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Surrender vs Control: Arabic Sufi Psychology of Acceptance in Ibn 'Ata'illah's Thought

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Abstract

This study examines Ibn 'Ata'illah al-Sakandari's At-Tamwir fi Isqāṭ at-Tadbir as a classical framework of acceptance that balances human agency and divine sovereignty. Using hermeneutic textual analysis, the research identifies ten causes (asbab) of ṣabr that function as psychological mechanisms, including theological reappraisal, meaning-making, gratitude-based remembrance, epistemic humility, perceived accompaniment, spiritual absorption, progressive movement toward ridā, unveiling of veils, values-consistent responding, and recognition of hidden kindness. These mechanisms demonstrate that taslim (surrender) is not passive fatalism but active psychological flexibility acting responsibly while releasing rigid attachment to outcomes. Ibn 'Ata'illah's use of parables provides a pedagogical strategy that translates abstract concepts into lived practice, with relevance for Islamic education and therapeutic communication. Comparison with Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) shows strong parallels in cognitive defusion, distress tolerance, and values-based action, though Ibn 'Ata'illah's model is firmly rooted in theological realism. The findings suggest that his framework offers Muslim communities culturally congruent strategies for coping with anxiety and uncertainty. This study concludes that engaging Sufi psychology enriches both Islamic Religious Education and clinical practice, providing spiritual depth without reducing religious insights to secular categories.

Keywords:

Ibn 'Ata'illah, Islamic Pedagogy, Psychology of Sufism, Religious Education

Abstrak

Penelitian ini menelaah At-Tamwir fi Isqāṭ at-Tadbir karya Ibn 'Ata'illah al-Sakandari sebagai kerangka klasik penerimaan yang menyeimbangkan agensi manusia dan kedaulatan Ilahi. Melalui analisis tekstual hermeneutik, ditemukan sepuluh sebab (asbab) ṣabr yang berfungsi sebagai mekanisme psikologis, antara lain penilaian ulang teologis, pembentukan makna, ingatan syukur, kerendahan epistemik, persepsi keberterimaan, penyerapan spiritual, pergerakan bertahap menuju ridha tersingkapnya tabir, respons berbasis nilai, dan kesadaran akan kebaikan tersembunyi. Mekanisme ini menunjukkan bahwa taslim (tunduk) bukanlah pasrah fatalistik, melainkan fleksibilitas aktif bertindak sesuai ikhtiar sambil melepaskan keterikatan kaku pada hasil. Metode perumpamaan Ibn 'Ata'illah menjadi strategi pedagogis untuk mengkonkretkan prinsip abstrak dalam praktik kehidupan, relevan bagi pendidikan Islam maupun komunikasi terapeutik. Perbandingan dengan Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) menunjukkan kesamaan dalam defusi kognitif, toleransi distress, dan aksi berbasis nilai, meskipun kerangka Ibn 'Ata'illah berpijak pada realisme teologis. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa kerangka tersebut menawarkan strategi yang sesuai budaya bagi komunitas Muslim dalam menghadapi kecemasan dan ketidakpastian. Penelitian menyimpulkan bahwa psikologi tasawuf dapat memperkaya Pendidikan Agama Islam dan praktik klinis, menghadirkan kedalaman spiritual tanpa mereduksi konsep religius ke kategori sekuler.

Kata Kunci:

Ibn 'Ata'illah, Pendidikan Agama Islam, Pedagogi Islami, Psikologi Tasawuf

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Introduction

Recent epidemiological surveys highlight that anxiety disorders represent the most prevalent class of psychiatric conditions worldwide, with an estimated lifetime prevalence of 7.3% (ranging between 4.8% and 10.9%). In high-income countries, specific conditions such as social anxiety disorder reach approximately 3.1% in 12-month prevalence (Stein et al., 2017). These figures illustrate not only the pervasive nature of anxiety but also its uneven distribution across socio-economic contexts, underscoring the urgent need for culturally sensitive approaches to mental health.

The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified this crisis, revealing that intolerance of uncertainty and perceived loss of control emerged as central predictors of psychological distress (Bakioğlu et al., 2021). While conventional control-oriented therapies, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) (Gonzalez-Prendes et al., 2019; Wilhelm et al., 2020), have shown effectiveness in certain populations, they often fail to account for the religious and spiritual dimensions that profoundly influence coping strategies in Muslim communities. For these populations, where faith and worldview are tightly interwoven, purely secular interventions may appear incomplete, raising questions about cultural congruence and therapeutic resonance.

