

A PRE-SYMPTOMATIC MODEL OF PSYCHOSPIRITUAL DISTRESS: AN INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS BASED ON AL-MUHASIBI'S CONCEPT OF KHĀṬIR

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Abstract

Psychological distress today manifests not only in clinical disorders but also in everyday experiences such as anxiety and emotional instability. Contemporary psychological approaches tend to focus on symptoms (symptom-based), thus often failing to fully capture the deeper dynamics of the inner self. This study aims to construct an interpretative diagnostic model grounded in Sufism, drawing on the thought of Al-Muhasibi, particularly the concepts of khāṭir and amrāḍ al-qulūb. Using a qualitative approach with an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design, the study involved six students through in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). The findings indicate that psychological distress develops through a layered process: khāṭir (initial thought impulses), cognitive distortions, amrāḍ al-qulūb (diseases of the heart), and ultimately the manifestation of symptoms such as anxiety and emotional reactivity. This study proposes a pre-symptomatic model that positions inner dynamics as the primary basis for analyzing psychospiritual distress. Theoretically, it extends psychological inquiry from a symptom-based approach toward a process-oriented understanding of the inner self. Practically, the model offers implications for the development of more contextual psychospiritual assessment and intervention, particularly through the management of khāṭir.

Keywords: *khāṭir; amrāḍ al-qulūb; Psychological distress; Al-Muhasibi*

Abstrak

Distres psikologis saat ini tidak hanya muncul dalam bentuk gangguan klinis, tetapi juga dalam pengalaman sehari-hari seperti kecemasan dan ketidakstabilan emosi. Pendekatan psikologi modern umumnya berfokus pada gejala (*symptom-based*), sehingga belum sepenuhnya menjangkau dinamika batin yang lebih mendasar. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengonstruksi model diagnostik interpretatif berbasis tasawuf dengan merujuk pada pemikiran Al-Muhasibi, khususnya konsep *khāṭir* dan *amrāḍ al-qulūb*. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan desain *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)*, melibatkan enam mahasiswa melalui wawancara mendalam dan *Focus Group Discussion (FGD)*. Hasil menunjukkan bahwa distres psikologis berkembang melalui proses berlapis: *khāṭir* (lintasan pikiran awal), distorsi kognitif, *amrāḍ al-qulūb* (penyakit hati), hingga manifestasi gejala seperti kecemasan dan reaktivitas emosional. Temuan ini menghasilkan model *pre-symptomatic* yang menempatkan dinamika batin sebagai dasar analisis distres psikospiritual. Secara teoretis, penelitian ini memperluas pendekatan psikologi dari berbasis gejala menuju berbasis proses batin. Secara praktis, model ini berimplikasi pada pengembangan asesmen dan intervensi psikospiritual yang lebih kontekstual melalui pengelolaan *khāṭir*.

Kata Kunci: *khāṭir*; *amrāḍ al-qulūb*; distres psikospiritual; Al-Muhasibi

Introduction

Al-Muhasibi, in *al-Ri'āyah li Ḥuqūqillāh*, places vigilance over inner dynamics at the core of human self-formation. One of his central concepts is *khāṭir*, referring to the initial thought impulses that arise in consciousness prior to being articulated into intention and action (Al-Muhasibi 1985:92). Within this framework, the evaluation of human conduct does not stop at outward behavior but extends to how individuals respond to and regulate the spontaneous flow of internal cognition (Badri 2018:22; Lochner and Melchert 1997:7). Al-Muhasibi further distinguishes the sources of *khāṭir*, including those originating from the *nafs* (egoic drives), satanic insinuations, and divine inspiration, each carrying distinct implications for the state of the inner self (Al-Muhasibi 1985:92).

He further argues that the failure to filter and direct *khāṭir* may lead to the formation of distorted cognitive patterns, such as self-justification, cognitive distortion, and ego-defensive processes. Over time, these patterns gradually sediment into relatively stable inner tendencies (Al-Muhasibi 1985; Alimov 2025:48; Moqsith 2017; Алимов 2024:53). In Sufi terminology, these tendencies are manifested as *amrāḍ al-qulūb* (diseases of the heart), including *riyā'* (Narcissistic Traits), *ḥasad* (Malicious Envy), *kibr* (Superiority Complex), and *'ujb* (Ego-Centric bias). These are not merely ethical deviations but psychodynamic structures that shape how individuals interpret themselves and their reality.

From this perspective, psychological disturbance does not originate at the level of observable symptoms but begins with distortions at the level of *khāṭir* that are not managed reflectively. This suggests that *khāṭir* can be understood as a pre-symptomatic layer in the formation of psychological experience. When such distortions are not corrected through practices such as *muḥāsabah* (self-accounting) and sustained self-awareness, they develop into more enduring patterns of cognition and affect.

The implications of this process are reflected in the emergence of various psychological responses, which in modern psychology are identified as anxiety, emotional irritability, interpersonal sensitivity, and heightened affective reactivity (Dork et al. 2024:10; Geli 2025:3). In the Sufi framework, however, these symptoms are not treated as isolated phenomena but as indicators of a deeper imbalance within the inner self. Without intervention at their point of origin, namely, the regulation of *khāṭir*, these conditions may gradually evolve into maladaptive personality patterns and lead to dysfunction in social relationships as well as in the individual's existential meaning-making.

