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Religious beliefs and work conscience of Muslim nurses in Iraq during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Religious beliefs are defined as thinking, feeling and behaving in accordance with the beliefs and teachings of a religious system. In other words, religious beliefs are indicative of the role of religion in the individual and social life of people, as well as adherence to values and beliefs in daily life, performing religious practices and rituals and participating in activities of religious organisations. Religious beliefs are a set of dos and don'ts, and values are considered one of the most important psychological supports that can provide meaning in all moments of life and save a person from meaninglessness by providing explanatory support in specific situations. In addition, work conscience is defined as a feeling of inner commitment to comply with agreed-upon requirements for work. In other words, work conscience means heartfelt satisfaction and practical commitment to the tasks that a person is supposed to perform properly, in a way that there will be no negligence in performing the duty even if no supervisor oversees the activity. Given the significant role of nurses in hospitals, especially during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, the religious beliefs of healthcare employees have become more important. Therefore, the present study aimed to evaluate the effect of religious beliefs on the work conscience of 1800 Muslim nurses in Iraq during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021. Standard questionnaires were applied to assess the respondents' religious beliefs and work conscience. In addition, data analyses (Cronbach's alpha, Pearson's correlation, etc.) were performed in Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). According to the results, religious beliefs have a positive effect on nurses' work conscience ($p = 0.822$).

Contribution: The findings of this study showed that the employees of an organisation, especially nurses and healthcare staff, can rely on their religious beliefs and benefit from their advantages in order to strengthen their work conscience during a hard time such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: religion; religious beliefs; Muslim nurses; work conscience.

Introduction

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) appeared at the end of 2019 in Wuhan, Hubei province, China. The rapid spread of the virus prompted the World Health Organization to declare a global health emergency on January 30, 2020, and a pandemic on March 11, 2020. To date, several million new cases have been identified and many more have died (Cerit & Uzun 2022). During this period, despite the unprecedented mobilisation of the people to combat this phenomenon, the identification and treatment of a large number of patients has put the health systems of many countries under unprecedented pressure and beyond its existing capacity to combat this pandemic. Meanwhile, the employees of the health system, especially the nurses, have been affected by this natural disaster more than other people on the front lines of this pandemic. The deadly outbreak of coronavirus has exceeded the existing capacities of the health systems of many countries and with the acceleration of the pandemic, the lack of equipment for prevention, personal protective equipment, diagnosis and treatment, especially amongst health staff inside hospitals, has become the most serious problem (Hui, Azhar & Madani 2020). On the one hand, the low usability of personal protective equipment has made the performance of work an important challenge for nurses. At the time of the pandemic, many health centres adopted a policy of reusing personal protective equipment, which itself had many health considerations. Prolonged use of personal protective equipment has also caused problems such as headaches, nausea and severe allergic skin reactions, mainly because of the low usability of this equipment. Reports indicate that the design of many of these devices does not take into account long-term use considerations (Lu, Stratton & Tang 2020).

COVID-19 is transmitted by air currents or airborne droplets and direct contact of infected hands with the eyes, nose or mouth (Cerit & Uzun 2022). Therefore, airflow or negative ventilation inside hospital wards plays an important role in controlling the transmission of this virus. On the other hand, nurses mainly face the problem that by wearing insulated clothes, they will be exposed to double heat stress, which can affect their performance and occupational health. Nursing is a stressful job, and employees in this profession typically face high levels of physical and mental workload, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, where work pressures have intensified because of special circumstances (Fernandez et al. 2020). As the pandemic continues, the number of patients admitted to the wards has increased and the need for patient care has increased accordingly, resulting in an increase in the physical and mental workload of health staff, especially intensive care unit nurses. At any given moment, patients may experience a drop in saturated oxygen levels in the blood, which requires immediate action, doubling the time pressure for nurses. In addition to what has been said, the job dimensions of nurses during this pandemic have been greatly influenced by the inescapable features of the COVID-19 phenomenon, including fear and uncertainty (Zhang, Shi & Sun 2020). At the beginning of the pandemic and with the increase in hospitalisations, there was an unpredictable situation in which patients without special symptoms were admitted to hospitals and exposed to other health personnel. At the same time, the lack of personal protective and diagnostic equipment for health workers contributes to the dimensions of this fear and uncertainty (Folgueira et al. 2020).

