

**Spirituality and Mental Well-being: a study of the members  
of three London based Sufi groups**

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## Declaration

I, Merve Cetinkaya, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

## Abstract

In this thesis, I present an exploration of the relationship between spirituality, well-being, and Sufi practices. My research is framed by the secularisation thesis and the distinction between spirituality and religion. The thesis investigates the factors and reasons that individuals participate in Sufi practices and how broader social, religious, and mental health contexts impinge upon their experiences in relation to their well-being. This thesis is divided into two main parts.

The first part of the thesis reports on a systematic review in which I reviewed currently available evidence about Sufi practices and their relationship with well-being. I identified 49 papers examining this relationship published between the years 2000-2022. Although the results of the systematic review suggested a potentially positive connection between Sufi spirituality and reducing anxiety and depression in patients, the included studies were of low quality. This review demonstrated that the topic of well-being and Sufi practices was under-researched, and there was a need to provide more comprehensive research. Therefore, I decided to conduct a more explorative, in-depth qualitative study for the second part of this thesis.

The second part of this thesis describes an original, in-depth qualitative study which I conducted with leaders and participants across three Sufi centres in England. I also conducted a follow-up study after Covid-19 Pandemic. Through thematic and narrative analysis of the qualitative data, I identified two main domains: 1) Belief and attraction to Sufism and 2) Well-being is an outcome of Sufi practices. Participants of the Sufi Centres did not demonstrate a division between spirituality and religion, and neither did issues of well-being motivate their involvement. Well-being is resulted from their engagement with Sufism.

My findings show that participants' mental health was impacted positively by Sufi practices and enhanced resilience and a sense of community. This is a promising area for further research and interventions to address the mental well-being of individuals and British Muslims.

## Impact statement

This work has the potential to impact 1) the academic community and 2) the public.

The work in my thesis makes a novel contribution to understanding the relationship between Sufi spirituality and mental well-being, the results of which have the potential to impact individuals' mental well-being.

My research brings into question the distinction between religion and spirituality in post secular societies. It points out how spirituality, rather than being disconnected from religion, can motivate and develop more positive well-being. Spirituality leads to a greater understanding of the religious resources of well-being. Religious and spiritual organisations may help and provide a source of well-being for individuals. Sufi communities could provide a space to be a source of well-being regarding the grief and hardship of individuals and daily life.

### **Academic impact:**

I used a multi-qualitative methods approach, incorporating both thematic and narrative analyses, and combined the perspectives of multiple contributors to explore the relationship between Sufi spirituality and well-being. The relatively sparse literature in the field has been expanded and added to this work.

I have presented and discussed the findings of my research at local, national and international conferences. I presented my findings at Spirituality and Religion in Society conference in Granada, Spain; Muslim Mental health conference in the US, Chicago; and the Spirituality, Religion and Health conference in Ohio, US and Medical Anthropology Conference in London, UK. I have also presented my findings at the Spirituality and Psychiatry special interest group at Spirituality and Psychiatry Conference in London, and Qualitative Health Research Network at UCL. I am in the process of preparing the manuscripts reporting on both the systematic review and qualitative research for submission to peer-reviewed academic journal. I have also provided a summary of my findings to the participants at the Sufi centres which took part in my research.

### **Public Impact:**

This work is important in endorsing and providing an empirical evidence base for understanding the relationship between spiritual and religious practices and well-being. The findings and future work arising from this project can help advance this agenda.

In terms of public dissemination, I was invited to discuss my work in a podcast by Social Muslims. I organise workshops in Muslim Mental health charities and have presented my findings in these workshops. I also attended and presented my work at the All Academic Festival in UCL, and participated in the Research Smorgasbord as a part of public engagement.

I have also given invited talks to the Yunus Emre Institute London, Institute of Psychiatry, Psychology & Neuroscience (IOPPN) Journal Club, and LSE book lunch.

## Acknowledgement

This thesis has been researched and written between two griefs, two years of pandemics, and many more challenges. I am grateful to Allah for giving me the power to survive and conduct this study.

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## Statement of personal contribution

As the principal researcher for my PhD, my contributions were as follows:

- I wrote the research proposal for this PhD with input from my supervisors.
- For my systematic review, I conducted searches of the literature, screened abstracts and full texts of papers, extracted the data, rated the study quality, and I have written the first draft of a manuscript summarising the Systematic Review to be submitted for publication.
- For my qualitative study, I applied for and obtained ethical approval from the UCL Research Ethics Committee, conducted all one-to-one interviews, and facilitated the focus groups. I transcribed the audio-recorded data, independently, coded the transcripts, and led the analysis. I wrote up the findings.
- I wrote the entirety of this thesis.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1. Overview of my PhD

I first became interested in the topics of spirituality and mental health whilst working on my master's program, on Religion in Contemporary Society. Religion has been understood in many different ways in contemporary societies and has various formations in societies and individual lives. Spirituality has increasingly become an important element taking the place of religion in many individuals' lives regarding their daily connection with the transcendental. Body, soul and mind practices have been a rising concept in contemporary societies alongside the spiritual form of Abrahamic religions.

Sufism is an Islamic spiritual tradition that has various formations in the West. Sufism can be defined as a belief and practice in Islam in which adherents seek out direct personal experience with God in order to find truth of divine love and knowledge (Schimmel, 2023). Sufism incorporates a variety of spiritual paths that are designed to understand the nature of humanity and of God and to enable the experience of the presence of divine love and wisdom.

In this thesis, I explore western Sufism and the impact of its practices on well-being from the perspective of members and leaders of three contemporary Sufi communities in London. I consider how individuals understand and practice Sufism in relation to their individual and community well-being. I explore how religion and spirituality are not separate aspects in Sufi Practices among my sample. I go on to look at how Sufism helps followers to engage with their social and self-identity as well as the community to which they felt belonging. I examine and consider the significance of the concepts of identity and community and how they meet in formulating mental well-being.

I also consider well-being as a subjective experience, not just a dimension that can be measured using particular metrics or scales. Instead, I wanted to explore the participants' experiences and understanding of well-being from their subjective point of view. I also considered the meaning of the concepts of spirituality, Sufism and well-being for my research participants. This research is therefore mainly qualitative in nature, not simply measuring well-being, but listening to participants' experiences

and views to allow me to discover and analyse in depth the links between Sufi spirituality and well-being.

In my PhD, I aimed to investigate the well-being of individuals practising Sufi spirituality. I questioned whether these practices impacted their well-being and had a chance to examine the practices' effects during Covid-19.

## 1.2. Research Questions of my PhD

The main aim of this research was to investigate the relationship between Sufi spiritual practice and Mental well-being. To achieve this aim, I set out with the following research questions

For the systematic review:

1. What is the evidence for an association between Sufi practice and mental well-being?
2. How exactly according to evidence does Sufi practice impact on mental health?
3. What is the quality of the evidence?

For the Qualitative Study:

1. What is the relationship between Sufi practice and mental health?
2. What motivates adherents from western backgrounds to participate in organised Sufi ideas and practice in England?
3. What role does mental health and well-being play in the previous circumstances of adherents and how does this relate to their current experience of Sufi practice?
4. To what degree does Sufi practice, within the participating centres, recognise issues of mental health and well-being among the people who take part?

For the Online Follow up Study:

1. What has been the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on participants' Sufi practice/ gathering?



2. How virtual Sufi gatherings have worked during Lockdown and has this had any effect on their experience?

### 1.3. Outline of my PhD Chapters

I utilised different research methodologies to investigate the relationship between Sufi spirituality and well-being in this thesis.

Chapter one outlines the motivation for this study and the broad research questions being addressed.

In chapter two, I define the key terms and concepts: spirituality, Sufism, and well-being. I also present an overview of the importance and relevance of this work and its relation to the secularisation thesis in contemporary Britain. I then outline the overall aims and objectives of my PhD.

In chapter three, I present a systematic review of the literature synthesising research on Sufi practice and well-being conducted to date and identifying key gaps in the current literature. The results of the review led the thesis in adopting a qualitative exploration.

In chapter four, I explain the methodology of the qualitative study. The results of the empirical qualitative studies are presented in chapter five.

In chapter six, I discuss the overall results of all three studies.

Chapter seven will conclude the thesis, followed by discussion of the strengths and limitations of this body of research, implications and future directions.

## Chapter 2: Background

In this chapter, I will introduce the key concepts discussed throughout this thesis. To do so, this chapter is structured into five sub-sections. The first section will present a brief definition of spirituality and religion. In the second section, I will define well-being and mental health and provide a brief overview of theories of well-being. In the third section, I will describe Spirituality and Secularisation theory as applied in Britain. In the fourth section, spirituality and mental well-being will be discussed. Since various explanations of spirituality are found within the literature; in these sections, I will pay attention to the definitions most relevant to the present research. In the fifth section, I briefly introduce Sufi tradition in Islam from its beginning through the various manifestations taken throughout its history and then present its contemporary existence in the West. Finally, I will summarise the role of well-being in contemporary research in relation to spirituality, religion and Sufism.

### 2.1. Spirituality and Religion

Religion is conventionally defined as a particular system of faith and worship; which includes a structured system of beliefs, practices, rituals, and symbols that endorse closeness to the sacred or transcendent to promote an understanding of one's relationship and responsibility to others living together in a community (Koenig, McCullough and Larson, 2001). Religion and religious practices often involve a code of morality and an underlying philosophy.

Spirituality has been defined as a way of connecting with the transcendent and is viewed as emerging from religion in general. However, contemporary conceptualisations of spirituality differ, taking several forms in different traditions and beliefs. One's spirit (soul) is a common aspect found in all spiritual traditions and thus, this aspect is a vital element bridging the notion with religion. All spiritual traditions, even those spiritual movements which are more recent or contemporary, share this transcendental element. Hence, the soul would be accepted as a common ground of spirituality and religion. The meaning of spirituality can be defined as:

“ the personal quest for understanding answers to the ultimate questions about life, about meaning, and about relationships with the sacred or transcendent, which may (or may not) lead to or arise from the development of religious rituals and the formation of a community” (Moreira-Almeida et al. 2006: 243).

Spirituality can be an important part for someone’s life from many angles . While some people see spirituality as a private and individual matter, others express their beliefs within an organised religion or a group. In the literature, spirituality is also understood as a broader term which also comprises religion. For example, Pargament (2013) has conceptualised spirituality from the religious perspective whereby he described spirituality as comprising a relationship with something perceived as sacred. Here, spirituality involves an intuitive understanding of the self and the universe as an extended aspect from the sacred or transcendental.

Pulchaski et al. (2014) have suggested that spirituality is a significant factor in individuals looking for an answer as to the meaning of life and their perception of social events. Taking a spiritual view of the events in one’s life supports positive behavioural improvements and the understandings held toward one’s life and that of others. Pargament (2013), however, has regarded spirituality as a form of motivation in seeking out a relationship with something perceived as sacred and as guided by religion.

As of yet, no conventional description of spirituality has emerged and it is increasingly common for individuals to provide their own description and ways of understanding their spiritual beliefs (Bennett et al., 2012). Individuals may thus accept spirituality as an influential factor in life, at least in the personal sense. The term has also had a significant impact on various religions and traditions within contemporary secular society. This can be seen in some of the New-Age spiritual movements gaining popularity. This can also be seen in groups adopting alternative understandings of Abrahamic traditions in Judaism, Christianity and Islam (focused on more spiritual interpretations of the relationship between the divine and the individual). Examples include groups utilising the Kaballah in Judaism, as well as Quakers in Christianity and Sufism in Islam.

In this thesis, I decided to understand the terms spirituality and religion in a similar sense. Although spirituality has been defined in many different ways, for the purposes of this research, I will use a definition pertaining to the 'well-being' context – namely Koenig et al.'s (2012: 3) definition of spirituality being 'distinguished from humanism, values, morals, and mental health, by its connection to that which is sacred, the transcendent'. In contrast, according to Koenig et al. (2012), religion 'involves beliefs, practices, and rituals related to the transcendent, where the transcendent is God'. Moreover, spirituality is considered to be more personal, in which people adopt for themselves and that is mostly free of the rules, regulations and responsibilities associated with religion (Koenig, 2009). This idea has become more popular in contemporary British society where, instead of following institutional religion, people prefer to have a holistic spiritual understanding of their lives – be this derived from Eastern spirituality or from the mystical aspects of Western religions or even from a range of self-chosen beliefs.

## 2.2. Secularisation and Spirituality in Britain

The concept of spirituality as separate from religion has become more significant, and the definition of spirituality has correspondingly received much scholarly discussion. Nonetheless, a universally accepted definition of spirituality is challenging to identify. While in some studies authors have defined the term as an extension of religion, others explain it as a distinct concept. To make sense of the meaning of spirituality, the theoretical framework of the secularisation process and the place of religion in secular and modern society will be examined in this section.

Secularisation is recognised as a process in which religious authority decreases in all aspects of social life and governance. The secularisation theory is one of the most contentious subjects discussed by many key Western intellectuals such as Durkheim, Marx, Weber, and Freud throughout the 19th and 20th centuries (Betty, 2012; Sommerville, 1998). Secularisation is a process in which scientific explanations gradually replace religious beliefs through economic and political rationalisation. An increased number of individuals in Western societies perceive the

world and their own lives without the assistance of religious explanations (Berger, 1967).

Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, religion has come to be regarded as an individual matter rather than one of established collective belief and practice. According to Charles Taylor (2007), secularity arises in the falling off from religious belief and practice in the public space. Taylor (2007), drawing on Max Weber's ideas, describes this as a process of 'disenchantment', whereby a sense of transcendence or the sacred is replaced by secular and scientific explanations. Through this process, people are no longer required to believe in God or attend religious services. Within this 'secularisation process', the pivotal position of religion has become lost in relation to the significance of state and society, and its nature has also changed at an individual level. Although contemporary culture has seen a shift away from religion, modernity has brought new ways of connecting sacred or transcendental themes to society. For example, new religious or spiritual movements involving a connection with the transcendental or supernatural have become a visible trend in modern Western societies. Sutcliffe and Bowman (2000:1) conclude that spirituality "turns out to be merely a particular code word in a larger field of modern religious experimentation". A new age spirituality is usually defined as a "pick-and-mix religion" (Hamilton, 2000) or a "spiritual supermarket" (Lyon, 2000). Alternative spirituality and Abrahamic spirituality have become equally popular in society with new formats and usages. It also becomes a widespread practice in some clinical settings. For example, transcendental meditation (TM), which is defined as a form of silent mantra meditation, has been examined as a beneficial technique in healthcare (Infante et al., 2014).

The concept of religion was initially studied from anthropological perspectives, as a cultural matter and one open to cultural analyses (Frazer, 1890; Lang 1899; Smith, 1894; Tylor, 1891). James (1898), for example, focused on analysing religion objectively and scientifically through a psychological lens to explore its visible and practical consequences. Durkheim (1912: 2001) and Weber (1978), in contrast, discussed religion in sociological terms and developed the basis of secularisation theory. While Weber examined cultural and religious beliefs in terms of their effects on daily life, Durkheim focused more on the social impacts of religion rather than its

individual manifestation (Martin, 2005). Durkheim (1912:2001) predicted that traditional religion was on the wane because of the increased individualisation of modern society and the popularity of science as an explanation for natural and social phenomena. While scientific knowledge is proposed to have replaced the theological dogmatism of traditional religious systems, Durkheim also regarded religion as an eternal necessity and as a 'social fact'. For him, religion would adapt and transform rather than disappear (Durkheim, 1912).

After the decline in (and shift of emphasis from) religion resulting from secularisation, a post secular culture is often defined as one with a renewed interest in the spiritual life, which contains interest in religion not on a social scale, but as discursive aspects of modernity, has seen changes to religion and religious participation from both multi-cultural and multi-religious perspectives. Resulting from the changed nature of Western society over the past two centuries, different cultures and beliefs have begun to co-exist. These situations have led to different cultures and religions existing together in contemporary societies. While this situation can sometimes lead to conflict between culture and religion, some national legal systems have emerged to ensure religious freedom without the need for an individual to give allegiance to a particular religion (Martin, 2005). This has occurred in Britain despite an established religion of the Church of England headed by the monarch. Some nation states therefore no longer need to be confessional and instead, in principle, give equal rights to all beliefs and cultures. In this multi-cultural and multi-faith post secular atmosphere, forms of spirituality that have emerged outside a particular belief system have become popular. It is asserted that many people today place more importance on their own subjective assessments of what makes sense spirituality rather than living in adherence to external forms of religious authority (i.e., holy books and institutionalised leaders) (Partridge, 2004). Additionally, while some forms of religion are waning, others are gaining popularity in Britain (Conradson, 2013). The flourishing of spirituality in the contemporary post secular society has been defined as a 'spiritual revolution' (Tacey, 2004; Heelas and Woodhead, 2005).

Secularisation can bring about the rationalisation and privatisation of religion. Some people no longer want to belong to a particular religion, denomination or community and prefer, instead, to search for a sense of inwardness and subjectivity in their

beliefs. On the other hand, due to the competing religious alternatives and spiritual trends in modern society, new religious or spiritual movements have begun to emerge even if some of these have much older roots. This renewed interest in religion involves spiritual trends of belief rather than institutional religious groups and has been explained as a post secular process. The definition of post-secular includes a renewal of interest in spiritual life, a relaxation of the secular mistrust held towards spiritual matters and a recognition that secular rights enable freedom of speech (Dalferth, 2009).

This post secular age opens up discussion of the idea of spirituality or belief in society and its role in the life of individuals. Within a worldly atmosphere, spirituality becomes a post secular activity among individuals as it is seen to be more modern and acceptable than traditional religion. The reasons that lay behind the search for a spiritual path in contemporary societies has been studied, both at an individual and cohort level, within the literature on this topic. At the societal level, spirituality contrasts with the ideals of materialistic societies, which may lead to personal depression and anxiety. Living in a multi-cultural and multi-religious post secular society has led to an increase in the number of people who are exploring various forms of spirituality. In post secular communities, which are neither religious nor secular, people who are seeking religious, spiritual, or moral experiences may express a revived interest in spiritual life(Dalferth, 2009).

Modernisation can lead to a decline of religion, both in society and individuals' minds. Old and new religious beliefs and practices have continued in people's lives despite some institutions losing their power and influence in many societies. Sometimes these beliefs and practices take on new institutional forms, and sometimes they lead to significant explosions of religious fervour (Dalferth, 2009:3).

Moving on now to consider the increased interest in spirituality, the theory of a post secular era thus implies a fragmentation of all kinds of religious monopoly (Martin, 2005). New Age or new religious movements offer different kinds of spiritual therapy (Martin, 2005:18). The progress of secularisation suggests that contemporary spirituality emerges out of the search for something that is apart from religion and is an alternative way of building a moral/spiritual life in the broadest sense. In

effect, giving meaning to life. In this regard, Taylor (2007:3) has explained secularity as "a matter of the whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual or religious experience and the search takes place". Secularisation processes thereby lead us to examine the current understanding of religion, noting that without its institutional supports it is less capable of providing a basis for meaning and reflection in one's personal life.

With regard to the British context, secularisation has foregrounded many theories, such as 'belonging without believing' (Davie, 1990) 'neither believing nor belonging' (Voas and Crockett, 2005) and the 'spiritual revolution' (Heelas, 2002). Grace Davies (1990) introduced the idea of 'believing without belonging' as a way of describing the change witnessed in the British understanding of religion in the 1990s. She argued that religion was on the wane because of the decline in churchgoing among contemporary generations yet they have continued to believe in God and to possess religious or (at least) spiritual sensibilities. However, more and more people have been affected by decreased intergenerational involvement with religious practice. In light of this approach, Voas and Crickett (2005) have argued that society has moved to a place of 'not believing and not belonging'.

Some studies have demonstrated that Christian religious attendance in modern Britain has declined in the past two decades, which has meant the number of church attenders and the usage of sacred places is getting lower over time (Bruce and Glendinning, 2010), yet the connection held or formed with religion, or the sacred/transcendental has continued (Luckmann, 2023). Others argue that people in the West are becoming more spiritual but not religious (Fuller, 2001). Being spiritual has been studied by Heelas and Woodhead (2005), who have described the current atmosphere in terms of a 'spiritual revolution' theory in which 'traditional forms of religion, particularly Christianity, are giving way to spirituality' in modern Britain. These theories have highlighted the issues associated with the popularity of spirituality wherein it manifests in the sense of a personal, individualised version of spirituality rather than one based on a view of organised religion.

Urbanisation and industrialisation meant that religion was less involved in civic administration and the organisation of work (Martin, 2005:18). However, many of the



critiques regarding the status of secularisation have led to considerable historical, ideological (political) and philosophical debate (Popper, 1957; Martin, 1965; Greeley, 1972). It is also important to be aware that the understanding of secularisation has been different in Western Europe and North America. In the latter, the religious disputes brought about by the Reformation led to a flourishing of different religious views which led to the secular state being distinctly above faith e.g. USA. While religious involvement might have declined, new trends and versions of belief or ways of connecting to the sacred or transcendent have emerged. In that regard, Berger (1999) analysed the growth of pluralism of belief, asserting that it did not lead to a decline in religious engagement but rather involved alternatives of belief. Moreover, Luckmann (1967) pointed out that 'privatisation' in the sense of religion is a long-term consequence of secularisation, whereby religion becomes a socially invisible and personal matter. Indeed, there are some other views that see religion become more dominant at a global level, often in a traditional form counter to the secularisation thesis (Wilson, 2014).

This contemporary interest in the notion of spirituality might be associated with two factors – personal well-being and an interest in the divine (Glendinning and Bruce, 2006). Thus, spirituality and its association with personal well-being will be discussed in the following section.

### 2.3. Mental Health and Well-being

Mental health and well-being are two distinct but related concepts (Dodge et al., 2012; Keller, 2019). Depending on the research context, the definitions for both will differ. According to the World Health Organization mental health is “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community” (WHO, 2004). Mental health is not defined by the absence of distress or negative emotions. A human being in good mental health can often experience being sad, unwell, angry or unhappy, and this is a natural way of living a complete life (Galderisi et al. 2015). The matter is how we position ourselves to these emotional changes, and well-being plays a role in the capacity to be in-control.

In very simple terms, mental health is the measurement of an individual's state of mind (Joshnloo and Nosratabadi, 2009). An individual's lifestyle, work, and relationships can influence their mental health status, and it can therefore vary greatly day-to-day (Galderisi et al., 2015). Difficult life events, however, can lead to the development of symptoms which cause significant and persistent emotional distress, which affect an individual's ability to function, to process information, and to make decisions. The presence of such symptoms can indicate mental health problems such as depression or anxiety (Hyman et al., 2016).

Mental health is broader than the opposition of 'mental health vs mental illhealth/illness'. Good mental health suggests the presence of certain mental skills, habits and capacities (Huppert and Timothy, 2013). In modern life, a person is surrounded by many obstacles. Indeed, the high levels of stress inherent in contemporary lifestyles have been shown to increase their risk of experiencing burnout, depression, and anxiety (Ekstedt and Fagerber, 2005). In contemporary society, people may regard their problems as less definable or less concrete than those faced by previous generations. Being a wealthy or physically fit person is not enough for individuals to be satisfied with their lives. This situation might reflect the characteristics of the secularised age in which they are living. Thus, one of the consequences of such contemporary distress is that the seeking of a spiritual path has gained popularity. My thesis is focused on this more broadly defined notion of mental health .

Well-being is more broadly defined as referring to an individuals' sense of self, their capacity to be in-control, and active engagement with the society. When we talk about personal well-being, this is strongly related with how satisfied we are with our life, day-to-day emotional experience and wider well-being (Keyes, 2006). Positive mental health usually contributes to living a decent human life, where a decent human life comprises (but is not limited to) well-being (Keller, 2019).

The concept of well-being has been examined from utilitarian, moral and objective perspectives (Griffin, 1986). Psychological accounts of well-being have been seen as a matter of finding enjoyment in various things, while 'enjoyment' is what we might call attitudinal, a conscious state or a state of a person (Griffin,1986.). Keyes (2006;

2014) recognizes three components of mental health: emotional well-being which includes happiness, being interested in life, and satisfaction; psychological well-being comprises having a good relationship with one's own self and others, being good at handling day-to-day obligations; and social well-being indicates healthy functioning and includes a contribution to society (social contribution), a feeling of belonging to a community (social integration), having faith that society is improving for the benefit of all people (social actualization) and finding the way society works meaningful (social coherence). Positive well-being is linked with developing strong connections, achieving individual potential, and engaging in activities of personal value and meaning (Simon and Baldwin, 2021).

### 2.3.1. Overview of well-being theories

Well-being has been studied in the social and health sciences in many different contexts. In contemporary societies, the concept of well-being has a crucial importance for individual and social life (Keyes, 1998; Ryff, 1995). Studies have been conducted on psychological, emotional, financial, intellectual, occupational, physical, social, and spiritual dimensions of well-being using qualitative and quantitative methods. It is important to be aware that these components are understood as an input and output. In the present study, the main aim is to explore the meaning of well-being in practice.

The meaning of psychological well-being is differently understood in the literature from the perspective of three theoretical approaches. These three approaches are Developmental psychology, Clinical Psychology and Mental health literature. Developmental Psychology is related with Erikson's model of psychosocial development; Buhler's formulation of basic life tendencies that work toward the fulfilments of life: and Neugarten's description of personality change in adulthood (Ryff, 1995). Clinical psychology utilises Maslow's (1943) conception of self-actualisation which regards an ultimate need once other more basic human needs have been met, and help being able to realize and fulfil one's potential. It also draws on Roger's (1959) view that the fully functioning individual requires an environment that provides them with "genuineness (openness and self-disclosure), acceptance (being seen with unconditional positive regard), and empathy (being listened to and understood)". Finally, Jung's definition of individuation suggests that the full

extension of consciousness as well as the development of personality demands that the individual needs to free themselves from the ego, which he believes is a mask one wears to interact with the outside world, and is the evocative force of one's unconscious contents (Schlamm, 2014).

The third category comes from the mental health literature which suggests that mental health goes beyond the 'absence of illness' definition and adopts Jahoda's formulation of positive criteria of mental health and Birren's conception of positive functioning (Ryff, 1995). The key dimensions of positive psychological well-being have been drawn by Ryff (1995) as comprising 6 aspects: self-acceptance; positive relationships with others; autonomy; environmental mastery; purpose in life; and personal growth. These concepts can be used to measure subjective well-being in empirical studies of well-being.

Studies of well-being have been conducted largely through the use of well-being instruments (Deiner and Biswas-Diener, 2008; Keyes et al., 2002; Ryan and Deci, 2001; Ryff 1989). Academic research on well-being is pursued in multiple disciplines and has led to numerous studies applied both to society and to individual life. However, one feature of these studies is that they generally concentrate on measuring quality of life for public policy purposes (Bache, 2014) rather than concerning themselves with the meaning of well-being.

The importance of meaning is addressed in Erikson's theory of psychosocial development which involves personality being developed in a series of stages. Freud's theories of personality involves three components of the mind: *id*, *ego* and *superego*. Differing from Freud, Erikson's theory about the development of ego centered on psychosocial development rather than on psychosexual development. Erikson explained his view of psycho-social development as occurring across six stages of the lives of human beings beginning with birth and ending with death. In his sixth stage which is concerned with the opposition of intimacy versus isolation and which happens during adulthood (19-40 years old), having a trustworthy close network is crucial to better mental and physical health.

The nature of modern society often leads to loneliness which makes it harder to develop intimacy in relationships and can therefore lead to isolation. Such relationships usually involve emotion, family relationships and a circle of loved ones.

According to Erikson (Ryff, 1995), success can be considered to be achieved in having a healthy fulfilling relationship. Erikson's understanding of intimacy is a loving relationship of any sort. Sharing yourself with others is also important and occurs in relation to helping, supporting, and listening to others. This also facilitates the development of deeper social connections on which meaning-making depends.

A strong social support network is therefore one of the factors in enabling intimacy, and thereby well-being. If an individual is struggling at this stage of life, this can result in loneliness and isolation which could have a negative impact on mental well-being. Communities and social groups which provide this social support network act as an alternative way of developing intimacy. Such social features are therefore important given that they provide a context for individuals to develop relationships, share ideas and resources, as well as connect individuals with larger society (Todd, 2017). Following the Eriksonian model, for humans a close connection between the individual itself and others around them is of crucial importance in the provision of different opportunities for the promotion of mental and physical well-being.

### 2.3.2. Subjective/ Personal Well-being

Well-being needs to be understood in terms of its subjective meaning but this is not reducible to happiness. Thin (2020) stated that well-being is a broader subject than happiness. Although happiness might be the aim for the individuals in contemporary society, well-being is a subject of reflecting life events protecting the stability of life and having a positive relationship with society and the self.

Seligman (2012) has mentioned that well-being or human flourishing, involves having solid social relationships, meaning in life and achievement of individual's potential. Many religious and spiritual rituals/practices and communities may help individuals to accomplish these goals (Cohen and Johnson, 2015). The term 'well-being' is effectively synonymous with 'subjective well-being' and is often defined in terms of how people feel (Thin, 2020).

Well-being refers to the desired process and outcomes of living well, including mental, bodily, sociocultural, and physical-environmental dimensions (Thin, 2020). Therefore, subjective well-being is an important dimension to examine in order to make the association between development of the self and society.

Some studies suggest that having positive subjective well-being is directly related to having a good relationship between the individual and society (Carvalho, 2021). Neil Thin (2020) mentioned social flourishing and self-transcendence in the context of Maslow's famous 'hierarchy of needs' (Maslow 1954;1970). In the Maslow hierarchy of the needs, self-transcendence is the top of the needs pyramid. Well-being is directly related with physiological needs and self-esteem to reach ultimate well-being, exploring "the importance of social connection and prosocial action for human well-being" (Helliwell and Akinin 2008: 248). One of the important points in carrying out religious and spiritual practices is to connect with others and develop a healthy social relationship with a community. As Helliwell and Akinin (2008) stated, having a social and individual relation to a community is important in creating better well-being.

## 2.4. Spirituality and Mental Health

Empirical studies have been conducted as to spirituality and religion with a focus on the positive results derived for an individual's physical and psychological health. Since William James' 1898 book 'Varieties of religious experience', religion and spirituality have been examined from both psychological and scientific perspectives through the observation of practice' (Dillion, 2009).

