MUSLIM FAMILIES AND FAMILY THERAPY

Manijeh Daneshpour
St. Mary University

Muslim immigrant families living in the United States may well come to the attention of mental health professionals. This article examines the applicability of the Anglo-American models of family therapy to Muslim immigrant families. The most significant differences in value systems between the Muslim and Anglo-American cultures is Muslim families' preference for greater connectedness, a less flexible and more hierarchical family structure, and an implicit communication style.

Systemic thinking, which deals with the pattern of relationships, is valid for all families regardless of cultural differences. However, the preferred directions of change for Muslim families need to be integrated into the assessment and goals for family therapy.

There is an increasing interest among family scholars, researchers, and therapists in understanding cultural diversity, family systems, and the impact of religious ideology on family life (Falicov, 1988; Haj-Yahia, 1995; McGoldrick, 1993; Modares, 1981; Tseng & Hsu, 1991). However, there remains a lack of information on Islamic ideology and its impact on the lives of Muslim immigrant families living in the United States.

Islam is a monotheistic religion, civilization, and way of life practiced by 1.1 billion people (Bill, 1994). Shortly after the year 2000, for the first time in history, the number of Muslims will surpass the number of Christians in the world (Bill, 1994). Islam is the religion of the majority of citizens in the Near East, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and much of northern Africa. Large numbers of people in Indonesia, Malaysia, and China also live in accordance with Islamic traditions (Fellows, 1979; Ludwig, 1989).

Muslim immigrants comprise a steadily growing group in the United States. Today there are more Muslims in America than there are Presbyterians and Episcopalians put together (Bill, 1994). These Muslim families have immigrated to the United States from many different countries with distinct cultural backgrounds. Therefore, it is difficult to make universal statements about the relationship of Muslim men and women and their attitudes about family life. Local ethnic, social, and historical factors affect the ways in which the Islamic faith is interpreted and applied. These influences determine how strict and traditional or how flexible and open the interpretation of Islam is in any given place. Most important, the attitudes of the family members toward their own ethnicity and its val-

---

ues and their own perception of their position in the dominant culture influence every Muslim family differently.

Despite these differences, Islamic ideology creates a fundamental link between cultures and establishes a common framework for understanding family life. Family structure, which derives from these belief systems, is predominantly patriarchal and based on the extended family. Traditions and rituals celebrating important events in both individual and family life cycles often have religious underpinnings. These religious influences foster important similarities in individual and family developmental tasks through the life cycle, reflected in the way children are socialized (Amini, 1994).

This article is an attempt to identify, discuss, and clarify some important issues for family therapists and family life educators working with Muslim immigrant families. Generally, these issues can be most clearly understood when viewed through the lens of Islamic ideology. As a native of Iran and a member of the Shi'i¹ sect of Islam, I have an insider perspective on Islamic ideology. Although my viewpoints might differ in some ways from those of an Orthodox Sunni Muslim, my goal is to focus on Islamic themes and premises that are common to many Muslim immigrant families regardless of their religious sects.

This article has three major goals. The first goal is to familiarize readers with the basic premises of Islamic ideology as it relates to marriage and divorce. Islamic ideology provides guidance about creating and sustaining *ideal* family relationships. Actual dynamics of family relationships are influenced by cultural beliefs, values, and practices. The distance between an ideal and the *real* may therefore be quite great. It is important for family therapists and educators to be introduced to very general yet basic premises set forth in Islam for marriage and divorce to prevent false stereotypes from interfering with clinician-client rapport.

The second goal is to discuss the dynamics of Muslim immigrant family relationships in terms of the Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems (Olson, Russell, & Sprenkle, 1993). This model will be used to compare and contrast Muslim immigrant families who live in accordance with Islamic ideology with Anglo-American families in terms of *cohesion, flexibility,* and *communication* patterns. The Circumplex Model provides a useful framework for understanding the different values and behavioral preferences of Muslim immigrant families compared to those of Anglo-American families.

The third goal is to provide guidance and insights that can assist family therapists and family life educators in working with Muslim immigrant families. Several strategies for approaching and helping Muslim families will be highlighted.

ISLAMIC IDEOLOGY AND MARRIAGE

Islam attaches great importance to marriage within the Islamic social system. In the Qur'an and the sayings of the prophet of Islam (Mohammed), marriage is greatly encouraged. The basic objectives of marriage in Islam are (1) securing a comfortable atmosphere for the husband and wife, and (2) producing a new generation and bringing up healthy, faithful, and virtuous children (Behishti & Bahonar, 1982).

