

The Concept of Intelligence in the Quran: A Comparative Analysis with Western Psychological Perspectives

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Abstract

Intelligence is a fundamental element in shaping human character and life. In Arabic, intelligence is synonymous with the term “al-‘aql” (reason), signifying the ability to think and understand. The Qur’an emphasises the importance of intelligence by referencing the term “‘aql” and its derivatives 49 times in verb form. This study aims to demonstrate that the concept of intelligence from the Qur’anic perspective holds a unique and distinguished status, markedly different from the Western psychological view. A comparative analysis was conducted between Western concepts such as Intellectual Quotient (IQ), Emotional Quotient (EQ), and Spiritual Quotient (SQ), and the type of intelligence endorsed by Allah SWT in the Qur’an, supported by relevant scriptural evidence. Additionally, the research introduces a religiously rooted dimension of intelligence, the Transcendental Quotient (TQ). This study employs deductive, inductive, and comparative analytical methods on existing literature. Findings show that the Qur’anic conception of intelligence varies considerably from Western notions in its foundations, purpose, and implications. Western intelligence tends to be world-centred and primarily located in the brain, whereas Qur’anic intelligence is divinely inspired and rooted in the heart. The stages of intelligence and supporting Qur’anic evidence are also outlined. In conclusion, accurate intelligence, as Allah describes in the Qur’an, is a divine gift used to attain happiness and well-being in this world and the hereafter, in contrast to the Western view, which primarily emphasises worldly success.

Keywords: Intelligence, Al-‘Aql, Qur’an, Western Psychology, Heart and Reason Concepts

Introduction

The Quran is a source of knowledge for building life. It addresses various branches of knowledge, serving as a pioneer in guiding and educating humanity, especially in foundational domains of thought that underpin other fields. The first revelation received by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was directly related to the pursuit of knowledge, as exemplified by Surah al-‘Alaq, which clearly suggests that knowledge is essential for humankind and can be attained through reflective or cognitive methods (al-Qardawi, 2000).

The expanse of the Quran presents boundless opportunities for scholarly exploration and inquiry. It offers a rich array of knowledge, and it is unfounded to assert that some issues are absent from the Quran or Islam, for Allah has not omitted any aspect required for human life (al-Ghazali, 2021).

This study focuses on the cognitive domain, a branch of psychology. Psychology covers a broad range of the human mind, particularly the core aspects of cognition, affect, and psychomotor processes. The subdivisions of psychological research are numerous, covering various fields such as educational psychology, developmental psychology, child psychology, and many others. Several key schools of thought exist within psychology, including psychoanalysis, pioneered by Sigmund Freud, and behaviourism, developed by B.F. Skinner, as well as humanistic psychology. This research examines explicitly humanistic psychology and its relation to intelligence.

Problem Statement

The motivation for this study arises from the researcher's awareness of the lack of scholarly literature on intelligence from the perspective of the Quran, particularly in the context of Islamic psychology. The general public remains perplexed when presented with concepts such as IQ, EQ, SQ, and other related psychological constructs, despite these ideas having foundations in Islam. Meanwhile, some people find themselves confused or surprised when introduced to topics concerning Islamic psychology, as if Islamic psychology and the concept of intelligence according to the Quran have never existed.

According to Muhammad Al-Ghazali (1998) in his book 'Kayfa Nata'ammalu Ma'a al-Quran', this issue may stem from the fact that many individuals are ignorant of the Quran's contents, let alone capable of comprehending its vast intellectual teachings. The phenomenon of Quranic illiteracy among Muslims can no longer be denied, affecting all age groups within the Muslim community. Not only does this pose a challenge in contemplating and deriving meaning from the Quran, but even its proper recitation and reading have become significant issues (al-Ghazali, 1996).

Prompted by this phenomenon, the researcher seeks to explore, examine, analyse, and uncover a critical aspect of the Quran about human life: the intellect, specifically cognitive intelligence as understood from a Quranic perspective. Generally, the Quran employs terms such as ta'qilun, tatafakkarun, tubşirūn, ulu al-albab, among others, which are discussed in detail in Chapter Two of this study.