Increased interest in spirituality is motivated by personal well-being and welfare as well as aspects of mental health (King, 2003). As some individuals in modern society come to rely on spiritual experience to overcome obstacles in their life, many studies have been conducted as to spirituality and its relationship with mental well-being in terms of depression and anxiety (Swinton, 2001; Hall, 2004; Oxhandler, 2017).

Nevertheless, several studies addressing the relationship between spirituality and well-being have identified that spiritual experience has positive effects on well-being (Van Dierendonck and Mohan, 2006; Lee and Newberg, 2005). In this sense, spiritual beliefs and practices enable people to make sense of and cope with difficulties that they face in their life (Koenig, 2010).

### 2.4.1. Associations with Well-Being

Recent scientific studies have demonstrated a widespread interest in the relationship between religion/spirituality and mental well-being. Notably, most studies have focused on spirituality and its relationship with psychological well-being (Swinton, 2001). Indeed, several studies have focused on how spirituality is of considerable significance to individuals, particularly those looking for answers as to the meaning of life and their perceptions of life events (Puchalski et al., 2014). Various studies pertaining to spirituality and mental health have studied this in a clinical context, related to mental health problems such as depression and anxiety (Moreira Almeida, 2014; Weber and Pargament, 2014; Pargament, 2007; Gilbert, 2007).

Standard measures of spirituality used in research contain “the questions of meaning and purpose in life, connection with others, peacefulness, existential well-being and comfort and joy” (Koenig, 2009; Moreira-Almeida A. et al., 2006). Koenig (2009) has criticised measures of spirituality that contain items related to well-being, arguing that the definition conflates the seeking of a spiritual path in contemporary society with that of personal well-being.

Furthermore, a higher sense of subjective well-being is frequently reported by religious people (Cohen and Johnson, 2015). Some studies also suggest that having a religious/ spiritual life motivates individual lives using religion in an instrumental way to achieve goals, such as comfort and social integration (Allport and Ross, 1967).

This understanding stimulates New Age and mind-body spirit institutions and centres. Notably, as Conradson (2013) has pointed out spiritual or religious retreat centres in Britain offer the promise of: (1) achieving some distance between work and home, and (2) engaging to a greater degree in personal and spiritual reflection than may generally be possible. As a result, the contemporary shift from the traditional presence of religious belief towards a more general spirituality is visible in many practices seen in Britain. For example, spiritual movements often focus on personal and psychological well-being, as exemplified by the marketing of retreat centres (Kelly and Smith, 2016).

### 2.4.2. Mindfulness

One of the most popular spiritual practices that has arisen from the ancient Eastern traditions of Buddhism and now popular in western secular society is *Mindfulness*. Mindfulness has been defined as an act of paying attention to your present moment experience (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). The skill of mindfulness is developed through regular practice using several meditation techniques that derived from Buddhist spiritual practices (Hanh, 1976). Many mindfulness interventions are built on formal mindfulness training exercises, such as learning to pay attention to your breathing in a mindful way. In addition to improving the quality and vividness of our daily experiences, mindfulness may also potentially help us better handle the challenges that life brings (Creswell, 2017). In Buddhist tradition, Mindfulness plays a crucial role in a framework that was created as a way to end individual suffering (Thera, 1962; Silananda, 1990). In the last 20 years, mindfulness has become the focus of considerable attention for a large community of clinicians and, a growing body of research. Numerous studies on mindfulness interventions have been conducted in a variety of settings, including the workplace (Good et al. 2016), clinical settings (Dimidjian and Segal, 2015), interpersonal outcomes (Brown et al., 2015), and others.

There is growing interest that mindfulness positively impacts both psychological and physical health and has been used in both clinical and non-clinical populations (Cavanagh, 2013). Although, because of its roots in the Buddhist tradition, mindfulness is often related to spirituality, empirical studies of this relationship are scarce (Leigh, Bowen and Marlatt, 2005). Practising mindfulness in contemporary societies is often understood as a response to a spiritual quest at a social level. Modern psychology has adopted mindfulness as a strategy for raising awareness of and skillfully addressing mental processes that might lead to emotional distress and maladaptive behaviour (Bishop et al., 2004).

### 2.4.3. Religious and Spiritual experiences in the context of well-being

It is necessary here to clarify exactly what it is meant by religious and spiritual practice in this thesis. The experience is the subjective involvement that seems to



the person having them to be of some objective reality and to have some religious significance (Winter, 2017). Although religiosity may include spirituality within specific beliefs or practices, it is a much more individualised version of practicing a belief or custom. A person who practices spirituality may not follow a formal religious practice or may not be associated with a religion (Longo and Peterson, 2000). For this study, spiritual experience is also understood as a part of religious experience. There are two important points in these experiences; first having involved the practices with a group and individually, second following a structured practice.

#### 2.4.3.1. Religion, Spirituality and well-being

In religion and spirituality, the individual benefits of practices have been highlighted in recent research. The association between religion, spirituality, and well-being appears to be robust across most studies. Religion and spirituality have been associated with the contribution to an individual self-perceived psychological and physical well-being in the empirical research (Lun and Bond, 2013; Krause, 2010; Mueller et al., 2001; Koenig, 2001). The first research conducted on Religion and Spirituality was *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (James, 1902/1985, p. 59), the classic volume that gave birth to the psychology of religion/spirituality, William James asks, "What is human life's chief concern?" and answers, "It is happiness" and trying to find the answer for the purpose of life on spirituality and religious perspectives. This does not mean that their religious understanding of the practices completely vanished, but rather focusing on more personal domains such as social and individual well-being. For example, there is a positive relation that exists between religious involvement and psychological well-being (Aranda, 2008; Mochon et al. 2008). A review conducted on religion and spirituality and health in empirical studies shows that religious/spiritual beliefs and practices are frequently adopted by both medical and psychiatric patients who come with illness and other stressful life changes (Koenig, 2012). Individuals with higher levels of spirituality and religion have better mental health and can respond to medical issues faster than those with lower levels of these traits (Koenig, 2012). Spirituality and religion are also an important coping mechanisms for managing stressful life events (Dein et al., 2010; Pargament and Park 1997). Although the association between religion, spirituality and mental health is complex, there are many studies which found that religion and spirituality

can contribute to an increased rate of well-being (Brawer et al., 2002; Crowther et al., 2002).

The association between spirituality/religion and mental health is not always positive. There are also some studies which illustrate that religion and spirituality may negatively affect an individual's mental health (Fallot, 2001; Hackney and Sanders, 2003; Lewis and Cruise, 2006). For example, Pergament et al. (2001) have identified differences in positive and negative coping providing an example of medically ill older adults' negative religious coping which has been shown to be a risk factor for dying. Therefore, addressing how individuals see well-being in spiritual and religious practices is a priority in this study.

There is also some discussion on the definition of spirituality in relation to the measurement of interventions related to well-being (Migdal and MacDonald, 2013). Measures of spirituality are difficult to construct in order to produce reliable quantification. Researchers have recognised the pressing need for clarification of the interpretation of the spiritual dimension in an intervention in order to improve reliability in measurement and/or methodology (Thoresen and Harris, 2004). This makes quantification of the relationship with well-being and spirituality particularly challenging.

Koenig (2008) raised the issue of the conflation of spirituality with well-being as well as the need for clarification of the determination and identification of the concept. Migdal and MacDonald (2013) examined the conceptual relatedness and overlap of spirituality and well-being in different models, such as the organisational model. Migdal and MacDonald suggested that "Investigators and practitioners alike to be cautious and conservative in their interpretation of the spirituality and psychological well-being research" (2013:279).

Well-being will be evaluated in this research as a part of people's spirituality and their religion. However, what most of the studies have been trying to do is turn well-being into an outcome measure related to health. We are aiming to explore the individual experience and explanation of well-being through their spiritual and religious practices.

## 2.5. Sufism

### 2.5.1. The definition of Sufism

Sufism is the English correlate of the Arabic term *tasawwuf*, which means a spiritual tradition of Islam which emerged around the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The Sufi tradition is defined as a way of practicing the religion of Islam in a spiritual, inner focused, and practical way. Sufism has survived into the twenty-first century with a significant resurgence across different geographies such as Asia, Africa, Middle East and Europe (Howell and Bruinessen, 2007). Depending on the society, Sufi tradition has different responses to modernisation and secularisation and various existences across the cultures.

There is some difference in opinion about the etymology of this term; some say the term derived from the Arabic word for wool, *suf*, as early Sufis wore wool as a sign of renunciation (Trimingham, 1971). Others say that the word comes from *safa*, meaning purity, to the phrase “*ahl al-suffa*” (the people of the bench) (Knysh, 2000). In a historical sense, Sufism is the esoteric or spiritual aspect of Islam, based on the Qur’an and the teaching of the Prophet Muhammed (Chittick, 2000). There are several other assumptions on the definition of the term, but these definitions commonly refer to a special devotion to the Prophet and Islam. Most of the definitions allow us to clearly understand that the term Sufism is more focused on the inner practice, which Geaves (2000) expressed as ‘practical Islam’. Hoffman- Ladd’s interpretation of Sufism as ‘purification of the heart, sincerity of worship, and renunciation of fleshly passions’ is a better fit for these explanations (Hoffman- Ladd, 1992:616). Islam is not just a religion; it is also a civilisation that produced a shared cultural heritage in Asia and Africa (Baldick, 2012). In the modern world, it also exists in Europe and America in many different manifestations.

Sufism is a tradition of practice and teaching concentrating on the importance to know the self and the transcendental which is Allah, the God. The term can be understood as a path that allows the followers to discover the self and allows them to seek the perfect being which is mentioned as ‘*insan-i kamil*’ in Sufi terminology. Chittick stated that “On the deepest level, Islam is a religion that teaches people how to transform themselves so that they may come into harmony with the ground of all

being” (Chittick, 2000:5). The spiritual path laid out in Sufism leads a person towards a state of pure inwardness through the help of practices such as prayer, remembrance (*zikr*), meditation (*muraqabah*) and contemplation (*tafakkur*). In the life of Sufis, everything is done in the name of God (Gabriel and Geaves, 2014).

The leading Sufi practice is *zikr*, remembrance of God, whereby Sufis will often chant the name of God as a form of worship (Chittick, 2009). Within Sufism, the Sufi master (*sheikh*) has been named the doctor of the soul, the one who guides the path of Sufis and the figure that helps individuals find the way in their spiritual journey. In the earliest psychological literature of al- Harith al-Muhasibi (165/782 ), purification of the soul (*tazkiyat al-nafs*) is explained as an accomplishment in this journey.

Muhasibi’s methodology for the purification of the soul may be understood as a way of human development (Picken, 2011). Similar to this, spirituality is frequently described as an attempt to improving in sensitivity – to the self, to others, to non-human creation and to God, or as an exploration into what is involved in becoming human, a pursuit of complete humanity. Sufi spirituality is also understood as a way of knowing, practicing and aiming to be a decent human being following the Islamic tradition as Muhasibi means purification of the soul.

Chittick (2009) has defined Sufism as a way of personally engaging with the divine. Likewise, Geaves (2014) and Hazen (2014) have explained the tradition as a unique approach to spirituality. It is an individualised, experiential path that helps create a personal relationship with the monotheistic idea of the divine. This personal connection with the divine leads Sufis to attempt to know their inner self. Sufism recognises an individual as comprised of three aspects – *nafs* (ego, soul), *aql* (intellect) and *qalb* (the heart and soul) (Shafii, 1985). This is the tradition, more than any other in Islam, that lends itself to an individualised understanding of religion as an inward-looking experience of spirituality. Sufis have talked about various pairs of ‘states’ (*ahwal*) experiences through the path of Sufism. These have taken various historical paths.

Asian spiritual traditions are becoming popular in Britain, with Sufism being one such Eastern spiritual tradition. It is perhaps unsurprising that the Sufi tradition has begun

to emerge in British society given the broad developments described above. In this sense, Sufi practice may have become attractive as a way of meeting spiritual needs in Britain (Hazen, 2014), both for Muslim and nominal Muslims and those with little or no religious allegiance.

Hazen (2014) has indicated that Sufism serves individuals who are seeking spiritual fulfilment and those who are disenchanted with materialistic existence. Hazen (2014) conducted research with British Sufis and explored the contemporary presence of Islamic Sufism in Britain. She stated that in a progressively materialistic and secular society, contemporary Sufism helps to fill a need for spiritual reconnection with God and serves to unite people from all religious and ethnic backgrounds (Hazen, 2014). Additionally, another study conducted in England on British Sufis has stated that many rejected materialism, secularisation, and religious tradition (Kose, 1996). Hence, the emergence of people who have no formal connection with religion, yet have a desire for spirituality, responds well to the contemporary post secular period. The desire for spirituality within secular British society may thus be seen in the search for other traditions – such as Sufism. As Steve Bruce (2017) has discussed, the issue of “the Westernisation of the Easternisation of the West” is an example of the post secular period. Post secular society could be described as a time that a renewed interest in religion and spirituality occurs in different social locations.

Bruce has described how so-called Eastern religion belief and practices have migrated to the West and in the process become westernized (Bruce, 2017). The experiences of Sufis in the UK also reflected this process as Hermansen (1996; 2000) explained. Western Sufi groups fall within three categories: ‘hybrids’ which show close ties to an Islamic source content, embedded in a non-Islamic framework; ‘perennials’ which represent the groups that are close to the idea that truth forms the base of all religion; and “transplants” who rather remain among themselves without adapting themselves to the new environment (Hermansen, 2006:11). Hermansen’s explanation mainly describes the European, and American version of Western Sufism. Werbner (2017) stated the Sufi organisations in Britain have six distinctive features that are mainly “(1) only some groups attract British-born followers (2) there is a general stress shared by all groups on *zikr* (chanting) or meditation, some groups are particularly inventive of new tradition (3) in some groups the extent of gender equality and mixing is quite remarkable, (4) many of the British born followers

of Sufi saints in Britain are educated professionals (5) although the groups perceive themselves to be open members of all faiths and nationalities, in reality groups are composed almost exclusively of men and women of Pakistani background (6) All the leaders engage in faith healing which is a key source of income and new recruits ” (Werbner 2017: 130). Although, Werbner’s point somehow summarise the characteristics of the Sufi groups in Britain, more heterogeneous groups increased.

### 2.5.2. The historical phases of Sufism

In the early period of Islam, among the companions of the Prophet, some paid attention to what was happening in their souls while accomplishing their religious duties. They tried to harmonise these internal experiences with external observances using renunciation of the world and asceticism.

Sufi tradition in Islam has various manifestations in the *tariqas* (Sufi orders) regarding the practices and the understanding of Islamic spirituality. The Sufis worked on building a coherent foundation of their theory and practice. They were guided by the Qur’an and Sunna, the “orthodox” custom of the Islamic world established in third/ ninth century (Griffel, 1998). The formative period of the Sufi tradition contextualises early Sufi ideas, which is mostly related to piety (*zuhd*) (Karamustafa, 2007). The origins of Sufism are seen to begin with Hasan Basri (d.728) from Basra, who introduced the notion of piety. Another eminent Sufi was a female mystic from Basra, Rabia (d.801), who taught the idea of sincere love (*muhabba*) of God. Baghdad and Khurasan became major centres of Islamic mysticism with their eminent Sufis such as Shaiq al Balkhi (d.810), who argued for the mystic state of abandonment into God’s will (*tawakkul*), and the Baghdadian al Muhasibi (d. 859) who added psychological introspection. The early period of Sufism is mainly based on piety; later on, Sufism in history changed the characteristics.

The second phase of the history of Sufism (950-1100) is mainly shaped by external authority. There was a positive tension between Sufism and authority. Since the 11th century, great importance has been recorded to a phase of approximation and transmission between Sufism and the Ash’aric theology. After Ghazali, etymology and language have changed. He was looking for a traditional Islam to fertilise mystical experiences. The science thus formed was called the knowledge of the

inner self or internal knowledge. Sufism is knowledge beyond reason. The tradition has two ways: piety and the community.

The formative period of Sufi literature (from 10<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> centuries) was highly creative; these writings “reflected the spiritual development of the Sufi path at the forefront of Islamic piety and asceticism within politically and socially turbulence times” (Avery, 2004:10). In the later period, the importance of community and society became visible in the established orders. After the 12th century, the Sufi orders (tariqas) were established to seek divine knowledge (Chittick, 2000). Sufism became public and a way to live life in a pious way. While Sufi practices are a version of the individualised practical way of Islam, Sufi orders took on social roles in the community (Yilmaz, 2018). These social roles usually help to practise Islam in the community and the transmission of the tradition and service to society needs. All of those Sufi orders became related to the sacred by chains of spiritual lineage (*silsila*) that would always link back to the Prophet (Gabriel and Geaves, 2014). Some main orders include Qadiri, Sa’di, Badawi, Rifa’i, Halwati, Bektashi, Naqshbandi, Mevlevi, Chishti, Suhrawardi, Shadili and Tijani. In this study, we will examine the more orthodox orders, such as Naqhsibandi Haqqani Sufi order, Qadiri (the one in the UK actually is a combination of three Sufi orders, Qadiri, Ansari, Rifai), and Mevlevi. The following explanation presents brief information about the selected orders which are used in the study.

*The Qadiri order*, formed by Abdul Qadir Jilani (d.1166), pays particular attention to the outwards practices of Islam as determined by the Sunna (the Prophet Muhammed practices). *The Rifai order* was established by sheikh Ahmed Rifai (d.1182) of Iraq. He is the nephew of Abd al Qadir Jilani.

*Naqshbandi Order* was formed by Muhammed Bahauddin Naqhsibandi (b.1317). It is well known for meditation, silent *zikr*, the study of Sunna and Shariah, and selfless defence of Islam.

*The Mawlawi order*, founded by Mawlana Jalaleddin Rumi (d.1273) in the 13<sup>th</sup> century is known for its very ritualistic and symbolic whirling dervishes. In the form of mawlawi practice the dervishes whirl to music. The desired experience of the dance is ecstasy and unity with the Divine.

### 2.5.2.1. Western Sufism

In the West, there is growing interest in Sufism, the major form of Islamic spirituality, which has become increasingly visible in Western societies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Translations of Sufi books from the East into European languages allowed Sufi groups and branches to spread throughout Euro-American regions. In the literature, the influence of Rumi and Sufi literature have also increased interest. The existing Sufi orders in the West have different features from Sufi orders in the East. When we differentiate Western Sufism from Eastern, the aim of this differentiation shows the cultural and social effects on Sufism. Although the knowledge is still similar to eastern Sufism in some sense, the difference may be more visible in the Sufi practices.

Geaves (2000) description of Sufism as 'practical Islam' can explain the existence of various manifestations of Sufism in Britain. These Sufi groups are broad enough to encompass the everyday realities of life (Geaves, 2000). Perceptions of the practices can vary from place to place and culture to culture. However, the growing literature on Western Sufism suggests that a large majority of Sufi orders in the West are characterised by Western culture. These orders operate as Muslim minorities in a secularized culture, as Gabriel and Geaves (2014:31) stated "In Britain, there is an urgent need to maintain Islam in the face of secular, non-Muslim environment, which on the one hand offers the freedom to practice one's religion, but, on the other hand may appear hostile."

Eastern Sufism may have showed a more universal spirit with regard to other forms of spirituality that they encountered. Sedgwick (2009) argues that 'neo-Sufi' trends, which is the nature of Sufism in the West in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as he labels them, are rooted in Western Spirituality, with a focus on the individual spiritual quest, which, in his opinion, has no equivalent in the Muslim world. In this context, the Westernisation of eastern religion should be explained. In the West, the decline of established religion is a matter discussed either as a decline in interest in religion or as a change of its shape (Bruce, 2017).

The interest of religion tends to be a secularised concept of 'alternative spirituality' or a relativised marketplace of religion in the process of adoption from the East to West.



Colin Campbell (2015) was the first to describe the Easternisation of the West with the process of change since the 1960s. Campbell states that there were elements of 'East in the West' as well as 'West in the East'. He mentioned about the West becoming engaged with Eastern culture and religion. Bruce (2017) also introduced an argument about the Westernisation of Eastern spirituality criticising how the West changed the nature of Eastern tradition through cultural and social interventions. For example, the understanding of spirituality, gender, and equality has been affected by the Western version of Eastern traditions. Yoga is an important example how an Eastern tradition has been modified by becoming more of a leisure practice and less of a religious practice.

Contemporary Sufism in Britain is also an example regarding the Westernisation of Eastern religions. There has been a steady growth of Sufi orders in the context of contemporary Muslim societies in the East and the West (Howell and Bruinessen, 2007). Similarly, regarding the situation in Britain, the Sufi orders play a role in the contemporary practices of spirituality. As we will see in this thesis, the effects of Westernisation of Eastern religion can be clearly seen in the dynamic of the centres. However, while all three Sufi centres are following the traditional way of practicing Sufism, they have adapted to western culture by embracing gender equality, singing and dancing, as well as laying out their spaces as a therapy setting (circled chairs facing each other).

Milani and Possamia (2016) have examined Australian Sufism regarding 'self-representation' and 'localisation of Sufism'. Their study demonstrates that although the Sufi orders studied each have established global networks, they also demonstrate strong local identities and indications of adaptation and appropriation (Milani and Possamia, 2016). The Australian sample provides an example of the Westernisation of Sufi orders regarding religion, spirituality and the consumerist orientation. Similarly, Sufism in Britain is also influenced by local culture and the secularisation of religious and spiritual life.

The earlier existence of Sufism in Britain was from the 1930s among the specific communities of immigrants from the Muslim world (Geaves et al., 2009). There were many established Sufi communities in Liverpool, Cardiff, Tyneside, Sheffield, and Birmingham (Gabriel and Geaves, 2014). In the 1960s and 1970s, many British

converts were experimenting with Islamic spiritual tradition bringing the Eastern Sufism to Britain (Geaves, 2000). After that, new Sufi groups Inayat Khan and Idries Shah came to the scene as a 'universal' Sufism that crosses the boundaries of Islamic belief and practices (Sedgwick, 2016). In studies on Sufi traditions that have been popular in the West, the idea of 'universal Sufism' is commonly applied (Khan 1963; Shah 1964; Geaves et al. 2009). Geaves (2000) outlines this in his study and explains how they have removed that Islamic content which is often seen as a cultural historical accretion to a universal and eternal message about human relationship with the Divine, while simultaneously emphasising or extracting the mystical aspect of Sufism (Geaves, 2000:161). On the other hand, there are Sufi orders which are traditionally bonded with Islamic context and aiming to answer the needs of spirituality in the modern setting (Geaves, 2017). Werbner (2003) conducted a study in a South Asian community comparing the Sufi tradition in Pakistan and in Britain. In an academic setting where the narrative of Sufism's transformation into a form of scripturalist Islam dominates, Werbner (2003) has also shown the dynamism and modernity of Sufi practices. Geaves (2006) explains that the revival of 'British Sufi-oriented Islam' is not a local phenomenon; rather, it draws on the global rise of Islamic Sufism while emphasising Muslim identity, authenticity, and increased public devotion and piety rather than more politically conscious forms of orthodoxy.

So far, I have discussed the historical and Western understanding of Sufism. I have shown how Sufism gets involved and transforms into modern life in Muslim worlds and the West. I have also explained how cultural and regional differences may affect the practices itself, have led to Sufi networks becoming global in order to answer the need of people either religious or not who live in the West. The literature examined in this thesis suggests that the existence of contemporary Sufi tradition in the West, specifically in Britain, may be explained by three factors; to maintain traditional Sufism among the Sufis who immigrated to the West; a need for Muslims to modify the faith to a contemporary lifestyle; and an individual spiritual tradition. I will now examine the association between Sufism and well-being.

#### **2.5.2.2. Associations between Sufism and Well-being**

In the literature, the interest in Sufism has attracted many scholars from the field of psychology, especially in the form of applying Islamic principles to psychiatry and

psychotherapy (Yusuf and Al-Akiti, 2022–2020; Rothman and Coyle, 2020–2018; Keshavarzi and Haque, 2013). These scholars have examined the traditional or classical Islamic approach to mental health and psychology in order to understand the nature and development of modern concepts. For example, Dr Asim Yusef has researched mental health problems in classical Islam, focusing on figures such as Abu Zayd and Abu Hamid. He mentions that the human self can be understood from an Islamic religious perspective on the nature and purpose of life (Yusuf and Akiti, 2022). Rothman (2018) has developed an Islamic model of the self by using the Ghazali understanding of the soul and expressing Islamic principles in psychology. The term ‘Islamic psychology’ has been used to examine the traditional approach to contemporary psychology.

In wellbeing researches, the self has been examined by using Islamic terminology such as explaining the states which involves in the main path of Sufism. The Sufi path is described as ‘peace through love’ (Marsa and Peer, 2005). The path is also explained as an inner transformation of bringing the soul back in harmony with the Divine (Hazel, 2008), which is living in a way that God would approve through the Qur’an’s Sunnah, and then believing as the result that God is in charge (Nasr, 2002). Seeking the perfect being (*insan al-kamil*) is one of the main purposes of Sufism thus, the tradition can be considered as a psychosocial phenomenon where people found themselves with the support of a sheikh and a community, as well as obtaining assistance for their mental well-being among the other likeminded participants in the Sufi centres (Boni, 2005). As contemporary life brings distress in the lives of individuals, having meaningful explanations for distress may help to manage life. Believing God is in charge provides a sense of meaning and purpose in life. Moreover, seeking meaning with a guide and a likeminded community provide an environment and support for the individual.

Sufis attempt to purify themselves from the temptations of greed, depression, and harmful intentions. The purification of the self, *tazkiyat al-nafs*, is central to understand Islamic spirituality. Muhadisi (d.857) explains the methods of spiritual purification (Picken, 2011) in his earliest Sufi psychology literature. Within the Islamic Sufi tradition, the self-development of these dimensions is the main element of being a Sufi. Sufism has long been recognised as providing spiritual guidance since the emergence of Islam (Arberry, 2013; Ernst, 2011; Chittick, 2000; Murata and Chittick,

1994; Lings, 1975). These developments can be explained in the different states (*hal*) and stages (*maqam*) of the self (*nafs*); which are *Nafs al ammara'* (the commanding self, lower self) ; *Nafs al lawamma'* (the blaming self) ; *Nafs al mulhama'* (the Inspired self) ; *Nafs al muttma'ina'* ( the secure self) ; *Nafs al radiyah'* (the content Self) ; *Nafs al mardiyyah'* (the Gratified Self). ; *Nafs al kamilah'* (The complete self) (Yilmaz, 2018; Cebecioğlu, 2009; Uludağ, 2001; Trimmingham, 1971).

In the Sufi path, the individual is on a journey from the *nafs al ammara* (lower self) to *nafs al kamilah* ( the complete self). Therefore, this journey may be accepted as a spiritual and psychological development of the individual in light of the following Sufi orders. Wilcox (1995:4-5) has written about Sufism and Psychology. She explains:

“Sufism is the way to healing the sickness of the soul, the alienation from one’s true being and from God that afflicts modern persons. That healing lies in connection with the source of life. Sufism offers what modern psychology and psychotherapy do not and cannot offer, for they do not have it to offer- the way to fundamental change, to transformation, to harmony, unity, tranquillity and survival.”

Sufism is not an explanation. It is finding and travelling along the way to meaning, along the way to connection with the source of light. Although the connection with the Sufi understanding and psychology has been examined in the literature (Abu Raiya, 2014; Skoll and Kortanje, 2012; Rothman and Coyle, 2018), there is limited research conducted on the understanding of Sufism from the point of view of well-being. My research addresses this gap questioning the relationship between Sufi practices and individual well-being from the experience of British Sufis.

## Summary

The aim in this chapter has been to show that the conception of secularisation and post secularisation is a leading reason for the popularity of spirituality in England. This chapter addresses that the non-institutional and multi-cultural atmosphere of belief within today’s post secular society leads to a search for spirituality. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the Sufi tradition has gained popularity within Britain across a variety of approaches towards contemporary Sufism. Given the general trend

towards the secular, this shift has also witnessed the ideas of spirituality having gained a degree of popularity in terms of their potential impact on mental well-being.

Well-being is a concept that has been studied in the wider context of its role in contemporary society. In the previous sections, I have related the concept of spirituality and Sufism with well-being and concluded that there may be a positive relation between Sufism and well-being. In the earlier sections, the subject of well-being was examined in more detail relating it to studies that have been conducted on well-being perspectives in the social sciences, religion, spirituality, and health. I used this to create a narrative enabling a more general explanation of the concept of well-being. I will not be relating this explanation to the measurement of well-being as is often the case when used in well-being, rather the concept is used in relation to the role that it plays in the narratives of the participants' understanding of their own individual well-being. Therefore, I consider the subjective well-being approach, which equates well-being with people's experience and evaluation of their lives and specific domains and activities in their lives.

The study of well-being, particularly subjective well-being, is an important part of current research which is seeking to answer 'how individual experience well-being in their religious and spiritual experiences', the importance of well-being in the study of Sufism and how the individual sees well-being.

I have summarised the importance of connection and network grounded human developmental psychology and community psychology. Such approaches are a secular version of religious and spiritual development. Maslow, Erikson and Roger's understandings of well-being aim to answer, 'how do you become better?'. All of them have a philosophical approach to what human flourishing is. In this context we can have a connection with the broader thesis on how spiritual practices help human flourishing. There are some studies conducted on religion, spirituality and flourishing (Dolittle et al., 2022). Religious and spiritual events take place in social situations where a group of people get together to pursue the sacred (Pargament, 2008). Religion and religious contexts continue to be interwoven in the personal, social, community, and societal spheres of day-to-day living in the modern person's life in different shapes. For example, contemporary Sufi gatherings may be a good example in context of a social network.

The primary aim of this thesis is to investigate the relationship between Sufi spirituality and well-being in terms of the meaning that my research subjects give to Sufi practice in a secularised environment, where spirituality is related to well-being. In this chapter, the different perspectives held as to secularisation theory, spirituality, Sufism and mental well-being have been reviewed, whereby attention has been drawn to the gap in understanding the potential relationship between Sufism and well-being. Given the reduced role of institutional religion in contemporary Britain, alongside the rise of more individualised spirituality, Sufi spirituality has attracted many individuals who view such practices as appealing to one's spirit and soul and as potentially offering positive mental well-being. This study thus seeks to undertake empirical research as to contemporary Sufi practice and how Sufi spirituality relates to issues of well-being in Britain.