A Muslim husband and wife should always be a source of comfort to each other. Their mutual relations should be far above mere sexual enjoyment and should reach the stage of cordial friendship accompanied by mutual benevolence. From the Islamic point

of view, marriage is not merely an instrument of legalizing sexual relations but is an agreement that unites the very existence of the husband and wife and gives a new color and a new rhythm to their life. It brings them out of solitariness, turns them into a couple instead of single individuals, and makes them complementary to each other (Motahary, 1974).

Freedom in Choosing Husband or Wife

Freedom in choosing a spouse is a principle to which Islam has paid much attention, for satisfactory conjugal life depends on intellectual, spiritual, and moral compatibility between the husband and wife. This compatibility can exist only if both parties are free in their choice and choose each other of their own free will after careful study and without any coercion (Motahary, 1974).

According to Islamic canon law, which in many countries in the Middle East is the governing law, the parties concerned can, in the presence of all other essential conditions, contract marriage directly. They can exchange the vows prescribed for this purpose provided that they are adults, mature, and of good judgment. For marriage it is not essential to appoint an attorney if the parties themselves can contract the marriage properly (Behishti & Bahonar, 1982). After a complete agreement is arrived at with regard to the conditions of marriage, a marriage contract is initiated by the woman. This shows that a Muslim woman is fully free in choosing her husband and it is up to her to contract the marriage. Then the husband accepts marriage with the conditions agreed upon.

At first the woman proposing the contract of marriage says to her future husband, "I give myself in permanent marriage to you with the dowry fixed (according to the condition agreed upon)." A woman cannot be given in marriage against her will nor can she be compelled to say yes by force or threat (Behishti & Bahonar, 1982). Similarly a man cannot be forced to marry any woman whom he does not like. As a rule any contract concluded through force or compulsion is void.

Thus, contrary to the popular belief, the tradition of arranged marriage in the form of coercing a woman to marry a man is against Islamic ideology. However, because marriage establishes a social contract between two families, both man and woman are advised to consult their parents in regard to the selection of their future spouse. Therefore, parents and the extended family have a strong influence on the mate selection process.

Furthermore, the teachings of Islam recommend that daughters should marry with the consent of their father. Many Muslim courts consider this consent to be an essential condition of marriage for women. However, such jurists hold this view only in respect to virgins. Evidently they give importance to this condition only because in their opinion the intervention of a loving and experienced father is of great value.

Even then, the consent of the father is essential only so long as he tries to safeguard the interests of his daughter and does not impose his own will on her against her interests. Given the fact that Islamic laws have great influence in Muslim countries even in secular courts, if it is found that a father is bent upon imposing his will against the interests of his daughter, it is the duty of the Islamic court to take notice of the case and take proper action to safeguard the interests of the daughter.

Financial Responsibility in Marriage

Financial (*nafaqah*) maintenance is a legal responsibility in the Islamic family system. In a marital relationship, a wife is entitled to be maintained by her husband. The husband

is responsible for providing food, clothing, accommodations, and all that is necessary for her comfort and for running the household. The financial competence of the husband should also be taken into consideration in the implementation of these responsibilities. Financial maintenance of the wife is obligatory for the husband even if she is well-off. If a husband does not provide the necessities of life to his wife, she can request a decree of separation (Moghaddas, personal communication, July 27, 1996).

Financial Independence of Married Women

In the social system of Islam, women, like men, are financially independent. They can earn money, and they have full control over their property, which they can dispose of as they like (Motahary, 1974). As for the domestic work the women do, it depends entirely on their own will, desire, and inclination. From a religious and legal point of view there is no compulsion. However, diverse cultural values play an important role in how these religious values are interpreted and applied in any given Muslim family.

In a marriage contract the husband undertakes to present a suitable gift to his wife. This gift is not to be regarded as the price of a woman's body nor as a recompense for her services in the household nor as something she can rely on in case of separation or death. It is just a gift, and if she so desires, he may present it to her before marriage. In the Qur'an, the word *sadaaq* has been used for dowry. The term *sadaaq* implies that a dowry is a sign of man's sincerity in love and in his offer of marriage. The dowry is, in fact, a means of showing respect to his future wife (Motahary, 1974).

It is important to note that immediately upon the conclusion of the marriage contract, whatever has been fixed as the dowry becomes the property of the wife. If it is a piece of land, a garden, or a sum of money, its benefits accrue exclusively to her. Only with the wife's consent can the benefits accruing from it be utilized for conducting their common life (Behishti & Bahonar, 1982).

