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Muslim Experiential Religiousness and Muslim Attitudes toward Religion: Dissociation of Experiential and Attitudinal Aspects of Religiosity in Iran

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Abstract

Investigations into Muslim psychology sometimes rely on measures emphasizing religious attitudes, with the Muslim Attitudes toward Religion (MAR) scale being an example. To capture the experiential aspects of Islamic religiosity, a recently developed Muslim Experiential Religiousness (MER) scale recorded an experienced submission to, love of, and closeness to God that define an ideal in Muslim religious consciousness. In a sample of 299 students from the University of Tehran and the Qom Islamic Seminary School, this study administered the MAR and MER, along with scales assessing mysticism, religious orientations, depression, anxiety, and satisfaction with life. Results demonstrated incremental validity of the MER over the MAR in predicting most of these religious and psychological adjustment variables. The MER also mediated and moderated some MAR relationships with religious and psychological outcomes. These data pointed toward a dissociation of the attitudinal and experiential features of Muslim psychology and confirmed the MER as a valuable index of Muslim religious experience.

Key words: Muslim Experiential Religiousness, Religious Attitude, Spirituality, Iran, Psychological Adjustment
Słowa kluczowe: muzułmańska religijność zorientowana na doświadczenie, nastawienie religijne, duchowość, Iran, psychologiczne dopasowanie

Empirical studies of Muslim psychology benefit from properly developed measures which capture the uniqueness of Islamic life. Among early endeavors along this line, the Muslim Attitudes toward Religion (MAR)scale recorded a personal embrace of Muslim beliefs and practices[1]. As suggested by its name, the MARputs an emphasis on the attitudinal aspects of Muslim religiousness. Itsitems record participation in central Muslim practices (e.g., "I fast the whole month of Ramadan"), adherence to a Muslim worldview (e.g., "I think the Qur'an is relevant and applicable to modern days"), and beliefin the positive impact of being a Muslim (e.g., "Islam helps me lead a better life").These attitudes in fact predict higher levels of religious commitment in both Iran[2] and Pakistan[3].

As a measure of relevant attitudes, the MAR did not focus on the experiential foundations of Islamic belief. With Islam, as with other religious traditions, the ideal is to make faith a personal experiential reality. That reality for Muslims begins with a sense of surrender or submission. "Whose way is better than that of the man who has submitted to God, and does good, and who follows the creed of Abraham the upright?" asks the Qur'an (4: 125). With surrender, a Muslim attempts to open up to the closeness and love of God. The Quran proclaims, "Say: 'If you love God then follow me that God may love you and forgive your faults; for God is forgiving and kind" (3: 31). This should be a powerful and awe-inspired love. "Only they are true believers whose hearts fill up with awe when the name of God is mentioned" (Qur'an, 8: 2). In short, intentional surrender, pursuit of closeness, and awe-filled love define an experiential ideal of Muslim faith.

The Muslim Experiential Religiousness (MER) scale recently operationalized the submission to, love of, and attempt to get close to God that definesthis ideal in Muslim religious consciousness[4] (Ghorbani, Watson, Ghranmayepour, & Chen, 2013b). With a strong emphasis on experience, MER items captured submission to God (e.g., "Experiences of submitting to God cause me to feel more vital and motivated"), love of God (e.g., "When I look deeply within myself, I understand that the experience of loving God is worth any effort in my life"), and experienced closeness to God (e.g., "I have understood how my passion to be closer to God has liberated me internally in contrast to the enslavement produced by the other passions in my life"). Previous findings have demonstrated its validity in predicting an array of psychological and religious outcomes in Iranian Muslims[5].

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[1] A. Wilde and S. Joseph, *Religiosity and personality in a Moslem context*, "Personality and Individual Differences" 1997, No. 23 (5), p. 899–900.

[2] N. Ghorbani, P.J. Watson, A.F. Ghramaleki, R.J. Morris, and R.W. Hood, *Muslim Attitudes Towards Religion Scale: Factors, validity, and complexity of relationships with mental health in Iran*, "Mental Health, Religion & Culture" 2000, No. 3, p. 125–132.