Well-being focusing on spirituality is a growing area of interest in contemporary research that has emerged out of social and scientific studies. Studies have shown some evidence to prove this relationship between Spirituality and well-being. Researching contemporary Sufi practices in Britain answers the growing interest in 'seeking spirituality' and 'meaning making', spiritual/ religious practices in contemporary societies. The literature also suggests that interest in exploring religion and spirituality in the context of health research has also increased. Although there are studies conducted on Islam, Sufism and health, there is a gap in the literature regarding Sufi practices and well-being outcomes. Therefore, this study aims to explore the relationship between Contemporary Sufi Spirituality and practices and mental well-being in the UK.

## Aims, objectives, and research questions

The overarching aim of my research is to develop an in-depth understanding of how Sufi practices relate to mental health in contemporary Sufi groups in Britain and, furthermore, to identify how British Sufis integrate into these groups. To address this aim, the specific objectives and research questions of the study posed the following research questions and associated objectives:

### *Literature review and Systematic review*

Question 1. What is the relationship between Sufi practice and mental health?

Objectives: To undertake

- a. a systematic review of the association between Sufi practice and mental health and well-being.

The purpose of the systematic review was to understand the existing empirical studies in the literature conducted with Sufi practices and mental well-being.

### *The qualitative study*

For my qualitative study my questions and objectives were:

Question 2. What motivates adherents from western backgrounds to participate in organised Sufi ideas and practice in England?

Question 3. What role does mental health and well-being play in the previous circumstances of adherents and how does this relate to their current experience of Sufi practice?

Question 4. To what degree does Sufi practice, within the participating centres, recognise issues of mental health and well-being among the people who take part?

Objective 1: To recruit a number of Sufi centres in England to participate in the research.

Objective 2: To undertake one-on-one interviews and focus group discussions in order to

- a. describe these contemporary Sufi centres, in particular the role of their leaders and how Sufism is practiced.

- b. explore the life courses of the participants prior to and following their joining of a Sufi group.
- c. examine how current Sufi practice in England mediates the well-being of participants.

### *Follow up Covid-19 Study*

For the follow up qualitative study, my questions and objective were:

Question 1. What has been the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on participants' Sufi practice/ gathering?

Question 2. How virtual Sufi gatherings have worked during Lockdown and has this had any effect on their experience?

Objective: To undertake follow-up online interview with the participants.

In the next chapter, I will describe the method, results, and discussion of my systematic review on Sufi practices and well-being.



# Chapter 3: Systematic Review of the Relationship between Sufi Spirituality and Practice and Mental Well-Being.

## 3.1. Introduction

Spiritual interventions in mental health treatments are gaining popular attention within western healthcare contexts. In the UK, Islamic Sufism is becoming an increasingly popular complementary practice amongst a growing number of spiritual paradigms undertaken today. While some trials and empirical studies have evaluated Sufi practice, there are currently no reviews synthesising and critically evaluate this body of literature. By conducting a comprehensive and systematic review of current evidence we are thus able to generate hypotheses about the relationship between Islamic Sufi practice and mental health. From this, more informed recommendations can also emerge for future research.

The research questions for this systematic review are:

4. What is the evidence for an association between Sufi practice and mental well-being?
5. How exactly according to evidence does Sufi practice impact on mental health?
6. What is the quality of the evidence?

## 3.2. Method

### 3.2.1. Aim

The aim of this study was to perform a systematic review including qualitative and quantitative studies to evaluate the effects of Sufi and Islamic spirituality on mental well-being.

### 3.2.2. Eligibility Criteria

#### *Inclusion criteria*

The main inclusion criterion for the review was that the study examined the association between Sufi practice and mental well-being. Specifically, studies had to include:

1. Sufi or Islamic practices as a treatment intervention for mental health difficulties and/ or research looking at Sufism and its relationship to well-being more broadly.
2. Research examining the effects of Sufi or Islamic practices upon the mental well-being of individuals (adult/children) with or without mental health problems.
3. Outcomes being measures of mental well-being.
4. Study type being original primary qualitative or quantitative research (including experimental, observational, and qualitative research designs).
5. Published in English or Turkish languages.

Otherwise, the study design of this review was constructed to be broad, thereby ensuring sufficient evidence could be found on the state of research in this field.

#### *Exclusion criteria:*

Studies were excluded if they described other religious practices (rather than Sufi or Islamic spiritual practices); other outcome measures (e.g., physiological outcome such as heart rate or rehabilitation), other type of studies or literature (e.g. previous reviews, book chapters, case studies, conference abstracts, report, letters, and editorials) and other languages.

### 3.2.3. Outcome of Interest

The primary outcomes of interest pertained to mental and emotional well-being, anxiety, and depression. Other mental health outcomes – such as subjective well-being, self-knowledge, self-control, mindfulness, and satisfaction with life – were considered as secondary outcomes. The findings have been divided in relation to their methods – between (1) quantitative observational studies, (2) experimental research and (3) qualitative research.

### 3.2.4. Search Strategy

Study searches were concluded in April 2019 and updated in February 2022 and included a number of databases –Medline/ PubMed, PsycINFO, Scopus, Web of Science, Cochrane Library, Ethos, Google scholar. A full list of exact search terms and combinations with Boolean operators for each database can be found in the Appendix A. The keywords were set as Sufi\* or Islam\* and mental health, mental well-being, emotional well-being, depression, or anxiety. Additionally, the reference lists of

each of the selected studies were checked for other potentially relevant studies not discovered in the original database searches.

### 3.2.5. Data Screening and Extraction

The retrieved search results were entered into Endnote and any duplicates removed. Potentially relevant citations were identified initially via a review of their titles and abstracts. The full text of the relevant citations were then read in full and examined in relation to whether they met the eligibility criteria. The study selection process was undertaken, independently, by two reviewers (MC, RG) by screening all titles and abstracts of papers for relevance following the inclusion and exclusion criteria. Articles that did not meet the inclusion/exclusion criteria were removed and those potentially eligible retained for full text screened. Full texts were independently screened by three reviewers (MC, RG, and AHA) to confirm eligibility. Any discrepancies over the eligibility of the studies between the reviewers were resolved through discussion.

### 3.2.6. Risk of Bias and Quality assessment

Two methodological quality assessment tools were used to evaluate the selected studies. The Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Review of Interventions (Higgins and Green, 2011) was used to assess the methodological quality of the randomised controlled trial (RCT) studies. This tool assesses six domains: selection bias; random sequence generation and allocation concealment, performance bias; blinding of participants and personnel, detection bias; blinding of outcome assessment, attrition bias; incomplete outcome data, reporting bias; selective reporting (see **Table 3.2**). Articles were accordingly categorised as either low risk (+), high risk (-) or unclear risk (?). The Hawker quality assessment tool (2002) for qualitative and quantitative studies was used to evaluate the quality of non-randomised controlled studies. The Hawker et al. (2002) tool assesses nine domains: abstract and title, introduction and aim, method and data, sampling, data analyses, ethics and bias, results, transferability or generalisability, implication, and usefulness. Each domain is rated as either good, fair, poor or very poor, and can be applied to both qualitative and quantitative studies. (See **Table 3.3**.)

The grading of recommendations assessment development and evaluation (GRADE) system was utilised in addition to the Cochrane and Hawker tools to assess the quality of included studies, which provides grades of high, moderate, low and very low. When the grade of the included studies is assessed as high, this could confidently mean that

the true effect lies close to that of the estimate of the effects. A moderate confidence in the effect estimates moderately that the true effects are likely to be close to the effect estimate, but there is a possibility that it is substantially different. When confidence in the effect estimate is limited, it is indicated as low, whereby the true effect may be substantially different from the effect estimate. Very little confidence in the effect estimate is graded as very low, whereby the true effects are likely to be substantially different from the effect estimate.

### 3.3. Results

#### 3.3.1. Study Selection

Figure 1 presents the flow chart diagram which represents the process of study selection. Two thousand four hundred forty-two citations were yielded from the first database search. After duplications were removed, 1875 records were screened by reviewing the titles/ abstracts. In the updated search in 2022, the titles/abstracts of a further 1779 references were reviewed after removing duplicates. After screening from both time points, 49 studies were deemed to be potentially relevant and full texts were reviewed. Finally, eleven studies were selected to be examined in regard to the research questions – these being Aslami et al. (2016), Hosseini (2013), Nasiri, Naboureh and Fayazi (2016), Hamsyah and Subandi (2017), Ghorbani et al. (2016) and Ijaz et al. (2017), Bozorgzadeg and Grasser (2021), Bahadorani et al.2021, Wani and Singh (2021), Gul and Jihangir (2021) and Gul and Jihangir (2019). Five of these studies were randomised clinical trials, while five were non-randomised quantitative studies and one was a mixed-method study.

#### 3.3.2. Study Characteristics

**Table 3.1.** summarises the characteristics of the selected studies. All of the studies were published between 2007- 2022. Most of the studies were conducted in Iran (4), others were conducted in Pakistan (2), United States (2), Indonesia (1) and India (1). Anxiety was measured by different scales in each of the randomized clinical trial (RCT) studies and other studies – for example, Hosseini et al. (2013) and Gul and Jihangir (2019) used the Hamilton Anxiety Scale (HAS; Hamilton, 1959), Aslami et al. (2016) used the Beck Anxiety and Beck Depression Inventories and Nasiri, Naboureh and Fayazi (2016) used the Hospital Anxiety Depression Scale (HADS).

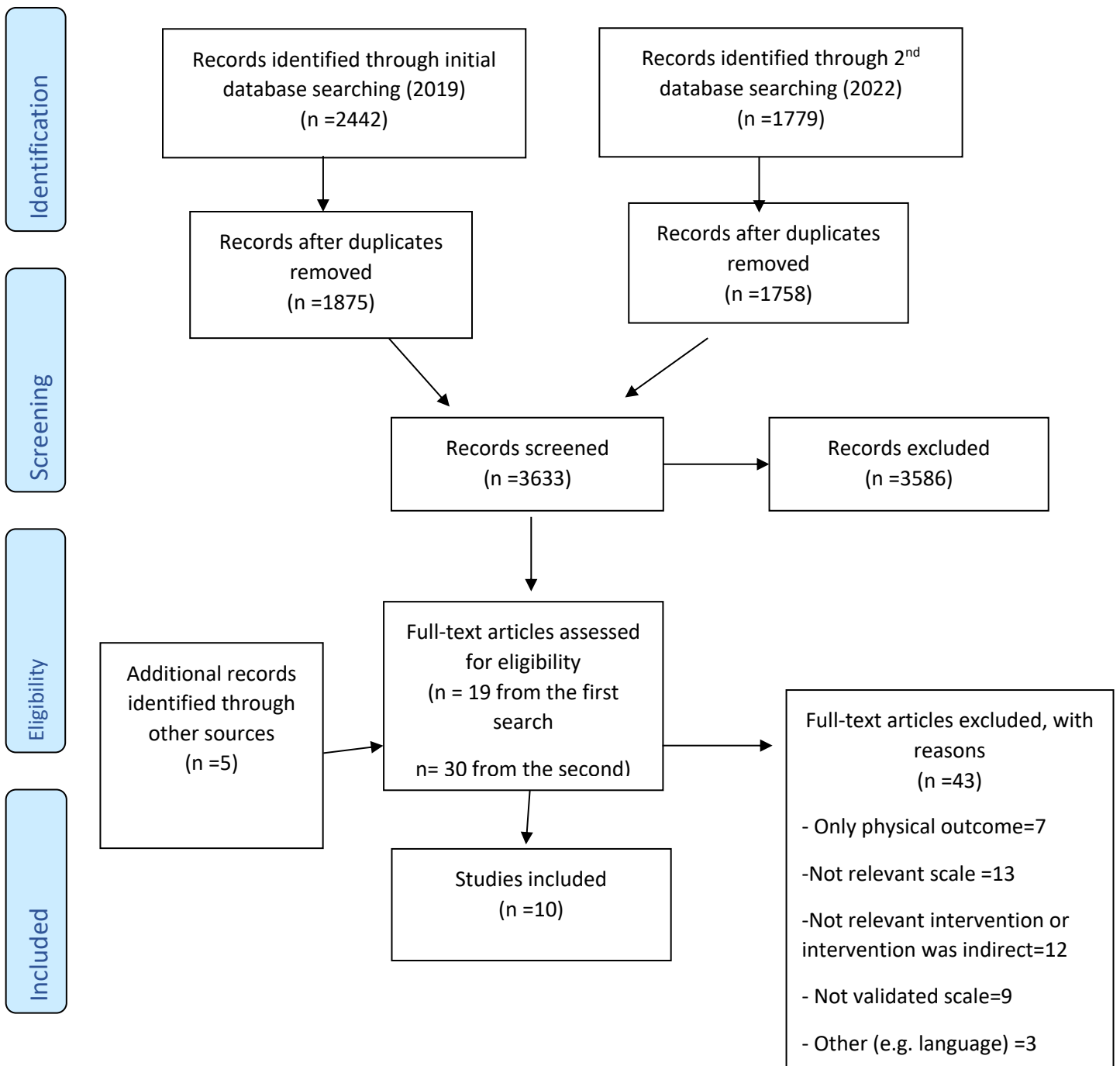
Other measures of mental health, well-being, anxiety and depression included: Psychological Well-being Scale (Ryff, 1989), The Satisfaction with Life Scale (REF), and the RAND Mental Health Inventory (Ijaz et al., 2017). Other secondary outcomes included Islamic Sufi practices, for example, Ijaz et al. (2017) used the Islamic Religious Education Scale, Salah Education Scale and Mindfulness in Salah scale. Bozorgzadeh and Grasser (2021) also used the Clinically Adaptive Multi-dimensional Outcome Scale (CAMOS), the Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation (CORE-10), the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), Herth Hope Index (HHI), and Brief Resilience Scale (BRS) to assess patients' self-reported levels of distress and psychopathology.

### 3.3.3. Interventions

All of the RCTs, apart from Bahadorani et al. (2021), used *zikr*- which is a form of Islamic meditation in order to remember Allah- as an intervention (Nasiri, Naboureh and Fayazi, 2016; Hosseini et al., 2016). Bahadorani et al. (2021) used *tamarkoz* – Sufi meditation as an intervention. Aslami et al. (2017) compared the effectiveness of mindfulness-based practice on Islamic–spiritual schemas and group cognitive-behaviour therapy in relation to the reduction of anxiety and depression. Gul and Jehangir (2019; 2021) also compared two different types of meditations; a Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction programme and Sufi meditation. Hamsyah and Subandi (2017) applied *zikr* as an intervention in a mixed-method study. Notably, some details of the interventions from the quantitative and mixed methods studies were not reported. These interventions failed to be conveyed in sufficient detail as it is not clarified who delivered the intervention or its duration. As such, these aspects are not included in this review.

Bozorgzadeh and Grasser (2021) introduce Sufi psychotherapy as an experiential practice design by providing data from 45 patients of three Sufi Psychology trained therapists at a separate private practice in Dallas, Houston and Chicago. Although relationship with distress was significant within-person variation in the aforementioned outcomes and change over session in these variables significantly differed by participant. Overall, the changeover session indicated decreases in these facets of distress. Wani and Singh (2019) used the Islamic psycho spiritual therapy in managing withdrawal symptoms, and mental health problems among cannabis users.

**Figure 3.1. PRISMA Flow Diagram.**



### 3.3.4. Quality Assessment

**Table 3.2.** summarises the quality assessment of the included RCTs. Overall, most of the RCTs were of low methodological quality, while one of the studies was rated as of moderate methodological quality (Naziri, Naboureh and Fayazi, 2016). Two of the three studies were found to be of low risk for selection bias (Nasiri, Naboureh and Fayazi, 2016; Aslami et al., 2016). The allocation concealment was considered unclear in all studies. The majority of the studies were graded as low risk for performance and reporting bias except for Hosseini et al. (2013), which was categorised as having an unclear risk due to the lack of details provided. Detection bias was considered unclear in most studies except for Nasiri, Naboureh and Fayazi (2016) which was graded as having a low risk due to the blinding assessment used. Attrition bias was reported as having a low risk in all studies. Lack of participant blinding and ambiguous possibility of selective reporting of results were the most frequent causes of poor scores. Low scores were caused by a lack of information regarding whether group membership was taken into account while conducting outcome assessments.

The full details of the risk of bias assessment in each of the non RCT studies is presented in Table 4.3. The abstract and title of all of the studies were good, with a structured abstract with full information and a clear title provided in each study. The data analysis results of most of the studies were good. The exception to this was Hamsah and Subandi (2017), which was ranked as fair due to the lack of some information and poor in relation to its introduction and aim due to the unclear research question held in the study. While the ethics and bias of the studies were fair for most of the studies, the transferability and generalisability and the implications and usefulness domains were graded differently for each study. Overall, the studies were considered as good and fair for most of the domains, but Hamsah and Subandi (2017) and Ijaz et al. (2017) were graded as poor for the transferability or generalisability and implication and usefulness domains due to the lack of description as to the context/setting. Overall, most of the studies were similar and of moderate quality, with little difference between studies in terms of quality.

**Table 3.1.** Main Characteristic of the Selected Studies.

ARTICLE	YEAR	COUNTRY	AGE	SAMPLE SIZE	PURPOSE	STUDY DESIGN
<i>Wani and Singh</i>	2021	India	14 to 37	N=45	To evaluate the effect of Islamic psycho-spiritual therapy in managing craving, withdrawal symptoms, and mental health problems among cannabis users.	Quantitative Study
<i>Bozorgzadeh and Grasser</i>	2021	United States	18 to 65	N=45	To evaluate the effect of Sufi Psychology practice in therapy.	Quantitative Study
<i>Bahadorani et al.</i>	2021	United States	18 to 30	N=103	To assess the effect of <i>Tamarkoz</i> ( Sufi meditation)practice on students mental and psychical health.	Quantitative study (RCT)
<i>Gul and Jhangir</i>	2019	Pakistan	15 to 60	N=100	To evaluate the effects of Mindfulness-Based Stress reduction program (MBSRP) and Sufi meditation (SM) in lower level of anxiety.	Quantitative Study



<i>Ijaz et al.</i>	2017	Pakistan	16 to 30	N=174	To identify the association between mindfulness in salah (prayer) and the mental health of individuals who offer salah prayer in mindfulness and those who offer without mindfulness.	Quantitative Study
<i>Hamsyah &amp; Subandi</i>	2017	Indonesia	22 to 71	N=51	To examine the relationship between subjective well-being and <i>zikr</i> intensity.	Quantitative and Qualitative Study
<i>Ghorbani et al.</i>	2016	Iran	M 23.8	N=296	To examine the link between Muslim experimental religiousness and better mental health.	Quantitative Study
<i>Nasiri, Naboureh and Fayazi (2016)</i>	2016	Iran	25 to 65	N=80	To assess the effect of Islamic praise (Zikr) on patients' anxiety after coronary artery bypass graft (CABG) surgery.	Quantitative (RCT) Study
<i>Aslami et al.</i>	2016	Iran	NI	N=90	To compare the efficiency of mindfulness based on Islamic spiritual schemas and group cognitive behaviour therapy on the	Quantitative Study

<i>Hosseini et al.</i>	2013	Iran	44 to 75	N=70	reduction of anxiety and depression among pregnant women. To evaluate the effect of spiritual/religious training intervention on anxiety in Shia Muslim individuals scheduled for CABG.	Quantitative (RCT) Study
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**Table 3.2.** Assessment of bias for RCT

Author	Random Sequence Generation	Allocation Concealment	Blinding of participants and personnel	Blinding of outcome assessment	Incomplete outcome data (short term 1 day -6 weeks)	Selective reporting	Total
Bahadorani, lee and Martin, 2021	-	-	N/A	?	+	+	2/7
Gul and Jahangir, 2019	+	?	N/A	?	?	-	1/7
Naziri, Naboureh and Fayazi, 2016	+	+	?	?	+	-	3/7
Hosseini et al., 2013	+	?	N/A	?	+	-	2/7
Aslami et al., 2016	+	?	N/A	?	?	-	1/7

**Table 3. 3.** Assessment of bias for Quantitative studies and Qualitative studies (Description of the Hawker et al. (2002) Tool for the Methodological Quality of Qualitative and Quantitative Studies)

<i>Author (Year)</i>	<i>Abstract &amp; Title</i>	<i>Introduction &amp; Aim</i>	<i>Method &amp; Data</i>	<i>Sampling</i>	<i>Data Analyses</i>	<i>Ethics &amp; Bias</i>	<i>Results</i>	<i>Transferability or Generalisability</i>	<i>Implications &amp; Usefulness</i>
<i>Ghorbani et al. (2016)</i>	Good	Good	Fair	Good	Good	Fair	Good	Fair	Good
<i>Hamsyah &amp; Subandi (2017)</i>	Fair	Poor	Fair	Poor	Fair	Fair	Fair	Poor	Poor
<i>Ijaz et al. (2017)</i>	Good	Fair	Fair	Fair	Good	Fair	Fair	Poor	Poor
<i>Bozorgzadeh and Grasser (2021)</i>	Good	Good	Fair	Good	Fair	Fair	Good	Fair	Fair
<i>Wani and Singh (2021)</i>	Good	Good	Fair	Good	Fair	Good	Good	Fair	Fair

### 3.4. Outcomes

*Anxiety:* Anxiety was a primary outcome in four of the RCTs (Nasiri, Naboureh, and Fayazi, 2016; Aslami et al., 2016; Hosseini et al., 2016; Gul and Jhangir, 2019) and was measured by the HADS (Hospital Anxiety Depression Scale), Beck Anxiety and Depression Inventories or the Hamilton Anxiety Scale (HAS). Three trials showed a significant difference post-intervention between the control group (who received usual care) and the intervention group on measures of anxiety (Nasiri, Naboureh and Fayazi, 2016; Hosseini et al., 2013; Gul and Jhangir, 2019). One of the three trials on Sufi practices saw no differences in the treatment arms (Nasiri, Naboureh and Fayazi, 2016). In this study the outcomes demonstrated almost no difference between the trial arms and with no statistically significant differences.

*Depression:* One trial measured depression in addition to anxiety and found a significant difference between the mean scores of anxiety and depression in the intervention group and control group ( $P < 0.001$ ) (Aslami et al., 2016). In this study the Mindfulness-based Islamic-spiritual schemas were used as an intervention in comparison with group cognitive behaviour therapy. The Beck Anxiety Inventory (BAI) was used to assess anxiety levels during the participant selection process. The intervention group received mindfulness-based Islamic spiritual schemes, while the control groups received cognitive behaviour therapy. The mean of anxiety and depression scores decreased in the intervention group, but increased in the control group

*Perceived stress:* Bahadorani et al. (2021) found that a *Tamarkoz* (Sufi mindfulness) intervention lowered perceived stress compared to a waitlist control group and general

stress management group. This study showed that the group receiving the *Tamarkoz* intervention reported lower scores for stress than both control groups, but the difference was significant only for the waitlist control group ( $t(27) = 2.98, p = 0.009$ ) in the second wave. For the third wave, the *Tamarkoz* group was significantly different from both the waitlist group ( $p = 0.003$ ) and the stress management group ( $p = 0.008$ ). Bozorgzadeh and Grasser (2021) also found that the intervention of Sufi Psychology sessions lowered perceived distress significantly when it was measured immediately after compared to before sessions.

*Subjective Well-Being:* Hamsyah and Subandi (2016) measured subjective well-being and zikr, with the results of the quantitative statistical analyses being significant and demonstrating a 33.64% contribution to the participants' happiness. ( $r = 0.58, p < .01$ ) as measured on the Satisfaction with Life Scale, Positive and Negative Affect Scales, and Dzikir (*zikr*) Intensity Scale. The qualitative aspect of Hamsyah and Subandi's study (2016) also reported an increased level of subjective well-being after practising zikr. The factors potentially implicated in these results were social interaction, health, welfare, and culture. The qualitative data illustrated that zikr practice of the Sholawat A'dzom Dzikir (*zikr*) Congregation had an impact on the aspects of subjective well-being of the subjects, such as life satisfaction and domination of positive affect over negative affect in the subject's lives.

*Other Well-Being Variables:* Ghorbani et al. (2016) who looked at religiousness and its association with mental health, described research outcomes pertaining to integrative self-knowledge, mindfulness, self-control, death anxiety and satisfaction with life (mental health). The study found that partial correlations of Muslim

Experiential Religiousness\* with religious\*\* and psychological\*\*\* functioning after controlling for age (\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$  \*\*\* $p < .001$ .). Muslim Experiential Religiousness correlated positively with integrative Self-knowledge and Self-Control.

Ijaz et al. (2017) examined mindfulness in salah prayer and its association with mental health. The study results demonstrated that mean scores were significantly higher for those who offered prayer with mindfulness ( $p < .01$ ) than for those who did not offer prayer with mindfulness as measured on the RAD Mental Health Inventory. The mean score on mental health was also higher for those who offered prayer ( $p < .05$ ) than for those who did not offer prayer as measured by RAD Mental Health Inventory which also measured mental health and other three variables; three self-reported measures were constructed- included Islamic religious education scale, Salah education scale and mindfulness in Salah scale-. The study indicated a significant positive correlation with all aspects of mental health and with mindfulness in salah prayer ( $p < .02$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

### 3.5. Discussion

The focus of the review was to explore the current state of evidence on the relationship between Sufi spirituality and mental health and how Sufi practices might promote well-being. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first systematic review exploring the relationship between Sufi practice and mental health. I found that Sufi practices in relation to well-being are researched little in the literature with to date only three trials, six quantitative studies, and one mixed-methods study retrieved through systematic searches.

It is evident from the data that *zikr* practices appear to be the most popular practices used in research as an intervention. Although most of the studies in this review found statistically significant effects identified between zikr spiritual intervention and anxiety, depression, or well-being, due to the low quality of the studies, we were not able to make a conclusive statement based on this research. Some evidence is presented

that zikr reduces anxiety in the pre-and post-operation stages of CABG surgery (Hosseini et al., 2013; Nasiri, Naboureh and Fayazi, 2016). Cognitive behaviour therapy and mindfulness-based Islamic schema were also shown to have a positive effect on anxiety and depression levels (Aslami et al., 2016; Bahadorani et al., 2021; Gul & Jehangir, 2019; 2021; Gul & Jehangir, 2019; 2021).

Most studies included in this review explored the effects of spirituality on the mental well-being of the patients in clinical settings, concluding positive effects on the patients' well-being. For example, Hosseini et al. (2013) and Nasiri et al. (2016) found a positive impact of spiritual/ religious intervention on patients' mental well-being by reducing anxiety and stress after/during surgery.

The findings of this review are consistent with other research which has shown that other types of spirituality have been shown to enhance mental health and well-being. For example, Rosendahl (2009) designed a study on the effectiveness of routinely applied psychological or spiritual interventions for patients undergoing bypass surgery, concluding small (but nonsignificant) effect sizes for several psychological outcomes (anxiety, depression, and positive mood) and statistically significant treatment effects for negative mood. Hosseini et al. (2013) also found that spiritual/ religious training can reduce anxiety in Muslim patients undergoing coronary artery bypass graft surgery. While Rosendahl (2013) used Christian prayer (the Lord's prayer) and the presence of God (according to the patients' belief) as a spiritual intervention, Hosseini et al. (2013) used Islamic supplicant (zikr) and the Qur'an on Muslim patient.

Studies in different spiritual/ religious interventions have also shown similar findings regarding an individual's well-being. A study conducted on patients who are living with heart failure found that religion and spirituality were inversely linked with depressive symptoms (Sacco et al., 2014). They also found that religion and spirituality were also related to less death anxiety (ibid.). Clark and Hunter (2018) reviewed the literature systematically on Advanced Heart Failure, finding the correlations between spirituality and several mental health issues and quality of life. Additionally, Bahadorani et al. (2021) used the Sufi practice as an intervention to reduce stress among university students, and they found significant increases in positive emotions and daily spiritual experiences and reductions in perceived stress and heart rate.



The findings of this review and other relevant reviews converged on the effectiveness of spirituality and religion on mental health and well-being. However, the findings of this review are also similar to another recently published systematic review which looked at religious/ spiritual practices (more broadly) and their effects on mental health, and which also concluded current research was methodologically limited (Malvia et al., 2022). The findings from this review also highlight that intervention and outcomes are different across the body of research; therefore, it is hard to draw conclusions regarding the overall effectiveness of Sufi practices on specific mental health outcomes. In general, a positive effect was noted in response to the interventions. Sufi practices reportedly decreased anxiety, depression, and perceived stress and had a positive effect on mental health and well-being outcomes. However, methodological quality of the included literature was moderate to poor, so these conclusions must be interpreted cautiously.

### 3.5.1. Strengths and Limitations of the included Studies

The quality of the trials included in the review is quite low due to the lack of some pertinent details – such as when and how the trials were conducted. None of the included studies were rated as being high quality. For example, the study of Hosseini et al. (2013) is very unclear as the process is hard to follow due to the lack of the timings of the intervention being set out. Moreover, an unclear explanation is given as to the sampling process – with no added flow diagram being presented and the sampling number being unaccounted. There are some problems associated with the analyses of the paper by Nasiri, Naboureh and Fayazi (2016) as discussed above. More details should have been included and the trial design should have been followed otherwise the intervention shall only result in an immediate and temporary effect. The study of Aslami et al. (2016) is also difficult to follow in regard to its study method and analyses. The study is described as an RCT and semi-experimental, yet it is a controlled study that the randomisation process was not clearly described. There is also an issue in the delivery of the mean and sd. (the Mean 4.0 and sd 6.0 has an effect size of 0.66 (not 6.0). Furthermore, no study flow diagram is provided and the explanation of the samples is unclear. The study of Hamsayah and Subandi (2017) is very low-quality as no clear research question is presented and only small samples

were used. Ghorbani et al. (2016) and Ijaz et al. (2017) are cross sectional studies and have a moderate quality. Therefore, it is hard to draw conclusions from the studies as the studies did not have high quality. Consequently, there remains a need for an ongoing review of Sufi practice and different mental health variables to understand, in depth, the relationship between Sufi/Islamic spiritual practice and mental well-being.

