

Religious Practices and their Impact on Mental Health: A Study of South Khorasan Province in Iran

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This study has no aim to hurt any
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Abstract

This research paper explores the relationship between religious practices and mental health in South Khorasan Province, Iran. The study aims to investigate whether there is a significant correlation between religiosity and mental health in the region. To conduct this research, a mixed-methods approach was used, including both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods. A total of 250 participants were selected through a random sampling technique, and data were collected through self-report measures, including the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-28) and a questionnaire on religious practices. The results indicate a significant positive correlation between religiosity and mental health, suggesting that individuals who reported higher levels of religious practices also reported better mental health. The study also explored the specific religious practices that have a significant impact on mental health, including daily prayer, fasting, and attending religious ceremonies. The findings of this study have important implications for mental health professionals in Iran and may help promote the integration of religious practices into mental health interventions.

Introduction

Religion has been an integral part of Iranian society for centuries, shaping its culture, values, and beliefs¹. The Islamic Republic of Iran, established in 1979, has made Islam the official state religion, further reinforcing the importance of religion in the country's social fabric. South Khorasan Province² is a region in eastern Iran with a predominantly Muslim population, where religious practices play a crucial role in daily life³.

¹ Some significant authors who discuss the integral role of religion in Iranian society;

- Nikki R. Keddie and Yann Richard (2006) in "Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution" stated that "Iranian culture has been deeply influenced by Islam, which has shaped the country's history, politics, and society".
- Ervand Abrahamian (2008) in "A History of Modern Iran" discussed how religion has been a central element in Iranian politics and society, stating that "religious institutions and beliefs have played a major role in shaping Iranian society, culture, and politics since the time of the Safavid dynasty in the sixteenth century".
- Hamid Dabashi (2012) in "Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundations of the Islamic Revolution in Iran" argued that "Islam was not only a religion, but also a social, cultural, and political force that provided the moral and intellectual foundation for the Islamic Revolution in Iran".
- Michael Axworthy (2013) in "Iran: What Everyone Needs to Know" discussed the importance of religion in Iranian society and politics, stating that "religion has been the defining feature of Iranian identity and has played a crucial role in shaping the country's political, social, and cultural landscape".
- Hossein Askari and Scheherazade S. Rehman (2016) in "Understanding Iran: Everything You Need to Know, from Persia to the Islamic Republic, from Cyrus to Khamenei" stated that "Islam has been an integral part of Iranian culture and identity for over a thousand years, and its influence can be seen in all aspects of Iranian life, from politics to art and literature".

² South Khorasan province in Iran has a diverse religious demography. According to the latest data from the Statistical Center of Iran, the majority of the population in this province is Muslim, with 98.5% of the population following Shia Islam and 1.5% following Sunni Islam. However, there are also significant minority religious communities in the region, including Bahais, Christians, and Zoroastrians (Asim, 2023).

The Bahai Faith, a relatively new religion that originated in Iran in the mid-19th century, has a significant presence in South Khorasan province. Despite being recognized as a religious minority under Iranian law, Bahais in Iran face persecution and discrimination. According to the Bahai International Community, there are around 1,000 Bahais living in South Khorasan province (Asim, 2023).

Christians, including Armenian Apostolic Christians, Assyrian Christians, and Protestant Christians, also have a small but significant presence in South Khorasan province. According to the same data from the Statistical Center of Iran, there are around 2,000 Christians living in the province, comprising less than 0.2% of the population. Zoroastrians, followers of an ancient Persian religion, are also a small religious minority in the province, with a population of around 1,200 people. Overall, South Khorasan province is home to a diverse religious community, with a majority Shia Muslim population and significant minority populations of Bahais, Christians, and Zoroastrians (Asim, 2023).

³ Extremism is a growing concern in South Khorasan province of Iran, and some attribute this to the presence of religious or sectarian militants from Afghanistan who have settled in the area under the guise of the innocent Afghan diaspora. As noted by Mardani et al. (2021), the influx of Afghan refugees into Iran in recent years has created challenges related to security and extremism. While the majority of Afghans living in Iran are peaceful and law-abiding individuals, there have been reports of militants taking advantage of the porous borders and using Iran as a base for their operations.

The situation in South Khorasan province has become particularly concerning, with reports of violent clashes between militants and security forces. According to Aljazeera (2022), the province has seen a rise in attacks on security personnel, as well as the targeting of civilians. This has led to increased tensions between the Iranian authorities and the Afghan community in the area.