Research on Islamic psychology and Sufism has increasingly demonstrated its relevance to education and mental health. Ibrahim et al. (2025) emphasized the role of *tazkiyah al-nafs* in character education, though they did not elaborate on the underlying psychological mechanisms of acceptance. Rauf et al. (2025) showed the effectiveness of Islamic counselling in reducing anxiety and depression, yet their study remained limited to quantitative outcomes without engaging classical sources. Similarly, the systematic review by Akib et al. (2025) highlighted the value of Islamic psychotherapy for adolescents but remained broad and did not address pedagogical strategies drawn from Sufi texts. Narimani and Naeim (2025) proposed the Socio-Cognitive Integration Theory (SCIT) as a culturally grounded mental health model in Islamic-Asian societies, but its theoretical contribution did not extend to classical spiritual literature. Finally, Ihsan et al. (2024) compared Ibn ‘Ata’illah’s notion of *ma’rifatullah* with Maslow’s peak experience, focusing more on mystical culmination than on everyday psychological mechanisms of coping and acceptance.

These studies reveal three significant gaps. First, Islamic concepts such as *tawakkul*, *ridā*, and *ma’rifatullah* are often treated as abstract variables without detailed exploration of their psychological mechanisms. Second, there has been little systematic engagement with classical Sufi texts, particularly Ibn ‘Ata’illah’s *At-Tamwīr fī Isqāṭ at-Tadbīr*, which offers structured mechanisms of acceptance through parables and strategies of patience. Third, the educational relevance of these classical insights for Islamic Religious Education and religious moderation remains underexplored, despite their potential to enrich curricula and foster spiritually resilient learners.

This study addresses that gap by focusing on Ibn ‘Ata’illah al-Sakandari’s (d. 1309 CE) seminal treatise *At-Tamwīr fī Isqāṭ at-Tadbīr*. Written in Arabic within the Shadhili Sufi tradition, the text provides a systematic psychology of surrender (*taslim*) and a critique of excessive self-direction (*tadbīr*). Ibn ‘Ata’illah enumerates ten specific mechanisms that enable believers to cultivate acceptance without collapsing into fatalism, employing parables and metaphors as pedagogical tools. Such insights resonate with contemporary acceptance-based therapies but are grounded in a theological and spiritual worldview distinct from secular psychology.

Accordingly, this study poses two research questions: How does Ibn ‘Ata’illah conceptualize the transition from control-orientation to surrender, and what psychological mechanisms underlie this process? What pedagogical strategies does he employ, and how might these inform therapeutic practice with Muslim clients today? The significance of this research is threefold. Theoretically, it articulates a classical Arabic framework of acceptance that complements yet challenges contemporary psychology. Methodologically, it demonstrates how hermeneutic engagement with Sufi texts can yield meaningful psychological insights. Practically, it offers Muslim

mental health professionals culturally congruent tools that align with both clinical effectiveness and spiritual authenticity.

Methods

This qualitative study employs hermeneutic textual analysis of Ibn 'Ata'illah's *At-Tanwir fi Isqath at-Tadbir* as the primary methodological approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2020). The research recognizes that classical Islamic texts operate within distinct epistemological frameworks requiring interpretive engagement rather than simple data extraction. The analysis proceeds through multiple hermeneutic circles, moving iteratively between parts and whole, between text and context, and between the horizon of the text and the horizon of contemporary psychological discourse.

The primary data source is Ibn 'Ata'illah al-Sakandari's *At-Tanwir fi Isqath at-Tadbir*, a classical Sufi text written in Arabic in the early 14th century CE. Multiple editions were consulted to ensure textual reliability, including the critical edition published by Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah (Beirut) and the annotated edition by Muhammad 'Abd al-Salam Ibrahim. Secondary textual sources include Ibn 'Ata'illah's *Al-Hikam al-'Ata'iyyah* (The Aphorisms) and *Lata'if al-Minan* (Subtle Blessings) for contextual understanding. Contemporary scholarship on Ibn 'Ata'illah, Shadhili Sufism, and Islamic psychology provides additional interpretive frameworks.

The analytical framework integrates three approaches: conceptual analysis, thematic analysis, and comparative analysis. Conceptual analysis examined key terms central to Ibn 'Ata'illah's psychology of surrender, including *tadbir* (self-direction/planning), *taslim* (surrender), *tawakkul* (trust in God), *ridha* (contentment with divine decree), *sabr* (patience), and *ma'rifah* (spiritual knowledge). Each concept was analyzed through close reading of relevant passages, attention to semantic fields and etymological connections, and consideration of how Ibn 'Ata'illah's usage relates to broader Islamic theological and mystical discourse.