Within the broader Islamic intellectual tradition, human beings have long been understood as composed of both outward and inward dimensions. The physical body serves as a medium, while the inner dimensions, encompassing *nafs*, *qalb*, and *rūḥ*, constitute the center of consciousness and meaning. This perspective implies that human experience cannot be reduced to biological or cognitive processes alone but is also deeply connected to the condition of the inner self. Accordingly, human well-being is determined not only by physical and mental health but also by the clarity and balance of the inner state.

In contrast, modern psychological frameworks typically explain phenomena such as anxiety, existential crises, and emotional instability through biomedical and cognitive-behavioral approaches. While effective in identifying and managing symptoms, these approaches often treat psychological experience as detached from its moral and spiritual dimensions. Critiques of this reductionist tendency can be found in the work of Michel Foucault (Iliopoulos 2022:252; Suijker 2023:10), who highlights the medicalization of human experience, and Erich Fromm, who emphasizes the loss of meaning in modern life (Fromm 2002:336).

With the growing interest in spirituality within mental health studies, a number of scholars have begun to stress the importance of meaning and inner awareness in shaping psychological well-being. The work of Viktor Frankl, for instance, suggests that psychological crises often stem from an individual's failure to find meaning in life (Frankl 1992:67). However, most of these approaches remain at a general conceptual level and have not systematically integrated specific concepts from established spiritual traditions such as Sufism.

In educational and mentoring contexts, particularly among university students, various psychological experiences are often encountered that cannot be fully explained through formal clinical categories. Excessive need for recognition, persistent social comparison, feelings of superiority, and fragile self-confidence indicate the presence of deeper inner dynamics that exceed conventional psychological explanations. These phenomena suggest the existence of an underexplored inner layer that remains insufficiently addressed within mainstream psychological frameworks.

Although studies integrating spirituality and psychology continue to expand, the use of *amrāḍ al-qulūb* as an analytical construct within empirical research remains limited. Yet, this concept holds significant potential as an interpretative lens for understanding psychospiritual distress in a more nuanced and comprehensive manner. This gap highlights the need for an approach capable of bridging classical Sufi concepts with contemporary psychological experiences.

Therefore, this study revisits Al-Muhasibi's conceptualization of *amrāḍ al-qulūb* as the theoretical foundation for constructing an interpretative diagnostic framework for psychospiritual distress. Rather than replacing established clinical diagnostic systems, the proposed framework seeks to uncover the spiritual and moral patterns underlying individual psychological experiences. By complementing existing psychospiritual models, particularly *tazkiyat al-nafs*, this study contributes a conceptual framework that extends Islamic psychology beyond spiritual development toward the interpretation of psychospiritual pathology. In doing so, it offers a more holistic, context-sensitive, and practically relevant approach for understanding the complex interaction between spiritual pathology and psychological well-being in contemporary life.

Method

This study employs a qualitative approach using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) design to explore students' subjective psychological experiences and interpret them through a Sufi conceptual lens, particularly the thought of Al-Muhasibi. This approach enables the researcher not only to describe participants' lived experiences but also to uncover the meanings they construct through a process of in-depth interpretation (Smith 2009:37; Tindall and Tindall 2009:346).

The study involved six participants selected purposively, based on the consideration that such a sample size is appropriate within the IPA framework, which prioritizes depth of analysis over generalization. Participants were chosen based on their engagement with everyday psychospiritual distress relevant to the focus of the study.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews with all participants, each lasting between 45 and 90 minutes. These interviews aimed to capture the dynamics of inner experience, including patterns of thought, emotional responses, and self-reflection. In addition, one Focus Group Discussion (FGD) session was conducted involving all participants to capture collective dynamics, identify recurring experiential patterns, and examine the consistency and resonance of meanings across participants. In this study, the FGD functioned as a form of interpretative triangulation rather than a primary data source, thereby preserving the idiographic nature of the IPA approach (J. Cresswell 2007:156).

Data analysis followed the standard IPA procedure, beginning with repeated readings of the transcripts, identification of meaning units, and the development of experiential themes (Smith 2009:37; Tindall and Tindall 2009:346). These themes were then interpreted hermeneutically by linking them to key concepts in the thought of Al-Muhasibi, particularly the processual sequence of *khāṭir*, inner distortion, *amrāḍ al-qulūb*, and psychological symptoms. Within this framework, *khāṭir* is understood as the initial cognitive, inner layer which, when distorted through processes such as self-justification or cognitive distortion, may develop into more stable inner tendencies such as *riyāʾ* (Narcissistic Traits), *ḥasad* (Malicious Envy), *kibr* (Superiority Complex), and *ʿujb* (Ego-Centric bias). These tendencies subsequently manifest in various psychological responses, including anxiety, affective reactivity, and interpersonal sensitivity.

