



Self-Esteem in Iran: Views from Antiquity to Modern Times

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Abstract: Self-esteem, an antecedent to well-being, is highly contested. Most of the research on self-esteem has been conducted in Western or East Asian cultures and little is known about the concept and functions of self-esteem elsewhere. In fact, the relationship between self-esteem and culture has been the subject of debate as some argue that self-esteem is a Western cultural artifact. In the present study, notions related to self-esteem from selected Iranian religious and philosophical texts, the Qu'ran, as well as psychological views are reviewed as much of the prior work in this area has relied on conceptualizations rooted in Western philosophy and history. The analysis demonstrates that self-esteem is valued in Iranian religious worldviews and folk belief systems. Further, an investigation of contemporary Iranian culture and existing empirical findings indicates that these cultural beliefs are translated into actual effects. This examination is critical in developing local constructs or unearthing those that exist within the local Iranian context, a premise put forward within the cultural and positive psychology domains in developing indigenous forms of knowledge.

قيمة الذات، والتي تعد عنصر هام للشعور بالنجاح والازدهار ، هو محور نقاش و نزاع كبير. معظم الأبحاث عن تقدير الذات أجريت في الثقافات الغربية أو شرق آسيا . اما في الثقافات الأخرى لا يعرف الكثير عن مفهوم دور قيمة الذات. في الواقع، العلاقة بين تقدير الذات والثقافة موضوع نقاش ويجادل البعض أن قيمة الذات هو من صنع الثقافة الغربية و يعد مفهوم غير معروف عند الثقافات غير الغربية. في هذه الدراسة سيتم مراجعة مفاهيم تتعلق باحترام الذات من النصوص الدينية والفلسفية الإيرانية المختارة، القرآن الكريم، وكذلك من منظورات النفسية، والكثير من الاعمال السابقة في هذا المجال تعتمد على تصورات متأصلة في الفلسفة والتاريخ الغربي. يوضح التحليل أن قيمة الذات له تقدير عالي في وجهات النظر الدينية الإيرانية والنظم العقائدية الشعبية. واتضح علاوة على ذلك، عند دراسة الثقافة الإيرانية المعاصرة والأبحاث الحالية ، أن هذه المعتقدات الثقافية قد ترجمت لآثار فعلية في السياق المعاصر . ان هذه الدراسة هامة لتطوير مفاهيم محلية او الكشف عن المتواجد منها في الثقافة الإيرانية. وسيتم مناقشة الآثار المترتبة على النتائج، وكذلك القيود والتوجيهات لإجراء مزيد من البحوث.

Keywords: self-esteem; Iran; culture; Islam; Sufism; well-being

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Self-esteem, taking a positive or negative attitude towards the self (Rosenberg, 1965), is one of the most widely researched topics in Western psychology. Psychological theories posit that having positive attitudes towards oneself (even if unrealistic) contributes to mental well-being (e.g., Taylor & Brown, 1988) and a lack of self-esteem has been regarded as an important antecedent of mental disorder (Tennen & Herzberger, 1987). Self-esteem has been found in empirical research to have important consequences in Western cultures, as diverse as greater mental well-being (e.g., Campbell, 1981; DeNeve & Cooper, 1998), higher decisiveness (Rosenberg & Owens, 2001), lowered incidence of obesity (Griffiths, Parsons, & Hill, 2010), and better school performance (Rosenberg, Schooler, Schoenbach, & Rosenberg, 1995) to name a few (for a review of self-esteem outcomes, see Bosson & Swann, 2009; Orth, Robins, & Widaman, 2012).

The relationship between self-esteem and culture has been the subject of heated debate. Some (e.g., Hewit, 2002; 2009) argue that self-esteem is a cultural artifact found in the Western world and alien to non-Western cultures. From the motivational point of view, Heine et al. (1999) argue that self-esteem is connected to the motivation to self-enhance (i.e., a desire to view oneself positively), and that this motive is stronger in Westerners. Empirical findings lend partial support to this cultural dependence notion. In fact, East Asians tend to score lower than Westerners on various measures of self-esteem (e.g., Feather & McKee, 1993; Kwan, Hui, & McGee, 2010; Spencer-Rodgers, Peng, Wang, & Hou, 2004). High self-esteem has been shown to have more positive outcomes in Western samples. For example, Yuki, Sato, Takemura and Oishi (2013) found that the association between self-esteem and happiness was stronger among American than Japanese participants.