The research will investigate the terms that represent elements of intelligence in the Quran as well as the Quranic methodology for attaining such intelligence. It will also examine the stages of intelligence presented by the Quran and the contributing factors to intelligence. Furthermore, the study aims to explain the relevance of the Quranic concept of intelligence to daily life and to explore the similarities and differences among IQ, EQ, and SQ from both Western and Quranic perspectives.

In addition to being compelled to examine and investigate these issues, the researcher also aims to highlight the contrast between Western psychological concepts and those found in the Quran. This effort is intended to address the confusion among some individuals who

believe that the discipline of psychology does not exist in Islam and who are overly captivated by Western psychological concepts and theories of intelligence. This phenomenon may indeed be what Malik Badri (1989) described in his book "The Dilemma of Muslim Psychologists," stating that "Muslim psychologists are now trapped in a lizard's hole from which it is difficult to escape" (Badri, 1989).

The current reality is that Muslims are not only entangled in the problem of immorality, but also unthinkingly follow educational systems, governmental models, and even cultural and lifestyle patterns of Christians and Jews, regardless of their inferiority or inadequacy; indeed, "if they were to enter a lizard's hole, Muslims would follow them without hesitation" (Abdul Mujib & Yusuf Mudzakir, 2001).

The researcher further intends to elucidate, as clearly as possible, the relationship between psychology and human development, particularly intelligence and its related dimensions, such as methods of thinking and their objectives. Most importantly, the researcher seeks to affirm that the Quran does not neglect any aspect essential to human life.

Literature Review

A review of previous scholarship reveals a significant gap in scholarship that addresses intelligence as conceived in the Quran. Much of the available literature originates from Western psychology, while Muslim scholars tend to favour the term "aql" over "cognitive intelligence." The literature can be organised into three primary trends: works by Muslim scholars, contributions by Western authors, and studies of intelligence from diverse perspectives.

Muslim scholars have approached the concept both within explicitly Islamic frameworks and as a general cognitive function linked to the mind. Abdul Mujib and Jusuf Mudzakir (2001) discuss Qalbiyah intelligence as encompassing intellectual, emotional, moral, spiritual, and religious domains, and compare Islamic and Western psychological theories. Robert Frager (2014), in his analysis of Sufi psychology, links intelligence to faith in God, critiques Western psychology's discordance with Islamic values, and emphasises spiritual fulfilment as the core of human intelligence. Harun Nasution (1979) explores the relationship between reason and revelation in the Islamic tradition, noting that the Quran encourages rational thought as central to the advancement of knowledge. Dr. Mohd. Zaidi Bin Ismail (2018) systematically analyses reason, knowledge, and education from the perspective of Sunni thought, drawing connections between cognition and Islamic epistemology. Harun Yahya (2000) advocates for deep, critical thinking rooted in Quranic methodology to transcend mental stagnation and habitual conformity. Yusuf al-Qardhawi (1996) describes the foundations of scientific reasoning in the Quran and addresses obstacles to cognitive intelligence in Islamic thought. Ahmad Syauqi Ibrahim (2014) provides a spiritual analysis grounded in Quranic evidence, discussing the tension between modern psychology and religious guidance. Muhammad Uthman An-Najati (2005) compares modern psychological terminology with its Quranic equivalents, examines cognitive, affective, and psychomotor features, and presents Quranic models for psychological therapy. Ibrahim El-Fiky (2006) outlines methodologies of thought, emphasising certainty as a hallmark of Quranic intelligence. Mohd Zaidi Bin Ismail (2016) distinguishes between reason and intellect and cites Islamic primary sources to clarify the epistemological framework. Achmad Mubarak (1999) links cognitive development methods

in Islamic propagation (dakwah) directly to Quranic teachings, while Syed Sheikh Bin Ahmad al-Hadi (1965) delineates the function of reason in understanding creation, causality, and divine attributes. Classical sources such as al-Ghazali, al-Muhasibi, Abd Qadir Jailani, Jalaluddin ar Rumi, and Ibn Maskawaih have thematically explored cognition and intelligence, laying a foundation for integrating Islamic perspectives with cognitive psychology.