In addition to considerations related to the lack of equipment, environment and job content of nurses, the organisational challenges of the hospital system, despite their importance, have received less attention. From this perspective, the lack of specialised and experienced nurses, unconventional work schedule, involuntary transfer of power between departments, insufficient support of the organisation, quality of rest time, contradictory rules and information and insufficient training are important problems for nurses during this period. At the beginning of the pandemic, the need for experienced nurses in this field had increased, and the lack of this workforce caused some more experienced nurses to work long hours whilst their work shifts changed erratically (Duygulu et al. 2020). On the other hand, with the infection of a number of nurses in the special wards and the quarantine of part of this important workforce, the shortage of nurses doubled and nurses from other wards were used to solve this problem. This replacement has also caused problems because of the unfamiliarity of new nurses with the special ward. At the same time, although there was a shortage of staff on the special wards, other wards of the hospital were closed because of the lack of outpatients and nonemergency surgeries, which reduced the revenue of private hospitals. As a result of this, some of these hospitals did not continue to cooperate with the contract staff, and this, along with the hard work of the nurses and the current situation, caused

discouragement and dissatisfaction amongst many of them (Vizheh, Qorbani & Arzaghi 2020).

Favourable behaviour and performance of employees is a serious and interesting topic for organisational managers. Studies show that a low number of employees dedicate all their efforts to their jobs by behaving favourably and in a satisfactory manner. Therefore, it is crucial to recognise the origins of these behaviours and determine the factors affecting them (Reger 2004). Islam has plans for all aspects of human life and guides them in a way that their financial and spiritual needs are met. In addition, it expresses all needs for growth, prosperity and evolution of human beings. Whilst material factors and facilities play an effective role in the improvement of employees' performance (Krogmann 2022), it is crucial, especially in Islamic organisations, to evaluate the factors affecting humans' behaviours from the perspective of Islamic teaching and improve employees' performance through reinforcing their religious beliefs and values. In this regard, human behaviour improvement means guiding employees towards meeting the financial and spiritual needs of the person and the organisation whilst focusing on the development of the world and the hereafter (Kayaoglu 2015).

Over the past few years, managers, researchers and employees have paid special attention to the position of religious beliefs and religiosity in organisations as a necessity for the interaction of the organisation with employees, customers and society. Work conscience and commitment are one of the main pillars of collective behaviour in any community.

In this regard, the Qur'an has repeatedly mentioned numerous guidelines to have work commitment and conscience. In the Qur'an, God calls himself the most loyal, saying, 'who is more faithful to his covenant than Allah?' (Surah At-Tawbah, Ayat 111) In another Surah, God resolutely rejects the least possibility of breaking the covenant with himself, expressing: 'Allah will not fail to perform his promise'. In addition, God calls his servants to be faithful to their obligations and to refrain from unfaithfulness and breaking the covenant. God warns those who do not fulfil the covenants by expressing the signs of the righteous (Surah Ar-Ra'd, Ayat 20). In another ayat, God requires the believers to be faithful to any covenant, stating: 'O you who believe! Fulfil the obligations' (Surah Al-Ma'idah, Ayat 1).

Respect for the covenant and the need to act on it is innate. Every human being learns and is inspired by the necessity of fulfilling the covenant in the first school of education, that is, human nature. At the beginning of life, children with their pure natures consider it necessary to fulfil covenants. They also condemn breaches of contract and are upset by the empty promises of some parents. At the same time, children grow up with this feeling. As a result of the nature of this principle in human society, breach of covenant is considered a moral vice and will have irreversible effects on the person's personality and humanity.

Meanwhile, nothing is more scandalous than breaking a treaty in the political arena. A nation is accepted when it fulfils its obligations and respects them. The Qur'an orders us to be faithful to our covenant and know that we are responsible to God. For instance, he orders us to keep the divine covenant. 'That is what he has enjoined upon you so that you may take heed' (Surah Al-An'am, Ayat 152). He also expresses: 'fulfil the covenant, for you will be called to account regarding the covenant' (Surah Al-Isra, Ayat 34). In another Ayat, he mentions: 'those who are keepers of their trusts and their covenant' (Surah Al-Mu'minun, Ayat 8). The most prominent and beautiful manifestations of loyalty can be found amongst the prophets and divine leaders. They both insisted on faithfulness to the covenant and called their followers to this great virtue. One of these models is mentioned in the Qur'an: 'mention Ismail in the book; surely he was truthful in [his] promise, and he was a messenger, a prophet' (Surah Surah Maryam, Ayat 54).