[3] Z.Khan, P.J. Watson, and F. Habib, *Muslim attitudes toward religion, religious orientation and empathy among Pakistanis*, "Mental Health, Religion & Culture" 2005, No. 8, p. 49–61.

[4] N. Ghorbani, P.J. Watson, S. Ghranmayepour, and Z. Chen, *Muslim experiential religiousness in Iran: Relationships with religious orientation, Muslim attitudes toward religion, and psychological adjustment* (manuscript submitted for publication).

[5] E.g. *ibidem*.

In a previous study, the correlation between the MER and the MAR proved to be substantial at $r = .58$[6]. Statistical analyses, nevertheless, revealed that the MER did account for variance in at least some other measures beyond that explained by the MAR. In other words, the MER displayed incremental validity over the MAR, but the strong relationship between these two constructs made it clear that further research needs to examine the relative roles of religious attitudes and experience within the Muslim psychology of religion. The current study addressed that need by investigating the incremental validity and the mediationand moderation effects of the MER relative to the MAR in predicting religious and psychological variables involving mystical experience, religious orientations, depression, anxiety, and satisfaction with life.

The Hood Mysticism Scale[7] assesses mystical experience across religious traditions. Mystical experience essentially involves a sense of transcendent unity, and the Hood scale operationalizes different aspects of that sense as described by Stace[8]. Factor analysis identifies three dimensions of mystical experience within this instrument, and this factor structure has been confirmed in Iran[9]. With introvertive mysticism, mystical experience involves consciousness of a timeless and spaceless ultimate void. Extrovertive mysticism reflects an experienced unity with all things. The interpretation factor measures tendencies to find religious meaning in mystical experience. All three mysticism factors predict greater spirituality in Iran[10].

Religious orientations assessed basic motivations for being religious[11]. The intrinsic orientation theoretically operates as the master motive in a believer's life. The extrinsic personal orientation involves the use of religion to achieve a sense of personal well-being. The extrinsic social orientation involves the use of religion to attain desired social results. Research in Iran and Pakistan establishes the intrinsic and especially the extrinsic personal motivations as clear predictors of Muslim religious and psychological adjustment, but the extrinsic social orientation has more ambiguous implications for these populations[12].

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[6] N. Ghorbani, P.J. Watson, N. Aghababaei, and Z. Chen, *Transliminality and Mystical Experience: Common Thread Hypothesis, Religious Commitment, and Psychological Adjustment in Iran* (manuscript submitted for publication).

[7] R.W. Hood Jr., *The construction and preliminary validation of a measure of reported mystical experience*, "Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion" 1975, No. 14, p. 29–41.

[8] W.T. Stace, *Mysticism and philosophy*, London 1960.

[9] R.W. Hood Jr., N. Ghorbani, P.J. Watson, A.F. Ghramaleki, M.N. Bing, H.K. Davison, R.J. Morris, W.P. Williamson, *Dimensions of the Mysticism Scale: Confirming the three-factor structure in the United States and Iran*, "Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion" 2001, No. 40, p. 691–705.

[10] N. Ghorbani, P.J. Watson, K. Shamohammadi, and C.J.L. Cunningham, *Post-critical beliefs in Iran: Predicting religious and psychological functioning*, "Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion" 2009, No. 20, M.M. Leach (Guest Editor, Special issue: *Islam and Mental Health*), p. 151–194; N. Ghorbani, P.J. Watson, Z. Rezazadeh, and C.J.L. Cunningham, *Dialogical validity of religious measures in Iran: Relationships with integrative self-knowledge and self-control of the "Perfect Man"* (Ensān-e Kāmel), "Archive for the Psychology of Religion" 2011, No. 33, p. 93–113.

[11] R.L. Gorsuch and S.E. McPherson, *Intrinsic/extrinsic measurement: I/E-revised and single item scales*, "Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion" 1989, No. 28, p. 348–354.

