

Self-Knowledge and Narcissism in Iranians: Relationships with Empathy and Self-Esteem

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Abstract Self-knowledge is a Muslim psychological ideal, but social theory suggests that the dynamics of narcissism and self-esteem may challenge the stability of Muslim society. In Iranian university students, an Integrative Self-Knowledge Scale displayed relationships with narcissism, self-esteem, and empathy that reflected relative mental health; and the Narcissistic Personality Inventory included factors that pointed toward adjustment as well as maladjustment. Evidence that narcissism predicted positive forms of self-functioning was more obvious in men than in women. Outcomes further confirmed that self-knowledge is as an adaptive process in Iran and that narcissism and self-esteem may have noteworthy implications for understanding Muslim society.

Keywords Narcissism · Self-knowledge · Empathy · Self-esteem · Iran

Visions of the self do not merely supply theoretical frameworks for research psychologists. They assume a broader cultural significance that has been especially obvious in recent attempts to understand Muslim society. Haque (2004), for instance, has argued that Muslims should reject secularized Western perspectives on mental health and should instead heed early Islamic calls for a “self-knowledge” in which spiritual yearnings underlie adjustment. Mortazā Motahharī, a philosopher and ideological theoretician of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, similarly identified self-knowledge as a central process in the cultural creation of the “Perfect Man” who is capable of resisting the corruptions of Western materialism (Shimamoto 2008). Such suggestions echo well-known Muslim descriptions of self-knowledge as a

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“prerequisite for God-knowledge” (Frozanfar 1992, p. 167) and as the noblest form of all knowledge (Rumi 1985, 1997).

In recent research, an Integrative Self-Knowledge (ISK) Scale operationalized active efforts of the individual to integrate past, present, and desired future self-experience into a meaningful whole (Ghorbani et al. 2008). In Iranian Muslim samples, this scale predicted psychological adjustment (Tahmasb et al. 2008; Ghorbani et al. 2010), and displayed associations with higher levels of religious and spiritual functioning (Ghorbani et al. 2009a, b). In at least this Muslim society, therefore, self-knowledge did indeed define a spiritually relevant process of adjustment.

Social theory nevertheless has identified the dynamics of self-functioning as a potentially critical problem in the viability of especially Islamic societies. In developing this claim, Fukuyama (1992) argued that selves universally are motivated by a Hegelian desire to be desired. All selves, in other words, desire to receive recognition that is worthy of a “master.” Cultures that fail to satisfy this universal imperative theoretically contain an internal contradiction that guarantees their eventual failure. Culture becomes the “master.” Individual selves become the “slave.” Frustrated demands for self-recognition then lead to conflicts that undermine sociopolitical stability. For Fukuyama, ultimate resolution of this Hegelian dialectic requires an essentially Western democratic synthesis in which sociopolitical structures enhance the recognition of all selves. Such a culture will strengthen and will be strengthened by socially constructed selves that actively pursue culturally sanctioned opportunities for recognition. As examples of failures to achieve this kind of democratic synthesis, Fukuyama pointed specifically toward Iran and other “fundamentalist” Islamic societies.

Thymos as Narcissism

Fukuyama (1992) explained the psychological dynamics of this supposedly universal dialectic in terms of a process called *thymos*. He borrowed this concept from Plato’s *Republic* and translated it as a “spiritedness” that is relevant to what we currently call self-esteem. “*Thymos*,” he suggests, “is something like an innate sense of justice; people believe that they have a certain worth, and when other people act as though they are worth less ... they become angry” (Fukuyama, p. 165). A culture that successfully provides genuine recognition for its socially constructed selves will minimize this anger and will display greater stability through the satisfactions of a widely available self-esteem.

Fukuyama’s analysis of *thymos* points toward contemporary descriptions of narcissism (Ghorbani et al. 2004). Narcissism most simply means self-love, but is often interpreted as a pathological tendency toward egotistical exploitativeness and grandiose arrogance (Sacksteder 1990). Kohut (1977), nevertheless, analyzed narcissism in terms that suggest how narcissistic “pathology” and Fukuyama’s depiction of healthy self-esteem might be combined within a single conceptual framework.

Kohut (1977) argued that healthy self-esteem develops out of immature narcissistic potentials through an internalization of nurturing social relationships.

Others “esteem” or “recognize” the innately narcissistic self, and through this process essentially teach an individual how to esteem his or her own self. Failures to internalize such relationships produce an immature self that demands unrelenting social support for its well-being. Such a “pathologically” narcissistic self requires constant approval in order to achieve an endurable affective life, develops no ability to empathically understand the needs and limitations of others, and pursues an exploitative interpersonal style that seeks to enforce compliance with its own narcissistic needs. When social supports become unavailable, this immature self collapses into narcissistic rage (Kohut 1978). Cultures that fail to promote a widespread internalization of self-esteem will therefore confront periodic crises of narcissistic rage within their populations. Of interest here is that Fukuyama (1992) translates *thymos* as “spiritedness,” but the more typical translation is in fact “rage” (Žižek 2008).