In addition to the exploitation of an experienced and capable workforce, the development of healthcare services requires the presence of loyal and committed personnel and nurses in order to advance things, which will ultimately increase the quality of services, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the unprecedented cooperation of the people to fight against COVID-19, the diagnosis and treatment of a huge number of patients has put unprecedented pressure on the health systems of many countries. In fact, the pressure has exceeded the capacities of these centres to deal with the pandemic (Rayani, Rayani & Najafi-Sharjabad 2021).

Meanwhile, there are people amongst the healthcare personnel, especially nurses, who have suffered the most because of working at the forefront of this challenge. Studies show that a shortage in prevention, diagnosis and treatment equipment at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic was the most important challenge for nurses (Labrague & De Los Santos 2020). Moreover, nurses' job characteristics have undergone serious changes with increased physical and mental workload, especially time pressure. On the other hand, nurses' job conditions were extremely affected by unavoidable characteristics of the COVID-19 phenomenon, including fear and uncertainty. Because of this situation, hospitals have dealt with issues regarding the provision of a suitable physical environment for their personnel and patients (Afshari, Nourollahi-Darabad & Chinisaz 2021).

Furthermore, little attention has been paid to organisational problems such as a shortage in the experienced workforce, lack of education of novice staff and insufficient rest time, despite nurses's importance. The outcome of these difficult situations has been nurses' physical and psychological disorders, which can seriously threaten their health and quality of care, as well as the performance of countries' health systems. Therefore, the sacrifices made by nurses during the COVID-19 pandemic must be explained based on other variables (Mekonen, Shetie & Muluneh 2020).

Religious beliefs give meaning to a person's life and work and have internal values for the person. In addition, they motivate individuals and lead to the proper performance of responsibilities because of connection to an infinite source. The way a religious person thinks about God or their relationship with God forms their perception of the world and affects their behaviours (Ferriss 2002). Such a perception affects the internalised form of the person's norms and beliefs and leads to the establishment of internal commitment, aiming at adherence to 'shoulds and shouldn'ts' for doing a task properly.

In other words, work conscience is the commitment, content and feeling of a sense of responsibility and practical commitment to one's responsibilities. Notably, management's knowledge of the organisation would be extremely changed if managers' worldview and approach to human resource management were based on Islamic and Qur'anic worldviews (Ten Kate, de Koster & van der Waal 2017). Even though different views exist on the management of organisations and human resource empowerment, most of them have a materialist view rather than an Islamic view. Accordingly, the present study aimed to evaluate the effect of religious beliefs (based on Islam) and the work conscience of Muslim nurses in Iraq during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021.

The role of religious beliefs in the formation of correct behaviour

In the context of religion, 'belief' is linked with the concept of 'faith'. In other words, faith is a state a person is in, which arises from a set of deep beliefs that not only become the origin of certain behaviours but also guide emotions and feelings and can be the origin of spiritual and mental relaxation (Masters & Spielmans 2007). Employees' beliefs can weaken or strengthen an organisation. In fact, there is a close and bilateral link between faith and practice in Islamic teachings, in such a way that the improvement or weakening of one results in the enhancement or a decline in the other one. Therefore, the combination of faith and righteous deeds is one of the most common combinations in the Qur'an (Surah Al-Baqarah, Ayat 25; Surah Ar-Ra'd, Ayat 29; Surah Al-Anbiya, Ayat 94). Belief is something that you strongly believe in. Most often, belief is also called faith. The word 'belief' is a term related to the field of social psychology, which studies discussions on the psychological phenomenon of belief in the sense that it has social behaviour. Beliefs are simply defined as thoughts that a person believes to be true (Berkman 1995).

From the point of view of Islam, religious beliefs are any beliefs that have a religious origin, such as believing in principles of religion such as belief in God and resurrection and prophecy. In addition, religious beliefs are a set of measures, behaviours, beliefs and attitudes related to ancillaries of the faith and principles of the faith and other religion-related areas, the consolidation of which in humans can determine their way of life (Yeary et al. 2012). Here,

Islamic beliefs refer to the original Qur'anic and Islamic beliefs and convictions, according to which a person sees God as the knower and observer of all their actions (Surah Al-Alaq, Ayat 11) and is sure that their actions are recorded with all details and that they will be punished or rewarded in the afterlife based on these actions. This type of belief, if institutionalised in the organisation, can guide human resources' behaviours, intensions and performance regarding their organisational responsibilities.

