

Holistic Well-being: A Conceptual Discussion Integrating Islamic Worldview, Secular Concepts, and Research Findings.

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ABSTRACT

Background: Holistic wellbeing is an elusive terminology. Defining such terminology differs according to perspective taken by the expert. Most discussion on the terminology originates from the secular paradigm with various perspectives being proposed. This paper aims to discuss the various secular perspectives and Islamic traditions on holistic wellbeing. **Methods:** Narrative review methodology was used to identify and summarise articles discussing well-being. A search strategy was constructed pertaining “health”, “well-being”, “holistic”, and “dimension” keywords and its synonyms in several databases. Both cotemporary research articles and Islamic traditions were referred. Focused-group discussions were also arranged to discuss the definitions and any related concepts. **Results:** A total of 33 articles included in the review related to definitions, dimensions, and inter-relation between dimensions. Contemporary definitions proposed three to five dimensions of health within two perspectives of hedonic and eudaimonic. The Islamic tradition proposed four to five dimensions of health with perspectives of processes and outcome levels. This review proposes a definition based on the Islamic tradition that improves the secular perspectives, consisting of five dimensions that are interrelated and integrated the Islamic worldview. **Conclusion:** This proposition is hoped to stimulate further discussion on defining, operationalising, and measuring holistic wellbeing appropriate to the Islamic worldview.

Keywords:

holistic well-being; Islamic tradition, conceptual definition

INTRODUCTION

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), health is “a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity.” (World Health Organisation, 2014). Health is viewed in multiple dimensions that constitutes a person and incorporates a functional perspective to a human’s life. This functional perspective is denoted by the terminology “well-being” as opposed to “wellness”, which the latter exclusively refers to physical health. The WHO has recognised the need for a holistic approach to health and well-being but the scope of holistic health differs between experts. Within the definition by WHO, health comprises three dimensions, that are: (a) physical, (b) mental, and (c) social. Others proposed holistic wellbeing can be viewed in a different perspective, that include: (a) personal, (b) family, (c) community, and (d) society (Dooris et al., 2017). Some experts further classify wellbeing as involving hedonic behaviours, which focus on pleasure, happiness, and removal of anything in opposition to this, and eudaimonic behaviours, which focus on achieving maximum potential and flourishing.

The multitude of definitions even within the secular world view provides a challenge to operationalise the concept and create an intervention plan. Subscription to the WHO’s definition would alienate the attention needed towards financial and spiritual dimensions despite the growing attention and concern to sustainability and inclusivity by the United Nation’s Sustainable Developmental Goals. Any intervention that disconnect with the latter two dimensions may reach a limit in application. Similarly, subscription to the hedonic and eudaimonic behaviours as definition of well-being would be too vague for targetted efforts to improve the state of holistic well-being.

Current discussions on holistic well-being has been purely from each secular and Islamic world views. This conundrum has been argued as secularising the understanding of the Islamic tradition and seeked to remove the integrative nature of Islam throughout the human life (Mavelli, 2013). Thus, applying holistic well-being into any Muslim community would be devoid of cultural appropriateness. A subscription to the pure spiritual Islamic world view without considering the secular world view may risk disfranchising the role of reality onto human life. Thus, a definition that incorporates all perspectives should be explored to enable

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culturally-appropriate understanding and approach to improve holistic well-being.

Comparisons between the conceptualisation of holistic well-being from Western, Eastern, and Buddhist world view have been explored by previous researcher (Jiwattanasuk et al., 2022). Many similarities exist within the Western and Eastern world views. Most interestingly was the Buddhist principles that viewed the development of physical, moral, emotional, and intellectual dimensions to produce a “balanced way of life”. The moral dimension, in specific, contains many description related to spirituality that governs human behaviour. Whereas the emotional dimension includes the development of the spiritual heart as the center of cognition and emotion.

In the Islamic tradition, al-Ghazali proposed that a person consisted of two dimensions: (a) soul, and (b) body. Soul itself comprises spirit (*ruh*), heart (*qalb*), desire (*nafs*), and intellect (*aql*). A person will achieve a state of well-being (termed happiness) when a person discovers all components of their identity in the sight of Allah. Similarly to the above perspective, hedonic and eudamonic perspectives were also deliberated and operationalised in the form of spiritual diseases and level of improvement of the spiritual elements.