Present Study

When combined together, the perspectives of Fukuyama (1992) and Kohut (1977) suggest that relationships with others critically influence a culturally important psychological dimension that ranges from pathological narcissism to mature self-esteem. Empirical support for this suggestion has appeared in studies examining the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (NPI; Raskin and Hall 1981). In Western samples, this instrument contains factors that have both positive and negative mental health implications (Raskin and Terry 1988). Some factors, for example, predict higher self-esteem whereas others do not and are associated instead with diminished empathy (Watson et al. 1992).

Fukuyama (1992) argues that the dynamics of self-esteem are similar across cultures. If so, then the NPI in Iran should contain factors with both positive and negative mental health implications. The present study tested that suggestion by administering a Persian version of the NPI to Iranian university students along with the Margolis and Thomas (1980) Narcissism Scale (MTNS), the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale, three empathy measures from the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis 1983a), and the Integrative Self-Knowledge Scale (Ghorbani et al. 2008). Western studies indicate that narcissistic pathologies tend to be more prevalent in men than in women (Stinson et al. 2008), so, the possibility of sex differences was examined as well.

Previous research has established that the MTNS records an unambiguously pathological form of narcissism in Iran (Ghorbani et al. 2004). The Interpersonal Reactivity Index operationalizes two adaptive forms of empathy. Empathic Concern reflects an emotional sensitivity to others, whereas Perspective-Taking involves a cognitive ability to see things from another’s point of view. In contrast, Empathic Distress records tendencies to be anxious and ineffective in response to the difficulties of other people. This more maladaptive aspect of empathy would presumably appear in more narcissistically immature selves who must receive rather than give social support if they are to function adequately. Again, Integrative Self-Knowledge measures attempts of the self to integrate experience across time.

Hypotheses

In summary, the dynamics of self-functioning may be centrally important in efforts to understand psychosocial processes in Iran and other Islamic societies. The present investigation tested four basic hypotheses about self-functioning in Iran:

First, if the perspective on Fukuyama's (1992) *thymos* as narcissism is valid, then the NPI in Iran should include factors with positive as well as negative implications for adjustment.

Second, and more specifically, adaptive narcissism should correlate positively with Integrative Self-Knowledge, Self-Esteem, Empathic Concern, and Perspective-Taking and negatively with the MTNS and Empathic Distress, whereas opposite relationships should appear for maladaptive narcissism.

Third, if self-knowledge is central to the psychological adjustment of Muslims, then Integrative Self-Knowledge should also correlate positively with Self-Esteem, Empathic Concern, and Perspective-Taking and negatively with the MTNS and Empathic Distress.

Fourth and finally, if sex differences discovered in the West are relevant in Iran, then narcissistic pathologies should be more obvious in men than in women.

Method

Participants

Participants were 406 students enrolled at the University of Tehran. Of this total, 229 (56.4%) were women, 165 (40.6%) were men, and 12 (3%) failed to indicate their sex. Average age was 21.3 years ($SD=2.9$). All involvement in this project was voluntary, anonymous, and in conformity with institutional ethical guidelines.

Measures

Persian versions of all psychological scales appeared in a questionnaire booklet that contained, in sequence, the Integrative Self-Knowledge Scale (Ghorbani et al. 2008); the NPI (Raskin and Terry 1988); the MTNS (Margolis and Thomas 1980); the Empathic Concern, Perspective-Taking, and Empathic Distress subscales from the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis 1983); and the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale.

Persian expressions of ISK items were created during scale-development procedures (Ghorbani et al. 2008). Translation of all other measures occurred in preparation for the present or previous studies. English statements translated into Persian by one person were back-translated into English by another. Meaningful contrasts between original and back-translated statements were rare and easily resolved. Psychometric adequacy of all Persian measures but the NPI was established with previous Iranian samples (e.g., Ghorbani et al. 2003a, 2004, 2008; Watson et al. 2002).

Responding to the 12-item Integrative Self-Knowledge Scale occurred along a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “largely untrue” (0) to “largely true” (4). As a

frequently employed index of narcissism, the NPI uses a forced-choice format with 40 items that present a narcissistic and a non-narcissistic response option. The MTNS includes 24 similar forced-choice items (Margolis and Thomas 1980). Using “strongly disagree” (0) to “strongly agree” (4) response options, subscales of the Interpersonal Reactivity Index (Davis 1983) present seven items to assess Empathic Concern (e.g., “I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me”), Perspective-Taking (e.g., “I try to look at everybody’s side of a disagreement before I make a decision”), and Personal Distress (e.g., “when I see someone who badly needs help in an emergency, I go to pieces”). Participants responded to the 10-item Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale with a 4-point scale ranging from “strongly agree” (4) to “strongly disagree” (0).