Thus, the analysis does not merely produce descriptive accounts of experience but also offers an initial construction of an interpretative diagnostic model, which holds potential for further development within psychospiritual assessment and intervention frameworks

Result and Discussion

The Dynamics of Khāṭir in Everyday Experience

The findings indicate that participants' psychological experiences in everyday life are generally initiated by the emergence of spontaneous thought impulses that are rapid, fragmentary, and often operate below the threshold of reflective awareness. These impulses do not always appear as fully formed thoughts but frequently manifest as brief impressions, immediate evaluations, or initial affective inclinations that quickly shape one's subjective experience. Within the Sufi framework, this phenomenon is referred to as *khāṭir*, understood as an inner cognitive impulse that arises prior to the formation of intention (*irādah*) and action (*ʿamal*) (Al-Muhasibi 1985:97; Khairani and Ramadhani 2025:415; Klinger 2018:221)

Empirical data suggest that *khāṭir* most frequently emerges in relational contexts, particularly in situations that trigger self-evaluation, such as social

interactions, exposure to social media, and academic experiences. These contexts create conditions for implicit self-other comparisons, which in turn generate initial thought impulses that are not always consciously recognized as sources of distress.

One participant described this experience as follows:

“Awalnya cuma lihat story, terus kepikiran ‘kok dia lagi dia lagi’. Lama-lama jadi kepikiran terus, sampai merasa diri ini kurang banget.” (At first, I just saw someone’s story, then I started thinking, ‘why is it always them again?’ Over time, I couldn’t stop thinking about it, until I felt like I was really lacking)

This account illustrates that *khāṭir* is not merely a fleeting response to external stimuli but tends to persist and recur within consciousness. This repetitive quality indicates that *khāṭir* possesses a certain degree of cognitive salience, making it easily followed yet difficult to disengage from. In cognitive psychology, this phenomenon resembles automatic thoughts, which arise rapidly without deliberate processing (Al-Muhasibi 1985:98; Moqsith 2017:13; Picken 2011:123). However, the present findings suggest that *khāṭir* is not merely an automatic cognitive event but carries the potential to shape the trajectory of inner experience more profoundly.

In Sufi literature, Al-Muhasibi positions *khāṭir* as a critical point in the dynamics of the self, as it represents the moment at which individuals are confronted with a decisive choice: whether to accept, follow, or resist the emerging thought through reflective awareness (*muḥāsabah*) (Al-Muhasibi 1985:98; Moqsith 2017:13; Picken 2011:123).. In this sense, *khāṭir* can be understood as a liminal space between spontaneity and volition, determining the subsequent direction of inner development.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that *khāṭir* is not neutral; rather, it often carries a specific affective orientation that signals underlying inner tendencies. In the context of social comparison, for instance, *khāṭir* tends to incline toward *ḥasad* (envy), as reflected in the following account:

“Saya jadi mikir terus, ‘apa ya yang dia punya?’ bukan fokus ke diri sendiri, tapi ke dia terus.” (I kept thinking, ‘what does that person have?’ My focus shifted away from myself and stayed fixed on them)

Here, *khāṭir* is not merely a cognitive event but also directs attention outward, displacing self-focus toward others. This shift is significant, as it forms the basis for recurring patterns of comparison. In social psychology, this dynamic can be linked to upward social comparison, which is often associated with reduced subjective well-being (Festinger 1954:138).

In other cases, *khāṭir* appears as an impulse toward seeking social recognition, leading toward *riyā’* (Narcissistic Traits):

“Jadi kadang saya ngomong bukan karena ingin, tapi biar dilihat aktif.”
(Sometimes I speak not because I want to, but so that I appear active)

This suggests that *khāṭir* may manifest not only as evaluative thoughts but also as performative impulses, a desire to present oneself in a certain way. In this context, *khāṭir* functions as an initial driver of behavior that may appear adaptive on the surface but is rooted in a deeper need for external validation. In psychological literature, this overlaps with the concept of impression management (Cleek 2015:103; Leary, Twenge, and Quinlivan 2006:111), although within the Sufi framework it is interpreted as an early indication of misaligned inner intention.

Similarly, in self-evaluative situations, *khāṭir* may develop into *‘ujb* (self-admiration):

“Pas dipuji, saya senang banget, tapi setelah itu jadi pengen diakui terus.”
(When I get praised, I feel really happy, but afterward I keep wanting to be recognized again)

Interestingly, in this case, *khāṭir* does not emerge as a negative thought but as a positive experience that gradually develops into psychological dependence on recognition. This finding highlights that not all problematic *khāṭir* are aversive; some arise in pleasurable forms yet still carry the potential to disrupt inner balance. From a psychological perspective, this dynamic relates to reward sensitivity and reinforcement-based behavioral patterns (Yakut 2022:188–89).

In interpersonal conflict, *khāṭir* may incline toward *kibr* (a sense of superiority), often expressed as heightened sensitivity to perceived threats to self-worth:

“Saya langsung tersinggung, rasanya kayak diremehkan, padahal mungkin mereka biasa saja.” (I immediately felt offended, as if I was being underestimated, even though they might have meant nothing)

This suggests that *khāṭir* not only initiates cognitive processing but also shapes subjective interpretations of social reality. Individuals do not respond to situations as they are but through the lens of initial thought impulses already infused with bias. In cognitive psychology, this can be understood as interpretive bias, where individuals tend to construe situations in negative or threatening ways (Constans et al. 1999:650).

