

Efficacy of Surah Al-Rehman Listening Therapy on the Psychological Capital of Competitive Civil Service Candidates: A Quasi-Experimental Inquiry

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ABSTRACT: The Central Superior Services (CSS) examination in Pakistan demands high cognitive concentration, sustained academic effort and significant adaptive ability to academic failures. Psychological Capital (PsyCap), a higher-order construct of self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism, is an important internal resource for optimizing performance and resisting stress in high-stakes evaluations. This study aimed to investigate the effect of a structured Surah Al-Rehman listening intervention on the PsyCap dimensions of Muslim CSS candidates (N=50) who failed the written examination and had low baseline PsyCap scores. A 7-day spiritual protocol was applied to participants, who were assessed with the Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ-24) before and after. A single-group pretest-posttest quasi-experimental design was used, with participants being assessed with the Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ-24) before and after the seven-day spiritual protocol. Overall PsyCap was significantly higher at posttest ($M=4.48$, $SD=0.39$) than at pretest ($M=3.34$, $SD=0.41$), $t(49)=14.80$, $p<.001$, $d=2.09$, and significant increases were found in the four subscales of PsyCap: self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism ($ds=1.77-1.92$; $p<.001$). The PCQ-24 showed high internal consistency ($\alpha=.89$). The results of this study suggest that spiritually integrated interventions may be useful in high stress academic settings. Findings of the study are discussed in the cultural context of Pakistan.

KEYWORDS: Surah Al-Rehman, Psychological Capital, Central Superior Services Aspirants, Religious Coping, Competitive Stress

Introduction

The Central Superior Services (CSS) exam is one of the most important institutional exams in Pakistan, which puts a tremendous socio-academic and psychological burden on the candidates. The extended preparation period, along with the high failure rates, often results in acute performance anxiety, a fear of academic failure, loss of motivation, and significant emotional distress. Candidates need strong personal assets to persist, adapt cognitively, and be emotionally stable in these high-stakes performance environments. In the current positive organizational scholarship literature, these personal capacities are defined as Psychological Capital (Luthans et al., 2007; Rozali et al., 2022).

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PsyCap is described as a state of positive psychological development in an individual that is manifested by their self-efficacy, goal-directed hope, adaptive resilience, and localized optimism (Luthans et al., 2006). Self-efficacy is a belief in taking the required actions to achieve difficult goals; hope is agency toward a goal and pathway planning; resilience is a bounce-back from extreme failure; and optimism is positive attributions for current and future success. PsyCap is a state-like, higher-order, synergistically integrated resource that can be targeted for development because each underlying asset responds to different aspects of performance adaptation. Empirical meta-analyses also show that structured psychological micro-interventions have statistically significant, lasting effects on PsyCap among various populations (Lupşa et al., 2020).

Spirituality and formal religious coping are basic coping strategies for reducing psychological distress and coping with performance failures in Islamic cultures (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Pargament, 1997; Fallah et al., 2011). Positive religious coping helps individuals to reframe the severe stressors in a way that allows them to see them as a means of growth, patience, and divine purpose. The listening to the Quran, particularly Surah Al-Rehman, has been identified as a psychologically integrated spiritual practice that can elicit physiological calmness, emotional regulation and cognitive tranquility (Ghiasi & Keramat, 2018; Moulaei et al., 2023). Surah Al-Rehman has a specific theme of divine benevolence, gratitude and transcendent hope that could be a mechanism for internal cognitive restructuring after stressful academic setbacks (Hadju et al., 2020; Rafique et al., 2019). Previous studies on Quranic interventions have focused mainly on clinical populations, maternal health care, or students with general distress, with a significant lack of empirical research on specific achievement populations under high-stakes career evaluations (Abdekhoda & Ranjbaran, 2022; Hadju et al., 2020; Imran, 2021; Jabbari et al., 2020; Majeed et al., 2022; Saleem & Saleem, 2023). In addition, studies have not yet examined whether spiritually integrated protocols have the potential to systematically improve multi-dimensional positive psychological capacities such as PsyCap (Fatima et al., 2025). The present study seeks to fill this gap in theory and practice through the study of the operational effectiveness of a structured Surah Al-Rehman listening protocol for the PsyCap profile of Muslim CSS candidates who failed in written examination.

