



## Exploring the Wellbeing Strategies of Muslim Women Living in the UAE for Adapted (and new) Positive Psychology Interventions

Shaikh, U.

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**Abstract:** This article explores the wellbeing strategies of Muslim women living in the United Arab Emirates. The aim is to gain an understanding of how their wellbeing practices overlap with existing positive psychology constructs. This study collected qualitative data from 11 participants through semi-structured interviews. Thematic analysis uncovered three higher-order themes, i.e., Faith in God, Family & Community, as well as Accomplishment. Two key findings were that spirituality and faith were powerful forces in coping with challenge, and that gratitude was commonly directed towards God. Participants also viewed relationships as the top contributor to happiness and showed prosocial behavior towards their communities. Accomplishments, defined as striving towards internal goals and positively impacting others, was also identified. Such practises rooted in culture and religion may offer researchers starting points for novel positive psychology interventions, as well as clues for how existing ones may be adapted for a better cultural and religious fit.

الملخص: تستكشف هذه المقالة تجارب النساء المسلمات في الإمارات العربية المتحدة. وبشكل أكثر تحديداً ، صحتهم النفسية والممارسات التي ينخرطون فيها لتعزيزها والتعامل مع الشدائد. الهدف هو اكتساب فهم لكيفية تجسيد الممارسات الحالية المتجذرة في الثقافة والدين بطبيعتها لمجموعة من مكونات علم النفس الإيجابي وكيف يمكن إضفاء الطابع الرسمي عليها كتدخلات تخدم السكان المسلمين. استخدمت الدراسة المنهج النوعي واستندت إلى البيانات التي تم جمعها من احد عشر (11) مشاركاً في مقابلات شبه منظمة. كشف التحليل الموضوعي عن ثلاثة موضوعات ذات مستوى مرتفع ، وهي الإيمان بالله ، الأسرة والمجتمع ، والإنجاز. كما كانت هناك نتيجتان رئيسيتان هما الروحية والإيمان كانا قوتين قويتين في مواجهة التحدي ، وأن الامتنان موجه عموماً إلى الله. رأى المشاركون أيضاً أن العلاقات هي المساهم الرئيسي في السعادة وأظهروا سلوكاً اجتماعياً إيجابياً تجاه مجتمعاتهم. أخيراً ، سلط المشاركون الضوء على دور الإنجاز ، مع إعطاء أهمية أقل للاعتراف الخارجي بالإنجازات وقيمة أكبر للسعي نحو الأهداف الداخلية والتأثير الإيجابي على الآخرين. يساهم هذا البحث في تنمية وجهات النظر غير الغربية في علم النفس الإيجابي ويقدم للممارسين المهتمين بالتكيف الثقافي التدخلات كوسيلة ليكونوا أكثر شمولية.

**Keywords:** positive psychology interventions; wellbeing; Muslim; Middle East; culture; religion

**About the Author:** Umbreen Shaikh is a positive psychology practitioner specializing in cross-cultural coaching and coaching for leadership and innovation. She holds an MSc in Applied Positive Psychology and Coaching Psychology from the University of East London as well as an MA in Near and Middle Eastern Studies from SOAS, UK. Email: [umbreen.shaikh@gmail.com](mailto:umbreen.shaikh@gmail.com)

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The field of positive psychology was introduced as an organized field of inquiry in 1998 by Martin Seligman. Seligman et al. (2005) defined positive psychology as “an umbrella term for the study of positive emotions, positive character traits, and enabling institutions” (p. 410). The shift towards studying what makes humans and societies thrive opened a refreshing new space in which to explore and foster the means of promoting optimal human functioning and quickly generated momentum in research and practice (Donaldson et al., 2015). From this pool of research stems positive psychology interventions (PPIs); intentional activities which are geared towards the cultivation of positive feelings, actions and thoughts (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). Much research has explored the impact of PPIs, showing that on the whole, they are effective in boosting wellbeing and ameliorating depression over time (e.g., Carr et al., 2021; Chakhssi et al., 2018; Hendriks et al., 2018, 2020; Hoppen & Morina, 2021; van Agteren et al., 2021).

