manage their family life, between the four

walls of their home." Mahmoud also shared doing a similar program "we started bringing

counselors with us, Imams, financial experts, our planner, because people were very worried

about everything [in the start of the pandemic]." For Imams, these collaborations would benefit

their congregants to help them expand and learn from other professionals. Along with

collaborative programs being developed, Imam S reported he consulted on cases as well:

And I have a couple of friends, one friend actually, who has just finished his PhD in

psychology, specifically young Muslim kind of psychology. And so I rely on him a lot,

but I wish that we had more Muslims who are trained to offer this kind of service.

For Imam S, these consultations could be useful as professionals may have expertise in certain

areas.

Though some participants had collaborations already in place, many agreed that there

needed to be more. Imam A stated "You know what? Let's make something out of this. Let's

build those alliances, let's build those connections, let's collaborate and help our community."

Imam Muhammad had recommendations for collaboration as well.

If you don't mind having, to work together, a counselor with Imam. Because Imam, meets

people every day. Counselor, they meet people whenever they want to come. But, Imam,

he meets all people. And all of them they have different kind of issues. So if we can work

together always like counselors, let them have good information... And cooperate with

each other. They can have meeting. They can also if it's allowed by law, have an Imam

with you, with the client. To study his [the congregant] case together.

Many participants shared their excitement to collaborate with professional counselors, even with

the researcher herself. Along with counselors, Imams also collaborated with other professionals,

including other Imams. Mahmoud spoke about consulting when it came to the complex matter of

divorce:

For divorce issues, I don't give this my own. I don't give the *Fatwa*, we call *Fatwa* our

opinion, just my opinion. I have to consult the other Imams, and this is what we do with

each other, especially when it comes to divorce. So today, I am actually meeting the

couple in a different *Masjid*, just to see the other Imam. So, we go out of our way a lot of times and that takes time, of course.

In Islam divorce is considered the "most unliked halal [permissible] act" and even emphasized by Mahmoud. Imam Muhammad also elaborated on the need for a team of scholars when it came to divorce:

> Sometimes that is a question. That question should have team scholars, not one. At least three, four. Like *Talaq*, Divorce. Some cases I cannot take a decision with this case. I have to have a team with me. This what happened with me many times. And they are waiting for the answer, yes. The answer cannot come from individual because that person, maybe, who will go to other Imam to ask him. Like *Fatwah* shopping. But if he has one *Fatwah* from group of Imams he should not play with other Imams to provide him different picture to have different answer.

Aside from the matter of divorce, Imam T mentioned he consults with other Imams when he feels stuck as well:

> Sometime, if I need some space, I can give them a break to think about it. Sometimes I consult with other imams, or some family therapists in the community. I pick up the phone, I text, I email, and ask my question.

As participants expressed the need for collaboration with helpers and building alliances, they continued to encourage the need to work together. Even though there were unique approaches to collaboration Br. DS summed it up pretty well "After that let's work together and see what can be done to do the healing.".

Synthesis of Experience

115

Five overarching themes were identified through the analysis of data in the interviews that provided rich depth around the experiences of Imams in their personalized interaction with their congregants. The textural description focused on *what* the participants experienced. The structural description of the data provided information on how the phenomenon was experienced (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Hayes & Singh, 2012).

Textural Description

All of the participants were Imams who had personalized interactions with their congregants. The textural description focuses on *what* the participants experienced (Hayes & Singh, 2012). All participants experienced incorporating their faith into their interactions as Imams and faith leaders in their mosque. Participants described different congregants they dealt with and how individual and community factors influenced their work. Most participants also reported a strong need to communicate with their congregants. There were mixed views around their interactions with their congregants but generally most of them described it favorably as they felt it was their duty to serve and provide support. Participants described their experiences as first responders when it came to many issues that their congregants faced.

Structural Description

The structural description focuses on *how* the participants experienced the phenomenon. Although there were varying views around the extent to what the interactions looked like, most participants described having to be adaptable and flexible when meeting the needs of their congregants. This sometimes included having to read and flex to differing and varying issues and situations. This also included having to adapt to different styles of communication and interactions based on the congregant they were working with. Imams also described experiencing

development in their understanding of issues but also their professional role in meeting the needs of those around them in a supportive manner.

Summary

This chapter started with an exploration of the participants in a form of sketches to provide context to the interview. The chapter also discussed the five identified themes in detail. Additionally, the data was synthesized with textural and structural descriptions.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The findings presented in this study help provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of Imams in their mosques with their personalized interactions with their congregants. The information revealed from this study was the first to explore and highlight the phenomenon of Imams' personalized interactions and hopes to offer a new contribution to the field of counseling. To make meaning of the collected data, phenomenological data analysis was conducted that resulted in the final five themes presented in chapter four. In this chapter, the findings of the study will be summarized. Implications will be offered as well as limitations and recommendations for future research. The chapter ends with the researchers epilogue and reflection on the study.

Discussion of Research Findings

The primary research question guided the qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological exploration: What are the experiences of Imams in their mosques *What are Imams experiences in their mosques during their personalized interactions with the congregants that they serve?* Though data analysis, five themes were identified. This section will summarize the findings of this study and build connections to existing research in this area. The discussion section will focus on four areas: Imams and their Multicultural Orientation, The Role of Community, Multicultural and Spiritual Competence, and Encouraging Collaboration.

Imams and Their Multicultural Orientation

In this study Imams shared their perspectives around working with their congregants which included a multicultural and open orientation in their approach to their work. There was a thread of experiences shared in which Imams approached their congregants with openness and willingness to learn and implored flexibility. Firstly, participants shared reasons congregants

were seeking Imams. Participants described many different reasons with a focus on social relationships and conflicts. This is consistent with existing research as Imam reported other common issues, they dealt with were matters of relationship and marital concerns (Ali et al., 2005; Bagby et al., 2001). The literature also revealed post 9/11, individuals seeking out support in fear of discrimination (Ali et al., 2005) but none of the participants in the study shared that to be a reason. Perhaps this is a change in dynamics as the focus has shifted to meeting the needs of individuals in the pandemic. Despite the changes in reasons, participants shared congregant needs often revolved around wanting religious guidance and answers to their Islamic questions. Research has found that Imams reported the common reasons congregants seek them out is for spiritual and religious guidance, which includes answering questions they may have (Ali et al., 2005). All of this was engaged around Imams being open to all ranges of concerns with willingness to meet congregants where they were at.

