

Being Love: Exploring Love and Death in Sufi Psychotherapy

Elif Zapsu, University of Edinburgh, Üsküdar University

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Abstract

The main objective of this study was to examine the relationship and importance of Love and Death within Sufi (Islamic Mystic) psychology, and to establish the extent to which these findings can be utilized in person-centered research on the self and psychotherapy. This study spanned four years and was supervised by the University of Edinburgh Counselling and Psychotherapy Department. Data was collected in various locations in Türkiye. The concepts of Love and Death were explored through *writing as inquiry* and integrated into the author's diary entries. *Autoethnographic fiction* enabled the ethical consideration of confidentiality, allowing the author to conduct *literature-based research* that blended with the colours of lived experience, thereby increasing the reliability of the findings. This presentation of results offers a distinctive insight into what it means to be human, highlighting the connection between love and death, which implies liberation from one's ego-based conditionings and indicates a state of existence beyond the physical form and the self. Suggestions are made for a new Sufi-inspired, holistic, therapeutic avenue. This includes cognitive work that focuses on deconditioning one's database of conditions, associated judgments, and emotions to experience the true self.

Keywords: psychotherapy, Sufi psychology, spirituality, writing as inquiry, autoethnography

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Introduction

A psychotherapist's chosen approach should be grounded in an understanding of the human that best fits their perspective. As such, this research began with the need to decolonize existing theories to gain a clearer, comprehensive experience of the therapist's self. The objective was to examine the connection and significance of two fundamental concepts, Love and Death, in Sufi (Islamic Mystic) psychology and to determine the extent to which these findings can be incorporated into person-centered literature on the self (Rogers, 2003) and into psychotherapy. Person-centered therapy is among the most widely used and integrated approaches in practice, alongside other methods (Silberschatz, 2007). Although person-centered theory can be a spiritual experience, its core concepts do not integrate religious or spiritual content, leaving room for contemplation of what such a transformation may entail. Furthermore, if being free from one's conditions of worth is essential for one's experience of the self to be as authentic or congruent as possible (Rogers, 1963, p. 31), this raises the question of whether the most significant conditioning is restricting the concept of the self to an ego-based perception, thereby enabling further consideration of a Sufi intervention.

The religion of Islam was revealed through Master Mustafa Muhammad (SAW) around the 600s A.D.; it can be viewed as a universal perspective that encompasses previous revelations (Fadiman & Frager, 1997, p. 4). Sufism, also known as Tasawwuf, is a mystical aspect of Islam in which individuals seek to experience their true selves before physical death through the power of divine, unconditional love for all that exists and for all that is yet to come (Schimmel, 2019). It concerns the personal experience of Allah, one reality, with eternal, unique compositions (Hulusi, 2015), a path of unconditional acceptance that encompasses all, regardless of one's religion. Research indicates that the experience of unity and being beyond the body, a feeling of oneness, can be profoundly healing (Lewis, 2020). Hundreds of quantitative studies from 1972 to 2010 (Koenig, 2012) suggest that religion and spirituality help people cope more effectively with mental and physical health challenges. There has been an increase in Sufi therapeutic practices (Solihin & Munir, 2017, p. 2585); however, authors suggest that there is insufficient research-based evidence (Nizamie et al., 2013, p. 221). Most certainly, they remain limited in Western literature (Mitha, 2019). It is hoped that the results of this study will be of service to those seeking spiritual and holistic paths beyond labels, including the label of "Sufism", as a Sufi is one who has been left bare, of even words, and has become nothing, that is, everything.

The Study

There are many Islamic sources that could have been utilized for the literature review on love and death in Sufism. This study drew on the work of Sufi scholar Ahmed Hulusi (as cited in Zapsu, 2023). His work was chosen because it was interpreted as written from an experienced heart, unconditionally, with the love of Allah and Muhammad (saw); it is modern (thus more understandable and accessible), scientific, dense, and enlightening. To say trustworthy is limited in reference to his incredible, transformative, profound work, which this author has experienced as a gift to humanity. The lack of financial and personal benefit to Islamic scholars from their religious knowledge was also a key ethical consideration. With my utmost respect, I am eternally grateful to have been introduced to his writing and apologize for my limitations in utilizing his work for this study.