Western literature on intelligence is vast and varied, emphasising critical, creative, and efficient thinking. Gardner et al. (1992), in "Intellectual Development," surveyed human intelligence from childhood to old age, examining biological, nutritional, and environmental influences. Their work underlines the fundamental role of cognitive intelligence in critical, creative, and efficient thought. Contemporary Western authors such as Alec Fisher, Gregory Bassham, Mac Neil Browne, Vincent Ryan Ruggiero, Tim Walter, Burton Porter, Tracy Bowell, Bruce Reichenbach, Brooke Moore, and others predominantly address the mechanics of critical thinking, creativity, and reasoning. Weil and Kincheloe (2004) highlight complex critical thinking, which integrates diverse disciplinary perspectives and acknowledges intellectual intelligence as a prerequisite for advanced reasoning. They encourage a transdisciplinary approach that embraces sociocultural, historical, and philosophical dimensions in assessing knowledge frameworks and subject positions.

Despite evolving frameworks for critical thinking in Western literature, a distinct research gap exists in integrating the Quranic worldview, which is holistic, universal, and rooted in faith. The Quranic paradigm offers cognitive intelligence that transcends cultural, linguistic, and disciplinary boundaries, positioning itself as a comprehensive solution to the complex demands of modern thought. Such integration remains essential for both the wider human community and specifically for Muslim societies seeking cognitive models grounded in religious tradition.

Research Objectives

This study aims to examine the concept of intelligence as presented in the Quran and to compare it with prevailing theories within Western psychology. Specifically, it seeks to identify and analyse Quranic terms related to cognitive intelligence, such as ta'qilun, tatafakkarun, tubşirūn, and ulul al-bab. The research also strives to articulate the Quranic methodology for cultivating intelligence and to explore the similarities and differences between Islamic and Western perspectives. Ultimately, this study aspires to highlight the relevance of Quranic intelligence in addressing contemporary cognitive and educational challenges within the broader framework of psychological studies.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach, using content analysis to examine Quranic verses on intelligence and compare them with established Western psychological theories. Relevant Quranic terms, such as ta'qilun, tatafakkarun, tubşirūn, and ulul al-bab, are identified and analysed to elucidate the Quranic perspective. Scholarly texts and classical commentaries are reviewed to provide interpretative insights. Furthermore, contemporary psychological literature is referenced to highlight similarities and differences with the Quranic concept of intelligence. The synthesis of Islamic and Western perspectives enables a comprehensive understanding of cognitive intelligence within both frameworks.

Findings

Analysis of the data from previous chapters indicates that Quranic intelligence consists of progressive stages. At its foundational level (IQ), intelligence emerges from hearing, sight, and reflection, primary faculties that initiate cognitive and intellectual growth. These elements act as gateways for information, and the synthesis of their input is retained in the heart through contemplation. This foundational intelligence evolves into more nuanced domains: the next level (EQ), further to higher (SQ), and ultimately a peak stage (TQ), corresponding respectively to emotional, spiritual, and transcendental intelligence. Each stage interacts dynamically, building upon cognitive foundations established in the Quran.

Discussion

Early Sufi scholars, such as Abul Harith al-Muhasibi and Hakim at-Tirmizi, identified the heart (qalb) as the true centre of intelligence, not merely in a physiological sense but as the locus of perception, reasoning, and spiritual insight. Quranic verses emphasise that understanding, seeing, and hearing are not just physical acts but spiritual processes rooted in the heart. Contemporary interpretations, supported by comparative linguistic and scientific research, show that the heart possesses properties analogous to the brain ("little brain"), providing further evidence that human cognition, reflection, and emotional intelligence have deep Quranic precedent.