Secondly, Imams shared their experiences with individuals facing stigma for seeking help. Participants described that congregants feared stigma they may face and fears about being labeled as crazy, sometimes leading to denial of their issue. The notion of stigma is consistent with existing literature on Muslims in America as often seeking help for mental illness is often tied to shame (Aloud & Rathur, 2009; Erickson & Al-Timimi, 2001). As perceptions around mental health are changing, this study illuminates how stigma is still perceived in the community. Participants also shared that congregants had questions around taboo topics as well. This also is supported in the literature as not only do congregants seek Imams for answers to spiritual questions but also are more likely to ask an Imam questions than a professional health provider (Aloud & Rathur, 2009; Al-Darmaki, 2003). This study focuses on this shift and types

of questions congregants ask of their Imams and how their Imams respond to them with openness and non-judgment.

Thirdly, participants shared their experiences presenting with openness with their congregants. This included listening and reflecting back what they heard to provide clarity and support. This finding is similar to previous research which has shown clergy members to be ranked higher in interpersonal skills than psychologists by their congregants (Schindler et al., 1987). Additionally, participants described being humble and non-judgmental to build their personal connection with their congregants. Research has found characteristics highlighted in clergy members including being non-judgmental and to act with humility (Faiver et al., 1998; Hayes & Shepard Payne, 2020). Additionally, participants described supportive guiding practices they engaged in to help encourage growth, motivate congregants, and build awareness. This is consistent with the literature as congregants often see Imams as a counselor of moral support (Padela et al., 2012). Though research does support clergy members engagement with their congregants through a Pastoral counseling lens (Young et al., 2003; Wickets et al., 1993) there has been a lack of understanding around that for Imams in the Islamic faith. The pastoral counseling lense is missing the important perspective of Islam and Imams. This study helps provide a deeper understanding of these supportive practices from an Islamic perspective. The study reveals that Imams also engage with openness and support akin to a multicultural orientation that a counselor may have. As counselors work to meet the needs of clients understanding that openness and nonjudgmental stance recommended to us (Ratts et al., 2015), Imams also work to be supportive and open to hearing the congregants concern with an open perspective. Imams do not bring their preconceived notions of biases into the room but work to meet congregants where they are with an open mind.

Fourth, participants shared their experiences setting structure and expectations for their interactions with congregants. This included setting expectations around the interactions as well as scheduling. Participants shared their experiences as a factor in learning to continue to set expectations. Additionally, we know that clergy members reveal stress around boundary intrusion with congregants (Rowatt, 2001; Weaver et al., 2002; Bleiger & Skufca, 2005). Participants shared the importance of setting structure with the timing and being accessible and flexible to congregant needs. Participants shared that they met congregants in all kinds of places sometimes in their office, sometimes outside in the park or in the mosque hallway. Additionally, they shared their meetings could be planned or unplanned and ranged from a few minutes to sometimes multiple hours into the night. Literature has revealed that minority community members prefer nontraditional or alternative forms of support (Yoon & Jepsen, 2008; Bonner, 1997). Sue and Sue (2008) additionally recommend working outside of the office to meet the needs of clients as not everyone will lean into meeting in a formalized setting. This willingness to meet congregants where they were at and to be flexible in their approach was part of Imams experiences. This was important for congregants as it reduced the formality around seeking support and lent for a more relaxed and non-judgmental environment.

And lastly, Imams expressed the need for documentation with discretion as they shared their experiences with confidentiality and documentation of their interactions. Literature reveals that for the most part clergy do not document their pastoral care (Doyle, 1996; Daaleman & Frey, 1998) in their day-to-day work but are more likely to do so when collaborating with other professionals such as in a hospital setting (Best et al., 2020). Overall, there is a lack of research on documentation in clergy and this study provides insight into how Imams are considering their work. Despite the limited literature in documentation there is much more on confidentiality as

certain faith traditions focus on confidentiality in sharing information for confession (Abernethy et al., 2016). There is also conversation around the importance of mandatory reporting and protecting confidentiality for clergy members as well (Leer-Salvesen, 2018). The participants in this study did not discuss their experiences in this lens but focused on the importance of providing discretion when working with congregants. This study perhaps illuminates a difference in Imam's perspective of their discretion and documentation as they tend with openness to their congregants' specific needs exemplifying characteristics described within a multicultural orientation.

The Role of Community

Researchers in the field of counseling have found community to be significantly connected to the mental health experiences of individuals (Ellison et al., 2006; Burns et al., 2005) Participants described their experiences as Imams including understanding congregants as a fiber of their community and to be attentive to the environment and community around them. Imams described the importance the community played in congregants experiences. Firstly, participants described the importance of the Masjid environment in congregants experience. As discussed in the literature, the Masjid is often considered a cultural hub for Muslims in America (Khalidi, 2008). A key element that emerged in this category was that masjid politics played an important role in the environment. As Imams expressed in the study, the majority of major and final decisions are not made by Imams but are by the executive committee or board of directors (Bagby et al., 2001). As Imams rarely have sole decision-making power (Al-Islam, 2006) there can be tension and masjid politics that adds to the environment that congregants pick up on. Many participants shared the need for creating safe and inclusive spaces in the masjid.

Counselors should be mindful in attending to understand community as it plays a significant role in the experiences of clients from this background.

Second, participants also shared the influence the COVID-19 pandemic has had on their communities and congregants' experiences around these changes. Imams shared that congregants were feeling more stressed and leaning more heavily towards religion and spirituality. Though the COVID 19 Pandemic is ongoing, these findings were consistent with the literature in terms of reporting of increased stress and anxiety for individuals in the pandemic (Kumar & Nayar, 2020). Due to the ongoing pandemic, researchers are still learning more about the experiences of different groups and this study provides a first look at not just the experiences of Imams but also Muslim individuals and families during this time. Additionally, congregants shared that they had to adapt their interactions and support to the virtual platform as well. Research has found that despite challenges in the ability to meet face to face, clergy members were able to continue to serve in the virtual space (Village & Francis, 2020). It is to be noted that this research was on clergy members from the Christian faith tradition and thus this study gives the perspective of Muslim clergy. As the pandemic continues forward, counselors should be mindful of the short term and long term effects for this group of individuals. .