Yet, as the field grows, there remains a dearth of non-Western understandings of wellbeing, as well as how it is attained in other parts of the world. The majority of research in the field relies upon WEIRD samples (Henrich et al., 2010); that is Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic. These groups form the sample composition in over 96% of studies in top psychology journals, but only make up 12% of the global population (Arnett, 2008). This makes the field less applicable to a global demographic as findings do not often account for the fact that different cultures have other understandings of wellbeing or that sociocultural contexts impact wellbeing in dissimilar ways (i.e., Lambert, Karabchuk et al., 2020). As the Western world is the lens from which positive psychology operates (Christopher & Hickenbottom, 2008; Donaldson et al., 2015), it does not always resonate with collectivist societies, who may hold a more holistic view of life and relationships, and where the individual is not at the core of existence (Ahuvia, 2002; Wong, 2011).

Globally, Islam is the fastest-growing religion (Ibrahim & Whitley, 2021); yet, the Muslim world may not benefit as much as it could from psychology as a whole. For instance, Lyubomirsky et al. (2011) found that collectivist cultures benefit less from PPIs compared to individualistic cultures, which place high value on the pursuit of individual happiness. Social stigma attached to mental illness in Muslim communities, as well as shame and discrimination further act as barriers to accessing support (Merhej, 2019; Tanhan & Francisco, 2019). Despite research involving religiosity, spirituality and positive psychology (Abdel-Khalak, 2010; Falb & Pargament, 2014; Joseph et al., 2006; Rye et al., 2013; Thomas et al., 2016; Thomas & Barbato, 2020), most therapeutic models overlook an Islamic perspective, which leads to a reservation on the part of Muslim communities to trust professionals due to a fear that treatment methods might be incongruent with Islamic values (Ibrahim & Whitley, 2021; Shah, 2018). Yet, practitioners with an ability to understand Islamic concepts and include Quranic scripture could build better rapport and engage more effectively with Muslim clients (Shah & Shah, 2021). In fact, a review of 76 studies (Griner & Smith, 2006) found that culturally adapted mental health interventions generated four times the effects than those that were not adapted, suggesting that these considerations are not trivial.

### **Positive Psychology Research and Cultural Trends**

Hendriks et al. (2019) analyzed randomized controlled trials (RCTs) of PPIs finding that the majority (78%) originate from Western countries, although as of 2014, there has been an increasing trend towards globalizing positive psychology research. Identifying 17 studies, their analysis found



that interventions shifting the focus from the individual to relationships with family and community were growing in number. Kim et al. (2018) also analyzed the research landscape, noting that the US alone accounted for the majority of the research (41%), but 52% of the articles were now published outside the US. They also revealed which topics were most frequently addressed by region. For example, African research most commonly studied violence and trauma, while European research typically addressed engagement. Only a handful of studies originated from the Middle East, i.e., Israel (25), Iran (7), and one other from Kuwait, Afghanistan, Algeria, Jordan, and Egypt combined.

An earlier review by Rao et al. (2015) found 53 articles from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, which most often studied spirituality and religion as well as family and social support as contributors to wellbeing, and comprised about 22% of the publications (Donaldson et al., 2015). Some explored cross-national comparisons; translating and validating Western-developed scales (Abdel-Khalek & Snyder, 2007) or replicating findings in the MENA region (Kuppens et al., 2008). Many developed new constructs (Bouskila-Yam & Kluger, 2011; Ghorbani et al., 2008; Simsek & Yalmcetin, 2010) and explored indigenous topics specific to the region (Hobfall et al., 2009; 2012). There was also a heavy reliance on quantitative approaches, with qualitative studies making up about 11% of the total (Donaldson et al., 2015). Calls have since been made for more qualitative studies (Hefferon et al., 2017). A recent meta-analysis (Basurrah et al., 2021) and review (Rashid & Al Haj Baddar, 2019) further identified research being done across the region (i.e., Al-Hattab, 2017; Al-Sabwah, 2010; AlWakeel, 2010; Al-Yamani et al., 2014; Barrington et al., 2019; Basurrah et al., 2020; Elsayed, 2016; Lambert et al., 2019; Salama-Younes, 2015; Ramadan, 2014); however, little of it has been culturally or religiously adapted (Basurrah et al., 2021), save for a few.

