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Religious Beliefs as Coping Strategies: Exploring the Conceptualisation of Hope in Islam

Siti Aisyah binti Mohd Nasir, *Lihanna binti Borhan, Syarifah Zafirah binti Syed Azman, Nur Afiqah binti Fauzi, and Roziana binti Shahril
International Islamic University Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Hopelessness tends to correlate with suicidal behaviours. Beck Hopelessness Scale (BHS) has been claimed to have a good predictive value in predicting suicidality. However, the low rate of suicide in most Muslim nations as compared to non-Muslim nation indicates hopefulness may be a better variable to explain the low rate of suicidality among Muslims. As the BHS lacks this element of hopefulness, especially in integrating the role of religious beliefs as the source of hope to Muslims, the current paper proposes an initiative for BHS to be used in predicting suicidality among Muslims by exploring Quranic verses related to hopefulness. These verses are believed to be the source of strength, comfort and hope for Muslims in facing life difficulties and indirectly predicting the low suicide rate among Muslims.

Keywords: *Hopelessness, Hopefulness, Suicidality, Religious Beliefs, Mental health*

INTRODUCTION

Mental health has been pushed to the forefront during the COVID19 pandemic. The disruption of normal life (social isolation, loss of job etc.) has given rise to higher number of anxiety and depression cases, and more seriously, suicide and attempted suicide cases across the world (World Health Organization, 2022).

Hopelessness was found to correlate with suicidal behaviours. Hopelessness and loneliness were found to be prevalent among Taiwanese adolescents who also reported to engage more frequently with suicide attempts and ideations as compared to Thai and Philippine adolescents who reported less suicide attempts as well as low level of hopelessness (Page et al., 2006). Meanwhile, Hirsch et al. (2012) has demonstrated the role of hopelessness in mediating the depressive symptoms and suicidality across populations including African Americans, Caucasians, Hispanics and Asians in United States and found that the effect is varied in which hopelessness was more prevalent among African Americans. In contrast, both hope and hopelessness were prevalent equally among Caucasians. Both hopelessness and hope were not found to be prevalent among Hispanics and Asians. In explaining this effect, it was believed that the prevalence of hopelessness among African-Americans was due to different interpretations of hope and hopelessness between different races in which African-Americans felt more hopeless as they were deprived of privileges and subject to discrimination. On the other hand, Caucasians have more access to privileges, therefore they were more hopeful. As demonstrated, hopelessness is one of the major risk factors in predicting suicidal intentions and behaviors indicating the importance to further work on conceptualising and measuring hopelessness. One of the most common scales used to measure hopelessness is the Beck Hopelessness Scale (BHS).

While Beck was focused on hopelessness, Synder et al. (1991) explored hope and they defined hope as a cognitive set consisting of the elements of determination to achieve a goal and the perception that there is a pathway to achieve the goal, or the goal is attainable. Both elements of determination and perception are related to one another. Without the presence of one of the elements, a person will not be hopeful. For example, people who have a determination to attain a job, but do not have a qualification needed to get the job, such as do not have a degree in medicine to be a medical officer, will lose hope of attaining the job as it is obviously impossible. Same goes for people who see there is a job, and they have the qualification (the pathway) but they do not have intention to work (absence of determination) are not hopeful as well since there is no goal to be attained.

The association with hopelessness and suicidality has led many mental health professionals to focus on measuring hopelessness. However, the premise that hope and hopelessness are universal and are conceptualised the same across cultures is questioned in this paper. Why is there a cultural pattern to the coping mechanisms related to despair and the risk of suicide? To begin to understand this, and perhaps later to come up with an alternative to measure hope as an active variable and not simply an absence of hopelessness (or vice versa), this paper will explore Islamic beliefs that help Muslims in facing with life adversities and to cope with their suicidality as opposed to BHS that focus on components and expressions of hopelessness. Understanding the specific religious beliefs taught in Islam for Muslims to employ in life and in facing and coping with life adversity is important as by identifying these beliefs, it later can be introduced and taught by psychologists during therapy sessions as a form of coping strategy to cope with life adversity and encounter suicidality.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Role of Religious Belief as a Positive Coping Strategy

Suicide risk among Muslim is mostly low as compared to non-Muslim populations across nations (Lester, 2006). In the same review, it was also found that the rate of suicide among immigrants from Muslim majority countries such as Bangladesh and Pakistan in United Kingdom is lower than the immigrants from non-Muslim countries. Ineichen (1998) has attributed the low level of suicide rate among Muslim to the religious attitudes and perceptions regarding suicide. Certain religious belief such as the belief in the concept of reincarnation and rebirth in Hindu contributes to the high rate of suicide among the followers.