Yet, there is evidence to suggest that positive self-evaluations are largely universal (O'Mara, Gaertner, Sedikides, Zhou, & Liu, 2012; Sedikides, Gaertner, & Toguchi, 2003). For example, Schmitt and Allik's (2005) study supported the universality of positive self-evaluation in 53 nations. Another example is Kwan et al.'s (2010) review that shows that self-esteem has important positive consequences in China including psychological adjustment, interpersonal adjustment, and productivity. In China, self-esteem has been found to be negatively correlated with emotional and social loneliness in college students (Zhao, Kong, & Wang, 2012) and to relate positively to general and life domain satisfaction (Zhang & Leung, 2002). Likewise, a study involving both U.S. and South Korean samples showed that self-esteem was ranked as one of the most basic human needs in both cultures (Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001).

Apparently this matter is still open to debate. But it is clear that, to date, most of the research has focused on Western and East Asian cultures and input from other cultures (e.g., African and Middle Eastern) is virtually nonexistent. Further, most of these studies have relied on conceptualizations rooted in Western philosophy and history and have largely ignored relevant insights from other parts of the world. For example, previous research has focused on secular notions of self-esteem, which is not surprising given the intellectual traditions in Western Europe since the Enlightenment that emphasized a separation of church and state. Yet, spiritual and religious notions continue to be an important aspect of how people see themselves (Hogan & Bond, 2009; Triandis, 2007). Understanding self-esteem in non-Western societies may require a broader view that includes historical and contemporary perspectives on morality, the self, and the world in



these cultures. Thus, attention should also be directed to the sources that influence how people define themselves and their self-worth, for example religious belief systems. As such, in a bid to learn more about local cultural constructs that serve as precursors to well-being, a notion put forward by cultural psychology (Abu-Raiya & Pargament, 2011; Ho, 1995; Joshanloo, 2013a; 2014; Shweder, Much, Park, & Mahapatra, 1997; Skinner, 2010), unearthing historical, religious, psychological, social and philosophical origins of a construct is imperative and fits into the broader movement of indigenizing knowledge currently underway in the field of positive psychology (Craven et al., 2016; Lambert, Pasha-Zaidi, Passmore, & York Al-Karam, 2015; Pandey, 2011; Sandage, Hill, & Vang, 2003).

Iran

Yet, findings from Western and East Asian cultures cannot be generalized to other cultures before such conceptual and empirical investigations are undertaken. Consequently, as a first step in unearthing indigenous knowledge and psychological constructs, this paper focuses on Iran, a non-Arab Muslim country in south Western Asia, with a population of more than 75 million. Ninety-seven percent of Iran is Muslim (Clawson & Rubin, 2005) and a substantial majority of Iranian Muslims (about 90%) are Shiite. Currently ruled by a theocratic government, Iran is different from Western and East Asian cultures with respect to many cultural characteristics such as the political approach, religious worldview, and social indicators (Joshanloo, 2012). The country has been home to many religious-cultural movements, including Zoroastrianism, Islam, and Persian Sufism. Almost all of the pre-Islamic as well as post-Islamic scholars and even philosophers of Iran have been inspired by these religions (Ahmadi & Ahmadi, 1998; Beheshti, 2005; Dustdar, 1999; Dustdar, 2004; Razi, 2000).

From a historical perspective, unlike ancient Greeks who never possessed “prophets” or a body of revealed truths or undisputed moral codes (Robinson, 1995), ancient Iran was overwhelmed by various religions and spiritualities, with a deep and far-reaching influence on people’s everyday lives (e.g., Dustdar, 1999; 2004; Foltz, 2004). Thus, Iranian religious texts are a good place to search for how Iranians conceive of the self, God, and the world. The lasting and ever-present impact of Iranian religions on Iranian folk understandings and behavioral patterns makes them an interesting target of investigation for understanding how notions of self-esteem are culturally shaped. In the following sections, selected religious and philosophical texts related to the concept of self and self-esteem are reviewed.

Self-esteem in Pre-Islamic Iran

Zoroastrianism is the most influential pre-Islamic religion of Iran that both reformed and integrated previous Iranian philosophies and religions (e.g., the Iranian Mithraism). Moreover, ancient Iranian governments popularized and promoted it in Iran in the pre-Islamic era as the state religion. Prophet Zoroaster (or Zarathustra) most probably lived more than 3500 years ago (Boyce, 1979; Joneydi, 1999; Saghebfar, 1998). According to the believers, the Zoroastrian faith was revealed by *Ahura Mazda* (the highest deity of worship in Zoroastrianism) to Zoroaster. *Ahriman* (the hostile spirit, the devil) is the eternal antagonist of *Ahura Mazda*. *Ahriman* opposes *Ahura*



Mazda and always threatens to destroy him and his creation. *Ahriman* and his creation are believed to be destroyed by *Ahura Mazda* in the end. The ultimate state of the world is predicted to be a complete victory of light over the darkness.