The Quran's terms for basic intelligence, hearing, sight, and contemplation are frequently referenced, representing the essential synthesis through which learning and wisdom are acquired. The importance of memory, the primacy of hearing over sight, and the impact of reflection are corroborated by scientific findings concerning sensory development and learning progression. Furthermore, Quranic intelligence progresses through specific activities, such as serious, focused, and deep thinking that correspond to higher-level cognitive processes, as denoted by terms such as tafakkur, dzikr, tadabbur, tafahhum, and fiqh. This mental engagement encompasses ongoing, collective, and creative intellectual work, underlining the Quran's encouragement of continuous and purposeful reasoning.

At higher levels, the Quran emphasises the need for evidence, logical reasoning, and spiritual significance. Terms such as sulṭon, burhan, dalil, hujjah, bayyinah, āyah, and 'alamah underscore the importance of proofs and signs for supporting beliefs and reasoning. The language of the Quran in these respects mirrors scientific principles of validation and comprehensive understanding.

Ultimate intelligence, in the Quranic paradigm, is marked by the capacity to derive lessons, reflections, and reminders from all experiences, including those related to metaphysics and faith. This culminates in the ability to take heed from history, spiritual signs, and divine guidance, reflecting transcendental intelligence (TQ) as described by the terms maw'izah, nakāl, tabṣīrah, nudzr, uswah, mathal, dzikro, muddakir, 'ibrah, āyah, and nasihah. The Quran advocates cultivating this advanced intelligence, emphasising it as a trait of the truly wise and reflective Muslim.

Conclusion

The comprehensive analysis conducted in this study shows that the Quran presents a complex, multi-layered conception of intelligence that encompasses sensory, emotional,

rational, spiritual, and transcendental domains. Unlike reductionist models that mainly equate intelligence with cognitive skills, the Quranic perspective places intelligence within a holistic framework, including the faculties of hearing, sight, reflection, and, importantly, the heart (qalb) as the seat of higher reasoning and insight. Early Islamic scholars and Sufi thinkers recognised the heart not just as a physical organ, but as a metaphysical centre with abilities for perception, discernment, and understanding, a view now supported by emerging scientific research on the heart's neurological complexity and its role in emotional processing.

This research elucidates the Quran's innovative delineation of intelligence development across four stages: the foundational (sensory-cognitive, IQ), important (emotional, EQ), high (spiritual, SQ), and peak (transcendental, TQ) levels. Each stage is marked by distinct Quranic terminology and supported by empirical references, highlighting that the heart's cognitive and affective functions interact synergistically with sensory input and rational thought. The findings reinforce that memorisation, education, and self-reflection, as promoted by the Quranic worldview, can significantly contribute to cognitive growth and moral-spiritual enhancement within individuals and communities.

Moreover, the heart's role in Quranic psychology is not limited to knowledge acquisition but extends deeply into the ethical, spiritual, and existential realms. The Quran's emphasis on continuous reflection (tafakkur), deep contemplation (tadabbur), and active engagement with signs (āyāt) aligns with both Islamic tradition and modern developmental psychology, advocating a lifetime journey toward self-actualisation, wisdom, and faith.

The comparative analysis with Western psychology reveals that, while Western frameworks research cognition, creativity, and evidence-based reasoning intensively, Quranic intelligence integrates these with a sense of higher purpose and universal ethics rooted in revelation and fitrah (innate human disposition). This positions the Quranic paradigm as a robust and adaptive model, offering significant relevance for addressing contemporary cognitive challenges, character development, and educational transformation, both within Muslim societies and for humanity at large.

Ultimately, this study affirms that intelligence, as conceptualised by the Quran, is inseparable from the holistic development of the human being. The heart (qalb) is the centre not only of emotion and ethics but also of intellect and spiritual intuition, uniting the rational and the transcendental in the pursuit of knowledge, wisdom, and divine proximity. Future research is encouraged to further explore the multidimensionality of Quranic intelligence, expand empirical investigation, and integrate its principles into global educational and psychological practice, thereby enriching scholarly discourse and the practical realisation of holistic human potential.

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