Whilst there is no certain definition for behaviour improvement and formation, based on discussions about human resources in organisational psychological science, human resource improvement could be defined as the enhancement of the performance of human resources, which guides the attitudes and values of employees towards a positive and favourable state and decreases and corrects unfavourable behaviours through strengthening Islamic beliefs (Osman, Mahphoth & Hashim 2014). In other words, human resource performance improvement results in the strengthening of persistent successful performance and helps people learn about their weaknesses and correct them. Ultimately, it improves productivity and efficiency in the organisation. From the perspective of Islam, organisations are not just established for work; in fact, each organisation is a social system formed as a tool for helping people and meeting their needs and achieving human objectives, which include human growth and excellence (both at the community level and the organisational level) in the shadow of divine and human values (Zangoueinezhed & Moshabaki 2011). Islam considers human perfection and spirituality in all fields as the main goal of doing work and also defines material gain within the framework of Islamic values and beliefs. Industrial psychologists believe that each organisation must pursue another goal called the improvement of human resources in addition to the main goal of production (Mellahi & Budhwar 2010).

Meanwhile, one of the outcomes of correct behaviour formation is the strengthening of people's work conscience (Jiang & Johnson 2018). The term 'work conscience' has been increasingly used in the administrative culture of Islamic society and must be taken into consideration by managers and employees of Islamic organisations (Nasution & Rafiki 2020). The essence of human nature requires that every activity and task undertaken by the person is completed in the best possible way and that any negligence is avoided. In other words, the essence of human nature is to do a task accurately and completely. Reason and religion dictate that everyone should do what has been undertaken firmly and well and that no discrimination is made between oneself and others. In this respect, Imam Ali (p) advised his son: 'treat all people kindly as long as you want them to treat you kindly. Accept for them whatever you accept for yourself, and find unfavourable for yourself all that which you find unfavourable for others' (Majlissi 1406 B.C.). This saying greatly depicts work conscience, and if adhered to by all people, this order will make society a better place. On the other hand, the absence of work conscience and unfavourable performance will prevent society from advancement, will disrupt many tasks and will lead to extreme losses. Imam Ali considers work conscience a human adornment, stating: 'the adornment and beauty of man is a good deed, not good clothes' (Tamimi Amedi 1410 B.C.). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed in this study:

Hypothesis: Religious beliefs have a significant relationship with work conscience of Muslim nurses in Iraq during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Research method

In this research, the statistical population included 1800 Muslim nurses in the cities of Baghdad, Najaf, Karbala and Samarra in Iraq in 2021. Religious beliefs were assessed using the standard questionnaire by Worthington et al. (2003), which encompasses 10 items that demonstrate how engaged a person is in religious affairs. A person with high religious beliefs is committed to their religious beliefs, values and duties and uses them in their daily life. In other words, religious beliefs show how much time is dedicated to religious activities. In addition, work conscience was assessed using the 16-item questionnaire by Costa and McCrae (1992). In this research, the items of the foregoing tool were scored based on a five-point Likert scale from completely disagree (1) to completely agree (5). In total, 1684 questionnaires were returned and analysed.

The validity of the instruments was evaluated using the content validity method. To this end, the questionnaires were provided to 10 faculty members in the areas of theology, sociology and psychology to be assessed by these experts. The generality of the tools was confirmed by the subjects and their reliability was approved by calculating Cronbach's alpha coefficient in SPSS (Table 1).

In this respect, a Cronbach's alpha of above 0.7 was confirmed as appropriate reliability (Momeni & Faal Qayyumi 2022). In addition, the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test was used to assess the normal distribution of the data. Furthermore, Pearson's correlation coefficient was exploited to evaluate the relationship between the variables following the confirmation of data normality.

In Table 2, variables with a level of significance above 0.05 had a normal distribution.

According to Table 3, there was a significant direct relationship work conscience and religious beliefs of Muslim nurses in Iraq at the confidence level of 95%.

Discussion

With the onset of COVID-19, healthcare staff, especially nurses, are amongst the main contributors to this phenomenon. The extent of the effects of this phenomenon

TABLE 1: Cronbach's alpha coefficient of the instrument.

Variables	Number of questions	Cronbach's alpha
Religious beliefs	10	0.74
Work conscience	16	0.78

TABLE 2: Kolmogorov–Smirnov test results.