Autoethnographic fiction enabled the author to integrate literature into lived experience, thereby enhancing the data's reliability and the approach as a way of being. A semi-fictionalized

account of the author's life story was combined with a literature-based exploration, ensuring participants' confidentiality and providing a safe space to delve deeper into the magical-realistic perspective of Sufism. Diary entries spanning four years were formally recorded from August 2019 to August 2022. Data collection of journal entries incorporated music, photographs, memories, conversations, experiences, videos, smells, poetry, and more. This creative-relational and reflexive autoethnographic approach allowed both the author and readers to observe the process of change and spiritual actualization over the course of the study, and to participate in a psychotherapeutic endeavour centered on human experience (Ellis & Adams, 2014, p. 27). The author learned through writing, *in writing*, for “in the process of writing itself, we create new knowledge” (Werder, 2016, p. 2). Through writing, data collection, analysis, and creation were written as “one” (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005, p. 962), weaving together literature with the colourful strands of lived experience. The central location was Istanbul, Türkiye; however, excursions to other cities in Türkiye and a religious pilgrimage to Saudi Arabia were integral to the experience.

The study adhered to the ethical guidelines of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy and Counselling and Psychotherapy in Scotland. Approval was obtained from the University of Edinburgh's *School of Health in Social Science, Board of Research Ethics, Integrity and Governance*, in direct contact with the *Counselling and Psychotherapy and Applied Social Science Research Department* (Zapsu, 2023). There was no foreseeable possibility of harm to the researcher or to those mentioned in the study. Only one individual was identified in the study without a pseudonym or fictionalized account. This person gave verbal consent, read and approved the content before it was submitted: their verbal consent was recorded and safely stored with the researcher. The study was guided by two lead supervisors from the Counselling and Psychotherapy department, and two focus questions were explored (Zapsu, 2023, pp. 49–50):

- What is the relationship between the Sufi concepts of love and death? (Explored theoretically and experientially).
- How do we integrate what emerges with the Person-centered concept of the self and psychological therapies?

Results

What is Love?

Love as Frequency and Energy

Love is described as a fundamental frequency or energy, aligning with the quantum physics' view of reality as energetic exchanges. Relationships are seen as energetic interactions, and love is a state of resonance or attraction. When this resonance becomes a dependency, it may reflect insecure attachment.

Various studies looking at the biomagnetic resonance of the heart and synchronization suggest that living systems are interconnected and communicate through magnetic resonance (Russek and Schwatz, 1994)...For myself, Love is existence, thus Love is information, frequency, energy, you- me-us. Unity and Multiplicity, the Magic and the Real. This was an experience of it within it. (Zapsu, 2023, p. 161)

Beyond Words and Ego

Love is ultimately beyond verbal definition—an experience of oneness and unity that transcends language. The truest form of love is unconditional, without expectations or boundaries, and is only accessible when one experiences no self, only pure consciousness. In this state, the observer observes itself in all it sees.

The human is born with a miracle: the brain, which might allow us to actualize and experience reality as saints do, to experience the whole universe within, and to experience unconditional love and being beyond boundaries. (Zapsu, 2023, p. 123)

The Illusion of Self

The brain is likened to a holonomic (holographic) quantum computer that generates an illusory reality. The ego is a construct—an accumulation of sensory data, genetics, environment, and conditioning. This illusory self creates the perception of separation, but in truth, all is one essence observing itself in infinite forms. Love, then, is the essence of this unity.

...Maldacena (1997) has now proved this through a formula mathematically... the Universe, is in a sense a hologram, a projection of information (Susskind, 2018, 51:39)...the brain is a hologram that creates its holographic world within a holographic system. (Zapsu, 2023, p. 211)

Healing and Transformation

True love is healing, activating the brain's reward system, and fostering happiness. It can be expressed through thoughts, prayers, and spiritual practices, which may have holistic healing effects. Both organic and technological means of frequency healing are also discussed.

...there is still some anger and hurt. From isolation during youth, abusive relationships, betrayals...you name it all of it. But the acceptance I can call an expression of love, and the warmth and happiness that comes with the experience of it, is starting to heal my heart. (Zapsu, 2023, p. 203)

Non-dual Love and Divine Essence

The highest experience of love is non-dual, recognizing no separation between the self and the other, or between creation and the creator. The Sufi perspective emphasizes that there is no God or God's—only Allah, the singular reality, whose essence is love. The name Al-Wadud (the creator of unconditional love) is highlighted as central to this understanding.