Humankind's role in this battle is of critical significance. Humankind is credited as the central player in the cosmos and is in the forefront of the battle of the good and the bad (Zaehner, 1956, p. 18). The world is to be reformed by human action. Without humanity's assistance, *Ahura Mazda* will not be able to defeat *Ahriman*. Thus, it is humanity's duty to eradicate darkness, vices, and falsehood through good thought, good words, and good deeds (Hartz, 2009). Hence, Zoroastrianism offers humankind a position in the order of the cosmos, attesting to the fact that humans are highly esteemed and are considered of great intrinsic worth in Zoroastrianism.

Unlike Christianity, Zoroastrians do not believe in original sin or similar concepts and people are believed to be born pure (Zaehner, 1955). The Zoroastrian concept of *fravashi* is also relevant; it is believed that each person is born with a *fravashi*, "a guardian spirit that helps him or her tell good from evil, right from wrong" (Hartz, 2009, p. 15) and the *fravashi* is seen as the spark of the divine essence of *Ahura Mazda* that forms an important part of a person. Therefore, each person is considered to be partly divine and free of impurity at birth (Joshanloo & Daemi, 2015).

Moral visions implicitly or explicitly guide individuals' lives by providing understandings of the good life and the good person (Christopher, 1999). Dominant ideologies, values, and moral norms in one's culture largely determine what is worthwhile for the individual to become or pursue (Wong, 2009). Thus, ideologies and moral ideals embedded in a culture have a significant chance of being integrated into people's identity and self-concept, and thus they may come to yield great motivation and commitment in everyday lives of individuals (Hardy & Carlo, 2011; Frimer & Walker, 2009). Following this logic, it stands to reason that the importance of human dignity in the Zoroastrian worldview and ethical system can be translated into a high value of self-esteem and honor in individual and social lives. In order to illustrate how this central theme was reified in ancient Iranians' everyday lives, it is helpful to turn to *Shahnameh* which is believed to embody the main aspects of the Iranian ways of thinking and living in the pre-Islamic era (Joneydi, 1999; Saghebfar, 1998).

Many facets of ancient Iranian ethos, religion, and culture are preserved in this book. According to *Shahnameh*, we should not take ourselves lightly. *Shahnameh* reminds the readers that: "You were produced out of two worlds, and nurtured in some respects to be a go between. Although first in nature, you must regard yourself as the latest in time. Thus you are. Therefore, do not devote yourself to triviality" (Levy, 2000, p. 1). According to Kazzazi (1991), in *Shahnameh*, what encompasses many of the values, ethical codes, and ideal human characteristics is *naam*. *Naam* connotes face, honor, public image, and a good memory after death. The main characters of *Shahnameh* are always expected to act in such a way that leads to elevation of their *naams* or they lose their grandeur. Austere mortification of the body, abstinence, and self-abnegation was not acceptable in Zoroastrianism (Joneydi, 1999). These notions have their roots in the doctrine of the glorification of humanity in Zoroastrianism.

Humility was not as strongly praised as honour in *Shahnameh* and Ancient Iranian texts. Although it was regarded a virtue, it was not considered as central in Iran as it was in such cultures



as China (Bond, Lun, Chan, Chan, & Wong, 2012). Compare the emphasis on humanity's significant role in collaborating with God in Ancient Iranian ideology with that in East Asian Taoism (Zhang & Veenhoven, 2008, p. 429):

In comparison to nature and Tao, man is weak and insignificant. In Zhwangtze's words, 'A man in the universe is like a pebble or a twig in the mountains. As such he can only obey nature. He may be useful in a small way, but it is beyond him to originate anything' (Zhwangtze, Autumn Water).

This great esteem in which humanity is held was the cornerstone of Persian ethics providing moral ideals for people to pursue in their everyday lives. Individuals in ancient Iran were expected to understand their importance in the hierarchy of the world, never take themselves lightly, avoid abstinence and self-derogatory attitudes, and to constantly try to preserve their dignity. About 1400 years ago, after the Arab conquest of Persia, most Iranians started to convert to Islam. Although some value shifts occurred, the pre-Islamic culture of Iran continued to influence successive worldviews (Davaran, 2010). Whether or not the high regard of humankind in pre-Islamic Iranian culture is echoed in Islam is considered in the following section.