Al-Seheel and Noor (2016) adapted a gratitude intervention on Muslim students in Malaysia. Connecting an expression of gratitude to God was compared with a secular gratitude intervention and control group. Both interventions showed an increase in happiness levels, with no significant differences in results immediately post-intervention; yet, in time, results showed that only participants who practiced the Islamic-based intervention had maintained their levels of happiness. Another study from Saudi Arabia (Al-Ghalib & Salim, 2018) modified Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (2003) to include localized examples, as well as religious incantations. Results showed marginally decreased levels of stress, anxiety, depression and increased mental well-being, mindfulness, and life satisfaction; however, a secular control group was not available.

Infusing Islamic and cultural precepts into the development of PPIs is a nascent space, with little guidance so far. Pasha-Zaidi et al. (2021) urges more research on the efficacy of Islamically-integrated PPIs, such as gratitude due to its importance in Islam, and incorporating the 99 names of God into work with Muslim clients. Similarly, Hayes and Van Zyl's (2019) work on positive journal writing acknowledged that emotions are experienced differently across cultures. Prior to their study, they co-constructed a list of relevant emotions with clients to prompt freeform writing about personal experiences to suit more diverse populations. Using broader variables has also been suggested: Smith et al. (2019) focused on savoring interventions and designed a conceptual framework which addresses fear of happiness, as well as the passage of time, and emphasized social connection to align with Eastern cultural values such as emotional self-control, harmony, and humility. Similarly, Ng and Lim (2019) suggest that novel interventions be rooted in collectivist cultural values and promote the acceptance of negative emotions. As a next step, it may be useful to continue exploring and



identifying parallels that exist between positive constructs and Western-designed interventions, as well as unique indigenous practices. As such, this study aims to uncover parallels between positive psychology and the wellbeing practices of Muslim women living in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

### **The Present Study**

This exploratory study had as its aim the discovery of parallels between Muslim cultural practices and positive psychology constructs and/or PPIs. This, to enable the future development of congruent, locally derived PPIs that are aligned with Muslim populations.

### **Method**

#### *Participants*

Eleven women living in the UAE were interviewed and recruited by word of mouth. Given the demographic makeup of the UAE, around 88% of the population are non-Emirati (UN Data, 2020); thus, participants were from a range of nationalities, with nine being non-nationals. To be included in the study, they also needed to self-identify as Muslim. Ages ranged from 18 to 53 years, with ethnicities including Syrian, Lebanese, Palestinian, Jordanian, Emirati, Egyptian, Pakistani, Senegalese and Bahraini.

#### *Procedure*

The research was approved by the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee at the University of East London, UK. Participants were interviewed in a one-hour semi-structured format using open-ended questions online via Microsoft Teams with web cameras. Interviews explored practices in which they engaged to promote their wellbeing as well as the resources they call upon to cope with challenge. Interviews were chosen as the methodology as responses revealed private aspects of religiosity and wellbeing and facilitated an uncategorized flow of thoughts and perceptions. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to draw patterns and commonalities from their experiences. In developing a coding system, values and beliefs rather than behavior were the initial focus. This was followed by a second round of coding that identified practices, often understood as outward manifestations of deeper value systems. The codes were placed into a master list and organized into higher-order themes. The third stage involved categorizing behaviors under the themes and seeing the sub-themes emerge.