[12] N. Ghorbani, P.J. Watson, and Z. Khan, *Theoretical, empirical, and potential ideological dimensions of using Western conceptualizations to measure Muslim religious commitments*, "Journal of Muslim Mental Health" 2007, No. 2, p. 113–131.

To assess psychological adjustment, we included measures of trait anxiety and depression[13], and of satisfaction with life[14]. Previous studies have established the validity of these measures for examining psychological functioning in Iranian samples[15].

Hypotheses

The assumption of this project was that the MER would capture specific aspects of Muslim commitments that were not recorded in the MAR. Specifically, the MER should show incremental validity over the MAR in predicting psychological and other religious variables. A further expectation was that the experiential reality of a faith is what ties basic religious attitudes to other dimensions of religious and psychological functioning. In other words, the hypothesis was that the MER would at least partially mediate MAR relationships with other measures. Finally, the presumed centrality of faith as an experiential reality suggested that MER would also moderate associations of the MAR with at least some of the religious and psychological variables assessed in this project.

Method

Participants

Students from the University of Tehran and the Qom Islamic Seminary School served as the research participants. The Tehran sample included 121 females and 41 males. In the Qom sample were 25 females, 110 males, and 2 individuals who failed to indicate their sex. Average age of the full sample was 25.3 (*SD* = 4.7).

Materials

Instruments appeared in a single questionnaire booklet. Translated versions of all measures had been validated in previous Iranian studies. For scales originally developed in English, one person translated the instrument into Persian, and then another translated it back into English. Differences between original and back-translated measures were minor and easily eliminated through revisions in the Persian translation. All but the single item religious orientation measures used a 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) Likert scale.

The questionnaire booklet included scales associated with a number of different projects[16].Within this booklet, measures appeared in the sequence in which we pre-

[13] C.G. Costello and A.L. Comrey, *Scales for measuring depression and anxiety*, "Journal of Psychology" 1967, No. 66, p. 303–313.

[14] E. Diener, R.A. Emmons, R.J. Larsen, and S. Griffin, *The Satisfaction with Life Scale*, "Journal of Personality Assessment" 1985, 49 (1), p. 71–75.

[15] N. Ghorbani, P.J. Watson, K. Shamohammadi, and C.J.L. Cunningham, *op.cit.*

[16] N. Ghorbani, P.J. Watson, N. Aghababaei, and Z. Chen, *op.cit.*

sent them below. Coming first was the *MAR* with 14 items[17], followed by the 15-item MER[18]. The *Mysticism Scale*[19] had 32 items that measured three factors. Extrovertive mysticism appeared in, for example, the statement, "I have had an experience in which all things seemed to be conscious". A representative introvertive mysticism item said, "I have had an experience in which something greater than myself seemed to absorb me". Illustrating the interpretation factor was the self-report, "I have had an experience which I knew to be sacred".In order to increase internal reliability, we eliminated one extrovertive and one interpretation item because they displayed negative item-to-total correlations.

Assessments of *Religious Orientation* involved use of the single statements recommended by Gorsuch and McPherson[20] and employed response options that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree). The intrinsic orientation appeared in the claim, "My whole approach to life is based on my religion". Expressing the extrinsic personal motivation was statement, "What religion offers me most is comfort in times of trouble and sorrow". Capturing the extrinsic social orientation was the assertion, "I go to activities associated with my religion because I enjoy seeing people I know there". Nine itemsmeasured *Anxiety* and 14 items measured *Depression*[21]. Representative of anxiety was the self-report that "I'm a restless and tense person". Illustrating depression was the claim that "I feel sad and depressed". *Satisfaction with Life*[22] had five items, including, for example, "I am satisfied with my life".