Thematic analysis identified recurring themes, patterns, and structural elements within *At-Tanwir*, particularly focusing on the ten causes of patience (*sabr*) that Ibn 'Ata'illah enumerates as enabling believers to accept divine decree without psychological resistance. Each of these ten causes was coded, categorized, and analyzed for its psychological mechanisms and pedagogical presentation. Special attention was devoted to Ibn 'Ata'illah's use of parables, metaphors, and analogies as pedagogical devices. Following cognitive metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), the study analyzed how Ibn 'Ata'illah employs concrete scenarios to illuminate abstract psychological principles. Each parable was examined for its source domain (the concrete situation described), target domain (the psychological or spiritual principle being illustrated), and the systematic mappings between them.

The comparative component situates Ibn 'Ata'illah's framework in dialogue with contemporary psychological research, particularly acceptance-based therapies such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) (Dindo et al., 2017; Hofmann & Gómez, 2017), mindfulness-based interventions, and dialectical behavior therapy (DBT) (Linehan & Wilks, 2015; Mehlum et al., 2016). This comparison is not intended to reduce Ibn 'Ata'illah's framework to Western psychological categories but rather to identify conceptual resonances, points of divergence, and unique contributions his framework might offer to contemporary therapeutic practice.

The data analysis process proceeded through several stages. Initial close reading of *At-Tanwir* involved multiple complete readings to develop holistic understanding, with subsequent readings focusing on specific sections, concepts, and literary devices. Key passages were translated from Arabic to English with attention to preserving conceptual nuance and avoiding anachronistic interpretations. Coding involved both deductive codes derived from psychological theories (e.g., cognitive reframing, emotional regulation, acceptance) and inductive codes emerging from the text itself (e.g., *shuhud al-minnab* - witnessing divine favor, *kashf al-hujub* - unveiling of veils). It is important to note that Ibn 'Ata'illah's concept of 'unveiling' (*kashf al-hujub*) refers to spiritual perception of divine attributes and wisdom, not literal vision of Allah's essence (*ru'yatullah*), which in Sunni theology occurs only in the afterlife (Qur'an 75:22). The 'unveiling' describes intensified

awareness of divine presence and mercy, not physical sight of the Divine Being. Coded segments were organized thematically, with particular attention to Ibn 'Ata'illah's systematic presentation of the ten causes of patience, which provides the primary organizational structure for the findings section. Throughout the analytical process, reflexivity was maintained through memoing and consultation with scholars of Arabic language and Islamic mysticism to ensure accurate textual interpretation.

Results

The Conceptual Framework: From *Tadbir* to *Taslim*

Ibn 'Ata'illah's *At-Tanwir fi Isqath at-Tadbir* opens with a fundamental critique of *tadbir* (self-direction or personal planning) as an obstacle to spiritual and psychological wellbeing. The term *tadbir* carries connotations of deliberate management, strategic planning, and calculated control over one's circumstances. Ibn 'Ata'illah's critique of *tadbir* should not be misunderstood as a call to abandon practical planning or responsible action. Within Islamic theology, believers are obligated to undertake appropriate means (*asbāb*) while simultaneously placing their trust in God's decree. As the Prophet advised, "*Tie your camel, then trust in Allah*" (Tirmidhi 2517), responsible effort and reliance upon divine providence must go hand in hand. What Ibn 'Ata'illah critiques is not the actions themselves but the psychological attachment to specific outcomes. Thus, a believer is encouraged to plan responsibly, work diligently, and employ lawful means to achieve goals, while at the same time remaining psychologically flexible when outcomes diverge from expectations. This teaching aligns with the Qur'anic principle: "*For you is your effort, and for Allah is the result*" (Qur'an 53:39-41). In this sense, the concept of *isqāṭ al-tadbir* signifies the surrender of rigid control and egoistic attachment, rather than the neglect of divinely mandated responsibility. Ibn 'Ata'illah does not condemn practical planning or responsible action per se; rather, he targets what contemporary psychology might term "cognitive rigidity around outcomes" or "intolerance of uncertainty manifesting as excessive control behaviors." His critique focuses on the psychological suffering that emerges when individuals become attached to specific outcomes, resist realities that conflict with their plans, and experience their worth as contingent upon successfully imposing their will on circumstances.

The text establishes a foundational distinction between harmful *tadbir* and healthy action through its commentary on Qur'anic verses. Analyzing the verse "So no, by your Lord, they will not believe until they make you judge in their disputes, then find no discomfort in their hearts from what you have judged, and submit in full submission" (Qur'an 4:65), Ibn 'Ata'illah articulates two dimensions of authentic faith: *ṭabkīm ṣāḥib* (outward implementation of divine guidance) and the absence of *ḥaraj* (inner resistance or discomfort). This dual structure parallels contemporary psychological frameworks distinguishing between behavioral compliance and experiential acceptance. One might comply behaviorally with a difficult situation while harboring significant psychological resistance what Ibn 'Ata'illah identifies as *ḥaraj* which becomes a source of ongoing suffering. True acceptance, or *taslim*, requires not merely adapting one's external behavior but also relinquishing inner resistance to realities one cannot change.