Prior to the interview, participants were given a questionnaire to capture their demographic information, an informed consent sheet to read and sign, and a list of defined positive psychology concepts. This was done to prompt participants to relate their experiences, as possible, to core concepts in the field. They were also asked to rank each concept in terms of its relevance to their wellbeing (i.e., 10 was extremely relevant and 1 was irrelevant). These included: Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, Accomplishment, Mindfulness, Resilience, and Self-regulation. The first five form the basis of the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011), while mindfulness (Kabat-Zinn, 2003) was added to reflect somatic awareness, along with resilience (Windle, 2010) and self-regulation (Heffernon & Boniwell, 2011) to capture coping. The interview questions included:



1. Are there any practices/rituals in which you engage to promote your wellbeing and/or help you flourish?
2. To what resources or practices do you turn to help you cope with adversity and challenges?
3. Can you please rank each concept on the list below on a scale of 1-10 in terms of importance to you and your wellbeing?
4. When you see the list of positive psychology concepts, are there any that connect to practices in which you engage? If so, how?
5. Are there any concepts you would add to this list as a key aspect of your wellbeing?

## Results

Both cognitive and behavioral practices promoting wellbeing and coping with challenge were reported, including prayer, supplication, exercise, meditation, breathing, gratitude, reading the Quran, yoga, self-talk, reflecting, fasting, reading, charity, therapy, eating (healthy and binge eating), hydrating, journaling, goal setting, cooking, family time, seeing friends, painting, nature, massage, medical appointments, and self-exploration. Three higher-order themes emerged, each with two to three subthemes, namely (1) Faith in God; (2) Family and Community; and (3) Accomplishment.

### *Theme 1: Faith in God*

There were 43 mentions of “faith,” “religion” and “Islam” from nine participants. When participants described the practices in which they engaged to promote their wellbeing, the most frequently noted was “prayer,” with 47 mentions by 10 participants. Gratitude was the second most noted, with 21 mentions by seven participants. Interestingly, 10 out of 21 mentions were described as gratitude specifically towards God. Fate being pre-determined and written by God, as well as trust in this plan being for the best were also common. Six participants spoke about this with 18 mentions overall. Faith in God’s plan offered a coping tool for navigating adversity and accepting challenge.

**Table 1**

### *Faith in God*

PPT #	Subtheme	Supporting statement
1	Religion as central to wellbeing	“Of course all of these things affect my well-being as well...like it’s a combination of many, many, many things. But the basis is the religion and praying and the du’a (supplication) and all these things, these are the most important.”
3	Religion as central to wellbeing	“I can have this (religion) and not have the others and can continue through life, you know, but not the other way around.”
9	Religion as central to wellbeing	“I think a lot of my positivity goes down to my religion, ok? Because I believe in Allah.”



- 4 Praying, and gratitude to God “These prayers a lot of time with, you know, calm me down and make me feel a lot, like a sense of tranquility, even if I didn't know if the issue was going to be solved or not. But it would calm me down.”
- 1 Praying, and gratitude to God “Being a Muslim, praying is something really crucial in my life and this is something that is, of course, as you know, happening every day five times, and this is part of I feel it makes a person and me calmer and it affects the whole positive wellbeing my wellbeing as well.”
- 6 Praying, and gratitude to God “In the Emirates we have access to clean water and sanitation...and the majority of the world do not have it. And we thank God in the UAE we are blessed with so many things. God chose me from so among many people to be part of Emirati culture, Emirati society.”
- 5 Praying, and gratitude to God “Like growing up in a Muslim household, we're like told to be grateful all the time. It's like, you know, we, we should say “Allah ka shukar” (thanks be to God) to everything, like “there's so many people who don't have what we have,” and that's absolutely true.”
- 1 Praying, and gratitude to God “It's part of who we are, being grateful to God, of what he gave us, health, happiness, sound of mind, you know these things you have to be grateful. And little things as well. It's part of who I am and this is part of like, within the family that we have grown, this is the way we think about things.”
- 9 Belief that fate is predetermined “And I know that Allah has, so this is what we know right? So He has written all the way all through and He always wants to give us the best.”
- 2 Belief that fate is predetermined “Part of it is reminding yourself of the trust you have in God, in His plan and intentions for you, in that He is looking out for you. And trust. Reminding yourself as well, of YOU, like how your intentions are pure and well meaning and so, trusting that you'll not “get what you deserve” but that God is, you know, knows best. And that you trust God.”
- 5 Belief that fate is predetermined “Even like chanting or reciting something like “husbee Allah wa na'mal wakeel” like where it's like God has a plan for you...And reciting that sometimes through really tough times has actually been really helpful.”
- 6 Belief that fate is predetermined “As in our religion, we need to accept the bad and good thing and by the end we think that by the end we will be rewarded. And this is from Allah, from our God. So once you change your thinking and your thoughts you will feel comfortable and you will accept it directly.”
- 1 Belief that fate is predetermined “We have this verse in the Holy Quran that says, I'll say it in Arabic but I'll say the meaning in English: “Don't hate something that is really maybe at the end it will be really good for you.”