Mitchell et al. (2020) defined religiosity as a belief in a higher power such as God as a source of guidance and comfort in one's life. Furthermore, religious belief provides religious individuals with cognitive framework in interpreting negative events (Murphy et al., 2000). This belief has been demonstrated to provide comfort and help people to survive life challenges as demonstrated by Becker et al. (2006) who examined the influence of religious belief in coping with the side effects of therapy among cancer patients in Germany. It was found that patients who answered 'yes' to the question "*Have you got a belief giving you comfort*" and were classified as a believer coped better with the side effects of therapy such as they reported fewer side effects of the therapy, generally appeared to be happier and they overcame their addictions to alcohol and tobacco better than the non-believers; indicating the role of religious belief in helping patients to cope with life adversities.

In addition, religious beliefs and practices such as praying were also found to be prevalent and effective in helping psychiatric patients to cope with severity of symptoms of mental illnesses including depression, anxiety, paranoid ideation and psychoticism (Tepper et al., 2001). The study indicated that 80 percent of patients with severe mental illnesses reported to practice some types of religious practices including praying, attending religious services, meditation, reading scriptures and worshipping God and to have certain religious beliefs. Employing religious belief and practices was effective in coping with severity of symptoms of mental illnesses as those who engaged more with religious practices were hospitalised less, showed less severe symptoms of obsessive compulsiveness, interpersonal sensitivity, phobic anxiety, paranoid ideation, psychoticism, lower levels of depression, hostility, frustration and better overall functioning as compared to those patients who reported lesser engagement with religious practices.

Murphy et al. (2000) has also demonstrated the role of religious belief and practices among individuals with clinical depression. It was found that individuals who scored higher in Religious Well Being (RWB) scale were less depressed and showed lower levels of hopelessness as opposed to those who scored lower. The same result was also found among cancer patients in Turkey and Greek in which those who were more religious and scored higher in the religious scale showed lower levels of hopelessness, less depressive symptoms and better wellbeing (Budak et al. 2020; Kaliaspos & Roussi, 2015). Religiosity also played a role among black communities (Mitchell et al., 2020). In the research, it was reported that middle aged and older blacks reported facing discrimination which resulting in higher levels of hopelessness. However, the presence of social support from family and friends and higher levels of religiosity were demonstrated to mitigate the negative effects of being discriminated against.

Beck Hopelessness Scale (BHS)

Beck came out with the scale to address the need to measure negative perceptions (Beck et al., 1974). Hopelessness was defined as a negative perception regarding one's future. The scale consists of 20 items representing three components of hopelessness including affective, motivational, and cognitive. The affective component represents the feelings of the future consisting of 5 items in total. The component consists of affective expressions such as hope, success, happiness, faith and good times. For example, "*I look forward to the future with hope and enthusiasm*". Meanwhile, the second component represents loss of motivation. For example, "*I might as well give up because there is nothing I can do about making things better about myself*". Lastly, the last component represents expectations regarding the future such as "*I can't imagine what my life would be like in ten years*".

Many of the previous cross-cultural studies only focused on testing the psychometric properties of BHS. For example, Forintos et al. (2010) has examined the validity and reliability of the test by assessing two clinical samples, a group of depressed patients with no suicide attempts and a group of depressed patients with suicide attempts and comparing the result to non-clinical samples in Hungary. The result indicated the scale as valid and reliable to predict future suicide attempts in Hungary. The scale was also found to be a valid screening tool among Nigeria schizophrenia outpatients and among rural Chinese suicide attempters (Aloba et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2015). Most of the analysis has shown a good validity and reliability of the scale across samples. However, by overemphasising on testing the psychometric properties of the scale, researchers have neglected a more important task which is to better understand the concept of hopelessness according to culture in predicting suicide especially among Muslim in which suicide risk is mostly low as compared to non-Muslim populations across nations

(Lester, 2006). The fact that many studies have indicated hopelessness to be a better predictor of suicide risk as compared to depression shows the importance to further define and conceptualise hopelessness within cultural bound understanding.