Ibn 'Ata'illah presents *taslim* (surrender) not as passive resignation but as an active psychological posture characterized by trust, flexibility, and openness to outcomes beyond one's preference or prediction. The text carefully distinguishes *taslim* from *'ajz* (incapacity) or *kasal* (laziness), addressing a potential misunderstanding that could lead to fatalistic inaction. Authentic surrender involves doing what is appropriate and possible while releasing attachment to specific outcomes and maintaining equanimity regardless of results. This formulation resonates strongly with contemporary research on "goal flexibility" and "secondary control" concepts referring to the adaptive capacity to adjust one's goals when primary control proves impossible or counterproductive (Wrosch et al., 2003). Ibn 'Ata'illah's framework suggests that such flexibility is

not merely a pragmatic coping strategy but reflects profound spiritual wisdom about the nature of reality and the limits of human knowledge and control.

The Ten Causes of Patience: Psychological Mechanisms of Acceptance

The core of *At-Tanwir* presents ten causes (*asbab*) that enable believers to maintain *sabr* (patience) in the face of difficult circumstances. While *sabr* is often translated simply as "patience," Ibn 'Ata'illah's usage encompasses what contemporary psychology might term "distress tolerance," "emotion regulation," and "acceptance." Each of the ten causes represents a psychological mechanism or perspective shift that facilitates acceptance of challenging realities without either denial or psychological collapse.

Wurud al-Anwar (The Coming of Lights)

The first cause involves divine lights (*anwar*) that illuminate the believer's heart, revealing that difficult circumstances come directly from God rather than from secondary causes. Ibn 'Ata'illah illustrates this through a parable: "If a person were in a dark house and struck by something without knowing who struck him, but then a lamp was brought in and he saw it was his sheikh or his emir who struck him his knowledge of this would obligate his patience with what occurred there." This parable operates on multiple psychological levels. The darkness represents ignorance of ultimate causation; the blow represents a painful experience; the lamp represents spiritual insight; and the revelation that one's beloved teacher or respected leader administered the blow represents recognition that the painful experience comes from a source one trusts and loves.

This cause addresses what cognitive psychology identifies as "appraisal" the evaluative process through which events are assessed as threatening, challenging, benign, or irrelevant. The same objective event can produce vastly different psychological responses depending on how it is appraised. Research in religious coping indicates that attributions of causality significantly moderate the relationship between stressful events and psychological outcomes; when negative events are attributed to divine will as part of a meaningful plan, distress is often reduced compared to attributions involving randomness, personal failure, or malicious intent by others (Pargament et al., 2001). Ibn 'Ata'illah's first cause essentially describes a reappraisal process wherein recognition of divine agency transforms the meaning of suffering.

Fath Bab al-Afham (Opening the Door of Understanding)

The second cause involves intellectual understanding of divine wisdom behind difficult events. Ibn 'Ata'illah writes that understanding (*fahm*) returns the believer to God, confines them to Him, and makes them rely upon Him. The text emphasizes that when believers understand the purposes served by trials purification from sin, elevation of spiritual rank, testing of faith, opportunity for reward acceptance becomes psychologically easier. This cause resonates with meaning-making theories in psychology of religion and bereavement research, which consistently demonstrate that individuals who can construct meaningful narratives about suffering experience better adjustment than those for whom suffering remains senseless (Park et al., 2020). However, Ibn 'Ata'illah does not promise that understanding will always be immediate or complete, acknowledging that some divine wisdoms remain hidden and that *fahm* itself is a divine gift rather than solely an achievement of rational analysis.

Waridat al-'Ataya (The Arrivals of Gifts)

The third cause involves remembering past divine gifts and blessings when facing current difficulties. Ibn 'Ata'illah employs the Qur'anic example of the Battle of Uhud: "When a disaster struck you, although you had struck them with one twice as great, you said, 'How is this?'" (Qur'an 3:165). The verse reminds believers that they had previously experienced victory at Badar, and this memory should inform their response to setback at Uhud. The underlying principle that recalling past positive experiences can provide psychological resources for navigating present challenges has been extensively validated in contemporary positive psychology research on gratitude, savoring, and positive reminiscence (Bryant & Veroff, 2017). This cause introduces a temporal

dimension to acceptance, suggesting that psychological resilience involves not merely responding to the present moment but drawing on accumulated memory of God's past goodness.

