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Santri Experiences of Dhikr, Salawat, and Qur'an Recitation for Psychological Well-Being

Afifatul Khilmiyah[1], Nanang Misbakhul Munir[1], Muhammad Nurdyanto[1], Amalya El Fatihah Djovana[1]
[1]Universitas Islam Al Azhar Gresik, Indonesia
afifaklmy@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: Muhammad Nurdyanto

Abstract: This study explored the experiences of santri (Islamic boarding school students) in practicing dhikr, salawat, and Qur'an recitation and how they interpreted these practices in relation to psychological well-being. A qualitative design using interpretative phenomenological analysis was employed. Data were obtained from a single interview session with three santri at Darul Ihsan Islamic Boarding School, Menganti, Gresik, Indonesia, and were analyzed through repeated reading, initial noting, development of experiential themes, and cross-case comparison. Four preliminary themes were identified: belief in God as a source of calm and strength; spiritual practices as a source of meaning and life direction; changes in responding to problems, including patience, forgiveness, optimism, and self-control; and the need for interpersonal support when worship felt insufficient. These experiences were not uniform, as one participant continued to feel anxious and sought advice from a teacher. The study concluded that these spiritual practices could serve as a meaningful source of support for santri but did not replace counseling or professional mental health services. Because the study involved only three participants and a single interview session, the findings are exploratory and cannot be generalized.

Keywords: dhikr; salawat; Qur'an recitation; psychological well-being; interpretative phenomenological analysis

INTRODUCTION

Psychological health is a crucial part of human life because it relates to an individual's ability to understand themselves, manage emotions, cope with stress, build healthy relationships, and find meaning in life. From an Islamic perspective, human well-being is understood not only through physical and psychological conditions but also through a spiritual relationship with Allah SWT. This view opens up space for the development of a mental health approach that considers beliefs, religious experiences, and worship practices as part of an individual's life. Research by Nuzula (2024), for example, found a positive relationship between Islamic spirituality and psychological well-being in Muslim respondents. These findings suggest that spirituality deserves attention in understanding psychological well-being, although a statistical relationship does not necessarily prove causality.

In this context, Islamic psychotherapy can be understood as a psychological support approach that considers Islamic values, spiritual experiences, and the human relationship with God in helping individuals face life's challenges. This approach does not merely position religion

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as a set of rules to be followed, but also considers how religious beliefs and practices are internalized and used by individuals when facing anxiety, stress, inner conflict, or a loss of meaning in life. Safitri (2023), through a literature review on dhikr psychotherapy, demonstrated that dhikr has the potential to help manage anxiety, but further research is needed to understand the mechanisms and contextual factors that influence its outcomes. Therefore, discussions of Islamic psychotherapy need to move beyond questions about the effectiveness of a practice and also consider the subjective experiences of the individuals who practice it.

One spiritual practice relevant to study is dhikr, the activity of remembering Allah through the tongue, heart, and consciousness, reflected in daily life. For a Muslim, dhikr has the meaning of worship and can also provide a space for calming oneself, directing attention, reflecting, and dealing with feelings that are difficult to express. Several studies have examined the relationship between dhikr and psychological conditions. Perwataningrum, Prabandari, and Sulistyarini (2016) reported a decrease in anxiety in a group receiving dhikr relaxation therapy in a study of dyspepsia sufferers. Reza et al. (2021) also studied dhikr in the form of salawat as an approach to dealing with academic stress in young Muslims. Meanwhile, research by Syahdiah et al. (2022) discussed the effectiveness of dhikr therapy in reducing anxiety in adolescents before exams. These findings demonstrate that spiritual practices have the potential to be a psychological resource, but the experiences of Islamic boarding school students (santri) in practicing dhikr as part of their daily religious routine still require a deeper understanding.

