



A modern conceptualization of phobia in al-Balkhi's 9th century treatise: Sustenance of the Body and Soul



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ABSTRACT

Morbid fears and phobias have been mentioned in religious, philosophical and medical manuscripts since ancient times. Despite early insights by the Greeks, phobias did not appear as a separate clinical phenomenon in Western medicine until the 17th century and has evolved substantially since. However, robust investigations attempting to decipher the clinical nature of phobias emerged in pre-modern times during the oft-overlooked Islamic Golden Era (9th–12th centuries); which overlapped with Europe's medieval period. An innovative attempt was made by the 9th century Muslim scholar, Abu Zayd al-Balkhi, in his medical manuscript "Sustenance of the Body and Soul," to define phobias as a separate diagnostic entity. Al-Balkhi was one of the earliest to cluster psychological and physical symptoms of phobias under one category, "al-Fazaá", and outline a specific management plan. We analyze al-Balkhi's description of phobias, according to the modern understanding of psychiatric classifications and symptomatology as described in the DSM-5.

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1. Introduction

Definitions, descriptions and classifications of mental disorders have undergone decades of evolution and conceptual reorganization influenced by changing societal, cultural, and economic factors (Canino & Alegria, 2008; Kirmayer & Young, 1999; Lilienfeld & Marino, 1995). Knowledge of the history of psychological definitions and classifications is imperative for many reasons; it explains the understandings of psychological conditions that have remained stable versus those that have changed over time, the factors that affect these changes, and their implications to mental health care (Jones, Greene, Duffin, & Harley, 2014). History also teaches care providers to appreciate the cultural and societal roots that affect the perception of mental illness and hence understand the help seeking behaviors of individuals and populations (Jones et al., 2014).

The aim of this paper is twofold. Our first aim will be to shed light on the substantial progress and contributions made during the Islamic Golden Era (9th–12th centuries) in understanding mental disorders. This will be accomplished by bringing to light al-Balkhi's important work in defining and describing phobias. Our second aim will be to analyze al-Balkhi's manuscript in light of the DSM-5 and discuss its practical implications. In doing so, we also hope to under-

stand historical factors that may have influenced the perceptions of mental disorders in classical Islamic societies.

1.1. Phobias in antiquity

The term phobia is derived from the Greek term "phobos," which means panic, fear, and terror (Errera, 1962; Marks, 1970). Classifying phobias according to a feared situation is evidenced by the countless prefixes attached to the word phobia by the Greeks (Marks, 1970). For example, hydrophobia means fear of water or agoraphobia means fear of the marketplace. Furthermore, two of the earliest clinical descriptions of men who had excessive fears were mentioned in the Hippocratic corpus (Errera, 1962; Himmelhoch, Levine, & Gershon, 2001). It is imperative to note, however, that Greek physicians considered morbid fears and phobias to be part of a mental disorder they termed "melancholy" and not a stand-alone clinical disorder (Kasper, Den Boer, & Sitsen, 2003, pp. 1–7). Greek physicians also believed that melancholy was caused by the predominance of black bile. By the advent of the Roman era, Caelius Aurelianus, a Roman physician, grouped phobias with mania in his classifications (Errera, 1962).

In the period between the fifth and eighteenth centuries in Western Europe, descriptions of psychological manifestations of phobias emerged in the works of philosophers and theologians. However, phobias were not considered to be medical illnesses as

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evidenced by the scholarly works from this time period (Errera, 1962).

Modern-day historians of psychology maintain that it was not until the 18th century that the concept of phobias appeared in medical or psychiatric literature (Bienvenu, Wuyek, & Stein, 2009; Errera, 1962; Himmelhoch et al., 2001) as a stand-alone medical illness (Marks, 1970). In scholarly works from the 17th and 18th centuries the term phobia began to be used in describing intense fears out of proportion to the apparent stimulus. The understanding of phobias characteristic of this era was that they were a psychiatric illness, either stand-alone or part of a constellation of symptoms in a larger disorder, that afflicted individuals with unexplainable fears that then led them to avoid the feared stimulus (Marks, 1970). Currently, the DSM-5 views phobias as marked fear or anxiety related to a specific situation or object that is out of proportion to the actual danger of the object or situation. This intense fear is typically associated with an increase in physiological arousal, lasting more than six months and causes clinically significant distress in social, occupational or other important areas of life.

1.2. Phobia and fears in medical manuscripts during the Islamic Golden Era

During the heyday of Abbasid rule, 9th–12th centuries, Islamic societies witnessed an exponential surge in scientific productivity now referred to as the Islamic Golden Era (Ahmed & Amer, 2012; Falagas, Zarkadoulia, & Samonis, 2006; Friendly, 2008). Just at a time that the Islamic world was set to embark on its equivalent of the Renaissance, medieval Europe was descending into what is now termed the “Dark Ages” (pp. 205–206). In stark contrast to the Dark Ages, scientific inquiry and understanding under Abbasid rule evolved by leaps and bounds (Falagas et al., 2006). For example, Abbasid rulers built institutions, such as the House of Wisdom, where ancient medical texts were translated from Greek and Syriac into Arabic (Awaad & Ali, 2015; Majeed, 2005; Wallace & Gach, 2010, pp. 205–206). The purpose behind such institutions was to avail the medical knowledge of Greek and Roman predecessors to scholars, physicians and researchers living in the Muslim world. Once translated into Arabic, scholars of the Muslim world then advanced the medical science of the ancients by contributing their own clinical observations, experimentations, and innovative treatments (Awaad & Ali, 2015; Gorini, 2007; Graziani, 1980; Majeed, 2005; Tchamouloff, 2006). Later, medical manuscripts from the Islamic Golden Era were translated from Arabic into Latin and likely reached Europe in this manner (Awaad & Ali, 2015; Husayn, 1970; Shanks & Al-Kalal, 1984).

