

Personal Spiritual Experience as The Foundation of Authentic Islamic Counseling: Phenomenological Findings on the Concept of Heart Communication Therapy

Ros Mayasari¹, Ainun Zaujah², Sri An Maharani Bintang³

^{1,3}IAIN Kendari, Indonesia

²Kantor Kementerian Agama Kota Bau-Bau, Sulawesi Tenggara, Indonesia

mayasarigayo@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: Ros Mayasari

Article History: Recived: 2025, 09, 01; Revised: 2025, 09, 22; Accepted: 2025, 10, 25.

Abstract: This study aims to explore the reflective experiences of a family counselor in formulating Qalbu Communication Therapy (TKQ) as an Islamic counseling approach based on personal and spiritual experiences. The study uses a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. Data were collected through participants' reflective notes and interviews, then analyzed using thematic analysis techniques. The results of the study show three main findings. First, the counselor's personal and spiritual crisis experiences served as an important energy source in formulating counseling innovations. Second, the application of TKQ not only helped clients find peace, but also encouraged social transformation through the formation of spirituality-based counseling communities. Third, the counseling process gave rise to empowerment, whereby some clients developed into community counselors. The conclusion of this study confirms that counselors' life experiences and spiritual reflections can be an authentic source in the development of Islamic counseling. Counseling does not stop at individual recovery but develops into a participatory, creative, and sustainable model of social empowerment.

Keywords: Islamic counseling, qalbu communication therapy, counselor experience, empowerment

INTRODUCTION

Islamic Counseling is a field that integrates spiritual values, religious teachings, and psychological approaches to assist individuals and families in facing life's challenges. In practice, Islamic counseling does not only focus on the resolution of psychological problems, but also strengthens the client's faith, moral character (akhlaq), and spiritual awareness so they can face life with patience (sabar), sincerity (ikhlas), and optimism (Akhmadi, 2019). This orientation is what distinguishes Islamic counseling from Western approaches, which emphasize more on cognitive and behavioral aspects.

Nevertheless, a number of studies in Indonesia indicate that the practice of Islamic counseling in the field still faces challenges regarding authenticity. Many Islamic counseling models are more theoretical and normative, but lack roots in the actual experiences of counselors in dealing with family life dynamics. Az-Zahra and Kurniawan (2021) assert that Islamic counseling often merely adopts Western techniques with the addition of a religious nuance, thereby losing its

spiritual depth and contextual relevance. This condition creates an empirical gap between the real needs of the community and the available counseling approaches.

Several previous studies emphasize that the counselor's personal experience is an important source for the development of more creative and contextual counseling techniques. Nelson (2017) and Smith (2019) found that personal crisis experiences can lead to therapeutic innovations that are more meaningful for clients. In the Islamic context, the counselor's spiritual experience plays a vital role in forming counseling techniques that touch the client's heart, not just solving problems cognitively (Rakhmat, 2020). These findings strengthen the idea that the reflection on a counselor's experience can serve as a foundation for the development of authentic Islamic counseling methods.

Furthermore, there are studies showing how counselors who draw from family experiences are able to create new approaches in Islamic counseling services. For instance, a study by Karimah (2021) revealed that a counselor's experience in facing personal marital conflict spurred the birth of an empathetic communication-based counseling technique. Similarly, Nurdin (2022) reported that counselors with direct experience in assisting children with emotional problems found it easier to formulate Islamic counseling strategies relevant to family needs. This indicates that life experience not only functions as a source of personal learning but also becomes a real contribution to society.

This research stems from the reflective experience of a family counselor who initiated Qalb Communication Therapy (Terapi Komunikasi Qalbu), an Islamic counseling approach born from their personal experience while facing a child's emotional crisis. From this experience, the counselor not only found healing for their own family but also developed a technique that was later widely applied in family counseling services in the community. This research highlights how the counselor's personal spiritual transformation developed into a broader, beneficial social transformation.