While this phenomenon can be partially explained through the concept of automatic thoughts (Knapp, Beck, and Knapp 2008:57), the framework of *Al-Muhasibi* extends beyond mere identification of such thoughts. It situates *khāṭir* within a broader inner structure that encompasses moral and spiritual dimensions. Thus, *khāṭir* is not only a cognitive event but a foundational point that shapes the direction of the self.

Moreover, Sufi tradition classifies khāṭir based on its source whether originating from the nafs (egoic drives), satanic insinuations, or divine inspiration (Picken, 2011). Although this study does not explicitly categorize these sources, empirical findings suggest that most participants' thought impulses are closely tied to egoic dynamics, particularly in contexts of social comparison and the need for recognition.

Taken together, these findings support the view that khāṭir constitutes a pre-symptomatic layer in psychological experience. It represents the initial point from which, if not managed reflectively, inner processes may evolve into cognitive distortions, enduring inner tendencies, and ultimately psychological symptoms. Within this framework, the key contribution of Al-Muhasibi lies in emphasizing the importance of awareness and self-monitoring (murāqabah and muḥāsabah) at the level of khāṭir, before it develops into more complex inner structures (Al-Muḥāsibī, 1985).

Cognitive Distortion as a Mechanism of Justification

The findings indicate that khāṭir that is not managed reflectively does not remain at the level of transient thought impulses but develops into cognitive patterns that function as mechanisms of internal justification. Participants not only experienced the emergence of spontaneous thoughts but also actively, whether consciously or not, constructed reasons that reinforced and sustained those thoughts. In this process, khāṭir undergoes a transformation into more stable and systematized forms of cognitive distortion.

Notably, this process does not occur under full conscious awareness. Participants were often unaware that they were constructing meanings around their experiences, as these justificatory processes appeared "logical" and "reasonable" from their subjective standpoint. This suggests that cognitive distortions do not operate merely as errors in thinking but as internal mechanisms that provide a sense of coherence to one's self-experience.

For instance, in the context of social comparison, one participant stated:

"Ya wajar sih saya kepikiran begitu, soalnya memang dia sering banget pamer. Jadi bukan salah saya kalau jadi nggak suka." (It's natural for me to think that way, since they show off all the time. So, it's not really my fault if I end up disliking them)

This statement reflects a mechanism of self-justification, in which individuals validate their negative emotional responses by attributing their cause to external factors. In social psychology, this pattern is associated with attribution bias and self-serving bias, the tendency to interpret events in ways that protect one's self-image (Miller and Ross 1975:213). Within the cognitive framework of Beck, such patterns fall

under cognitive distortions that reinforce negative emotions through selective interpretations of reality (Knapp et al. 2008).

However, the findings suggest that these distortions function not merely as interpretive errors but as active justificatory mechanisms that allow individuals to maintain their affective stance without confronting internal tension. In this sense, cognitive distortion operates as a form of “pseudo-psychological stability,” shielding individuals from cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1954) while simultaneously inhibiting critical self-reflection.

Other findings reveal patterns of mind-reading and personalization, particularly in social interactions:

“Saya merasa mereka sengaja tidak menganggap pendapat saya penting, walaupun mereka tidak bilang langsung.” (I feel like they deliberately don’t value my opinion, even though they never actually said it)

In this case, individuals assume others’ intentions without sufficient empirical evidence and internalize these assumptions as subjective truth. This process demonstrates how cognitive distortions not only shape thinking but also construct the social reality experienced by the individual. In psychological literature, this relates to interpretive bias and hostile attribution bias, often observed in conditions of heightened emotional reactivity (Constans et al. 1999; Knapp et al. 2008).

Furthermore, these distortions serve a defensive function for the ego. When individuals encounter experiences that threaten their self-worth, cognitive distortions enable them to preserve their self-image by modifying the meaning of those experiences. Within the framework of ego defense mechanisms, this process can be understood as rationalization, an attempt to provide socially acceptable reasons for underlying, often unconscious, impulses (Cramer 2000).

Viewed through a Sufi lens, this phenomenon indicates that *khāṭir* is not merely received but is actively maintained and reinforced through repeated processes of justification. In the thought of Al-Muhasibi, this condition reflects *ghaflah* (heedlessness), wherein individuals fail to engage in *muḥāsabah* (self-accounting), allowing thought impulses to gain internal legitimacy and develop without regulation (Al-Muḥāsibī, 1994). In this context, cognitive distortion can be understood as a form of *tazyīn al-nafs*, the tendency of the self to “beautify” or rationalize internal impulses so that they appear valid and worthy of pursuit (Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, 2001).

This is evident in participants’ attempts to justify their desire for superiority:

“Saya tahu sebenarnya saya ingin dilihat lebih baik, tapi menurut saya itu juga penting, biar orang tidak meremehkan.” (I know I want to be seen as better, but I think that’s also important, so people don’t underestimate me)

This statement reflects a form of partial awareness of internal impulses; however, such awareness is not followed by critical evaluation but rather by justification. This highlights a key complexity: individuals are not entirely unaware, but instead use their awareness to reinforce the very impulses they might otherwise question. In psychological terms, this dynamic is closely related to motivated reasoning—the tendency to employ cognitive processes in ways that lead to desired conclusions (Kunda, 1990).