Religiosity of Islamic Scale (RoIS)

As the importance of studying and measuring the role of religious beliefs in relation to mental health is evident, Jana-Masri and Priester (2007) developed a scale known as Religiosity of Islamic Scale (RoIS). The scale consists of 19 items and divided into two subscales, the Islamic beliefs and the Islamic behavioral practices. However, the RoIS still has weaknesses such as the items are too general in which it only focuses on general Islamic beliefs and teachings such as the beliefs in Islam as the final religion, the existence of *jinn*, Quran as the final word of Allah, the creation of angels, and the obligation of pilgrimage which is reasonable as the objective of developing the scale is to measure religiosity only. This raises a need to develop a new Islamic scale that can be used to measure the specific Islamic beliefs that help Muslim to cope with life adversity and can be integrated as a part of treatment in correcting the way depressed Muslim clients perceive and approach life.

METHODOLOGY

In order to conceptualise hope in Islamic religious beliefs, a preliminary textual analysis of Quranic texts is carried out. However, instead of exclusively looking at a specific term i.e., “amal” (أمل) or “raja-a” (رجاء), a more pragmatic and holistic approach is done. Since the premise is that the religious beliefs as held by the person is key to one’s coping strategies, several terms commonly used are selected and then a basic search was carried out to identify potential sources of Quranic texts pertaining to the terms. Other works are then also used to the attempt to conceptualize hope. Since this is an exploratory study to affirm the need to provide an alternative approach to understand mitigating factors of suicidality, the search is not exhaustive.

The terms used are “tawakkal,” (توكل) “sabr” (صبر) and “hazan” (حزن).

CONCEPTUALISATION OF HOPE IN ISLAM: RELIGIOUS BELIEFS AS COPING STRATEGIES

As stated by Murphy et al. (2000), religiosity serves as a cognitive framework for religious individuals to give meaning to life events and as it is evident that having religious beliefs is used as a coping strategy to cope with life adversities, help individuals especially patients with mental illnesses to cope with symptoms, therefore, understanding and exploring the specific religious beliefs may help to predict suicidality.

Al-Qarni (2005) in his book titled ‘*Don’t Be Sad*’ has listed the Islamic religious beliefs that provide Muslim the cognitive framework and interpretations regarding life events. For example, in surah ash-Sharh, verse 6, Allah has promised that “*Verily, with every hardship, there is relief*” (p.41). The verse conveyed the belief that with every hardship, there will be ease. Based on this verse, Muslim believed that pains and sufferings will not last and are only temporary and will be replaced with joy and good tidings if they are patient and believe in Allah. “...whose word is truer than Allah’s?” (4:122). Allah also mentioned in the Quran, “*And it may be that you dislike a thing that is good for you, and it may be that you like a thing even*

though it is bad for you. Allah knows and you know not” (2:216) (p.43). Based on this verse, Muslims do not view hardships and struggles as literally harmful as they interpret every hardship as a blessing in disguise. The verse also taught about *‘tawakal’*, which is to surrender oneself completely to God as Allah mentioned *“Allah knows and you know not”*. In Islam, life trials are also regarded as an expiation from sins as mentioned by the Prophet (pbuh) *“Whatever befalls the believer in terms of anxiety, hardship or grief, Allah will make it an atonement for (some of) his sins”* (Sahih Bukhari) (p.69).

Furthermore, Mitchell et al. (2020) claimed that religious belief provides the source of comfort. Hence, the thought that Allah is *near* helps Muslim to cope with hardships, *“And when My servants ask you, [O Muhammad] concerning Me, indeed I am near”* (2:186). He also mentioned in surah at-Taubah, verse 40, *“Do not be sad, indeed Allah is with us”* (p.67) as well as in surah al-Imran and al-Furqan, *“Allah (alone) is sufficient for us, and He is the best Disposer of affairs (for us)”* (3:173) (p.56) and *“But sufficient is your Lord as a Guide and Helper”* (25:13) (p.58). Al-Qarni explained the characteristics of relying, surrendering and trusting Allah with one’s affairs as important characteristics of a good Muslim. These characteristics indicate a good level of faith and the right understanding of the essence of religion. He added, those with these traits will not be worried about the future and will reach contentment by surrendering to God of one’s affairs just like all the prophets who were tested but, in the end, they were helped due to their certainty in Allah as the best helper as Allah has commanded *“And put your trust in Allah if you are believers indeed”* (5:23) (p.57). In another verse, Allah mentioned *“So (for me) patience is most fitting. And it is Allah (Alone) Whose help can be sought against that which you assert”* (12:18) indicating again the belief that He is the source of help (p.126).