The objective of this research is to explore the counselor's reflective experience in formulating Qalb Communication Therapy using a phenomenological approach. This study attempts to fill the gap between theory and practice in Islamic counseling by presenting evidence that the counselor's personal experience can be a source of authentic innovation. Furthermore, this research is expected to contribute to the development of an Islamic counseling model that is not only theoretical but also applicable, creative, and aligned with the real needs of the Muslim community.

METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a phenomenological approach, a qualitative method focusing on understanding the meaning of individuals' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology was chosen because the research aims to deeply explore the experience of a family counselor in discovering and developing Qalb Communication Therapy (TKQ – Terapi Komunikasi Qalbu), which originated from a personal experience of healing their child until it became a professional practice. In the phenomenological tradition, the researcher seeks to "return to the things themselves" (*zu den Sachen selbst*) to understand the essence of the experience (Husserl, 2012). Therefore, the main data for this study are the participant's reflective notes, which are written based on their experience.

Participant

The participant in this study is a family counselor who self-taught and developed a counseling approach based on Islamic spirituality. The participant was asked to write reflective notes about their personal journey, from the initial child-rearing crisis and spiritual experiences (taubat, doa, dzikir / repentance, prayer, remembrance of God), to the development of TKQ as a counseling technique for the community. In phenomenological research, the use of a single participant is permissible when the focus of the study is to deeply explore a unique and deeply meaningful experience (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Research Stages

Data collection was carried out in several stages. First, the preparation of open-ended questions. The researcher designed reflective questions, such as: what the experience of facing a crisis in the family was like, how that experience influenced them to pursue counseling, how the idea of Qalb Communication Therapy (TKQ) was born, and how the participant applied TKQ to the community until they became a professional practitioner. Second, the participant compiled reflective notes. The participant wrote down their personal experience in a narrative form. Third, clarification was conducted through interviews; if there were ambiguous parts in the writing, the researcher conducted a follow-up interview.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using a phenomenological approach with thematic analysis. The steps taken refer to Moustakas (1994) and Braun & Clarke (2006). The researcher practiced bracketing personal assumptions to focus on the participant's experience. All significant statements from the reflective notes were given equal weight. Subsequently, themes were grouped. Similar statements were merged into thematic categories, namely: personal crisis and spiritual experience, social awareness and empathy, discovery of the secret of inner communication, application of Qalb Communication Therapy (TKQ) to the community, and the theme of counselor professionalization. The essence of the participant's lived experience is that TKQ was born from a personal spiritual journey that transformed into a professional Islamic counseling approach.

Data

Trustworthiness To ensure credibility, this study utilized the technique of member checking, where the analysis results were re-confirmed with the participant. The entire analysis process was recorded transparently. Finally, thick description was performed, which is the detailed presentation of the experience narrative so that readers can understand the context of the participant's activity as a counselor (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Analysis of Reflective Notes and Participant Interview

The analysis of the participant's reflections and interviews concludes with three major themes of the participant's achievements in the counseling field, which are not only for self-development but also for facilitating transformation in others. The explanation and discussion of the research findings are divided into three sub-topics: the experience of discovering and exploring the Qalb Communication Therapy technique from personal experience, the idea and experience of applying TKQ for counseling, and the effort to empower clients to become counselors.

Experience of Exploring the Qalb Communication Therapy Technique

Individuals develop through various ways and conditions. Some begin from unpleasant or even bad conditions and experiences, which become the starting point for realizing new perspectives on life. This occurred with the participant; the condition of their child's development prompted self-reflection and an improvement in parenting patterns. This indicates that lived experience becomes a source of transformation and new awareness.