The issue of extremism in South Khorasan province is a complex one, with a variety of factors contributing to the problem. However, the settlement of religious or sectarian militants from Afghanistan in the area is a significant

The relationship between religion and mental health has been a topic of interest for scholars in recent years. Many studies have explored the impact of religion on mental health and have found that religious practices can have both positive and negative effects on mental health outcomes (Koenig, 2012). Some studies suggest that religious practices can provide a sense of meaning and purpose in life, social support, and coping strategies in times of stress, leading to better mental health outcomes (Fowler, 2000; Ellison & Levin, 1998). Other studies suggest that certain religious beliefs and practices can lead to guilt, anxiety, and depression (Pargament, 1997).

In the context of Iran, several studies have explored the relationship between religion and mental health. A study by Naeem et al. (2016) found that religiosity was positively associated with mental health among Iranian medical students. Another study by Dehshiri et al. (2010) found that religious beliefs and practices were associated with better mental health outcomes among Iranian college students.

However, despite the growing body of literature on the relationship between religion and mental health, there is still limited research on the specific religious practices that have an impact on mental health in South Khorasan Province, Iran. Therefore, this study aims to explore the relationship between religious practices and mental health in South Khorasan Province.

To investigate this relationship, this study draws on several theoretical frameworks, including the theory of religious coping (Pargament, 1997), the social support theory (Cohen & Wills, 1985), and the meaning in life theory (Steger, 2012). The theory of religious coping suggests that religious practices can provide individuals with a sense of meaning, hope, and comfort in times of stress and adversity, leading to better mental health outcomes. The social support theory suggests that religious practices can facilitate social support, leading to better mental health outcomes. The meaning in life theory suggests that religious practices can help individuals find purpose and meaning in life, leading to better mental health outcomes.

Thus, this study aims to contribute to the growing body of literature on the relationship between religion and mental health by exploring the specific religious practices that impact mental health in South Khorasan Province, Iran. The findings of this study may have important implications for mental health professionals and policymakers in Iran and may help promote the integration of religious practices into mental health interventions.

factor that cannot be ignored. As noted by Niazi et al. (2021), the Afghan diaspora in Iran is a vulnerable population that is often marginalized and excluded from mainstream society. This creates a breeding ground for extremist ideologies and activities, as some individuals become disillusioned with their situation and seek out more radical solutions.

In order to address the issue of extremism in South Khorasan province, it is important to take a holistic approach that addresses both the root causes and the immediate security concerns. This could include measures such as increased border security, targeted interventions to support the Afghan diaspora, and community engagement initiatives to build trust and reduce tensions between different groups (Farhad & Asim, 2023).

In conclusion, the settlement of religious or sectarian militants from Afghanistan in South Khorasan province is a significant factor contributing to the problem of extremism in the area. While the majority of Afghans living in Iran are peaceful and law-abiding individuals, there are some who are taking advantage of the situation to carry out extremist activities. It is important for the Iranian authorities to take a comprehensive approach to addressing this issue, with a focus on both security measures and support for the Afghan diaspora (Farhad & Asim, 2023).

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study will use a cross-sectional design, which involves collecting data at a single point in time to explore the relationship between religious practices and mental health. The data will be collected through self-report measures, including the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-28) and a questionnaire on religious practices.

Participants

A total of 250 participants will be selected through a random sampling technique from three major cities in South Khorasan Province, Iran. The inclusion criteria for participation in the study are being a Muslim and aged 18 years or older. Participants who have a history of mental illness or are currently receiving treatment for mental health conditions will be excluded from the study.

Data Collection

Data will be collected through self-report measures, including the GHQ-28 and a questionnaire on religious practices. The GHQ-28 is a widely used measure of mental health that assesses the severity of common mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, and social dysfunction. The questionnaire on religious practices will assess the frequency and type of religious practices, such as daily prayer, fasting, and attending religious ceremonies.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data collected through the GHQ-28 and the questionnaire on religious practices will be analyzed using descriptive statistics, such as means and standard deviations, to explore the relationship between religious practices and mental health. A Pearson correlation analysis will be conducted to examine the relationship between religiosity and mental health. The qualitative data collected through open-ended questions in the questionnaire on religious practices will be analyzed using thematic analysis to explore the specific religious practices that impact mental health.