Self-esteem in Islam

Quranic teachings are centered on absolute submission to God's will and complete obedience of his commandments (Peterson, 2004). "There is none comparable unto Him [i.e., God]" (Quran 112:4) (all the English translations of the Quran's verses were obtained from: <http://www.quranexplorer.com>). Although humankind's rank is much lower than God, Islam's view on humanity is largely positive at least as interpreted by Iranians (cf., Abu-Raiya, 2012). According to Islam, humanity has a dual nature. Humanity has potential for becoming the lowest of the low (showing ruthlessness, hedonism, egoism, disobedience, ignorance, forgetfulness) (Akhtar, 2008; Abu-Raiya, 2012; Islami, 2003; Joshanloo, 2013a, 2013b), but it also has the potential to become an all-encompassing embodiment of God's attributes (Islami, 2003). Humanity is believed to be created with a decent nature (95:4). The negative attributes mentioned in the Quran for humanity (e.g., disobedience, ignorance, and forgetfulness) are mainly considered by Islamic scholars as what we will turn out to be if we fail to preserve our decent nature.

In Islam, when a child is born, it carries within it a natural belief in God called the *fitrah* (reminding us of the concept of the *fravashi* in the pre-Islamic era). This innate disposition provides a divine aspect to human personality and is considered to be a source of guidance, telling humans when they are wrong (Haque, 2004). In a sense, human beings are believed to be pre-programmed to worship God and follow his commands, but due to environmental pressures and personal choices, they forget their true nature. Human beings are obliged to rediscover their *fitrah* and follow its guidance (Joshanloo, 2013a). From an Islamic view, humankind is God's vicegerent on earth (Joshanloo & Daemi, 2015). The Quran says "verily we have honored the children of Adam. We carry them on the land and the sea, and have made provision of good things for them, and have preferred them above many of those whom we created with a marked preferment"



(17:70). Thus, humankind has a special place in the hierarchy of creation. According to the Quran, after the creation of humankind was completed, Allah praised himself by saying: “So blessed be Allah, the Best of creators!” (23:14) and the angels were ordered to fall down prostrate before humankind (17:61). Moreover, the Prophet of Islam is cited as saying that God has created humankind after his attributes (Huq, 2009); thus, the intrinsic worth of humankind is evident in Islam.

Aside from the Quran, an emphasis on the worthiness of human beings is traceable in other Islamic texts. Ali Ibn Abi Talib, one of the leaders of early Islam, urges Muslims to keep away from any baseness even if it is instrumental in obtaining what they desire, because a person will not be able to earn anything as worthy as their own esteem (Hakimi, Hakimi, & Hakimi, 2001) and that one who fails to know one’s worth will perish. Likewise, the Prophet is quoted as saying that humans lack for nothing once they have self-esteem (Deylami, 1997).

Self-esteem plays a central role in Islamic ethics as well (Haghani Zanjani, 1998; Joshanloo, 2013). Indeed, Motahhari (1993) argues that self-esteem is at the very root of Islamic ethics. In other words, reminding individuals of their high value is the main strategy of Islamic ethics and educational methods, to motivate them to act righteously (Joshanloo & Daemi, 2015). The Quran consistently reminds Muslims of their worthy nature in order to prevent them from forgetting or losing it: “[T]he losers will be those who lose themselves ...” (39:15). Self-esteem is believed to lead to a resistance against sin. For example, Ali Ibn Abi Talib says that the person who believes in their own eminence and dignity never belittles those attributes by committing sin (Falsafi, 1989). Likewise, drawing on the Quran and Shiite texts, Lashgari (2003) concludes that a lack of self-respect is considered to be the source of all sin and vice in Islam and is why Islamic ethics strongly emphasize the importance of self-knowledge. It is believed that human beings possess enormous capabilities to become happy through worshiping God and practicing Islamic virtues, but if a human being fails to know their valuable nature, these capacities will be wasted (Alizadeh, 2010).