Moreover, the findings indicate that these cognitive distortions are repetitive and cross-situational. Participants did not employ them in isolated contexts but across various similar experiences, suggesting the formation of relatively stable patterns of thinking. In cognitive theory, this condition corresponds to maladaptive schemas—enduring cognitive structures that organize how individuals consistently process information (Young, Klosko, and Weishaar 2003). From a Sufi perspective, this stage can be understood as a transitional phase toward the formation of *amrāḍ al-qulūb*, where inner tendencies begin to sediment and shape the individual's character.

Thus, cognitive distortion in these findings cannot be reduced to mere errors in thinking; rather, it should be understood as an existential justificatory mechanism that bridges initial thought impulses (*khāṭir*) and the formation of deeper inner structures. It represents a critical point at which psychological experience begins to sediment, from what is initially spontaneous into patterns that become increasingly fixed.

Without reflective intervention, this mechanism continuously reinforces particular directions of inner development, eventually crystallizing into *amrāḍ al-qulūb*. In this regard, the key contribution of Al-Muhasibi lies in emphasizing that inner disturbances do not merely originate from the emergence of thoughts, but from the individual's failure to critically examine and regulate those thoughts before they gain internal legitimacy (Al-Muḥāsibī, 1994).

The Formation of *Amrāḍ al-Qulūb*

The findings indicate that recurrent cognitive distortions do not remain as momentary mental processes but undergo a form of psychological sedimentation that gradually shapes more stable inner tendencies. At this stage, a significant shift occurs, from cognitive dynamics toward the formation of more enduring internal structures, which in the Sufi tradition are referred to as *amrāḍ al-qulūb* (diseases of the heart). This shift marks a transition in which psychological experience is no longer situated at the level of fluctuating thoughts but becomes embedded within the individual's inner organization.

Phenomenologically, this process does not occur abruptly but unfolds through the accumulation of repeated internal experiences. When cognitive distortions continue to function as justificatory mechanisms, they not only sustain particular thoughts but

also condition affective responses and behavioral tendencies. In this sense, individuals no longer merely “have certain thoughts” but begin to “become” those patterns within themselves.

This dynamic is evident in participants’ accounts of recurring responses to social situations. One participant explained:

“Saya sadar, tiap lihat orang lain berhasil, reaksi saya selalu sama. Awalnya cuma kepikiran, tapi lama-lama jadi perasaan yang sulit dikontrol.” (I realize that every time I see someone succeed, my reaction is always the same. At first, it’s just a thought, but over time it turns into a feeling that is hard to control.)

This statement reflects a transition from cognitive response to a more enduring affective disposition. Within the framework of Al-Muhasibi, this condition can be understood as a movement from *khāṭir* toward the formation of inner traits (*malakah*), in which repeatedly entertained and justified thought impulses eventually crystallize into relatively stable internal tendencies (Al-Muḥāsibī, 1994; Picken, 2011). What was initially incidental thus becomes structural.

Furthermore, the data show that the forms of *amrāḍ al-qulūb* identified among participants are closely linked to the patterns of distortion described earlier. For instance, distortions rooted in social comparison tend to develop into *ḥasad* (envy), as illustrated in the following statement:

“Saya jadi nggak nyaman kalau lihat dia sukses. Rasanya kayak terganggu, padahal saya tahu itu tidak seharusnya.” (I feel uncomfortable when I see them succeed. It feels disturbing, even though I know it shouldn’t)

Here, discomfort is no longer a fleeting response but has become a relatively automatic emotional tendency. In psychological terms, this condition can be associated with affective conditioning, in which emotional responses are formed through repeated associative processes (Cleek 2015:4).

Similarly, distortions centered on self-justification and the need for recognition tend to develop into *riyā’* (showing off):

“Saya sering merasa harus menunjukkan sesuatu supaya dianggap mampu. Kalau tidak, rasanya seperti tidak dihargai.” (I often feel like I have to show something so that people see me as capable. Otherwise, it feels like I’m not valued)

This suggests that the need for recognition is no longer situational but has evolved into an inner orientation that consistently shapes behavior. In psychological literature, this overlaps with the concept of contingent self-worth, where self-esteem is heavily dependent on external validation (Ryan and Deci 2000:69). However, within

the Sufi framework, this condition is interpreted more deeply as an inner dependency that shifts orientation from sincerity toward performativity.

In other cases, distortions related to excessive self-evaluation develop into ‘*ujb*’ (self-admiration):

“Kadang saya merasa sudah cukup baik dibanding yang lain, jadi sulit menerima masukan.” (Sometimes I feel that I’m already better than others, so it’s hard to accept feedback)

This reflects the formation of a stable evaluative bias toward the self. Individuals no longer simply hold positive thoughts about themselves but develop internal convictions that are resistant to correction. In cognitive psychology, this phenomenon can be linked to overgeneralization and confirmation bias, where individuals selectively maintain existing beliefs (Constans et al. 1999).