"My child felt lonely because the house was often empty due to the parents' intense activity in the working world; they often had tantrums because of the negative emotions held back in their soul. Until finally, Allah gave guidance to my heart that my child is a good child who is experiencing a spiritual void. I repented to Allah, asking for forgiveness over a long and extended period, while setting aside time every day to accompany them playing and storytelling. I started diligently attending parenting webinars, consulting with psychologists, and even joining parenting communities..." (AZ Reflective Note)

Referring to the participant's personal experience, including the spiritual experience when the participant felt that God had given guidance to understand their child's condition, including guidance on how to heal their child's tantrum behavior, the Islamic counseling perspective indicates that spiritual experiences like repentance (taubat) and prayer (doa) can become a psychotherapy turning point (Fadillah, Kusuma, & al-Lakhm, 2023). This phenomenon relates to the concept of growth through suffering in positive psychology (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004) and is referred to in Islam as a trial that gives birth to wisdom (QS. Al-Insyirah: 5–6). Suffering can be a test and a theological reflection, as conveyed by Salligan "... suffering is a form of test and trial for the innocent. If people turn to God in the midst of their suffering and remain patient, then they will receive a great reward in the hereafter...". Shihab (2020) emphasizes that every trial has a higher purpose, which is to strengthen one's faith and character. By facing various challenges, individuals are given the opportunity to demonstrate patience, steadfastness, and sincerity. Through this process, trials can be seen as a form of Allah's love that encourages humans to improve themselves and realize their inner potential. Trials become a form of spiritual education that guides humans toward goodness.

The personal experience that prompted them to draw closer to Allah also encouraged them to empower themselves as a parent by actively participating in parenting webinar activities. The experience of consulting with a psychologist regarding their child's tantrum condition and joining parenting activities made the participant increasingly aware that the attention and time available for their child were insufficient, and they learned a lot from evaluating the parenting patterns they had been using.

The transformation of a personal problem was not only for self-development but also gave rise to a sense of empathy for families experiencing similar issues. Based on personal experience, a motivation to build a Mental Health community emerged.

"The experience of raising my first child, which left a wound in my soul, made me think that perhaps out there, many families are negligent in their busy pursuit of a livelihood. They need a counseling space..." (AZ Reflective Note)

The participant used their personal experience in parenting and spirituality as the foundation for a counseling technique. The birth of the therapy, which was later partially named Qalb Communication Therapy, originated from the counselor's experience of finding the power of prayer, empathetic communication, and a heart-to-heart connection. In Islamic counseling

literature, qalb communication refers to inner interaction based on dzikir (remembrance of God), prayer, and empathy (Warsah & Uyun, 2019).

The Idea and Application of Qalb Communication Therapy

The participant explained the steps for implementing Qalb Communication Therapy (TKQ) that they have developed over the last seven years to help clients who come for consultation. The core counseling session begins by inviting the client to engage in Qalb Communication, followed by playing calming music. The participant explained using tranquil music, featuring bird sounds, selected from YouTube. The client is asked to sit calmly, without burden, to be fully present and whole in the counseling room. The counselor asks the client to close their eyes while focusing on listening to the guidance through affirmation sentences. The counselor invites the client to start with a prayer, asking permission from Allah SWT (God Almighty) to communicate with the subject they wish to communicate with. The counselor asks the client to regulate their breathing pattern. The counselor requests the client to visualize the face of the subject they want to communicate with, as if they are present in front of the client. Then, the client begins with a greeting to the subject and proceeds to convey the contents of their heart from the deepest part of their soul. This includes expressions of protest, apology, gratitude, and prayer. The counselor asks the client to close the Qalb communication session with istighfar (asking for forgiveness) 10 times and shalawat (salutations) to Prophet Muhammad 10 times. In the final session, the counselor asks the client to give a gift and appreciation to themselves for successfully staying strong in facing life's trials by hugging themselves, and sending the gift of Surah Al-Fatihah to themselves. The session concludes with a countdown from 10 to 1, and the client slowly opens their eyes and returns to full awareness.