### 3.5.2. Strengths and Limitations of this review

I employed a comprehensive search strategy, including both Turkish and English language publications across six databases. The study was targeted to review all available peer-reviewed published evidence, We also searched all the reference lists of included studies to identify potential further relevant research. We included independent researchers in the screening of potential studies and quality appraisals. Despite these strengths, several limitations are identified in relation to this study. As the intervention was limited to English and Turkish-language sources, studies published in other languages might exist and have not been considered here. This might be particularly important to the number of studies as these types of interventions might likely be conducted in non-English or non-Turkish speaking countries. The study is limited only to Sufi practices within Islamic spirituality (such as *zikr*, prayer and *muraqabah*). We have chosen a very narrow version of such practices (i.e., Sufi practice) and therefore further research might be adapted to Islamic practices in relation to different mental health outcomes. A meta-analysis could not be conducted due to the heterogeneity of the study methods.

### 3.5.3. Implications for Practice and Research

The results of this review emphasise the potential of spiritual intervention in helping mental well-being – such as in reducing anxiety and depression among Muslim patients. However, it is hard to definitively reach this conclusion due to the poor quality of the included studies. One study suggests promising results that *zikr* could be beneficial prior to and following CABG surgery, thereby acting as a non-pharmacological, low cost and non-invasive method which lacks side effects, but more specific evaluation of this intervention is required before recommendations should be made. Overall, *zikr* might have a positive impact on patients undertaking CABG surgery and pregnant women, while it may allow healthy individuals to improve their mental well-being and to reduce potential anxiety and depression. This review has

highlighted that more robust research is needed as to Islamic spirituality/Sufi practices on mental health. The undertaking of similar studies including other mental health variables is needed to develop more appropriate outcome measures and enable comparisons to be made between different types of Sufi practice. Future research should also consider how Sufi practices are implemented among Muslim and non-Muslim populations and how they may be practised differently between individuals.

### 3.6. Conclusion

Sufi spiritual practices have been evaluated as a means of reducing anxiety and depression in patients undergoing surgery or during pregnancy, with this also being shown with psychological therapy modified to contain Islamic and indigenous themes (i.e., zikr). However, due to the methodological limitations in the studies – such as variations in the age groups, mental health problems, outcome measures, intervention timings and study methods – it is not possible to conclude that Sufi practices are effective in improving mental well-being. Further, more rigorous research is needed as to the effectiveness of Sufi practice towards improving mental health.

My systematic review has also shown that all of the studies identified related to Sufi practice and mental well-being were of moderate to low quality. Therefore, I have concluded that before further studies are embarked upon, a more detailed research approach is needed to understand the field. In response, I have identified that asking research participants about their involvement in contemporary Sufi groups in Britain is one way of deepening the understanding held as to spirituality and its relationship with mental well-being in Britain. More qualitative and in-depth research is urgently needed.

## Chapter 4: Method

### Method of the Empirical Qualitative Study

This chapter outlines the methodological approach of the empirical study aimed to explore the relationship between Sufi Spiritual practice and mental well-being in contemporary Sufi centres in Britain. First, the rationale for the use of qualitative methodology to achieve this aim is presented. Subsequently, I describe the study procedures, including ethical considerations, procedural and practical issues regarding participant recruitment, data collection and data analysis.

#### 4.1. Rationale for Using a Qualitative Design

A qualitative approach was used to collect data in the research, as my systematic review found few qualitative studies addressing Sufi practice and health outcomes. Existing literature was very scarce, and the quality of the quantitative studies was not sufficient to understand the topic. While quantitative research is important in answering specific and focused questions, qualitative research allows the researcher to understand individual experiences in a more in-depth fashion and is particularly crucial when exploring novel, under-researched areas. The quantitative methods employed in this area of research did not provide clear information about Sufi practice, and were not able to further understand how participants saw the impact of Sufi practice on mental health and well-being. Qualitative research can be considered suitable for exploring the views/attitudes of participants regarding Sufi practice and its role in the mental well-being of individuals. Gaskell (2000:39) has identified that in-depth interviews are effective in gaining "a fine-textured understanding of beliefs, attitudes, values and motivations in relation to the behaviours of people in particular social contexts". To develop an in-depth understanding of the human experience and unique explanations as well as interpretation of these experiences, qualitative methods provide rich data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In relation to the topic of the practice of Sufism in Britain and its potential relationship to mental health and well-being, qualitative methods allow us to explore in detail how the experience of Sufism affects practitioners' feelings, lives, and relationships; it also allows the researcher the opportunity to explore the effects of Sufi practice on an individual's perception of their

mental well-being. In order to achieve this in-depth understanding, the study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the relationship between Islamic Sufi spirituality and mental well-being?
2. What motivates adherents from western backgrounds to participate in organised Sufi ideas and practices in Britain?
3. What role does mental health and well-being play in the previous lives of adherents and how does this relate to their current experience of Sufi practice?
4. To what degree does Sufi practice, within the participating centres, recognise issues of mental health and well-being among the people who take part?

#### 4.1.1. Development of research strategy

The selection and use of appropriate and applicable research methodologies is important in order to undertake research successfully. The research method used in this study was developed through successive iterations as the research questions were modified as a result of preliminary findings and increasing understanding of the nature of Sufi practice in the UK. The COVID -19 pandemic also introduced unpredictability into the research leading to a significant part of the study to be conducted online. This produced an unanticipated benefit for the research in the form of an additional empirical online data given that collective Sufi practice had to be reconfigured as a result of the imposition of social distancing.

The intention in this research was to take an entirely inductive approach to the data, but the nature of the data guided me to use mixed inductive and deductive approaches. Inductive and deductive approaches to the data, also called 'data-driven' and 'theory-driven', were used together in this study (Willing, 2013). The inductive approach involved engaging with data without an *a priori* coding frame in mind; all themes being derived from the data and tightly grounded in the researcher's position (Boyatzis, 1998). On the other hand, the deductive approach allowed some form of a coding template that is borrowed from previous studies (Crabtree and Miller, 1992). Combining these two approaches for the different research questions worked well with the data achieved: involving using a coding template for specific questions to leaders

about their views about the Sufi centres, whilst producing new more inductive themes about individuals' experiences of attending them and practicing Sufism (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Therefore, the current research adopted a combination of deductive and inductive approaches to analysing the qualitative data generated in the study. The design of this study therefore took the form of a qualitative research project which involved in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (some taken in-person and some via the internet).

The following data analysis section provides more information on the application process of these two approaches.

## 4.2. Qualitative Interviews and Focus group discussions

This section presents the methodologies for data collection and approaches to analyses for both in-depth interviews and focus group discussions.

### 4.2.1. Ethics

Research ethics approval was received from the UCL Ethics Committee on 1 May 2019. The project has been registered with the Data Protection Coordinator at UCL. The Data Protection Identification number is Z6364106/2019/01/02 (See Appendix C for approval letter). The ethics approval was extended for another year due to the Covid Pandemic 14565/001 with the additional inclusion of an online interview amendment (See Appendix D for approval letter).

### 4.2.2. Setting, participants and procedures

#### *Setting*

Three Sufi centres in London were used as the sites of the research, with each centre selected in accordance with their different approaches towards contemporary Sufism in Britain. The Threshold Society (reformed-Mevlevi order), Naqshbandi-Haqqani Tariqa (traditional), Ansari Rifai Sufi Order-UK (hybrid) were explicitly chosen for both their approaches and the characteristics of the participants. These Sufi groups have been selected to participate in the study given the wide range of more culturally defined examples of Sufism present in the UK, specifically to utilise the heterogeneity of their participants and their hybrid approaches to the understanding of Sufi tariqas and Sufi practices. Most of the Sufi community in the UK has been focused on one tariqa, and mainly, their memberships draw on a

specific culture or ethnic population. These three Sufi centres were selected to represent a more British form of Sufism which was more diverse in terms of national, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds.

While I recognise that different Sufi groups may reflect different kinds of audiences, these groups have more attendees from diverse backgrounds. I focused on the actual Sufi groups which were open to all sorts of audience, modifying their practices to the secular audience.

### *Initial immersion*

An initial immersion period in the centres was undertaken to understand the context of Sufi practice, deepen my knowledge of the groups and their practice, and to refine the research questions I would be asking in the study. Although I visited the centres before commencing formal data collection I was always identified as a researcher. Soon after my registration for this PhD, I began an informal search of Sufi groups in Britain. First, I participated in groups simply to understand their approach(es) and audience. After that, I introduced the idea of the research to the leaders of the groups and those involved in their practice. Each Sufi group has at least one weekly gathering of a 3–4 hour duration. I spent the first six months understanding how the groups functioned, achieved by attending their meetings and by making notes about their practice. Each group has a specific place to conduct its weekly practices. These places are either a rented church room or a Sufi centre. Before the Covid pandemic each centre already live-streamed sessions via Zoom for the participants who could not be there in person. After the pandemic began, the weekly gathering moved to be entirely online. The centres welcomed all kinds of participants regarding their age, sex, and Muslim and religious background. The practices were conducted in a large place to conduct zikr (Sufi practices) with the group in two of them rented in a Christian church and one had its own centre. The zikr (practices) lasted around 3 hours and were conducted in mixed gender groups. The main practices began with the silent zikr and were followed with a loud group zikr and ending with reading a Sufi text, sharing the participants' opinion, and then eating dinner together.

### *Recruitment and sampling*

I sought to recruit people from different backgrounds (non-religious, spiritual and religious participants). I purposively recruited participants from different Sufi groups in

terms of their approach to contemporary Sufi practices and regarding how their approach differed from other mainstream Islamic and spiritual groups. I was looking for a variety of Sufi groups that could provide access to a diverse range of experiences in relation to contemporary Sufi groups in the UK. Individual participants were recruited through an introduction by the leader of each Sufi centre. The participants were either (a) having no previous religious background, or (b) be from Christian and other religious backgrounds.

I included stakeholders (the leaders of the centres) leading the gatherings and the practices in the centre, and individuals who either knew members of the centre or had been a member for a while. I excluded participants who were not regularly attending the centre, as I wanted to access participants who would provide personal experience with contemporary Sufi practices and could describe their experiences and views on experiencing Sufi practices with the centres in terms of the potential well-being benefits entailed.

For qualitative interview studies, there is no agreed standard for the assessment of sample size (Malterud, Siersma and Guassora, 2016). There are different opinions about data saturation. Fuss and Ness (2015) explained that saturation may be understood as having reached the level that additional interviews do not contribute information to the data already collected in the earlier interviews. There are a lot of critiques of 'data saturation', because it goes against much of the epistemology of qualitative research (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 2006).

Malterud, Siersma and Guassora (2016) criticised data saturation as a means of determining sample size. They propose a new concept which is 'information power' to guide adequate sample size for qualitative study. 'Information power' has been defined as the more information the sample holds, relevant for the actual study, the lower the amount of participant is needed (ibid.). Malterud, Siersma and Guassora (2016:1754) criticize the idea of 'data saturation' reflecting on how the information power needed for a specific study can be achieved with the pragmatic model. The information power of sample calculation is identified with five dimensions: study aim, sample specificity, use of established theory, quality of dialogue, and analysis strategy. This approach suggests a pragmatic model for the assessment of sample size on qualitative studies.



In this study, the pragmatic model fits well as a justification for the study. I aimed to recruit a maximum of 40 individuals, the information power helped me to predetermine likely sample size for my research question. My sample size reached the information power with 35 participants.

Five Sufi centres were initially approached to recruit for the study. One of them did not want to be a part of the study; another was not suitable for the study because their adherents are mainly from a particular nationality or non english speaking community. Three of the centres approached agreed to participate. I first contacted the stakeholders (the leaders of the centres) to explain the purpose of the study and inclusion criteria of the participants in order to ask them if I could recruit members of the centre. If they agreed, I asked them to contact some of the participants who were willing to be a part of the study. I visited each centre many times and attended their weekly gatherings for over a year and explained the study face to face to eligible participants, answered any questions, and give potential participants the information sheets to take away (see Appendix G for the information sheet).

### *Procedures for seeking consent*

People who agreed to be contacted were given an information sheet (see Appendix G for the information sheet) at least 24 hours in advance of a potential interview date, thereby allowing them to consider the nature of the interview and the areas that were to be covered. The consent form (see Appendix H for the consent form) was given prior to interviews and focus group discussions. Participants were informed that they could interrupt or pause the interview at any time and that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

### **4.2.3. Data Collection**

I interviewed five leaders and 30 individuals from the three centres. Three methods of data collection- initial in-depth interview, focus groups and follow up online interviews- have been used in the study. Most of the interviews were conducted before the COVID Pandemic, however, four of the interviews and focus group discussions, and follow up interviews about COVID19 experiences were conducted online.

I collected demographic information about each participant including their time being a member of Sufism, their religious/spiritual background, age, sex, and ethnicity (see Appendix B for the demographic information).

Individual in-depth interviews were conducted with each participant, starting by asking them to introduce themselves and sharing their experience of Sufism. A life course approach in which participants were asked to place their interest in Sufism in the context of their life narrative, This was used to understand the intentions and attitudes of British Sufis in relation to contemporary spiritual practices and mental health. The interview included prompt questions (see Appendix F) asking the participants about their life before and after Sufism, and their life at the current time, their mental health history and how the Sufi practice has affected their life over time. The interviews were conducted in the Sufi centre group meeting place or at another suitable place for the participants such as meeting room at UCL, Division of Psychiatry and lasted approximately one hour. The interviews occurred at a time that was most suitable for participants.

I also used focus groups as they enabled the opportunity of gaining additional insights from the interaction between participants and often proved a more natural setting for gathering data (Abrams and Gaiser, 2017). The focus group discussions with 4-10 participants were held online and lasted approximately one hour each time. Focus groups have been argued to be a particularly helpful tool when you need to “explore perceptions, feelings, and thinking about issues, ideas, products, services, or opportunities” (Krueger and Casey, 2014: 37). Focus groups are distinctive in that they emphasise interpersonal interaction in the analysis. Therefore, three focus group discussions were conducted with three centres. The question for the focus group participants was around their experience of Sufism in general and its effect on their well-being (see Appendix F).

### *Online Covid-19 interviews*

I conducted a follow-up online interview with those whom I had interviewed previously, asking questions about how their experience of Sufi practice changed in the context of Covid-19 and how they were affected by being away from group practices. The purpose of follow up interviews was understanding the effects of Sufi practices during the Covid-19 Pandemic. This unexpected situation provided the

opportunity to conduct an extra study that strengthened the research with respect to examining the effectiveness of Sufi practices during a period of prolonged isolation.

The focus group discussions and follow up interviews were conducted remotely using Zoom and Skype. Doing fieldwork in a lockdown has been a challenge, but it also opened a new door for my research. Online interviews are frequently described as a "second choice" to the "gold standard" of face-to-face interviews, according to Deakin and Wakefield (2014: 604). As the pandemic did not allow me to conduct my study entirely in person, I had to use online synchronous interviews to continue my research. I was able to continue my research virtually, which in this case, meant doing online interviews with the participants via a video call. Lupton (2021) discussed the potential benefits of online interactions providing an alternative source for social research materials if the researchers decide to use this method. O'Conner and Madge (2017) has mentioned that online synchronous interviews have distinct advantages and more closely resemble a conventional face-to-face interview in many respects. Although for some individuals, techno-competence may be inhibited by disabilities such as dyslexia or lack of technology skills, online synchronous interviews allow the researcher to use appropriate conferencing software or chat room access to facilitate interviews that require less sophisticated technological skills compared to other methods such as to use email (Madge, 2017). In this method, online interviewing resembles a traditional face-to-face interview as it is an online synchronous exchange. Additionally, time investment is one of the advantages for this approach alongside the availability of the participant -responders can be anywhere in the world- and transcript are available immediately to end up similar outcome (O'Conner and Madge, 2003).

As I had completed most of the recruitment for my study in person, and only some interviews were conducted online, some of the common challenges of this approach were not faced such as the difficulty of online recruitment, but still there were challenges such as online interaction, interview conduct and design. Abrams and Gaiser (2017) stated that conducting synchronous online focus group discussion is more closely comparable to the face-to-face medium, because everyone is online at the same time in the chosen online platform just like a live focus group. However, Abrams and Gaiser (2017) do suggest that online focus groups should use fewer

participants than face-to-face with a recommendation to include just three to eight participants (Poytner, 2010).

#### 4.2.4. Reflexivity

Reflexivity is the "act of self-reflection that considers how one's own opinions, values, and actions shape how data is generated, analysed, and interpreted" (Castree et al., 2013). I have knowledge about Sufism and Islam, having a degree in theology and being Muslim, so from my own personal knowledge, I was both an insider and outsider in conducting this research, of which there are pros and cons. The insiders are more aware of the lives of their participants than outsiders (Corbin-Dwyer and Buckle, 2009).

I am a researcher with an understanding of Arabic and Sufism. Also, several of the groups in the UK have their origins from Turkey, wherein I have further insight through being Turkish. I am able to acknowledge the use and meaning of Islamic/Sufi terminology when the participants express their experience of Sufism. It provides a close connection and communication with the participants and enriches the data from the interview. Therefore, I am an insider in this sense.

As part of my reflexivity in the interview process, I made notes after each interview. The notes included important details about the interview as well as the process of conducting the interviews, which I kept as a research diary (Nadin and Cassell, 2006). There are also cons to being an insider; for example, during the data analysis, there might be a potential risk of overlooking parts of the data that outsiders might take for granted (Perry et al., 2004). Hayfield and Huxley (2015) mentioned that being an insider allows the researcher to be more aware of the lives of their participants than outsiders.

On the other hand, an insider researcher may have high expectations from the participants due to their shared positions, and it may affect the data. This might be related to potential 'blind spots' that I may not see as I am familiar with the characteristics of the participants. I redressed these points through supervision, trying to remain curious about the data, and having to support other researchers to look at my transcripts to see if they noticed things different to me in the data.

I am also an outsider in relation to my research topic as I am not British and nor am I Sufi. Even where I may have shared some degree of similarity with participants' lives, there were also potentially many more differences due to other personal, social, and

situational factors that outweighed what was shared, making it less likely that an insider will understand participants' perspectives than an outsider (Bridges, 2001). Conversely, an outsider researcher may be unable to understand or accurately represent the experience of their participants (Hayfield and Huxley, 2015).

Alongside all these debates on being an outsider or insider, Geaves (2019:66) has examined being an insider or outsider in the study of religion. He stated that the challenges of the simplistic understanding of being an insider for an 'insider' who studies 'insiders', such as a Muslim studying Muslims. His suggestion about the Islamic terminology *tawhid* (unity) as a dualistic insider/outsider approach could better fit this research's approach as it relates to my position as a Muslim studying British Sufis. Being partly insider and partly outsider researcher in this project, I used the pros and tried to reduce the cons with supervision and personal reflection throughout the data reporting.

#### 4.2.5. Data Analysis

The interviews and focus group discussions were audio-taped, transcribed verbatim and anonymised. The data were stored in a secure way (encrypted on a UCL computer) to ensure data protection, while audio recordings were deleted in accordance with the GDPR.

By immersing myself in multiple readings of the transcripts and audio recording of the data, I analysed the interviews broadly to identify analytical areas and thereby created categories and themes from the commonalities found in the data. Here, attention was also given to any exceptions, discrepant ideas or counter-narratives. Data analysis was used to gain insights into the subjective experiences of Sufis and their opinion as to how these practices mediate mental well-being.

#### *Analytic approach*

I have taken a multi-method qualitative approach to analyse the data, using both narrative and thematic analysis to address the different research questions. I used NVivo 11 to manage the coding and analysis of the data and thematic and narrative analysis of the data.

I decided with my supervisors that a mixed thematic analysis and narrative analysis for the different research questions were the most appropriate methods for analysis

to fulfil the aims of the study. I utilised a combination of inductive and deductive methodologies, using the raw data of the experiences of Sufi practices to generate the sub-themes (Nowell et al., 2017). I also analysed the data in line with the research questions I was examining, with the overarching themes reflecting my research questions.

By undertaking the methods described above, I was able to address the main aim of the study on helping us to better understand the relationship between Sufi practice and mental health and well-being. The study has used a mix of deductive, and inductive research questions. For example, questions such as 'how you would define contemporary Sufi centres' which was asked of Sufi leaders is more deductive in order to gain specific answers about leaders' views of the characteristics of the centres. Other research questions were more inductive to access participants' personal experiences. The analysis of these questions was also differentiated due to the nature of answers. The first question was asked to the leaders and the answers analysed thematically. The second based question was more inductive, and the questions analysed narratively and the study used real life approaches.

The narrative analysis allowed me to understand specifically the individual's life story and how Sufism shaped and impacted mental health through the use of a life story approach. The rest of the data were broadly analysed using thematic analysis.

### *Thematic analysis*

Braun and Clarke's (2014) approach to thematic analysis suggests that the first step is to familiarise yourself with the data through the transcription of the audio recorded interviews, listening to the recordings several times and reading the transcripts carefully to identify potential codes which assist in developing themes. Thematic analysis is common in qualitative research and flexible while still adhering to a set of processes. (Nowell et al., 2017). A thematic analysis approach enables the researcher to summarise datasets while taking into account the similarities and differences between the perspectives of various individuals. (Nowell et al., 2017; Braun & Clarke, 2006). I felt this approach was most suitable to use for the analysis of the remainder of the data.

An inductive approach to thematic analysis was utilised to analyse the data, a result of this providing the most flexibility within qualitative research, and it is widely used in

several different disciplines (Braun, 2013). Such an approach was used to provide a comprehensive overview of the data and emergent concepts that might explain mental health through the lens of Sufi practice (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

The specific steps of my thematic analysis were conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2009) approach. The first step is familiarisation of the data, as stated by Braun and Clarke (2006). This was done by re-reading, transcribing and re-reading the data alongside reflexive notes written during data collection, including initial analytic thoughts from my research diary (Tuckett, 2005). I then conducted initial coding of the data and shared it with my supervisors (MK and PH). Following initial coding, we met to discuss the codes and agree on what was relevant to the research questions. I then continued my analysis using the software package NVivo, as this allowed me to more comprehensively incorporate the large amounts of textual data arising from the interviews and focus groups. Thematic analysis was an ongoing and iterative process throughout the interviews, namely due to its flexibility and adaptability in identifying patterns in the data and in adjusting and adapting thematic codes indicated by the data (Braun, 2013).

### *Narrative analysis*

Life narratives have been used as an approach to individual interviews. The purpose of this analysis is to tell a story with a focus on how the story is being told, as in narrative analysis (Reissman, 2005). In this study, individuals described their life stories and how they engaged with Sufism over time, and particularly, how this related to their mental health and well-being. Narrative research allowed us to become informed by the narratives themselves, providing the core of self-definition and a life story (McAdams, 1985). There was not a prescribed way to conduct a narrative analysis, and approaches may vary according to research aims and the researcher (Reissman, 2008). The specific approach I took to narrative analysis was described further, below.

Murray's (2003) approach was used by starting with summarising each narrative to identify and understand the key features of the narratives' orientation, form, and genre. This has been applied for the individuals' interviews to gain the most valuable outcome from their life narratives. After transcribing each interview, I paid attention to each individuals' story. A detailed picture of how three Sufi groups' members were

enacting change was shown through the participants' stories. I had specifically looked at stories about how the life of participants evolved into new ways of understanding their life. The analysis began with the identification of the stories contained within each life story. My supervisors (MK and PH) and I discussed the life stories from the interview. The participants provided me with several examples of stories and turning points of their lives regarding their mental health and religious histories. Thus, the narrative stories naturally formed at various points throughout an interview as the interviewees tried to relate relevant examples to the discussion's more prominent themes or, conversely, utilised stories of specific events to find an explanation or response to a general question. The analysis of these stories took place in three stages. First, I identified the story line that summarises how I thought the specific story related to the overarching narrative of Sufi experience of participants. The second level of analysis I engaged in identified the similarities and differences in the stories. The third level of the analysis was creating an argument that could be found and represented logically and inferentially engaged with a broader theme.

Narrative analysis was used for the individual life stories; these parts of the thesis were purposively selected to understand an individuals' life course regarding the mental health histories throughout their Sufi experience. While transcribing the data and re-reading the texts, I made detailed notes on their understanding of the different influences on the individual's journey through their Sufi experience and how their narrative was told. Supervisors also checked the individuals' interviews and discussed the different interpretations of the narratives.

### *Integration of thematic analysis and narrative analysis*

In early conversations with my supervisors, thematic analysis was the most appropriate approach to analyse the data. After conducting thematic analysis on the whole data and creating the themes and topics, we realised that the narrative analysis was better suited for some parts of the study. Therefore, according to the research questions, hybrid methods of thematic and narrative analysis were used. The deductive part of the study is actually the research questions that were used to describe the contemporary centres through the leaders' interviews as I have a research framework and received a deductive response to it.



## Chapter 5: Findings from the Empirical Qualitative Study

This chapter outlines the findings from the interviews with leaders of the Sufi centres and the interviews and focus group with individuals who are taking part in Sufi groups. A description of the sample is provided followed by the analysis of the interviews and focus group discussions.

### 5.1. Participants

The leaders of the three centres comprise three men and two women, leading the Sufi practices in the three centres. Forty individuals agreed to be contacted, of whom thirty-five were interviewed. Of the remaining five who initially agreed to be contacted, they decided not to take part, either did not want to share their experience or could not arrange a time to be interviewed. Interviews with the leaders and individuals were conducted in the Sufi centres, a café and participants' homes. Interviews with the leaders lasted an average of 50 minutes and took place 2019-2020. The majority of the interviewees were White British (14) or South Asian (13), and almost equal in gender (m: 17, f: 18). More than half were coming from an Islamic background and a third were Christians, the rest described themselves as spiritual (see **Table 5.1** for the full characteristics). All three centres' participants whose recordings were included in the study took part in an interview or focus group. For the focus group discussions, three online sessions were conducted during 2020. Twenty participants agreed to attend focus group discussions, thirteen of them attended online discussions. By the time of the focus group discussions, due to covid-19 pandemic and the change of the nature of fieldwork, only people who were available to be interviewed online were able to participate in the study. The pandemic allowed me to conduct follow up interviews with the individuals who took part in the study, twenty-two of the initial thirty-five participants agreed to follow up interviews. Extracts from participants' interviews are shown below to illustrate these themes with participant pseudonyms.

**Table 5.1.**Demographic characteristics of participants who took part in the study

**Demographic: Leaders (5), Individuals**

<b>(30)</b>		<b><i>n</i> = 35</b>
Nationality (%)	White British	14 (40.0)
	Black British	3 (8.6)
	Asian British	9 (25.7)
	Other	9 (25.7)
Sex (%)	Male	19 (54.3)
	Female	16 (47.5)
Age	Range (mean; SD)	19 to 76 (48.5; 12.4)
Sufi Centres	Mevlevi Sufi Order	11 (31.4)
	Ansari Qadiri Rifai Sufi Order	13 (37.1)
	Naqshbandi Haqqani Sufi Order	11 (31.4)
Religious Background (%)	Muslim	18 (51.4)
	Christian	7 (20.0)
	Jewish	1 (2.9)
	Non-religious	9 (25.7)
Duration for attending to Sufi group	Years in Sufi groups—range (mean; SD)	0 to 35 (13.1;10.01)
Current Belief (%)	Muslim	29 (82.9)
	Spiritual	6 (17.1)
SOC <sup>a</sup> group (2010) (%)	1. Managers, directors, and senior officials	1 (2.9)
	2. Professional occupations	29 (82.9)
	3. Associate professional and technical occupations	2 (5.7)
	4. Administrative and secretarial occupations	-
	5. Skilled trades occupations	3 (8.6)
	6. Caring, leisure, and other service occupations	-
	7. Sales and customer service occupations	-
	8. Process, plant, and machine operatives	-
	9. Elementary occupations	-

<sup>a</sup> Standard occupational classification. (SOC, 2020)

## 5.2. Analysis

The qualitative analysis explores leaders' and individuals' perceptions about their experiences of Sufi practices at the Sufi centres in Britain. These findings answered the research questions, which are 1) how Sufi practices and mental health are related, 2) To what extent do Sufi practises in the participating centres acknowledge participants' concerns about their mental health and general well-being and 3) what inspires followers from western backgrounds to engage in organised Sufi beliefs and practises in England. First, the leaders' interviews explained the practices from the organiser's point of view and provided information about contemporary Sufi centres. Secondly, participants' interviews allow us to understand the Sufi practices from an individual perspective. In addition to the individuals' interview, the follow-up questions enabled analysing the practices' impact during the pandemic. Lastly, the focus group discussions allowed me to explore the practices and their effects on the social contexts of each group from the interaction perspective among the group and the community. The first section describes leaders' understanding and perspective of Sufi practice alongside describing the characteristics of the contemporary Sufi centres in England. In the sub-themes of the first section, I explore how the centres mediate the Sufi practices in the Western environment regarding the authenticity of the practice and leadership. I conclude the first section outlining the nature of the audience of the centres. In the second section, I explore life narratives of the individuals, presenting the motivation for participating in organised Sufi ideas and practices. In the last section, I analyse the data around the mental well-being theme.

**Table 5. 2.** Themes from analysis of interviews and focus groups

<b>Domain</b>	<b>Themes</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>
Belief and attraction to Sufism	a. Defining the contemporary Sufi centres	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a.1. Authenticity:It is spiritual,but also religious</li> <li>a.2. Leadership:Leaders’ role in the centres</li> <li>a.3. Audience: Striving to meet the needs of a diverse audience</li> </ul>
	b. Life Narratives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>b.1. Group 1: Non- Muslims who accept Islam and become Sufi: Finding a place</li> <li>b.2. Group 2: Non-Muslim and defined themselves as spiritual, not religious: Meaning for life</li> <li>b.3. Group 3: Muslims who become a Sufi:Re-connecting with the faith</li> </ul>
The context of well-being and mental health	a. Leaders’ perspective	a.1. Well-being is an outcome of Sufi practices
	b. Individuals’ perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>b.1. Identity                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>b.1.1.Grief and Bereavement</li> <li>b.1.2 .The importance of having a guide (sheikh)</li> <li>b.1.3. Developing trust in Allah</li> </ul> </li> <li>b.2.Social Support-Having trustful and supportive community</li> </ul>
	c. Follow up Covid interviews	c. Dealing with uncertainty and instability of life

### 5.3. Contemporary Sufi centres in England/ Belief and attraction to Sufism from Leaders’ perspectives

One of the issues of interest in my research was to what degree does Sufi practice, within the participating centres, recognise issues of mental health and well-being among the people who take part. For this reason I explore and describe these contemporary Sufi centres, in particular the role of their leaders and how Sufism is practiced in the contemporary Sufi centres in England. I identify three themes in this section; 1) It is spiritual, but also religious 2) Leadership in the centres 3) Striving to meet the needs of a diverse audience. The thematic analysis has been used to drive the data as the questions asked to leaders were descriptive.