In interpersonal contexts, distortions such as personalization and mind reading tend to develop into *kibr* (arrogance or a sense of superiority):

“Saya sering merasa orang lain tidak selevel, jadi malas mendengarkan mereka.” (I often feel that others are not on the same level, so I don’t feel the need to listen to them)

This indicates that distortion does not merely shape perception but also informs relational attitudes. Individuals begin to position themselves hierarchically in social interactions, which in turn affects the quality of interpersonal relationships. From a Sufi perspective, this condition reflects the dominance of the ego (*nafs*) that remains uncorrected, producing a sense of superiority that obscures reality.

These findings confirm that *amrāḍ al-qulūb* do not emerge as isolated entities but as the result of repeated and accumulated internal processes. In the thought of Al-Muhasibi, such conditions arise when individuals fail to engage in *murāqabah* (self-awareness) and *muḥāsabah* (self-evaluation), allowing distorted thought impulses to develop without correction (Al-Muḥāsibī, 1994). Consequently, what was initially open to intervention becomes an entrenched inner tendency that is difficult to alter.

From the perspective of modern psychology, this phenomenon resembles the formation of maladaptive personality traits or enduring cognitive schemas, in which patterns of thinking, feeling, and responding become relatively consistent across situations (Young et al. 2003:7). However, a fundamental difference lies in its ontological depth. While cognitive approaches tend to conceptualize these as mental structures, the Sufi framework understands them as conditions of the inner self that simultaneously encompass moral, spiritual, and existential dimensions.

Thus, the formation of *amrāḍ al-qulūb* in these findings can be understood as a critical phase in the development of psychospiritual distress. It represents the point at which internal dynamics are no longer transient but have solidified into inner structures that consistently shape individual experience. Within the proposed model, this stage functions as a bridge between early cognitive processes and the subsequent manifestation of observable psychological symptoms.

Moreover, the findings suggest that intervention at this stage becomes more complex compared to earlier stages such as *khāṭir* or cognitive distortion. Once patterns have sedimented into *amrāḍ al-qulūb*, change can no longer rely solely on cognitive restructuring but requires deeper inner transformation, as emphasized in Sufi practice through *tazkiyat al-nafs* (purification of the self) (Al-Ghazali 2010; Ibn Qayyim al-Jauzīyyah 2004).

Manifestation of Psychological Symptoms as Expressions of Inner Imbalance

The findings indicate that *amrāḍ al-qulūb*, once sedimented as enduring inner dispositions, do not remain confined to the internal domain but express themselves in the form of observable psychological symptoms in everyday life. These symptoms do not emerge as isolated or incidental phenomena; rather, they represent the outward expression of an inner configuration shaped through preceding processes. Consequently, surface-level psychological experiences should be understood as the “endpoint” of deeper, layered inner dynamics.

Phenomenologically, participants were not always aware of the connection between their inner states and the symptoms they experienced. Symptoms were often perceived as reactions to external situations, whereas deeper analysis revealed that their primary determinants lay in how individuals internally interpreted and responded to these experiences. This highlights the importance of reading symptoms as manifestations rather than origins.

One of the most prominent manifestations identified was anxiety, particularly within contexts of social comparison and self-evaluation. A participant described this experience as follows:

“Kalau lihat teman lebih berhasil, saya jadi gelisah. Rasanya seperti ada tekanan, padahal tidak ada yang menuntut secara langsung.” (When I see my friends being more successful, I feel restless. It feels like there’s pressure, even though no one is actually demanding anything from me)

This account illustrates that anxiety does not solely arise from objective pressures but from subjectively constructed internal tensions. In this case, *ḥasad* (envy) and the need for recognition function as internal “lenses” through which reality is perceived as threatening. In psychological terms, this aligns with the concept of social

comparison anxiety, where continuous self-evaluation relative to others generates psychological distress (Festinger 1954; Leary et al. 2006). However, the present findings suggest that social comparison is not merely a cognitive process but is rooted in deeper inner orientations.

In addition to anxiety, participants reported emotional irritability and heightened affective reactivity, particularly in interpersonal contexts. One participant noted:

“Saya jadi gampang tersinggung, hal kecil saja bisa membuat saya kepikiran lama.” (I’ve become easily offended; even small things can stay on my mind for a long time)

This response reflects a lowered emotional threshold, where minor stimuli trigger disproportionate reactions. In psychological literature, such patterns are associated with difficulties in emotion regulation (Gross 2015) and heightened affective reactivity (Davidson, 2000). Within the context of this study, these tendencies are closely linked to *kibr* (arrogance) and self-defensive orientations toward perceived threats to self-worth. Individuals do not respond to situations as they are, but through inner structures that frame experiences as threats to the self.

Another salient manifestation is interpersonal sensitivity, defined as a tendency to feel judged, ignored, or devalued by others. This is illustrated in the following statement:

“Kadang saya merasa orang lain melihat saya tidak cukup baik, walaupun sebenarnya mereka tidak mengatakan apa-apa.” (Sometimes I feel like others see me as not good enough, even though they never actually say it)

This phenomenon reflects a distortion in interpreting social interactions, commonly referred to in psychology as negative interpretive bias (Beck, 1976). Individuals not only misinterpret reality but consistently construe it in ways that are detrimental to themselves. From a Sufi perspective, this condition signifies a loss of clarity of the heart (*ṣafā’ al-qalb*), resulting from the dominance of *amrāḍ al-qulūb* that obscure one’s perception of reality (Al-Ghazali 2005; Al-Qhazali n.d.). Reality is no longer perceived as it is, but through accumulated inner distortions.