Third, Imams shared community needs that encouraged them to adapt their interactions with their congregants. This included more Imams who had mental health training as they felt they were first responders in a way. The notion of first responders is a continued term in the literature and research has revealed that clergy members continue to be the first or second source of assistance when it comes to their congregant's mental health needs (Ellison et al., 2006; Burns et al., 2005; Farooqi, 2006; Kianpoor & Rhoades Jr., 2005). Imams continue to serve in the role of spiritual first responders when it comes to meeting the needs of their congregants. Research

has also revealed the importance of Imams in the healing process of Muslim (Padela et al., 2012). This study continues to provide depth to this experience as first responders and how the Imam and the Mosque play a role as part of the community. Counselors should continue to be mindful of the different stakeholders involved in the healing process.

Additionally, it is important to make connections to connectedness theory (Lee and Robbins, 2000; Rude and Burham, 1995) as it has multiple areas of focus but this study emphasizes cultural (Daneshpour, 1998) and community (Maton et al., 1998) dimensions. When it comes to cultural connectedness, cultural dimensions explore how differences in the value systems of Muslims as opposed to mainstream values leads to greater connectedness (Daneshpour, 1998). This is consistent with the findings of the study as the experiences of Imams included discussing how cultural aspects in the masjid provided a common bonding space for congregants in their community as opposed to the western mainstream community. Additionally, connectedness theory has a focus on a community dimension (Maton et al., 1998) and when it comes to community connectedness there are five main areas of focus which include family, religious environment, extracurricular activity, peers, and teachers (Maton et al., 1998). Given our understanding and knowledge around specific needs of the Muslim community, these dimensions align with the needs of this group that can lead to more connectedness. Often the mosque serves as the cultural hub for many of these dimensions (Khalidi, 2008) and as Imams are the leaders of the mosque they play a huge role in facilitating this community space.This is important for counselors to know as they work to facilitate connection for their clients.

Multicultural and Spiritual Competence

Participants in this study were not mental health clinicians themselves but they also described the importance of attending to multicultural and spiritual needs of their congregants. Though the

multicultural and social justice competencies do include attention to faith specifically (Ratts et al., 2015), as a profession, we often view the ASERVIC (2009) competencies as more directly related to matters of religion and spirituality. Though there is a need for specific focus on matters of spiritual and religious issues, Imams shared and demonstrated that the ideas of faith and other multicultural issues were more mingled and intersecting. Imams shared that part of an individual's experience may include matters of seeking religious knowledge and faith-based questions, but often other issues were unrelated as congregants had concerns outside of that realm. And yet Imams treated both concerns together and tied the work together. Imams adopted more of an intersectional approach in helping bridge the gap between different issues that came up. As of now our field honors both foci of multicultural and spiritual competence but there is a missing perspective in more of an integration for the intersection between these identities. This intersection, as the participants shared, if more rooted for Muslim clients who are looking towards a balance of culture and faith.

Secondly, participants shared about incorporating *deen* and faith-based practices into their work. And though those practices appeared to be indigenous healing often they are compatible with western approaches. Participants shared that often there was compatibility with the different approaches. Traditionally, literature has seen the two types of models in work with Muslim clients. There are western models that adapt Islamic values (Husain & Hodge, 2016; Tanhan, 2019) and models rooted in Islamic theology, ethics, and guidance (Rothman & Coyle, 2018, Rothman & Coyle, 2020; Abu-Raiya, 2012; Keshavarzi & Haque, 2013). Though the western models are more popular, both are growing areas of understanding and there are differing views on which perspective to take (Haque et al., 2016). Participants demonstrated that often there was more overlap in the approaches in their work, which could lend for more overlap

in our work as well. Counselors should be mindful of western practices as often being rooted or repacked from indigenous healing methods. Participants revealed in their work that they worked to meet client needs and often saw overlap in their work with clinical work.

Third, participants reported that their experiences with their congregants also included incorporating Deen into their interactions. Imams shared that this included two categories, the first being incorporating scripture as *Hidayah* and the second incorporating traditional Islamic healing practices with congregants. Imams shared their experiences using scripture as a means to guide congregants with divine wisdom. Research has found that incorporating scripture to encourage health behavior is a role Imams engage in with their congregants (Padela et al., 2010). As participants revealed in their artifacts there was a focus on service as duty to God and others, honoring all congregants, and helping to shift focus on deen over duniya. The shift from deen over duniya was consistent with the literature in terms of interventions for Muslims (Haque and Keshvari, 2014) focus on shifting the compass from creation to Creator, which is similar to shifting focus from this world to larger faith. The artifacts revealed elements of Islamic theology that could be integrated in to support and practice for meeting the needs of Muslim congregants. Counselors often adapt theories from a more western perspective and participants revealed that congregants are looking for a healthier mix between deeply Islamic traditions and finding a balance in the Western world. Counselor should be mindful of this balance in their work.

Lastly, Haque and Keshvari (2014) found that some of the Islamic faith-based practices including reading scripture, invoking blessings known as *dhikr*, and informal prayer known as *dua*. Participants spoke in depth about the need and importance of using scripture, *Quran* and *Sunnah*, as a guide and model for their work. Islamic tradition holds scripture on high ground as believe in it is one of the pillars of Islam (Esposito, 2004). *Dua*, was reported by many

participants as a request for Imams from congregants when meeting with them. Additionally, participants reported they encouraged congregants to engage in their *Salat*, prayers, as well. Research has found that *Dua* and *Salat* are both forms of prayers that are part of Islamic faith practices (Haque and Keshvari, 2014). Participants also shared their experience providing *Rouqya* and considering the influence of evil eye and magic on congregants. *Rouqya* involves citing *duas* and reading the *Quran* with the intention of warding off evil eye that may be causing individual distress (Deuraseh, 2006; Kianpoor & Rhoades Jr., 2005). And lastly, researchers have discussed that traditional practices can be less stigmatizing for people of color and helps them feel more comfortable when speaking to clergy (Consantine et al., 2000). Counselors do work to engage in faith-based practices, participants revealed the power and healing that congregants attributed to these important and sacred rituals.

Encourage Collaboration

Through this study, participants described their experiences in encouraging collaboration with professional helpers. Imams described the importance of collaboration but also building community and their role in that. Firstly, Imams described their experiencing referring to other professional helpers when they recognized the issues were beyond this scope. Similarly, research has found that clergy members continue to be important when it comes to mental health support especially in marginalized communities as they are often the liaison between professional and community-based services (Milstein et al., 1999). Majority participants shared that they felt clear about when they should reach out to someone else, though sometimes they did not know where, but they recognized when issues were no longer in their scope. This differs from some previous literature that revealed that clergy members often see the burden of care resting on themselves alone (McMinn & Dominguez, 2005; Milstein et al., 2008). In a study on pastors, it was found

that 40% agree with the use of medication but only 2% thought psychotherapy should be used (Smietana, 2014). Though the focus on medication and a medical perspective is similar to what participants shared, most Imams also agreed that there was room for psychotherapy for congregants. Participants described that sometimes some areas or concerns were out of their ability to provide support and they saw physical and mental health as solutions to those concerns. Additionally, participants shared differing views on if congregants should be referred to Muslim or non-Muslim counselors. Overall participants shared it did not stop them in referral if the profession was not Muslim, but they preferred it that way. Though there is a lack of research on the Muslim community, researchers also found that Christian clergy responded more favorably when consulting and collaborating with Christian psychologist (McMinn et al., 2005) yet when it came to referral they were just as open to non-Christian mental health professionals (Bledsoe et al., 2013).

