

Kierkegaard's concept of self-identity dynamics to awaken spiritual powers: Spiritual counseling perspective

Yohanes Ignasius Setiawan *

Universitas Sanata Dharma

Yogyakarta, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author. e-mail: yisetiawan@usd.ac.id

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Abstract

Counselees who take part in spiritual counseling are usually those who are experiencing life impasses. Spiritual counseling offers intervention to reactivate the counselee's spiritual powers. This article aims to look at the possibility of using Soren Kierkegaard's thought of self-identity dynamics as a framework for spiritual counseling interventions. Kierkegaard, who is known as an existentialist philosopher, considers that human self-identity has three dimensions. First, the synthesis of two opposite poles: between the infinite and the finite, the mortal and the eternal, freedom and necessity. Second, internal relations: relations that connect oneself and one's individuality. The third is deep dependence on the transcendent. The three dimensions of human identity are in harmony with the main character of spiritual counseling. The method used to see this possibility is a literature study. The author reviews various literature related to spiritual counseling and Kierkegaard's concept of self-identity dynamics to produce a comprehensive discussion. There are ten journal articles that the author used for this research. Three main discussions of this paper are the definition of spiritual counseling, the concept of Kierkegaard's Self-identity dynamics, and the application of Kierkegaard's self-identity dynamics to spiritual counseling. The discussion concluded that Kierkegaard's thoughts on self-identity provided an adequate framework for the dynamics of spiritual counseling, especially to help counselees realize and actualize spiritual powers to build wholeness in freedom. This study will benefit spiritual counselors to deal with counselees experiencing life impasses and to broaden the counselor's understanding in facilitating the counseling process.

Keywords: *Kierkegaard, dialectics, spiritual power, despair, counseling*



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Introduction

People who decide to have counseling sessions are usually individuals who experience deadlock or someone who is experiencing an impasse in life. They are individuals who feel hopeless amid all the problems they are experiencing. They are often powerless to turn on the spiritual powers within. In this point, a spiritual counselor can help the counselee to excite these potentials (Gladding & Crockett, 2019).

From the psychotherapy and counseling perspective, various means have been used to overcome this impasse. Drugs and means to deal with stress are varied. However, intervention from the outside isn't efficacious; it must have accompanied from within. Religion and spirituality played a pivotal role in the coping repertoires of, bolstering their self-confidence and facilitating

the development of lasting coping strategies (Philip, et al., 2019). Therefore, assistance through spiritual counseling is an effective intervention to help counselees generate these potentials.

Religion and spirituality often play a vital role in healing someone (Bozek, et al., 2020). Hence, neglecting the counselee's spiritual orientation not only jeopardizes the establishment of therapeutic relationships but also precludes opportunities for potential intervention in the counselees (Frunza, et al., 2019). In a multicultural Indonesian context, adapting counseling to cultural backgrounds salient to a client, including spirituality and religion, empowers the counseling relationship and treatment outcome (Evans & Nelson, 2021).

Because the depth of insight into spirituality and cultural values is very strategic for the counselee's treatment, an adequate philosophical framework is required to enable the counselor to comprehend the interplay and mutual influence of the cultural worldviews, values, and belief between the client and therapist. This understanding is essential for collaboratively shaping a relational experience imbued with a healing spirit (Davis, et al., 2018).

Søren Kierkegaard, an existentialist thinker, offers an adequate framework for the dynamics of Self-identity. His thought has important implications for therapy, especially for building trust, hope, and forgiveness. Those are essential elements for love for oneself, others, and God (Tan, 2022; Webb, 2016, p. 24). This article will elaborate on Kierkegaard's self-identity dynamics which can be used as a framework for understanding to overcome the deadlock in one's life through the intervention of a spiritual counselor.

Method

This paper uses a systematic literature review with a library research design. According to Snyder (2019) a literature review provides summary and analysis of existing research on a particular topic. It can be used to provide the basis for new conceptual model or theory, or to map the development of particular research field over time. The specific method that should be used for a literature review will vary depending on the goal of the review (Snyder, 2019, p. 334). The data for this study came from secondary sources, which the researchers obtained by reviewing journal articles. The following is a list of the 10 journal articles that were used as references. The articles analyzed were those published from 2015 to 2022.