In addition to dhikr (remembrance of God), reciting salawat (invocations of blessings upon the Prophet) to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is a spiritual practice that holds a significant place in the lives of Muslims. Salawat is not only performed as a form of worship and an expression of love for the Prophet, but can also be interpreted as a means of bringing peace, fostering hope, and strengthening connection with the Prophet's exemplary values. However, these meanings are not always experienced by every individual in the same way. Some may feel calm when reciting salawat, while others emphasize the meaning of obedience, love, togetherness, or habits inherited from the Islamic boarding school environment. The study by Reza et al. (2021) provides a starting point for examining the relationship between salawat and academic stress management, but studies specifically exploring the subjective experiences of students in interpreting salawat as part of psychological well-being are still needed. Therefore, in this study, salawat is not directly assumed to be a therapy with uniform effects, but rather is studied based on the students' experiences and interpretations.

Another spiritual practice is Qur'anic recitation, which is reading Qur'anic verses as a form of worship and a Muslim's interaction with revelation. In the lives of Islamic boarding school students (santri), recitation can occur as a scheduled activity, part of learning, or as a personal activity when facing inner problems. Ghiasi and Keramat (2018), through a systematic review of 28 experimental and quasi-experimental studies, found that listening to Qur'anic recitation is generally associated with reduced anxiety in various situations, although the strength of the evidence and the methodological quality of the studies still need to be considered. Similarly, Moulaei et al. (2023) reviewed research on the effects of reading and listening to the Qur'an on anxiety, stress, and depression, while a systematic review by Che Wan Mohd Rozali et al. (2022) discussed the effects of listening to, reciting, and memorizing the Qur'an on physical and mental health. These findings support the importance of further research, particularly to understand how students give meaning to recitation, not just how their psychological responses are measured through specific instruments.

The discussion of psychological well-being in this study is not limited to reduced anxiety or the emergence of a momentary sense of calm. Psychological well-being can also be understood through experiences of self-acceptance, the ability to maintain meaningful relationships, manage life's demands, personal growth, and purpose in life (Ryff, 1989). From this perspective, spiritual experiences have the potential to help individuals understand difficulties differently, develop self-awareness, and develop more adaptive attitudes in facing life. Wahyudi et al. (2025), through phenomenological research on Sufi meditation and mental health in Indonesia, described the experiences of dhikr, muraqabah, and muhasabah as related to emotional management, inner peace, self-awareness, and the meaning of life. This research is relevant because it shows that spiritual practices can be understood through one's experiences, not just through frequency of practice or psychological measurement results. However, findings from the tarekat community cannot be directly equated with the experiences of students in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren), which have their own educational structures, upbringing, and religious obligations.

Pesantren (Islamic boarding schools) are an important context for examining the relationship between spiritual practices and psychological well-being because the lives of students take place in an environment that integrates religious learning, habituation of worship, social interaction, and character building. Routines of dhikr, salawat, and Qur'an recitation can be a source of spiritual strengthening, but students' experiences are also influenced by the demands of learning, discipline, relationships with caregivers and peers, and the process of adjusting to collective life. Arifin and Rhoyachin (2019), in their phenomenological study of 'uzlah practices in Islamic boarding schools, examined how students understand and navigate self-isolation to strengthen their mental and spiritual dimensions. Nasution et al. (2025) also discussed the mental health of students and the integration of spiritual practices with social-emotional learning in Islamic boarding schools. Both studies demonstrate the relevance of the Islamic boarding school environment in spirituality-based mental health research, but do not specifically explain how dhikr, salawat, and Qur'an recitation are interpreted together as daily experiences related to students' psychological well-being.

Research on spiritual experiences in Islamic boarding schools (pesantren) has also begun to demonstrate the importance of a more contextual approach to understanding the lives of students. Falasifah (2025), for example, examined the flow experience of memorizing the Qur'an among female students living in Islamic boarding schools. The study demonstrated that concentration, intrinsic motivation, spiritual discipline, and a sense of accomplishment can be part of the Qur'an memorization experience (Falasifah, 2025). These studies strengthen the case for understanding Islamic boarding school students' psychological well-being as an experience shaped by the interaction between personal circumstances, the Islamic boarding school environment, and spiritual life. Therefore, religious routines need to be viewed within the context of the students' real lives, including how these practices are carried out when they feel calm, stressed, tired, or facing personal challenges.