In these themes, I analyse these three centres from the leaders’ perspectives, including issues of leadership and targeted audiences. I will outline the

understanding of Sufi practices held by these Sufi centres in the first subtheme, and in the second subtheme I consider the role of leadership in the centres. The third subtheme presents the characteristics of the audience.

### 5.3.1. It is spiritual, but also religious

There are many Sufi organisations that exist in the UK, but currently, there is a new emerging category of Sufis that integrate tradition and contemporary aspects (Hamid, 2013). Members of these Sufi groups often differentiate themselves from the existing mainstream religious organisations but have a close relationship with the religious practices. The participant leaders of the Sufi centres articulated and described this situation as an adaptation of the existing culture and explained that these centres create a space for like-minded communities, both Muslim and non-Muslim participants in the West.

“We’re trying to create something that is more organically of the culture and society we’re in”. (Ahmed)

While Ahmed mentioned their attempt at creating a meaningful path for the Western audience, the preservation of tradition was also highlighted as well as concerning the culture of the targeted society.

“The main reason for Sufi practices is that a path leads you to learn, recognize and acknowledge Allah, and to fall in love with Allah. Sufism is being in this path.” (Ali)

Ali identified Sufism as a ‘path’ and ‘journey’, which refers to ascertaining the nature of humanity through facilitating the experience of the presence of divine love and wisdom. Leaders stated that it is possible with recognition and connection with the inner self. These connections would be made possible through the practices of Sufi wisdom. When the leaders were asked about Sufi practices, most commented that the practices are not different from Islamic practices.

“We’re really careful to be rooted in the heart of the message of Prophet Muhammed and the Qur’an.” (Ahmed)

When asked about the practices, the Sufi leaders were unanimous in the view that Sufi practices are Islamic practices containing prayer, remembrance of Allah and conversation around the wisdom of Sufi theosophy. The lineage of Sufi order

(*tariqa*) has an effect on the way that practices are organised; therefore, each centre has slightly different practices, but contains the same context.

Ahmed identified how the practices are different in centres, as the tradition has been preserved in the orders, but the way of conducting Sufi practices may vary. Ahmed's explanation on the practices is based on a set of practices from the Sufi lineage which has been mentioned by other leaders. Faruk also stated

"The *zikr* wherever you go in the whole world, Naqshbandi Zikr is always the same".  
(Faruk)

In another example,

"In our *tariqa* (Sufi order), we have our daily *zikr*. All the students practise on their own." (Ali)

The importance of authenticity in the practices was mentioned by the leaders many times in the interviews. Although each centre has a set of practices to conduct *zikr* (weekly gathering), some of them adjust the practices regarding acculturation to the Western setting. Ahmed mentioned how their approaches to the Sufi practices are grounded within tradition, while trying to address the existing culture.

"...When we pray and the lined-up women and men are in the same lines, this is not usual, and people can object to it. But it doesn't matter to us because we know that we were standing on firm ground. For example, the Hanafi School teachings actually have religious rule '*fatwas*' on how to pray when women and men are in the same row." (Ahmed)

As can be seen by the quotations above, authenticity plays an important role in the formatting of the practices. It is noteworthy how Ahmed uses the image of '*firm ground*' when defining their way of practice then moving to use '*fatwas*' religious rules to ground their way of practice. His referring to the existing religious rules in the tradition as '*fatwa*' seems to support the point that was raised by Fatma as a concern about whether Sufi practices are Islamic. Others expressed concern whether Sufism is whether it is an Islamic practice.

"I think it is said that Sufism has become a separate thing in so many people's eyes. Sufism should be an integral part of every Muslim practice; we all should see that as an important part. It's not separate; I think it's one of these things that we get labelled that all Sufis are spiritual, and they don't do their prayers. That is not true." (Fatma)

For most participants, however, authenticity was a very important part of their practices not only because of the way of conducting the practice, but because of the importance of religious tradition in the centres.

### 5.3.2. Leader's role in the centres

Of the three centres which participated in this research which have a leader; two of them have two leaders, one male and one female. The leaders are responsible for organizing and running the weekly *zikr*. The *sheikh*, who is the main spiritual guide of the Sufi group, and who is recognised by their own Sufi order, assigns the leaders. As Sufi orders are expanding worldwide, each group is assigned a leader who is responsible for running the Sufi *zikr* circles (practices) by a sheikh. Usually when a member of the Sufi groups moves to another place where there is no existing Sufi community, they are usually assigned a task to establish a Sufi circle (weekly group). The important point in the leadership is that a person is not allowed to establish a Sufi circle without the sheikh's permission, and this permission generally has been given as a duty by the sheikh. Only a Sufi (the person who took *biat*, initiation to the sheikhs) is able to be a leader or run Sufi practices in these Sufi orders. Ahmed mentioned about creating a team to lead the weekly session in the centre.

“Well, we organized a team, you know, there's some criteria for the team. One is that you have to be a *Darwish* (Sufi). You have to have taken initiation in this path with the sheikh to be part of this team, because there needs to be a connection.” (Ahmed)

Ahmed used the word 'connection' which means having a bond with the tradition to be able to transfer correctly to the participants. Although the centres are open to everyone in terms of participation, each only allows the running of the practice by Sufis who had *biat* initiation to the sheikh to run groups. There is an example among the participants that Joey defined himself as Sufi, but not Muslim. Joey believed that he could lead the *zikr* (Sufi practices) but was not allowed to do that in the centre because he wasn't Muslim. It is an example to show the importance of authenticity in the centre. However, he established his own Sufi circle afterwards, but his Sufi circle does not have any connection with any established Sufi order. Joey's example illustrates how Sufism now exists in various forms in England, and some groups have no traditional religious basis at all.

Another important point regarding the leadership was brought up by Julia who highlighted the issue of women's role in the centres is:

“We wanted to make sure that women are also welcome. And for women to also see that this is not just a path for men. This is also a path for women. And to see that spiritual responsibility or duties are not just for men, but also for women. And that it's not only men who can teach but women who can teach.” (Julia)

The issue of gender equality is highlighted by the leaders that have male and female leaders and are open for everyone which is the main goal of the centres. Relatedly, Ahmed also mentioned about the importance of women participation in the *zikr*. As he mentioned in the practice women and men lined up together and the women can lead the *zikr* and the prayer.

“There's a lot of evidence and when we have a woman leading the *zikr*... there is a school which has a very important Jurist, his name was Sufyan es-Sevri. Many of the great Sufis followed his school, and his opinion was -Yes, a women can lead the prayer.” (Ahmed)

Concerns around the leadership either regarding gender equality or being able to lead the *zikr*, come with the caveat of authenticity. Ahmed reiterates that practicing Sufism in the centres revolves around tradition. , the centres are concerned with both the authenticity of the tradition and the characteristics of the audience.

### 5.3.3. Striving to meet the needs of a diverse audience

From the narratives of the leaders, the Sufi centres in the UK are public and everyone can join the practices and are welcome. The leaders are also aiming to reach Western audiences, both Western Muslims and non-Muslims.. These Sufi groups have predominantly Muslim participants but also have non-Muslims, Christian and non-religious participants who are actively engaged with Sufi practices.

“We never asked about their religious backgrounds. We have had devoted nuns, priests and pastors who participate. We have Jewish rabbis, Buddhists, and lots of Muslims. A lot of people choose to become Muslim once they were travelling with us. But we don't know. For us what matters is to come with a heart that is open. That's what makes the difference.” (Ahmed)

For the Muslim participants, the main reason to participate is that the practices are a religious duty when one becomes a Sufi. They call it '*vazifa*' which is conducting



regular practices for a Sufi to communicate with their inner self and progress along the Sufi path when they have an initiation (*biat*) with a sheikh who is the spiritual leader of the Sufi order.

“Well, first of all, if you are Muslim and Naqshbandi and you've taken *biat* (initiation) with your Sheikh then it's an obligation for you to attend. As part of being an Naqhsibandi you should do *zikr* for every week.” (Faruk)

Faruk mentioned attending Sufi practices for Muslims as a religious duty. He also added that for non-Muslim participants the Sufi practices are not different from any other spiritual tradition:

“For the non-believers, people who don't live but they're into Sufism, and so when they hear that there is a Sufi *zikr*, then they all want to come. Common experiences are a bit like people going to yoga or doing like meditation. Sufism is just the same. It's just another thing like that.” (Faruk)

These centres have a range of audiences who come from diverse backgrounds. The diversity of the participants leads to modifying the practices, as previously mentioned as acculturation to the Western setting. Although the centres give importance to protecting the authentic way to conduct practice, the leaders are concerned with the culture of existing society. For example, the way in which *zikr* is conducted with a mixed gender group in a centre lead by either a male or female leader is one such example. The role of leaders is important to set the *zikr* and the limit of the modification of the practices in Western society. Leaders reported that the centres have two types of audiences: religious and non-religious. Religious audiences were predominantly coming from Muslim and Christian background. Non-religious participants usually come from the spiritual perspective.

Above I have discussed how these Sufi groups according to the various orders were situated in relation to both Sufism and how the centre was organised. Below I go on to outline the individuals' responses on the motivation to join Sufi groups. The findings illustrate that they motivate internally, not only just externally.

#### 5.4. Individual stories

This section deals with the second of the three findings in the study. Previously, the details of the three contemporary Sufi centres were described after a comprehensive

description of the recruited participants. The first section illustrated the understanding of Sufi tradition and practices in the selected Sufi centres that were agreed among the Sufi leaders. The second section contextualises the characteristics of the audience in the contemporary Sufi centres using the data from the individuals' life stories. This section will allow us to answer the research question of 'What motivates adherents from western backgrounds to participate in organised Sufi ideas and practice in England?'. In order to answer the question, I used narrative analysis for the data from individual's life stories. The narratives of the participants suggests that two groups of participants exist within the respondents regarding their background within contemporary Sufi centres: religious and non-religious. Taking a closer look at the participants' life narratives allows me to obtain an overview about the contemporary Sufi audience in England. Participants who come from a religious background were predominantly Muslim, some participants Christian and one participant Jewish. The majority of these participants become Muslim in the process; the rest combined their existing religious beliefs with the Sufi practices. Others who were non-religious, generally defined themselves as spiritual. Regardless of their purpose in attending Sufism, the majority of the participants emphasised that Sufism affected their well-being in a positive way.

During the in-depth interviewing, I asked the participants about their journey to Sufism. While analysing the data, I realised some similarities, such as their reason to be part of these Sufi centres, the religious backgrounds, within a group of participants. Although there are similarities and differences across the groups. I decided to present the analysis within the categories of the participants. Across the narratives of the participants, the characteristics of the audience are divided into three categories in the centres according to their answer to the research question. The first category focuses on the individuals who were born and raised non-Muslim and change their religious affiliations to Islam as Sufi. The second category explains the participants who were raised as Muslim and became Sufi, which includes mostly those raised in the mainstream Muslim community as a child of Muslim immigrants or migrated from a Muslim country. The third one presents participants who were born and raised non-Muslim and defined themselves as spiritual, not religious.

### 5.4.1. Group 1: Non- Muslims who accept Islam and become Sufi

The 12 individuals in this category embrace Islam throughout their search for spirituality. Many of them were experimenting with various religious and spiritual traditions throughout their search. A few were specifically looking for Islamic spirituality, as they became Muslim before meeting with Sufism, and looking for more spiritual contents in the religion. Conversion to Islam for these individuals usually happened as a result of reading books, attending an event or meeting someone from a Sufi community. Typically, these participants had searched any possible way to learn and experience different religious and spiritual traditions. The varied religious background of the participants has been highlighted in this category. Many of the participants already have a religious (Christian, and one Jewish) background, some of them have grown up experiencing a different spiritual tradition. While spiritual experiences are frequently in the conversion narratives of Sufi adherents, they are commonly discussed within the previous religious and spiritual experiences. Those in this category indicated that they are British, including white and black African. There were almost equal numbers of men (7) and women (6) who attend the Sufi centres. The duration of attending the Sufi centres for the respondents in this category is between 3 to 30 years. Ten of the participants were born in the UK and defined themselves as white or black British, two from Europe, and one from Australia.

#### ***‘Finding a place’***

The majority of individuals in this category were initially searching for the meaning in their faith and they also were looking elsewhere to find that. The reason for this search was being not satisfied with their current faith or the tradition in which they had grown up and their lives, experiencing it as empty and not connected with it. As Sufi groups in the UK are open to everyone wishing to be part of them, they had a chance to experience Sufi practices. The Sufi gatherings are usually conducted in a church room or hall which is hired for this purpose and announced publicly through social media and leaflets. Prior to being introduced to a Sufi path, these individuals experimented with a variety of different spiritual paths, and they were already on a spiritual quest more broadly. The reason to prefer the contemporary Sufi way was explained by the participants. For example, Jonathon told me “Contemporary Sufi

groups have a traditional and religious root, it also creates a space which is non-judgmental, gender equal and open to everyone.”

Jonathon discovered Sufism through an interfaith program which was provided between Christianity and Islam. For instance, Jonathan is a former priest and he had some spiritual experience through his training for Christianity, and he recalled acknowledging that his Sufi journey is a way to find himself. He expressed that he was impressed by the spiritual practice *E'tikaf'* (which is a practice in the Islamic faith which consists of a period of retreat in a mosque, for a certain number of days in accordance with the believer's own wish. That he had experienced during during his spell in an interfaith programme. When his marriage broke down and he moved to London, he remembered that experience and started to search for Sufi organisations.

“...it just seemed like a really human space. I just felt completely at home. Just like I've been doing a lot of beans counting and the study reading dialogue writing stuff in various books, but this was deeper, more connected, less rigid, it's not patriarchal, not led by men and it is very equal. So yeah, so just with anyone taking part anyone could do the call to prayer. Anyone can do the sermon. Anyone can lead the prayer which seems great.” (Jonathan)

Jonathan has experienced a variety Sufi of organisations in London. Although the centres have certain differences in the way they run, the practices are fairly similar. The centres have male and female leaders who lead the *zikr* circle and also conduct the *zikr* together. This atmosphere attracts western participants, as well as the way of conducting *zikr* being more interactive. Participants defined their feelings as '*feeling at home*'. The term '*home*' shows that the individuals feel comfortable in the Sufi centres, additionally, they expressed the '*feeling of being accepted*', and '*finding a place*' in their in-depth interviews. Some of the interviewees in this category were looking for a more heart-centred, equal and interactive environment.

In Jonathan's story, his life has dramatically changed after his divorce, and he experienced a huge breakdown after that. This breakdown led him to receive therapy. He mentioned that the Sufi community and the *zikr* (the practices) overlapped with the therapies and provided him a support. His expression about the therapy and the Sufi *zikr* was that while the therapy is a secular space it does seem quite spiritual because '*it's about connecting and being authentic and sharing what's*

*really going on*' and a non-judgmental safe space which is quite similar with the *zikr* circle from group1. Even as he struggled to share his feelings, he stated that these Sufi practices are a way to work on that '*I do that working more than I have got from the therapy space*'. That there is transformation and there is a development meaning of Sufi practices. These Sufi gatherings provide a space to share and find non-judgmental support, not only the moment when the practice is conducted, but after the session they have a community and spiritual leader (*sheikh*) to have a communication with.

Jonathan's view of Sufi practice (*zikr*) is that '*it works*' and being able to do the practices together, feeling with each other and sharing is the key for the practices. The concept of friendship and being a family with the Sufi community is the common expressions by the participants.

Another example is Adam, who was raised in a white British family coming from an Anglican Christian faith background, but not practising at all. He mentioned that he never accepted himself as a Christian, but he grew up in a highly spiritual environment as his mother was interested in new religious movements like astrology and tarot. He started looking for something more in his life. After a period of good reading and thinking about Islam, he became Muslim and experienced various Muslim communities in the UK. As he stated, '*I was trying to find a home*', and mentioned the reason for this search as '*there was always something missing*'. One of his readings was about Rumi which led him to be a Sufi, while he was chasing the author of the book he met with the Threshold Society (Group1). He expressed his experience with the Sufi centre as:

"It's just been my home that place where I know that I belong. Everybody is free to practise as they like, I don't have any problems with any other way." (Adam)

The missing part is generally related with the feeling of belonging and being accepted by the community. Some of the participants stated that they had been judged by their previous community due to following Sufism as being not sufficiently religious. Therefore, most of the participants explain their feeling of being part of the Sufi community as being at home where they feel belonging and accepted.

For Lucy, the situation was a bit different as her choice to be Sufi, or Muslim was not understood by her family and friends. She was coming from a non-religious

background. She mentioned about the possibility of sharing how she thinks and being surrounded with the people that share similar aspects as an important reason to attend a Sufi community.

“But the second thing that I love and find so compelling about it is the community aspect. It's that feeling of being in Ummah, in a family of people who ultimately feel the same way and are wanting to dedicate that time to the same objective.” (Lucy)

She was raised by an atheist family but studied in a Church of England school, and she was exposed to religion while she was growing up. Her interest in spirituality began with Buddhism and continued with Islam as she was less knowledgeable on that topic. Her interest began with reading books on Islamic philosophy, and she continued to learn and practise Sufism.

“I think one of the key doctrines or principles within Sufism is the abandonment of the *nafs* and this sort of detachment from your ego. And that's something that I feel in contemporary culture, there's so much identity politics and there's a lot of sorts of, people get very tied down with the self really and labels and how you identify yourself and who you are and all of these things.” (Lucy)

Like Lucy, Adam also added a similar comment on the Sufi community that focuses on self-improvement, and this is the reason for him to follow the Sufi path.

“It was nice to just hear people talking about the heart really and other than politics, or what you wear or, you know, all of the outward actions they have taken, and it was really good. I looked around at every other form of Islam that I could find. They all had either the exterior, or they were too involved in politics or external things when I became a little bit familiar with Sufi practice, it was all about improving my inner world, overcoming the inner obstacles. And it really spoke to me, it really spoke to me, rather than just for us but it also spoke to me because I'm self-conscious it doesn't divide human beings into groups or nationalities.” (Adam)

Both Jonathan and Adam mentioned about how Sufism does help to understand their feelings and emotions. As Jonathan mentioned, these Sufi gatherings allow him to express his feelings and share with others. Adam expressed that the Sufi practices allow him to acknowledge beyond feelings.

“Ultimately, what Sufi practice does is to help me to feel close to Allah. It makes me understand that this life is not an illusion, but it's an education. And that there's a lot

to be learned just from doing *zikr*. And the heart was really alive and sometimes I'm tired or I'm grumpy or something else and I don't quite feel that. So, I always feel better, especially in a group *zikr*." (Adam)

Adam sees the individual Sufi practices as a way to be educated in emotions that understand the self and learn from life events from other participants. Niki also mentioned these Sufi practices allow her to acknowledge that the hardships in life are a kind of exam, and the practices allow her to get educated about what has happened and improve and understand her emotions and feelings.

Like Adam, Niki had a similar explanation on Sufi practice as she thought that this life is a test and the Sufi understanding, and practice would help her to pass this test and appreciate life. Niki comes from a Catholic background and works in education. She became a Muslim in her teenage years at about 17 and made contact with Sufism at the same age. She was interested in Sufism when she was facing difficulties in her life. She expressed that when she went through hard times in her life Sufi wisdom always helped to support her.

"The *zikr* is the knowledge about the different light, and also the different secrets that you could like to just remember in Allah. So, and how to use it to comfort you, how to use it to console you, how to use it to make you feel, have a lot more confidence and self-esteem. So, you don't have to go to anyone. That's what I like in Sufism. You don't have to go to any one because the remedies are all there within you, the remedies are there in the *zikr*." (Nikii')

Luis had a very different beginning in Sufism than did the other individuals in this category. He had learnt about Sufism by chance, attending a Sufi gathering in his area and was impressed by the practice. Since then, he has been a member of the Sufi order. Luis is an academic in science, he has had many mental struggles throughout his life, and he used to be addicted to alcohol. He mentioned that his life dramatically changed after being a member of the Sufi order. The practices, the community, and conversation with the sheikh and community were a huge part of this change.

He mentioned about doing *zikr* is "a temporary holiday away from their troubles wherever in the world". Being on a path is important to a Sufi's life that provides a purpose to reach the highest level of a human being. Moreover, being able to reach

a community or a sheikh (spiritual leader) whenever you need provides a huge importance to the participant.

“it's a mysterious thing how people's hearts open. But yeah, I think people get a sense of welcome and a sense of peace and community and tolerance of their different characters.” (Luis)

He mentioned that his sheikh described himself ‘as the keeper of the madhouse’ which is because, ‘people are going through some mental problems quite a few of them’. He mentioned that the Sufi understanding, lifestyle, and wisdom enlightened his life. Although the practices are physical the aim of all practices was for mental and psychological support.

#### 5.4.2. Group 2: Non-Muslim and defined themselves as spiritual, not religious

The second category involves six individuals who defined themselves as spiritual. Four of them are white British, two of them immigrated from Bangladeshi and Iran. Those in this category all indicated having experience with different spiritual organisations through their searching for a path. Participants mentioned about their religion as a ‘love’ instead of structured religion. One participant defined themselves as unitarian and others mentioned as spiritual, but not belonging to any religion.

##### ***‘Meaning for life’***

Many interviewees in this group defined Sufi practices as a way of finding peace and purpose in their life that they understood as a spiritual practice with a religious (Islamic) essence to it. Furthermore, they recognised Sufism was a way of life with clear guidance provided by a spiritual leader (a sheikh). Although the centres have a range of participants from diverse (religious/ spiritual) backgrounds, the outcome of the Sufi practices on the participants' lives is similar. While participants from religious (Muslim and Christian) backgrounds have been looking for more meaning in their faith, non-religious (Spiritual) participants were looking for a spiritual path to follow. Individuals in this category defined their faith as spiritual. Participants coming from non-religious backgrounds defined their approach as ‘the way of love, ‘Unitarian’,



'spiritual', which leads to a heart connection to the divine. This connection provides a sense of meaning for life which is the most common reason to follow a Sufi path regardless of participants' life stories.

Shaun grew up in a Christian family but was not fully engaged with his faith. He mentioned that his family was not a happy family, and their relationship was full of tension due to his parents.

His spiritual journey started when he was fired from his job because of his illness. He was always searching for something.

“Not just this I was blind in one eye that was actually quite trivial by comparison with the emotional trauma that I was holding and struggling to hold. And it started me on the spiritual journey.” (Shaun)

Throughout his spiritual journey he was experiencing Qigong, Buddhism and Sufism. His Sufi journey started with whirling dervishes which involves whirling practices. He has been to different Sufi organisations to practise Sufism.

Shaun 's experience with the whirling dervishes ended up with a disagreement with the centre's leaders which he mentioned as *“The problem is that these narcissists construct a self-image. And they imagined that they themselves are the superior one's present.”* He thought that he was capable of running the Sufi practices, but it was not possible because he is not Muslim. He defined himself as Unitarian, which he explained as *“It is the oneness, which is the divine, the interconnectedness that exists in all monotheistic religions and other beliefs”*. Although he accepts himself as a Sufi it was not possible to become a leader in the Sufi centre as he stated that *“So that's decided by the leadership. So even though I was frequently the most senior turner, president, I was never allowed to be leader because I was not part of their team.”* (Shaun) He left his former group and started attending Group1 as the centre welcomed him and was open to everyone.

“I simply formed a private group to turn people who left for the same reason.”

This is an example of how different Sufi groups exist in the UK. Shaun started his own turning group as they use Sufi practice as a way to express and experience their spirituality, apart from any religion.

Jane's experiences were similar to Shaun's, Sufi practices brought her life a dramatic change with a new lifestyle. She mentioned about her previous experience with spirituality which was mainly about healing as she is also trained as a medical doctor. She mentioned that Sufi practices are not different from any other spiritual practices. She was happy to have this path. Jane creates her own community to help for spiritual healing.

Another example is John who grew up in a non-religious family but started thinking and searching for spirituality. He mentioned that his reason to be Sufi is having a meaning of his life.

"I was always kind of thinking, What is the point? I could get a good job. I get a nice house or get married and have kids but then why everything was but then what? Not necessarily in a negative way. I just thought there must be more to this experience than doing these things. And I suppose those questions led me into Sufism." (John)

He grew up in a well-balanced, supportive family, and not having any problem in life, but he was pursuing a reason for life, and he mentioned that Sufism is not something different than well-being, they are interchangeable.

Another example is Sharon. Similar to John she was also searching for a meaning for life. She introduces Sufism through Islamic Art. But her way to search spirituality was after the nuclear explosion of Chernobyl happened. She mentioned that "was the first sort of wakeup call of a more tangible spirituality, less intellectual and more experience". After that she tried different faiths and traditions through her spiritual quest. Sharon grew up in a Christian family, she explains the reason to be Sufi as

"The church has become very passive. Even the Orthodox Church, which is far more vibrant than the Western churches, is more passionate, but it's still passive. It's still alive, but very actively involved in chanting those prayers wholly involving, physically involving I like that in Sufi practices...So this dissenter, yes, Christianity actually helped me to ascend. Descending is a very practical business. And Sufism fits into it can just be flexible in the way it can fit into everyday life." (Sharon)

She defined herself as "Somebody on the Journey; a researcher so a researcher a free minded researcher".

In the analysis, participants in this category indicated their feelings during the practice of Sufism as 'happiness', 'content', 'conscious', 'confident', 'release',

'surrounded', indicating a powerful positivity toward the Sufi practice and its effect on well-being. Some participants also continue to combine their practices with other spiritual activities such as 'reiki', 'kabbalah', 'mindfulness', or the practices of the 'Quakers'. They have found similarities in the practice of these spiritual groups in the societies. Because they have identified some similarities for example, the community spirit, the way they focus and share ideas. Some of the participants indicated that they only follow one of the Sufi paths which they feel is enough not searching or attending any other spiritual or Sufi group.

#### 5.4.3. Group 3: Muslims who become a Sufi

The third category involves 17 individuals who were born and raised in Muslim families. Their profile is remarkably different from those who were coming from a non-Muslim background. These participants were either immigrants, themselves, or the child of immigrants from Muslim countries. They are the second or third generation of immigrant families, one was the child of a white British family who accepted Islam through following a Sufi path. All of the participants in this category indicated being born in a Muslim family, and they were more likely to be female (11), than male (6). Their family backgrounds were overwhelmingly Asian (Pakistani or Bangladeshi) and European. Their narratives were mostly focused on experiencing an inner, transformational change toward being a true Muslim.

The participants who were raised Muslim went through a crisis to identify their religion and existence of their faith in the contemporary world. They joined a Sufi order because they aimed to gain spiritual development and Sufism was a way to strengthen their relationship with their faith. Although they questioned the validity of Sufism in the beginning, and looked into other Islamic traditions through their search, they ended up being Sufi as they see it was a way to re-connect with their faith.

### *'Re-connecting with the faith'*

Similar to the other categories of participants, the most common reason for following a Sufi order is having a more meaningful life. The participants having Muslim parents or having grown up in a Muslim environment, they already had a sense of Islamic spirituality to their faith.

Many of the participants in this category started to follow the Sufi order because it was a way to strengthen their relationship with Islam and helped them in spiritual development. In contrast, those who came from other religious backgrounds, participants in this category were more likely to look at Sufism and other Islamic tradition. Although most of them question the validity of Sufism at the beginning, later they found that the Sufi way was the best fit in their contemporary lifestyle. Sufi traditions were rejected from some of the Muslim group as it was seen as a non-Islamic approach. However, as this study clearly indicates, Sufi practices are not separated from Islamic practices by Muslim and non-Muslim participants.

Other common reasons for following a Sufi order for the participants in this category were intellectual spiritual development and spiritual healing. Five of the participants indicate that they already had experience of Sufism in their family background and continued to participate in a Sufi order. Six of them became a Sufi while they were on a quest for spiritual healing. Only one participant indicated that she was dissatisfied with the Salafi (which is strict/ puritanical approach to Islam) understanding of Islam, because their approach to the faith was ignoring inward practice. Hence, she has chosen the Sufi way after 15 years of being Salafi. The rest of the participants did not indicate a specific explanation on that, but they found Sufism is a way to live their faith in the contemporary society.

Fatma's parents accepted Sufi Islam in 70s, while there were lots of spiritual movements and people getting interested in different Eastern religions. She grew up in a white British Muslim family. During the interview, she recalled that her family were among the earliest Sufis in the UK and that she was always engaging with the Sufi community in her early life. She explained her father "became a Muslim through Sufism, so his route to Islam was a very spiritual Sufi oriented type route to Islam". Her extended family were Christian and Jewish, so she was growing up in a broader religious perspective. Her interest in Sufism began while she was under a series of

depressions, suffering from some mental health problems. She remembered her mother's experiences with the Sufi tradition and decided to try that for herself. She mentioned that her mental situation may be related with not being engaged with the religion enough. Her experience with Islam and Sufism began after her spiritual need/ healing that she mentioned as:

"I got that depression I started going back to *zikr* I started going through the one, as I say, I went to do *zikr* in Barbados and that was the beginning of my happiness helping me to reconnect and helping me to be strong in myself again. And I definitely believe that, you know, that connection with a spiritual path was what helped me, you know, completely to feel much stronger generally every day." (Fatma)

Another example is Osman, who grew up in a Shia family who was familiar with Sufism, but not interested until his mother got ill. He mentioned that he believed the power of *zikr* and prayer after they were doing together, so at the beginning he was there for his mother's recovery, but later when his mother recovered, he kept attending the Sufi community. Osman explained during the interview that he was aware of the intellectual knowledge of Sufism, but never interested in the practice. However, he mentioned that he realised being in the Sufi community felt better after the busy workday. He mentioned that he never sees himself as a Sufi, but continues to attend the practices because, he feels better after the gatherings.