Procedures

Conduct of this study conformed to institutional ethical research guidelines. Participants volunteered for the project, and all responding was completely anonymous. We administered the questionnaire booklet to groups of varying size in a classroom setting and scored all instruments in terms of the average response per item. Data analyses began with an examination of MAR and MER correlations with other measures. Tests of hypotheses drew upon multiple regression procedures. Incremental validity became apparent when entering the MER on the second step of these procedures produced a significant R^2 change after the MAR had been entered on the first step. Significance tests of mediation used 1000-sample bootstrap methodswith a 95% confidence interval[23]. To reduce multicollinearity, we centered the MAR and MER at the meanwhen testing moderation by examining their multiplicative interaction.

[17] A. Wilde and S. Joseph, *op.cit.*

[18] N. Ghorbani, P.J. Watson, S. Ghranmayepour, and Z. Chen, *op.cit.*

[19] R.W. Hood Jr., *op.cit.*

[20] R.L. Gorsuch and S.E. McPherson, *op.cit.*

[21] C.G. Costello and A.L. Comrey, *op.cit.*

[22] E. Diener, R.A. Emmons, R.J. Larsen, and S. Griffin, *op.cit.*

[23] A.F. Hayes, *PROCESS: A versatile computational tool for observed variable mediation, moderation, and conditional process modeling*, 2012 (white paper); retrieved from http://www.afhayes.com/public/process2012.pdf [accessed: 5.01.2013].

Results

As reported in a previous project focusing on other issues[24], the two sexes did not differ on the MAR or the MER; but seminary students did score higher than regular university students on both measures, as would be expected of religious constructs. The MER and MAR displayed a strong correlation of .81, which was .59 for seminary subjects and .82 for university subjects (all *p*'s < .001). Table 1 shows the full sample relationships of the MAR and MER with psychological and other religious variables and also presents the descriptive statistics for each measure. The correlational pattern for the MER was similar to that for the MAR. Both correlated positively with the religious interpretation of mysticism and the intrinsic and both extrinsic religious orientations and negatively with depression. The MER also exhibited a linkage with higher levels of satisfaction with life.

Table 1. Correlations of Muslim Attitudes toward Religion (MAR) and Muslim Experiential Religiousness (MER) with religious and psychological variables

	MAR	MER	M (SD)	α
Introvertive Mysticism	.02	.06	3.18 (.78)	.71
Extrovertive Mysticism	–.06	.09	3.28 (.80)	.81
Interpretation of Mysticism	.27**	.34**	3.61 (.69)	.77
Intrinsic Orientation	.72**	.68**	6.33 (2.62)	–
Extrinsic Personal Orientation	.60**	.60**	6.41 (2.57)	–
Extrinsic Social Orientation	.21**	.20*	2.52 (2.61)	–
Depression	–.25**	–.29**	2.19 (.76)	.90
Anxiety	–.04	–.10	2.72 (.82)	.84
Satisfaction with Life	.11	.20*	3.15 (.90)	.84
M (SD)	4.28 (.76)	4.02 (.82)		
α		.95	.93	

*p < .01 **p < .001

Source: own study.

Multiple regression procedures, withthe MAR entered at step 1 and the MER then entered at step 2, tested the incremental validity and mediational effects of the MER relative to the MAR. Table 2 presents the outcomes observed in these analyses. A significant increment in total variance explained in the model (ΔR^2) served as a marker for MER incremental validity over the MAR in predicting the criterion variables. In this project, the MER demonstrated incremental validity in predicting the extrover-

[24] N. Ghorbani, P.J. Watson, N. Aghababaei, and Z. Chen, *op.cit.*

tive and interpretation factors of mysticism, the intrinsic and extrinsic personal orientations, depression, and satisfaction with life.

Mediational effects appeared when magnitudes of significant regression coefficients for the MAR β at step 1 became significantly lowerafter controlling for the MER β at step2. The MER in such instances explained at least part of the association between the MAR and a criterion variable. With one exception, allthe significant MAR coefficients with a criterion variable displayed reliable decreases in size at step 2. Significance tests using a 1000-sample bootstrap confirmed that all of these mediational effects were significant with 95% confidence intervals. The one exception involved the extrinsic social orientation in which the MER did not increase the variance explained at step 2. With regard to extrovertive mysticism, the MAR β was not significant on step 1, but the step 2 results suggested that a positive MER correlation with extrovertive mysticism had previously suppressed a negative MAR relationship with this mysticism factor, and vice versa. In other words, a covariance between the MAR and MER obscured their connections with extrovertive mysticism, and such relationships became apparent only when statistical procedures disentangled that covariance.