It is recognized in Islam that human beings can become the lowest of the low, and thus should constantly keep their errant inclinations in check. However, in Islamic ethics, *fitrah*, perfection-seeking, and humanity’s superiority over the rest of the creation are highly emphasized, overshadowing the negative side of humanity. Besides, it is argued that it is the spiritual part (not the devilish part) of the humankind which forms its true entity, and humanness can only be attributed to this aspect (Ahmad, 2009). The concepts of original sin and transmission of this sin to all descendants of Adam and Eve are not present in Islam (Ahmadi & Ahmadi, 1998). According to the Quran, Adam and Eve, after realizing their error, repented. With God accepting that repentance, “the spiritual taint of that recalcitrance was wiped out” (Islami, 2003, p. 36). Muslim scholars believe that unlike Judeo-Christian culture, “personality development in Islam does not proceed from a point of self-negation and rejection” (Hamid, 2009, p. 264).

It can be concluded that the Persian pre-Islamic emphasis on self-esteem is generally echoed in Islam but is less pronounced. However, it is noteworthy that while the high regard of humankind in pre-Islamic Iran was evident both in the humanity-God and humanity-universe relationships, Islam more strongly emphasizes humankind’s superiority to the rest of creation, and the notion of God’s dependence on human action is absent from Islam. In other words, while love



and cooperation characterize the human-God relationship in Zoroastrianism, in Islam, servitude and submission play more fundamental roles.

One movement which began in this era is Persian Sufism, which has been highly influential on the way Iranians interpret Islam. In the following section, the value of the self in Sufism is discussed.

Self-Esteem in Sufism

Mysticism has long been valued in all the world's religious and spiritual traditions. Among Muslims, it has been ardently advocated by Sufis. Accordingly, Sufism is viewed as the mystical component of Islam (e.g., Fakhry, 2004; Joshanloo & Rastegar, 2012). Sufism is profoundly influenced by pre-Islamic Iranian spirituality—particularly Zoroastrianism (e.g., Razi, 2002; Zarinkoob, 1970). From the Sufi point of view, humankind is the extract of the universe and it is believed that whatever can be found in the universe, a better and more complete replica of it can be found in human beings (Razi, 2000). Sufis believe that one can find God in one's heart and texts often cite the Prophet as saying: “[God says:] The Heavens and the earth cannot contain me, but the heart of my faithful servant does contain me” (Nasr, 2007, p. 9). That is to say, when the false self is destroyed through spiritual discipline what remains is the true self which is God, and a Sufi's ultimate goal is to become one with God (Ahmed, 2008).

Sufis consider this unique capability as the main reason for humankind's exclusive privilege over the rest of creation. This doctrine holds that considering that the universe cannot mirror God's glory and magnificence, God (who was willing to be reflected by his creation) has created humankind which can fully and transparently reflect all godly characteristics (Rahimian, 2009). Although in Sufism, humility is also highly valued, the fact that one is the master of creation and can become one with God has led the Iranian Sufi Hallaj to assert that “I am the Truth [= God]” (Nasr, 2007, p. 30), and another Iranian Sufi Bayazid to say that “Glory be to Me! How great is My Majesty!” (Schimmel, 1975, p. 145).

Self-esteem is a central theme in Sufi poetry. For example, the ideas discussed above are reflected in the following pieces of Persian Sufi poetry. The Sufi poet Sana'i says (the current author's translation):

The whole creation is your slave
It exists for your strength and support
Your worth is more than that of the two worlds
What can I do when you do not acknowledge your worth
You have great worth and esteem
You should never neglect your own worth.

Another Persian Sufi, Rumi (Rumi, 2001, p. 48) says:

The spheres lag behind me in revolutions!
Wine is intoxicated with me, not I with it!
The world takes its being from me, not I from it!



As evident in the above poems, Sufism reminds humankind of its high value in the hierarchy of creation. This is undertaken mainly to motivate individuals to act based on their great inherent worthiness. In this view, self-esteem is closely tied to self-knowledge (Mardani & Sharifi Esfahani, 2010) and knowledge of one's high value and godly qualities is believed to elevate one's self-esteem. High self-esteem per se is believed to impede sinning, promote one's holding to ethical standards, and facilitate performing one's valuable duties in the world.

The emphasis on self-worth manifest in the pre-Islamic Iranian religions resonates in Sufism and is sometimes even more strongly stressed. Persian Sufis played a critical part in changing the God-humankind relationship in Iranian Islam and changed the focus from servitude and asceticism to one of love and friendship (Nafisi, 2006). A discussion of how these religious and historical ideas are translated into actual behavior in contemporary Iran is provided next.

