Reliance on God as a core construct of Islamic psychology

Bagher Ghobari Bonab*, Ali Akbar Haddadi Koohsar

*University of Tehran, Faculty of Psychology & Education, Ale Ahmad Ave, Tehran, P.O.Box.14155-6456, Iran
bUniversity of Tehran, Faculty of Psychology & Education, Ale Ahmad Ave, Tehran, P.O.Box.14155-6456, Iran

Abstract

“Reliance on God” is one of the spiritual virtues and a major stage in the ascension toward God’s proximity. Its practice is highly recommended for believers (Kor.26:217). Prophet Mohammad is told: “Put your trust in God, He suffices as a guardian” (33:3). Allah also mentions that true believers put their trust in their Lord (Kor. 8:2). God calls Himself dependable, trustworthy, and manifests Himself throughout the Koran accordingly. Stories from the Koran demonstrate that God was sufficient for Prophets and believers who put their trust in Him, and relied on His support. Empirical studies demonstrated the significance of reliance on God as a coping strategy in the reduction of anxiety, depression, and restitution of hope (Bolhari et al., 2000; Ghobari et al., 2004). In the current paper, the process of developing a conceptual model to define and delineate reliance on God is illustrated; procedures for the operationalization of this construct by utilization of semi structure interviews, and a Likert type scale are reviewed. Moreover, the results of some findings in regard to the relationship of mental health status of college students with degrees of their reliance on God are explored. Finally, the significance of reliance on God for spiritual maturation and psychological wellbeing is explored.

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1. Introduction

Reliance on God is considered one of the major Islamic virtues. It is also one of the stages in spiritual development and one of the steps for those who are certain in their conviction. Indeed it is the highest rank for individuals who seek proximity of God. Major books on Islamic virtues (e.g., Al-Ghazzali, 1972) have devoted a chapter to this concept. Reliance on God has been considered an important stage of spiritual advancement in Islamic spirituality (Sabzavari Khurasani, 2008). Ibn al-Arabi (1972) considers it a preparatory stage to be ready for spiritual journey. For this reason when he describes Prophet Mohammad’s nocturnal journey, he talks about reliance on God, and its impact for the preparation for this journey. Reliance on God also is one of the widely used coping strategies among Muslims in distressful situations. There are various religious and spiritual coping strategies that Muslim people use in times of distress. One of these coping strategies is “reliance on God” (Tawakkul) which is recommended in Koran and tradition.

Reliance on God has cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and relational components. In a cognitive conception, individuals perceive God as the first order cause of everyday events. Nothing can take place without permission.
from divine being. In the *emotional* level, individuals attain readiness and inclination to put their trust in God, and find Him sufficient to take care of them. Its *behavioral component* which is easily observable means carrying out individuals’ plan through permissible and lawful means of action. In a *relational* level seeking God’s proximity and believing in His availability and support are considered crucial. In the following sections reliance on God has been treated as a spiritual virtue as considered in Koranic verses and stories. It also has been considered as a psychological construct in determining individuals’ wellbeing.

### 1.1. Reliance on God as an Islamic Virtue

Reliance on God is considered one of the critical stages in spiritual development of individuals (Qushayri, 1966). When individuals move toward this stage they develop a cognitive schema that prepares them to witness Allah (God) everywhere, and in everything (Morris, 2005). They go beyond multiplicity of objects and causes, and observe the unity of the intellectual force that governs all events in the world. This psycho-spiritual state of mind motivates individuals to stay connected with this intellectual powerful force and brings them a numinous feeling. This kind of oceanic felling has been captured by some mystics in Islam (e.g., Rumi, 2004). Individuals who reach this state of psycho-spiritual reality become more resilient to daily hassles and ongoing ordinary life stressors. They become more centered, more deeply connected with themselves others, nature, and divine being. Their behaviors become consistent with their cognitive schema and psycho-spiritual state. They are not conditioned by environmental restraints, socio-political conditions of the society, but controlled from the inside by their orienting belief system (Al-Ghazzali, 2001). In addition, *reliance on God* brings the intimate relation with divine to individuals’ lives. It originates from individuals’ belief on divine unity. It fosters becoming more intimate with divine. This is the reason Islamic spirituality revolves around the development of *reliance on God* in believers’ daily life. Verses from the Koranic, stories of prophets and believers as illustrated in Koran all indicate the importance of reliance on God as a spiritual virtue.