DIVORCE IN ISLAMIC LAW

Divorce or dissolution of marriage in Islam results in the end of all responsibilities of the husband and the wife in regard to their rights and obligations to each other. Islam has assigned to marriage the status of a contract dissoluble if either party develops grievances against the other leading to a final and irrevocable break in their mutual relations. From the Islamic viewpoint, the disintegration of family bonds is very undesirable in principle. In fact, divorce is regarded as unpleasant and bitter, and Islam has suggested certain precautions designed to minimize the possibility of divorce. Nevertheless, permission is given both to men and women to obtain a release from the bond of marriage in cases of absolute necessity (Siddiqi, 1952).

In Islamic law and ideology, men have been given the liberty to divorce under certain conditions. It is important to note, however, that with regard to the dowry they have bestowed on their wives, they are not permitted to withhold it or take anything back from it if they decide to divorce.

Conditions for Divorce

Divorce is valid and operative only if the following conditions are fulfilled: (1) The husband who divorces must be of mature age and must be of sound mind. Divorce pro-

nounced by a minor or a mentally ill man is invalid. (2) The husband must be exercising his own free will. Divorce under compulsion is not valid. (3) Two witnesses must be present (Behishti & Bahonar, 1982).

According to the Shi'i school of thought, and as stated in the Qur'an, divorce must be pronounced in the presence of at least two trustworthy and righteous witnesses. The condition automatically implies that two righteous persons should be aware of the decision of the spouses to dissolve the marriage. In many cases their intervention facilitates the reconciling of the husband and wife. Further, their knowledge and presence may be helpful in settling financial, child support, child custody, and other issues (Moghaddas, personal communication, July 27, 1996).

Kind of Divorce

Divorce may be either revocable or irrevocable. In the case of revocable divorce, if the man regrets his decision and wants to resume conjugal relations, the tie is automatically restored and there is no need to contract marriage again, provided he revokes his act within a three-month period of probation (*iddah*) (Moghaddas, personal communication, July 27, 1996).

There are several conditions for irrevocable divorce: (1) if the husband agrees to dissolve the marriage at the request of the wife, (2) if the marriage is dissolved because both the husband and the wife have asked each other to terminate it, and (3) if the husband and wife reconcile and redivorce more than two times (Behishti & Bahonar, 1982).

There are two ways in which a woman is allowed to seek divorce from her husband: through prenuptial agreement or by filing suit in a court of law. In Islam, it is open to both the husband and the wife to enter into an agreement prior to marriage on matters that they consider important for the regulation of their future relations (Moghaddas, personal communication, July 27, 1996). Such agreements are part of the marriage contract and are adjudicable in a court of law. Therefore, a woman can lay down conditions prior to marriage, which can include the right to divorce her husband in the case of irreconcilable differences.

An alternative means of divorce involves the wife filing a suit against the husband in a court of law. Some of the grounds for divorce are (1) refusal to provide economic sustenance, (2) change of religion, (3) impotence, (4) infectious disease, (5) willful desertion, and (6) disappearance of the husband (Siddiqi, 1952). It is important to note that according to the Islamic law, in case of divorce, remarriage for both men and women is common and acceptable.

Right of Guardianship of Children

Islamic law gives the custody and care of children in the early years of their lives to the mother, even if the father is competent enough and willing to look after them. In a case where the mother is not capable or fit to take care of the child, the responsibility of guardianship goes to the father. In both cases the father has to bear the expenses of raising the child (Behishti & Bahonar, 1982).

Because the right of guardianship is recognized solely for the benefit of the children, the child should be in the custody of the person who can best look after the child. If both parents are unable to look after the child, some other suitable arrangement should be made to ensure the child's welfare. If the father and mother agree, the child may be placed in the custody of a third person under whose guardianship the child can make

proper physical and spiritual progress (Moghaddas, personal communication, July 27, 1996). It is important to note that different Islamic cultures may have different ways of dealing with child custody issues, depending on their country's specific laws.

THE CIRCUMPLEX MODEL AND CLINICAL ASSESSMENT
OF MUSLIM IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

A culture defines broad patterns of social order that locate human experience in a large context and legitimate ways of knowing and ways of behaving (Tamura & Lau, 1992). Even though families and therapists are both affected by their cultural patterns, they may not be aware of patterns that are implicitly a part of their being. Cultural patterns come to light only to the degree that we can step aside from the cultural systems in which we are embedded, for example, by comparing them to the others. Cultural differences become an issue when a cultural boundary is created within the therapeutic system, often because a therapist and a family belong to different cultures (Ho, 1987). The boundary can also occur within the family system in the case of a multicultural marriage (McGoldrick & Preto, 1984), or in immigrant families where the degree of acculturation varies among the family members.