Secondly, participants shared their experiences building alliances and collaboration. Imams shared programs and seminars created with mental health professionals to help meet the community needs. Researchers have explored clergy collaboration with mental health professionals (McMinn et al., 1998; Weaver et al., 2003, Oppenheimer et al., 2004) yet the experiences of Imams have been missing from those perspectives. Imams also shared a desire to collaborate more with professionals on cases. A study conducted by Ali and Milstein (2012) found that Imams were more likely to refer to an individual and continue seeing them themselves at the same time, which lends for room for collaboration. Participants in this study did share that they often followed up with their congregants after they referred them to make sure they had the support they needed. And lastly, participants shared that they worked closely with other Imams, especially in tough cases like divorce. Researchers have explored the perceptions of congregant

and involvement of Imams in marriage related concerns (Killawi et al., 2017) and clergy members collaborate with one another (Moran et al., 2005) yet this study dives deeper into the focus of Imams and their collaboration with other Imams. To date, there have not been many insights into how Imams collaborate with one another, mostly with other professionals, thus making this one of the first study to learn more about this.

And lastly, participants described the obligations they felt as leaders in their Masjid and leaders in the act of collaboration. Literature reveals that clergy members have distinct personality profiles around their occupation including high attrition and high motivation (Parker & Martin, 2009; Conway et al., 2015). This was consistent with the study as participants described their role as motivators and high level of investment and care in their role and congregants. Participants described the importance of transformation in their leadership style with congregants. This notion was consistent with the literature as Elseginy (2005) found that leadership styles of Islamic school principals reflected transformation and transactional styles. The four main characteristics of the transformational style include individualized consideration, idealized influence, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation (Bass & Avolio, 1990). Imams often work to focus on these characteristics, with particular attention in this study on individualized consideration. Many participants spoke about striving for a transformation leadership style and trying to engage their personal interactions around that focus. Imams shared that they felt that as leaders of their mosque they were responsible for transformative change in the community. They are also expressed as the face of the community they knew their responsibility in connecting congregants with what they may need.

Novel Findings that Expand the Understanding of Imams Interactions

As a result of this study there were several novel findings that provide deeper insight and understanding to the experiences of Imams and the phenomena of their personalized interactions with their congregants. Some of the novel findings from this study include: (a) the experiences of Imam's navigating their work in the COVID-19 pandemic, (b) Deeper understanding of Imam's referral process, and (c) Imams multicultural orientation and disposition in their community engagement.

Firstly, an important finding shared by the participants was their experiences navigating their work in the COVID-19 pandemic. As the pandemic continues on, this study is one of the first looks at how Imams are pivoting their focus in our new global reality. Participants shared the experiences of congregants which included additional stress and the move to virtual interactions. As the clergy pivots towards virtual interactions (Village & Francis, 2020), and may continue for long after the pandemic, this study helps to illuminate a deeper understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic on parts of the Muslim community as well as Imam's responses and experiences in navigating this new reality.

Second, this study revealed more information around Imam's referral process and collaboration with other professional helpers. Existing literature focuses on the burden clergy members place on themselves to be the sole individual responsible for their congregants and carry that burden of care (McMinn & Dominguez, 2005; Milstein et al., 2008). Yet participants in this study did not share much around those feelings of burden and instead spoke openly about referring to others when the interaction was out of their scope. Imams shared that they did not want to be responsible by themselves and instead wanted to connect congregants to those who may be better suited to help them with their concerns. As perspectives around mental health and treatment are changing, perhaps Imams attitudes around referring are continuing to change as

well. Participants shared much around their experiences with collaboration that it developed into the final theme of the study. To date, this is the first study that focuses on these experiences from an Imams perspective with such richness and depth.

Third, Imams multicultural orientation and disposition in their engagement provided new insights into the experiences of Imams interactions. Though it is understood that clergy members engage with their congregants with supportive practices and present with openness (Schindler et al., 1987; Watson et al., 2003; Favier et al., 1998; Hayes and Shepard Payne, 2020) this study provides depth to those experiences for Imams in particular. Though there is ample evidence in pastoral counseling literature around the internal communication (Young et al., 2003; Wickets et al., 1993) these perspectives are missing the voices of these participants. Clergy literature has been dominated with mostly discourse from a Christian perspective and so to date, this is the first study that focuses on these experiences from an Imam and Islamic perspective. According to participants, their experiences in meeting clients included presenting with openness, engaging in supportive practices and setting structure and expectations. As participants navigate these experiences as leaders of a marginalized group, their perspectives are new to our understanding of the phenomena.

Implications

The five themes provided depth and understanding to Imam's experiences of their personalized interactions with their congregants. The findings from this study build on to the understanding of Imams work with Muslim congregants but also offer implications for counselors in practice and counselor educators for training and research. Additionally, the study reveals implications for Imams as well.

Implications for Counseling Practice

The findings of this study are important for mental health counselors and practitioners to understand and learn from Imams experiences as well as provide multiculturally competent care for Muslim clients who may be coming to them for support. Due to the results of this study, there are several implications for mental health counselors, such as (a) Learning about Islam and Challenging Views on Muslims, (b) Collaborating with Imams, (c) Assessing Religion and Spirituality in session, and (d) Incorporating traditional practices with client permission. First, counselors should actively work to learn more about the Islamic faith but also nuances around the role of culture and the role of faith in clients' lives as well as challenge their views on what they think they know about Muslims. Counselors should take the time to understand the role that faith and the role that culture play into the experiences of Muslim clients. Additionally, counselors should attend to the differences between culture and faith for clients. Participants expressed the importance of understanding cultural backgrounds and faith backgrounds. Counselors should focus on basic tenants of Islam and understand unique experiences of Muslims in America when working with Muslim clients. Kirkwood (2002) encourages all counselors to know enough about the Muslim faith to help Muslim clients. Participants expressed that congregants would be able to build a better relationship with clients if they demonstrated awareness of basic Islamic principles. Multicultural and spiritual competencies in counseling already focused on the importance of knowledge in working with multicultural populations (ASERVIC, 2009; Ratts et al., 2015). Counselors must continue to educate themselves with humility to address the needs of their clients. Additionally, counselors should take the time to reflect and challenge their preexisting notions and ideas around what Muslim clients may need. Participants shared experiences congregants had with counselors that made assumptions around their identity. Mental health counselors should reflect on their own biases and preconceived

notions and work to expand their understanding of what will be beneficial for Muslim clients.