Table 1. List of Articles

No.	Author and Year	Journal	Title
1	(Jungers and Gregoire, 2016)	Journal of Humanistic Counseling	Authenticity in Ethical Decision Making: Reflections for Professional Counselors
2	(Saunders, 2015)	Pastoral Care and Counseling	Cognitive-Existential Family Therapy: A Proposed Theoretical Integration Model for Pastoral Counselors
3	(Winston, 2015)	The Humanistic Psychologist	Points of Convergence and Divergence Between Existential and Humanistic Psychology: A Few Observations
4	(Kristiono, 2017)	Verbum Christi	Pemahaman Kierkegaard tentang 'Diri' dalam Buku <i>the Sickness unto Death</i>
5	(Herlina and Hidayat, 2019)	Indonesian Journal of Educational Counseling	Pendekatan Eksistensial dalam Praktik Bimbingan dan Konseling
6	(Bowen, 2020)	Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care	The Importance of Patience in Kierkegaard's Becoming Self
7	(Victor & Treschuck, 2020)	Journal Holistic Nursing	Critical Literature Review on the Definition Clarity of the Concept of Faith, Religion, and Spirituality
8	(Bennett, 2021)	Journal of the Oxford Graduate Theological	Kierkegaard for the Information Age: Analyzing the Impact of Social Media on Self

			and Selfhood
9	(Hategan, 2021)	Journal for the Study of Religions and Ideologies	The Practice of Counseling Between Philosophy and Spirituality: An Interdisciplinary Approach
10	(Werbart, Grake and Klingborg, 2022)	Counseling Psychology Quarterly	Deadlock in Psychotherapy: A Phenomenological Study of Eight Psychodynamic Therapists' Experiences

In this design, the author collects some scientific articles and literature related to the keywords spiritual counseling, Kierkegaard, and self-identity dynamics to be analyzed comprehensively to obtain theoretical conclusions that are useful for further research and development. The main book that the author uses to explore Kierkegaard's thoughts on the dynamic concept of identity is *The Sickness unto Death*. The tools used to collect literature data in this study were Google Scholar, SINTA, Media Neliti, ResearchGate, and the Internet Archive. Furthermore, the author reviews the literature from several electronic books relevant to the keywords. In analyzing the data, the author compares the results of studies from one literature with other literature, examines the theory, then compares them with selected articles used as references.

Findings and Discussion

Spiritual Counseling

Counseling is an opportunity to deal with current problems. It is also a chance to gain practical knowledge and experience dealing with future issues (Tan, 2022, p. 18). Counseling is both theory and art. Meanwhile, spirituality implies the search for the divine - the openness of the human soul to the Transcendent. Spirituality is the process of human formation, the inner dynamic of each individual. Spirituality is also an innate capacity and tendency of each individual. Spiritual drives move the person to knowledge, love, meaning, peace, hope, transcendence, connectedness, compassion, well-being, and wholeness. Spirituality is a complex and multi-faceted aspect of the human experience, serving as inner belief system (Dewi & Hamzah, 2019).

Spirituality is distinct from religion. Religion is a specified and coded form through which a person can express his spirituality. In simple terms, religion is a chamber to accommodate spirituality. Religion cannot fully articulate spirituality because spirituality is much bigger, more universally applicable, and greater than religion. Religion represents a set of beliefs and rituals institutionalized by groups and individuals concerning the Transcendent. Religion is also an expression of concrete spirituality through a specific cultural orientation. Although spirituality and religion are two different things, a person's spiritual and religious beliefs often express the purpose and meaning of one's life. Both accommodate transcendent feelings and trust/belief in an entity bigger than oneself. The difference is that religion is seen as a social process, while spirituality had considered an internal process.