"I really believe it has had an effect on her treatments (his mother). That does bring me well-being, but it is also a source of my anxiety because I know that can happen again at any time and for me, I am always anticipating it will happen again. For me, this practice is a source of mental strength. Because I've went through it before, it had an effect, an indirect effect on me. And I continued to believe that it is a source of mental strength and mental well-being. So that's why I continue to attend." (Osman)

Amirah works at a children's hospice, as Osman mentioned she also finds a relief in the Sufi community and practices as a support to her stressful job. Osman's expression about the modern Muslim, was echoing Amirah's experience with contemporary Sufism. Amirah grew up in a traditional Muslim family, studying Islamic theology. When she started to question her faith, she was supported by her family regardless of any decisions she made. After 9/11 she mentioned that being a visible Muslim (wearing hijab and burka) was becoming harder in the society. She

mentioned after she abandoned all religious conventions, she experienced a deep crisis.

“I have known times in my life where, for example, I've been so isolated in pain that I couldn't even meet people. You know, after breakups and after bereavements in my family or relationships falling apart. And to the point that I've been cynical even about threshold groups, I could look at everything. That's all nonsense... you know, you find yourself in a situation where everything feels dark.” (Amirah)

She mentioned about the importance of having a community that can understand feelings. She mentioned that she was almost about to leave her religion, but the Sufi group gave her re-connection with her faith. She also mentioned that her understanding of the faith and life were highly affected by the Sufi ideas.

For Dora, being in the Sufi order is not any different from being Muslim. She was a Salafi before coming to Sufism, and she thought that

“It was outward practice. There wasn't any inward practice. So, I started looking at various Sufi groups, and I ended up in this group about 17 years ago.” (Dora)

She mentioned that being a Salafi for a long number of years made her longing for a more meaningful faith and she was searching online to find a Sufi order because she was thinking about the Sufi practice as “it's a way of not just following a ritual it's a way of touching your heart and your soul”.

“I was religious before in terms of when I was with a Salafi congregation...Yeah, but to me that was just ticking boxes. I didn't have any inner feeling about it. I tried hard. But I was damaged a lot from those people about Islam. So, I wanted a group which had Islamic roots, like some Sufi groups, there's not much Islam in it. You know, somebody strays into Buddhism rarely. For me, this seemed to be rooted in Islam. And yet there was space to explore your feelings and your ideas and which, in a Salafi congregation if you said some of the things, you'd just be jumped on to keep quiet or something.” (Dora)

The first part answered the research question of “What motivates new adherents from Western backgrounds to participate in organized Sufi ideas and practice in England?” It demonstrated the role of the participant's finding a place, meaning for life and re-connecting with the faith. Some of the interviewees from a religious background who were looking for a more heart-centred, equal and interactive environment and those

from non-religious background seeking spirituality or well-being have found a place in these contemporary Sufi groups which are non-judgmental, gender equal and open to everyone. The next topic will address the second research question “What role does mental health and well-being play in the participants’ life, and how does this relate to their current experience of Sufi practice?”. The second part which is about the role of mental well-being in motivating people to join Sufi groups. The findings suggest that rather being the dominant factor it is actually much more complex issue. One of the complexities is that as they become engaged with spiritual issues around mental health they become Sufis. The section outlines how different individuals have experienced issues of mental well-being or its absence and how they have incorporated it into their spiritual journey.

### 5.5. The context of well-being and mental health

In this section the third and the last theme of the study is presented. In section 1 and section 2, I demonstrated the characteristics of selected Sufi centres and explained the individual reasoning to join these Sufi centres. I described their experiences with contemporary Sufi practices in England that they associated with the religious and spiritual practices with their past and present life. I also outlined the modification of the practices regarding secularisation, modernisation, and spiritual life in contemporary society. I will now describe in the final section ‘the context of well-being and mental health’, how these practices influence the people’s life and interaction with their mental well-being regarding the participants responses. Below is the last theme of the results chapter ‘the context of well-being and mental health’, how Sufi practice affected individuals’ well-being and how the Sufi centres recognise well-being in the practices.

In the chapter, the answer to the research questions that are related to the well-being of the participants: what role does mental health and well-being play in the previous circumstances of new adherents and how does this relate to their current experience of Sufi practice and to what degree does Sufi practice, within the participating centres, recognise issues of mental health and well-being among the people who take part, will be presented obtained from the data. I used thematic analysis throughout the data from leaders’ and individuals’ interviews and focus group discussions.

In the following parts, I will describe the leaders' and individuals' perspectives on well-being separately in order to understand the similarities and differences of the centre and individual's points. For the leaders the well-being is stated as not a primary concern of the practices, but as an outcome of the practices. On the other hand, the attendee's well-being is an important motivation. It is not that the attendance is based primarily on a negative experience being made positive by attending, but their motivations also include how it gives them a sense of well-being. These become clearer with the data from follow-up interviews with the individuals during the Covid 19 Pandemic. The third theme will explain the analysis of data obtained from the follow up interviews with the individuals. The data illustrate that the practices help with the coping in uncertain and difficult situations that will be explained later in this section.

### 5.5.1. Leaders' perspectives

This section describes the perspectives of the leader on well-being in the centres and Sufi practices conducted in the centre. It explains the difference between organisers and participants' point in terms of the well-being context. For all leaders of three centres in terms of a religious, and spiritual values of the practices in a structured way of conducting the practices that were adapted for the western participants.

In the following theme, named 'well-being is an outcome of Sufi practices', there is a sense of concerted agreement among leaders of three Sufi centres that the main aims of the practices are 'being in a sincere relationship with the divine', 'experience of love' and 'being a better human being'. Being a Sufi was described as in a path or a journey for a personal development which aimed to reach the state of the complete person/ the perfect individual (*insan-i kamil*). Participants in the contemporary Sufi practices in these centres influenced positively regarding their general mental well-being that was made by developing 'trust to the divine' and 'personality'.

#### 5.5.1.1. Well-being is an outcome of Sufi practices

For many of the leaders the Sufi practices are the way of experiencing 'love' with the divine, the self and others. The context of well-being was a consequence of these loving relationships. It was an obvious consequence which was also promoted by the centres without ignoring the main aim of the practices which was creating a solid connection between the individual and the transcendent (God).



“Sufism at its core, is about knowing the essence of being human and understanding what it means to be a human being and what it means to be in a relationship, a human in relationship with the divine.” (Ahmed)

“The whole thing teaching of Sufism also is to make you a better individual. so, as you progress, you fine return your characters, the way your behaviour and all this is a purification of the *nafs*, refining and purifying yourself. You move away from your bad qualities gradually. Instantly something that happened. So ultimately you will reach a level where you all are what we call as *Insan-i Kamil* (perfect human being).” (Ali)

Regular Sufi practices in the centres provide a friendly environment to the individuals’ who are searching something for that may be ‘a community’, ‘a place to practise their faith’, ‘a space to share their feeling’ or ‘healing’. The leaders stated that most of the participants have a story to share about their struggles of life. The Sufi centres allow the practitioners to gather regularly and create a weekly checking, so everyone is aware of each other and knowing about their life. Leaders mentioned about the importance of being aware of the individuals’, checking them and taking care of them in the centres. In the following quote, Julia emphasises the participants’ expressions after the *zikr* practice with the words of ‘*unburdening*’ and how it helps their well-being.

“We have people coming, who may be depressed, maybe unwell, maybe suffering loss, maybe longing for something and may actually have a diagnosable condition. So, there are sometimes people who come and share with us what health conditions that they have. And yet obviously, the advice we have is for them to engage with their medical professionals etc. But sometimes just the act of being able to share their problems or concerns, even to a complete stranger, who they may never see again can be a kind of an unburdening.” (Julia)

She hints at the effects of sharing the feelings and explaining that having an opportunity to share how they feel may help them to feel better.

“So, the *zikr* could potentially be for some, not any oversight from the normal thoughts and normal feelings, but also, somehow a way of unburdening and dropping some of what they’re carrying in terms of emotions and feelings. So, we can’t say that

the *zikr* itself does anything like curing or healing. But I would say that some people do feel better after giving their attention to Allah. “ (Julia)

Leaders described a range of practices for weekly gathering including silent meditation, group practice (*zikr*) and dinner with conversation (*sohbet*). *Sohbet* was one of the important parts among several practices by which participants enhance Sufi wisdom through the leaders’ conversation, interacting with their questions and contributions. The leaders’ account was often described as the main person to consult with the participants’ sharing about their life. Being able to share and having a sincere and loving environment allows participants to build a resilience throughout the rest of the week. Some leaders mention bringing the attention to God or to the individual itself help dealing with other day stressors. Faruk mentioned about the effects of the practices:

“... If you're giving that focus intention on yourself, then you are more able to control your feelings that arise out of weird situations.” (Faruk)

Reflecting and discussing experiences in light of the Sufi wisdom and sharing feelings might help the individual to feel better which have been expressed by the leaders. They were aware that the main aim of the Sufi practices was the objective of becoming a better human being and it is possible through the improvements of the self that these improvements have a positive impact on an individual's life. Having attention to the self could be helped as providing a ‘letting go’ that participants drew upon and adapted to their daily life.

“The whole thing about the teaching of Sufism is to obviously make you a better individual...when you are doing individual Sufi practices (*vazifa*), you are strengthening that inner being with the name of Allah. And that has to reflect through action.” (Ali)

Ali discussed that Sufi teachings and practices provide a perspective that allows an individual to understand that life events have happened for a reason mainly believing the faith. Although Sufi teaching is not intended to be for relaxation or to simply provide psychological support, Ahmet mentioned that these consequences were one of the reasons for individuals’ who live in Britain to attend Sufi groups. The

participants of the contemporary Sufi practices in their centres in Britain have generally intended to obtain both emotional and psychological support while the participants were searching for spirituality.

“So many of us come because we're hurting. We're looking for healing. That's very common for people to be seeking spirituality in order to feel better about themselves. Or because they feel alone. They want to belong to some community where they feel that they're welcomed or not accepted. Or because they're looking for identity. Something to identify something to feel that I am part of this or because they want attention. They want to feel special. “ (Ahmed)

Identity is another issue expressed by the participants, especially in the context of belonging to a community. They stated that the core principle of these practices is 'love,' and it is the way to have a meaningful communication with the self, the community, and the transcendental, God. Throughout the observation and engagement in the weekly practice sessions of the centres, the communication between the participants and leaders appears to be very powerful. They are concerned with each other's problems and where necessary, offer psychological and physical support. The leaders emphasise that most participants have been involved or remained members for a long time because of the 'love' content in these practices. When asked the leaders' opinion about the reason for the participating Sufi practices for the Western audience, the majority of the respondents reported that it was because of the concept of 'love'. Ali expressed that as “They feel that love” (Ali). Ali also stated that the concept of 'love' may help to have a better feeling about the individual itself. Faruk mentioned that they are helping the people who are 'searching for something'.

He also stated that this search might be something for meaning or community or faith; we are aiming to help those people regardless of their identity. In this sense, despite well-being not being a core aim of these Sufi practices, it is one of the consequences, and leaders are concerned about participants' well-being.

In summary, the leaders stated that Sufi practices initially are religious and spiritual practices, because the practices are aiming for personal development and inner strengthening. Well-being was an obvious consequence which was stated by the

participants and advertised by the centres. They were not a group of people gathering just for a support session, nor did they have an uncommitted spiritual practitioner. They were initially the Sufi centres which practicing traditional Islamic spirituality and were concerned about the participants mental and general well-being.

### 5.5.2. Individual perspectives

In this second section, I reflect on how individuals consider the concept of mental well-being experienced through Sufi practices. Because individual responses to the practices in both in-depth interviews and focus group discussions indicated what the leader expects from the Sufi practices for the individual and that the individual's opinion to the practice are slightly different. The well-being domain is an important element for a Western audience to participate in Sufi practices. Reflecting on the position of individualist Sufi practices were 'a journey', 'a path' that helped them through their life by allowing them to express their 'identity' in a way that they feel 'belonging' and 'accepted' and providing them 'social support' which they felt 'a home', 'a family' in a welcoming community.

In the following, I describe the theme which I have termed 'identity' in which participants accounts illustrate the role that experiencing 'individual journey and having a guide' play an important role in their experience with Sufism regarding the well-being domain. The second subtheme 'social support' is driven by the data highlighting the importance of 'having a trustful and supportive community' in the participants' perception.

#### 5.5.2.1. Identity

For many participants, Sufi centres were a place where they can express their faith and beliefs in a non-judgmental, welcoming atmosphere without changing their own identity. Referring to the second section of the results chapter, the individual stories illustrated that these centres provide an opportunity to practise individual's faith and belief in a contemporary multifaith and multi-cultural environment. The effects of 'being accepted', and 'feeling a sense of belonging' has been mentioned by the participants, indicating a powerful positive outcome regarding their well-being. Participants mentioned that they found a satisfying answer to their spiritual quests and search for a more meaningful life. Throughout this search they were feeling

apart from their existing community and were searching for one where they will feel a belonging.

They talked about the centres and their motivation to attend the practices with the words of 'acceptance', 'non-judgemental', 'equal', 'loved', 'home'. To some extent, these words may be interpreted as either a way to be in the community while they protected their identity and feeling of belonging. Although the participants were coming from diverse backgrounds, they were able to be a part of the community while they protected their own identity. Predominantly, the participants mentioned how they were happy with the characteristics of these centres which is openness and welcoming to everyone and not paying attention to the participants' history in any ways.

"I feel much more at home there. It has the liberal aspect of Sufism which is open to everyone, and they allow people to come from all different faiths or no faith. But there's still a very strong Islamic character to it." (Lucy)

### ***Grief and Bereavement***

One of the people involved with the research, Deborah mentioned about her experience with Sufism who started her search for identity as a Muslim and her discovery with the faith was much more related with the resilience. She found her weekly *zikr* gathering to be a vital component of her recovery from her grief.

"I always identified myself as a Muslim. But I was always a bit sceptical about it because a lot of what I saw in the community growing up felt very contradictory...I realized that I wanted to make my own relationship with God and with Islam. And so, I started asking deeper questions, and really wanting the answers to those and also feeling much closer to God personally. I was 21 when my father passed away, I was in a time of deep grief. And at the same time, I was surprised by my own faith, because I didn't think I had a strong faith, but I was surprised that the way things happened. I felt so meaningful to me and made me feel closer to God." (Deborah)

Grief and bereavement were the common experiences among the participants in the centres. Most of the participants were experienced/ experiencing the process of grief and bereavement and expressed that they found a resilience with their faith. For

example, Jonathan mentioned the Sufi practices were becoming a 'counteraction' for him.

"I have followed, for inspiration and for consolation and when I was during a time of profound grief. In the space of a few months, I lost one of my parents, I lost my partner, and a very close friend. And I would play Sufi music and meditate. Sufi music and meditation and go into places of bliss. It was my counteraction." (James)

### ***The importance of having a guide (sheikh)***

The participants' approach towards the Sufi practices was grounded in an attitude of experiencing individual development and connection with God and their opportunity to change their life and perspectives. The feelings of the guided were clearly expressed across the data and the participants were convinced that they were able to handle the life distress because of the guide of the sheikh (spiritual leader) who helps to handle difficulties. For example, Jonathan and Lucy brought up how they came to Sufism and how their life at that point began to change.

"While in one way or another it turned my life upside down, it is opening my heart connecting with emotions and all kinds of things that I haven't really connected with. leaving the old behind and picking something new." (Jonathan)

"I came looking for something more philosophical and then I stayed for the more emotional." (Lucy)

Most of the participants believed these practices led to understanding their feelings towards the life experience. There was an agreement among participants that *zikr* (remembrance) practice is the most important Sufi practice that they experience on a daily basis. *Zikr* is a way to connect with the inner self and become closer to God (Allah). To be connected with the self and the transcendent were possible through the *zikr* practices.

"*Zikr* makes me feel connected with Allah and makes me feel peaceful and calm and trusting because there are some frustrations in life, you can't achieve, maybe at the moment. But the *zikr* helped me to believe in Allah, it will come at the right time.

That's why I feel that doing the *zikh* gave me more faith, stronger faith, and gives me more patience." (Chan)

"*Zikh* itself is part of that spiritual training for you to reach your destination." (Faruk)

The life and its obstacles were described as a test, which should be understood and learned from by the participants. The participants wanted to learn from life events, including relationships, as well as how to be in a good relationship with the self, God, and others. They wanted to understand the wisdom and be acknowledged by the test. Accepting this life as a test, including knowledge about life, was necessary to be a better human being and being strong towards life. The participants did express the practices make them stronger in life and in their faith.

"It is all a test for a reason for you, whatever the test it always knows that you can always handle it because Allah almost wants to never give you something that you can't handle." (Faruk)

"I used to sing and listen to as a kid, but one of the things with Sufi practice is for instance *zikh*, it gives you something to say. So sometimes something happens and you're very grateful for it. So, it gives you something that chimes in with your personality to be able to refresh and to comfort yourself and others." (Khadija)

The feelings of 'tranquillity', 'calmness', 'happiness' were expressed regarding participation in Sufi practices. Sufi practices were described as a pause from a busy and tiring life by the participants. Participants saw their behaviours evolve over time that they spend in Sufism, and their relationship with themselves, and others evolve. They were happy to see their improvement through the journey.

"I find that the *zikh* is a crucial part of helping me to feel more at peace within myself, and I certainly feel that in doing the *zikh*. It reconnects me to, you know, that sense of peace, which obviously is one of the names of Allah. In our 'Salaam' is one who brings peace into our hearts and, doing the *zikh* really reminds me of my purpose as well, in our purpose is to be connected to Allah." (Fatma)

Chan also agrees with Fatma's opinion on the benefits of *zikh* as it provides her with a better connection with Allah and makes her feel calm and peaceful. The role of the

sheikh was discussed in all focus groups and participants agreed on the importance of having a sheikh as a guide through their life journey and highlighted the importance of being in tune with the sheikh.

“The most beautiful thing of all, it's, you know, you can talk to your sheikh (the leader of the Sufi order). And just knowing you have that opportunity or not on your own.”  
(Richard)

### ***Developing trust in Allah***

The majority of the participants had used the words 'love' which was devoted to describing the feeling during Sufi practices (n = 30). They also expressed the feelings that they felt during the practices as 'calm', 'being at home', 'joyful', 'cheerful', 'stillness', "peace". None of the participants mentioned about a negative feeling that occurred during or after the practices.

“It's always positive. It's never negative. I've never had a negative experience. Sometimes there are feelings of bliss. Sometimes there are feelings of just unity and just different qualities of love. And the acknowledgement of something a lot higher than my sense of my individualised self in the world.” (John)

The word '*barakah*', which means blessing, abundance, refers to a general state of having a positive feeling from the Sufi life, and was often used by participants. However, as it refers to a positive consequence of the Sufi life, individual experience of *barakah* may differ. On top of using words and phrases directly related to well-being, the participants also used many phrases or idioms rooted in mainstream spiritual tradition but conveyed a Sufi literature equivalent. Using this language, the participants did not indicate a negative experience or feeling generated from Sufi practices. (A glossary that presents the English equivalents of the Sufi words can be found in the Appendix F). As stated above, the participants used different *barakah* in their experiences with Sufism. They talked about the Sufi practices which help them when they are experiencing a psychological breakdown or mental distress due to losing someone or breaking up in a relationship.



'You get stressed out about how I am going to do this, I'm going to do that. I got to do this; I got to do that. But when you connect in the Sufi way of life, it makes it easy for you. Every time you pray and do the *zikr*, you're taking that stress off you, and your heart is lighter, that you cope.' (Chris)

The participant mentioned that believing and trusting in Allah and knowing he had a plan to his life is an important factor to cope with life distress. They mentioned 'trust' is an important feeling that they built through the Sufi practices. While several participants mentioned that while there were times of profound grief, Sufi practices were a 'consolation' for them.

"It's saved my life, literally saved my life. I've no idea what I would have been capable of doing. I was never suicidal, but I cannot imagine. It's not just helped my mental health; it has transformed my entire being, connected me to myself, connected me to love... There is nothing else in the world that is more powerful and more healing than having a Sufi teacher." (Hafsa)

"While in one way or another it turned my life upside down, it is opening my heart connecting with emotions and all kinds of things that I haven't really connected with. leaving the old behind and picking something new." (Jonathan)

The group members' approach towards the Sufi practices was grounded in an attitude of experiencing individual development and connection with God and their opportunity to change their life and perspectives. The feelings of the guided were clearly expressed in the data and the members were convinced that they were able to handle the life distress because of the guide of the sheikh (spiritual leader) who helps to handle difficulties. Participants brought up how they come to Sufism and how their life at that point began to change.

#### 5.5.2.2. Social Support - Having trustful and supportive community

The second theme expresses the importance of having a supportive community in the individual life. The community was essential for most of the participants in the focus group discussions. The presence of the faith and like-minded community were important for the individuals, as this made the person supported whenever it is

necessary. The presence of sources such as the text, the practices and the sheikh (spiritual leader)'s advice were other significant points in their Sufi journey.

The experience of calmness was initially mentioned by the participants, when the researcher asked the feelings that emerge through their Sufi practices experience. It was important for members to be accepted as they are and not to be questioned about their identity. Several participants expressed that it was a good experience not to be judged in the community. Feeling supported was further confirmed by a trustful relationship and positive atmosphere in the Sufi centres. Many of the participants felt that protecting their identity was basically their motivation to be a member of these Sufi centres, but the wisdom that they were gaining through belonging in such a community is a very important experience that helped through their life.

“It (Sufism) saved my life so many times. There have been periods in my life when I've considered ending and the thing that has kept me going is sometimes just the passage of the Quran, or the ability to walk into a room could be beyond my friends, or, actually, to know that I've had periods of faithlessness as well. You know, because it's been so excruciatingly painful, that I've also had periods of being faithless, and yet still being held in a lot of love by friends. So that's also been amazing. Because I know that not everybody gets that from their communities.”  
(Amirah)

“That was a very new thing for me before because, as I say, I never belong to an Ummah, a sort of I've never belonged to a Muslim family of any kind, you know, literal or metaphorical. So, I suppose the most powerful element of sacred practice for me, is actually being able to feel it through being with a group of other people, as if it is a sort of family connection almost. And so that's the biggest thing for me really.”  
(Lucy)

A trusting relationship involved the feeling of being accepted and supported, which meant that individuals experienced belonging in the community. The engagement from the sheikh and the other community members enabled the individual to feel at home and to be able to trust. They felt peace and trust to share their feelings and interact with the others. This could also include not structured rules to attend the practices or not being questioned about their faith during the Sufi practices. Being able to attend the practices as they are, made these participants easily access the

Sufi practices and the community. The 'sense of community' was the most popular word used by the participant for the reason to be a part of Sufi centres. Participants from each category expressed their interest to get involved in contemporary Sufi centres as being with a like-minded community and finding a space to share their feelings.

"The practices help me to realise at times when I've needed to let go of something, being there with others who have the same intention to direct their energy to Allah to the one who has no form, no name, just essence. This gives you the strength to be able to do that. And then you can return to your life more detached with more composure with a calm, peaceful, approach whether you're feeling grief or anger."  
(Sharon)

Links between feeling distant from the existing community because of the adjustments to their religious and spiritual beliefs were mentioned by both participants who are coming from a religious and non-religious background. While a participant coming from a Muslim background emphasised that his relationship with the local mosque was changed negatively when he decided to be a Sufi, another participant from a non-religious background mentioned a similar context and stated that being able to share similar thoughts and feelings is an important reason to be part of the Sufi order. The expression of the community has been used as 'family', 'friends', 'sister and brother' by the participants that may interpret a close and sincere relationship among the community.

"Most importantly, we become a group of family. We support each other. It's truly from the heart. You can feel that." (Chan)

"But for me, how it's helped me is the *tariqa* (Sufi order) is so strong the community that the emotional and physical support is so incredibly strong, that has protected my well-being." (Jane)

Most of the participants have experienced mainstream religious and spiritual communities. However, the participants vary the reason to find the community sense in the Sufi orders. First, most of the participants stated that they were looking for a community that is based on 'communication' and 'interaction' among the participants and the centre. They said that 'preaching' or 'being alone' in a pew does not work.

“It is a practice, just turned up and get into it. And it's not like going to church. If I go to church, I'll be sitting in the pew. There are no more people in the pew. It is really spread out, and it's the experience of it which enabled me to take the practice and do it at home as well.” (Jonathan)

It became clear among most participants that experiencing Sufi practice in contemporary Sufi centres produces a positive outcome. These practices also included assisting the individual to recognise the self and gain knowledge about the self and the ego through individual practices and receive support through the communal practices.

The meaning of being a Sufi varied between participants, where some participants felt that their own (well-being) benefit was the main factor and others describing the importance of support and help from the sheikh, the community was involved. The quotations below demonstrate a general understanding in the groups. Individual stories and the discussions about the meaning of Sufi practice focused on the well-being benefits. Still, it was understood and discussed as a matter of course that the practice and becoming a Sufi was the foremost and key element.

“So basically, we're super busy and as far as I am concerned, in a nutshell, Sufism is telling us. Focus on yourself and not others.” (Niki)

The data allow us to understand the general perspective of the individuals. The members' opinion was different from the leader's opinion on the practices. While the leaders' perspective was mainly about the religious reasoning of the practices, the individuals' opinion was more personal benefit regarding their well-being, identity, social support. Although they were also mentioning about the religious reasoning of the practices, the overwhelming topic in the discussions was their outcomes from the practices.

## 5.6. Covid-19 Interviews

This is the third part of the well-being and mental health section of the results, however, it was conducted as a 'stand alone piece of research emerging out of the

changed circumstances of the Covid 19 pandemic in the UK. Previous studies had been planned from the beginning of the research and this last study was added after the pandemic affected the data collection process. Twenty-two participants were interviewed as a follow-up to the individual interviews. The questions centred on how their experience with Sufi practice changed during the Covid pandemic and how did Sufi practices help during lockdown. Thematic analysis was applied throughout the data. The answers to the questions highlighted that the individual and online group practices were helpful during the pandemic and lockdown because the centres already used online (Zoom) platform for the participants, who are unable to attend in the gathering in person. Turning the usual weekly Sufi gatherings entirely online was therefore able to happen straightaway. The majority of the participants stated that they were continuing to attend online (Zoom) gatherings and even had more opportunities to spend more time with the larger community, sometimes across the world.

Only four of twenty-two participants did not attend the online *zikr* as they found they were not connected to the practices as much as when it was in person. However, the rest of the participants found the online gathering as a way to stay connected with the community and a way to socialise at least online. The participants agreed that individual Sufi practices positively affected their mental health during the pandemic due to providing a chance to connect with others and provide individual time to reflect what had happened. The role of community is visible in the data that is actually created a supportive community and it shows that their supportive community can also operate virtually. Another important finding of the data was the importance of the individual practices for example, *muraqabah* (it is a way of mindfulness in Islam which is transcendental union with Allah) and individual *zikr* practices. It was also highlighted by the participants that because they developed skills, such as trusting Allah and acceptance of the life struggle as a way of testing they were helped through the pandemic and lockdown.

“I mean the obvious, the external impact is that we no longer meet in person. We have our meetings online via Zoom. And I suppose in some ways, like we used to. We had those Friday gatherings, as you know, but what’s happened since the pandemic, we have meetings with the sheikh and his wife... And so in a way, we’ve

had a bit more contact since the pandemic. I feel that for me personally what's happened is that I feel the loss of those personal interactions in face to face. Zoom is amazing. It's amazing to have this technology, but I feel that sometimes what can happen as you start to feel like every day is Groundhog Day. This is very similar, and it's not broken up by socializing or it's not even broken up by coming to pray'together or any of those things because zoom is very different. It's purely the zikr (practice), and the sharing but then afterwards, obviously we don't lead the salah (prayer) together or when we don't eat together. Remember that happened so it's quite different. For the loss of those personal interactions and being face to face with friends. But still, we are managing to connect. "(Amirah)

### 5.6.1. Dealing with uncertainty and instability of life

The overarching experience leans from two questions that I asked, however, there is limited data about the specifics of it. I will describe the Covid data under the team of 'dealing with uncertainty and instability of life'.

In previous themes, I demonstrate how individuals' experience of contemporary Sufi practice resulted in expressing their identity and providing social support in the multi-cultural and hectic environment. I described their experiences about the Sufi practices in individual and communal practices associated with well-being in usual time. I also outline how they associated these practices with their daily life and use as well-being sources. I will now describe in the final theme 'dealing with uncertainty and instability of life' and how Sufi practices affected individual's mental well-being during the process of the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is evident from the participants' account that their experience of Sufi practices during lockdown was different than their usual experience within the context of gathering in the Sufi centres. Experiencing the pandemic for an unpredictable time affected life fewer human contacts and less communication with the wider community. There was clear evidence that the participants were missing the communal practices in the centres. On the other hand, the Sufi practices involve much more individual practices that develop the inner self of the individuals. The lockdown was a great opportunity to focus and develop the inner self working and improving Sufi wisdom through the sources.

"I think these practices help with any answer, uncertainty, and now even more. It somehow puts you more at peace with the fact that there are things that are simply

beyond our control. I mean, even before probably dying.... But when this became more physical more obvious...But I think I was more at peace with the fact that this is something beyond my control. And I'll have to deal with it. I mean, I had my own portions of anxiety, I had my own questions, and I guess I still have them, we all have them. But the practice on some level was kind of, I don't know how to explain like, airing room on a daily level, you need to open the windows and let fresh air get in. If you don't clean the room, fresh air might come in, but you still need to clean the room. So, there are bits that are more than just the Sufi practice. But still, it's like having that fresh air that flow in and out. On the other hand, I think it was encouraging in a way to sit with your feelings, sit with your anxiety, deal with your emotional state, or whatever it is and to observe the whole phenomenon in much more global terms, but also in more spiritual terms. It was not only a pandemic, but it was a kind of invitation to go deeper inside to explore the inner world in more depth. And yeah, and another aspect, which I found very useful is just being in more frequent touch with our teachers. Having water from the fountain directly having their guidance, that was definitely a blessing." (Sharon)

The emphases on the *zikr* practices by participants clearly explained the importance of communal practice either online or in person. On the other hand, because of missing the human interaction of the wider community with other practices such as eating, praying and having conversation together, some of the participants dropped out from these online practices. As well as the importance of the practices itself, the sense of community was another important point expressed by the participants. Being together and sharing the togetherness with group prayer and dinner were the most missing parts of the practices. Although these communal practices were missing, the individual practices were more preferable to the participants. The individual practices which are *zikr*, *muraqabah*, reading and thinking about Sufi wisdom helped during the lockdown, more than the group practices.