### *Theme 2: Family and Community*

Family and community emerged as another key theme, with family being mentioned more than any other factor playing a role in the wellbeing of participants: 71 mentions from all participants. Friends were mentioned 40 times and community six times. With human relationships being central to participant wellbeing, it was not surprising that the desire to help others and impact family and society emerged as a meaningful purpose. While the findings showed an overwhelming trend towards family, there were also opposing views, with some participants expressing a desire for solitude, self-exploration, and more self-oriented thinking. Participants also discussed an awareness of their privilege and a deep sense of responsibility to utilize themselves for the benefit of helping others. This was supported by examples of pro-social behavior done for the sake of bettering their communities while also recognizing that these efforts added to their own wellbeing.

**Table 2**

### *Theme 2: Family and community*

PPT #	Subtheme	Supporting statement
2	Purpose to help others	“What felt closest to my purpose in life was the impact that I have on people....the career is important. I'm ambitious, I'm curious, I'm driven, but you know, raising good humans is more meaningful than any job or career.”
8	Purpose to help others	“Helping my friends, my family, even strangers, sometimes just like to like, feel like I have a purpose, and like I can like, I am helping these people, I'm adding something into this the universe.”
4	Purpose to help others	“To serve a better purpose for my community and the environment around me and everything- I really care about that.”
6	Purpose to help others	“Self exploration, I think, is important. Because if you know what you have, what the qualities you have, you will use them, you will benefit the community... Especially in our society, people they don't know what they have. They don't know anything about themselves. Maybe because of our culture, our habits.”
10	Purpose to help others	“In the UAE we don't have something called individual thinking, it's collective thinking....solitude is a big thing for me and I wish that more people in the UAE understand that getting to know yourself is a good thing.”
4	Sense of responsibility to help others	“I grew up very, very very, very privileged like, I grew up in UAE in the first place which is an extremely, it's a bubble of privilege...I don't need to think about the food on my plate, physically like my health is amazing like and I feel like I need to, the fact that this this, I feel like I need to return it and I



		feel like I need to be using all of my energy towards helping those that weren't as privileged as me.”
12	Sense of responsibility to help others	“You go and help other people instead of nagging about your situation, you know what I mean? Like this is this is a framework of living. It's not only something that you believe in it, something that is aligned and embedded in your psychology, in your behavior”
6	Pro-social behaviors	“You know, just you donate through the online services through your phone while sitting at your home and sometimes, I know some specific poor families and I give them. And I also collect from others...You know when you help others you feel happy. And even if I'm not the one who's donating, but at least collect from others and give that.”
3	Pro-social behaviors	“So my top my joy is doing (free coaching webinars for parents of special needs children) because I'm helping those parents that they don't have time or the finance to go and seek those information.”
4	Pro-social behaviors	“I'd like to do something that's like, impactful. Not just like give someone money. I'd like to develop like a program or technology that can have a significant influence on a community or like an environment around me.”