The counseling steps practiced seemed to flow into the participant's mind effortlessly. The participant described the knowledge simply coming to them while they were trying to heal their child who often had tantrums, as shown in the following interview:

“I found it when restoring my child, Mother. When I was at the peak of frustration. I often woke up at night, often contemplated, often performed istighfar, repented, while asking for Allah’s guidance. Then Allah sent guidance into my heart to carry out these stages. I have practiced this for 7 years, Mother.” (Interview, AZ)

The counseling stages described by the participant indicate that the Qalb Communication Therapy applied in serving community consultations is based on the fundamentals of Islamic counseling. Qalb Communication Therapy can be a form of counseling intervention that emphasizes the spiritual aspect through the approach of prayer (doa), remembrance of God (dzikir), affirmation, and relaxation. Within the framework of Islamic counseling, this process is not only aimed at solving the client's psychological problems but also directing the individual to draw closer to Allah SWT. Bastaman (2001) explains that Islamic counseling functions as a means of integrating the psychological and religious dimensions, enabling the client to achieve inner peace (thuma'ninah) and pure consciousness (fitrah).

The stages of Qalb Communication Therapy begin with a counseling session founded on the principle of wisdom (hikmah) and gentleness in providing service to the client. This is in accordance with the word of Allah SWT: “Invite (all) to the Way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching...” (QS. An-Nahl [16]:125). At this stage, the counselor positions themselves as an empathetic facilitator, listening carefully, and responding according to the client's needs. Subsequently, the counselor invites the client to enter a state of relaxation with calming music, silent sitting, and positive affirmations. This process serves to bring about full awareness

(mindfulness), which in the Islamic tradition is connected to zikrullah (remembrance of Allah). The Qur'an affirms: "Verily, in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest" (QS. Ar-Ra'd [13]:28). Afiatin (2012) emphasizes that affirmation combined with prayer can strengthen belief and reduce anxiety.

The core stage of this therapy is prayer and qalb communication, where the client is asked to pray to Allah SWT before conveying their deepest feelings to the subject visualized in their imagination. This activity is not merely a technique for emotional catharsis, but also a form of tazkiyah al-nafs (purification of the soul). The word of Allah SWT: "Call upon Me; I will respond to you" (QS. Ghafir [40]:60). According to Adz-Dzaky (2002), qalb communication can be a medium for releasing negative emotions and forming healthier spiritual awareness.

The session concludes with the practice of istighfar, shalawat, and self-appreciation. This practice holds deep meaning in Islamic counseling. Istighfar cleanses the soul from sin, as stated by Allah: "And seek forgiveness from Allah. Indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful" (QS. Al-Muzzammil [73]:20). Self-appreciation reminds the client that humans are dignified creatures (QS. Al-Isra [17]:70), making them valuable even when facing life's trials.

The final stage, where the client returns to conscious reality, symbolizes the integration between spiritual experience and daily life. Corey (2013) affirms that counseling success is measured not only by emotional release but also by real changes in attitude and behavior in living life. Thus, Qalb Communication Therapy is a holistic Islamic counseling practice because it combines a psychological approach with spiritual values.

Transformation of Clients into Counselors

Successful counseling should not only be able to encourage clients toward recovery but also transform them into helping agents. This transformation occurred in a number of the participant's clients.

"Many of my clients eventually developed an interest in the counseling world and actively studied in the community; now they have joined the community's counseling team." (Interview, AZ)

Effective counseling processes foster self-efficacy and a desire to help others. Bandura (1997) emphasizes that self-efficacy plays a crucial role in a person's behavioral change and social role. In the context of counseling, the client's success can encourage the emergence of altruistic motivation (Hawkins, Bean, & Sandberg, 2022).

The participant also encourages those interested in becoming mentors or counselors by attending counseling training and obtaining competency certificates, which function as social legitimacy in the community.

