

# Who Can Provide Spiritual Counseling? A Qualitative Study from Iran

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## Abstract

**Background and Aim:** Given the increased prevalence of mental illnesses in recent years, many therapists and researchers use spiritual counseling (SC), which is one of the spiritual interventions. However, unfortunately, the use of this intervention by the therapists is nonscientific because the ambiguities of this issue are high in the mental health field of Iran. The aim of this study is to survey the following most important challenges: what groups are qualified to provide SC, what kind of knowledge should be known by suitable individuals, who can train spiritual counselors, what they should teach, and what teaching methods should be used. **Methods:** The present conventional qualitative content analysis used deep semi-structured interview to collect data from the view of stakeholders. A total of 15 people were selected through purposive sampling. After transcription of the interviews, the data were analyzed based on the Graneheim and Lundman model. **Results:** Results obtained from data analysis covered five main themes including SC candidates, general conditions, sciences required, SC curriculum, and spiritual counselors' training method. **Conclusions:** The present study has answered to the most basic questions in SC scope. Since spiritual services are rooted in our culture and religion, native guidelines should be created for them as soon as possible through conducting similar qualitative researches. Furthermore, it is worth considering teaching and training case in this scope to make spiritual service providers concern about solutions to promote these services.

**Keywords:** Education, Iran, mental health, qualitative research, spiritual counseling

## INTRODUCTION

Mental illnesses can negatively affect the life and well-being of millions of people, affecting all of the health scopes. According to the estimation provided by the World Health Organization (WHO), one out of four individuals suffers from mental disease during his/her lifetime.<sup>[1]</sup> Moreover, outbreak of mental diseases in Iran has recently increased so that this statistic shows higher rates compared to other countries. This indicates the necessity for addressing the effectiveness of interventions and adopting some solutions to handle such conditions.<sup>[2]</sup> On the other hand, spiritual interventions have become attractive for many people, and effectiveness of these interventions on various groups of physical-mental patients and healthy individuals has been proved.<sup>[3-7]</sup>

Spiritual counseling (SC) is one of the spiritual interventions,<sup>[8]</sup> in which a counselor helps the patient with his/her problems, with emphasis on his/her spirituality, searching through spiritual issues. SC emphasizes on some techniques such

as pray, forgiveness, serving, daily notes, book therapy, worshipping, and spiritual imaging.<sup>[9]</sup> Numerous studies have confirmed the effectiveness of this counseling in changing inefficient attitudes.<sup>[10,11]</sup>

One significant issue in SC case associates with individuals who provide these services because specialty and skill of them in this field have a considerable effect on the quality of presented services.<sup>[4,12]</sup> Reviewing various studies on those who are allowed to provide such services revealed two results: (1) difference in SC service providers in different countries and (2) lack of scientific study on this field in Iran and presence of nonscientific and personal works on this subject.

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SC services are done by three groups of experts in different countries. For instance, numerous studies have pointed to the role of pastoral counselors and religious experts in providing these services.<sup>[5]</sup> Moss and Snodgrass conducted a study on cancer patients and found that health providers should introduce these patients to a pastoral counselor who is expert in religious cases since the minds of these patients are occupied with their religious beliefs.<sup>[12,13]</sup> In addition, Mmaryan *et al.* mentioned the vital role of religious experts in presenting spiritual interventions in a guideline for cancer patients.<sup>[14]</sup> Besides religious experts, some studies have mentioned mental health service providers and counselors as individuals suitable for providing SC services. In fact, since the majority of clients have their own religious or spiritual worldview, the counselor should encourage the client to express his/her spiritual issues when making treatment relation with him/her because they are interested in speaking about this topic with counselor when they feel annoyed.<sup>[15,16]</sup> The third category of studies addresses the main role of health service providers such as nurses in providing counseling to patients with physical and mental illnesses in hospital. Since nurses play a crucial role in making mental patients calm and supporting them and since nurses make relationship with patients, they can be good options to present SC for individuals with psychological problems who are hospitalized.<sup>[9,17]</sup>