In learning about the various models of family therapy, I could not help raising the question of how applicable these models of family therapy are for Muslim families. Given the fact that I am a Muslim and a native of Iran, is it possible to use my knowledge in this field to create a family therapy model suitable for Muslim immigrant families who come to the United States from very distinct cultures across the world? Is it even necessary or feasible to devise an Islamic model of family therapy?

These are important questions to consider, because any attempt to apply family therapy models to Muslim families without considering differences in context will fail to achieve the desirable effects. There is also a danger that crucial information and continued engagement with client families will be lost. On the other hand, it is important to note that Muslim immigrant families coming from Eastern countries share many cultural values with other Easterners. Therefore, although there are no specific models of family therapy applicable to Muslim families, systemic thinking can provide a contextual framework for understanding the dynamics of Muslim family relationships.

In this article the Circumplex Model of Marital and Family System (Olson, 1993) will be used as a point of reference to compare Muslim immigrant families with Anglo-American families. Three basic concepts used in the Circumplex Model and which are common to most other models of family systems are *cohesion/togetherness, flexibility/adaptability, and communication* (Goral & Olson, 1994).

Cohesion/togetherness is defined as the degree of emotional bonding or closeness within a family (Olson et al., 1989). There are four levels in the cohesion dimension of the Circumplex Model. They are, in order from low to high, disengaged, separated, connected, and enmeshed. *Flexibility/adaptability* is defined as the amount or degree of change in family leadership, role relationships, and relationship roles (Olson, 1993). The four levels of flexibility are rigid, structured, flexible, and chaotic. *Communication* is defined as the level of family skill in listening and speaking with one another (Olson, 1993) and is the key to family system change (Goral & Olson, 1994).

In the section that follows, characteristics of Muslim immigrant families at each level

of the Circumplex Model will be described and compared to characteristics of Anglo-American and northern European families, with guidelines suggested to fit the challenges that arise from Muslim family system patterns.

Cohesion in Muslim and Anglo-American Families

Applying the Circumplex Model to Anglo-American families, it is hypothesized that the central levels of *cohesion* (separated and connected) are more conducive to marital and family functioning, with the extremes (disengaged or enmeshed) being the most problematic (Olson, 1993).

In the dominant Anglo-American culture, the importance of the separateness of the individual takes precedence over the connectedness among family members. The degree of individuation and autonomy of the individual are important criteria of healthy families (Olson et al., 1989; Skynner, 1987). Growth in childhood, according to object relations theory, is a process of progressive differentiation of self from an attachment figure. Generation boundaries are supposed to be kept clear so that young adults can leave home and achieve physical independence from their parents (Tamura & Lau, 1992). Because dependency tends to be seen as a serious problem, a child who cannot function independently by early adulthood is likely to be perceived as a problem (McGoldrick & Preto, 1984), and adolescent difficulties are often framed in therapy as leaving-home issues (Tamura & Lau, 1992).

In contrast, Muslims value *unity* and *connectedness*. In the Muslim community, nature is a unity. It is important to maintain harmony between individuals and nature. Harmony with nature also means that preservation of family ties and collectivist behavior take precedence over individualistic orientation and behavior. The Muslim heritage is based on shared loyalty and strong kinship bonds. Colman (1986) describes how Anglo-Americans sacrifice connectedness to achieve separateness. Muslims sacrifice separateness to achieve connectedness. This involves intensely emotional intimate relationships, high levels of empathy and receptivity to others, and strong identification with the reputation and honor of the family (Brook, 1995). Thus, one's self-image, esteem, excellence, security, and identity are evaluated on the basis of their relationships with family.

The Circumplex Model describes enmeshment as unbalanced and unhealthy as an ongoing family style, with extreme amounts of closeness, dependency, and demand for loyalty and a general lack of personal separateness (Olson, 1993). This kind of relationship, however, is strongly valued in Muslim immigrant families. Marriage can be considered a process of integration toward a more complex family system, which includes in-law relationships, rather than as a process of individuation and separation, that enables Muslim families to function well within the close and intimate relationships of the extended family and community.

Thus, in Muslim families, the optimal balance of separateness/connectedness is defined much more toward the connectedness side of the continuum than in Anglo-American society. A more common problem for Muslim immigrant families is insufficient connectedness. This occurs when a significant family member is absent, when there is too much distance in the marital relationship, or when individuals are isolated from the support network. To achieve connectedness in the family system, it becomes important to increase mutual support, sensitivity to others, and maintenance of group harmony.