Furthermore, the findings reveal that these symptoms are often accompanied by rumination, defined as repetitive and persistent thinking about negative experiences. One participant explained:

“Kalau sudah kepikiran, susah berhenti. Saya bisa mengulang-ulang kejadian itu dalam pikiran.” (Once I start thinking about it, it’s hard to stop. I keep replaying the situation in my mind.)

In psychology, rumination is recognized as a mechanism that prolongs and intensifies psychological distress, particularly in anxiety and depression (Nolen-hoeksema 2000:509). However, within the framework of this study, rumination can be understood as an استمرار (continuation) of unresolved khāṭir. It is not merely repetitive thinking, but an indication of an unbroken inner cycle in which thought patterns are continuously reproduced without reflective intervention.

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that psychological symptoms—such as anxiety, irritability, interpersonal sensitivity, and affective reactivity, constitute the final manifestation of a layered and cumulative inner process. In Al-Muhasibī's framework, these symptoms cannot serve as the starting point of analysis, as they are outcomes of inner imbalances formed at the level of khāṭir (Al-Muḥāsibī, 1994; Picken, 2011). Therefore, approaches that focus solely on symptoms risk reducing the complexity of human experience.

From the perspective of contemporary psychology, interventions typically target symptoms through emotion regulation and cognitive restructuring (Gross, 2015; Beck, 1976). While effective in reducing symptom intensity, the present findings suggest that such approaches may not address the root causes. As long as the underlying inner structures, namely amrāḍ al-qulūb, remain unchanged, symptoms are likely to recur, potentially in more complex forms.

Accordingly, this study underscores the importance of a pre-symptomatic approach, one that does not stop at symptom management but traces and intervenes in inner processes from their earliest stages. Within the Sufi framework, this is operationalized through practices such as murāqabah (self-awareness) and muḥāsabah (self-accounting), which enable individuals to recognize, evaluate, and correct inner impulses before they solidify into more resistant structures. This approach is not only preventive but also transformative, as it seeks to reshape the individual's relationship with the self at its most fundamental level.

Integrative Model of Psychospiritual Distress Based on Inner Dynamics

Based on the overall findings, this study proposes an integrative model demonstrating that psychological distress does not emerge abruptly at the level of symptoms, but rather develops through a layered, gradual, and mutually reinforcing inner process. The model follows the sequence: khāṭir → cognitive distortion → amrāḍ al-qulūb → psychological symptoms. This trajectory indicates that psychological experience possesses an internal structure that can be systematically traced, where each layer is interconnected and forms a continuous process.

At the initial stage, khāṭir functions as a pre-cognitive trigger that arises within awareness prior to the formation of intention and action. The findings reveal that

khāṭir is not merely a neutral stream of thought, but carries specific affective orientations that may develop into deeper inner tendencies. In Al-Muhasibī's framework, khāṭir represents a critical نقطة (turning point) in the dynamics of the self, as it is at this stage that individuals possess the capacity to intervene through reflective awareness (muḥāsabah) (Al-Muḥāsibī, 1994). The study demonstrates that failure to regulate khāṭir opens the pathway for more complex and less controllable internal processes.

The next stage involves cognitive distortion, which in this model acts as a transitional mechanism between initial thought impulses and the formation of deeper inner structures. Distortions such as self-justification, comparison bias, and personalization not only reinforce the direction of khāṭir, but also provide internal legitimacy to it. In psychological terms, these distortions are associated with cognitive biases that maintain self-consistency (Kunda 1990:486). However, from a Sufi perspective, this process carries a deeper significance. It can be understood as *ghurur*, the tendency of the self to embellish and rationalize internal impulses so that they appear justified and worthy of pursuit (Al-Muhasibi 1985). Thus, cognitive distortion is not merely an error in thinking, but an internal mechanism that shapes the orientation of the inner self.

When these distortions recur over time, they undergo a process of psychological sedimentation and crystallize into *amrāḍ al-qulūb*, relatively stable inner dispositions such as *riyā'*, *ḥasad*, *kibr*, and *'ujb*. At this stage, internal dynamics are no longer situational, but have become embedded within the individual's personality structure. In classical Sufi literature, this condition is described as a disease of the heart that obstructs clarity and disrupts the individual's existential relationship with the self and with God (Al-Ghazali, 2005; Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, 2001). The findings confirm that *amrāḍ al-qulūb* do not emerge suddenly, but are the result of accumulated inner processes that remain unregulated from the level of khāṭir. They can therefore be understood as the crystallization of sustained inner distortions.

At the final stage, *amrāḍ al-qulūb* manifest in various psychological symptoms, including anxiety, emotional irritability, interpersonal sensitivity, and affective reactivity. In modern psychology, these symptoms are often the primary focus of intervention (Gross 2015:7). However, the findings of this study suggest that such symptoms are more accurately understood as expressions of a deeper inner imbalance. In other words, symptoms represent the endpoint rather than the starting point of analysis. Approaches that focus solely on symptoms risk remaining superficial, as they do not address the underlying sources of distress.