The medical books of Galen and Hippocrates gained great fame among physicians of the Islamic world (Kasper et al., 2003, pp. 1–7; Youssef, Youssef, & Dening, 1996; Wallace & Gach, 2010, pp. 205–206). Hence, it is not surprising that Muslim scholars used the black bile theory as an explanatory model for many mental disorders. Similarly, morbid fears and phobias were described by most scholars during the Islamic Golden Era in the same manner as their Greek predecessors. Fears and phobias were either considered to be subjective psychological symptoms that constituted part of another syndrome, i.e., “melancholy,” or were listed as somatic symptoms of physical diseases, i.e., organ dysfunction.

An illustrative example is the description of morbid fears by Ibn Sina (980–1037), known in the West as Avicenna, in his famous medical encyclopedia *The Canon of Medicine* (Avicenna, 1877). According to Ibn Sina, fears of unknown origin could manifest as one of the symptoms of mild melancholy. However, if the melancholy was severe, the person was likely suffering from “al-Fazaá”; which translates into phobia or panic. He also noted that the phobias found in severe melancholy were usually unrealistic and of countless types. Furthermore, he explained that such phobias may

be associated with physical symptoms and could be confused with physical diseases. Moreover, Ibn Sina maintained that there was a relationship between one’s pulse and their psychological state. For example, if a phobia, “al-Fazaá”, comes on suddenly, it is associated with a fast, irregular pulse. If “al-Fazaá” comes more gradually, however, then the pulse is similar to that of “al-Gham” (sadness); which is slow, weak and variable. In another section of *The Canon of Medicine*, Ibn Sina attributed excessive fears as a symptom of a neurological disorder he termed “al-Ra’sha,” or body shaking.

Similar to Ibn Sina’s understanding of phobias, Ar-Razi (865–925) and Najib al-Din al-Samarqandi (1097) in their books, “al-Hawi” (Husayn & al-’Uqbi–, 1977) and “al-Asbab wa al-’Alamat” (Al-Samarqandi, 1222), respectively, viewed phobias as the psychological manifestation of melancholy. Aligning himself with Ibn Sina’s second opinion, Thabit ibn Qurrah Al Harrani (836–901) in his medical encyclopedia “al-Dhakhirah” described “al-Fazaá” as an underlying etiology to the neurological disorder called “al-Ra’sha,” body shaking (Kurdi, 2010).

To our knowledge, morbid fears and phobias were not described as a separate diagnostic entity in the most famous of the medical manuscripts of the Muslim world. However, an exception to this general rule is the 9th century medical manuscript, “Masalih al-Abdan wa al-Anfus” (Sustenance of the Body and Soul) authored by the Muslim scholar Abu Zayd al-Balkhi, in which he dedicated an entire chapter on classifying, diagnosing and treating “al-Fazaá” in a manner very similar to the modern understanding of phobias.

2. Al-Balkhi’s manuscript “Sustenance of the Body and Soul” and his description of phobias

Abu Zayd Ahmed ibn Sahl al-Balkhi was an encyclopedic Muslim scholar from Khorasan who lived in the late 9th century (al-Balkhi, Misri, & al-Hayyat, 2005; al-Balkhi–, Badri–, & ‘Ashwi–, 2003; Awaad & Ali, 2015). Historically, Khorasan referred to the region between India and Iraq and was part of the Islamic empire during al-Balkhi’s lifetime. Al-Balkhi was not a practicing physician (al-Balkhi et al., 2005; Awaad & Ali, 2015); rather, he excelled in theoretical medicine.

Penned in the Arabic language, his manuscript, “Masalih al-Abdan wa al-Anfus,” translates into “Sustenance of the Body and Soul.” The word “Abdan” in Arabic is the plural of the word “Badn” which means body. The word “Anfus” is the plural of the word “Nafs” and means soul. Our analysis of al-Balkhi’s work is based on his original Arabic manuscript found in the book bearing the name, *Masālih al-Abdān wa al-Anfus*, which was reproduced by al-Balkhi et al. (2005) and published by “The Institute of Arabic Manuscripts” (Ma’ had al-Makhtūtāt al-’ Arabīyah)/World Health Organization. The same original Arabic manuscript was also found in the reproduction by Balkhi–, Sezgin, & Süleymaniye Umumî Kütüphanesi (1998) under the same title.

Al-Balkhi’s book is composed of two sections. The first section “Masalih al-Abdan” is focused on physical health maintenance, while the second “Masalih al-Anfus” is dedicated to mental health. The section on “Masalih al-Anfus” is further subdivided into eight chapters, covering different mental health topics, such as the definition of mental health, the importance of mental health science, and the prevention of mental health disorders. In the last five chapters, al-Balkhi discusses classification of mental disorders and provides suggested treatment modalities.

In chapter six and parts of chapter four, al-Balkhi defines and describes a stand-alone psychological disorder he terms “al-Fazaá”. By comparing his description of this disorder to the descriptions of anxiety disorders found in DSM-5, “al-Fazaá” very closely matches the criteria for specific phobias. Al-Balkhi describes “al-Fazaá” as an excessive fear that results from seeing, hearing or thinking of

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