Flexibility in Muslim and Anglo-American Families

Applying the Circumplex Model to Anglo-American families, it is hypothesized that balanced levels of flexibility (structured and flexible) are more conducive to marital and family functioning, with the extremes (rigid and chaotic) being problematic as families move through the family life cycle (Olson, 1993). A *rigid relationship* exists when one individual is in charge and is highly controlling. There tend to be limited negotiations, with most decisions imposed by the leader. The roles are strictly defined, and the rules do not change. A *flexible relationship*, on the other hand, which is highly desired in American society, is an egalitarian leadership with a democratic approach to decision making. Negotiations are open and actively include children. Roles are shared; there is fluid change when necessary, and rules can be changed.

On the other hand, the need to control one's world is not a supreme value for the Muslim families. They believe that God controls human destiny (Barakat, 1985; Kanaana, 1982; Rugh, 1984). According to this religious value, there is no room for conflict and dissension either between individuals and their environment or among family members. In other words, a regular, normal life is characterized as conflict free and is distinguished by harmonious relationships, equilibrium, and homeostasis. Hence, it is believed that family problems develop when the family unit or individuals in the family fail to maintain balance and harmony with their environment. Thus, there is not much flexibility in the American sense. Change is often kept to the minimum. Leadership is authoritarian, negotiations are limited, and decisions are usually imposed by parents. Roles are strictly defined; rules are often unchangeable, and they are strictly enforced.

Therefore, Muslim immigrant families are generally less flexible in the American sense than Anglo-American families. The roles and rules are determined by religion and cultural values and are not often flexible. Thus, the optional balance of flexibility/rigidity is defined much more toward the rigidity side of the continuum. A more common problem for Muslim immigrant families is lack of hierarchical order in the family. This occurs when an adolescent rebels against family rules and questions family leadership; when there is too much chaos in the marital relationship due to the lack of clear roles and boundaries; or when individuals want to differentiate and isolate themselves from their support network.

Communication in Muslim and Anglo-American Families

Overt, explicit, and open communication is positively valued in the Anglo-American cultures (Tamura & Lau, 1992). Family communication focuses on listening skills, speaking skills, self-disclosure, clarity, continuity tracking, and respect and regard (Olson, 1993). Very good communication consists of congruent, clear messages and open discussion of self, feelings, and relationships.

In contrast, indirect and *implicit expression* is common among Muslims and in many Eastern cultures (Hong, 1989). Indirect means of communication include frequent allusions to proverbs and folk parables. Muslims, like other non-Muslim Easterners, are not encouraged to make their desires explicit to others. Instead, they are expected to be highly sensitive to what other people have in their minds despite the minimal use of verbal interaction.

Direct and explicit communication in Eastern cultures leads to differentiation between people (Tamura & Lau, 1992). Assertive and articulate communication is often devalued

and the speaker is regarded as acting only on his or her own behalf, selfishly, and indifferent to maintaining group harmony. Such communication may result in confrontation and lead to loss of face within the group.

In Eastern cultures, indirect and covert communication can create a strong bond between speaker and listener. It respects people's judgment about their own understanding of context in the dialogue. If one is explicitly criticized or given orders by others, self-autonomy and independence are threatened and one loses face. If people take the initiative in understanding the context in which they are criticized or ordered around without needing an explicit message, they can stay close to others without feeling threatened.

One way to gain autonomy and independence is by physically separating from others, which is one solution used by Anglo-Americans. Another, which is popular among Easterners (Tamura & Lau, 1992) and Muslims alike, is by the use of a covert and intuitive communication style.

Many Muslim families dislike confrontations and direct communication. A more common problem for families is a person's frequent discussion of self rather than family relationships. Family members who are preoccupied with their feelings in a relationship and use an explicit communication style create problems within the family system. An Anglo-American therapist working with a Muslim family might be tempted to encourage members of the family to make their own messages clear and explicit so that each person could be more aware of what the others expected in the family relationship. What would be more culturally consonant in this situation, however, would be focusing on each person's sensitivity to others' expectations and wishes and being respectful to others' feelings and messages.

Reluctance to Participate in Therapy

Muslim families, like any other families living in the United States, may find themselves in crisis and in need of professional help. However, there are a number of reasons why Muslim immigrant families are generally reluctant to seek help from mental health professionals.

First, many Western opinion makers consistently label all Muslims with words such as *aggressive, militant,* and *uncivilized* (Bill, 1994). Islam is the *religion of the Sword,* and Muslim activists are considered *terrorists.* Further, many people believe that Islamic ideology is oppressive to women and that Muslim women have no rights.