This includes creating space for self-reflection and working to integrate humility into practices.

Counselors should empower clients to share their own experiences rather than make assumptions

about what is needed.

Second, collaboration is an imperative duty and major role of mental health clinicians.

Counselors collaborate with professionals to be able to address and understand the holistic needs

of their clients and for Muslim clients this may include collaborating with Imams. Imams also act

and serve as cultural brokers when it comes to the needs of mental health (Padela et al., 11).

Cultural brokers serve as bridges among cultures to be able to communicate nuances of a

minority culture to the mainstream and vice versa (Herzog, 1972; Singh et al., 1999). Mental

health advocates push for the inclusion of cultural brokers in helping promote and meet the

mental health needs of clients, especially from minoritized backgrounds (Salami et al., 2019;

Singh et al., 1999). Counselors may use Imams in that manner as brokers to build stronger

collaboration for the needs of the clients. Hall and Livingston (2006) recommend that therapists

form an alliance with Imams to clarify Muslim norms and worldview, facilitation of referrals and

effective application of treatment strategies. Collaboration can include three areas of focus: (1)

introduction to the Imam and getting to know the community, (2) referral to counselor and

referral to Imam, (c) consultation on cases. Firstly, Counselors should reach out and introduce

themselves and build connections with the local Imam in their community. It is the duty of

counselors to initiative this step as social justice advocates in their communities particularly

knowing there might be a need for equitable and accessible services in the Muslim community

(Ali et al., 2005; Amri & Bemak, 2012). Secondly, counselors can collaborate with Imams to

build a network of referrals. This includes referrals to Imams when clients express concerns or

nuanced issues around spirituality and religion as well as referrals to counselors from Imams when congregants need specific attention to mental health and wellness. And lastly, counselors and Imams should consult on cases and clients/ congregants they both work with. They should encourage clients to sign releases that allow them to consult on the case together as part of a treatment team. Collaboration is one of the most important implications for counselor practice. As Imams serve as a bridge to that gap between counselors and clients, including as cultural brokers, this includes learning from Imams but also counselors providing psychoeducation to Imams on counseling notions and ideas. These may include models of counseling, of change, and even challenges that may occur such as spiritual bypass or others. Imams and counselors can continue to collaborate on this to help meet client needs.

Third, counselors should assess spirituality and religion in the client's life. Addressing and acknowledging spirituality and faith in counseling is an important and ethical consideration for clinicians (ASERVIC, 2009). Yet, many clinicians report hesitancy around how to integrate and assess spirituality in their work (Reiner & Dobmeier, 2014). This study adds to the literature and encourages counselors to assess spirituality and its importance in the client's life, and also empowering clients to bring in their faith, spirituality, and religion into the counseling session if they choose. Participants shared varying perspectives congregants have around the integration of spirituality in counseling and thus modeling an open and humble perspective in assessing the role of faith in the client's life is imperative to respecting their views and choice.

Lastly, after obtaining permission from the client themselves and with the guidance and collaboration of Imams, clinicians could incorporate traditional practices into the counseling room. It is argued that one of the ways to decolonize counseling practices is to reclaim the indigenous roots of counseling and healing which can in some cases be faith based practices as

well (Singh et al., 2020). Some participants also encouraged clinicians to focus on integrating traditional practices in session. With client permission, clinicians may incorporate *Dua*, reading of scripture, and *Dhikr* into the counseling room. Imams also shared using scripture stories as a way to guide congregants and so counselors can also consider narrative therapy as a means to continue storytelling and drawing parallels (Armstrong & Munro, 2018). It is incredibly important that counselors incorporate these culturally responsive practices with a humble and open mindset in collaboration with their client and with the guidance and consultation of the Imam. Counselors are encouraged to attend to these multicultural and spiritual competences and needs with more of intersectional perspective as it is not one of the other. This is especially true in the Muslim community and is imperative for counselors to be mindful of in their clinical practice.

Implications for Training

The findings of this study are also important for counselor educators and training. Counselor Educators work to train graduate students who are preparing to work with clients from diverse cultural and spiritual backgrounds including Muslim clients from their communities. It is imperative for them to build awareness and understand the complexities of these clients and it is our job as counselor educators to prepare them for this work. Due to the results of this study, there are several implications for Counselor Educators, such as (a) Attendance to Spiritual Competence, (b) Embedding Models of Cultural Humility (c) Expansion to Community Based Research Models, (d) Engagement in Experiential and Service-Learning Activities.

Firstly, counselor educators should focus on integrating and illuminating the importance of addressing spirituality in counseling through their teaching, supervision, and clinical practice. This includes teaching and evaluating spiritual competencies, laid out by ASERVIC (2009), and

135

focusing on preparing clinicians to address and assess faith in the counseling room. Based on the experience of participants, there are differing views, a spectrum of sorts, on the role counselors have in integrating spirituality into their work. Based on this, and our developed competencies for multicultural work (ASERVIC, 2009; Ratts et al., 2015), counselor educators should teach and help clinicians in training learn more about how to integrate spirituality in counseling and meet individual client needs. Counselor educators should provide students with the framework to assess the importance of spirituality for a client, beyond the intake or initial questioning. Counselor Educators are encouraged to help counselors in training gain familiarity and understanding around how to navigate these conversations in session to learn more about the client's relationship to their faith. Additionally, counselor educators can work to train counselors on how to integrate specific faith-based practices with the permission of the client. All this work can come specifically and directly from community collaboration. Counselor Educators are in a unique position to enhance our views of the competencies, both Multicultural and ASERVIC, further in developing more specificity and attend to unique diverse experiences with an open mind. This study illuminated the needs for more deeper understanding of the intersection both of these areas have and the need for our profession to be mindful of it as well.