Table 2. Incremental validity and mediational effect of Muslim Experiential Religiousness (MER) for Muslim Attitudes toward Religion (MAR) in predicting some religious and psychological outcomes

	Step 1 with MAR	**Step 2 with MER**			
Criterion Variables	**R2**	**MAR β**	**ΔR2**	**MAR βMER β**	
Extrovertive Mysticism	.00	–.06	.06**	–.38**	
.40**Interpretation of Mysticism	.07**	.27**	.05**	–.02	.36**
Intrinsic Orientation	.52**	.72**	.03**	.49**	.29**
Extrinsic Personal Orientation	.36*	.60**	.04*	.33**	.33**
Extrinsic Social Orientation	.04**	.21**	.00	.15	.08
Depression	.06**	–.25**	.02*	–.04	–.25*
Anxiety	.00	–.04	.01	.10	–.18
Satisfaction with Life	.02	.11	.04*	–.15	.32**

* p < .01 ** p < .001

Source: own study.

Moderation effects examined if the correlational pattern of the MAR with a criterion variable varied at different levels of the MER. We discovered four significant moderations, which appear in Figure 1. For people high in the MER, an increase in the MAR led to higher levels of the introvertive and interpretation factors of mysticism. Conversely, for people low in the MER, an increase in the MAR led to lower

levels of the introvertive and interpretation dimensions of self-reported mysticism. In predicting psychological adjustment, a higher level of MER boosted the negative correlation of the MAR with depression and anxiety.

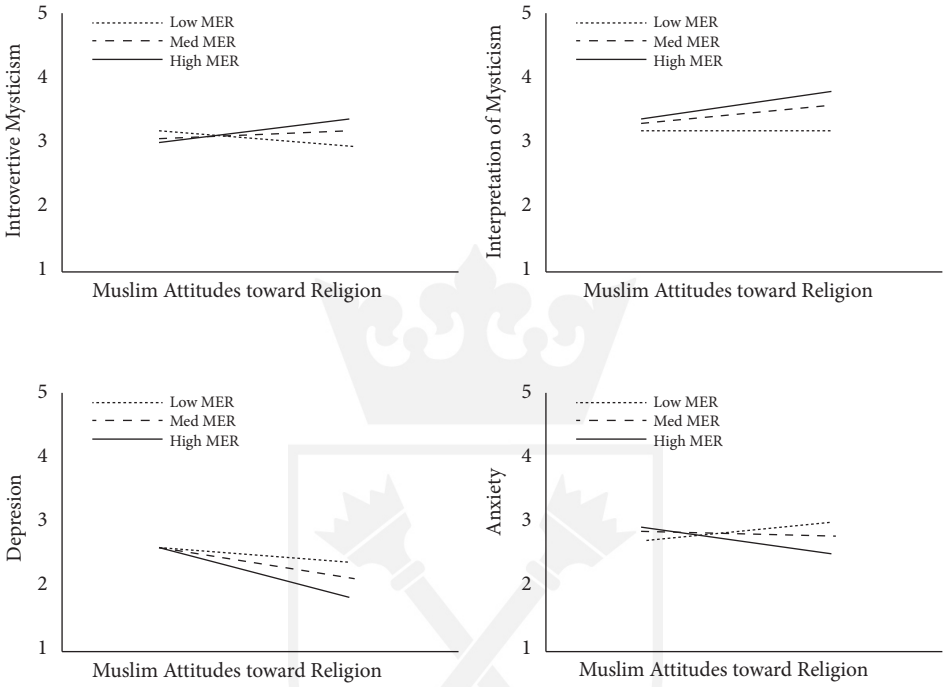

Figure 1. Moderational effect of Muslim Experiential Religiousness on Muslim Attitudes toward Religion in predicting introvertive mysticism, interpretation of mysticism, depression, and anxiety

Source: own study.