Shuhud Husn al-Ikhtiyar (Witnessing the Beauty of Divine Choice)

The fourth cause involves recognizing that God's choices for a person are superior to what that person would choose for themselves. Ibn 'Ata'illah supports this with the Qur'anic verse "It may be that you dislike something while it is good for you, and it may be that you like something while it is bad for you" (Qur'an 2:216) and the hadith comparing God's mercy to a mother's love for her child. The argument is that if a mother's protective instinct is intense, God's mercy toward believers infinitely surpasses it, ensuring that what God decrees, even when painful, ultimately serves the person's best interest. This cause addresses epistemic humility recognition of the limits of one's knowledge and foresight. Psychological research on the "planning fallacy" and "illusion of control" demonstrates that people systematically overestimate their ability to predict and control outcomes (Ay & Özdemir, 2025; Kahneman, 2011).

Ilm bi Wujud Hilmibi (Knowledge of God's Forbearance)

The fifth cause involves awareness that God witnesses one's struggles during trials. The Qur'anic verse "Be patient for the judgment of your Lord, for indeed you are in Our eyes" (Qur'an 52:48) assures believers that suffering is not hidden from divine sight. Ibn 'Ata'illah illustrates through a story: "A man was struck ninety-nine lashes without groaning, but when the hundredth lash fell, he groaned. When asked about this, he replied: 'The one on whose account I was being lashed was present in the circle for the first ninety-nine, but when he left, I felt the pain.'" This cause highlights the psychological function of felt accompaniment during suffering. Contemporary research on social support consistently demonstrates that the perception of being accompanied during difficulty buffers against stress, even when the accompanying party cannot change objective circumstances (Polizzi et al., 2020).

Zuhur bil Wujud Jamalibi (Manifestation through the Beauty of God)

The sixth cause describes experiences where divine beauty is revealed to the believer in such an overwhelming way that consciousness of physical or emotional pain is temporarily eclipsed. Ibn 'Ata'illah references the Qur'anic account of women who, upon seeing Prophet Yusuf's extraordinary beauty, inadvertently cut their own hands with knives while preparing fruit, so entranced that they felt no pain (Qur'an 12:31). The analogy suggests that spiritual experiences of divine beauty can so captivate consciousness that painful realities recede from awareness. This cause points to the psychological phenomenon of absorption the capacity for focused attention to become so complete that peripheral stimuli are not processed consciously. Research on mystical experiences and flow states demonstrates that intense focus on one stimulus can genuinely reduce awareness of pain or discomfort (Boffi et al., 2016).

As-Sabr Yurith ar-Ridha (Patience Begets Contentment)

The seventh cause articulates a causal relationship wherein patience (*sabr*) in trials leads eventually to *ridha* (contentment with divine decree). Ibn 'Ata'illah uses the metaphor of bitter medicine taken in hope of cure; one endures the unpleasant taste because of the anticipated benefit. This graduated approach resonates with dialectical behavior therapy's distinction between radical acceptance as an ideal and willingness as a more accessible entry point (Linehan & Wilks, 2015). Ibn 'Ata'illah's framework acknowledges that contentment represents an advanced spiritual state that may not be immediately accessible, but patience understood as behavioral perseverance combined with cognitive commitment to trust God remains possible and worthwhile.

Kashf al-Hujub wa al-Astar (Unveiling of Veils and Curtains)

The eighth cause involves the removal of spiritual veils that ordinarily obscure direct awareness of divine reality. When these veils lift, the believer experiences such intimate nearness to God that worldly pains become negligible by comparison. Ibn 'Ata'illah makes a striking claim: if God were to fully unveil Himself to the inhabitants of Hell, they would not feel the punishment; conversely, if God were to completely veil Himself from the inhabitants of Paradise, they would not enjoy its delights. This suggests that the ultimate heaven is God's presence and the ultimate

hell is God's absence; physical circumstances are merely outward expressions of these spiritual realities. This perspective resonates with mystical traditions across religious boundaries describing suffering as a catalyst for spiritual transformation (Nowicki et al., 2024; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004; Tedeschi & Moore, 2021).

Wurud Asrar at-Ta'rif (The Arrival of the Secrets of Acquainting)

The ninth cause concerns understanding the differentiated demands that God places upon believers in various circumstances. Ibn 'Ata'illah identifies four universal conditions: obedience, disobedience, blessing, and trial, and specifies God's right upon the believer in each: in obedience, to witness God's favor rather than claiming credit; in disobedience, to seek forgiveness; in blessing, to express gratitude; and in trial, to maintain patience. Understanding what response God seeks in each circumstance makes the appropriate response psychologically easier to mobilize. This structured clarity parallels cognitive-behavioral approaches that reduce anxiety through psychoeducation about expectations and values-based action commitments (Hayes et al., 2011; Liu & Xiao, 2023; Spencer & Levin, 2025).

