

psychotherapy in Iran

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Historical Background

Iran in ancient times was called Persia, Aria or Pars. The Iranian civilization goes back to almost 7000 years. The Persian empire, according to Horodotus the "Father of History" in his great historical book called " Histories" (479-490 B.C.) dates back to 2500 years ago. During those centuries, Iran was advancing in arts and sciences.

Although there is not much written history before the emergence of Islam in Iran, but from the teachings of prophet Zoroaster or Zarathustra or Zartusht which are preserved in the holybook called Avesta, one of the oldest sacred books, in the world we can presume from his philosophy of mental health namely (Good thinking ,Good speaking and Good behavior) that emphasis was made on cognition, lanaguage and behavior.

The great German philosapher Feredrich Nieche in his book called " Thus spoke Zarathustra" has a reference to these matters. Nieche mentianes that by using this triad of Zarathustra's mental health approach one finds a meaning of life. And according to him this meaning or aim of life gives person the strenght to endure almost any life stress and hardship.

The Emergence of Islam

Islam was brought to Iran some 1400 years ago. Since then great many physicians, philosophers, poets, writers and religious scholars have produced many psychological concepts which can be considered as the ancestors of modern approaches to psychological structures and functions.

For example, long before Sigmund Freud introduced the structures of the mind, namely Id, ego, and super ego, Islam believed that human mind or personality consists of three parts quite comparable to Freud's concept of personality, only much more extensive.

But since Iran has not historically had any known important psychotherapeutic movement during her long history, therefore we have to pay attention to individual scientists, philosophers, and physicians of special periods of history.

One of the most known Iranian scientist, philosopher and physician who used psychotherapeutic techniques similar to those of our time was Ebnecina or Aviceenna as he is called in the West. Aviceenna's writings were important teaching resources in western medical schools for a long time.

He used something close to implosive technique in today's behavior therapy approach to cure anxiety reaction, phobia, obsessive compulsive state and conversion reaction. He reported, a now famous case, of a court maiden whose back without a known reason bent and would not straighten up.

Abnecina had her come to the emperor's court ,and in front of everybody started to undress her. When he reached her underwears, she suddently stood up and ran out of the courtroom and was therefore cured. Another famous patient Abnecina Ereated was the case of a young man of upperclass who had continuous fever and physicians could not found the etioelogy of his illness and their treatment were not useful.

Avecina discovered that the boy was in love with a young lady of a different class from his own but did not remember where she lived and would not dare to tell his family about it. So everyday Avecina would take the boy to different streets of the city. One day when they came upon a street the young man stopped. He remembered the house of his beloved and emediatly he recovered.

Abnecina,therefor advised the boy's parents to arrange for his marriage. In both cases this was a technic of confrontation frequently used by today's behavior therapists.

Recent Developments

The dominant psychotherapeutic theories and methods in Iran are those borrowed from western countries mainly the U.S.A. The most used of these techniques are behavior therapy, cognitive therapy, cognitive behavioral therapy and analytic therapy.

In recent years some psychologists have shown innovations in psychotherapy based on traditional concepts and techniques, used in ancient times in Iran, some of which will be discussed here.

Story therapy

The technique of story telling or reading is also an ancient psychotherapeutic approach in Persia. The essence of this method of treatment is to read a story relevant to the patient's problem and by analyzing it give him some problem solving insights (Rizvi, 1988; Pezeckian, 1974). Dr. Pezeckian an Iranian psychotherapist who has worked on this technique in Germany for many years, wrote a very important book on this subject which was published by a famous publisher in New York (Pezeckian).

Poetry therapy

Poetry Therapy has a long tradition in Iran's medical history. In recent years some specialists have made extensive use of it in psychotherapy. (Farvardin, 1984). Using the poetry of such great classic poets as Rumi, Saadi, Hafez (about whom the great Goethe has written with admiration) and Omar Khayam, today's Iranian Psychotherapists claim positive results.

Dr. Farvardin an Iranian Psychiatrist published an interesting book showing clinical evidence in support of this treatment (Farvardin, A , 1984). In recent years the poems of Khayam and Rumi have gained special attention in western world as a substitute for western psychotherapies (Noorbach, J. 1965). I read in Time Magazine that Rumi's book of poetry called *Massnavy* is one of the most widely read book in United States.