Thus, spiritual counseling is an approach that guides individuals in recognizing and understanding their potential, reshaping their perspectives to address life's challenges and fostering a connection with God through heightened awareness (Muhtasor & Irawan, 2022). Spiritual Counseling is a comprehensive guide for someone in their faith; a systematic consultation in the sphere of belief and morality aims to guide a person to freedom in making decisions and actualizing goodwill in harmony with the moral law. Of course, this process also introduces the role of the Transcendent as a person who has authority over everything. Help here and now to answer existential questions which arise in certain situations (war, death, illness, suffering, natural disasters). The key advantage of spiritual counseling lies in addressing incorrect and harmful spiritual interpretations for individuals. Spirituality may lead to adverse consequences when patients interpret their situations maladaptively (Sitepu, et al., 2019)

The uniqueness of Spiritual Counseling lies in the involvement of spiritual and religious dimensions in counselee intervention. During times of stress, individuals may exhibit biased

behavior, concentrating on challenges; crucial support helps them recognize positives, fostering a perspective shift, with spirituality dynamically influencing the client's understanding of the problem. Spiritual Counseling offers interventions aimed at activating spiritual potential. In line with this, Spiritual Counseling respects and cares about the counselee's context (ethnicity, culture, religion, tradition) and uses them as insights for handling problems (forming therapeutic relationships and intervention techniques) of counselees.

Many exercises can use to activate these spiritual powers, for example: meditating, practicing breath awareness, and writing down the feelings you experience in a daily journal. These tools will be more effective if the counselor has a particular framework to accompany the counselee because a specific framework will provide direction in spiritual counseling interventions. Therefore, the following section presents Kierkegaard's thoughts on the self-identity dynamics, the concept of despair, and how damaged self-identity could be restored.

Søren Kierkegaard's Concept of Self-Identity Dynamics

Søren Kierkegaard is a thinker concerned with the dynamics of human identity spiritually. His philosophical-theological reflections on the dynamics of self-identity have become a reference for subsequent Western thinkers. Kierkegaard is a philosopher who lived between 1813-1855 in Denmark. He was the first thinker to introduce the term 'existence' commonly used in the 20th century in a school called existentialism. Kierkegaard believed that belief is subjective and very personal (Yogiswari, 2020). Kierkegaard's Existence means always making new choices personally and subjectively (Hardiman, 2019, pp. 240-241). Only a person who becomes an actor for himself exists. An individual may lose direction when separated from their group, feeling empty and inauthentic. Ultimately, when someone loses the group identity, they may feel alienated, even from themselves (Fiqron, 2023). According to Kierkegaard, self-identity is something that exists and possesses a nature of contingency or continuity (Gultom, et al., 2019).

People who feel stuck are those who do not exist. So, in this understanding, to make someone active/existent again, he/she needs to make new choices personally and subjectively; he/she needs to be dialectic with his identity. In this understanding, Kierkegaard underlines the importance of hope, elucidating its crucial role in human agency and the cultivation of practical identity or selfhood (Fremstedal, 2020). Implicitly, Kierkegaard believes that every individual has the power to change and improve. The person who can give hope to that person is him/herself. A spiritual counselor is a person who accompanies/directs self-discovery when someone is unable to stretch their spiritual powers. So, to get to that point, spiritual counselors must have a particular frame of mind.

Many of Kierkegaard's thoughts had developed by other existentialist philosophers, such as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Martin Buber (1878-1965), Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973). Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) later inspired several initiators and important figures in existential therapy, such as Ludwig Binswanger, Medard Boss, Viktor Frankl, Rollo May (Nelson-Jones, 2011, pp. 325-327), James Bugental, and Irvin Yalom (Nelson-Jones, 2011, pp. 323-325). In the following, the concepts of identity, hopelessness, and how self-identity can be restored, according to Kierkegaard's writing entitled *The Sickness unto Death*, will be presented sequentially.

1. The concept of the self and its dynamics

Kierkegaard considered that the human self form by a third factor - distinct from the body and soul - namely the spirit (the power of being). It is this spirit that enables humans to transcend physical-psychological boundaries. Spirit empowers humans to find new ways when facing life impasses. Without it, the body-soul union is passive (it). The relationship between body and soul is a given relationship – which has existed since the beginning of human genesis. However, the relationship between body and soul is not a real relationship. The relationship between body and soul is not yet a self (I). It is still it (dative-state; passive).