'Ilm bi ma Awda'a fih min Lutfih (Knowledge of Hidden Kindness Within)

The final cause involves recognition that apparent evils often contain hidden goods. Ibn 'Ata'illah supports this with the hadith "Paradise is surrounded by unpleasant things, and Hell is surrounded by desires" and the Qur'anic affirmation of potential good in disliked things. The text explains that trials purify the soul, humble the ego, and shock one out of heedlessness effects that, while painful in the moment, serve long-term spiritual welfare. This cause bears significant resemblance to contemporary research on post-traumatic growth, which identifies positive psychological changes emerging from struggles with highly challenging circumstances (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). However, Ibn 'Ata'illah is careful to note that recognizing hidden benefits requires spiritual insight, not merely intellectual analysis, acknowledging that some divine wisdoms remain genuinely inscrutable.

These mechanisms, while rooted in classical Arabic Sufi psychology, also provide valuable pedagogical tools for Islamic Religious Education. By teaching students that *taslim* (surrender) is not equivalent to fatalistic passivity, but rather a disciplined trust in divine wisdom, educators can foster resilience and spiritual intelligence. Such lessons help students cope with academic and social stressors while grounding their responses in Islamic values. Furthermore, Ibn 'Ata'illah's parables offer practical models for educators, as they illustrate how abstract spiritual principles can be communicated through vivid analogies that resonate with learners' daily experiences.

Pedagogical Strategies: The Power of Parables

Beyond the psychological content of the ten causes, Ibn 'Ata'illah's methodological approach deserves attention for its implications for therapeutic communication and religious education. The text employs numerous parables, metaphors, and analogies to convey abstract psychological and spiritual principles. Analysis reveals several consistent patterns. First, Ibn 'Ata'illah grounds abstract concepts in concrete, relatable human experiences: a parent's love for a child, a patient enduring bitter medicine, a person discovering the identity of someone who struck them in darkness. These concrete scenarios make abstract principles psychologically accessible and emotionally resonant.

Second, the parables often involve structural parallels between human relationships and the divine-human relationship, allowing readers to draw on their existing understanding of human dynamics to grasp theological points. The comparison of divine mercy to maternal love leverages experiential knowledge of parental care to illuminate divine attributes. Third, many parables create "perspective disruption": they present scenarios that challenge intuitive assumptions and invite reconsidering situations from alternative angles. The story of the man who did not cry during ninety-nine lashes but groaned at the hundredth is counterintuitive, creating cognitive interest that makes the underlying point memorable. Contemporary research suggests that material requiring

effortful processing produces deeper learning than immediately obvious material (Bjork & Bjork, 2020).

Fourth, the parables avoid moralism and judgment, instead offering validation and explanation. They acknowledge that difficulty is genuinely difficult and then illuminate psychological resources that can help navigate it. This validating tone parallels contemporary therapeutic emphases on balancing acceptance and change acknowledging current reality while identifying possibilities for shifting one's relationship to that reality (Dimeff et al., 2011; Linehan, 1993).

Comparison with Contemporary Acceptance-Based Therapies

Ibn 'Ata'illah's framework demonstrates remarkable conceptual parallels with contemporary acceptance-based therapies, particularly Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), despite emerging from radically different epistemological foundations. Both approaches fundamentally question the workability of control-oriented strategies for managing internal experiences, argue that attempts to avoid or eliminate painful emotions often paradoxically increase suffering, and advocate for accepting unwanted internal experiences while still pursuing valued action.

However, the frameworks differ in crucial ways. ACT's theoretical foundation in functional contextualism views psychological constructs as tools evaluated based on practical workability rather than correspondence to metaphysical truth (Boone et al., 2015; Spencer & Levin, 2025). Ibn 'Ata'illah's approach, conversely, is thoroughly realist it assumes certain metaphysical truths about God are objectively true, and that aligning one's psychology with these realities produces wellbeing precisely because they are true. This distinction has practical implications. ACT therapists can work with clients regardless of metaphysical beliefs, treating religious content as one among many possible sources of values. Ibn 'Ata'illah's approach is necessarily embedded within Islamic theological commitments; the psychological principles are inseparable from their theological grounding.