"The training contribution is very useful for validation in the community because we have competency certificates in the field of counseling." (Interview, AZ)

Certification increases credibility and social acceptance, making it easier for those who were once clients and wish to become counselors to be accepted by the community. According to Corey (2017), professional training strengthens the counselor's authority while influencing public trust in the services provided.

Mentorship does not stop in the counseling room but continues on social media and results in collective work (books). Post-counseling support carried out through WhatsApp groups and collaborative book writing activities demonstrates a new dimension of empowerment. Clients not

only receive emotional support but are also motivated to produce collective work that benefits others.

“Currently, I am coordinating the Baubau mental health mothers to write and publish a book. It is an endeavor to care for mental health, serving as a form of mentorship in the WhatsApp group after the counseling room.” (Interview, AZ)

Continuous mentorship strengthens group support and sparks the clients’ creativity to share experiences in the form of work. Research by Mead, Hilton, & Curtis (2001) asserts that continuous group support plays an important role in the recovery process, while also serving as a means to strengthen community capacity.

The participant is involved in counseling services integrated with institutional programs (KUA, Pusaka Sakinah), thereby having a wider impact.

“At KUA Wolio, I have an additional duty serving Pusaka Sakinah Counseling. All my performance evidence is summarized in procedural counseling reports.” (Interview, AZ)

The results of this study show that the counseling process does not stop at resolving individual problems but encourages a transformation of roles from the counselee to the community counselor. This transformation confirms that counseling can be a medium for social empowerment, where clients who were initially only recipients of services evolve into actors who contribute by providing similar services to others.

Theoretically, the results of this study can be understood through the framework of empowerment theory (Zimmerman, 2000), which emphasizes three dimensions: intrapersonal (increased self-confidence and self-control), interactional (the ability to understand and influence the social context), and behavioral (real action in the form of contribution to the community). The findings show that these three dimensions are present in the process of counselees transforming into counselors, who not only help themselves but also others in their environment.

This finding reinforces that the counseling performed by the participant serves a dual function: as a means of personal recovery and as a mechanism for social empowerment. When counselees are successfully empowered, they have a great opportunity to become community counselors who contribute to expanding the impact of counseling services. Thus, the counseling performed by the participant is not just a practice of individual healing but also a social strategy that creates a sustainable cycle of goodness in the community.

CONCLUSION

This study makes a significant contribution to Islamic counseling and family counseling literature by filling the gap in research which is still limited regarding the counselor's experience as a source of Islamic counseling innovation. The counselor's personal reflective and spiritual experience becomes an alternative source of energy in developing Islamic counseling services. The counselor found new meaning, sincerity (ikhlas), and motivation from their life experiences and spiritual reflection, which subsequently enriched the family guidance method through Qalb Communication Therapy.

This research concludes with three important findings that contribute to the development of Islamic counseling strategies. First, the strengthening of the counselor's spiritual dimension as the primary energy. The counselor's spiritual reflection, such as gratitude, sincerity, and religious meaning-making of suffering, becomes the driving energy in maintaining the sustainability of the services. This aspect is relatively rarely discussed in family-based Islamic counseling research. This

study shows that the counselor's spirituality is the engine of innovation, not merely a framework of normative values. Second, Islamic counseling as a practice of empowerment. From counselee to community counselor, this process shows that Islamic counseling is capable of building family and community capacity building, a gap that has been less explored in previous research. Third, a sustainable and participatory family counseling model. Counseling services do not stop in the face-to-face room but continue in the form of community activities, peer support, and collective writing. This broadens the paradigm of Islamic family counseling to be more participatory, reflective, and sustainable.

By integrating the counselor's personal experience, reflection, and spirituality, this research affirms that Islamic counseling is not merely a service based on theory and procedures, but a living practice that originates from the counselor's real experience and spiritual energy. This enriches the literature by showing that the counselor's experience is a source of innovation. The counselor's spirituality becomes the main energy that maintains the sustainability of the services. Islamic family counseling can develop into a participatory, creative, and role-transformation-oriented social empowerment model.