Secondly, counselor educators are encouraged to embed models of cultural humility in their teaching and supervision. Participants shared their recommendations for counselors to bring a non-judgmental attitude to their work with Muslim clients and to see Islam from a strengths-based perspective. As counselors in training are encouraged to work on multicultural competence, cultural humility takes it a step further and focuses on the counselor's way of being with a client (Owen, 2013). Culturally humble counselors work collaboratively with clients to help them integrate their cultural lens and background into their counseling sessions (Owen et

al., 2016). Counselor educators are in a position to not just introduce cultural humility as a theory and model for counselors-in-training but to also encourage them to access cultural humility as a skill. When working with Muslim clients, or any clients from a marginalized background, cultural humility honors their perspectives and invites them to work with the counselor in a collaborative manner on integrating their cultural background (Owen et al., 2016). Cultural humility does not just support absence of assumptions (Own, 2013) but also encourages counselors to evaluate their own values and beliefs to avoid stereotyping (Foronda et al., 2016). Embedding models of cultural humility in teaching and supervision as a deposition but also a skill for counselors in training can be extremely beneficial to their development.

Thirdly, counselor educators should teach and train counselors to focus and integrate community-based models for research when working with all clients, but especially those from marginalized groups. Community based research models empower clients and individuals in the community to specify their own needs and communicate that with counselors. Counselor educators are encouraged to consider Community Based Participatory Action Research (CBPAR) as a model when learning more about the needs of the Muslim community. CBPAR focuses on meeting the needs of the community and incorporating multiple perspectives (stakeholders, partners, and collaborators) to learn more about what is needed and help produce research that comes from the communities own identified needs (Burns et al., 2011; Freudenberg & Tsui, 2014). An important aspect of CBPAR includes disseminating findings back to the community as the identified needs come from the community (Burns et al., 2011). Counselor Educators should train counselors and future counselor educators to keep community-based perspectives in mind when working with the Muslim population, particularly when conducting research and building collaborative partnerships.

And lastly, counselor educators should encourage experiential learning and exposure for counselors in training in teaching and supervision. This includes potentially integrating service-learning activities in collaboration with Imams, to expose counselors in training to the Muslim community around them and help them learn and identify their needs. Key elements of service learning include purpose, structure, partnership, and reflection (Furco; 1996; Jacoby, 2003). Service learning moves beyond a field experience as it works to address a community need (Furco, 1996). Service-learning exposes students to systemic issues and engages them in social justice advocacy. Additionally, multicultural immersion is associated with deepened cultural identity, knowledge and skills (DeRicco & Sciarra, 2005). Our counselor education training can continue to grow in advocacy and social justice training around these matters. Counselor educators are in a unique position to encourage counselors in training to build the relationship on ground in the community that can help and aid in their learning experience in training and lay an example for their work beyond as a clinician Counselor educator should continue to encourage their students and supervisees to engage in continued work in learning not just during training but beyond training as well.

Implications for Imams

Due to the nature of this study, there were implications to consider for Imams in their work and practice as well. The researcher of this study acknowledges and recognizes her limited perspective as the counselor educator and researcher and offers these implications and suggestions with humility in the hope that they are helpful for Imams to continue their incredibly tireless service to their congregants and community. Due to the results of this study, there are several possible implications for Imams, such as (a) Building Alliances with Counselors, (b)

Formalized Supervision for Imams, (c) Increased training in mental health and interpersonal skills, (d) Creating mindful and inclusive spaces in the mosques.

Firstly, like counselors, Imams are encouraged to build alliances with mental health counselors in their community and work on collaborating with them on cases. This may also include consultation and referrals. Like counselors, Imams may also consider referring clients to mental health providers if they deem the congregant's case is out of their scope of practice (Hall & Livingston, 2006). Additionally, in building the alliance, Imams may also offer to let clinicians refer Muslim clients to them if the matter is in their scope of practice around spirituality and faith. Also, Imams are encouraged to consult with practitioners in their community, and if the congregant is being seen by a clinician at the same time, they could consult on the case together with the permission of the client to provide a holistic treatment team. This collaboration may help imams in filling their gap of understanding around specific mental health needs that a counselor may be able to provide psychoeducation around.

Secondly, Imams could consider potentially formalizing supervision in their profession to help collaborate with other Imams, clergy members, and maybe even mental health professionals. Participants shared their experiences with their mentors and teachers who guided them in informal supervision to help understand and meet the needs of their congregants. A potential consideration is to formalize supervision in this area as Imams are starting out in their profession to have guided and structured mentorship around how to help congregants in individualized settings. Participants shared that time and experience helped them navigate their role with ease. Thus, creating a formalized supervision experience may help in meeting the needs of imams and congregants. Johnson (1973) and Orthner (1986) speak more about the need for supervision for clergy members. This supervision is more formalized for pastoral counseling

models (Gubi, 2016) yet those models focus heavily on Christian clergy members experiences. Imams could benefit from such formalized supervision to help provide specific structured mentorship around personalized interactions and congregant needs beyond mosque responsibilities and duties.

Thirdly, Imams could benefit from increased training in mental health and interpersonal skills. Training like the First Responder Training at the Khalil School of Islamic Psychology (Khalil School of Islamic Psychotherapy, 2021) are available and starting to become accessible for community faith leaders. For those Imams who may not have access to these, or wish to expand their understanding, they could collaborate with counselor educators and counselors in their local community to learn more about interpersonal communication skills and ways to continue to build rapport and alliances with their congregants for better outcomes. Imams are also encouraged to continue to invite counselors to the mosque for joint lectures or programming to share information with the community.

And Lastly, Imams can collaborate with counselors and other professional helpers to continue to create mindful and inclusive spaces in their mosque that invite congregants to seek them for guidance and assistance. Participants shared experiences around modifying the mosque environment to create a more inviting and welcoming space. Imams, with the support and backing of their community, can work to help create more inclusive spaces in the mosque that will invite more Muslims to be a part of the community as well (Nejad et al., 2019). Creating such spaces where Muslims find the mosque to be a place where they can seek help and assistance can make their personalized interactions easier and reach more congregants.

As mentioned before, the researcher presents these implications for Imams with an open mind and a humble attitude as she understands she is not an Imam and does not understand their

role in complexity thus could be missing nuances in these implications. These implications are meant to start dialogue and collaboration between counselors, counselor educators and Imams to continue to work together to build a supportive network and meet the needs of congregants and clients.

Limitations

The purpose of this qualitative hermeneutic phenomenological study was to examine the experiences of Imams in their mosques during their personalized interaction with their congregants. The researcher aimed to gain awareness of this phenomenon and understand the experiences of Imams. However, this study is not without limitations.