Selflessness

The greatest Persian poet of Gnosticism or as we call it Erfan, Rumi, advocates the method of selflessness, for treating anxiety, fear and anger, depression and especially malignant narcissism (Rizvi, 1988). In this approach the main therapeutic aim is to dispel the artificial compactness of "self" or "I" which in western culture is assumed to be the source of ego strength for facing the competitive forces of fast moving industrial societies.

In these cultures since the main emphasis is on the individual achievement and competing with others, western psychologists and especially psychotherapists believe that individuals ego

should be reinforced to make them able to confront the demands of society and also the continuous conflict between the demands of ego and superego.

For example in some western cultures it is very common when you tell others about your problems, they respond by saying this is your problem not theirs and you should solve it by yourself. But in eastern cultures, generally speaking, one believes he or she is responsible for others.

For this reason social support is much more stronger for these people who are in grief and bereavement than in western cultures. This is in tradition of Saadi, the great Iranian poet whose poem is written on the entrance of the United Nations building. It says "the children of mankind are all parts of a single body. When a part is pained, the others also become annoyed and restless."

Therefore, contrary to the recommendation of western psychologists instead of reinforcing "self" or selfishness, the "ego" or as some believe narcissism in individuals, the selflessness approach recommends to individuals to put the "self" at the service of other needed human beings and spiritual needs rather than the material ones.

For example altruism is much more praised than having material wealth. In this approach narcissistic persons or immature individuals are encouraged to put themselves at the service of others rather than always demanding others to be at their service.

Fromm in an introduction to a book written about Rumi by Dr. Reza Arasteh an Iranian psychologist has supported this point of view (Arasteh, R. 1964). This approach has been especially useful in treatment of malignant narcissism and some personality disorders such as Psychopathic behaviors disorder. (Rizvi, R 1988).

Meditation

The technique of meditation has a very long philosophical and religious past but a short psychological history in Iran. Recently psychologists with religious tendencies have used Islamic meditation for psychotherapeutic purposes.

In this technique person uses the sentence "God is great" as a mantra and repeats it silently every day for thirty minutes after the evening prayer. It is said that this technique will cause a deep and long lasting feeling of relaxation in the individual (Rizvi, R. 1988).

Serenity (Silence)

This technique of psychological treatment is an offshoot of meditation. In this technique it is recommended that persons sit cross-legged on the floor for one hour every day for at least one year and be quiet and try to think of nothing.

Some good results have been reported in using this method of psychotherapy by Psychologists such as Rizvi, S.S.A. 1988 , Yahne, C. and Miller, W.1999.

HOPE

One of the oldest techniques suggested by many Iranian psychologists based on Rumi's Gnostic philosophy is using the concept of Hope in Psychotherapy (Shamloo, 1998).

In this technique, Psychotherapist asks his client to read some poems, stories and other hopeful readings. The client then writes similar writings for one hour every day.

The therapist also gives him or her a sample of such writings as the following: "I am drunk with love and hope, I will not be conscious of despair". Recently some Psychologists have done clinical and experimental research on this subject both in Iran and in the West, and they have found acceptable result.

And they have found acceptable result. The client is instructed to engage in every day endeavors based on Hope. He or she, then, writes about these every day experiences and brings them to Psychotherapy sessions to be discussed and analysed (Shamloo, 1998).

Forgiveness

Forgiveness which has recently been brought up in western psychological literature, has been a useful concept and a method of psychological treatment in Iran for ages. According to this approach, patient is persuaded to forgive those who have hurt him or her in his or her past. Patient is told that a saying in our culture, advises that a person is really considered a grown up and reaches peace of mind and psychological maturity,

only when he or she is able to forgive their parents or who ever has hurt them in the past. This technique is especially useful for those patients who have been abused. It is worth mentioning that Freud believed that only when our personality matures that we can forgive our parents (Freud, 1919). The present author has used this technique successfully in Psychotherapy. It should be added that this method of treatment must be used very judiciously and infrequently and only when the therapist has judged the patient to be psychologically ready, and specially a time that patient wants to know when he or she can be free from his or her past malignant thought of being abused abusers.

The reason for this caution is that if patients are not ready to accept forgiveness they may have this elusion that there has been a collusion between the therapist and their abuser .This factor will damage the healthy relationship between the therapist and the patient.

It must be mentioned that an Iranian psychologist (M. Khodayar2003) has recently done clinical studies and research on this subject with good result which was published in a handbook by Mc Mllough, M.E.& Worthington , E.L., Hebel , J, Enright , R.D.and , Sanderson, C., 1999.