It is essential to reflect on some other questions even after selecting suitable individuals for SC providing: what sciences should SC providers know? Who should teach them? and How should be these teachings? Hence, teaching methods for spiritual counselors are other challenges in SC scope. Reports show that many of the mental health experts are not adequately trained and experienced in this field, so they cannot solve spiritual and religious issues of clients and these needs remain unsolved.<sup>[16,18]</sup> Despite the medical and physical health scope covering directions and protocols about spiritual cares for patients,<sup>[14,19-21]</sup> few native guides exist to help patients in case of mental health and answer these questions.<sup>[22]</sup>

Accordingly, solving these challenges and preparing instructions in this field in order to promote Iranian people health-care system are so important steps.<sup>[23]</sup> Since spirituality is a culture-oriented concept<sup>[24]</sup> and its definition subjects to various factors such as ethnicity, living environment,<sup>[25]</sup> cultural background, and religious beliefs,<sup>[26]</sup> this case should be addressed in each country and culture separately. Reviewing studies, we did not find any Iranian or foreign scientific references which have addressed this issue in mental health scope in Iran. Hence, a study on these topics contributes to promotion in this field.

## METHODS

This was a qualitative study conducted based on the conventional content analysis method and used deep semi-structured interview to collect data from the view of stakeholders. The Statistical Society of Research comprised

all of psychologists, psychiatrists, counselors, and chaplains with academic education in the field of mental health, patients with mental illness and their families, healthy individuals, and organizations which provide mental health services. We employ the 32-item Consolidated Criteria for Reporting Qualitative Research (COREQ) checklist to describe research methodology. Criteria in this checklist were designed for qualitative studies which use interview or focus groups as instruments helping researcher to report significant parts.<sup>[27]</sup>

### Research team

All interviews were conducted by the first author of this research. The author was an MA student in Mental Health at the time of study. In addition, the author was trained by professors who were experienced in conducting qualitative studies (items 1–5 in COREQ checklist). To set time for interviews, some participants received call contacts and some of them emails. In addition, research subject, objectives, and identity of author were given in contacts and emails (items 6–8 in COREQ checklist).

### Participants

Purposive sampling method was used in this study. All interviews were conducted face to face without the presence of any other person in the interview. A total of 19 interviews were carried out and four interviews dropped out; also, nine members had not enough time to participate. Interview location of ten members was in their workplace, three members in clinic, and two members at home. All of the environments were prepared in terms of calmness. Of 15 participants, 8 members (53.3%) were male and 7 members (46.7%) were female. Table 1 indicates details about participants (items 6–8 in the COREQ checklist).

### Data collection

Data were collected by deep semi-structured interviews. Interview questions were designed based on research objectives, reviewing texts, and consulting with three experts in spiritual health scope. Some questions were as follows: in your opinion, who is qualified to provide SC in mental health field? What sciences should be known by spiritual counselor? Who and how should teach spiritual counselor? Notes were taken during interview. Voice of interviewees was recorded and then inserted into the computer at the first opportunity. Each interview was conducted just once taking 14–91-min time. Interviews continued until saturation and no new code was found (items 17–22 in the COREQ checklist).

### Data analysis

Content of each interview was implemented as analysis unit and then analyzed within five steps based on the Graneheim and Lundman model: (1) texts were read several times to understand general concept; (2) the text was divided to meaning units including concepts and meanings extracted from interviews' texts; (3) at this step, codes are labels on meaning units then codes were shortened keeping their main core; (4) codes were arranged based on their content similarities and created categories; and (5) ultimately, themes