‘Vahdedhü la Sherike leh’ (Master Mustafa Muhammad (saw) in Ibnül-Arabi, 2021, 41). If existence is One being without equal, then how can we be two? ‘I’ can only be One as ‘We.’ When you know your true self, thinking as though you are separate ends and We as One begins (Ibnül-Arabi, 2021, 65). You must know yourself. You must ‘know the whole’ (Hulusi, 2014, 12). That is why we are on our way home. To find ourselves, and where can we be, but in our hearts...in Love? (Zapsu, 2023, p. 149)

What is Death?

Death as Transformation

Death is not an end but a transformation—a continual process of renewal. Every moment, the “self” changes as new information enters the brain. There exists only a “You” that is here and now, experiencing instances.

As the fundamental biological nature of the brain is known, we cannot deny that every moment we are renewed and transformed as new information enters our brains every second. That which we call our ‘self’, in truth, a database we observe that changes forever. (Zapsu, 2023, p. 240)

Angelic Computation and Non-locality

Death is described as an “angelic being” (Azrael) that enables the transition from physical to spiritual existence. In the quantum view, there is no true separation or movement—only a shift in frequency within a unified reality.

That which you speak is a physical death, which is merely the end of one body, and the continuation of another (The Quran in Hulusi, 2020, 465). One does not experience another death after the first one, and they are eternal. (Zapsu, 2023, p. 147)

Dying Before Death

The Sufi teaching is to “die before you die”—to let the ego (the false self) “dissolve” before physical death. This means transcending the illusion of separateness and living from the perspective of the true self, which is one with all existence. The experience of heaven is actualizing this potential; hell is failing to do so.

...surpass the illusory ‘duality’ formed by the ‘self’ and its conditions to see that our true selves are ‘consciousness emanating from non- existence...we are not confined to flesh and bones’ (Hulusi, 2012 in Zapsu, 2023, p. 190)

The Holographic Principle

According to the holographic principle, reality works similarly to a hologram—each part contains the whole, and all is one. The illusion of multiplicity is the “magic,” while the essential unity is the “real.” Love is the force that enables the dissolution of the self and the experience of unity.

Quantum entanglement (Cowan et al., 2013) shows us how objects or rather matter can communicate beyond space and time, all of this and more complementing each-other, implying unity within a wave-like energetic being and supporting the holographic principle (Maldecena, 1997). (Zapsu, 2023, p. 213)

Integration: Love and Death

Conditions, Judgments, and Emotions: The “False Self” (Ego)

The “false self” (ego) identity is formed through conditions, value judgments, and emotions. The “ego” is a database of these concepts, protected by the brain’s emotional center. Spiritual practices like fasting can help quiet the ego and facilitate experiences beyond the body (Zapsu, 2023, pp. 244–49). As can prayers, chanting, giving alms, and much more, as recommended by Muhammad (saw) (Zapsu, 2023, pp. 244–49).

Cognitive Formula: The Embrace of Love and Death Ends in Unity

Unconditional acceptance (love) triggers the death (transformation) of the illusory self, releasing the conditions, associated value judgments, and emotions that create the ego identity. The quantum brain is seen as a holonomic unit that collects information it identifies with as the ego, which experiences itself as separate. The experience of unconditional love breaks down these barriers, leading to healing and actualization. (Zapsu, 2023, p.244). An example of this process can be seen with the possible condition of *I am a woman* (possessing it as opposed to seeing it as qualities or attributes) + value judgment-*If I don’t look beautiful, I am unworthy* + emotions- *depression, isolation, loneliness, and more*. The more one loves, the more judgments of the self and thus others fall away, as do the triggered emotional content. As such, they no longer cause suffering. Eventually, depending on the individual's desire, the perspective on the concept of the self-changes as well, so the conditionings remain data rather than possessions. *I am* transforms into *I am Nothing*, just infinite quantum potential expressing and observing itself through its unique combination.

The True Self

One’s true self is “Nothing” but infinite data, with focus on gut-brain access through the nervous system’s communication with the amygdala (Zapsu, 2023, p. 245). The deconditioning processes allow one to achieve greater peace eternally, to the extent that one is in “love” and desires to live up to one's potential (Zapsu, 2023, p. 246). The ultimate state is silent observation of the self, in infinite forms, without commentary and without judgment. As judgments fall away, so do the attached emotional responses, and all that’s left is divine love, beyond the body and all its labels (Zapsu, 2023, p. 246). One’s perspective of the “self” metamorphoses to “no self,” and experiences essential unity, oneness.