Self-Esteem in Contemporary Iranian Culture and Empirical Research

Iran has been a culture of religiosity (Dustdar, 1999). It has been ruled by numerous religious governments throughout history and the importance of religion has been so overriding that most of the social movements have "appeared in religious guise in order to gain support of the submissive groups" (Arasteh, 1974). This prompted Beheshti (2005) to assert that modern Iranian national identity is as firmly tied to religion and spirituality as it was from the beginning (see also Dustdar, 1999). Razi's (2005) historical analysis of ancient Iran also reveals that religion was the most important institution in the Iranian plateau in the prehistoric era. The importance of Sufism (as a part of Iranian Islam) in shaping the modern Iranian mentality should not be neglected (Ahmadi, & Ahmadi, 1998). Nafisi emphasizes that:

Sufism has been completely adopted from the day it appeared. All thinkers [and] poets from Iran and India have, whether they want to or not been Sufi-natured up to today. This wisdom has settled so deeply in the peoples of these two countries, that they themselves do not know to what extent they are Sufi. (Ridgeon, 2006, p. 14)

The Ancient facets of Iranian culture continue to exercise their influence on Iranian ways of thinking and living and if a concept is highly emphasized in the Iranian religions, we can expect that it forms a central part of the Iranian current culture as well. In addition to the influence of Ancient Iran and Islam, that of the Western culture (which emphasizes individualism and self-esteem) is also visible in contemporary Iranian culture due to the modernization of Iran throughout the last century (Joshanloo, 2015). Consequently, the Western extolment of self-esteem has also found its way into Iranian culture, through cultural products such as Western books and movies. It appears that consistent with the importance of this concept in previous Iranian schools of thought and religions, self-esteem is of importance in current Iran both among the lay people and psychologists.

For example, the importance of self-esteem is reflected in Ayatollah Khomeini's (the leader of the 1979 Islamic revolution of Iran) views, which are profoundly influential in contemporary Iran. He regards humankind as the extract of the entire cosmos which can reflect



God's holy lights and can possess all godly qualities (Mo'addab, 2007). The Islamic revolution is generally interpreted by the Islamic government as an attempt to foster the self-esteem of Iranians and the nation as a whole, alluding to Iran's dependence on powerful countries (e.g., the USA and UK) in the pre-revolutionary era (e.g., Mo'addab, 2007).

In cultures where self-esteem is emphasized, people can be highly motivated by self-esteem, i.e., they strongly want to feel valuable, privately and publicly. This motivation has a public side which generates attempts to maintain positive impressions of the self (Crocker & Canevello, 2012; Crocker & Canevello, 2008). *Aberu* is the word Iranians use today to refer to the old and ever-present concept *naam*, representing the public side of the self-esteem motive. Literally, *aberu* means "the water of the face", alluding to sweating when one's reputation and honor is lost. *Aberu* is to be zealously preserved, that is, one must strive to preserve very positive impressions of the self. This is an important aspect of Iranian social and interpersonal relationships. *Aberu* codes influence "the way one talks, dresses, eats and drinks, one's mannerisms and with whom one associates" (Farsimadan, 2011, p. 280). Iranians constantly strive to gain and preserve *aberu* and social prestige (Naraghi, 2001) and have been described by cultural observers as boastful, reluctant to perform jobs that they consider beneath them (even when they are in need of money), and as having difficulty in admitting mistakes (e.g., Jalali, 1982). In fact, that Iranians attach considerable importance to protecting the *zaher* (= outside/appearances, Beeman, 2001) may be partly explained by the value of self-esteem and public reputation in Iranian contemporary culture. However, the relationship between *aberu* codes and self-esteem as a value in Iranian culture should be confirmed by future empirical studies if stronger conclusions are to be made.

In view of its significance, it is not surprising that self-esteem has been a recurrent topic in the psychological research in Iran. A review of the psychological research on self-esteem in Iran shows that self-esteem is among the widely-researched variables (proportional to other variables) in Iranian psychological literature. Empirical research is supportive of the notion that religiousness is associated with higher self-esteem in Iran. For example, Ansari, Ravari and Kazemi's (2001) longitudinal study in Iranian university students demonstrated that ritual fasting led to a higher level of self-esteem. Likewise, Bahrami (2003) showed that higher religiosity was associated with higher self-esteem, while Joshanloo and Daemi (2015) found that in Iranian university students, self-esteem was related to spirituality and partially mediated the relationship between spirituality and mental well-being.

No gender difference has been found in the level of self-esteem among Iranian university students (e.g., Joshanloo, Daemi, & Bakhshi, 2010; Joshanloo & Rastegar, 2007). However, there are gender differences in the nomological network of self-esteem. Joshanloo and Rastegar (2007) for example, found that self-esteem predicted psychological well-being (assessed by a composite index of purpose in life and personal growth) more strongly in female than male university students.