Theoretical Framework

This study falls under the intersection of three theories: PsyCap Theory (Luthans et al. (2007), Religious Coping Theory (Pargament, 1997), and Metatheoretical Resilience (Richardson, 2002). PsyCap resources are state-like constructs that can be developed and trained using structured cognitive and developmental activities. Religious coping offers cognitive schema, emotional stability, and divine support mechanisms when experiencing life distress. Resilience model sees spiritual involvement as a key pathway of disruption-reintegration, whereby individuals can move from acute failure to higher order psychological functioning. These models indicate that structured exposure to Surah Al-Rehman is a multi-component spiritual and cognitive intervention that systematically improves self-efficacy, hope, resilience and optimism (Southwick et al., 2014; Haroon, 2023). Therefore, it is hypothesised that Surah Al-Rehman listening therapy will increase the psychological capital of competitive civil service candidates.

Method

Research Design

A single group pretest-posttest quasi-experimental research design was used to evaluate changes in PsyCap within persons before and after exposure to an intervention. Since there was no randomized control group, internal validity threats (history, maturation, testing effects, regression to the mean, and researcher demand characteristics) cannot be ruled out completely.

Participants and Sampling Procedure

A purposive sampling method was used to select Muslim CSS candidates in Pakistan who had failed in the written CSS examination and had low scores in the baseline screening questionnaire (which measured PsyCap). A total of N=50 subjects were included in the final analytical sample after a total of eighty subjects were approached. The age of the participants ranged from 22 to 30 years, with 54% being male (n=27) and 46% female (n=23). Sixty-four percent (n=32) had a Master's degree and 36% (n=18) had a Bachelor's degree.

Measures

Demographic Profile

Demographic profile includes the age, gender, marital status, educational background, family background, and CSS examination history.

The Psychological Capital Questionnaire (PCQ-24)

The Psychological Capital Questionnaire (Luthans et al., 2007) having 24 items consists of four subscales: self-efficacy (items 1-6), hope (items 7-12), resilience (items 13-18), and optimism (items 19-24). Items are scored on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree), with three reverse scored items (13, 20, 23). The higher the aggregate scores, the better the PsyCap reserves. The maximum possible score is 144 and the minimum is 24. The internal consistency of the scale was high in the current sample ($\alpha=.89$), as was the internal consistency of the subscales (α ranged from .78 to .82).

Intervention Protocol

The intervention was conducted according to a standard seven consecutive days listening protocol, which included listening to Surah Al-Rehman (without translation) by Qari Abdul Basit Abdul Samad. One 25-30-minute session was conducted daily with each participant. Before every session, candidates were requested to sit comfortably, close their eyes, relax, forgive all with a pure heart and present themselves before Allah in their minds for forgiveness and interpersonal reconciliation. After listening to Surah Al-Rehman, participants were asked to repeat the name of Allah three times in their heart without moving their lips or tongue, and then to sip three times, saying "Allah" in their heart with each sip, while keeping their eyes closed. Lastly, participants opened their eyes and prayed their own prayer (dua) for their needs (Bukhari, 2014; Bukhari, 2020).

Results

Table 1

Psychometric Properties of Psychological Capital Questionnaire (N = 50)

Variables	k	α	M	SD	Actual-Potential Ranges		Skew	Kurt
PsyCap	24	.89	106.74	14.63	71-140	24-144	0.29	0.41
Self-Efficacy	6	.82	26.84	4.21	18-35	6-36	0.31	0.42
Hope	6	.80	26.51	4.08	17-35	6-36	0.27	0.36
Resilience	6	.78	26.37	4.15	16-35	6-36	0.22	0.48
Optimism	6	.81	27.02	4.12	18-36	6-36	0.35	0.29

Note: k = number of items; α = Cronbach's alpha; M = mean; SD = standard deviation; Actual-Potential Ranges = observed and possible score ranges; Skew = skewness; Kurt = kurtosis.

Psychometric screening confirmed the parametric suitability and structural reliability of the PCQ-24 within this specific competitive candidate population. Descriptive indices, internal consistency coefficients, skewness, and kurtosis values are summarized in Table 1.

Table 2
Pretest and Post-test Comparison on Psychological Capital (N = 50)

Variables	Pretest M (SD)	Post-test M (SD)	Mean Diff.	95% CI	t (49)	p	Cohen's d
PsyCap	3.34 (0.41)	4.48 (0.39)	1.14	[0.99,1.29]	14.80	<.001	2.09
Self-Efficacy	3.38 (0.47)	4.51 (0.43)	1.13	[0.95, 1.31]	12.50	<.001	1.77
Hope	3.31 (0.45)	4.46 (0.42)	1.15	[0.97, 1.33]	13.10	<.001	1.85
Resilience	3.27 (0.44)	4.43 (0.41)	1.16	[0.98, 1.34]	12.90	<.001	1.83
Optimism	3.40 (0.46)	4.52 (0.40)	1.12	[0.95, 1.29]	13.60	<.001	1.92

Note: M = mean; SD = standard deviation; Mean Diff. = mean difference; CI = confidence interval; t = paired-samples t statistic; p = significance level; d = Cohen's d effect size.