Rogers and Hulusi: Two Perspectives

Similarities

Both Carl Rogers and Ahmed Hulusi emphasize the importance of living sincerely and actualizing one’s potential through unconditional acceptance. Both see the individual as possessing the answers within themselves (Zapsu, 2023, p. 251).

Differences

Rogers believes in actualizing a congruent self, while Hulusi states there is no self—only the ego, database, which must be transformed. For Rogers, the past is relevant; for Hulusi, it is

relevance is only data. Rogers values the therapeutic relationship; Hulusi sees integration of information as sufficient for transformation (Zapsu, 2023, pp. 252–3).

Conclusion: A New Way of Being

There are Sufi therapists who describe profound work in their practice, which also once included this author (Khan, 2022; Zapsu, 2021). Nevertheless, the results of this specific study suggest that when one adopts Hulusi's interpretation of Sufism as a way of being, it no longer aligns, either theoretically or practically, with Person Centered Therapy (Zapsu, 2023, pp. 252–3). No self leaves no room for a Rogerian self-concept. One must then disregard an integrated method and instead suggest a new therapeutic perspective, which might be called *One Psychology*, where unconditional Love triggers transformation (death), resulting in the release of value judgments and associated emotions, until one is left beyond the body and ego, where one is left “self-less”. The title *One Psychology* was much debated. Simply put, as jarring, perhaps confusing, or nonsensical as it may sound, it was titled as such to make readers' cognitive processing align more easily with the world of unity and Oneness. The heart of the approach is unconditional divine love, which lacks any separation in essence; we are all one psychology, one macro, albeit incomprehensible, mind, observing itself through infinite micro brains. As such, in the spirit of non-duality and desire to end “othering”, it felt sensible at that time to utilize this as the title, as this was a simple and easy way to show readers the core message of this new perspective. This decision is always open to change.

As One Psychology is founded upon a unique interpretation of Sufism, where all are welcome in the “religion of Love” (Rumi, 2019, p. 25), the end goal is to reach a state of being beyond judgment, labels, words, and even religion. Thereby, there are two main pathways one can utilize, one with and one without religion. For the first path, one could use Sufi Psychology through education and alternative therapeutic avenues, one can learn about unity of being and the false self through scientific perspectives, and work on deconditioning the *false self* through opening the heart to unconditional love and acceptance, as well as a range of holistic Sufi practices seen as best fit by the individual that include but are not limited to art therapy, music therapy, meditation, fasting, praying, chanting, dance and more (Zapsu, 2023, pp. 252–3). Or as a Sufi, you may of course prefer independent work with a Sufi Master. The second path would only teach the science, for example, the physics of unity, the quantum (holonomic) brain, and the illusory ego, using basic cognitive psychology, after which we can do the same deconditioning process, without introducing spiritual-religious sources (Zapsu, 2023, pp. 252–3). Thus, it could benefit everyone, regardless of religion, and would not require a therapist. It would necessitate providing this information for free and, if possible, teaching it unconditionally, without monetary return, to protect the ethics of this approach, which is meant to be given unconditionally from the heart. Both pathways only strengthen each other and can be utilized by anyone. Currently, this author has integrated this approach, treating both pathways as one, into an optional psychology course for students at Üsküdar University in Istanbul. The author is also considering testing it as an educational program (a second path without religion) for the Genç Hayat Vakfı, a youth foundation based in Istanbul, Türkiye.

Greater research-based evidence is required on the holonomic brain and how one might decondition with ease, as well as on holistic therapeutic methods. It would need to be worked on considerably so that it could be adaptable for all ages, with or without spiritual or religious components. This study offers only a minimal interpretation of a Master scholar's work and presents just one perspective. The author is endlessly limited in this respect. It serves as an avenue for those seeking knowledge and healing through unconditional acceptance—beyond

judgment—and love that knows no boundaries or labels. It provides an alternative and complementary option to traditional talk therapy. This holistic approach decolonizes conventional Western ideas of what psychotherapy can be and means. It continually renews itself with the latest knowledge from science, spirituality, and other fields, welcoming all individuals, regardless of their orientation. There is significant room for growth in this approach, best achieved through more research and educational practice.

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Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that Grammarly, an AI-assisted writing tool, and ChatGPT were used to proofread, edit, and refine the manuscript's language. The usage was limited to correcting grammatical and spelling errors and rephrasing statements. No AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate content or data for the manuscript.

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Contact email: elifzapsu@gmail.com