The sample criteria for this study were limited to Imams who were affiliated and currently serving in mosques. There is a growing segment of Imams in the US who are not affiliated with a mosque yet serve as chaplains or Imams of research and training centers. Thus, this research study is missing their perspective. Additionally, the sample criteria included Imams who were Middle Eastern and Asian. This sample is missing the important and valuable perspectives of other Imams including African American and Black Imams and Latinx imams. Also, the sample of these imams were all men, as men often serve in leadership roles in the mosque. But women are growing in leadership and this study is missing their valuable perspective. Female leaders in the mosque are in a unique position and have unique congregant experiences, due to their often-marginalized status, often with other women that this study was unable to learn more about. The sampling criteria and the obtained sample is limited in providing important and incredible perspectives of other faith leaders in the Muslim community. Additionally, the focus of this study was transferability (Hayes & Singh, 2012). Through the qualitative methodology there was richness of data, but these experiences are of the 8

participants of this study. The hope in providing depth is to be able to provide transferability to the experiences of other Imams but there can always be limitations around being able to do so. Imams continue to be a diverse group of individuals and thus it is possible some aspects of this study are not transferable.

Recommendations for Future Research

To date, this is the first study that explores the phenomena of Imams experiences in their mosques in their personalized interactions with their congregants. Due to the exploratory nature of this study, the findings warrant continued research moving forward. Other areas yet to be explored include the experiences of other subgroups of other Islamic faith leaders, as well as community models for collaboration, and assessing effectiveness of differing approaches to work with Muslim clients. Further, this study can be replicated with different samples including African American and Black Imams, Latinx Imams, Women leaders like *Alimah*, and Imams who serve outside the mosque in chaplain roles.

Based on the findings of this study there are a number of future possible research inquiries and directions. The first would be a study looking specifically at the experiences of African American and Black Imams and/ or looking at the experiences of Latinx Imams. These Imams were not included in this sample but have their own unique experiences that should be highlighted. Another idea is research focused on the experiences of Imams with professional mental health background and training in their personalized interactions with their congregants. Additionally, other sample considerations include specific mosque sizes and locations in the US (i.e suburban, urban, and rural). And lastly, a study to explore the experiences of Women leaders in the Masjid. Female leaders in the mosque are in a unique position and have unique congregant

experiences, due to their often-marginalized status, often with other women that this study was unable to learn more about.

Additional areas of focus could be a mixed methods study with a focus on referral practices and attitudes for collaboration of Imams. Another area of focus is needed at the perceived competence of Imams when making mental health related decisions. To add more depth to this study and differing perspectives, another idea worth exploring is understanding the experience of congregants during their personalized interactions with their Imams. Some research may be conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of collaborative programs in existence between Imams and mental health professionals and even a study evaluating the effectiveness of Islamic psychotherapy models and Western adapted models for Muslim clients. And lastly, there needs to be further research into the potential creation of a community collaboration model for Imams and mental health professionals and testing its effectiveness for practice.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the experiences of Imams in their mosques during their personalized interactions with the congregants that they serve. There were many findings that were supported by existing literature as well as new findings that contributed to the literature as well. The five identified themes provided a deeper understanding of the phenomena at hand and provided implications for counselors, counselor educators, and Imams. Implications call on the field to be more mindful of its approach to working with Muslim clients and attend to adopting a more multicultural and spiritually competent in our practice, training and research. This chapter also explored limitations to this study as well as future research directions to continue to add to our understanding of Imams and their work.

EPILOGUE

﴿١﴾ أَلَمْ نَشْرَحْ لَكَ صَدْرَكَ ﴿٢﴾ وَوَضَعْنَا عَنْكَ وِزْرَكَ ﴿٣﴾ الَّذِي أَنْقَضَ ظَهْرَكَ ﴿٤﴾ وَرَفَعْنَا لَكَ ذِكْرَكَ ﴿٥﴾ فَإِنَّ مَعَ الْعُسْرِ يُسْرًا

﴿٦﴾ إِنَّ مَعَ الْعُسْرِ يُسْرًا ﴿٧﴾ فَإِذَا فَرَغْتَ فَانْصَبْ ﴿٨﴾ وَإِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ فَارْغَبْ

سورة الـشرح

Did We not expand your breasts [O Muahammad]? And We removed from you burden. Which had weighed upon your back? And raised for you your reputation? For indeed, with hardship [will be] ease. Indeed, with hardship [will be] ease. So when you have finished [you duties], then stand up [for worship]. And to your Lord direct [your] longing. (Surah Ash-Sharah: The Relief)

In asking my participants to share their artifacts, their guiding scripture, I reflected heavily on my own work as a helper and what guided me. As a female, Muslim, Hijabi, Counselor and future Counselor Educator; I have considered what my role and my duty is to my community, my *Ummah*, and my profession. It is nothing but Allahs's greatest blessing upon me to put me in this position to do this work here today. And through I am not alone, I hope to see a time with our profession will have more voices that bring attention to the wonderful and beautiful strengths of our Muslim community. When the Day of Judgement comes and Allah asks me what I did with my life, I want to say I tried my hardest to help those who needed it. I used my privilege and my opportunities to bring attention to the forgotten voices and support to those in need. *Oh Allah, guide me on this path and make it easy for me to help your servants in this life and the next. Oh Allah give me the humility to know what I do not know and help me to be a source of guidance for those who may need it. Oh Allah help me to uncover the knowledge that will guide us all towards your truth, justice, and mercy.*

This dissertation is just the beginning of what I hope to be a long path to bring these lost

narratives to the forefront of our profession. And as I continue to develop my counselor identity, I hope my work can continue to provide and normalize mental health for my brothers and sisters in Islam. Allah does not burden any soul more than it can bear. And verily, with every hardship there is ease. If Allah puts me as a companion, for a short or long time, in the journey of incredible individuals, then that the greatest honor bestowed upon me.

To my participants who do this work day in and day out without little appreciation and much responsibility. To my participants who are the glue that holds their community together. To my participants who take calls in the middle of the night and respond to their congregants before Fajr prayer. To my participants who sometimes don't see their own families. To my participants who work hard to save marriages and help families. To my participants who sit with their congregants and guide them from their darkest times. To my participants who have the weight of the world on their shoulders. To my participants who continue to be spiritual first responders.

I hope I have shared your experiences with the details and diligence it deserves. Your work is seen. Your work is recognized. And may Allah reward you in this Duniya and in the Akhira. Ameen and Jazak'allah Kheir.