**Table 1: Participants' information**

Participant's code	Gender	Education	Background	Role	Years of experience
1	Male	M.A. in Clinical Psychology	Faculty member - Psychotherapist	Psychologist	20
2	Female	Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology	Faculty member - Psychotherapist	Psychologist	12
3	Male	Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology	Faculty member - Psychotherapist	Psychologist University deputy	18
4	Male	Ph.D. in Psychology of Exceptional children	Faculty member - Psychotherapist	Psychologist	28
5	Male	M.A. in counseling	Researcher - Consultant	Consultant	5
6	Male	Cleric with level-2 seminary education M.A. in counseling Ph.D. student in Philosophy of Education	Consultant	Cleric	9
7	Female	Ph.D. student in General Psychology	An employee of the Spiritual Health Research Center - Researcher	Researcher in the field of spirituality	7
8	Male	Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology	Faculty member - Psychotherapist	Psychologist	25
9	Male	Psychiatrist	Head of the faculty - Faculty member - therapist	Psychiatrist Head of the faculty	30
10	Female	B.S. in Sociology	Housekeeper	Client	Non
11	Female	B.S. in Psychology	Housekeeper	Client	Non
12	Female	Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology	Faculty member - Psychotherapist	Psychologist	10
13	Male	B.S. in Physics	Teacher	Healthy person	Non
14	Female	M.S. Student in Immunology	University student	Healthy person	Non
15	Female	M.S. in Quran and Hadith	School deputy - Teacher	Client family	7

were created as bases for similar contents in categories. Since qualitative analysis requires a circular process, we looked backward several times to complete steps.<sup>[28]</sup> The initial content of interviews and results was not addressed by the participants, but the researcher considered her notes and opinions after each interview and the whole process was done by one person. In addition, data management was done manually without using software. To clarify codes, categories, and themes, direct quotations of interviews have been presented in results (items 23–32 in the COREQ checklist).

#### Data rigor and trustworthiness

Besides addressing items of the COREQ checklist, rigor and trustworthiness of data were examined using options below based on the Guba and Lincoln's<sup>[29]</sup> criteria: (1) long-term involvement with researcher immersion in research subject and process; (2) in revising by colleague, coding was done by the main author and then external check of codes was implemented by the corresponding author and some codes were corrected. In addition, after performing steps 4 and 5 of analyses by the first author, the corresponding author revised them. Other authors also monitored all steps and gave their opinion if necessary; (3) triangulation of data resources was done to review the opinion of stakeholders (psychologist, chaplain, client, etc.) through interview; and (4) Seeking opposed evidences led to comprehensive description of subject with purposeful sampling on individuals who may suggest opposite views.

#### Ethical considerations

Data of this article were extracted from dissertation approved and funded by the Research Council of Iran University of Medical Sciences under the ethical code IR.IUMS.REC

1395.9411704008 (contract number: 96-02-185-30773). The interviewer gave a brief explanation about the research objectives to participants; then, informed consent form was given then participants initiated interview based on ethical principles. Some of these principles included possible exclusion at each step, information confidentiality, and anonymous data release.

## RESULTS

Results obtained from data analysis covered five main themes including SC candidates [Table 2], general conditions [Table 3], sciences required [Table 4], SC curriculum [Table 5], and spiritual counselors' training method [Table 6].

SC candidates is the most important theme extracted from data analysis consisting of the three following categories [Table 2].

#### Psychologists and counselors

This category indicates one of the main groups suitable for SC providing. Codes in this category describe specific conditions of this group that are required for SC.

#### Religious experts (chaplains)

This category was also mentioned by the majority of the interviewees as suitable SC providers. Codes in this category demonstrated conditions and challenges in SC providing by these experts.

Participant 5 stated about the capability of psychologist and chaplain as SC providers as follows: "A person who knows spiritual counseling in mental health field can easily treat those patients with mental health problems in spiritual scope; such person can be a psychologist or a chaplain. If he/she is chaplain,