Procedure

All procedures of this project received human subjects approval from the University of Tehran. In small groups of 20 to 40 students, participants responded to the questionnaire booklet in a classroom setting. Scoring of all measures focused on average responses per item. Analysis of the NPI factor structure reflected responding of the present sample because (1.) this procedure made it possible to define perhaps unique dimensions of narcissistic functioning in Iran, (2.) the frequently examined Raskin and Terry (1988) factor structure failed to adequately fit the data (χ^2 [14, $N=45$]=60.263, $p<.001$; RMSEA=.09, CFI=.838, NFI=.807), and (3.) recent research has suggested that no previously reported NPI factor structure is fully adequate psychometrically (Corry et al. 2008).

Results

As a measure of pathological narcissism, the MTNS correlated positively with the NPI and Empathic Distress and negatively with Integrative Self-Knowledge, Empathic Concern, Perspective-Taking, and Self-Esteem (see Table 1). The full NPI displayed negative correlations with Empathic Concern and Integrative Self-Knowledge. Integrative Self-Knowledge also predicted lower Empathic Distress and greater Perspective-Taking and Self-Esteem.

No overall sex differences appeared in the responding to these scales (MANOVA Wilks $\Lambda = 0.98$, F [7/382]=1.17, $p>.30$). Men and women did differ, however, in the pattern of their correlations (Box’s $M=44.33$, F [28/424825]=1.55, $p<.05$). In contrasts that were of at least borderline significance ($Z\geq 1.96$, $p\leq .05$), the NPI displayed linkages with the MTNS that were .40 ($p<.001$) in women, but only .13 ($p>.10$) in men. An inverse NPI linkage with Integrative Self-Knowledge was also significant in women ($-.23$, $p<.001$), but not men ($-.04$, $p>.10$). On the other hand, NPI associations with Empathic Distress were negative in men ($-.18$, $p<.05$), but not women (.05, $p>.40$), and the NPI relationship with Self-Esteem was positive in men (.19, $p<.05$), but not women ($-.08$, $p>.20$). The connection of the MTNS with lower Empathic Concern was stronger in women ($-.33$, $p<.001$) than in men ($-.14$, $p>.05$). Integrative Self-Knowledge predicted greater Perspective-Taking in men (.24, $p<.01$), but not women (.04, $p>.50$).

Table 1 Mean (M), standard deviation (SD), Cronbach's α , and correlations of narcissistic personality inventory (NPI), Margolis and Thomas (1980) narcissism scale (MTNS) and measures of integrative self knowledge (ISK), empathy, and self-esteem

Variable	M	SD	α	Correlations						
				1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.
1. NPI	0.43	0.13	.69	–	.30***	–.15**	–.12*	.02	–.03	–.01
2. MTNS	0.31	0.17	.70		–	–.29***	–.27***	–.35***	.23***	–.42***
3. ISK	2.37	0.69	.79			–	.04	.14**	–.25***	.26***
4. Empathic concern	2.72	0.68	.66				–	.22***	.25***	.18***
5. Empathic perspective-taking	2.32	0.57	.52					–	–.24***	.25***
6. Empathic distress	1.93	0.61	.60						–	–.36***
7. Self-esteem	2.60	0.71	.74							–

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Principal axis factor analysis of the NPI with a varimax rotation uncovered a complex structure involving 12 factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0. A scree test suggested that these data could be usefully summarized by forcing them into three factors. Thirteen items defined a Manipulative Leadership factor that included such self-reports as “I find it easy to manipulate people” and “I am a born leader. Confident Leadership included eight items (e.g., “I will be a success” and “I see myself as a good leader”). Interpersonal Vanity contained nine items (e.g., “I like to be complimented” and “I want to amount to something in the eyes of the world”). (Complete results of this factor analysis are available upon request).

Confident Leadership correlated positively with Interpersonal Vanity (.16, $p < .01$), but was unrelated to Manipulative Leadership (–.07, $p > .10$). Manipulative Leadership also failed to correlate with Interpersonal Vanity (.04, $p > .40$). A MANOVA revealed no sex differences in responding to these three factors ($p > .90$), nor did correlations among these factors differ between men and women ($p > .25$).