Disease of the spiritual component has been described extensively involving the heart (*qalb*) with several description of diagnoses. The heart (*qalb*) can be improved to achieve a state of serenity (*qalbun salim*) and similarly with desire (*nafs*) which can be improved from the state of carnal desire (*nafs al-ammarah*) to the ideal of content desire (*nafs al-muthmainah*) (Shamsudheen & Rosly, 2018). The body dimension focuses specifically on physical fitness and ailments. There were specific prayers and daily meditation (*zikr*) that mentioned visual and auditory health based on the Islamic heritage (Banna, 1976). Interestingly, other than specific meditation on physical health, there were also meditations mentioning social, spiritual, and financial health. These differing definitions and conceptualisations of holistic well-being precludes the need for further exploration on defining the terminology. An accurate definition is needed to enable healthcare professionals research and design interventions that are appropriate to Muslim community. Therefore, this review aimed to to discuss the various secular perspectives and Islamic traditions on holistic wellbeing, and offer a culturally appropriate definition of holistic well-being.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Narrative review methodology was used to identify and summarise articles discussing well-being. A search strategy

was constructed pertaining “health”, “well-being”, “holistic”, and “dimension” keywords and its synonyms in Science Direct, EBSCOhost, Wiley & Sons, Taylor & Francis, and PubMed. Boolean operators of OR was used within synonyms and AND was used between different categories of keywords. Both cotemporary research articles and Islamic traditions were referred. Articles were screened by the authors and included in the narrative review if it adds new input to the concept of holistic well-being. Focused-group discussions were also arranged to discuss the definitions and any related concepts. The discussions comprised of experts from allied health, health promotion, Islamic studies, psychology, and medical anthropology in a roundtable format. Summary of the literatures included in the review were presented and deliberated to answer the question: “what is the definition and dimensions of holistic well-being?”. Each expert may access the accumulated literatures on holistic well-being despite not summarised in the presentation.

RESULTS

Evidence Suggesting Holistic Well-being in Contemporary Research & Islamic Tradition

Each of the components can influence the state of the other. An experimental study on the sedentary lifestyle of men has shown engagement in aerobic exercise moderated the relationship between stress with both mental and general health (Klaperski & Fuchs, 2021). Interestingly, an earlier study reported that self-reported physical activity was negatively correlated with mental health scores (i.e.: depression, burnout, and anxiety) as opposed to actual aerobic fitness. Those who self-report to engage in moderate physical activity showed better mental health states (Josefsson et al., 2014). This may reflect the role of psychological factors in mediating the role of physical fitness and mental health. Factors such as empowerment, self-efficacy, and mental health literacy have been shown to negatively predict psychological distress and mental health literacy, specifically, contribute to the development of resilience among the study population (Zhang et al., 2023). Therefore, physical fitness or the psychological factors underlying physical fitness are related to the mental health of an individual.

Conversely, those diagnosed with mental illness were prone to develop a high body mass index, poor Framingham index, and high waist circumference (Luciano et al., 2022). Among several psychosocial factors studied, internalised stigma, psychosocial functioning, and quality of life were significant predictors of their metabolic parameters. Another study also reaffirmed the role of psychosocial factors towards mental health. Social capital

was positively related to mental health through a sense of coherence with their population (van Sint Fiet et al., 2022). One's social circle also has a role in developing an individual's sense of coherence that is characterised by: (a) ability to make sense of their life experiences, (b) belief in their capacity to cope, and (c) ability to find meaningful interpretation of their experience (Galletta et al., 2019). In these studies, socio-spiritual dimensions are suggested to contribute to the state of mental and physical health.

Additionally, those that indulge in the carnal desire of poor dietary habits will affect their physical and mental health (Owen & Corfe, 2017). In poor physical health, the act of worship (ibadah) will become more challenging, thus affecting the state of spiritual health. Therefore, the state of true happiness or well-being can only be achieved when all components are in line with the teachings of the Quran and Sunnah.

A meta-analysis of spiritual interventions has summarised that such intervention is effective in improving state of mental health and well-being (de Diego-Cordero et al., 2023). This finding was corroborated in the report by Najafi et al. (2022) which noted that spiritual health showed negative correlation with depression, anxiety, and stress among individuals with chronic illness. Even in the presence of chronic illness, individuals can maintain a state of good mental health which reflects WHO's definition of wellbeing.