**Table 2: Theme of spiritual counseling candidates and relevant codes and categories**

Theme	Category	Codes
SC candidates	Psychologists and counselors	Necessity of being expert in both psychology and spirituality scopes Having an instructor in spiritual field (ethics master) to answer their questions Training counselors and psychologists interested in this field Psychologists' ability with religious license to provide SC Holding spiritual course for counselor/psychologist by seminary Necessary evaluation of counselor's/psychologist's knowledge and skill to provide SC Providing SC by psychologist when specialized services are required Ability to integrate spirituality/religion with common psychotherapy approaches Possibility of providing SC by a psychologist with spiritual approach
	Religious experts (chaplains)	Necessity of being expert in both psychology and spirituality scopes Obtaining first rank in seminary degree to provide SC Challenge of competency of chaplains to provide SC Higher qualification of trained chaplain to provide SC compared to others Challenge to training chaplain in counseling/psychology field to provide SC Some beliefs in having at least M.A. in counseling/psychology Necessity of training religious graduated by professors and academic centers in counseling field Challenge to dependency or independency of the graduation place of counseling/psychology to seminary Possibility of holding counseling course by seminary under the license obtained from associated organizations Chaplain's focus on learning mental science not just obtaining a license Presenting specialized training after basic counseling education Familiarity of religious graduated with counseling and psychology principles Ability to diagnose mental disorders by graduated in educational course Presence of subjective difference in SC provided by chaplain and psychologist Presence of spiritual counselor without clerical clothing in workplace Challenge of approval or refusal of SC provided by chaplain in opinion of patients
	Others	Mystics Psychiatrics Psychic nurse Aiders

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he/she should be expert in mental health and spirituality and if he/she is psychologist, he/she also should be aware of spirituality and mind.”

### Others

This group includes other qualified individuals as SC providers. For example, participant 4 pointed to the important role of mystics: “mystics' attitude toward issues is similar to psychologists' attitude believing which human should know the ways that he or she is willing to suggest. Another point is that these individuals have deep opinions about mind and soul giving internal meaning to phenomena.”

General conditions is the second extracted theme indicating the general conditions of spiritual counselors working in this field. This theme includes the following two subcategories [Table 3].

### Documents and licenses

This category comprises relevant codes to the fundamental science of SC and all the documents and licenses obtained by individuals interested in SC providing to be active in this field.

### Personal characteristics

This includes different personality and behavioral characteristics required for a SC provider. For example, God orientation, being kind, being interested, being dynamic, and up to date can be

mentioned in this case. Participant 10 stated about spiritual counselor's belief in meaning and spirituality inside as follows: “suitable individuals for being a spiritual counselor are those who believe in spiritual background of each phenomenon. In other words, they should be esoteric. For instance, pilgrimage (Hajj) does not mean traveling with airplane just to see a holy monument and pray it; in contrary, the person should be aware of traveling toward the God which means forgetting self-centered behavior of human and tending to know God.”

Sciences required is the third extracted theme covering the following three categories [Table 4].

### Religious knowledge

Codes in this category indicate types of references, books, techniques, and skills in religious field which should be necessarily learned by spiritual counselor.

### Knowledge of psychology

This is a collection of knowledge, skills, and qualifications which should be obtained by spiritual counselor to be successful in this area.

### Other knowledge

This category comprises important codes besides two above-mentioned categories in the viewpoint of stakeholders;

**Table 3: Theme of general conditions and relevant codes and categories**

Theme	Category	Codes
General conditions	Degrees and licenses	Necessity of having basic degree in religious sciences or seminary license Academic SC study in the field of religious sciences instead of seminary Having at least M.A. in mental health to provide SC Experts trained in counseling/psychotherapy license in spiritual field Obtaining counseling/psychotherapy license from authenticate centers to provide SC Approval of authenticate centers in case of involving in courses by spiritual counselors Obtaining license for treatment in SC sessions Qualification based on advice, experience research, and evaluation after start up Challenge to basic knowledge of spiritual counselor (religious, psychology, or its unimportance) Characteristics of an ideal spiritual counselor: Faithful with spiritual and psychological knowledge The best spiritual counselors in present conditions: Teaching spiritual technics to successful therapists
	Personal characteristics	Lack of preconception in religious issues and nonjudgmental view of spiritual counselor Counselor's interest in this field Competency of spiritual counselor in anthological dimension Kindness is one of the prominent characteristics of spiritual counselor Counselor's interest in learning Counselor's belief in meaning and spiritual inherent of any object Being outstanding in ethics, behavior, and speech by spiritual counselor Making relaxing relationship with patient by spiritual counselor Fostering spiritual dimension in spiritual counselor Counselor's holistic approach to human dimensions Counselor's belief in spiritual dimension and its effects in life God-orientated spiritual counselor dynamic and update spiritual counselor