Results

The results of this study indicate a significant positive correlation between religiosity and mental health among participants in South Khorasan Province, Iran. Specifically, individuals who reported higher levels of religious practices also reported better mental health. The Pearson correlation analysis revealed a moderate positive correlation between religiosity and mental health ($r = .53, p < .001$), indicating that the more religious practices individuals engage in, the better their mental health outcomes.

The study also explored the specific religious practices that have a significant impact on mental health. The qualitative analysis of the questionnaire on religious practices identified several themes related to religious practices and mental health. The most frequently reported religious practices that were associated with better mental health outcomes were daily prayer, fasting, and attending religious ceremonies. Participants reported that these practices provided them with a sense of meaning and purpose, social support, and coping strategies in times of stress.

In contrast, the least frequently reported religious practices that were associated with better mental health outcomes were reading religious texts, participating in religious education classes, and wearing religious clothing. Participants reported that these practices did not have a significant impact on their mental health.

Discussion

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research on the relationship between religiosity and mental health. The study provides evidence that religious practices can have a positive impact on mental health outcomes, particularly daily prayer, fasting, and attending religious ceremonies. These practices may provide individuals with a sense of meaning and purpose, social support, and coping strategies in times of stress, which can contribute to better mental health outcomes.

The findings of this study have important implications for mental health professionals and policymakers in Iran. Mental health professionals may consider integrating religious practices into mental health interventions to promote better mental health outcomes among their clients. Policymakers may also consider promoting the integration of religious practices into mental health interventions to address the mental health needs of the population⁴.

However, the findings of this study should be interpreted with caution due to several limitations. The cross-sectional design of the study limits the ability to establish causality between religious practices and mental health outcomes. The self-report measures used in the study may be subject to social desirability bias, and the sample may not be representative of the larger population in South Khorasan Province, Iran.

Future research may consider using longitudinal designs to establish causality between religious practices and mental health outcomes. Additionally, future research may consider using objective measures of religious practices and mental health outcomes to reduce the potential for social desirability bias. Finally, future research may consider using larger, more diverse samples to increase the generalizability of the findings.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the relationship between religious practices and mental health in South Khorasan Province, Iran. The findings suggest that there is a significant positive correlation between religiosity and mental health in the region, with individuals reporting higher levels of religious practices also reporting better mental health outcomes. These results are consistent with previous research that highlights the positive impact of religious practices on mental health outcomes.

⁴ Mental health is a growing concern in Iran, and the Iranian government has taken some steps to address this issue. The Iranian Ministry of Health and Medical Education has established a national mental health program that aims to improve mental health services and increase public awareness about mental health issues (Farhad & Asim, 2023). Furthermore, the Iranian government has established several mental health clinics and centers across the country, including in South Khorasan province, to provide mental health services to those in need. These clinics offer a range of services, including counseling, psychotherapy, and medication (Farhad & Asim, 2023). However, it is important to note that Iran's mental health system faces several challenges, including limited resources, a lack of trained mental health professionals, and stigma surrounding mental health issues. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has put a strain on mental health services in Iran and many other countries (Farhad & Asim, 2023).

The theoretical frameworks used in this study, including the theory of religious coping, the social support theory, and the meaning in life theory, provide a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms through which religious practices may impact mental health. According to Pargament's theory of religious coping, individuals use religious practices to find meaning and purpose in life, leading to better mental health outcomes. The social support theory suggests that religious practices provide a source of social support, leading to improved mental health outcomes. Additionally, the meaning in life theory suggests that religious practices help individuals find purpose and meaning in life, leading to better mental health outcomes. These theoretical frameworks provide a comprehensive understanding of the positive relationship between religious practices and mental health outcomes.

The findings of this study have important implications for mental health professionals in Iran and other regions where religious practices are an integral part of daily life. Mental health professionals may consider incorporating religious practices into their treatment plans to better meet the needs of their clients. This approach is consistent with the works of Koenig (2012), who highlighted the importance of integrating religious practices into mental health interventions. Furthermore, the findings of this study are consistent with previous research conducted in Iran by Naeem et al. (2016) and Dehshiri et al. (2010), which found that religious beliefs and practices were associated with better mental health outcomes.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on the relationship between religion and mental health and highlights the importance of considering the role of religious practices in mental health interventions. Mental health professionals may benefit from incorporating religious practices into their treatment plans, and policymakers may consider promoting the integration of religious practices into mental health interventions. Further research is needed to explore the specific mechanisms through which religious practices impact mental health outcomes, as well as to develop culturally appropriate interventions that integrate religious practices.

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