Variables	Value of K–S statistics	Level of significance	Result
Religious beliefs	0.634	0.543	Normal
Work conscience	0.453	0.475	Normal

TABLE 3: Pearson's test results to assess research hypothesis.

Research hypothesis	Number of samples	Correlation coefficient	Error rate	Level of significance
Religious beliefs have a significant effect on the work conscience of Muslim nurses in Iraq.	1684	0.822	0.05	0.000

on the individual, the organisation and even outside health organisations can be studied and considered.

In the meantime, issues related to personal protective equipment and devices, especially considerations related to their design and usability, should be considered. Environmental health of hospitals, including proper ventilation and disinfection of the environment is also an important issue within the organisation that needs serious attention. In addition, the dominance of the COVID-19 phenomenon over the nursing profession is also thought-provoking, with fear, uncertainty, high physical and mental workload and time pressure in a number of dimensions.

Organisational and extra-organisational issues, on the other hand, are a very important issue that has received less attention. Lack of specialised staff, lack of training of new staff and insufficiency of rest time are problems within the organisation, whilst public distancing from health staff and lack of support for nurses and their families are issues outside the organisation. Furthermore, the results of these difficult and exhausting conditions for many nurses have been many physical and mental disorders that pose a serious threat to their health and quality of care, as well as the functioning of the health system. Nurses are one of the largest working groups and facilitators of hospital care services. Therefore, increasing the efficiency and effectiveness of nurses in hospitals is of particular importance. On the other hand, human resource productivity is one of the priorities of development and progress of any organisation. Hospitals are no exception and in recent years, many efforts have been made to develop the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of nurses' productivity. Nurses' productivity is a very important issue because hospitals are a place to care for patients with complex and multiple needs, and it is well understood that nurses are an important source of work in the organisation (Thompson & Stanowski 2009).

Success in work, social and professional activities relies on having efficient and good human resources. Proper services are provided to the community if the human resources work favourably. By doing so, people, agents and employees will achieve their goals and will successfully communicate with the environment and customers. One of the fundamental strategies to achieve this goal is to institutionalise the work conscience. In this regard, the best and most necessary factor to increase work conscience is to establish the basic principles and values of Islam about mankind, such as faith in God and charity. The constant presence of this cycle will lay the foundation for the institutionalisation of work conscience and turn it into an invariable element of the personality of brokers and employees.

Belief in God is strong support for the truths in the universe (e.g. work conscience), and those who lose this support will definitely have a vulnerable work conscience. History shows that religious people are more committed to conscience, compared with nonbelievers. Oppression and crime committed from the front of infidelity and atheism have darkened the course of history and cannot be compared with the sins of believers. The Qur'an expresses this reality: 'And be not like those who forgot Allah, and so he made them oblivious of themselves. They are the wicked ones' (Surah Al-Hashr, Ayat 19). This self-forgetfulness, lack of integrity and unconsciousness in doing works are obviously made by infidelity.

The present study aimed to evaluate the effect of religious beliefs on the work conscience of Muslim nurses in Iraq in 2021. According to the results, religious beliefs had a positive significant effect on work conscience (p: 0.822). Throughout one's life, decisions are made based on one's beliefs, attitudes and values. This confirms the research hypothesis that Islamic beliefs could play a role in the correction and improvement of human resources' performance. Strengthening and consolidating the Islamic beliefs of the organisation's human resources is less costly compared with other factors and has the greatest impact on improving the behaviour and performance of human resources in the workplace.

Conclusion

According to the teachings of the Qur'an, there is a deep and bilateral relationship between Islamic beliefs and the favourable performance of people. The nature of sound faith and beliefs is that the believer behaves in a worthy and healthy manner and adheres to the principles of their faith and beliefs. Accurate beliefs often have positive outcomes and lead to proper performance. In addition, belief in divine supervision and accurate recording of human performance, which is the basis for calculation and evaluation on the Day of Judgement (resurrection), affects human behaviour. The effect of this belief on behaviour is strengthened when the belief is also strengthened. In other words, the more a belief is strengthened, the higher it impacts the organisational behaviour of employees and enhances their performance. Therefore, if managers are able to institutionalise in the mind of employees the specific basic beliefs and assumptions which God has put forward in his word, employees will be better able to correct and improve the performance of the organisation's workforce. Accordingly, our findings could be used in all work

environments, especially Islamic organisations, based on Qur'anic teachings.

Acknowledgements

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