### *Theme 3: Accomplishment*

The final theme involved accomplishment, although participants made a point of distancing themselves from extrinsic recognition and externally motivated accomplishments; instead, favoring intrinsic rewards. The latter included mention of the importance of self-development and reaching personal goals, as well as being engaged and exerting effort towards their attainment. For others, it was seeing their children and family happy, or being successful in relationships over professional life; others still spoke of accomplishment as being linked to their purpose of helping others.

**Table 3**

### *Theme 3: Accomplishment*

PPT #	Subtheme	Supporting statement
3	Rejecting extrinsic motivation	“I don't care about the awards.”
7	Rejecting extrinsic motivation	“It's not a competition. Basically it's not the awards that you get.”



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|----|--------------------------------|--|
| 8  | Rejecting extrinsic motivation | “Accomplishments are measured by other things as well, not specifically honors and awards.”  |
| 4  | Rejecting extrinsic motivation | “It usually depends on the time at how important this achievement is to me, or this is to me as a person and my values...Like at work when I got promoted...I honestly couldn't care less.”  |
| 5  | Rejecting extrinsic motivation | “What do these accomplishments and honors and awards really mean, and what do they give me in the long run? And yes, there are positive emotions connected to it. It does, you know make me feel like oh I'm working towards something like reaching, but I've realized that once I get that I don't have that like long term happiness or wellbeing that I want.” |
| 6  | Intrinsic rewards              | “I think this is related to any effort that we put in any task. If I achieve this task and I know myself that I really worked hard, I used everything, all the available resources, I feel that I have accomplished a lot, even if the goal failed by the end, but at least I really worked hard and I have gained and developed many skills.”                     |
| 7  | Intrinsic rewards              | “For me an accomplishment is with everyone around me is happy. I'd rather buy people stuff than myself stuff and see that smile on their face. And you know, have that effort. That's an accomplishment.”  |
| 2  | Intrinsic rewards              | “There are accomplishments you know at work that have you know that that I recall. But again, now having kids, there are many more, I think that will come with parenthood...if you see your kids happy or healthy it does give a sense of accomplishment. Especially when it's directly linked to, you know the environment you provided”                         |
| 10 | Intrinsic rewards              | “Bill Gates, of course, he's an entrepreneur, he's a tycoon. But when it comes to his personal life, he had a very fragmented relationship. So he's not accomplished in life. He is only accomplished in his professional life, right?”  |
| 12 | Intrinsic rewards              | “I'm not oriented by my wins or what I want to do. I am oriented always, by how can I be of use for this situation for the people around me?”  |

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### Discussion

The discovery of parallels between the wellbeing strategies of Muslim women in the UAE and PPIs/positive psychology constructs was the first aim of this study. Participants identified Islamic practices such as prayer, reading Quran (Islamic holy book), dhikr (invocation or remembrance of God through chanting), dua (supplication), fasting, and charity as ones that contributed to their wellbeing. While this study did not measure religiosity itself, the link between religion and wellbeing confirms prior research (i.e., Barton & Miller, 2015; Cohen & Johnson, 2017; Diener et al., 2011; Gulamhussein & Eaton, 2015; Peres et al., 2018; VanderWeele, 2017), including regional and/or



Islamic studies (i.e., Abdel-Khalek & Tekke, 2019; Thomas et al., 2016; Thomas & Barbato, 2020). At the same time, religiosity also implicates a sense of identity, social support, engagement in rituals and meaningful social participation (Dunbar, 2021; Garsen et al., 2021; Munsoor & Munsoor, 2017) that broadens potential points of intervention for greater wellbeing.