Both approaches emphasize defusion from unhelpful thought patterns, though conceptualizing this differently. ACT's cognitive defusion helps clients observe thoughts as mental events rather than literal truths (Assaz et al., 2023; Harris, 2019). Ibn 'Ata'illah's parallel process involves recognizing that immediate emotional reactions may not reflect ultimate wisdom that what feels unbearable may serve purposes one cannot perceive. Both create space between stimulus and response, but Ibn 'Ata'illah grounds this space in trust in divine wisdom rather than pragmatic evaluation.

Despite these differences, clinical integration appears feasible. For Muslim clients who share Islamic theological commitments, Ibn 'Ata'illah's framework may offer cultural congruence and spiritual depth that enhance engagement. The psychological mechanisms are similar to evidence-based therapies, but the framework feels more authentic and motivating for clients seeking approaches congruent with Islamic spirituality.

The findings suggest several implications for clinical practice with Muslim clients, particularly those presenting with anxiety, difficulty accepting difficult circumstances, or conflicts between religious values and control-oriented coping. First, the ten causes provide a menu of cognitive reframing options that can be offered based on what resonates with clients' current psychological and spiritual states. Not all causes will be equally accessible; clinicians can explore which framings clients find compelling and focus therapeutic attention accordingly.

Second, Ibn 'Ata'illah's pedagogical use of parables suggests that narrative and analogical communication may be particularly effective when discussing acceptance and surrender. Rather than didactically explaining concepts, clinicians might share relevant stories from Islamic tradition and invite clients' reflections, which is less likely to trigger resistance than direct advice. Third, the framework offers a religiously grounded alternative to potentially problematic control-oriented coping strategies, providing a nuanced middle path between fatalistic passivity and anxious hypervigilance. Fourth, the framework addresses religious scrupulosity by clarifying expectations

and emphasizing divine mercy. Fifth, the framework's integration of theology and psychology may enhance treatment engagement for clients who perceive mental health treatment as secular.

However, clinical application must navigate several challenges. Clinicians must avoid imposing spiritual interpretations or engaging in "spiritual bypassing" using spiritual concepts to avoid legitimate psychological pain (Ahmad et al., 2023). Ibn 'Ata'illah's framework describes possibilities rather than prescribes obligatory attitudes. Clinicians must attend to trauma history, particularly when working with concepts like divine mercy and providential suffering. For clients with histories of abuse, especially religiously justified abuse, theological frameworks emphasizing submission may trigger trauma responses. Finally, clinicians should recognize competence limits and consider collaboration with religious scholars when clients' questions move into explicitly theological territory.

Discussion

This study affirms that Ibn 'Ata'illah's *At-Tamwīr fī Isqāṭ at-Tadbīr* provides a psychology of acceptance that is simultaneously spiritual, pedagogical, and clinically relevant. The shift he outlines from *tadbīr* (rigid control) to *taslīm* (surrender) illustrates that authentic acceptance does not equate to passivity but to active flexibility rooted in divine trust. His ten causes (*asbāb al-ṣabr*) describe mechanisms that modern psychology frames as reappraisal, meaning-making, social support, distress tolerance, and post-traumatic growth.

These findings extend earlier research in several ways. Ibrahim et al. (2025) emphasized *taẓkiyah al-nafs* in character education but did not explain how acceptance is cultivated. The present study contributes by articulating Ibn 'Ata'illah's concrete mechanisms of acceptance. Rauf et al. (2025) demonstrated the effectiveness of Islamic counseling in reducing anxiety, yet their outcomes were primarily quantitative. By contrast, this analysis shows how classical Sufi pedagogy especially through parables transmits therapeutic wisdom. Akib et al. (2025) highlighted the role of Islamic psychotherapy for adolescents but did not explore detailed pedagogical strategies; this study fills that gap by showing how narrative and metaphor function in teaching resilience. Similarly, Narimani and Naeim (2025) proposed SCIT as a contextualized mental health model, yet without grounding in classical texts; Ibn 'Ata'illah's framework provides precisely such a theological anchor. Finally, Ihsan et al. (2024) compared *ma'rīfatullah* with Maslow's peak experience, focusing on mystical culmination. The present study, instead, emphasizes everyday psychological processes how patience, humility, and remembrance help believers cope with stress.

Pedagogically, Ibn 'Ata'illah's parables demonstrate how abstract theological truths can be made accessible, echoing constructivist approaches to learning. For Islamic Religious Education, these strategies foster *wasatīyyah* (moderation), teaching students to avoid extremes of despair or fatalism while grounding resilience in Islamic values. Comparisons with Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) show strong overlap particularly in defusion, willingness, and values-based action yet Ibn 'Ata'illah's framework remains distinctive in its theological realism. This cultural congruence is especially valuable for Muslim clients and students, for whom secular models may feel incomplete.