In addition, Allah has also encouraged Muslim to make invocation as He will always respond to them indicating that He is responsive and always there for every servant *“...invoke Me (and ask me for anything), I will respond to your invocation”* (40:60) (p.45). In surah an-Naml, verse 62, Allah again stated that He always responds to His servants *“Who responds to the distressed one, when he calls Him and Who removes his affliction?”* (p.44). Allah has also affirmed that He is closer to us more than our own veins as He mentioned in surah Qaf, verse 16 *“And We have already created man and know what his soul whispers to him, and We are closer to him than his jugular veins”*. These verses provide the understanding and serve as an affirmation that Muslim are not going through hardships on their own, God is near, and their hardships are not in vain. These verses provide affirmation that God is always with those who are patients help Muslim to keep going on with life and to cope with every life adversity. He also affirmed that He is with those who are patient *“O you who believe, seek help through patience and prayer. Indeed, Allah is with the patient”* (2:153).

As Allah has stated in surah al-Baqarah, verse 153, for Muslim to seek help by staying patient and through salah. This verse introduced Muslim to perceive salah as a source of strength. Al-Qarni described by performing prayer, a Muslim will find comfort and relief. Maybe due to this perception regarding the role and effect of prayer to provide comfort to an individual’s soul, it was evident that many people who were depressed were found to score higher in religious practices such as prayer (Murphy et al. 2000). Murphy et al. (2000) who found that depressed people as more religious explained that it could be due to the religious people regarded religion as a positive coping mechanism to cope with negative life events, a source of comfort such as the understanding and belief that God is the One Who will solve one’s problems that increases their religious seeking help behaviors such as performing prayer. As explained by al-Qarni, prayer provides comfort to the soul. Prophet (pbuh) said to Bilal *“O’*

Bilal! Give us comfort and call for the prayer". The prophet has associated prayer with comfort to the soul.

Staying patient is an important characteristic of being a Muslim. Allah has promised those who stay patient will be rewarded for their patience. This is a concept known as compensation in which everything that was removed will always be replaced with something better as He mentioned *"And We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth, lives, and fruits, but give good tidings to the patient. Who, when disaster strikes them, says, "Indeed we belong to Allah, and indeed to Him we will return. Those who are the ones upon whom are blessings from their Lord and mercy. And it is those who are the rightly guided"* (2: 155-157) (p.47). In another verse, Allah stated *"Only those who are patient shall receive their rewards in full, without reckoning"* (39:10) (p.129) indicating that Allah will complete one's rewards for their persistence. Those who persevere with their patience in facing life trials will be compensated with paradise as Allah said *"Peace be upon you for what you patiently endured. And excellent is the final home"* (13:24) (p.47). The Prophet (pbuh) mentioned *"Whoever loses a loved one from the people of this world and then seeks his recompense with his Lord, will be compensated with Paradise"* (p.46). The belief that their pains will not be in vain is what help Muslim to keep going on with life difficulties.

In addition, Muslim also regarded worldly life as a place to be tested as Allah mentioned, *"Or you think that you will enter Paradise without such trials as came to those who passed away before you? They were afflicted with severe poverty, ailments and were shaken"* (2:214) (p. 55). Besides, in Islam the trait of hopelessness is described as a trait associated with disbelievers as Allah mentioned *"And never give up hope of Allah's Mercy. Certainly no one despairs of Allah's Mercy, except the people who disbelieve"* (12:87). He also mentioned in another verse *"And who despairs of the Mercy of his Lord except those who are astray"* (15:56) (p.138). Most of the verses in the Quran has associated and advised Muslim to face life trials with patience. In contrast, in the Quran, the trait of giving up and despair are associated with disbelievers.

These Islamic beliefs and teachings are believed to mediate the feeling of hopelessness. These verses provide hope to mitigate suicidality for the Muslim. As of this, we believed that there is a need to establish a scale measuring hopefulness. The Beck Hopelessness Scale (BHS) is not adequate to explain the low suicide trend among Muslim as it ignores the hope aspect, and we posit that this hope may be manifested and conceptualised differently in different belief system. Hence, the development of an alternative scale measuring both hope and hopelessness that considers religiosity, or perhaps spirituality, should be explored to have a better indicator of possible suicidal intents for those who have been raised within the belief system, in this case, the Islamic belief system.

CONCLUSION

The paper has attempted to understand the Islamic beliefs that are thought to explain the low rate of suicide among Muslim. Beliefs such as the belief that a hardship is a blessing in disguise, the belief that Allah is the source of Help and Comfort as He is affirming that He is near in the Quranic verses, the belief in the concept of compensation, and the belief that the worldly life a place of trials are what helping Muslim to face life difficulties. Thus, there is a need to develop a scale based on these beliefs to better capture the role of the beliefs in mediating the effect of life stressors on the tendency of suicidality among Muslim.

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