Koranic verses reveal that true believers have confidence in Allah as the ultimate available resource in times of need. Allah, the most high says: “So put your trust in God [and rely on Him] alone if you are indeed believers” (Kor.5:23). This indicates the centrality of reliance on God on individuals’ spirituality in Islam. In another verse Allah assures that individuals will get the needed help from divine when they rely on God, and trust in Him. “For individuals who rely on God, God will prove all sufficient” (Kor.65:3). Allah also loves individuals who rely on Him (Kor.3:159) and is surprised by individuals who have some reservation on trusting Allah and says: “Is not Allah (God) sufficient for his servants?” (Kor.39:36)? Prophet Mohammad said to his companions: “If you were able to rely on God as true reliance on Him requires, He would provide you as He provides birds that leave their nests hungry in the morning and return full in the evening” (Al-Ghazzali, 2001).

### 1.2. Reliance on God as a Psychological Construct

In practice, Muslim people use reliance on God as a coping strategy in challenging situations. Our survey (Ghobary et al., 2005) showed that university students used reliance on God in varieties of challenging situations including social, economic, health, and unexpected natural disasters. For example, in situations like marital discord they believed that they have to use all available means (e.g., marital counseling) to solve the problem, but the final solution will rest on God’s will. This indicates a belief on the hidden means of the problem solutions in addition to the mean we are consciously aware of, and we will get an access to them by collaboratively working with God on the issue concerning us. The implication of this spiritual view is also to consider an active relation between divine and individuals in their daily life.

### 1.3. Using Spiritual Coping in Distressful Situations

Recently, various spiritual strategies have been addressed in the literature that individuals utilize when they encounter with situations that are hard to manage. Studies have found that individuals use spirituality in coping with a wide variety of events and adversities such as *raising a handicapped child* (Barsch, 1968; Friedrich, Cohen, & Wilturner, 1988), *cancer* (Gibbs, & Achterberg-Lawlis, 1978; Yates et al., 1981), *widowhood* (Harvey, Barnes, & Greenwood, 1987; Siegel & Kuykendall, 1990), and *daily hassles* (Belavich, 1995, Hathaway, 1992). Neighbors and colleagues (1982) reported that African American elders use prayers most frequently in times of stress to cope with stressful situation. According to Koenig and his associates (1992) 20% of older people (over 65) reported religious coping, the most important strategy to handle stresses of illness. Macare (1984) reported using coping
among community members experiencing loss during their lifetime. The US National Polling Organization conducted a survey that showed increase in church attendance of people in US from 6% to 24% following a week from the air attack on September 11, 2001 (Walsh, 2002). Spiritual coping methods have been found to be a better predictor for the maintenance of individuals’ health than their traditionally used religious variables (i.e. denomination, frequency of attendance of services; Pargament et al., 1990). In this paper reliance on God has been considered as an active coping strategy in Islamic psychology.

1.4. Spiritual attachment and reliance on God

Reliance on God has been used as a coping strategy by prophets and believers in stressful situations (e.g., Kor.4:81; 5:12; 10:71; 11:87-88; 14:11-12). The relationship between reliance on God and individuals’ secure attachment to Him has been established in Islamic theology. For example, in chapter 67 of Koran, God says: “God is most gracious and merciful: we believers find security in Him and rely on Him” (Kor.67:29). In addition to the revelation there is a conceptual and empirical basis (e.g., Belavich & Pargament, 2002) to relate reliance on God to spiritual attachment. Since individuals who rely on God in distressful situations have a solid perception of His availability, Omnipotence, Omnipresence, and accessibility, they also believe on God’s responsiveness in times of crisis and need. Therefore, a set of assumptions about God’s attributes, and nature of His relation with His servants are prerequisite to make individuals ready to rely on Him. These sets of belief system are previously explained and attributed to the attachment figures (e.g., Bowlby, 1969/1982; Ainsworth et al., 1978; Kirkpatrick, 1999, 2005). Therefore, theoretically it is plausible to make a connection between reliance on God and attachment to Him.

Reliance on God is an active coping strategy similar to the collaborative coping style introduced by Pargament (1997). Some studies (e.g., Belavich & Pargament, 2002) reported that there was a significant positive correlation between individuals’ choice of coping strategies and their quality of attachment. Individuals with a secure attachment style are more inclined to choose collaborative approach while individuals with an anxious and avoidant attachment choose self-directive approach. Since reliance on God and collaborative coping strategy are similar to each other in some respects, it is logical to hypothesize that possibly significant relation exists between reliance on God and spiritual attachment. In fact, one of the studies verified this significant relation (Ghobary, 2008). Connecting reliance on God to the theory of attachment provides us a better understanding of reliance on God as a psychological construct.