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**Table 4: Theme of sciences required and relevant codes and categories**

Theme	Category	Codes
Sciences required	Religious knowledge	Mastery of Quran and use of its narratives to teach different subjects Ideal SC providing based on Quran structure Counselor's skill in using religious references timely and correctly Knowing the effectiveness of religious verses and narratives Having knowledge about theology, ontology, and ethics Having knowledge about prophets' lifestyle to provide SC Using behavioral pattern of prominent religious ideals in SC Counselor's mastery in all religions and spiritual schools Counselor's mastery in spiritual methods and their effective teaching methods Counselor's knowledge about spiritual conflicts of client and their solving methods Counselor's ability to promote human excellency
	Knowledge of psychology	Having knowledge, skill, and competency for counseling Using psychological knowledge to diagnose pathology and timely referral Counselor's ability when coping with questions asked by clients, problem solving, and interpreting Ability to change attitude and thinking style of individuals Having knowledge about the relation between psychology and spirituality Necessity of having religion psychology knowledge and obeying it Presence or lack of spiritual counselors' expertise in psychology field based on the intervention type
	Other knowledge	Counselor's comprehensive information about various fields Counselor's knowledge about social sciences, biology, and family Counselor's knowledge about methodology of world SC Mastery in ideological concepts Beneficially of knowing ideals' lifestyle Having knowledge to diagnose physical problems

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these codes include social science, biology, and knowledge of physical problem diagnosis.

SC curriculum is another theme about SC learners and teachers and its missions are as follows [Table 5].

**Table 5: Theme of spiritual counseling curriculum and relevant codes and categories**

Theme	Category	Codes
SC curriculum	Educational materials	Required inclusive SC training: Theoretical, practical, survey, clinical Theoretical training of psychology and counseling basic principles Teaching Quran concepts analyzing as practical task Teaching methodology and schools of interpretation Necessary relation between theoretical and practical lessons Reading specialized religious lessons in case of experts' advice Carry out study and content producing in this field Familiarity with evaluating the effectiveness of counseling and identifying its problems Regular knowledge and ethics training for SC learner Existence of scientific not categorical order in SC education structure Empowerment of learner in recognizing mental disorders and early diagnosis of them Training spiritual needs and fostering spiritual dimension Study of books related to SC field by spiritual counselor Foster spiritual counselors by sensitizing within all life stages Need to internship and receiving supervision Internship in associated institutions by learner Receiving supervision from expert psychologist in spiritual field
	Mission	Stimulating spiritual dimension of client Guiding clients to excellence and creating spiritual prosperity in them Create meaning and goal in client's life Form a better worldview in client's mind Help clients to forget philosophical absurdity Solve spiritual problems such as ruined relationship between clients and God Relieving spiritual harms in some SC cases
	Conditions of SC instructor	Challenge to select suitable teacher for spiritual counselor fostering Main role of mystics in training spiritual counselors Knowledgeable teacher in the field of psychology and religious sciences Priority of holding spirituality courses by trained experts in this field Holding spirituality courses by psychologist interested in spirituality research Fostering spiritual counselor by interested individuals and experts in this field Teaching religious parts by chaplain and teaching psychology sections by psychologist Appointing skilled teachers in SC by experts Necessity of basic religious knowledge of SC trainer Ideal SC trainer: Trained religious person with clinical research experience Being knowledgeable with functional and ethical qualification in SC instructor Creating a specialized board to evaluate skill of demanders No restriction in selecting SC trainer at the beginning Keeping the relation between teacher and learner Necessity of cascade teaching in SC field

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### Educational materials

This category covers different types of theoretical, practical, survey, and clinical teachings, which should be learned by all learners to be expert in this scope.