Believing that fate was pre-determined and having faith in God's plan proved to be a coping mechanism for adversity and aligns with values-based therapies such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Hayes et al., 2011), where acceptance of challenging internal experiences versus the mitigation thereof, is the aim. Faith acted as a protective mechanism, where negatives were considered present by design and part of a greater beneficial plan, supporting Ng and Lim's (2019) suggestion to attend to negative emotions as much as the positive. Indeed, an external locus of control where responsibility for actions depends on God rather than one's self seems to be more prevalent in Muslim cultures (Clauss-Ehlers, 2009) and remains an item to be investigated: specifically, whether it detracts from a sense of agency (Bandura, 2006) and autonomy (Ryff, 2014). Further, the extent to which gratitude was directed towards God was embedded in participant vernacular across Arabic phrases like "Allah ka shukar" (thanks be to God) and "Alhamdulillah" (praise be to God) to express appreciation. Aqababaii et al. (2012) found that gratitude towards God positively correlates with psychological wellbeing and subjective happiness. Pasha-Zaidi et al. (2021) note the more powerful nature of gratitude directed towards God which can be cultivated as often as desired, compared to the limited nature of interpersonal gratitude, which is dependent on human action.

Themes of family and community also emerged. Prior research has found that people are most happy when surrounded by friends and family and in strong social and romantic relationships (Amati et al., 2018; Diener & Seligman, 2002; Lucas & Dyrenforth, 2006), including in the UAE (Lambert D'Raven & Pasha-Zaidi, 2016). While the UAE is considered a collectivist society (The Hofstede Center, n.d.), two Emirati nationals commented on the need for more individualism and self-exploration. Lambert, Karabchuk et al. (2020) found that relationships added to life satisfaction for Emiratis as a whole, however, the relationship was non-existent for young adults. Prior research by Whiteoak et al. (2006) also found that younger UAE nationals had higher levels of individualism compared to older nationals. Balancing social duties with individual needs may need closer attention.

The desire to help others can be understood through the lens of altruism. Altruism is a type of prosocial behavior that involves benefiting others without expecting any benefit in return (Batson, 2011; Dibou, 2012). This study's results showed a strong desire to help others; yet, intertwined with this desire was also the expressed motivation of boosting their own wellbeing. Batson (2002) describes these 'egoistic feelings' as powerful drivers resulting in positive outcomes for helpers and those being helped. Indeed, Park et al. (2017) affirmed that generous behavior led to increases in self-reported happiness and PPIs promoting intentional acts of kindness as a path to greater wellbeing are well known (Curry et al., 2018; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). At the same time, research suggests that religiosity also motivates prosocial behavior (Duhaime, 2015; Einhoff, 2011; Kanekar & Merchant, 2001) forging a congruent path between beliefs and actions for religious individuals.

Finally, while participants identified that accomplishments contributed to their wellbeing, what motivated these accomplishments was important. Rather than be driven by external rewards and recognition, participants were instead driven by an emphasis on personal goals, maintaining harmonious relationships, and helping community. This coincides with Wong's (2011) construal of



positive outcomes for groups which include harmonious relationships, group morale, and collaborative success, versus those more commonly found for individuals, such as life satisfaction, achievement, and self-esteem. Self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) is also helpful for understanding intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Research has found that when all else is equal, emphasizing intrinsic aspirations and goals related to community, affiliation, and personal growth (versus extrinsic aspirations like wealth, image, and fame) is more often associated with wellbeing indicators (Kasser & Ryan, 1993, 1996; Niemiec et al., 2009; Romero et al., 2012).

### Implications and Future Research Directions

This study had as one of its second aims, the use of the present findings towards the modification of PPIs for a better fit (Schueller, 2014). For example, PPIs such as the best possible self (King, 2001), gratitude letter (Seligman et al., 2005), using signature strengths in a new way (Peterson et al., 2005) or loving kindness meditation (Fredrickson et al., 2008) could be reframed as best possible family, or even my best possible spiritual self, gratitude letter to God, using signature strengths in a new way for my community, or loving kindness mediation prayer, and tested to see if they resonate with a Muslim demographic, and whether the addition of religious elements has an additive effect. Further, given suggestions (Ng & Lim, 2019) to develop more collective interventions, elements of Bagasra's work (2021) exploring a socially engaged spirituality, that is, religiously motivated actions rooted in Islamic tradition and encompassing communal and personal actions, may be used as a framework through which to promote charitable actions given secular acts of kindness are already known to be impactful (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005), providing an example not only of developing or modifying new and existing PPIs, but using more culturally/religiously aligned theoretical models to support them.