Muslims themselves, however, maintain a different worldview. First, Muslims see themselves as the afflicted, not the afflicters; they feel themselves desperately on the defensive, not on the offensive; they consider themselves the objects of violence, not the initiators; and they see themselves as extremely misunderstood when it comes to the issue of women's rights (Bill, 1994). Thus, it is uncomfortable for Muslim immigrant families, even if they desperately need help, to discuss the family's private struggles with a therapist who has limited knowledge or negative views about Islamic ideology and Muslim families.

Second, Muslim immigrant families usually present problems accompanied by a tremendous sense of failure. Their cultural patterns intertwined with religious ideology provide explanations for health and illness, and for normality and deviance. Muslims believe that the family is responsible for the greatness or deviance of family members (Amini, 1994). The family is the primary resource for teaching children how to behave in

society and how their relationships should be with others. Many Muslims view the home environment as the root of problems and behavioral disorders. In marital relationships, the family of origin and the spouses' upbringing are viewed as important elements of a satisfactory marital relationship. Therefore, psychological problems are viewed as families' lack of responsiveness to family members' needs.

Third, discussing personal problems with someone outside of the kinship networks brings a deep sense of shame. Muslim immigrant families, like many other Easterners, make a fine distinction between what is inside and what is outside their support network (Doi, 1985). Children's school problems or couples' marital problems are not considered problems that call for the involvement of a third-party expert. They are private problems that families are expected to control and take responsibility for handling with the help of the extended family.

In the case of marital problems, for example, Islamic ideology suggests that whenever it is not possible for the husband and wife to sort out their differences themselves, they should go to two arbiters, one selected from each family of origin (Behishti & Bahonar, 1982). The reason for this is that the arbiters are expected to have knowledge of the temperaments of the husband and wife as well as of their domestic affairs. They may also be committed to settling their differences, and most important, they are insiders.

Muslim families living in the United States, however, do not usually have such extended family support available to them. Thus, they need outside help when in distress. Yet only when members become very desperate do they seek psychotherapy. By the time the family comes in for therapy, they are often overwhelmed by a sense of crisis or persistent strain.

PRIORITIES IN WORKING WITH MUSLIM FAMILIES

Several priorities are important in meeting these challenges in working with Muslim immigrant families. First, the joining process is crucial, because Muslims feel vulnerable and powerless when they have to present problems to the therapist, who might not understand their cultural background and their religious ideology. Mental health professionals and educators need to convey their respect for the family's culture and religion. The family needs to gain a sense of connectedness to the practitioner without feeling inferior or judged. Unless the practitioner wins the family's trust, family members will be reluctant to share their real feelings.

The strong sense of cohesion and interdependency among Muslim families requires a holistic, ecological perspective toward intervention rather than a limited, reductionist perspective that takes only the individual or the nuclear family into account. This comprehensive perspective should consider the individual and the nuclear family as well as the relationships between individuals, their extended families, and others in the cultural context. Family practitioners who begin intervention with nuclear Muslim immigrant families will soon find that they cannot ignore the extended family and community, especially the elderly members, who are respected for their experience and wisdom. Thus, it is possible to involve older family members and benefit from their instrumental resources, their life experiences, their extensive formal and informal ties, and their social status.

Western practitioners may be uncertain how to approach situations in which there is conflict between the interests of the family and the interests of the individual. They need

to know that intervention is welcomed by clients as long as it maintains the unity of the family and emphasizes the goals, desires, and interests of the family unit as opposed to those of individual family members. Any help or support rendered to individuals is also welcomed as long as it does not conflict with the needs and goals of the nuclear family or the extended family or both.

Muslims may not see the value of resolving problems by verbal communication. They tend to internalize concerns, which is a way of maintaining an integrated whole and making a strong connection to God (Allah) (Moghaddas, personal communication, July 27, 1996). Thus, praying is traditionally and religiously considered one of the best ways to heal distress. It is believed that one feels pain, bereavement, or worries only because one tries to struggle against the flow of nature and the will of Allah. By sitting silently and praying, one gets in touch with the true self, which is intrinsically connected to Allah. This enables the person to accept the self and the pain because one is not an isolated existence but a part of the total wholeness in relation to Allah.

Furthermore, Muslim immigrant families may be reluctant to express themselves openly in conjoint family sessions. Whereas the mother might be able to complain openly about her husband at an individual session, she would not do so in a session where her husband and children were present, for two reasons. One is the value placed on the covert communication style, which discourages direct confrontation or criticism of others. The other reason is the hierarchical nature of the family structure. A wife may not directly criticize her husband because of her subordinate position. Also, the husband may find it difficult to share his feelings in front of his wife and children because he feels the need to maintain his authoritative position in the family.