Although this research provides important contributions, there are several limitations that need to be noted. First, the research data is sourced from the reflective experience of one main participant, so the findings are more focused on a context-rich case study but are limited in terms of generalization. Second, the researcher's involvement in the interpretation process carries the potential for subjectivity, although it has been minimized by data triangulation from reflections, interviews, and literature. Third, this study highlights the counselor's perspective more than the client's experience in depth, so it has not fully captured the dynamics of transformation from the client's point of view. Fourth, this study has not quantitatively measured the effectiveness of Qalb Communication Therapy in reducing specific psychological symptoms, so it remains focused on narrative, reflective, and descriptive aspects.

For future research, it is recommended to involve more participants, both counselors and clients, to obtain a more comprehensive picture. Quantitative or mixed-method studies can be used to empirically test the effectiveness of Qalb Communication Therapy, for example, regarding the increase in psychological well-being, the strengthening of spirituality, or the reduction of anxiety levels. Comparative studies with other Islamic counseling approaches are also important to see the advantages and limitations of TKQ. Longitudinal research can be conducted to track the sustainability of the transformation of clients into community counselors.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION

This paper was collaboratively written by the researcher and the participant. Ros Mayasari, as the principal researcher, developed the concept, theoretical review, and analysis of the reflective data provided by the participant. Ainun Zaujah, as the participant, reviewed the draft manuscript to ensure conformity between the data analysis and the reflective notes. Sri An Maharani Bintang is a student who was involved in conducting the literature review and finalizing the structure of the manuscript.

FUNDING

The research was conducted independently without assistance from any institution.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST

There are no potential conflicts of interest in this paper.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Gratitude is extended to Ibu Ainun Zaujah for her willingness to be involved in this research and for helping to provide feedback on this article.

REFERENCES

- Akhmadi, A. (2019). Konseling Islami dan Peran Spiritualitas dalam Membangun Kesehatan Mental. *Jurnal Bimbingan Konseling Islam*, 10(1), 55–72.
- Az-Zahra, F., & Kurniawan, A. (2021). Tantangan Penerapan Konseling Islami di Era Modern: Antara Teori dan Praktik. *Jurnal Konseling Religi*, 12(2), 101–116
- Nelson, J. (2017). Personal experiences as sources of therapeutic innovation. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 64(3), 345–358.
- Nurdin, M. (2022). Parenting experiences as the foundation of Islamic counseling practices. *Psikoislamika: Jurnal Psikologi dan Psikologi Islam*, 19(1), 33–46.
- Bandura, A. (1982). Self-efficacy Mechanism in Human Agency. *American psychologist*, 37(2), 122-
- Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (2004). Posttraumatic Growth: Conceptual Foundations And Empirical Evidence. *Psychological inquiry*, 15(1), 1-18
- Warsah, I., & Uyun, M. (2019). Kepribadian Pendidik: Telaah Psikologi Islami. *Psikis: Jurnal Psikologi Islami*, 5(1), 62-73.
- Afiatin, T. (2018). Psikologi Perkawinan dan Keluarga: Penguatan Keluarga di Era Digital Berbasis Kearifan Lokal. Jakarta: PT Kanisius
- Bastaman, H. D. (2001). Integrasi Psikologi dengan Islam: Menuju Psikologi Islami. Pustaka Pelajar diterbitkan atas kerjasama dengan Yayasan Insan Kamil
- Corey, G. (2013). Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy. Brooks/Cole Cengage Learning
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2016). Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among Five Approaches. Sage publications
- Husserl, E., & Moran, D. (2012). Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology. Routledge.
- Shihab, M. Q. (2007). Wawasan Al-Qur'an: Tafsir Tematik atas Pelbagai Persoalan Umat. Jakarta: Lentera Group
- Moustakas, C. (1994). Phenomenological Research Methods. Sage Publication.