At this point, they are negative entities (psychosomatics). With the spirit which connects itself to the true self, humans establish their self (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 13). Being yourself is made possible by the power of the spirit, the human life force.

Kierkegaard has eliminated the 'what' aspect of human existence, formulating a definition of the human spirit solely based on 'how' it exists, with this existence being characterized by a predetermined purpose inherent in the concept of the self as fashioned by God (Jacoby, 2023). In its dynamics, the spirit has three characteristics forming human self-identity: first, the synthesis of two opposite poles, namely between the infinite and the limited, between the mortal and the eternal, and between freedom and necessity. The concept of selfhood involves navigating a balance between the infinite and finite, the temporal and the eternal, and freedom and necessity (Ryan, 2022). Second, internal relations: relations that connect oneself and one's identity. Third, intense dependence on the Transcendent.

The finite and the infinite. Only the spirit enables humans to transcend physical-psychological boundaries. This process of transcendence is not instantaneous. The dynamics of ups and downs are always in dialectics. When one tries to reach for the infinite (dreams, hopes, goals in life), this person must remember to step down and correct the limited (self-capacity). After the finite can accommodate the spark of the infinite, he must seek a 'challenge' from the infinite again to transcend the limited (body-soul) (Perkins, 1987, p. 56). Thus, this dialectic continues; in endless repetition (Kierkegaard, 1983, p. xiii). This dialectic is expressed in back-forth dynamics from the finite to the infinite.

The mortal and the immortal. Man is a synthesis between temporaries and eternity. Humans are mortals, but at the same time transcend time. Humans can weave past, present, and future in a single moment of abstraction. Although humans form by a series of moments separated by their time, humans are creatures whose existence transcends this separation. Existentially, humans are not only creatures guided by basic desires and desires, which aim to achieve temporary satisfaction and often dictate life but creatures who crave a coherent and whole life.

Freedom and necessity. Spirit is the main element that allows the synthesis of body and soul. Kierkegaard's spirit is a human power present in a possibility that empower it to be actualized (to be oneself). In other words, the spirit is the force that shakes "possibility" to become "actual" through freedom. Imagination is the spirit exercises its infinitive function and projects it to the possibility of infinity.

To become a complete self (a self), the human self must continuously incorporate the eternal in its mortality. Humans must constantly limit the infinite without identifying it with a particular form. In short, the true self requires the maintenance of an absolute relationship with the Absolute and a relational connection with the related (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 30).

2. The concept of despair

Kierkegaard interpreted identity as the spirit that directs humans toward freedom and self-determination. Spirit is a self-reflective impulse. This impulse serves to connect himself and his deepest self. Identity becomes real in freedom. The process by which the self becomes a self is the dialectic of the spirit. If human identity is a relationship, then non-being is a relationship error. Kierkegaard calls this relationship error as despair (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 15). Despair by Kierkegaard is the pain of death (*The Sickness unto Death*) (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 18); this is the other side of the dynamics of identity.

Despair is not an inherent state in human nature. Despair is a situation that befalls humans, something that humans suffer passively. It's just one way of being. Despair is human ignorance and unwillingness to be himself (Sugiyono, 2023). For Kierkegaard, hopelessness is a sign of failure to be oneself and neglect to exist. Despair is the result of

man's refusal to realize his nature. Despair is also known as living without awareness and knowledge of one's nature as a human being.