Bearing systemic thinking in mind, family practitioners can see family members individually before a conjoint session in order to engage them. Individual sessions might also have some particular advantages for Muslim immigrant families. They confirm the communication style, which avoids direct confrontation. They would be particularly useful when trying to engage unmotivated fathers who are reluctant to come to a conjoint session. The father can be asked to come as a "link therapist" (Tamura & Lau, 1992) so that his authoritative position in the family is not challenged.

The use of a genogram of at least three generations is crucial in understanding the family and their culture. It is useful not only for eliciting transgenerational patterns and family myths but also for illustrating the whole picture of the family system. Even if the family consists of a one- or two-generation household and the rest of the extended family lives in their home country or miles away, they would still maintain close emotional links and expect to be involved in all important issues.

Moreover, interventions that emphasize education and advancement of the children in a family as a goal are welcomed by Muslim families. Hence, reinforcement of belief in the value of education can encourage Muslim families to seek help from a family practitioner and engage in professional therapeutic relations willingly, as long as the family feels that the practitioner respects their beliefs and is willing to help them in the process of fulfilling their goals.

Muslim immigrant families mostly continue to attribute positive value to their cultural and historical roots and emphasize the past, which represents respect for adults and elderly members and valuing their wisdom and experience (Barakat, 1985; Kanaana, 1982). They also have a time orientation emphasizing the present (Ahlawat & Zaghal, 1989; Al-

Haj, 1989; Jalali, 1996). Because life is perceived as a cyclical process in Muslim ideology, imposed intervention plans may be perceived as disrupting the natural course of life. Hence, concrete, immediate solutions to family problems (here and now) are perceived as more practical and effective than future-oriented goals.

It is assumed, therefore, that Muslim families prefer solutions oriented toward the here and now and are most likely to cooperate with family mental health practitioners who help them to achieve such solutions. Moreover, solutions that overemphasize the historical development of the family and individual members of the family, or solutions that are too philosophical and abstract, may be rejected (Saleh, 1989; Soliman, 1991). In general, the aims of intervention should be practical, immediate, and attainable although also remaining congruent with the goals and values of the family in particular and their religious ideology in general (Haj-Yahia, 1995).

CONCLUSION

It is important for family practitioners to apply approaches that are congruent with Muslim values and their family processes. Systemic thinking, the basic premise of Western models of family therapy, is applicable to Muslim immigrant families as long as there is awareness that the Muslim family's cultural value system emphasizes the connectedness of relationships. Practitioners also need to remember that this value orientation sets the pattern of family lives in a way that may be quite different from that of the Anglo-American culture. They should also be aware that strategies aimed at therapeutic impact through verbal interaction are built on premises that emphasize verbal communication. Strategies that emphasize the nonverbal mode of communication may be more appropriate for Muslim immigrant families.

The Circumplex Model of Marital and Family Systems can be used to understand dynamic relationships in Muslim families on the three dimensions of *cohesion, flexibility,* and *communication.* However, professionals need to assess what the functional family structure is within Islamic culture and be careful not to blindly impose Anglo-American standards. The way in which a family problem is understood and the desired direction for change are strongly colored by religious ideology and the cultural belief system. Muslim families place high value on the process of integration and pay less attention to the process of differentiation. Further, basic rules about marriage, divorce, and the position of women within Islamic ideology need to be taken into consideration. The goal is to have Islamic values recognized and respected by family practitioners without having Muslim immigrant families feel misunderstood and oppressed by the misrepresentation of their values and belief systems.

REFERENCES

Ahlawat, K. S., & Zaghal, A. S. (1989). Nuclear and extended family attitudes of Jordanian Arabs. In K. Bon, G. Sgritta, & M. B. Sussman (Eds.), *Cross-cultural perspectives on families, work, and change* (pp. 251–273). New York: Haworth.

Al-Haj, M. (1989). Social research on family lifestyles among Arabs in Israel. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies, 20,* 175–195.

Amini, I. (1994). *Principles of marriage and family ethics.* Islamic Propagation organization. Tehran: Sepher.

Barakat, H. (1985). The Arab family and the challenges of social transformation. In E. W. Fernea (Ed.), *Women and the family in the Middle East: New voices of change* (pp. 27–48). Austin: University of Texas Press.

Behishti, M. H., & Bahonar, J. (1982). *Philosophy of Islam.* New York: Islamic Seminary.

Bill, J. (1994). Muslims everywhere yet still in chains. *Mahjubeh, 13*(11), 5–6.

