

Islamic Psychology ^[1]

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The History of Psychology

The history of psychology was shaped by Ancient Greek wisdom for many centuries, until the Islamic scholars carried the Greek texts to the great Houses of Wisdom.

Here, they developed their own ideas and a new Islamic psychology emerged, which would later influence Europe as it shook off the memory of the Dark Ages and underwent the first Renaissance.

Whilst Islamic psychology retained the Hellenic trait of looking at mind, philosophy and spirit together, the Middle Eastern scholars also began to develop a more practical approach to psychology. Islamic psychology was based upon looking at ways to cure and heal, rather than merely theorize.

As with the Ancient Greek psychology, it is important to remember that the Muslim scholars did not have a specific term for psychology and did not identify themselves as psychologists. Islamic scholars did not practice the discipline in the modern sense of the word and wrapped it together with their standard, holistic approach to medical matters.

However, their work on studying the mind and proposing treatments for mental conditions is extremely important, and underpins many of our modern techniques, even if many of the theories are couched in philosophical and theological terms. Whilst many Islamic scholars contributed to the history of psychology, and the work of others lies forgotten in the depths of time, a few great minds deserve their place amongst the greatest modern psychologists.

Ibn Sina (avicenna) and Islamic Psychology

Ibn Sina (981 - 1037 CE) was the major influence upon the history of Islamic psychology, taking the ideas of the Greek philosophers and adapting them to fit Islamic doctrine. He began with Aristotle's idea that humans possessed three types of soul, the vegetative, animal and rational psyches. The first two bind humans to the earth, and the rational psyche connects them to God.

In the same way, Avicenna's Islamic psychology proposed that the five senses, shared with animals, were bound to earth. He believed that the ability to reason gave humanity a unique

connection to the divine. Ibn-Sina attempted to ascribe certain mental abilities to specific parts of the brain, but the Islamic prohibition of dissection prevented him from gathering observational evidence to support his theories.

Avicenna also proposed that humans have seven inner senses to complement the outer senses. In the long history of psychology, this was one of the first attempts to try to understand the way that the mind and reasoning operate.

Ibn Sina's Islamic Psychology

- **Common Sense:** This sense collates the information gathered by the external senses.
- **Retentive Imagination:** This sense remembers the information gathered by the common sense.
- **Compositive Animal Imagination:** This sense allows all animals to learn what they should avoid and what they should actively seek in their natural environment.
- **Compositive Human Imagination:** This sense helps humans to learn what to avoid and what to seek in the world around them.
- **Estimative Power:** This is the ability to make innate judgments about the surrounding environment and determine what is dangerous and what is beneficial. For example, an innate and instinctual fear of predators would fall under this sense.
- **Memory:** The memory is responsible for remembering all of the information developed by the other senses.
- **Processing:** This is the ability to use all of the information and is the highest of the seven internal senses.

Avicenna's Islamic Psychology and Healing

Avicenna's theories incorporated more internal senses than Aristotle's idea of three souls, but he remained true to the Greek's ideas of internal balance. In practical terms, Avicenna's psychology led him to develop a variety of cures for mental ailments, and he developed rudimentary fear, shock and musical therapies to cure illnesses. This contribution to the history of psychology finally put to rest the belief that mental ailments were 500 (Purification) caused by demons and evil spirits.

The Islamic scholar also understood the importance of the link between mind and body, proposing that a person could overcome physical ailments through believing that they could become well. Conversely, ibn Sina believed that a healthy person could become physically sick if they believed that they were ill, adding psychosomatic illness to the vocabulary of the history of psychology.

This mental and physical linkage formed the basis of his approach to mental disorders and he meticulously documented many conditions, including delirium, memory disorders, hallucinations, fear paralysis and a host of other conditions.

Certainly, Avicenna stands in the history of psychology as the scholar who first used an approach recognizable to modern clinical psychologists. However, the methodology was still shackled to the idea of a soul and higher human consciousness.

Al Razi's Islamic Psychology and Ethics

Muhammed Zakariyah-e-Razi (864-930CE), known as Razi or Rhazes in the West, was one of the great Islamic polymaths who contributed to many fields. In addition to his volumes of work in other areas, Rhazes made some interesting observations about the human mind. In his book, *Teb al-Fonoon*, he made some postulations concerning human emotional conditions and made suggestions for their treatment.

In addition, he contributed to the history of psychology with astute observations concerning medical ethics and the use of conditional therapy, centuries before the behavioral psychologists of the Twentieth Century.

Al Ghazali, Islamic Psychology and Mysticism

The pragmatic approach of the Muslim scholars towards mental ailments continued, and they were the prime movers behind setting up hospitals and clinics dedicated to research and healing. The great scholar and Sufi mystic, Al-Ghazali (1058 - 1111CE), wrote the book *Ihya*, which pointed out that children were naturally egocentric. His Islamic psychology proposed that children's desires rarely included the potential consequences of their actions. Al-Ghazali (Creative Commons) believed that fear was a learned condition, either taught to children or gained through negative experiences.

As a Sufi mystic, Al-Ghazali was a firm believer that introspection and self-analysis were the keys to understanding mental issues and unlocking hidden reasons. Very tentatively, one wonders how the influence of Eastern mysticism affected this particular method of self-assessment, a technique that Al Ghazali used upon himself.

He also brought into the history of psychology the idea of needs, proposing that the human personality had urges to fulfill certain desires, based upon hunger and anger. Hunger drove such emotions as sexual urges, thirst and hunger, whilst anger drove rage, frustration and revenge. This division is very crude, certainly when compared to relatively modern ideas such as Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, but it did provide some guidelines towards categorizing mental constructs.

Other Contributors to Islamic Psychology

Ibn-Khaldun (1332 - 1406CE) further added to the store of knowledge by proposing that an individual's surroundings and local environment shaped their personality. This insightful view acted as a precursor for modern ideas, such as cultural relativism and the age-old Nature vs Nurture debate. He followed the lead of Aristotle and Ibn-Sina in believing that the mind was a *Tabula Rasa*, and that human behavior was shaped solely by experience. Ibn-Khaldun (Public Domain)

Najub ud din Muhammed, who lived at the same time as al-Razi, wrote extensively about many mental disorders including depression, paranoia, persecution complex, sexual dysfunction and obsessional neuroses, amongst a host of other mental ailments. His observation-based approach certainly influenced many other scholars in the field of Islamic psychology.

The History of Psychology and Treatment

The insightful views of the Islamic scholars towards mental issues saw a huge improvement upon the treatment of cases. The Islamic rulers set up specialist hospitals in Damascus, Cairo, Baghdad and other major centers across the Islamic world, by as early as the Eighth Century. Whilst this innovation did not mean that every single patient received treatment, and superstition still held sway across large swathes of the Islamic world, it was an improvement on the European ideas of demonic possession and witch's curses.

Certainly, the Islamic scholars were instrumental in equating mental illness with physical ailments, understanding that mind and body shared a tangible link. This led to many advances in the study of the mind, with the setting up of hospitals and the recognition by Islamic physicians of a range of mental ailments.

Whilst there is little doubt that this Islamic psychology was linked to Islamic theology and the religiosity of the soul, the Muslim scholars still removed the ideas of demonic possession or spiritual sickness from the canon of medicine. Their meticulous observations certainly created the foundations of the history of psychology and influenced modern thoughts and theories.

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