"I never participated in the gatherings online. Because I was not familiar with this kind of way, with a beautiful way to participate into the gathering, then definitely I interrupted the gathering. But I went on with my own practice of *Muraqabah* (Sufi mindfulness), mostly during the Ramadan month. Then, from this point of view, the pandemic has added a positive effect to my personal practice." (Carol)

The follow up questions were answered as they supported the individual interviews with the contents of social support. The data present the importance of connection with others and having an opportunity to connect which is important for human well-being. Although the existing pandemic did not allow in-person human interaction, the online regular gatherings were useful. The large majority of the participants stated that having an opportunity to connect with people who are familiar for the reason for *zikr* and sharing their feeling during lockdown had a huge effect on their well-being. The minority of the interviewees stated that connecting online does not feel the same way as in person gathering, so they stop attending the online one as they were also unfamiliar with the method. Although all centres were providing Zoom call in their previous Sufi gatherings for overseas participants and people who were not able to attend for any reason, still some of them did not find the same benefits from that.



## Chapter 6: Overall Discussion

The main aim being investigated in this thesis was to understand the nature of the relationship between Sufi spirituality and mental well-being among participants of three London based Sufi groups. In particular, I was interested in the motivation of those participants who came from Western backgrounds to be a part of Sufi groups. I was also interested in how their life narratives related to the secularisation thesis as well as the effects of their interest in spirituality on mental well-being. The research also examined Sufi group leaders' perspectives on the nature of the practices that they led as well as their perception of its effects on group members' well-being. As the research went on the nature of the research questions changed given the higher number of participants who were already acquainted with Islam and who saw their spirituality in more conventional religious terms. The occurrence of the Covid Pandemic in 2020 created new circumstances for my study and allowed an examination of the relationship between Sufi practices and well-being in a period where the main elements of collective practices were restricted. I have presented the findings of my qualitative research in Part 5. In this section, I firstly summarise the main findings of the study. I then discuss the interpretation of findings in relation to previous literature and other pertinent theories. Following this, I discuss the overall strengths and limitations of the research and potential directions for future research on the topic of Sufi spirituality and mental well-being. Finally, I integrate these sections to provide an overall conclusion for the thesis.

### 6.1. Summary of main findings

#### 6.1.1. Systematic Review

The objectives of the systematic review were: 1) to evaluate the evidence for an association between Sufi practices and mental well-being; 2) to explore the methodologies that have been used to evaluate the claim that Sufi practice positively affects mental well-being.

The systematic review allowed me to understand the extant empirical literature on the field of Sufi practices and mental well-being. The systematic review of the empirical research on Sufi spirituality and mental health demonstrated that the existing literature on the topic is scarce and limited. Regarding the first objective, the review suggested that there is some evidence to support the argument that there may be positive effects

of Sufi practices on individuals' well-being. Regarding the second objective, the methodologies used in collecting evidence were not sufficiently rigorous to make robust conclusions about the nature of this relationship, and there was not a sufficient body of qualitative research to explore the complexities of this topic. One of the limitations of the systematic review approach was that it addressed the issue of spirituality at a surface and sometimes superficial level. Therefore, I found that an in-depth qualitative analysis would help to understand the issue in a much deeper level. I was able to explore the relationship between Sufi spiritual experience and individual's well-being in my field work and consider how Sufi practices affect individual's mental well-being.

### 6.1.2. Qualitative Study

My qualitative research involved conducting both in-depth qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with Sufi leaders and Sufi practitioners in order to explore three main objectives: 1) to describe contemporary Sufi centres, in particular the role of their leaders and to understand how Sufism is currently practised in the UK; 2) to explore the life courses of the participants prior to and following their joining of a Sufi group; 3) to examine how current Sufi practice in England mediates the well-being of participants in relation to their lives and employment.

The interview and focus group discussion guides followed a mix of deductive and inductive questions. While deductive questions facilitated answering the first objective of how group leaders defined the role of contemporary Sufi centres in promoting contemporary Sufism in Western countries, the rest of the questions explored Sufi practitioners' views and experiences of practicing Sufism in the UK and its impact on their mental health and well-being. I conducted a mix of thematic analysis and narrative analysis, responding to these objectives. Below I critically discuss my findings and describe how Sufi practices may mediate mental well-being.

The data was analysed in three subsections reflecting the above research questions. The first section addressed the main research question of the study: what is the relationship between Sufi spirituality and mental well-being? Exploring this question, my analysis suggested a relationship between Sufi spirituality and a positive mental well-being in individuals' life. I identified two themes which were 'personal strength and social support' that represent how Sufi community and practices provide

participants with support for their well-being. It was also noted that that mental well-being or distress were not an attractor for all respondents to engage with Sufism, but the practices itself produced 'resilience to stress'. In addition, these themes were supplemented by a sub-study (see Section 5.3.) considering the well-being of the participants during the isolation brought about by the Covid 19 pandemic. The findings of this study suggest that Sufi practices provided opportunities for supportive individual practice outside of the collective practices normally associated with Sufi practice. This is also important given that the community support of groups was not reliant on physical proximity.

In the second part of the analysis, the nature of contemporary Sufi centres was described by the leaders of the three Sufi centres in England. All five leaders talked about their perspective of Sufi practices as authentically bonded with Islamic tradition but also modified to address a western audience which included religious, and non-religious participants. Regarding the thesis of the Westernization of the Easternization of the West (Bruce, 2017), which summarises the transformation of eastern tradition in the west, I identified a theme of 'the striving to meet the needs of a diverse audience'. This theme explains the effects of the Westernisation of Eastern religion in the centres and the points of view of individual attendees. While the leaders emphasise the need for modification of tradition to reach a western audience, the individuals attending them expressed how they felt alienated by modern society, and they tended to seek spirituality/ community in the Sufi groups.

The final part of the analysis explored how the group participants' perspectives on Sufi practices and well-being differed from that of the leaders' understanding of what was happening. The majority of participants saw their participation in contemporary Sufi groups as being connected to moments of distress in their lives. Many made a clear link between their experience of hardship in their lives before they joined in the Sufi groups and the start of their searching for a meaningful spirituality. The nature of this hardship could take the form of either the loss of a sense of meaning in their life or the loss of a loved one. The loss of meaning associated with the participants' previous life experiences links with the second research question examining the motivation for adherents from western backgrounds to want to participate in organised Sufi ideas and practices in England. My analysis of the data drew out three themes regarding the motivation for participating in Sufi practices: 'finding a

place, 'meaning of life, and 're-connect with the faith' These themes may be relevant to the previous theme in which the individuals' felt alienated in Western society. By alienation, the individuals feel separate from their existing community either their family or the belief community therefore, these individuals started to seek a meaningful community for their life.

## 6.2. Interpretation of findings

Previous qualitative work regarding Sufi practices has not focused on the topic of mental well-being. Earlier qualitative work on Sufism described the common reasons to be Sufi in western societies such as adaptation of the faith to secular life (Khan, 2020; Hermansen, 2019; Hazen, 2016; Kose, 1999) or described Sufi organisations in the west (Khan, 2020; Quisay, 2019; Morris 2016; Gabriel and Geaves 2013; Genn, 2004).

In this research the main aim was to examine the relationship between Sufi spiritual practices and mental well-being through empirical data collected from three contemporary Sufi centres in Britain. As an interdisciplinary project based on the collection of data using different qualitative research methods, I have been able to make several unique contributions across multiple disciplinary fields: Sociology, Psychology, Cultural Psychiatry and Mental Health and well-being in the previous chapters. In this section, I draw together the various analytical and theoretical threads that I introduced in the preceding chapters and examine the findings within the context of relevant literature. I also discuss how themes identified from the literature review had to be re- thought in the process of analysing the data produced by the qualitative study.

In the results chapter, the data are presented in three sections that are divided according to the research questions. In this section, the findings are also examined in three main sections: *post secular environment*, *technology of the self* and *well-being* themes. In the post secular section, the theories initially discussed in Chapter 1 are re-examined regarding the first research question. In the Technology of the Self section, the examination of the participants' life stories through the Sufi practices will be examined. The final section will clarify the main research question: 'What is the relationship between Sufi practices and mental well-being'. My extensive analysis of the data allowed me to identify a number of themes from the data that

revealed the relationship between Sufi practices and well-being so as to answer the research questions.

Analysing the data through the lens of well-being has allowed me to uncover the different ways of understanding spirituality, religion and Sufism that were shaped by the individuals' lived experiences. Hence, in this study I was not concerned with the theological appraisal of practising Sufi spirituality, rather the focus was on how contemporary Sufi spiritual practices in Britain could be understood from a well-being point of view.

In planning this thesis, I had initially assumed that well-being would be a motivator for joining Sufi groups. Although well-being was undoubtedly a factor, it was different in form from how I had anticipated it. For this reason, I examined the participants' relationships with religion in the sections that followed, but firstly I will examine the well-being outcome of the findings before continuing to analyse the other findings.

### 6.3. Mental Well-being

The findings of this research show the interesting background of the participants of whom a notable number of them (n=9) were professionals in health care sectors such as nurses, hospice carers, psychologists, mental health workers, and healers (e.g., Reiki). These backgrounds also suggest that the participants of these Sufi centres are on a quest for spirituality alongside experiencing and learning about well-being outcomes.

As discussed in the systematic review, one of the aims of this research was to see how Sufi practices mediate the well-being of the participants in relation to their everyday life. I drew upon the relevant literature to see whether it could provide proof of a potential relationship. Although the literature shows the presence of some studies conducted on the subject of Sufi practice and health, there was not a clear explanation for its contribution to well-being. Although, the leaders were aware of that most of the individuals seeking spirituality had various reasons, with the most common one was well-being.

“So many of us come because we are hurting. We are looking for healing. That is very common for people to be seeking spirituality to feel better about themselves. Or

because they feel alone. They want to belong to some community that is where they feel that they are welcomed or accepted. Or because they are looking for identity. Something to identify something to feel that I am part of this or because they want attention. They want to feel special...or a lot of people like sheria refugees. They are running away from the suffocating rules, extremism and buying that that is imposed on them by so called traditional Islam, which is we have to accept that to this traditional simple. It's not real Islam, not for us. So, they are running away. But they don't want to leave, so we're looking for something that makes sense for them... "(Ahmet, Leader)

Ahmet, who is one of the leaders of one of the Sufi centres, summarises the reason for the British audiences to attend contemporary Sufi communities by emphasising their emotional needs. The data from the individual interviews also revealed similar conclusions that can be summarised in terms of social identity, social integration, social support, personal development, and meaning. Although the leaders and the individuals are aware of well-being outcomes, both groups pointed out that the primary motivation is practising religion and spirituality and not well-being. However, it is also the case that well-being is an outcome of taking the Sufi path. The well-being outcome will be discussed through the data within four subthemes: Identity, Attachment, Loss and Bereavement, and Flourishing.

### 6.3.1. Self and social Identity

Discovering the self and having a connection with the community were discussed by the participants in the context of identity, whether this was a personal or a social identity. The emphasis on the individual rather than on a collective group differentiates social identity from personal identity. Personal identities are self-concepts that are primarily intrapersonal and linked to our life experiences. Social identities are the aspects of the self that derived from involvement in social groups (Spreckels, J. & Kotthoff, H., 2009). Issues such as protecting their identity or feeling a sense of belonging to the community were raised by participants. Julian (female leader of group 2) mentioned that most of the participants expressed 'feeling a sense of belonging' when they got involved with Sufi groups. Amirah and Nazia mentioned the importance of expressing their religious and cultural identity through the Sufi groups.

Social identity and mental well-being have often been parallel discourses in modern societies. As contemporary societies become more variegated in terms of culture and

religion, it is recognised that social relationships and affiliation have a powerful effect on physical and mental health (Berkman et al., 2000; Parker, 2011; Seynold and Hill, 2011). Additionally, there is considerable evidence that suggests spirituality may be linked to or have a positive effect on general mental health or well-being (Hodges, 2002; Townsend et al., 2002). The director of one of the contemporary Sufi organisations in this study stated that these centres create a social connection with the people having likeminded interests. On the basis of data derived by the participants' explanation and understanding of Sufi practices, the overarching theme in terms of well-being outcome was social integration. Social integration can be understood as resulting from participants' feeling of belonging and welcolm by the Sufi community and this helped foster a sense of identity. The enabling of 'Social integration' was one of the main findings of the role of the contemporary Sufi centres that aimed to integrate tradition to the western audience. The themes of 'identity', 'sense of community' and 'finding a home' were identified as key components of the socially integrated individual.

The backgrounds of the participants are also worth mentioning given that many of the participants were the children of immigrants from Muslim countries, while the rest of them were either of European or British heritage. Cultural integration is an important part of the centres' role mentioned by the Sufi centres as integrating Eastern and Western culture in the carrying out of Sufi practices. Berhman et al., (2000) assess that by examining "actual ties between net-work members, one can empirically test whether community exists and whether that community is defined on the basis of neighbourhood, kinship, friendship, institutional allegation, or other characteristics." (2000:845). Having a community and a constant relationship provided a healthy networking among the individuals in this study. These results are in line with those of previous studies conducted on the sense of community and well-being (Davidson and Cotter, 1991; Wange et al., 2015; Oh, Ozkaya, and LaRose, 2014). Research also shows that with a supportive community and a sense of belonging and feelings accepted, this can influence mental well-being. Participants' pointed out the subject of identity and that having a supportive community was important for them to assess their mental well-being in a positive way. Previous research has also shown that there is a positive connection between personal identity and psychological well-being/ mental health (Kirmayer, Brass & Tait, 2002; Scheff, 2001).

Due to the shifting and changing nature of the understanding of religion and spirituality in contemporary societies, the position of religion and spirituality in an individual's life has been re-defined for the participants. While some of them viewed religious identity as a way of protecting their culture, others only defined it as a path for reaching the ultimate truth.

"I think for me, it started in childhood. So, in Kashmir, Sufism is kind of quite grassroots. Like it's kind of very much in the fabric of society there... I grew up in the U.K., but mainly in parts of the U.K. where there wasn't much ethnic diversity. So, it was always the only kind of non-white or ethnic kid in school or my class. So, I didn't really grow up having Muslim friends or even friends from many other religions... I guess I kind of had a bit of a crisis of faith, like in my teenage years. And then I connected in my 20s when I think I was always looking for it." (Nazia)

"I have very much engaged with Sufism, and other spiritual practices are profoundly related to my mental and spiritual well-being... So Sufism is not just a bunch of techniques. And then once you've learned them, you've got it. It's a journey for life. It's a journey of complete, it's completely open-ended." (Shaun)

A large proportion of the participants stated that when they started on their spiritual quest the first place was the traditions with which they were familiar. For example, if a person is Muslim they will initially examine an Islamic tradition such as Sufism (6.4.3. Group3). However, for the people coming from a non-religious background, they may look at Taoism, Tarot card or Buddhism for inspiration (6.4.2. group2). This is explained in further detail in section 5.4. detailing individual stories, self and social identity are important to a person's striving for health and well-being (Sharma, 2009). Individuals' psychological well-being / mental health was highlighted to be influenced by positive self- conceptions, high self-esteem and the social identity. Self and identity may be defined in two contexts which are individual versus social level phenomena (Ashmore and Jussim, 1997). Self-development was discussed in the preceding sections, as perceiving to be a better human being in Sufi tradition. Identity and feeling a sense of belonging are also important elements.



“I feel much more at home there it has the liberal aspect of Sufism is open to everyone and they allow people to come from all different faiths or no faith.” (Lucy)

The openness of the centres is another effective way in which people felt a sense of belonging without the need to change their identities faith, or gender and found that the centres welcomed all people with different identities. The director of one of the groups (Ahmed) clearly stated that the groups are welcome to everyone, and this also allowed people to not feel neglected. They are a part of this community and that they do not have to change their identity, for example they do not have to be Muslim or change their appearance to attend the weekly gathering. Participants did however consistently distance themselves from the non-religious spiritual practices which did not include Islamic practices or any religious essence in some of Sufi groups in London that defined themselves as non-Islamic organisations. The participants and the directors clearly stated that Sufi practices carried out in the centres were Islamic and the main aim was practising Islam and becoming close to Allah (God). Despite the focus on ‘secularisation’ and ‘spiritual revolution’, participants of these Sufi centres are explicit that the practices express their own individual experience of Islam as a religion. The connection and closeness of God with developing trust and belief are other findings that the participants raised.

### 6.3.2. God as an inner attachment figure

The findings also suggest that the figure of God in the participants’ explanations can also be understood as an internalised attachment figure that provides an internal support mechanism. Bowlby (1982)’s attachment theory suggested that ‘an innate psychobiological system’ motivates a secure supportive connection with others in times of need for the sake of protection and safety.

Cherniak et al. (2020) have suggested that attachment theory deals with the development and dynamics of interpersonal affectional bonds. Many religious individuals experience God as a source of resilience. From the data a large number of participants have expressed the view that believing and trusting God provides them a significant source of support. Kitpatrick and Shaver (1999) actualised individuals’ relationship with God as an attachment bond and suggested that believers may

perceive God as an especially powerful source of support. There is extensive evidence that spiritual and religious experiences tend to perceive and relate to God as a secure connection (Scheff, 2001). Granqvist (2020) widens this concept and relates them with theories and empirical studies on attachment in the psychology of religion and spirituality. Granqvist (2020) has suggested religion as attachment in relation to mental health. He argues that not being part of a closely-knot social group and without having enduring intimate relationships, humans tend to become anxious and depressed over time (pp.186). Westerners living in an increasingly individualistic society have less sense of social connection and community (Twenge 2000). Beyond the cultural shifts lessening community and affiliation, Twenge and colleagues (2010) have also pointed to social shifts away from meaning in life and toward materialism and extrinsic goals. Religious and spiritual organisations provide welcoming social communities, emphasising the connection between community and the self and promote a sense of meaning for individuals in modern society. There are some specific literatures addressing this connection. For example, Koenig (2012) examined 'attachment to God' related with spiritual/ religious sources which causes people to engage with each other and adopt more specific health promoting religious practices. In addition, religious/spiritual involvement was correlated with better mental health (Koenig, 2012).

Participants described how their journey with Sufism often started with a loss of meaning, or the loss of someone in their life, or maybe the ending of a significant relationship. The spiritual path to Sufism was therefore, a way to find meaning. The spiritual quest was a response to separation and loss. Death of significant others was often a trigger for people to start seeking spirituality in their life. A significant number of participants (n=12) had undergone grief or some form of breakdown from a bereavement. This accords with the work of Kirkpatrick (2005) who sees a connection between attachment and loss and the effects of death and separation.

### 6.3.3. Grief and bereavement

Some participants' experience of grief, bereavement and breakdown is viewed as part of their spiritual search and is connected with their well-being. The awareness of the benefits of spirituality on the process of grief and bereavement of the individuals has been discussed in previous literature. Nicholls (2007) has discussed the role of

spirituality in coping with life distress after experiencing loss and grief. In line with this, some participants in the current study specifically described their spiritual journey as a 'life-saver'. In this context, Sufi practices and the Sufi community are seen to be a way of coping with the process of grief and bereavement. Many of the participants mentioned the process of experiencing grief before starting their spiritual journey and how their experience helped them to find a purpose in their life.

“So, when my father passed away, I was 27. And it happened very suddenly. And it was a real wakeup call...I was going through a grieving period, but it also took me back to my religion in a way that was not unexpected. At that time when I was engaging in more spiritual practice, I felt a greater closeness to God. And I think that was a turning point. I think losing my dad was like a reassessment of many things.” (Deborah)

When situated in the experience of grief 12 out of the 35 participants interviewed, experienced either the death of loved relatives or a breakdown, the data showed evidence of meaning being both lost and found through this process. The crucial point in the losing and finding of meaning is how participants learnt to deal with negative experiences in life.

In this context, the impact of Sufi teaching and practices on an individual's life is visible in terms of meaning making. This was especially evident during times of loss such as bereavement and divorce: the case was both the space for release of emotions and the need for support and sharing those feelings. For example, Jonathan mentioned his divorce and how the community and the practices associated with them have helped him through the process. Therefore, within the participants' discourses there was a flow between ideas of community and identity that further explain the role of social support and being able to express who you are. The data has shown that making these experiences meaningful during these low points and being able to have social and emotional support were positive for individuals' well-being.

#### 6.4. Practicing religion and Spirituality in the Post Secular Environment

The term post secular is understood as a renewed interest in religion and spirituality (Berger, 1999). In the modern Western societies, religion is often understood to be a private matter, but it is also continues to shape our lives and worldviews. Post

secular can refer to the return of religion not on a widespread social scale, but as a discursive aspect of modernity (Horstkotte and Hodkinson, 2020). In the secularisation process, the understanding of spiritual practices has shifted from ones that have a religious foundation to becoming tools that can help individuals' well-being. As Bruce (2017) emphasises, religion has not disappeared in the social space, it has just changed.

Modernisation has changed how the status and nature of religion is understood by society. In diverse and pluralistic societies, there is not only one way to express beliefs or even to have them. Additionally, while secularisation has caused the place of religion to fade in individual and social life (Taylor, 2007), alternative ways of expressing belief and spirituality have arisen. As discussed in the literature review, contemporary Western society has created a secular, individualised environment. Britain is a multicultural and pluralistic society that includes various cultures and faiths within itself.

Within this understanding there are a number of studies that have been conducted on the Western understanding of Sufi practices (Milani and Posemai, 2015). Harmensan (2000; 2007) describing Sufi practices in the US highlighted 'the universalist teachings that emphasized private personal spiritual development and describes them as the American way of practising Sufism. Milani and Possamai (2015) conducted a case study on Sufism, Spirituality and consumerism in Australia highlighting the westernisation of the Sufi order and the localisation of Sufism in Australia. As a parallel of our findings, the study (ibid, p.83) emphasised that the Australians studied 'despite retaining a traditional outlook, are driven by contemporary concerns that have influenced important shifts in their worldview and their approach to Islamic praxis and identity'. The British sample of Sufism in our study is different from the Australian and American approaches in two ways; the first is that most of the participants were coming from a religious background rather than comprising more secular participants; the second, the demographic of the sample is predominantly Muslim. However, Werbner (2006) has charted a variety of practices in the UK pointing out many different ways of practising Sufism. However, there is still an absence of in-depth analysis on contemporary Sufi groups internationally and furthermore, there has not been a study that has been conducted on the context of well-being.

While Sufi practices are varied and adopt different interpretations in different locales, in our research, the participants mainly integrated the Sufi practices with religion and British culture. The analysis of the participants' responses demonstrated that the practices led to the social integration of the eastern tradition in a western environment. Modern society has promoted a diversity of spiritual and religious approaches besides Bruce's theory on the 'Westernisation of the Easternisation of the West'. One is that the idea of decline of religion is too simplistic in nature (Bruce 2017:12). In fact, Religion/Spirituality has been re-shaped in the light of social changes such as increase in religious diversity and religion's loss of its social functions. Therefore, multi-cultural societies like Britain involve many different traditions, faiths, and religions. People are attracted to Sufism because of the spiritual dimension and in some senses, Sufism has adapted towards this group by creating a more individual sense of spirituality which is not religious on a surface level. On the other hand, the three groups were clear about their religious roots in the practise of Sufism. Contemporary approaches to Sufism in the post secular environment reflect Bruce's position. Contemporary Sufi organisations aimed to address a variety of cultures by using modifications of the traditional Sufi practices. These modifications are usually related to the needs of modern individuals, such as their need to connect their everyday lives with their beliefs and using these beliefs to cope with daily life distress. The Sufi centres studied in this research were also aware of this spiritual environment and the need for the integration of the Sufi practices into society. These centres advertise their events as a way of practising mindfulness<sup>1</sup>.

In my findings (Section 5.3.), I discussed the Westernisation of Sufi practices from the Leaders' perspectives and their aim to create a meaningful path for Western audiences while also protecting the authenticity of Sufi practices. *Striving to meet the needs of a diverse audience* (section 5.3.3.) was one of the themes that sought to explain how the leaders of the centres recognised and applied their approach to Western culture.

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<sup>1</sup>[Sufi meditation](#)

### 6.4.1. Sufism in a Post secular Society

Significantly, most of the participants going to the Sufi groups in the study were from a religious backgrounds rather than having no religion or seeing themselves as spiritual rather than religious. This was different from what was expected when the research began. Most of the participants had already experienced various different spiritual groups before becoming members of the Sufi groups. Those from a secular background were the minority of those participating in this study. When participants were asked to evaluate their life before and after participating in Sufism, I found an interaction between religious identity and motivation to be part of the Sufi community. The majority of my respondents were already highly engaged with religion and spirituality before engaging with Sufi practices. The participants who were not religious had already tended to engage with other spiritual practices through various spiritual traditions such as Buddhism, Kabbalah, Quakers and Qigong before coming to Sufism. As such, there were two groups of participants: religious and non-religious, but already engaging with spiritual practices.

Participants who came from religious backgrounds were predominantly Muslim or had accepted Islam in later life. The demographic data show that these participants were mostly second or third generation children of immigrant Muslims who were born and raised in Britain or were White British who had become Muslim. Both groups mentioned that they were looking for spirituality in their faith. Muslim participants evaluated the group as 'finding a place' and 're-connect with the faith'. These findings may have explained an important factor in the social integration of the people who came from a Muslim background in modern society. The social integration in this case may be described by finding a connection with contemporary society, re-discovering the religious and spiritual identities. For example, one of the participants mentioned the feeling of re-connecting their faith and identity as:

"The Islam I had prior to my journey into Sufism was very sterile, I didn't really have any emotion in it, it was kind of prescriptive. And then this (Sufism) really changed. I think my foray into it became very emotional, very connected to humanity on you know, irrespective of religion." (Amirah)

Another point that most of the participants made was using the words 'home', 'family' and 'friend' as a description of the closeness of the relationship to the community.

Participants found 'a sense of belonging' within these contemporary Sufi communities as the centres were aiming to reach the western audience by modifying Sufi practices. The participants were searching for belonging alongside spirituality. This may be a way of social integration for the Muslim minorities as well. Some of the participants were the children of immigrants and did not share a similar background to their parents, and some of them were looking for a more meaningful way to live their faith and practices. In the literature review, the thesis of 'believing without belonging' (Davie, 1990), and 'spiritual, but not religious' (Fuller, 2001) has been used regarding the British context of secularisation. These theories were not evident in our sample. The participants in the current study held some religious beliefs, but they were not satisfied with these and had begun to feel disconnected. This feeling has been described as 'seeking spirituality' in my research, or looking for spiritual side of their tradition.

The Sufi community provided a set of practices that allowed the participants to practice their faith and belief in a modern environment. My qualitative study findings stress the integration of Western culture and contemporary Sufi practices in Britain. Within the secularisation process, while religion may fade away, spirituality has become more evident. In pluralistic societies, many different expressions of faith have existed, but also organised religion has never disappeared totally. Spiritual forms of organised religion, meanwhile, are becoming more prominent among the Western audiences in the form of going on retreat, doing mindfulness, or undertaking Christian meditation. In the field of mental health too, interpretations of spiritual traditions have witnessed a renewed focus on well-being (Koenig, 2009).

As identified in my investigation of the three contemporary Sufi organisations in the UK, it was important for the leaders of the Sufi centres to 'bond with the tradition' to maintain the religious aspects in the Sufi practices and strive to meet the needs of a diverse audience in the West. The Secularisation thesis may not be appropriate to account for the findings in this study as Sufi the leaders clearly expressed the religious components of their practice alongside the aim of helping the individuals' well-being. Sociologists understand the secularisation thesis as 'the decline of religion' in modern society; however, for my participants, Sufi spirituality was understood as comprising both religion and spirituality; not as a contrasting problem, but an integral component of their faith. To this extent, Sufism is understood as an

integration of the definitions for religion and spirituality in the sources (Green 2012; Kynsh, 2017). This was also evidenced in my findings, where the term 'Sufism' was not mentioned as being different from 'religion' and 'spirituality' by the participants. Spirituality has become a more dominant position than religion in modern society while religion in the West has become a relatively marginalised experience and this research suggests that this is the case for the groups studied.

In the current research, the findings regarding the definition of Sufism also engage with the meaning of religion and spirituality. While religion contains doctrines to obey, spirituality allows the use of personal agency in the individual's faith and practices. The use of spirituality allows subjectivity in the individuals' search. This subjectivity allows the individuals to make their own choices about individualised spiritual practices. Sufi spirituality provides a better fit as a way to practise a faith/ beliefs or spirituality within an individualized secular society. Durkheim (1912: 2001) mentions that as a result of social change individualism in society has resulted in lower social integration and lower social regulation. Modern societies and the secularisation thesis imply much more individualisation which has the result of less social regulation and less social integration however in the case of this study the combination of religion and spirituality is much more secularised than it might at first appear because it is actually chosen rather than being imposed and therefore develops its own form of social integration.