1.5. Operationalizing the construct

As mentioned in the previous section, reliance on God was conceptualized by the current author as a psychological construct. After reviewing major Islamic texts in addition to Koranic verses, three important dimensions of reliance on God were identified: a) cognitive dimension - attribution of occurrences to the divine will. Nothing can take place without divine permission; b) emotional dimension, with an assurance to God’s mercifulness, availability, and willingness to help individuals feel secure, tranquil, and expect a desired outcome even in seemingly uncontrollable situations; c) and behavioral dimension - selecting the most efficient available, and lawful action which is available to reach a desired outcome. Content analysis of our semi-structural interviews with individuals coming from various demographic backgrounds also showed these three dimensions. Therefore, we based our preliminary conceptualization of reliance on God on these three dimensions.

Investigators surveyed sample of situations that college students reported challenging and disturbing situations that may elicit individuals’ calls for divine intercessions. The fifty situations were identified in a way that most of them were threatening. Later on these situations were reduced to 10 representative situations. Scenarios were developed about these 10 situations and presented to students to elicit their responses in an interview format.

Our aim was to construct a scale in a Likert scale. We used information from the literature review and interviews to write the scenarios. The final format of the scale was designed in 10 hypothetical scenarios (situations) each eliciting response to various degrees from the respondents in: a) attribution of the occurrences to a divine decree, self-initiated actions, collaborative endeavor of divine with self (reliance on God), significant others, and natural law; b) behavioral dimension (coping modality) putting the responsibility of managing situations to one of the previously mentioned agencies; c) and the most probable emotional state in each encounter. Therefore, for each situation (scenario) we designed 13 probable responses (5 for attribution domain, 5 for behavioral domain, and 3 for emotional domain). Each respondent would choose combinations of 13 choices for each situation with various degrees (i.e., from one to five) based on their readiness to respond, and attitudinal dispositions. Therefore, the scale
1.6. Reliance on god, mental health and wellbeing

Studies show that seeking spiritual comfort and God’s guidance in decision making is tied to a greater wellbeing (Mercer, Lorden, and Falkenberg, 1995). Moreover, spiritually based coping is related to more positive affect (Pargament et al., 1995) and better mental status (Pargament et al., 1995). Since reliance on God is one of the spiritual coping strategies in Islamic spirituality, we expect to find a significant relation between individuals’ degree of reliance on God and their mental health. Some studies carried out in this area advocate this hypothesized relation. In one of the studies relationship between reliance on God, anxiety, patience, and a degree of hopefulness in university students was studied (Ghobari, 2004). Results indicated that there was a significant negative relation between reliance on God and anxiety (P < 0.05). Also significant positive relations were found between reliance on God and hopefulness (P < 0.05), as well as reliance on God and patience (P < 0.05).

In another study relationship between reliance on God and mental health status of college students (as measured by SCL90-R) were studied (Ghobari & Sadri, 2006). This study revealed that depression in college students was negatively associated with students’ reliance on God. Moreover, this study revealed that except on psychoticism subscale, all other subscales were negatively associated with emotional domain of reliance on God in college students. In addition to mental health studies, positive correlation was reported between reliance on God and self-esteem (Ghobary, 2004). In this study, seminary college students who were higher in reliance on God reported to have higher self-esteem. In a more recent study examining the relation between reliance on God and quality of attachment to God in college students, positive relation was found between reliance on God and secure attachment. Moreover, analysis of data indicated a negative association between anxious and avoidance attachment to God and reliance on God (Ghobary, 2008). These studies indicate the importance of studying reliance on God in Muslim communities. In the future studies, the nature of relation between reliance on God and psychological constructs should be studied more in depth to further discover direct and mediating effects of reliance on God on psychological constructs especially in the area of wellbeing.

2. Discussion

Reliance on God is a spiritual virtue according to Koran and Prophet Mohammad’s tradition. It is a multidimensional construct as illustrated by Islamic scholars (Al-Ghazzali, 2001). From centuries ago Muslims have used reliance on God as a coping strategy to deal with challenging events of life (Al-Ghazzali, 2001). However, in the light of new psychological paradigms such as attachment to God, religious attribution, religious coping, and reliance on God can be studied in the context of psychological paradigms. Current review was an attempt to bring this concept from Islamic theology to the field of psychology. In addition to emphasizing spiritual and theological connotation of this concept, current author tried to show its relation to psychological paradigms like attachment to God, and spiritual coping strategies that is developed by Pargament (1997). A procedure to operationalize the construct to measure it empirically was discussed in this paper, and connection between reliance on God and some other psychological constructs were discussed briefly. Future challenges will focus primarily on exploring the development of reliance on God in children, adolescents, and young adults.

References