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Appendix A: Excerpts from Bridling Journal

October 8th, 2020

Some elements that stood out for me were the continued parallels for our work. Imam S talked a lot about how he has to be flexible depending on the issue but also who he is working with. He provided a lot of details of how he adapts and changes his style and approach depending on who he is working with. He basically talked about the notion of meeting the congregant where they are. He did not talk about stages of changes but he alluded very heavily to it as well which really stood out to me.

Something else he talked about was feeling like he was limited. That he sometimes he wonders what else he is lacking in his "toolkit" which even the parallel language really stood out to me I would take this a step further and say that Imams like him have the disposition aspect, the part we wonder in counseling if you can teach others (empathy, desire to help etc) but just may not have the "techniques". But it comes down to the idea that you maybe can't teach disposition to others but you can teach them theories and techniques. And for Imam S experience helped him learn a lot of this. He feels the Islamic knowledge part he learned from training but not the social aspect. This really had me internally reflecting on my ideas of who is made to be a helper and if disposition can be taught and trained into a student. .

November 3rd, 2020

The Imam talked about going out of his own way to fill in gaps that he had in knowledge. He mentioned once he spent his own money on a three day training that was on customer service because he felt like he was lacking in skills around how to deal and help talking to people. Made me wonder if maybe we can do basic listening techniques classes with Imams. Most people learn that good listening is about open ended questions and reflections but maybe we can give language to this.

Another main idea coming to me is that for many Imams when I ask them about what theory guides them they really talked more about dispositional approach to working with individuals. Which makes sense but I thought maybe Islamic theory would come in a lot more. But a lot of it is about a way of being - reminds me so much about how Sunnah is suppose to be our way of living Islam if Quran is telling us what to do. For the Imams their work is guided by what a helper should be but it's a way of being. Additionally, Imams keep talking about practicing within their scope. Which I really think is so thoughtful. I can see generally anyone with knowledge in a particular area thinking they know it all. But I guess the more you learn the more you know what you don't know.

Appendix B: Demographic Questionnaire

Demographic Questions

1. What is your age?

2. How do you identify as racially/ ethnically?

3. How do you identify by gender?

4. How do you identify in terms of religion?

5. Is there a specific denomination and school of thought you follow?

6. Are any other identities salient for you?

7. What US State do you live and serve in?

8. Your current title or position?

9. How many years of experience have you had as an Imam?

10. What does the congregation look like? (racial, size)

11. Where did you receive your formal training? (ask level)

12. Pseudonym selection.

Interview Questions

1. What led you to want to be a part of this study?

2. Tell me a pivotal moment in your journey that made you want to become an Imam?

3. Describe your one on one experiences with your congregants?

    a. What are common concerns individuals have?

4. How do you come to see congregants individually?

5. Based on your experience what do congregants typically come to you for and how do you understand their need

6. Describe what your typical one on one session looks like?

7. How do congregants respond to your support?

    a. What do congregants find helpful?

    b. How do you know it's helpful to them?

8. How has COVID influenced your engagement with congregants?

9. What is your role as a leader in the mosque?

    a. Does this fit with your individual work?

10. Are there any theories or guiding philosophies you use when meeting with congregants one on one?

    a. If no: What guides you?

11. How has your formal and informal training prepared you for your work?

12. What (artifact) scripture did you bring today that serves as your guide on your role as an Imam when it comes to providing support?

13. How have you come to understand healing?

     a.   What do you see as your role in healing?

14. How have you come to understanding mental health?

     a.   What do you see your role when it comes to mental health?

15. What might be important for counselors and the mental health field to know?

     a.   What should they not do when working with Muslim clients?

16. As an Imam, how would you sum up your experience during your individual interactions with your congregants?

17. Is there anything else you would like to add?

18. Do you know anyone else who might be a good fit for this?

Appendix D: Informed Consent

William & Mary
School of Education

DEPARTMENT OF SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGY AND COUNSELOR EDUCATION

You are invited to participate in a research study entitled **Experiences of Imams and their One-on-One Interactions with their Congregants**. This research study seeks to understand the experiences of Imams and their one on one interactions with their congregants. This study will focus on the participants experiences in providing informal support to their congregants and their attitudes about the overall encounter.

Participants have been identified who:
1. Over the age of 18
2. Identify as Asian or Middle Eastern
3. Currently serve as an Imam in a mosque in the United States
4. Have had at least three years of experience serving congregants as an Imam.

The purpose of this study is to better understand the experiences of Imams in terms of their one on one interactions with their congregants. Participants understand the nature of this objective and are aware of the following:

Participants understand that their involvement in this study is voluntary and they may refuse to answer any questions during the interviews if you so choose. If you feel distress of any kind, we encourage you to reach out to a counselor through Psychology Today or another support for your mental health. You may also terminate your participation in this study at any time. (To do so, simply inform the interviewer of your intentions). Neither of these actions will incur a penalty of any type. At any time, a participant can request for their data to be destroyed and excluded from any analysis.

Participants understand that they will be interviewed on the telephone or video call by researchers from William & Mary. The interview can be expected to last approximately 60-90 minutes and will be audio or video recorded to ensure accurate data retrieval and analysis. This recording will be stored on an encrypted flash drive until they are deleted after transcription and coding are complete.

Participant understands that the telephone or video interview will consist of questions related to the participant's experience in serving their congregants. Participants will also be asked demographic questions related to their personal and professional experience.

Participants understand that data will be collected using a pseudonym provided by the participant to protect their identity. At the end of the study, any information linking your name to the pseudonym will be destroyed. Participant's personal information and identity will be concealed and kept confidential by using passworded and protected files. Your name and other identifying information will be known only to the researchers through the information you provide. Neither your name nor any other personally identifying information will be used in any presentation or published work without prior written consent.

I understand that this research study has been reviewed and approved by the College of William and Mary, School of Education Institutional Review Board (IRB). You are required to notify Dr. Ward, chair of the EDIRC, at 757-221-2358 (EDIRC-L@wm.edu) and Dr. Jennifer Stevens, Chair of the PHSC at 757-221-3862 (jastev@wm.edu) if any issues arise during this study.

By completing the interview, you are agreeing to participate in the above described research project. Thank you for your consideration. If you have any questions or concerns about the research study, please contact Leila Warraich at lkwarraich@email.wm.edu or Dr. Natoya Haskins at nhhaskins@wm.edu. Please keep this letter for your records.

By signing and dating this form, you will indicate your voluntary agreement to participate in this study, and confirm that you are at least 18 years of age.

_____   _____
Signature   Date