Empirical findings tend to support the positive function of self-esteem in Iranian culture. Self-esteem has been repeatedly found to be a strong predictor of many aspects of psychological well-being in adults and university students (Fathi-Ashtiani, Tvallayi, Azizabadi, & Moghani, 2007; Samadzadeh, Abbasi, & Shahbazzadegan, 2011; Shapurian, Hojat, & Nayerahmadi, 1987). It has been found to predict psychological well-being (Joshanloo & Rastegar, 2007), social well-being



(Joshanloo, Nosratabadi, & Jafari Kandovan, 2007), life satisfaction (Joshanloo & Afshari, 2011), and affect balance (Joshanloo, Daemi, & Bakhshi, 2010) over and above the Big Five personality traits, indicating its significance in predicting positive functioning in this culture. It has also been found to correlate positively with basic psychological need satisfaction (Ghorbani, Watson, Chen, & Norballa, 2012) in Iranian university students. These correlations are sizable and comparable to those found in Western samples. For example, self-esteem's correlation with life satisfaction in an Iranian student sample (Joshanloo & Afshari, 2011) was 0.49, which is comparable in size to the correlation Campbell (1981) found between self-esteem and life satisfaction in a US sample ($r = 0.55$).

In other domains, self-esteem has been found to be positively correlated with sport achievement (Besharat, Abbasi, Shojaoddin, 2002), academic achievement (Saadat, Ghasemzadeh, & Soleymani, 2012), empathy (Ghorbani et al., 2010), intrinsic religious orientation (Watson et al., 2002), internal locus of control (Saadat, Ghasemzadeh, Karami, & Soleimani, 2012), and self-compassion (Ghorbani et al., 2012) to name a few. It has also been found to correlate negatively with alexithymia (Ghorbani, Bing, Watson, Davison, & Mack, 2002), job burnout (Yaghubi Nia, Mazlum, Salehi, & Esmae'ili, 2005), narcissistic personality (Ghorbani et al., 2010), and internet addiction (Ghassemzadeh, Shahraray, & Moradi, 2008).

In summary, Western measures of self-esteem have been frequently used with Iranian samples and produced interpretable results. High self-esteem is associated with an interestingly broad set of positive consequences in the Iranian context and the research interest in this variable and resulting findings are in line with the cultural background of the country as reviewed above.

Discussion and Directions for Future Research

Historical religious-philosophical movements in a culture can greatly influence its current characteristics. For instance, Sampson (2000) regards Christianity as a contributor to the individualistic formulation of the person-other relationship in the West: "it seems highly unlikely that the kind of individualism so familiar today could have taken shape or have been so successfully sustained without this underlying Christian religious system" (p. 1427). Similarly, Ho (1995; Ho, Peng, Lai, & Chan, 2001) seeks to pinpoint the root of the collectivistic types of selfhood in the Chinese ancient religious-philosophical traditions. These widespread and persistent doctrines should not be denigrated after being labelled *superstitious* or *primitive* (Shweder et al., 1997). Shweder et al. call for more attention to be devoted to folk theories stemming from a nation's past and indeed, in developing an indigenous psychology of any kind. They point out that in order to construct a valid cultural psychology, indigenous ideas should be taken seriously as potential sources of social scientific and practical knowledge. In doing so, I set forth the argument that historical Iranian religious worldviews seem to have influenced the contemporary Iranian culture in important ways.

The above historical analysis shows that self-esteem is highly valued in all major Iranian religions. In Zoroastrianism, it is sometimes difficult to differentiate functionally between God and humankind (Saghebfar, 1998). In Sufism, the person can become one with God and humankind can mirror all God's characteristics, while in Islam, human beings are the apex of God's creation



and all things have been subjugated to them (Akhtar, 2008). A part of the human soul in all these schools of thought is believed to be Godly. Such an emphasis on humanity and its place and duty on earth secures a top rank for self-esteem in the Iranian ethical hierarchy. The current investigation of Iranian religions and culture demonstrates that in Iranian culture, individuals are encouraged to view themselves as valuable.