It is also worth asking to what ends new regional PPIs should be developed. As Islamic views of wellbeing tend to be more eudaimonic in nature (i.e., Joshanloo & Weijers, 2019), the outcome measures of PPIs may be considered accordingly. Van Zyl et al. (2019) and Ng and Lim (2019) ask whether the goal is to have a better hedonic life experience with a greater frequency of positive emotion, a eudaimonic life experience where greater functioning and meaning in life are the targets, or still yet, greater adherence to religion, better community relationships, less depression, sound mental health, or a positive Islamic identity (Pasha-Zaidi & Odeh, 2019)? While mainstream PPIs raise the level of several wellbeing outcomes, they are not benign interventions and may have cultural and/or spiritual ramifications that remain unknown to date. Qualitative studies will be especially useful as they can yield ideas from participants that researchers may well overlook. Historical and generational practices that have fallen by the wayside may be unearthed as a result. A range of intervention studies examining behaviors from within the Islamic faith and regional cultures should be prioritized by wellbeing research labs in the region, of which there are now a growing number.

Researchers also need to move beyond evaluating PPIs for whether they work and instead, ask for whom they work best and why (Van Zyl et al., 2019). While many moderators have been explored, i.e., personality, existing levels of depression and happiness (Ng, 2015; Wang et al., 2017), a broader range can be included, such degrees of religiosity and cultural identification. These may show unexpected effects that serve to better understand the mechanisms of PPIs. Whether wellbeing effects are due to the power of the original PPI or the inclusion of faith-based constructs will be vital



to determine and active-control groups can be especially helpful (and increasingly recommended). That is, testing PPIs against another active condition yields more accurate statements of efficacy (Hendriks et al., 2018). Future research should also include men, as well as more or less religiously inclined individuals, as well include a range of cultural orientations (i.e., vertical and horizontal collectivism/individualism; Triandis & Gelfand, 1998) to determine what specifically contributes or detracts from wellbeing. Opportunities could also be explored working specifically with female and/or migrant populations, who are already more vulnerable yet have displayed a great capacity to tap into faith and community to build resilience and increase wellbeing.

### Limitations

While the sample size was small, what was lost in breadth was gained in depth given the qualitative one to one nature of this study (Hefferon et al., 2017). Still, only female participants were included, which limits its generalizability; thus, including men over time will offer valuable insight and potentially allow a gender focus to emerge. Interviews were also conducted in English, a second language for many. The author's role as a Muslim researcher could have resulted in participants not mentioning certain beliefs, assuming they were implicitly understood due to their mutually shared value systems. Importantly, neither the validity of participant strategies, nor their effects on wellbeing were tested. Still, this study provided insight into the wellbeing strategies used by Muslim women living in the UAE, a non-WEIRD view that is not typically captured in the literature.

### Conclusion

This contribution adds to the promise of third wave positive psychology (Lomas et al., 2020), which aims to embrace complexity, promote inclusivity, and strive towards a deeper understanding of the effects of religion, community, and values on wellbeing to facilitate flourishing. This exploratory study adds its voice to that chorus and exposes an opportunity for researchers to consider Islamic and cultural value systems and how they might be embedded and empirically validated as PPIs for greater wellbeing in this community. This move will also serve to develop and broaden the field to represent views beyond those of the West, as well as meet the mental health and wellbeing needs of Muslims everywhere, who have a right and need to access services that are culturally and spiritually congruent with their own (Lambert et al., 2015, 2020; Wong, 2019). Ethically and professionally, culturally and spiritually congruent services must be prioritized, including those developed in positive psychology. Given that PPIs are well used and successfully so (Bassurah et al., 2021), designing new interventions originating in the region rather than modifying Western-designed interventions is surely possible. As the UAE and other regional countries have shown a commitment to wellbeing initiatives at a national level, the promotion of such aims can also spell the beginnings of a home-grown, empirically validated, culturally and religiously congruent science of wellbeing.

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