Brook, G. (1995). *Nine parts of desire: The hidden world of Islamic women.* New York: Anchor Books.

Colman, C. (1986). International family therapy: A view from Kyoto, Japan. *Family Process, 21,* 651–664.

DiNicola, V. F. (1985). Family therapy and transcultural psychiatry: An emerging synthesis. *Transcultural Psychiatric Research Review, 22*(2), 81–113; (3), 151–180.

Doi, L. T. (1985). *The anatomy of self: The individual versus society.* Tokyo: Kodansha International.

Falicov, C. J. (1988). *Family Transition: Continuity and change over the life cycle.* New York: Guilford.

Fellows, W. J. (1979). *Religions East and West.* New York: Holt.

Goral, M. D., & Olson, D. H. (1994). Circumplex Model of Family System: Integrating ethnic diversity and other systems. In D. Mikesell, T. D. Lusterman, & S. McDaniel (Eds.), *Integrating family systems and family psychology.* American Psychological Association.

Haj-Yahia, M. M. (1995). Toward culturally sensitive intervention with Arab families in Israel. *Contemporary Family Therapy, 17*(4), 429–447.

Ho, M. K. (1987). *Family therapy with ethnic minorities.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Hong, G. K. (1989). Application of cultural and environmental issues in family therapy with immigrant Chinese Americans. *Journal of Strategic and Systemic Therapies, 8,* 14–21.

Jalali, B. (1996). Iranian families. In M. McGoldrick, J. K. Pearce, & J. Giordano (Eds.), *Ethnicity and family therapy.* New York: Guilford.

Kanaana, S. (1982). *Change and continuity.* Jerusalem: Arab Studies Association. (Arabic).

Ludwig, T. M. (1989). *The sacred paths: Understanding the religions of the world.* New York: Macmillan.

McGoldrick, M. (1993). Ethnicity, cultural diversity, and normality (pp. 331–360). In F. Walsh (Ed.), *Normal family processes.* New York: Guilford.

McGoldrick, M., & Preto, N. G. (1984). Ethnic intermarriage: Implications for therapy. *Family Process, 23,* 347–364.

Modares, M. (1981). Women and Shi-ism in Iran. *M/F, 5*(6), 62–82.

Motahary, M. (1974). *The system of women's rights in Islam.* Tehran: Sadr.

Olson, D. H. (1993). Circumplex model of marital and family system: Assessing family functioning. In F. Walsh (Ed.), *Normal family processes* (2nd ed.). New York: Guilford.

Olson, D. H., Russell, C., & Sprenkle, D. (1989). *Circumplex Model: System assessment and treatment of families.* New York: Haworth.

Rugh, A. B. (1984). *Family in contemporary Egypt.* Syracuse: Syracuse University Press.

Saleh, M. A. (1989). The cultural milieu of counseling. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counseling, 12,* 3–11.

Siddiqi, M. M. (1952). *Women in Islam.* Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture.

Skynner, R. (1987). Frameworks for viewing the family as a system (pp. 3–35). In A. Bentovim, G. G. Barnes, & A. Cooklin (Eds.), *Family therapy: Complementary frameworks of theory and practice* (Vol. 1). London: Academic Press.

Soliman, A. M. (1991). The role of counseling in developing countries. *International Journal for the Advancement of Counseling, 14,* 3–14.

Tamura, T., & Lau, A. (1992). Connectedness versus separateness: Applicability of family therapy to Japanese families. *Family Process, 31*(4), 319–340.

Tseng, W., & Hsu, J. (1991). *Culture and family.* New York: Haworth.

NOTE

[1]Shi'ism is distinctive, particularly in relation to Sunnism, the most orthodox and dominant Islamic movement, in its position on the status of the successor of the prophet as the leader of the community. The Prophet Mohammed did not explicitly name his successor. After his death most followers agreed in choosing Abu Bakr on the grounds that he was close to Prophet and a good politician. A small group of followers, however, argued that the successor must also be a religious authority possessing the spiritual ability needed for the continuing interpretation of the revelation and the comprehension of the Prophet's esoteric teachings. They insisted that such spiritual ability was transmitted to Ali (the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law and his first believer) by the Prophet's designation of him through appointment and testament. This then, Shia argue, was inherited by two sons of Ali and Fatima (the Prophet's daughter) and was carried on until the twelfth generation's successor, Mahdi, went into osculation (esoteric concealment). The twelve inheritors of the Prophet's spiritual function are known as Imams. The Shi'i doctrine of Imamat differentiates Shi'ism from other Muslim sects.