A critical safeguard must be emphasized for practitioners engaging with Ibn 'Ata'illah's framework. His teachings address the believer's internal psychological responses to trials, not the accountability of perpetrators. Consequently, this framework must never be misused to justify abuse or oppression by urging victims to "accept it as God's will," to silence them with exhortations of patience, or to excuse systemic injustice by appealing to hidden wisdom in suffering. Islamic theology makes a clear distinction between *personal acceptance* (*taslīm*) of unchangeable decrees and *social responsibility* (*amr ma'rūf nahy munkar*) to resist injustice. For trauma survivors, particularly those with a history of religiously justified abuse, practitioners must exercise caution: spiritual interpretations should not be imposed prematurely, and validation of suffering must precede any reframing. Collaboration with qualified mental health professionals is essential,

as is recognizing situations where clinical intervention must take precedence over spiritual counsel. The Prophet said, “*Help your brother, whether he is an oppressor or oppressed*” (Bukhārī 2444), underscoring that ethical responsibility entails active intervention against oppression rather than passive acceptance of injustice.

Comparison with Acceptance and Commitment Therapy reveals both striking parallels and important differences. Both critique control-oriented strategies and emphasize accepting rather than avoiding psychological pain, but Ibn 'Ata'illah's framework necessarily embeds within Islamic theological commitments. For Muslim clients sharing these commitments, the framework may offer cultural congruence and spiritual depth enhancing engagement and reducing perception of therapy as secular. Clinical integration appears feasible through thoughtful layering onto evidence-based techniques, attending carefully to clients' spiritual states, trauma histories, and readiness. Practical implications include offering the ten causes as reframing options, employing narrative communication consistent with Islamic pedagogy, providing alternatives to anxious control while maintaining a middle path, addressing religious scrupulosity through clarified expectations, and enhancing engagement through visible integration of authentic spirituality. However, application requires sensitivity to avoid spiritual bypassing, attend to trauma especially religious trauma, respect spiritual autonomy, and recognize competence limits regarding theological questions.

This study bridges classical Sufi psychology and modern research by showing that acceptance can be cultivated through multiple pathways cognitive, emotional, and spiritual. Ibn 'Ata'illah's framework enriches both therapeutic practice and Islamic pedagogy, offering tools to cope with uncertainty while reinforcing faith-based resilience.

Conclusion

This study has undertaken a comprehensive textual analysis of Ibn 'Ata'illah al-Sakandari's *At-Tanwir fi Isqath at-Tadbir*, examining how this classical Sufi text articulates a psychology of acceptance that navigates the tension between human agency and divine sovereignty. The analysis reveals that Ibn 'Ata'illah presents surrender not as passive resignation but as active psychological flexibility characterized by epistemic humility, cognitive flexibility, and emotional openness. The ten causes enumerated provide multiple pathways for cognitive reframing, emotional validation, and spiritual meaning-making, addressing questions about suffering and control that remain contemporary relevant.

The study contributes to Islamic psychology by articulating a classical framework that complements contemporary therapies while remaining rooted in authentic Islamic epistemology. Rather than merely translating Western concepts into Islamic vocabulary, Ibn 'Ata'illah offers distinctive insights grounded in theological realism. The framework's emphasis on multiple acceptance pathways, validation of difficulty, and careful distinction between beneficial surrender and harmful passivity address clinical challenges Muslim clients navigate. The pedagogical sophistication evident in parables models narrative therapeutic communication that honors clients' intelligence while offering traditional wisdom. Beyond its psychological significance, this study demonstrates that Ibn 'Ata'illah's framework offers essential contributions to Islamic Religious Education. His distinction between *tadbir* (excessive self-control) and *taslim* (surrender) cultivates balanced attitudes that align with the principles of religious moderation (*al-wasatīyyah*). Integrating these insights into educational curricula can empower students to develop resilience, avoid extremes of despair or fatalism, and embody moderation in both spiritual and social life. Thus, the study affirms the relevance of classical Arabic Sufi texts not only for therapeutic contexts but also for shaping holistic and moderate Islamic education in contemporary settings.

Future research should develop quantitative instruments operationalizing the ten causes, conduct prospective studies examining predictive validity, create and evaluate manualized interventions, and explore demographic and clinical moderators. As Muslim populations worldwide face rising mental health challenges, recovery and translation of classical Islamic wisdom represents urgent practical contribution to culturally responsive practice, offering insights

transcending particular religious boundaries to address universal human experiences of suffering, uncertainty, and the eternal tension between control and acceptance.

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