In the perspective of Muslims, the ultimate goal would be to enter the Heaven (*Jannah*). The Prophet Muhammad s.a.w. has described the life in Heaven as: *"Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) said: The (members of the) first group that would be admitted to Paradise would have their faces as bright as full moon during the night. They would neither spit nor suffer catarrh, nor void excrement. They would have their utensils, and their combs made of gold and silver and the fuel of their braziers would be aloes and their sweat would be musk and every one of them would have two spouses (so beautiful) that the marrow of their shanks would be visible through the flesh. There would be no dissension amongst them and no enmity in their hearts. Their hearts would be like one heart, glorifying Allah morning and evening."* (Muslim, 6796) (Siddiqui, 2020)

Within the hadith, one can observe components of holistic wellbeing described in detail. Physical, financial, social, psychological, and spiritual components in Heaven were specific within the hedonic perspective. In other hadith, the Prophet Muhammad s.a.w. has also described the physical appearance of dwellers of the Heaven as of 33 years old, hairless (at-Tirmidhi, 2545) (Abu Khalliy, 2007),

with the beauty of the Prophet Yusuf, and at the height of sixty cubits (approximately 3.6 meters) (al-Bukhari, 6227; Muslim, 2834) (Bukhari & Uddin, 2020; Siddiqui, 2020). Even the sweats and belching were described from a hedonic perspective (Muslim, 6800) (Siddiqui, 2020).

Psychologically, the dwellers of Heaven experience perpetual peace without presence of animosity (al-Fajr, 89:27-28) (Kathir, 2024). There will never be any sadness, sorrow, nor mental fatigue (35: 34-35). This description painted the hedonic nature of psychology in Heaven. Social psychology elements were also described in several places in the Quran in which the dwellers of Heaven will never hear ill speech, trolling, nor resentment (56: 25-26; 15: 45-48). In particular, the victim of murder will not resent the murderer when met in Heaven as consequent both obtaining the forgiveness from Allah. This futuristic interaction was described as a funny perplexing experience in the Islamic tradition.

Dwellers of Heaven will be in the social presence of angels that always greet them with beautiful words (13: 24), and family members that are righteous (13: 23-24). Social gatherings were a norm in Heaven, which occur every Friday. Those that return from the gathering in a street of Heaven achieved improvement in their physical appearance that amazed their family members (Muslim, 6792). This reflects an eudaimonia perspective to physical appearance.

Financially, the extravagance of possessions was described by the Prophet Muhammad s.a.w. from housing to utensils used by the dwellers of Heaven. Even tents in Heaven were described as being made from a single hollowed pearl that spans sixty miles from all sides. Utensils will be made of gold and silver for daily use. The extent of financial freedom in the Heaven was generally described as "no eyes have ever seen", "no ears has never heard", and "no hearts have ever thought of" (al-Bukhari: 7498). In practice, there seems to be a surprising element of opulence promised by Allah.

Dynamism of Holistic Well-being Dimensions in the Islamic Tradition

Other than the multidimensional nature of holistic health derived from the description of the dwellers in Heaven above, the dynamic relationship between these dimensions also existed. The Prophet Muhammad s.a.w. once advised his companion of his action of fasting all day and performing prayer all night long; *"...Do not do that! Observe the fast sometimes and also leave them (the fast) at other times; stand up for the prayer at night and also sleep at night. Your body has a right over you, your eyes*

have a right over you and your wife has a right over you." (al-Bukhari, 5199). In this hadith, the physical and social health is given equal importance to the spiritual health. There was also evidence on the use of nutritious food to improve physical, spiritual, and psychological status (ibn-Majah, 3445,3453).

The Islamic tradition further recognised the influence of social health on the state of physical health. In the Quran, Allah says *"And indeed, those who disbelieve would almost make you slip with their eyes."* (al-Qalam: 51). According to ibn Abbas, the evil eye is defined as the eyesight from those that harbour jealousy and hatred towards a person. It was deemed serious to the extent that the Prophet Muhammad s.a.w. advocated to regularly meditate and seek protection from the evil eye (ibn-Majah, 3512). Interestingly, the predictor of physical and financial health was related to social health. In one hadith, the Prophet Muhammad s.a.w. mentioned, *"Who ever is pleased that he be granted more wealth and that his lease of life be prolonged, then he should keep good relations with his Kith and kin."* (al-Bukhari: 5985).

The mention of financial health has been discussed earlier in the form of daily supplication and meditation (*zikr*). In addition, financial health has always been related to the state of social health through various religious-based practices. The act of *zakat*, *waqaf*, and *sadaqah* exemplified the tenets that link financial and social health. The fixed portion of *zakat* derived from an individual is invested into the identified categories in the society, whereas the *waqaf* is an optional avenue to invest financial resources in beneficial outcome that are perpetual in nature. Most interestingly, the act of *sadaqah* was encouraged to prioritize those with familial relations as recipients. The Prophet Muhammad s.a.w. has mentioned, *"The best alms is that which you give when you are rich, and you should start first to support your dependents."* (al-Bukhari, 7(64): 269).