Dr. Sousan Saif , an Iranian psychologist has recently extended the western forgivness scale to Iranian population,(Saif,Susan 2004).

This scale originaly had 3 models of constructions by:

1-Hargrave and Andrson (1992), Hargrave model (1993).

2- Johnson's Model (1986).

3- Smede's Model (1984,1996).

Research with these scales identifies five common constructs related to forgiveness which are:

1)Realization:

Realization which means realistic attending or perciving the existanceof forgiveness as a usefull phenomenon in curing psychological abnormalities.

2) Recognition:

Recognition,which is the perceptual and cognitive apperception of forgivness as a usefull approach in obtaining psychological well being.

3) Reparation:

Reparation, in which a person cognitively and emotionally prepares for coping with phenomenon of forgiveness.

4) Restitution:

Restitution, which means reconstruction of a set of attitudes about using forgiveness as a tool for becoming a normal person.

5) Resolution:

And Resolution, the last stage in which person decides actively and practically to use forgiveness for becoming free from an unhealthy past and to have again a healthy life.

All the studies on this scale both in United States and Iran show high degrees of validity and reliability (Saif, Sorousan 2004).

Another interesting finding in this respect is that, although there were not statistically significant differences in essential components of forgiveness between men and women but in general, women were more positive and willing to accept their mistakes and ready to compensate for them in both cultures of Iran and United States (Saif, Sorousan, 2004).

It should be added that in 1996, Enright suggested a concept of forgiveness which goes beyond just forgiving the past abusers. He proposed a triad of:

1- forgiveness of others, 2- Self- forgiveness and 3- receiving forgiveness.

You may ask why self-forgiving is suggested by Enright as a part of this kind of therapy. It is because of a very powerful and deeply rooted guilt feeling present in all abused persons. Unless they forgive themselves they will not be able to forgive others.

The stages of forgiveness in which the patient passes thru are:

1-Patient's acceptance of the hurt (that means not denying his or her anger and hatred). This is the first and possibly the most important and difficult stage in forgiveness. It is also a very much used technique in coping with psychological problems by patients.

2-Patient's desire for seeing justice done. This feeling should be supported by the psychotherapist, and patient should be encouraged to express her or his feelings in this regard.

3-At this stage patients are aware of the negative effects of being hurt by their past thoughts. Therefore they are willing to consider forgiveness as a treatment for their psychological pain.

4-Patient puts himself or herself in his or her abuser's place and considers his or her abnormal behavior while hurting their abusers. This confronts the patient with abuser's abnormal behavior, and enables them to forgive their abusers their abnormal behavior.

5-This positive feeling and attitude enables the patient to forgive his or her abuser and does so. (Khodayar, M. et al. 2003).

Finally I must add that a comprehensive and extended study of historical and present theories , research, techniques and approaches to process of psychotherapy in Iran requires the continuous and vigilant efforts of many scientific institutions, and scientists specially psychologists, psychiatrists, psychotherapist, psychoanalysts and other related fields for many years to come.

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Psychotherapy in Iran

Iran, a reminiscence of the old Persian Empire, has a rich and long history of 7000 years. Unfortunately there is not much written history before the emergence of Islam, except for some writings of Zoroaster the prophet. In the book called Avesta, there are some psychological concepts. After the emergence of Islam some 1400 years ago, there have been many psychotherapeutic concepts and techniques, some of which have been continued till present time. The western educated Iranian psychologists, in addition to the use of modern techniques in psychotherapy, have benefited from the traditional approaches some of which are mentioned in this paper. Story Therapy is a technique in which a story relevant to patient's problem is given and by analyzing the meaning of it, patient would come to have some problem solving insights. Another method of treatment is using poetry similar to story therapy. Selflessness is an ancient therapy based on Gnosticism. By this method patient is relieved of egotistic and narcissistic tendencies. Meditation in Islam is another therapeutic method using the name of God as a special kind of "mantra". Serenity or silence therapy is an offshoot of meditation using a special technique which is different from the methods used in south-east Asian countries. Finally, another method of psychotherapy based on Rumi's Gnostic philosophy is Hope therapy. By using special approach, psychologists create hope in patient's mind which cures him of depression, anxiety and distress.

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has used this technic succesfully in Psychotherapy.It should be added that this method of treatment must be used very judiciously and infrequently and only when the therapist has judged the patient psychologically ready.