There are three types of despair that Kierkegaard believed in, namely despair of weakness (a person is aware of the spirit but is too weak to break with immediacy and to attach himself to any transcendent references, and thus he does not become a self) and despair of defiance (a person is aware of spirit and hence from itself, but disconnected from any transcendental reference). In each case, the self is not a self because of the disconnection in the relationships that make up the identity. The three kinds of despair are:

- a. Not aware of this problem – man does not know that he is a synthesis between time and eternity. Such a person does not feel his despair. Kierkegaard referred to this situation as despair improperly so-called. Actual in an aesthete and a worshiper of pleasure.
- b. Realizing that he is not only temporal but also eternal. This person, although aware of the eternal aspect of himself, does not want to reveal his whole human essence but only the temporal dimension. Because this attitude rejects a part of himself, Kierkegaard calls it despair at not being willing to be oneself (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 67). An even lower form is despair at not wanting to be a self, and the lowest is despair at wanting to be not yourself because you want to have a new self (Despair at willing to be another than himself, wishing for a new self).
- c. The third attitude is to be aware of the fundamental tension in man as a synthesis between the temporal and the eternal and try to express this tension with his strength. The person who takes this attitude will seek to reveal the immortal dimension on his while separating himself from every relationship with the Power that created him (Kierkegaard, 1980, pp. 71-72). Kierkegaard calls this attitude despair at being willing to be oneself. Humans who are in this situation do not expect help from outside. For Kierkegaard, this action is a denial of the Divine (defiance) by making oneself an experimental god (Kierkegaard, 1980, pp. 73-74). This attempt, however, will fail. This person was hopeless. This despair will only be relieved when people turn to the Divine and allow themselves to be helped by it.

3. Restoration of the self

Although self-identity is lost and experiences despair, Kierkegaard believes that self-identity can be re-established. One's sense of identity doesn't come predetermined; rather, it evolves and becomes comprehensible through life's experiences (Fauziah, 2023). Kierkegaard's belief that humans are dynamic and independent, always in the process of being, made him uncomfortable with the idea that humans cannot move from an impasse. The main requirement for this is the awareness that he is a spirit. He is always in the dialectic between himself and his deepest self.

The condition for rebuilding a fallen self is silence. Silence helps someone optimize his awareness to weigh and reflect on daily life experiences so that he does not live in immediation. For Kierkegaard, the ability to be silent is essential to the journey of being yourself. Silence is the essence of the inner life (Bennett, 2021, p. 90).

Furthermore, the knots of reflection are actualized repetitively. The whole self only be attained through repetition in a steady and continuously renewed choice (Carlisle, 2006, p. 43.). It requires a commitment to continue imagining and actualizing the infinite. In the act of repetition, an individual exists when he tries to achieve total unity by paying attention to the eternal dimension of his life. Repetition can produce a sustainable and stable identity. According to Kierkegaard, repetition is a continual metaphysical process diligently pursued, with its ultimate culmination reaching fulfillment within God (Gultom, et al., 2019). Repetition is different from recollection. Compared to recollection - repetition is directed toward the future. Repetition brings together the past, present, and hereafter of the

individual engaged in practice (Bowen, 2020, p. 5). To be a truly existent person means to involve oneself in a long process of expressing one's self-identity.

According to Kierkegaard, committing, both to humans and to the Divine, is a leap. The basis is that commitment always contains a promise to focus on a particular party in the future, even though the time ahead is possibility and uncertain. No human has control over the future. By committing, humans jump: making the uncertain future sure by focusing on the party receiving the commitment. Trusting oneself wholly in the Divine Reality is a leap of faith (absolute choice) that must be taken by humans who wish to recover after their fall.

As Kierkegaard described, despair is closely related to one's choice stage of life. Despair is a sign for someone that he must do something about himself, including the courage to penetrate a higher realm of existence (Hanson, 2021).

Kierkegaard's Thoughts on Spiritual Counseling

The three points of Kierkegaard's thoughts (concept of self-identity, despair, and restoration of the self) can become a spiritual counselor's framework for dealing with counselee problems. In dealing with counsees, counselors who have a framework that human identity is a continuous dialectical dynamic - that the despair experienced by humans is a situation because the person does not want to be in dialectics with himself, that the damaged self can be restored - has great potential to bring the counselee to wholeness freedom and revive dead spiritual possibilities. Practically, the following things are assistance that spiritual counselors can try to help counsees overcome life's deadlocks.