Correlations of these NPI factors with other measures appear for the full sample and for women and men separately in Table 2. Confident Leadership had positive mental health implications. This factor was associated with greater Integrative Self-Knowledge and less Empathic Distress in both sexes; and in men, Confident Leadership also correlated positively with Self-Esteem and negatively with the MTNS. Manipulative Leadership was associated with diminished Integrative Self-Knowledge in both sexes, and in women, it correlated negatively with Self-Esteem and positively with the MTNS and with Empathic Distress. Interpersonal Vanity correlated positively with the MTNS and negatively with Empathic Concern.

Discussion

Functioning of the self may be central in efforts to understand psychosocial processes in Iran and other Islamic societies. Self-knowledge, for example, may

Table 2 Correlations of manipulative leadership (ML), confident leadership (CL) and interpersonal vanity (IV) with the Margolis and Thomas (1980) narcissism scale (MTNS), integrative self knowledge (ISK), empathy, and self-esteem for full sample and for men and women separately

Variable	Full sample			Women			Men		
	ML	CL	IV	ML	CL	IV	ML	CL	IV
MTNS	.20***	-.02	.31***	.27***	.11	.31***	.09	-.18*	.31***
ISK	-.44***	.38***	-.03	-.47***	.27***	-.05	-.39***	.52***	-.02
Empathic concern	-.02	-.06	-.17**	.00	-.10	-.17*	-.04	.01	-.16*
Empathic perspective-taking	-.07	.07	.02	-.08	.01	.00	-.04	.14	.03
Empathic distress	.11*	-.19***	-.03	.16*	-.18**	-.01	.04	-.22**	-.09
Self-esteem	-.17**	.17**	.05	-.23**	.11	.04	-.07	.26**	.08

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

define an Islamic psychological ideal (Haque 2004; Shimamoto 2008). On the other hand, a universal demand for self-esteem supposedly achieves its actualization in the Western democratic self and may challenge the stability of Muslim cultural arrangements (Fukuyama 1992). Both perspectives received at least some support in this investigation.

As hypothesized, the NPI included factors with both positive and negative adjustment implications, and Integrative Self-Knowledge in fact correlated positively with Self-Esteem and Perspective-Taking and negatively with the full NPI, the MTNS, and Empathic Distress. Especially noteworthy was the manner in which Integrative Self-Knowledge differentiated between the two types of NPI factors. In the full sample and in each sex separately, Integrative Self-Knowledge more clearly than any other variable predicted lower levels of a more maladaptive Manipulative Leadership factor and higher scores on a more adaptive Confident Leadership measure. This pattern of outcomes first confirmed the importance of self-knowledge in Muslim society. It also supported the interpretation of Fukuyama's (1992) *thymos* as narcissism and thus suggested that the dynamics of self-recognition might indeed exert important influences on Muslim sociopolitical arrangements.

Iranian men were not more narcissistic than Iranian women. The two sexes did differ, however, in the relationships of narcissism with other variables with these contrasts revealing that narcissism tended to be more maladaptive in women and more adaptive in men. Only in women, for example, did the full NPI correlate positively with the MTNS and negatively with Integrative Self-Knowledge. Only in men did the NPI predict greater Self-Esteem and lower Empathic Distress. Similarly, with regard to the NPI factors, Manipulative Leadership was associated with higher MTNS and Empathic Distress scores and with lower Self-Esteem only in women. Only in men did Confident Leadership correlate positively with Self-Esteem and negatively with the MTNS. Such findings imply that opportunities for the maturation of narcissism may be more constrained for women than for men in Iran.

Three caveats seem most important in efforts to interpret these data. First, students enrolled in one of the leading universities in Iran served as the research participants. Future studies will need to examine adult Iranians with a wider range of ages and from different walks of life. Second, Iran is not necessarily representative of all Muslim societies. Investigations into other Islamic societies are an obvious need. Finally, self-knowledge is a mental health ideal not only in Muslim societies (Ghorbani et al. 2003b). Relationships between self-knowledge and narcissism deserve analysis in non-Islamic cultures as well.

Discussions of narcissism and self-knowledge in Iran have a potential to move in all kinds of polemical directions. Recent sociopolitical turmoil in Iran could point toward the dynamics of *thymos* as narcissism, a possibility perhaps confirmed by the present NPI data. Integrative Self-Knowledge also proved to be a noteworthy predictor of mental health; so, Iranian social life may indeed find a source of stability in the self-knowledge advocated by a prominent ideologist of the Iranian revolution (Shimamoto 2008). Perhaps most importantly, however, adaptive narcissism correlated positively with Integrative Self-Knowledge. A critical question therefore arises. How and to what extent can self-knowledge and self-recognition be maintained within Muslim society? As noted at the outset, understandings of the self do not merely supply theoretical frameworks for research psychologists. They do not assume significance only in the statistical tests of social scientists, but also in the tests of history. Visions of the self have a profound cultural importance.

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