Although previous research provides an important foundation, several gaps remain relevant for study. First, a conceptual gap, namely the tendency to position spiritual practices primarily as interventions to reduce anxiety, stress, or depression, while the meaning of these practices for the broader experience of psychological well-being has not been widely explored within a single research framework. Systematic reviews of dhikr and Qur'an recitation psychotherapy have demonstrated the potential benefits of these practices, but have not yet explained how students interpret their spiritual experiences in everyday life (Safitri, 2023). Second, a gap in the focus of

practice, namely the lack of an integrated discussion of dhikr, salawat, and Qur'an recitation as three practices with different forms, experiences, and meanings. Previous research often examines a single practice or measures specific psychological outcomes, while this study seeks to understand the similarities and differences in the meaning of these three practices in the students' experiences. Third, a gap in context and approach, namely the need for phenomenological exploration that specifically positions students as subjects who share their own spiritual experiences in Islamic boarding school life. Phenomenological studies on Sufi meditation and the practice of 'uzlah have provided an overview of the importance of subjective experience (Arifin & Rhoyachin, 2019; Wahyudi et al., 2025), but space to examine the experience of dhikr, salawat, and Qur'an recitation in an integrated manner in the context of the psychological well-being of students is still open.

Based on these gaps, the novelty of this research lies in its attempt to reinterpret dhikr, salawat, and Qur'anic recitation as spiritual experiences potentially related to the psychological well-being of Islamic boarding school students, rather than merely as a series of acts of worship or techniques to alleviate specific psychological symptoms. This research does not start from the assumption that these three practices will necessarily produce the same positive impact on every student. Instead, it seeks to explore how students experience calm, deal with anxiety, build hope, make sense of difficulties, and understand the relationship between spiritual closeness and their psychological well-being. Using a phenomenological approach, students' experiences can be examined through the stories, perceptions, feelings, and meanings they give to these spiritual practices. The results are expected to enrich the study of Islamic psychotherapy, particularly in the development of psychological support that is sensitive to the religious and cultural values of Islamic boarding schools. This approach can also serve as a starting point for Islamic caregivers, educators, and counselors in understanding spiritual practices as a source of psychological support, without replacing the need for professional assistance when students experience mental health problems that require specialized treatment.

Therefore, this study aims to explore and understand the subjective experiences of students in carrying out dhikr, salawat, and recitation of the Qur'an and how they interpret these practices in relation to psychological well-being in the Islamic boarding school environment. Specifically, this study is directed at understanding the psychological and spiritual meanings felt by students, identifying experiences that they consider helpful or challenging in carrying out these practices, and explaining how these experiences relate to how they deal with stress and give meaning to life. To achieve these goals, this study uses a qualitative phenomenological approach by placing the students' life experiences as the main source of understanding. The focus of the research is formulated in three questions: (1) How do students experience and interpret the practices of dhikr, salawat, and recitation of the Qur'an in their daily lives in Islamic boarding schools? (2) How do students understand the relationship between these spiritual practices and psychological well-being, including inner peace, emotional management, hope, and the meaning of life? (3) What factors within the students themselves and the Islamic boarding school environment support or hinder these spiritual experiences in their psychological lives?

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative design using interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA is a phenomenological approach that seeks to understand how individuals experience and make sense of a phenomenon, while recognizing the role of the researcher's interpretation in

understanding participants' meanings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Smith et al., 2022). The design was chosen because the study focused on the lived experiences of santri in performing dhikr, salawat, and Qur'an recitation rather than on testing the clinical effectiveness of these practices. A comparable phenomenological study of spiritual practices and mental health was reported by Wahyudi et al. (2025).