The counselor helps the counselee so that the spirit (life force) of the counselee is revived. Being yourself is made possible by the spirit, which is the power of human life (Kristiono, 2017, p. 96). On this understanding, the counselor can understand the counselee's situation better: if the counselee experiences a period in his life when he is unable to recognize himself anymore, the spirit that supports the counselee's life spirit is likely in a dim state. The counselor can help him by making the spirit excited again.

From an existential therapy perspective, the role of the counselor is to stimulate the counselee's spirit by building a comfortable-conducive space-time that the counselee feels free to be authentic himself so that the counselee is enabled to make sense of the heavy events in his life, make choices freely and responsibly, grow in awareness and letting go of all self-masks (Tan, 2022, p. 163). Meanwhile, from a personal-centered therapy perspective, the role of the counselor is to stimulate the counselee's spirit through guiding and communicating authenticity, unconditional positive acceptance, and accurate empathic understanding to the counselee (Tan, 2022, p. 195).

The counselor facilitates the counselee to recognize the roots of his life's deadlocks (Werbart, et al., 2022, p. 751). The impasse in life experienced by counsees can be read as hopelessness in Kierkegaard's thoughts. With this understanding, the counselor can help the counselee overcome this impasse by inviting the counselee to examine things that make him choose not to know or choose not to use his spiritual powers in life (choosing not to have hope) (Kierkegaard, 1980, p. 14). If the root of the counselee's problem does not lie in both of them, the counselor can invite the counselee to train the counselee's willingness to give space to Transcendent powers. The counselee can invite to accept helplessness amid all existing problems so that there is room for divine powers to work.

The counselor accompanies the counselee so that he dares to enter the silence, diligently repeats the knots of meaning, and dares to take a leap of faith. Kierkegaard's Restoration of Identity can be read as space-time counseling. In counseling sessions, in addition to building a conducive space-time so that the counselee freely and authentically conveys everything that burdens his life, the counselor should invite the counselee to be comfortable in silence to organize the parts and self-images that are chaotic because of all the problems that arise at one time (Hidayat, 2019). This opportunity to reflect in silence is crucial because only the counselee

understands the best ways to overcome his impasse. After the knots of meaning appear, the counselor can help the counselee organize them, can be following the sequence of time, and can be according to other categories that best suit the counselee's problems. Conversations in subsequent counseling sessions are to repeat these knots so that they have more transformative power for the counselee. The main thing that slowly needs to be added when the counselee feels capable of managing his life is the courage to make a leap of faith. Trusting oneself completely in Divine Reality is a leap of faith (absolute choice) that must be taken by a person who wishes to recover after his fall. In this case, the spiritual counselor can invite the counselee to be sincere and dedicate all his good intentions and efforts to the divine powers of the transcendent (Haṭegān, 2021, p. 156). Kierkegaard's concept of self-identity dynamic, which is used as a framework for spiritual counseling, can help spiritual counselors in Indonesia to handle clients more appropriately according to the client's global meaning, which often goes beyond specific religious beliefs.

Conclusion

Individuals who experience an impasse cannot maintain the continuity of the body-soul-spirit dialectics in their three distinctive characters. The spiritual counselor's job is to revive these stagnant spiritual powers. Instead of answering why there is suffering, Kierkegaard in the sickness unto death offers an answer to how to deal with suffering. Kierkegaard provides a positive approach to individuals who are experiencing life impasses. Instead of seeing despair as a life dead end, Kierkegaard saw it as an opportunity to do something for himself, including the courage to enter a higher realm of existence. This kind of positive frame of mind is in harmony with the virtues of spiritual counselors in accompanying counselees. Instead of only focusing on past things, the counselor – with the dynamics of Søren Kierkegaard's frame of mind – invites counselees to look to the future, rebuild their lives with everything that still exists, and involve the Transcendent as the principal resource beyond suffering. Kierkegaard's concept of self-identity dynamic can be used as a framework for spiritual counseling. It is important to carry out further research in applying this thesis to prove that spiritual counseling is different from spiritual direction or counseling based on religious beliefs.

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