

A Comparative Analysis of the Therapeutic Approach of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) with the Psychological Teachings of Imam Reza (A.S.)

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Abstract

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The founders of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), as one of the newest and most successful therapeutic approaches, inspired by Eastern philosophy and relying on mindfulness, have challenged some prior paradigms and methods in psychology. It appears that this approach, compared to some of its predecessors, exhibits greater similarity to divine religions, particularly Islam. This research has sought to answer more precisely the question of to what extent and in what domains similarities exist between Islam and ACT. The research method of this paper is a comparative review and analysis of the theoretical foundations and therapeutic methods of ACT and Shiite Islamic teachings, with emphasis on the teachings of Imam Reza (A.S.), using their primary sources. The results of this study indicate that there are significant similarities between the two. Furthermore, various ACT techniques for well-being find considerable parallels in the verses of the Holy Quran and Islamic narrations.

Keywords: Imam Reza (A.S.), Psychology, Religion, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT).



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1. Introduction

In the contemporary era, despite technological advancements and material welfare, an increase in the rate of psychological disorders, such as depression, is observed in advanced societies. This paradox indicates that psychological strategies based on the avoidance and control of inner experiences have not only been ineffective but have themselves become a factor in exacerbating suffering. In response to this challenge, “Acceptance and Commitment Therapy” (ACT), as one of the third-wave behavioral therapies, was introduced by Steven Hayes. Instead of eliminating suffering, this approach emphasizes its active acceptance and moving forward on a value-driven life path. On the other hand, Islam, particularly in its Shiite interpretation, by accepting suffering as an inevitable part of worldly life and emphasizing concepts such as forbearance (sabr), Divine Decree and Predestination (qada wa qadar), and righteous deeds (amal-e salih), offers strategies for constructively confronting hardships. This research has been conducted with the aim of uncovering the structural and functional convergences between these two systems of thought, focusing on the teachings of Imam Reza (A.S.) as a prominent representative of authentic Shiite Islam.

2. Research Objectives

The primary objective of this research is the systematic comparison of the theoretical foundations and therapeutic methods of the ACT approach with the teachings of Shiite Islam ,emphasizing the conduct and words of Imam Reza(A.S.) The central research questions are:

Is there convergence between the foundations ,objectives ,and components of ACT psychotherapy and the teachings of Shiite Islam in the views of Imam Reza(A.S.)? In which domains can the dimensions of this convergence or divergence be explained ?And can these commonalities be utilized for the indigenization of psychotherapy models within the Islamic-Iranian culture?

3. Methodology

This research was conducted using a comparative-analytical approach and a documentary-library method. Data were collected through an in-depth study of primary sources in two fields:

Core psychological texts related to ACT;

Authentic Islamic texts, including the Quran, narrations (riwayat), and reliable Shiite hadith and jurisprudential books, focusing on the narrations of Imam Reza (A.S.).

The data analysis method was “qualitative content analysis” with a “systematic comparison” strategy. Accordingly, the six core processes of ACT (Acceptance, Cognitive Defusion, Self-as-Context, Contact with the Present Moment, Values, and Committed Action) were established as the basic analytical framework, and concepts corresponding to each were extracted from Islamic sources and compared across three levels: “Foundations,” “Objectives,” and “Strategies.”

4. Findings

The systematic comparison revealed significant convergence in the core foundations and processes between ACT and Shiite Islam. The most important findings in aligning the six core processes of ACT with Islamic concepts are as follows:

1. Acceptance: In ACT, this means openness to experiencing unpleasant feelings, which aligns with the Islamic concepts of "Forbearance" (Sabr), "Contentment with Divine Decree" (Riza bi al-Qada), and "Contentment" (Qana'ah).
2. Cognitive Defusion: In ACT, this means reducing entanglement with thoughts. In Islam, this is reinforced by the belief in the external origin ("Satanic whispers" Waswasah al-Shaytani) of many negative thoughts and the recommendation of remembrance (Dhikr) and focus on positive matters.
3. Self-as-Context: In ACT, this refers to perceiving the self as a constant observer of transient experiences. In Islam, this aligns with the distinction between the "constant reality of the soul" (Haqiqat al-Ruh) and the "transient states of the heart" (Ahwal al-Qalb), as well as the concept of "Repentance" (Tawbah) as the possibility of separating identity from action.
4. Contact with the Present Moment: In ACT, this means being present non-judgmentally in the now. In Islamic narrations, this is reflected in the emphasis on valuing the "present moment" and avoiding regret for the past and anxiety about the future.
5. Values: In ACT, these are defined as the compass for life. In Islam, they are articulated within the stable yet flexible framework of "Divine Law" (Shari'ah), and the criterion for success is acting upon them.
6. Committed Action: In ACT, this means taking effective action in line with values. This directly and fully corresponds with Islam's profound emphasis on "Righteous

Deeds" (Amal Salih) and conscious striving on the path of transcendence. Furthermore, from a philosophical perspective, "Functional Contextualism" in ACT shares common ground with Islam's emphasis on "Intention" (Niyah) as the criterion for an action's value, as well as attention to "context" in interpreting events (such as the interpretation of the event of Karbala by Lady Zaynab, Peace Be Upon Her).

5. Conclusion

This research demonstrates that the Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) approach and the teachings of Shiite Islam, particularly drawing upon the treasure of knowledge from the Ahl al-Bayt (Peace Be Upon Them) and Imam Reza (A.S.), possess significant structural and functional similarities. This convergence is evident at the levels of foundations (accepting suffering as an inevitable part of life), objectives (a meaningful and committed life), and strategies (such as acceptance, defusion, and committed action). These commonalities create a unique capacity for the indigenization of psychotherapy and the development of mental health models consistent with Islamic-Iranian culture.

Suggestions:

Conducting comparative studies to examine the philosophical differences between "Functional Contextualism" in ACT and the epistemological foundations of Shiite Islam.

Developing and validating integrated therapeutic protocols combining ACT and Islamic teachings for Muslim populations.

Utilizing the findings of this research in designing psychological interventions for counseling and therapeutic centers with an Islamic approach.

Keywords: Imam Reza (A.S.), Psychology, Religion, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Islam.