The study was conducted at Darul Ihsan Islamic Boarding School, Menganti, Gresik, on 18 September 2026. Three santri, coded P1, P2, and P3, were selected purposively based on their experience of practicing dhikr, salawat, and/or Qur'an recitation. The data came from a single interview session. Interviews were recorded using a mobile phone and transcribed. The interview guide covered experiences of dhikr, salawat, and Qur'an recitation; changes felt when facing problems; and the steps taken when worship was felt to be insufficient.

The analysis followed the IPA steps outlined by Smith et al. (2022). First, transcripts were read repeatedly to understand each participant's experience. Second, relevant sections were highlighted, and initial notes were made on content, language use, and meanings in participants' accounts. Third, these notes were developed into experiential themes closely related to the data. Fourth, relationships between themes were examined within each participant's account before similarities and differences across cases were considered. Fifth, interpretations were constructed by clearly distinguishing participants' statements from the researchers' interpretations. Because the material consisted of transcripts from a single interview session with three participants, the results are treated as exploratory findings rather than generalizations.

Trustworthiness was supported by checking the correspondence between transcript statements, analytic notes, themes, and conclusions, and by the researchers' reflection on their personal assumptions so that interpretations did not override participants' meanings.

Participants' identities were protected using the codes P1, P2, and P3. This study addresses the meaning of spiritual experiences and psychological well-being, not diagnosis or the testing of clinical effectiveness.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Spiritual Practice as an Islamic Psychotherapeutic Experience

From a phenomenological perspective, spiritual practices need to be understood from the experiences and meanings given by those who practice them. A study by Wahyudi et al. (2025) illustrates that the practice of dhikr and spiritual reflection can be related to emotional management, inner peace, and the meaning of life. However, these experiences cannot be assumed to be the same for every individual. Therefore, interviews in this study were used to examine how students themselves explain their spiritual experiences.

The three participants shared different but related experiences. P1 felt calm because he believed that God was All-Seeing and provided wisdom and goodness in every event. P2 felt calmer because he believed that everything would return to God. Meanwhile, P3 stated that dhikr strengthened him in shouldering his responsibilities.

These responses indicate that the meaning of dhikr for the participants lies not only in the repetition of recitations, but also in faith in God. For P1, belief in the wisdom behind events helped build a more positive perspective. For P2, the realization that everything returns to God became a source of calm. For P3, dhikr was interpreted as strengthening when facing responsibilities. These data support the understanding of dhikr as a source of spiritual support

experienced by participants, but do not yet prove its clinical effectiveness or that the same results will be experienced by all students.

For these three participants, dhikr was interpreted as a reminder of their relationship with God, providing peace and strength in carrying out responsibilities. The form of this experience varied according to each participant's interpretation.

Psychological Well-Being: Calmness, Optimism, and Self-Control

Psychological well-being is not simply the absence of anxiety, but also encompasses how a person faces problems, maintains hope, and manages self-responses. Suryatiningsih et al. (2024) found a relationship between resilience, religiosity, and psychological well-being in Islamic boarding school students (santri). These quantitative findings provide context, while the interviews in this study reveal the participants' personal experiences. Djovana et al. (2026) positioned the Panca Jiwa Pondok values as the foundation for developing classical guidance in Islamic boarding schools. This perspective can be expanded to understand dhikr, salawat, and Qur'anic recitation as not merely worship rituals, but spiritual practices that have the potential to support emotional regulation and the psychological well-being of students.

P1 stated that when facing problems, he found it easier to forgive others and was more patient. P2 felt more optimistic and motivated to fight. P3 reported that he had become more self-controlled.

The participants' statements revealed three forms of experiences related to psychological well-being: patience and forgiveness in P1, optimism and perseverance in P2, and self-control in P3. These experiences do not mean that their problems disappeared, but rather indicate that they experienced a change in how they addressed them. Because the data came from only one interview session and three participants, these results should be understood as subjective experiences, not general conclusions about all students.