This model carries significant theoretical implications by shifting the analytical focus from a symptom-based approach toward a process-oriented or pre-symptomatic

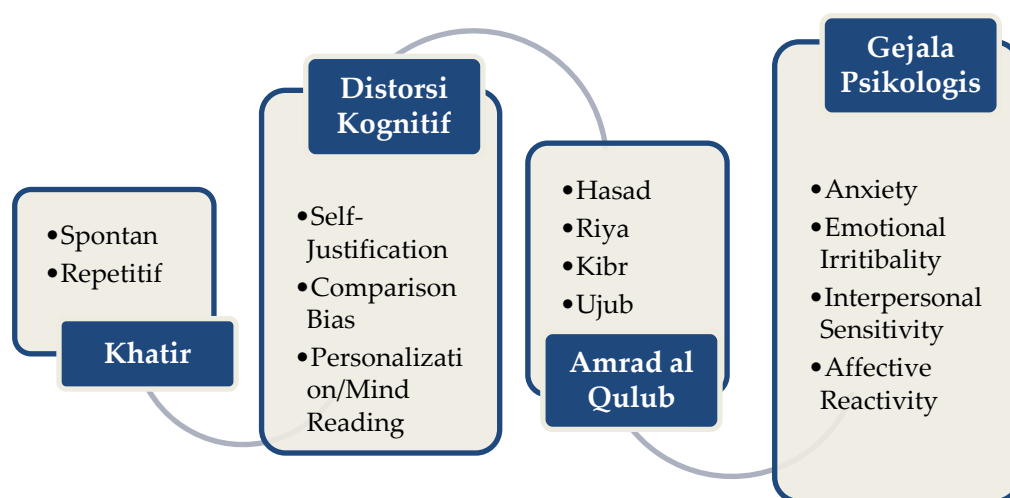
framework. Within this perspective, psychological analysis begins not with what is observable, but with how inner experience is formed at its earliest stages. This orientation aligns with the Sufi tradition, which emphasizes *murāqabah* (continuous self-awareness) and *muḥāsabah* (self-evaluation) as primary mechanisms for maintaining inner balance (Al-Ghazali 2010; Al-Muhasibi 1985; Ibn Qayyim al-Jauziyyah 2004).

Furthermore, the model opens possibilities for developing more contextual and applicable psychospiritual assessment frameworks. By understanding the trajectory *khāṭir* → distortion → *amrāḍ al-qulūb* → symptoms, practitioners can identify earlier and more foundational points of intervention. Interventions are no longer limited to symptom reduction, but are directed toward transforming the underlying inner processes. In this regard, the proposed model is not only descriptive, but also holds potential as a foundation for developing Sufi-based diagnostic instruments and psychotherapeutic interventions.

More broadly, the contribution of this study lies in its effort to bridge classical Sufi thought with contemporary psychological analysis. By formulating inner dynamics into a systematic model, this research offers not only a conceptual reinterpretation of Al-Muhasibi's thought, but also opens new avenues for the development of empirically grounded, contextually relevant Sufi psychotherapy.

The interpretation of participants' experiences demonstrates that what appears as psychological symptoms is, in fact, the culmination of a long and layered inner process. Drawing upon the Sufi framework, particularly the progression from *khāṭir* to *amrāḍ al-qulūb*, this study formulates a model that systematically maps this inner trajectory. The visualization of this model is presented in Figure 1 as a conceptual representation of the study's main findings. This model offers a novel contribution by positioning inner dynamics as the primary unit of analysis in understanding psychological distress, which has often been reduced to cognitive and symptomatic levels in modern psychology.

Figure 1. Integrative Model of Psychospiritual Distress Based on Inner Dynamics



Conclusion

The findings of this study indicate that psychological distress cannot be adequately understood if analysis is confined solely to the level of symptoms. Instead, participants' experiences reveal a layered inner process that begins with the emergence of *khāṭir*, develops through cognitive distortions, sedimentates into *amrāḍ al-qulūb*, and ultimately manifests as psychological symptoms. In this sense, symptoms are not the point of origin but rather the expression of deeper internal dynamics. Through an interpretative phenomenological analysis approach, the study demonstrates that psychological experience follows a systematically traceable trajectory: *khāṭir* → cognitive distortion → *amrāḍ al-qulūb* → psychological symptoms. This sequence confirms that manifestations such as anxiety, emotional irritability, and interpersonal sensitivity represent the final stage of inner processes that originate at the earliest level of thought emergence.

The primary contribution of this study lies in the formulation of an integrative model that bridges Sufi thought, particularly the framework of Al-Muhasibi, with contemporary psychological perspectives. This model not only expands the understanding of psychological distress but also shifts the analytical focus from a symptom-based approach toward a process-oriented (pre-symptomatic) framework. By doing so, it offers a conceptual basis for identifying earlier and more fundamental points of intervention.

Practically, these findings open avenues for the development of more contextualized psychospiritual assessment tools, as well as intervention designs that move beyond symptom reduction toward the transformation of underlying inner

structures. Nevertheless, this study remains exploratory in nature. Further research is therefore needed to test and refine the proposed model across broader contexts, including the operationalization of key variables and empirical validation across diverse populations.

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