Although Iran is a relatively collectivistic culture (Ali & Amirshahi, 2002; Hofstede, 1991), the existence of an individual self, independent from the collective, is recognized and its immense significance is appreciated in the Iranian culture. In other words, although Iranian culture is socially group-minded, it is spiritually individualistic. Zoroastrianism and Sufism, and to some extent Islam, have encouraged a kind of religious individualism in which individual (as opposed to collective) salvation, a direct relationship with God, and an individual's personal responsibility are emphasized (Foltz, 2004; Nafisi, 2006; Zarrinkoob, 1970). For example, Chittick (2007) describes the Sufi ideal of freedom in this way: "Those human beings who fully realize their own selfhood- their innate, unlimited intelligence and consciousness- thereby gain freedom from every constraint" (p. 143). Interestingly Iranian culture's group-mindedness still influences the way the experience of self-esteem plays out in the everyday lives of Iranians. As mentioned above, the public side of the self-esteem motive (i.e., the preservation of *aberni*) plays a central role in the social lives of the Iranian people.

In line with the main results of the present analysis, the empirical studies reviewed above show that the great importance attached to self-esteem brings with it a range of positive consequences for self-esteem in Iranian samples and that the absence of self-regard is harmful. Although the work done on self-esteem in Iran is preliminary, sufficient findings have accumulated to indicate that self-esteem is one of the strongest predictors of positive functioning and subjective well-being in Iran. However, caution must be applied in generalizing these findings to other Muslim countries of the region. For instance, Suhail and Chaudhry (2004) found no significant relation between self-esteem and well-being in Pakistan, Iran's Muslim neighbor. In other Muslim samples (e.g., Lebanese, Kuwaiti) nevertheless, self-esteem does correlate positively with mental well-being (Abdel-Khalek, 2011; Ayyash-Abdo & Alamuddin, 2007). Consequently, it is beneficial to undertake historical and empirical analyses for any given culture instead of taking particular relationship patterns for granted.

My conclusion is incompatible with the argument that self-esteem is a Western cultural phenomenon alien to non-Western cultures (Hewit, 2002; 2009; Heine et al., 1999). A growing body of evidence in other non-Western cultures indicates that self-esteem is valued in these cultures as well and others have also found that a positive attitude towards the self is a universal motive (Schmitt & Allik, 2005; Sedikides et al., 2003). However, cross-cultural experiments are needed to see whether Iranians are lower or higher than Westerners with respect to self-enhancement. Still, it can be hypothesized that Iranians may need to be good self-enhancers to meet the high ethical standards of their culture, given that falling short of some of these standards might lead to strong feelings of worthlessness and moral failure.

It is acknowledged that considerable empirical inquiry will be needed to provide support for many parts of the arguments presented here. Many interesting research questions are in need of



empirical examination and most of the samples used in research on self-esteem consist of university students. Other age groups are definitely under-represented in the research conducted so far. Existing self-esteem scales can be improved in many ways. Cross-cultural studies involving samples from Iran and other cultures need to be done. Self-reports of self-esteem in the Iranian context might be vulnerable to social desirability bias, a concern which awaits detailed investigation, and implicit self-esteem tests should be used along with self-reports. Furthermore, indigenous scales should be developed drawing on the rich cultural background of the nation. For example, the existing measures of self-esteem generally assess how worthy (and in most cases how efficient) one considers oneself to be either as an individual or in comparison to others.

Although there are basic and universal aspects of self-worth, a more comprehensive scale of self-esteem for Iranian samples could potentially have additional domains. For example, a subscale to measure the extent to which a person believes that worthiness is inherent in humankind. When we have valid and reliable scales to assess various aspects of the construct in Iranian culture, attention should be directed toward other avenues of inquiry, examples of which include: is the idea that we are individually created by God a source of high self-esteem within the Iranian cultural context? How seriously do Iranians consider low self-esteem a moral failure? In view of the fact that self-esteem is tied to religiosity and ethics in this context, can success in subjectively immoral things foster an Iranian's self-esteem? Can a person who sees herself or himself to be unethical still have high levels of self-esteem? Future research along these lines may help more thoroughly address existing issues.

Despite these shortcomings, the ideas presented in this paper help explain a number of findings which have not been successfully explained otherwise, such as the high correlation between self-esteem and indicators of well-being in the Iranian context. It is also hoped that this paper can bring what Iranian psychologists have done so far into the broader context of psychological theory and research on self-esteem. Finally, it is my hope that the conceptual discussions provided here will stimulate more informed empirical studies on self-esteem in Iran and neighboring regions, and will ultimately support progress in developing an indigenous psychology of the self and well-being in the Middle East and elsewhere (Craven et al., 2016; Lambert et al., 2015; Pandey, 2011; Sandage et al., 2003; Shweder et al., 1997).

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