In this interview, spiritual practices were understood by participants as part of a way of dealing with problems through patience, forgiveness, optimism, struggle, and self-control.

Dhikr and Salawat: Faith, Hope, and Life Goals

Dhikr focuses on remembering Allah, while salawat is an expression of respect and love for the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Both can have different personal meanings for each person. Reza et al. (2021) examined dhikr in the form of salawat in relation to academic stress in young Muslim men. However, the participants' experiences in this study should be interpreted based on their own accounts, not assumed to be consistent with previous research.

P1 stated that reciting salawat and the Qur'an made him more confident in his life's purpose, remembering the Prophet Muhammad's struggles and the advice found in the Qur'an. P2 stated that he still sometimes feels anxious and ultimately seeks advice from his teachers. When asked about dhikr, P2 emphasized his belief that everything will return to Allah.

For P1, memories of the Prophet's struggle and the advice of the Qur'an were related to his belief in the purpose of life. For P2, spiritual experiences did not always alleviate anxiety; he still needed the advice of a teacher. This distinction is important because it demonstrates that spiritual practice can coexist with difficult feelings and the need for interpersonal support. The interviews did not indicate that P2's anxiety was a sign of a lack of faith or sincerity; those were questions P2 had asked himself, not conclusions drawn from the researchers.

Salawat and reading the Qur'an were interpreted as strengthening life goals by P1, while P2's experience confirmed that anxiety can still arise and support from teachers is still needed.

Qur'an Recitation: Advice and Reflection on Life

Qur'anic recitation is both a form of worship and an interaction with revelation. A review by Ghiasi and Keramat (2018) discusses the relationship between reading or listening to the Qur'an and several psychological conditions, including anxiety and stress. However, this research cannot replace exploring the meaning students attach to the experience of reading the Qur'an.

P1 felt more confident in his life's purpose through the Prophet's struggle and the advice in the Qur'an. P3 reported that when reciting salawat and the Qur'an, he felt calmer and felt he was receiving advice from the Qur'anic verses. P2's interview notes indicated that he was still sometimes anxious and preferred to seek advice from his teachers.

Based on the available answers, the Qur'an was interpreted as a source of advice and of a stronger sense of life direction by P1 and P3. For P3, this experience was also accompanied by a greater sense of calm. Meanwhile, P2's experience showed that anxiety is not always resolved through spiritual activity alone and can lead him to seek help from trusted individuals. The interview notes did not specify particular verses, the frequency of recitation, or the circumstances in which participants read the Qur'an; therefore, these aspects cannot be inferred.

The participants who expressed their recitations interpreted the recitations as a source of advice, peace, and reinforcement of life's purpose. These meanings are personal and not experienced or conveyed in exactly the same way by all participants.

When Worship Is Not Enough: Reflection and Social Support

Islamic-based psychological counseling needs to respect spiritual practices while also addressing emotional needs and social support. Nasution et al. (2025) position spiritual practices and social-emotional learning as relevant elements in discussions of student welfare. This balanced approach does not conclude that psychological difficulties automatically indicate a weakness in faith, but rather allows students to seek help.

P1 said that when worship wasn't enough, he sought advice from someone more knowledgeable. P2 said he asked himself if he wasn't sincere and faithful enough to God. P3 chose to pray for the ability to carry out God's commands.

The responses of the three participants showed diverse approaches. P1 sought support from someone perceived as more understanding, P2 engaged in self-reflection through questions about sincerity and faith, and P3 strengthened prayer to enable him to carry out his responsibilities. P2's statement should be understood as a personal inquiry, not evidence that anxiety is caused by a lack of sincerity or faith. These findings demonstrate the importance of non-judgmental support that can combine spiritual support with safe conversations with teachers, caregivers, counselors, or professionals when needed.

When religious services felt insufficient, participants employed different strategies: seeking counseling, self-reflection, and prayer. Spiritual support should not preclude interpersonal support or professional assistance.