The results of inferential analysis with paired-samples t-tests showed that there were statistically significant improvements after the seven consecutive days intervention in total PsyCap and all four sub-domains of PsyCap. Item-level mean scores increased from M=3.34 (SD=0.41) at pretest to M=4.48 (SD=0.39) at post-test, representing a statistically significant mean difference of 1.14, t (49) =14.80, p<.001, d=2.09. The effect sizes were standardized and large in all four areas: self-efficacy (d=1.77), hope (d=1.85), resilience (d=1.83), and optimism (d=1.92).

Discussion

The results of this empirical study show that the seven consecutive days of the structured Surah Al-Rehman listening intervention had a statistically significant effect on the Psychological Capital (PsyCap) of the Muslim Central Superior Services (CSS) aspirants failed the written examination. The findings are consistent with the positive organizational literature that PsyCap is a state-like construct that can be systematically developed through micro-interventions (Lupşa et al., 2020; Ibrahim & Whitley, 2020). The observed change in self-efficacy (d = 1.77) suggests that structured spiritual reflection and positive cognitive processing can help to restore self-belief and performance confidence after significant academic failures. The positive increases in goal-directed hope (d = 1.85) and optimism (d = 1.92) also underscore the cognitive reframing potential of spiritually integrated coping protocols.

The concurrent increase in goal-directed hope (d=1.85) and optimism (d=1.92) further highlights the cognitive reframing ability of religious coping. The central theme of Surah Al-Rehman, which focuses on divine mercy, gratitude and divine benevolence, provides candidates with a way to reinterpret academic failure as a temporary developmental hurdle instead of a permanent personal deficit (Ano & Vasconcelles, 2005; Pargament, 1997). The results are consistent with the findings of other studies on listening to the Quran that report decreased psychological anxiety, emotional stress, and physiological stress (Ghiasi & Keramat, 2018; Moulaei et al., 2023; Rozali et al., 2022). They also correspond to certain investigations of the therapeutic effects of Surah Al-Rehman in various clinical and non-clinical groups (Hadju et al., 2020; Imran, 2021; Majeed et al., 2022; Rafique et al., 2019; Saleem & Saleem, 2023). The significant increase in resilience (d=1.83) is consistent with the meta-theoretical view that spiritual resources act as psychological buffers during crisis recovery (Richardson, 2002; Southwick et al., 2014). In the Pakistani culture, positive religious coping is found to work in parallel with self-regulatory coping mechanisms to improve subjective well-being (Fatima et al., 2025; Khan et al., 2012). The observed effect size (d=2.09) might be

due, however, to statistical regression to the mean or response-bias effects due to the multi-component intervention design as participants were selected based on low initial PsyCap scores.

Limitations and Future Directions

The study is a single group quasi-experimental design with self-report measures, which precludes causal inferences, may be subject to social desirability bias, and lacks non-spiritual control comparisons and longitudinal follow-up. Therefore, future studies should employ randomized controlled trials (RCTs) using active comparison groups to separate the therapeutic effects of Quranic audio exposure from other factors. Furthermore, using objective, longitudinal measures (e.g., stress biomarkers, follow-up exam scores) in larger, more diverse samples will help to better understand the long-term sustainability and generalizability of these increases in Psychological Capital.

Implications of the Study

In practice, the results of the study show that a short, inexpensive and culturally sensitive spiritual intervention can be incorporated into academic support programs to restore confidence and resilience in competitive examination candidates. Civil service academies and counseling centres in Muslim majority settings can use spiritually integrated protocols in addition to the traditional academic training to reduce performance anxiety and emotional distress. Methodologically, the study emphasizes the importance of assessing positive psychological resources such as Psychological Capital (PsyCap) instead of just symptom reduction when assessing spiritually oriented mental health interventions.

Conclusion

This study shows that listening to Surah Al-Rehman for seven consecutive days significantly improved the Psychological Capital (PsyCap) and its sub-dimensions (self-efficacy, hope, resilience, and optimism) among the aspirants of Central Superior Services (CSS) in Pakistan who failed in written examinations in the past. The results suggest that spiritually integrated, culturally congruent interventions hold promise in promoting psychological strength and emotional regulation in high-stakes academic contexts. These initial findings are promising, but more randomized controlled trials with longer-term follow-up are needed to confirm the causal efficacy and sustainability of these benefits.

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