Proposed Definition of Holistic Well-being

Various evidence from contemporary research and Islamic tradition have discussed the components and relations within the holistic health framework. However, the dilemma remains on defining this intangible concept that has been central to the effort of the WHO. The integration of the Islamic tradition to the current contemporary framework adds further to the complexity of defining the terminology.

This review proposed the following definition for holistic well-being, culturally appropriated to the Islamic worldview:

"The state of striving for congruence of the spiritual, physical, psychological, social, and financial health"

The terminology of "striving" was proposed as the Islamic worldview appreciates the effort a person makes to improve their state of well-being despite the initial and current conditions. The Prophet Muhammad s.a.w. said, as narrated by Abu Sa'id al-Khudri, that a man of Bani Israel, who died in his quest for repentance, was granted forgiveness due to his closer distance to the village for repentance (al-Bukhari, 3470). The effort to improve well-being is as important to the end goal of well-being.

The terminology of "congruence" was proposed to denote the inter-relation and dynamism between the different dimensions of health. It is also to reflect the proposition that the spiritual dimension is central to the fulfillment of other dimensions. Firstly, Islam is described as a way of life rather than a religion and possessing the quality of *syumuliyah* (Syed Hassan, 1997). Inherently, Islam has inscribed their believers to manage their physical, psychological, social, and financial health through generic and/or specific guidelines as derived from the Islamic tradition. Secondly, internal motivation that has spiritual roots was known to predict efforts and commitment towards an outcome (Wang et al., 2018; Wong-Macdonald & Gorsuch, 2004). This will feed positively to the operationalization of "striving" towards better well-being.

However, the definition also view spiritual dimension as an independent dimension with its own level of attainment. Discussion on the spiritual development within the Islamic tradition was extensive involving the levels of *nafs* as described above and levels of piety that drives good behaviour. Levels of piety starts from avoid engaging in forbidden behaviour to abstaining from permissible things for fear leading to the forbidden. Piety was applied in various contexts from social life to business in which often discussed as encompassing spiritual, psychological, and social dimensions of behaviour (Bhatti et al., 2021). Most importantly, piety was important for well-being in the hereafter according to the Islamic tradition. These propositions are summarised in Figure 1.

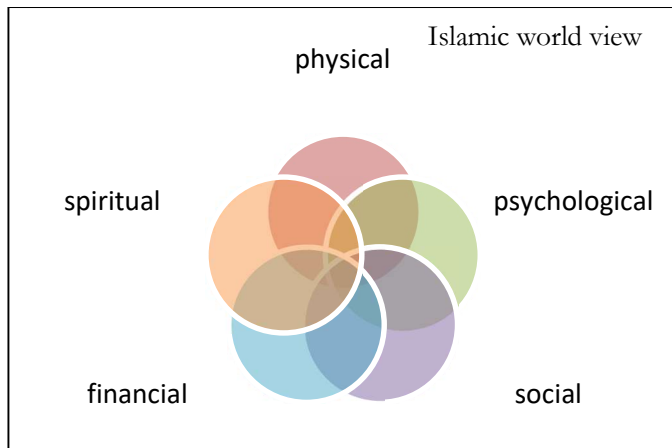


Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework for Holistic Well-being

CONCLUSION

Five dimensions of well-being were proposed with the spiritual dimension being the root for other dimensions and simultaneously a dimension on its own. Both perspectives of processes and outcome levels were included in the definition. This review is an attempt to initiate further discussion on the matter and stimulate the formulation of a comprehensive and pragmatic definition of holistic well-being. Wordings have been arranged to be generic despite their root in the Islamic tradition. This is done purposely to reflect the concept of mercy to all mankind (*rahmatan lil alamin*) towards those who do not subscribe to the religion of Islam.

Current conceptualisation was derived from exclusively Muslim experts in allied health, health promotion, Islamic studies, psychology, and medical anthropology. Views from non-Muslim was lacking. This will pose a challenge in applying such definition on a multicultural society of Malaysia. Future discussion and input from non-Muslim should be explored.

This proposed definition provides the area of focus and a systemic consideration in improving holistic well-being. Authorities and policy-maker may consider a joint taskforce in designing their intervention targetting holistic well-being. The appreciation of processes and outcome levels provided added benefit to authorities and policymakers to integrate contextualised milestones in measuring the success of their intervention.

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