The Pesantren as a Context for Spiritual Experience

The spiritual experiences of students take place in an environment that encompasses religious learning, relationships with teachers, and communal living. A study by Nasution et al.

(2025) emphasized the relevance of spiritual practices and socio-emotional support in the context of Islamic boarding schools. Therefore, the experience of worship needs to be understood alongside the students' relationships with those who serve as sources of advice and support.

In this interview, the teacher's role is directly evident in P1's responses, which include seeking advice from someone more knowledgeable, and P2's responses to seeking the teacher's advice when still experiencing anxiety. P3 emphasized prayer for the ability to carry out God's commands. The interview notes do not provide detailed information about the pesantren's schedule, relationships with peers, or the atmosphere in which worship services are held.

P1 and P2's responses indicate that teachers or others perceived as more knowledgeable can be a source of support when religious practices are insufficient to alleviate the difficulties they experience. In P3, prayer was the response described. These data provide a preliminary indication that participants' spiritual experiences do not occur in isolation but can be intertwined with the support of others. Due to limited contextual information, this study cannot yet fully explain the influence of the pesantren system on their experiences.

Interviews revealed the role of advice from teachers or others with greater understanding for some participants. To assess the role of the Islamic boarding school environment more comprehensively, further research is needed to delve deeper into social experiences and worship routines.

Synthesis of Findings and Implications for Psychological Support

In phenomenological research, the discussion needs to distinguish the participants' actual experiences from the researchers' interpretations. The literature on dhikr, salawat, Qur'an recitation, religiosity, and psychological well-being provides a foundation for understanding the possible relationship between spiritual practices and inner experiences, but it does not prove that every individual will experience the same results.

Overall, P1 mentioned calmness, belief in wisdom, purpose in life, patience, forgiveness, and seeking advice. P2 mentioned calmness through the belief that everything returns to Allah, optimism and struggle, but also anxiety that prompted him to ask the teacher for advice. P3 mentioned feeling strengthened in assuming responsibility, calm, advice from verses of the Qur'an, self-control, and prayer.

Themes emerging from the data include (1) belief in God as a source of peace and strength, (2) spiritual practices as a source of meaning and direction in life, (3) changes in responding to problems, such as patience, forgiveness, optimism, and self-control, and (4) the need for support when worship is not sufficient. These findings are preliminary because they only involved three participants with one interview session. The data are also insufficient to state a cause-and-effect relationship or clinical effectiveness. In mentoring practices, dhikr, salawat, Qur'an recitation, and prayer can be valued as sources of support according to the students' beliefs, while still providing access to advice, counseling, and professional mental health services when needed.

Interviews revealed that spiritual practices are perceived as a source of calm, strength, reflection, and purpose in life, but these experiences are not uniform and do not always alleviate anxiety. Responsible mentoring requires respecting spirituality while addressing the psychological needs of each student.

CONCLUSION

Based on interviews with three students at the Darul Ihsan Islamic Boarding School in Menganti, Gresik, dhikr was interpreted as a source of calm and strength in facing responsibilities. Participants associated prayers and Qur'anic recitation with faith in life's purpose, advice, and serenity. When facing challenges, participants described experiences of patience, forgiveness, optimism, perseverance, and self-control. However, these experiences were not uniform. One participant still experienced anxiety and chose to seek advice from a teacher, while other responses included self-reflection, seeking advice from those with greater understanding, and prayer. These findings suggest that spiritual practices can be a meaningful source of support for participants, but are not always sufficient to overcome every difficulty. The results of this study are exploratory because they are based on three participants and one interview session; therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to all students or used to draw conclusions about clinical effectiveness. Psychological support in Islamic boarding schools should respect students' spiritual values while providing space for social support, counseling, and professional services when needed. It is recommended that further research involve more participants and in-depth interviews so that the variations in experiences and the factors that influence them can be understood more fully.

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