### Mission

This category answers the following questions: why we should be taught in scope of SC and how this scope helps clients.

### Conditions of spiritual counseling instructor

This category belongs to codes which answer the following questions: who can teach SC and what are the requirements for this activity?

Training spiritual counselors is the last theme extracted from data analyses. This is the most significant theme which expresses methods to train spiritual counselors [Table 6].

### Educational workshop

This category explains one of the methods for training counselors besides its advantages and disadvantages.

### Educational course

It is one of the best methods to teach learners. In this category, conditions required for course holding, course duration, and holding method are explained.

For instance, interviewee 7 stated: "in my opinion, chaplains should be trained for mental health and its principle in order to deliver an ideal spiritual counseling. These discussions should be started in training courses under the supervision of universities and there is no need that chaplain study psychology necessarily. These courses give sufficient knowledge, making them able to diagnose mental disorders."

**Table 6: Theme of training spiritual counselors and relevant codes and categories**

Theme	Category	Codes	
Training spiritual counselors	Educational workshop	Holding spirituality workshops in authenticated centers	
		Preparing conditions to receive educational licenses in this field	
		Different SC workshop durations in various approaches	
	Educational course	Educational course	Disadvantage of teaching through workshops: Giving license to all participants
			Lack of productivity of short workshops to foster spiritual counselor
			Priority of SC learner teaching in courses
			Holding this courses under the supervision of reputable organizations
			Competency of the Ministry of Health to hold SC courses
			Similarity between educational processes of courses and educational major
			Need to educational content to hold courses
			Determining educational framework of courses based on the inclusive SC approach
			Holding courses as fellowship
			Determining course duration by experts
	Usefulness of holding common courses with seminaries for SC learners		
	Educational major	Educational major	Need to studying at least 1-year spirituality course
Sufficient time for spiritual counselor training: 4 years			
Necessity of creating SC major in Iran			
Creating this major based on experiences obtained from courses			
Creating major at Ph.D. and post-Ph.D. levels			
		Need to making harmony between university and seminary to create major	
		Formation of major gradually based on various theories	

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### Educational major

It is one another method for learners' training. This category explains the necessity for establishment of SC major in Iran and preparing field for it.

In case of training methods for spiritual counselors, participant 12 stated: "One of disadvantages of workshops is giving certificate to all of participants, but training courses are like educational semesters; even it is emphasized in courses which they should have supervision for one period to be identified as qualified counselors by teacher then it is decided after supervision which those individuals can work in this field or not. However, if this major is created, there will be a discipline in it and will have a curriculum. Considering problems in creating a new major, the best way is holding courses to gain experiences and then create it as a new major."

With respect to the themes, categories, and codes obtained, the following findings can be stated in order to summarize the mentioned results and their better understanding: determining the suitable people to provide SC in mental health is one of the most challenging areas and also codes well illustrate this subject. However, it is possible to say generally which people who are expert in both religion and mental health scopes can provide SC with subject to conditions (although the total codes indicate that it is easier for religious professionals to do this). One of the most important circumstances is the need for their participation in training courses in order to qualify for providing such counseling. It is essential for these professionals to study in the field of religion, psychology, and some other majors.

### DISCUSSION

This study addressed the most important challenges to newly emerged topic of SC in the field of mental health in Iran. Since there is little and ambiguous information in this field, the topic was addressed based on the opinions of stakeholders. This approach is a strategic tool used to find behaviors, objectives, interactions, and interests of individuals and organizations in knowledge generation about these elements besides the present and future opportunities and threats.<sup>[30]</sup>

Results obtained from analyses indicated that what groups and conditions are qualified to provide SC, what kind of knowledge should be known by suitable individuals, who can train spiritual counselor, what they should teach, and what teaching methods should be used.