Discussion

These data offered substantive support for the major hypotheses of this project. First, the MER demonstrated incremental validity over the MAR in predicting both mystical and motivational aspects of religiosity and also depression and satisfaction with life. Such findings revealed that the MER was useful in accounting for variance in these variables that had been left unexplained by the MAR alone.

Secondly, the MER partially mediated linkages of the MAR with the intrinsic and extrinsic personal orientations, and fully mediated connections of the MAR with the interpretation of mysticism and with depression. The MER, therefore, was an important element in explaining at least some of the religious and psychological im-

plications of the MAR. For instance, a higher level of mystical interpretation apparently was not due to Muslim attitudes (as it seemed to be in the correlational results); instead, it was predicted by the experiential reality of a Muslim faith as measured by the MER. The failure of the MER to mediate the MAR relationship with the extrinsic social orientation was in line with previous evidence suggesting the ambiguous nature of this religious orientation in Iran[25].

Thirdly, moderation effects suggested that a person high on both Muslim attitudes and experience, compared to those high on either or neither, tended to self-report elevated levels of the introvertive and interpretation dimensions of mysticism and also less depression and anxiety. At least for the current sample, therefore, a synergy of Muslim attitudes and experience seemed to work together to optimize religious experience and psychological functioning.

A closer look at the data revealed some evidence for the existence of a mechanism that selectively associated the MER with the experiential reality of faith and the MAR with other aspects of religiosity. On one hand, the MER fully mediated associations of the MAR with the interpretation factor of mysticism, moderated the MAR effect on the introvertive factor, and revealed its association with extrovertive mysticism after controlling for variance defined by the MAR. In this last case, the MAR turned out to be negatively correlated with extrovertive mysticism, which suggested that Muslim attitudes could even suppress religious experience. On the other hand, the MAR remained a robust predictor for intrinsic and extrinsic personal orientations even after controlling for the MER. Such selective associational networks perhaps implied the existence of a subtle psychological process under which attitudinal religiosity could be dissociated from experiential religiosity. This finding not only strengthened the value of MER as a measure for experiential religiousness, but called for future work to more discriminatively analyze these two aspects of religiosity.

In predictingpsychological adjustment, the MER was more robust and fully mediated the MAR association with depression. Moderational analyses further corroborated the important role of the MER by suggesting that it was a combination of high levels of the attitudinal and experiential dimensions of religiosity that promoted psychological well-being. High levels of both appeared to produce an even greater reduction in depression, whereas the failure to display this pattern tended to point toward greater anxiety. Such findings highlighted the importance of both the experiential and attitudinal aspects of religiosity.

Limitations of this project necessitate caution in the interpretation of outcomes. Scores on the MER and MAR were negatively skewed. With the majority of participants self-reporting high levels on both measures, ceiling effects could have influenced observed outcomes. On the one hand, some results might have been biased by the violation of normality; while on the other hand, these data might lack power to detect significance in some analyses. In addition, university and seminary students will not be typical of the Iranian population. Analysis of more representative samples will be necessary before definitive conclusion can be generalized to wider

[25] N. Ghorbani, P.J. Watson, and Z. Khan, *op.cit.*

Iranian society. Finally, Iran is a largely Shiite society, and the findings of this investigation may or may not generalize to other Muslim populations.

In conclusion, this study clearly demonstratedthe incremental validity of the MER over the MAR in predicting religious and psychological adjustment variables. The MER also mediatedandmoderated some apparent MAR effects on mystical and motivational features of religious commitment, suggesting that important dissociations exist in the attitudinal and experiential dimensions of Muslim religiosity. Data also suggested that the MAR and the MER worked synergistically to promote psychological well-being. In short, the MER proved to be a valuable measure in capturing the experiential aspect of Muslim religiosity and clearly deserves additional research attention.