Whilst individualism is essentially an attribute of individuals, Individualisation is a process of making everybody individual (Beck, 2010). In the current study, these three themes appeared differently in the interpretation of the participants. Most of the participants expressed that they felt separated from their existing community and wanted to have their own journey seeking spirituality and the purpose of life. Amongst this sample, the experience of Sufi practices and expressions of spirituality were interwoven throughout the narratives of the participants as they talked about their life experiences. The meaningful explanations and deeper understanding of the belief were an integral dimension of participants' spiritual searching. Finding the purpose of life, such as during the process of grief and the uncertainty of life such as the process of the pandemic were exemplifying that participants brought up in the interviews. Amirah, for example, mentioned losing family members before and during the pandemic and how Sufi practice (particularly zikr) helped her cope. Adam was



another example, mentioning how the Covid-19 Pandemic lockdown had not affected him negatively because he had developed a 'trust of God' through his Sufi practices. The findings illustrated the number the nuances and the socio-cultural context of the Sufi spiritual experiences and expressions of the effects in their life. There was, for example, a need to practise a religion perceived as being contemporary: in particular, to practise not only in the structured religious form, but also as a response to a spiritual quest. Sufi practices in the three groups provided a space to practise religion in a contemporary way for the people living in Britain and who have a diverse religious history. The reason of practicing religion and spirituality in the sample of Sufi groups was further related to the idea of community. For a Muslim, this community involved the pursuit of practicing religion in a sincere way. For a non-Muslim, it was to engage with the likeminded community and share their own thoughts and feelings within a responsive environment. Sufi spiritual practices were indeed central to the expression of the feelings of the participants.

### *The practices*

Sufi groups are focused on the zikr (remembrance) as well as many other specific devotional practices. Sufism emphasises the importance of practice in spiritual development and closeness to Allah. Sufi practises are aimed at maintaining a constant focus on Allah's unity and love. The practices in the Sufi centres functioned in two ways; individual and communal. The communal practices were the way the participants gathered with other like-minded people in a community, the individual practices were mostly related to self-development. For the communal practices, Hermansen, Godlas and Geaves' (cited in Hazen, 2014) perspectives on western Sufism relate to our findings. Western Sufism has been described as as comprising of four aspects (1) orientation of Islam, (2) ethnic composition, (3) acculturation to the Western setting, (4) and organisational component. Although, our sample reflected these aspects, the awareness of well-being adds a dimension. The Sufi leaders tried to manage the competing demands of their audience which includes two broad groups: Muslims and non-Muslims. The distinction between participants was between a Muslim audience who were coming from inside Islam, and an audience who wercoming from outside, yet both groups were searching for fulfilment. Muslim audiences were more interested in Sufism as a way to practise their faith in a spiritual way in a modern and pluralistic environment. Non-Muslim

participants usually came from the spiritual perspective, but both audiences were pursuing well-being outcomes.

The Eastern traditions of spiritual practices have become popular in the UK. Bruce (2017:154) writes that 'while Eastern religious themes have proved somewhat attractive, they have been changed in ways that look like capitulation to the West's secular culture'. Our finding supports the theory of the Westernisation of Eastern tradition (Bruce, 2017) affects the way of practising Sufi spirituality in the UK. The practices become more individualistic than communal. The contemporary approach toward Sufism is said to be closer to authentic Buddhist practice such as mindfulness or observance of moral precepts regarding individual spiritual practices. To this extent, Foucault's (1988) understanding of 'the technology of the self' may be a useful approach in relation to the subjectivity of the practices.

### 6.5. Developing the self in a spiritual path: Technologies of the (spiritual) Self

The analysis of the participants' accounts demonstrated an important point regarding the search for spirituality. This search begins with the loss of meaning and a longing to find a new meaning. The issue of pursuing meaning can be regarded as a way of developing the self in ways that are consistent with the work of Michel Foucault.

The participants' perception of spirituality was shaped by the contemporary discourses of human development. Therefore, there was an awareness of personal growth as part of a spiritual journey. Foucault explains the *technology of the self* as 'practice of the self' to reach the knowledge of the self (Kelly, 2013). Foucault points out that "Techniques of the self, I believe, can be found in all cultures in different forms" (EW1, 277). The self-knowledge may be understood as discovering the authentic self-alignment with your action. Underlying the argument of Foucault is that a technology of the self is the way to acknowledge 'self-knowledge' (Kelly, 2013). The idea of spirituality has become self-transformative in Foucault's understanding in his later works (Kelly, 2013). Religion may see the followers as an 'object' following established rules, but spirituality allows the individual to focus on their own reactions. However, the findings of this study showed that the Sufi practices in the three groups were seen as religious practices by the group leaders, whereas the individuals' interviews referred significantly more to the spiritual and religious practices fusing together. In

this context, the Sufi spiritual experiences can be seen to be a journey or a path that provides both personal and spiritual development.

The results of this study indicate that Sufi practices include collective and individual practices. While the collective practices happened in the Sufi centres weekly, the individual practices had spread to participants' entire life as a way of living their life. The consideration of the research question about the individuals' life stories about their mental health before and after being a part of Sufi 'journey' or 'path' (which is expressed by the participants during the interviews), did not show that participants had mental health issues. However, they were struggling with the distress of loss, which is either the loss of loved ones (family member or a partner) or loss of meaning. The results of this study further support the idea of searching for a meaning in the struggle of life. Victor Frankl (1985) wrote about the importance of people discovering their purpose or meaning of life events. His argument about finding a meaning in suffering in order to cope with, and look for, a purpose of life is applicable to the participants in this study. The current findings are consistent with Sufism providing a 'meaning for life' for the participants. There are several possible explanations for the results in terms of the participants' backgrounds. For some of the participants, who are Muslim, the contemporary Sufi community and the practice of Sufism was a way to re-connect with their faith. One participant, Dora, mentioned about her previous experience with her religion as a long-term Salafi. Dora finds more meaning in Sufi practices as the practices are more heart centred. For others, the Sufi way is a path that provides a sense of purpose in life. The participants used 'path' and 'journey' to describe their experience that led them to know their self and God (Allah). This resonates with Foucault's late works on 'knowing the self' and 'technology of the self' in the context of personal development. In Sufism, the aim of the practices is communion with God through spiritual realization and practices (Nizamie et al., 2015). It is possible to reach the level of the perfect self (*insan-i kamil*).

In our examples, most of the participants mentioned that the path of Sufism allowed them to know themselves in a deeper sense especially during stressful times in their life. Losing and finding meaning was frequently mentioned in discussion with the participants. 'Grief' and 'Bereavement' have been expressed as a common feeling that tends to affect individuals seeking spirituality.

“So, it was like I was going through a grieving period, but it also took me back to my religion in a way that wasn't unexpected. So, I was surprised because he died so suddenly. But the things that happened around his death really was so meaningful for me.” (Amirah)

When situated in the living event of the participant, the data showed evidence of personal development and resilience as ways to deal with life distress. Life distress may be understood in the context of the relationship with others and the self, additionally it may be a mature response to unpleasant events. For example, during the pandemic, unexpected lockdowns and uncertainty about the Covid-19 virus created a significant problem at both individual and social levels. However, the findings in this study showed that since Sufi teaching and practices developed their trust and belief of God in times of grief or the illness of loved ones, participants did not struggle to adapt during the pandemic situation. Participants pointed out that the uncertainty and loneliness experienced during the lockdown were related to their connection with God. In this context, Beck's (1992) argument regarding 'reflexive faith' may be a good explanation of our samples' perspective on developing the personal connection with God. Beck's argument about 'Reflecting Faith' can be evaluated as the individualization of the practices as a reflexive religiosity in modern Britain. The participants often had an expression of having a sincere and close relationship with their faith and God through the Sufi discourses, particularly about dealing with the struggles in their lives. The data from the Covid-19 follow-up interviews demonstrated that participants relied on their trust and connection with God to overcome, loneliness, uncertainty, and the fear of illness and isolation.

Our study showing that Sufism among our respondents was understood as a path that led the individuals towards a personal growth by utilising special techniques. This is similar to Foucault's understanding of the techniques of the self as forms of self-mastery as Sufi practices have a set of practice to access the complete human being (Gozel, 2012; Vicini, 2017). Foucault's concept of the techniques of the self is useful in understanding the contribution of Sufi spiritual practices to well-being. The value of Foucault's approach is that he draws attention to the need for the care of the self in a society which is preponderantly about consumerism and gratification. Foucault's idea parallels with my findings showing that some of the respondents saw

their engagement with Sufism as a path directed to reaching perfection (insan-ikamil).

## 6.6. Concluding comments

Sufi spirituality has many different impacts on individual lives in many different ways. Involvement in the Sufi community and its practices impacted on participants' mental well-being in a positive way. As discussed in previous sections, participants experienced social and individual benefits from the Sufi community and Sufi practices. The underlying nature of the participants' engagement with contemporary Sufism was that it was a hybrid approach to spiritual and religious experience in a contemporary social environment rather than being a purely spiritual or well-being focused activity. In this context, the participants drew upon explanations of how their life could develop through their engagement with Sufism in terms of how it constituted a 'journey' and 'path' and was therefore an aspect of personal growth.

I have argued in this chapter that while Sufi practices in the three centres are spiritual practices, its constitution for many of the participants is also very much also religious. This is all the more surprising given that the groups were consciously set up in the context of the operation of spirituality in a post secular environment, and in the context of the Westernisation of Eastern religion. Equally, rather than spirituality being pursued in an individualised form being directly related to their mental well-being. Identity, community, and social support originating in Sufi practices came to influence participants' ideas of well-being and, meaning making as well as providing a purpose in life. The distinction between spirituality and religion in contemporary Western Sufi practice does not seem to be so clear cut as might have been thought.

Additionally, Sufi spirituality can be utilized in potential qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods interventional study designs for future research. These potential studies could be appropriate for use as a culturally integrated spiritual support approach in a palliative care setting for the patients, the patients' relatives, and health care professionals. It is also valuable to consider these activities as an alternative to mainstream mindfulness therapies by modifying those practices to be more culturally meaningful. With the increase in the Muslim population in Britain alongside the participation of Muslim healthcare professionals in many healthcare

settings, these modifications might be useful in improving health and social care services by addressing diversity and equality agendas.

This study's findings differ from those in the existing literature possibly because the participants in this study are more heterogeneous than was the case in other more focused research. For example, Werbner (2006) describes a more ethnically homogeneous group of a specific Sufi tariqa when she describes the nature of Sufi communities in her research and highlights the role of faith healing. Her study was therefore focused on the particular understandings exhibited by this Sufi order. In my study the main aim of the research was to examine the context of 'well-being' in three different Sufi orders. These had a more heterogeneous membership regarding religious, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds. In other studies, the focus was much more on the Sufi communities and how practices differed depending on geographical and cultural contexts. My study was concerned with how disparate individuals related Sufi practice to mental well-being rather than specific ethnically mediated cultures.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion

### 7.1. Strengths and Limitations

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first qualitative study to be conducted in the UK that examines the relationship between contemporary Sufi practices and well-being while considering the views of leaders and participants in three Sufi centres. A comprehensive, thorough, and in-depth analysis of the subject was made possible by my methodological choice of research approach, which comprised of qualitative interviews, focus group discussions, and initial observations of the centres. To access a wide and diverse range of viewpoints, I included in the qualitative interviews a large and demographically diverse sample of participants recruited from three key locations. Interviews and focus group discussions were held with participants from western backgrounds who were experiencing Sufi activities, both Muslims and non-Muslims.

I included Sufi centre's leaders to hear their own account of leading and organising the Sufi practices and their perspective of the well-being effects of the practices. I also included accounts from the individual's perspective for completeness and to gain an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of how it feels to experience Sufi practices regarding their mental well-being.

I also included accounts from the individual's perspective for completeness and to gain an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of how it feels to experience Sufi practices regarding their mental well-being. I also interviewed fellow participants during the Covid 19 Pandemic. The inclusion of the individual's perspective during the Covid-19 Pandemic contributed to the richness and relevance of the data and analysis examining the effects of Sufi practices regarding communal and individual practices.

My existing knowledge of the literature on spirituality, Sufism and mental well-being and qualitative methodology proved to be strong skills that enabled me to carry out every aspect of my research confidently. Although the study focused on a small number of groups, it may be possible to look to other groups of Sufism or other spiritual groups as a comparison.

I did an initial observation with Sufi communities that existed in London. I used the community leaders and personal invitation to facilitate access to potential participants, and while this approach has shown success in reaching target numbers there is a risk of leaders' effects that can limit the selection of the participants who get enrolled in the study. Although we were able to facilitate participants currently in the Sufi community, we were not able to have an interviews with others who dropped out of the community. There may also be people who dropped out completely of the community because of Covid . Although I was aiming to conduct my research in person, half of the data collection remained online because of lockdown.

## 7.2. Future Directions

In light of increased religious and cultural diversity in Britain (Booth et al., 2022), there is a need for further research on religion, spirituality and well-being. The 2021 census shows a 5.5 million (17%) decrease in the number of people who identify as Christians and a 1.2 million (43%) increase in the number of people who identify as Muslims, bringing the total number of Muslims in Britain to 3.9 million. Additionally, 7.2% of people – 22.2 million – declared they had “no religion”, the second most common response after Christian. The change to religion and spirituality in contemporary British society in past decades reflects a broader societal change in how spirituality is perceived. This situation does also reflect immigration. My research showed that respondents felt that their mental health was impacted positively by Sufi practices that provide resilience and community. There is a need for more research on Sufi practices with comparative research with other spiritual traditions to see if the secularisation thesis is equally applicable to other traditions as well. As we were unable to include participants who dropped out of Sufi practice totally or during the Covid 19 Pandemic, further research with these groups as a comparison could yield interesting findings. Another key issue is the nature of the social effects of practicing Sufism in Britain. The result might be different if this research had been conducted in another country, such as America or any other country. Therefore, a comparative method among different cultures might be another point for research in the future.



### 7.3. Conclusion

This study represents the first comprehensive study conducted on Sufi spirituality and mental well-being in England. The study was conducted in three Sufi groups which represent traditional and hybrid approaches to the Contemporary Sufi practices regarding the theory of the westernisation of Eastern tradition that happened culturally and practically on Sufi practices in selected three groups. The overarching goal of this thesis was to describe these Sufi organisations and their practices regarding their relationship with well-being effects on the participants lives. Specifically, this thesis has explored the secularisation thesis and the rise of spirituality in British society in relation to Sufi practices in three groups, as well as the relationship between the practice and well-being as constituted in the lived experience of the participants.

Throughout this thesis, I have considered multiple theories which characterise the spiritual practices of my participants in Britain and have related them to how they understand and practice Sufism in their lives. By presenting the organisational and individual points of view, I have shown how Sufism is not just a spiritual activity but comprises rather a hybrid approach to spirituality and religiosity. I also considered how Sufi practices mediate well-being of the participants' lives, resulting in positive well-being being a result of the practices rather than being a motivation.

I found a connection between Sufi spiritual practices and the well-being of the participants. The life narratives of the participants in this research have enabled us to gain important insights into the relationship between the Sufi spiritual experience of three groups of participants and their mental well-being. Although most of the participants had mentioned their experience with grief and breakup, this was not a principal motivation to get involved in Sufi spirituality. The participants stated that they were seeking more intellectually rewarding answers to their spiritual questions and were searching for meaning. They engaged with spiritual thinking and religious understanding as ways of strengthening their capacity to deal with the distress thrown up by everyday life.

The underlying attitude for many of the participants was to take a hybrid approach to spiritual and religious matters in contemporary social environments rather than

taking a purely spiritual or well-being approach. They did not embrace religion without a notion of spirituality, neither did they develop a spirituality without a religious dimension. Sufism represented a meaningful way of expressing their faith and spiritual practices in a secularised multi-cultural and multi-faith context.

In this context, the participants drew upon explanations of how their life developed through an engagement with Sufism in which the experience was constructed as 'journey' and 'path' leading to personal growth. Participants further alternated in their accounts between a sense of belonging in the contemporary environment of individualism, and an awareness of their self-identity drawn from their faith and culture. In this regard, theories of 'spiritual, but not religious' or "not believing and not belonging" are not applicable to the respondents from the three Sufi groups. In contrast, the groups' members found that believing a faith that they were able to practice in contemporary society and belonging in a likeminded community were important outcomes that affected their well-being positively. The interconnection of identity, community, and social support also influenced the participants' idea of well-being; meaning making and finding a purpose in life were highly related to their individual mental well-being. This thesis has therefore highlighted the significance of understanding the personal perspective of Sufi spirituality in relation to individual well-being.

I have explored how Sufi practices and well-being is related regarding three Sufi centres' participants in the England. I have considered how Sufi practices experienced in England are shaped by the secularisation and individualisation of the society and the individual. Beck's methodology points out that people are both isolated and individualised in contemporary society. During the pandemic, individuals were isolated and their religious practices became an individualised form of a collective entity because religion require collective worship. Reflecting on this kind of tension, pandemics create different individualised religiosity. The study furthers our knowledge of the spirituality/religion debate in the context of secularisation thesis. For those who choose manifestations of established religions, eg Sufism, spirituality is not perceived in opposition to religion.



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## Appendices

### Appendix A

A full list of exact search terms and combinations with Boolean operators.

#### Detailed Search Terms:

The academic database search conducted using a list of predetermined search terms which were derived from four main search terms “Sufi”, “experiences”, “mental health”, “well-being”, “emotional well-being”, “depression”, or “anxiety”. These main search terms were further elaborated to include alternative terms. The search terms were applied across sources using advanced search option, the PICO structure and MeSH terms combined using Boolean operators. (Sufi\* OR; Islam\*) AND (mental AND health OR mental AND well-being OR emotional AND well-being OR depression OR anxiety).

#### For Scopus:

```
( TITLE-ABS-KEY ( sufi* OR islam* ) AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ( mental AND health OR mental AND well-being OR emotional AND well-being OR depression OR anxiety ) ) AND ( LIMIT-TO ( PUBYEAR , 2022 ) OR LIMIT-TO ( PUBYEAR , 2021 ) OR LIMIT-TO ( PUBYEAR , 2020 ) OR LIMIT-TO ( PUBYEAR , 2019 ) )
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#### For Web of Science:

```
ALL=(Sufi* OR Islam* AND mental health AND mental well-being AND emotional well-being AND depression AND anxiety)
```

## Appendix B

A full list of participants.

	Pseudonym	Gender	Sufi Group	Religious Background	Current Belief	Duration being Sufi
1	Ahmet	M	Group1	Muslim	Muslim	25 years
2	Julian	M	Group2	Non-religious	Muslim	30 years
3	Ali	M	Group2	Muslim	Muslim	30 years
4	Fatma	M	Group3	Muslim	Muslim	20 years
5	Faruk	F	Group3	Catholic	Muslim	10 years
6	Nazia	F	Group1	Muslim	Muslim	25 years
7	Lucy	F	Group2	Non-religious	Muslim	2 years
8	Jonathan	M	Group1	Christian	Muslim	4 years
9	Sharon	F	Group2	Christian	Spiritual	11 Years
10	Osman	F	Group1	Shia Muslim	Muslim	4 years
11	Joey	M	Group1	Non- Religious	Spiritual	25 Years
12	Amirah	M	Group1	Muslim	Muslim	11 years
13	Ihsan	M	Group2	Non-religious	Spiritual	New member
14	Kasim	M	Group2	Sufi Muslim	Muslim	13 years
15	Deborah	F	Group1	Muslim	Muslim	7 years
16	Chan	F	Group2	Muslim	Muslim	6 years
17	Khadijah	F	Group1	Muslim	Muslim	21 years
18	John	M	Group1	Non-religious	Spiritual	13 years
19	Dora	F	Group2	Salafi Muslim	Muslim	17 years
20	Zora	F	Group3	Christian	Muslim	-
21	Yusuf	M	Group2	Muslim	Spiritual	16 years
22	Safiyah	F	Group2	Muslim	Muslim	New member
23	Aya	F	Group3	Non-religious	Muslim	-
24	Chris	M	Group3	Catholic Christian	Muslim	35 years
25	Luis	M	Group3	Non-Religious	Muslim	25 years
26	Jane	F	Group3	Non-religious	Spiritual	14 years
27	Nikii	F	Group3	Catholic	Muslim	30 years
28	Jaqoop	M	Group3	Muslim	Muslim	12 years
29	Adam	M	Group1	Non-religious	Muslim	14 years
30	Richard	M	Group2	Jewish	Muslim	8 years
31	Carol	M	Group2	Christian	Muslim	3 years
32	Hafsa	F	Group1	Muslim	Muslim	7 years
33	Caroline	F	Group1	Muslim	Muslim	5 years
24	Abbas	M	Group2	Muslim	Muslim	13 years
35	Alif	F	Group3	Muslim	Muslim	5 years

## Appendix C

Ethical approval letter. The Data Protection Identification number is Z6364106/2019/01/02





## Appendix D

Ethical approval for online interview amendment

## Appendix E

### **PROMPTS AND QUESTIONS FOR THE INTERVIEW**

This interview will be mainly about your journey towards Sufi practice and how it has had an impact on your life:

- Could you tell me a bit about yourself?
- Could you tell me how your interest began?
- What lead you to interesting this kind of practice?
- Why do you like these practices?
- Are there other places where you receive Sufi practice or other spiritual practice? What do you find different there?
- How do you feel during the Sufi practice sessions?
- Would you say the Sufi practice has affected your mental well-being?

### **Questions for Leaders**

- Could you tell me a bit about what you do in a Sufi practice session?
- What sort of practices/ meditations do you do?
- What might be a typical choice for being a Sufi? What is the reason for the people following the Sufi group?
- What are the main practices in which attendees' practices?
- What do you think about the mental health issue in these Sufi practices

### **FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION GUIDE**

Warm up; Welcome, an introduction of researchers and the PhD project

Instructions regarding the focus group: "We are interested in what Sufi practices play a role in the mental well-being of individuals.

Instructions: At the beginning, we will explain the project and ask some questions designed to assess your current views and feelings about Sufi practice, and its effects on individuals' mental well-being.

In general:

Purpose: To get participants to speak broadly about a topic without a strong directional lead from the moderator. Provides avenues for more focused discussion in the next segment of the group.

As you know, we are going to sharing our opinion on Sufism, Sufi practices and its effects on an individual's life, mental well-being. When I say Sufism, Sufi practice

What is the first thing that comes in your mind?

Guiding Questions; In-depth look at experiences and feelings

- What do you think of Sufi practice and its effects on your life?
- What is the key reason for these Sufi practices?
- Do you think it helps mental well-being?
- How do you feel while practicing and how do you feel afterwards?

Probes for discussion: Sufism, Sufi practices, Spirituality, Mental well-being.

Concluding Question: of all the things we have discussed today, what would you say are the most important thing or benefit being Sufi?

Conclusion: Thank you for your participating.

### **RESEARCH GOALS OF THE FOCUS GROUPS AND THE INTERVIEWS:**

- What is the role of spiritual practice on participants' mental well-being?
- How does mental health or well-being play a role in the lives of members of these groups?
- What are individual accounts of the attractiveness of Sufism for participants? How do they explain their interest and how they get particularly mental health?

## Appendix F

A glossary that presents the English equivalents of the Sufi words

**Ahwal;** states

**Aql;** intellect

**Barakah;** blessing, abundance

**Biat;** initiation

**Darwish;** Sufis in Mawlawi Order.

**Fatwa;** religious rule

**Insan-l kamil;** the perfect being

**Muhabba;** love

**Muraqabah;** a kind of mindfulness

**Nafs;** the self

**Nafs;** ego, soul

**Qalb;** the hearh and the soul

**Sheikh;** spiritual leader

**Silsila;** lineage

**Stage;** maqam

**Tariqa;** Sufi order

**Tasawwuf;** Sufism

**Tawakkul;** the state of abandonment into God's will

**Tezkiyyetul nafs;** the prufication of the self

**Vazifa;** daily practice for a Sufi

**Zikr;** remembrance

## Appendix G

Participant information sheet for participants

### Participant Information Sheet

UCL Research Ethics Committee Approval ID Number: \_\_\_\_\_

#### YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS INFORMATION SHEET

**Title of Study:** The relationship between contemporary Sufism and well-being in terms of mental health in UK Sufi groups.

**Department:** Division of Psychiatry

**Name and Contact Details of the Researcher(s):** Merve Cetinkaya

**Name and Contact Details of the Principal Researcher:** Prof Paul Higgs

#### 1. Invitation Paragraph

You are being invited to take part in this PhD research project. Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what participation will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading.

#### 2. What is the project's purpose?

Sufism is a spiritual tradition involving various practices and thought related to self and consciousness. We wish to study how Sufi practices affect individuals' mental well-being. We hope that ultimately this research will increase our understanding of the relationship between "Sufism" and "mental well-being" practices in the contemporary Sufi groups.

#### 3. Why have I been chosen?

This study will recruit adults (aged 18 and older) who are attendees of one of the contemporary UK

Sufi groups.

#### 4. Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. You can withdraw at any time without giving a reason and without it affecting any benefits that you are entitled to. If you decide to withdraw you will be asked what you wish to happen to the data you have provided up until that point.

#### 5. What will happen to me if I take part?

If you agree to take part in this research, you will be individually interviewed and may be a part of focus group discussion led by a researcher. The focus group will take 30 minutes and the interview will take between 30 minutes to an hour. You will be asked to talk about your experience of Sufi spirituality during the interview and during focus group discussions. Your answers will help us to understand the role of Sufi practices on individuals' mental well-being. First, we will ask you to sign a consent form to show that you have agreed to take part

and will give you a copy. The interview and focus group discussion will be audio-recorded. Information disclosed to us through the process of interview will be treated as highly confidential and will be anonymised.

#### **6. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

We do not foresee there being risks associated with the study. There is small potential to be upset during the interview if it evokes unpleasant memories. In that case, the interview will be stopped and to ensure the participants' well-being participants will be offered support and the opportunity to talk to the interviewer or a member of staff at the centre where the interview /focus group is being held.

#### **7. What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for people participating in the project, we hope that this research may help to benefit other people in the future.

#### **8. What if something goes wrong?**

If you wish to raise a complaint about something occurring during or following your participation in the project, you should contact;

Prof. Paul Higgs;

UCL Division of Psychiatry

If you feel your complaint has not been handled to your satisfaction, you can contact the Chair of the

UCL Research Ethics Committee – [ethics@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:ethics@ucl.ac.uk)

All the information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept confidential and quotes will be anonymised. Please note that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered.

Please note that confidentiality may not be guaranteed; due to the limited size of the participant sample.

#### **9. Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?**

All the information that we collect about you during the course of the research will be kept confidential. You will not be able to be identified in any ensuing reports or publications.

#### **10. Limits to confidentiality**

Confidentiality will be respected subject to legal constraints and professional guidelines.

#### **11. What will happen to the results of the research project?**

Recorded interviews will be transcribed (written up) and the recordings will then be deleted. Only the investigator mentioned above will have access to the data collected from this study and the results of the study will be used in articles, presentations, and presented within a PhD thesis. All data will be completely and irreversibly anonymised and will be collected and stored in accordance with GDPR.

#### **12. Local Data Protection Privacy Notice**

**Notice:**

The controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Officer provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data, and can be contacted at

[data-protection@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:data-protection@ucl.ac.uk)

This 'local' privacy notice sets out the information that applies to this particular study. Further information on how UCL uses participant information can be found in our 'general' privacy notice:

For participants in research studies, click here

The information that is required to be provided to participants under data protection legislation (GDPR and DPA 2018) is provided across both the 'local' and 'general' privacy notices.

The lawful basis that would be used to process your *personal data* will be your consent.

The lawful basis used to process *special category personal data* will be for scientific and historical research or statistical purposes.

***Your personal data will be processed so long as it is required for the research project.***

If we are able to anonymise or pseudonymise the personal data you provide we will undertake this, and will endeavour to minimise the processing of personal data wherever possible.

If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, or if you would like to contact us about your rights, please contact UCL in the first instance at [data-protection@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:data-protection@ucl.ac.uk).

### **13. Contact for further information**

If you have any questions about the study please do not hesitate to contact me at the above address and email address. You can withdraw your data from the project at any time. Please discuss the information above with others if you wish or ask me, if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. You will be given a copy of the information sheet and a signed consent form to keep

**Thank you for reading this information sheet and for considering to take part in this research study.**

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## Appendix H

consent form for participants

### CONSENT FORM FOR ADULT PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH STUDIES

**Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet and/or listened to an explanation about the research.**

**Title of Study:** **Title of Study:** What is the relationship between contemporary Sufism and Mental well-being in the UK Sufi groups?

**Department:** Division of Psychiatry

**Name and Contact Details of the Researcher(s):** Merve Cetinkaya, UCL Division of Psychiatry,

**Name and Contact Details of the Principal Researcher:** Prof. Paul Higgs, UCL Division of Psychiatry

**Name and Contact Details of the UCL Data Protection Officer:** Lee Shailer [data-protection@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:data-protection@ucl.ac.uk)

**This study has been approved by the UCL Research Ethics Committee: Project ID number:**

\_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for considering taking part in this research. The person organising the research must explain the project to you before you agree to take part. If you have any questions arising from the Information Sheet or explanation already given to you, please ask the researcher before you decide whether to join in. You will be given a copy of this Consent Form to keep and refer to at any time.

**I confirm that I understand that by ticking/initialling each box below I am consenting to this element of the study. I understand that it will be assumed that unticked/initialled boxes means that I DO NOT consent to that part of the study. I understand that by not giving consent for any one element that I may be deemed ineligible for the study.**

		Tick Box
1.	*I confirm that I have read and understood the Information Sheet for the above study. I have had an opportunity to consider the information and what will be expected of me. I have also had the opportunity to ask questions which have been answered to my satisfaction and would like to take part in an individual interview.	
2.	*I consent to participate in the study. I understand that my personal information will be used for the purposes explained to me. I understand that according to data protection legislation, 'public task' will be the lawful basis for processing.	
3.	*I understand that all personal information will remain confidential and that all efforts will be made to ensure I cannot be identified. I understand that my data gathered in this study will be stored anonymously and securely. It will not be possible to identify me in any publications.	



4.	I understand that the data will not be made available to any commercial organisations but is solely the responsibility of the researcher(s) undertaking this study.	
5.	I understand that I will not benefit financially from this study or from any possible outcome it may result in in the future.	
6.	I understand that the information I have submitted will be published as a report and I wish to receive a copy of it.	
7.	I consent to my interview being audio/video recorded and understand that the recordings will be destroyed immediately following transcription.	
8.	I hereby confirm that I understand the inclusion criteria as detailed in the Information Sheet and explained to me by the researcher.	
9.	I am aware of who I should contact if I wish to lodge a complaint.	
10.	I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.	

\_\_\_\_\_

Name of participant                      Date                      Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Researcher                      Date                      Signature