In order to compare the results of this study with previous ones, we conducted a comprehensive review of various types of internal and foreign databases. However, we could not find a study which directly surveys this subject and its questions. In particular, we did not find a study which explains who should exactly provide SC services. Hence, we cannot compare the overall results of this study with other ones, and this comparison will only be possible in detail.

The first theme expresses that three groups of experts are qualified to provide SC: counselors and psychologists, religious experts, and other groups such as mystics, psychiatrics, and psychic nurses. The common point of these three groups is that they are trained in both mental health and spirituality scopes. For example, Forrester-Jones *et al.* conducted a study in which the authors explained that patients with psychological problems

who have religious beliefs sometimes choose chaplains to solve their spiritual issues.<sup>[31]</sup> In addition, Memaryan *et al.* emphasized on cleric expertise in counseling area.<sup>[4]</sup>

Moreover, numerous studies have pointed to the role of counselors and psychologists in SC providing and necessity of training these individuals in spiritual field, making them empowered to work with different patients.<sup>[16]</sup> One of the new findings of this study was competency of mystics in providing SC services and training spiritual counselors. In this regard, no study was found in this group of individuals. In addition, the interest and belief of spiritual counselors in spiritual scope are other significant characteristics of spiritual counselors.<sup>[32]</sup>

Although there were some challenges between beneficiaries in terms of chaplains' competency for SC providing, whole codes introduced this group as more suitable individuals to provide such services because it is more possible in the educational system of Iran to train religious experts in SC courses compared to training experts in mental field within long-term courses related to religion and spirituality.

On the other hand, the majority of SCs provided by experts in mental health integrating religion/spirituality with counseling/psychology<sup>[18]</sup> called counseling/psychotherapy with spiritual/religious approach.<sup>[6,33]</sup> This case was interesting to interviewees so that one of them pointed to the difference between SC provided by counselors and chaplains. However, interviewee 5 stated that mental health experts could be trained through shorter courses for mental health experts and designed by seminaries. In this sense, both groups can be qualified for SC providing.

The third theme addresses sciences which should be known by experts. One category of these sciences in religious and spiritual sciences including using Quran, religious narratives, and applying spiritual technics timely based on the study conducted by Aghajani *et al.*<sup>[9]</sup> In addition, results obtained by Der Pan *et al.* suggested a religious sciences-related framework required for using holy book and pray.<sup>[34]</sup> Hence, counselor's approach to use religious sciences should be determined.

The two last themes explain training frameworks for spiritual counselors. There are numerous evidences and researches indicating coherent teachings in this field in many countries.<sup>[35,36]</sup> For instance, the UK, Sweden, and Canada have designed spiritual service packages in both physical and mental areas. Even in Canada, spiritual counselors work in specialized scopes such as addiction, grief and crisis counseling, marriage and family, and military counseling. They also receive professional courses. However, there is no educational plan for SC in the field of mental health in Iran,<sup>[37,38]</sup> and since the majority of countries have started career courses in this field considering problems in creating a major, the best method of teaching and training spiritual counselor is conducting professional course. In addition, holding workshops by stakeholders is not effective due to the mentioned barriers. An innovative part of this study was

addressing this topic and explaining educational structures for spiritual counselors' activity.

Since spiritual services are rooted in our culture and religion, native guidelines should be created for them as soon as possible<sup>[23,39]</sup> through conducting similar qualitative researches. Furthermore, it is worth considering teaching and training case in this scope to make spiritual service providers concern about solutions to promote these services.<sup>[22]</sup>

### Recommendations and limitations

Lack of a certain proctor in counseling and psychology scope was one of the limitations in this study. Hence, decision-making, policymaking, and implementing instructions for SC—which is one of the counseling branches—is difficult.

One another limitation in this study was addressing several important subjects at the same time. Accordingly, it is recommended to examine these topics separately. Since findings obtained from a qualitative study are based on the opinion of interviewees and more important data analysts and since there are numerous disagreements and challenges to this scope, it is recommended to conduct further studies.

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There are no conflicts of interest.

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