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From Self Esteem to the Tranquil Heart: Theoretical Analysis and Integration of Western Self-Esteem with Islamic Tazkiyah Al-Nafs

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Abstract

Self is the fundamental concept of psychological well-being. Western psychology has mostly used self -esteem as a person's global evaluation of their own worth, which is considered a primary framework for healthy relationships. But researchers have pointed out certain deficiencies; it depends too much on external success, hard to differentiate between narcissism, secular and do not give clear way to handle moral failure. Muslim psychology takes a different approach with tazkiyat al-nafs; purification of self which is rooted in Qur'an, Hadith and classical scholars like Al Ghazali and ibn Qayyim. This theoretical research article, compares Western self -esteem with Muslim self -worth. The Western approach is about how one can subjectively rate themselves using scales like Rosenberg Self -Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg,1965) which is a secular way of judging one's self-worth. The Muslim perspective starts with the idea that your worth is inherent and given by the God (Qur'an 17:70), then describe three levels or stages of self; Ammara, lawwama and mutmainnah and structure pathway for Restoration after moral failure through tawbah or repentance (Qur'an 39:53). But, the views of two perspectives agree on the importance of self-awareness and early experiences but they split on transcendence; how they understand guilt and the actual goal of self-development. On its own; neither approach is complete or cover everything. Western psychology provides empirical tools, while Muslim psychology provide transcendent foundation, a more differentiated model of self and spiritual practices for growth. They can be interrelated to give Muslim clients more complete mental health care. The paper concludes by saying there is a necessary tension between evaluation and purification; one that cannot be resolved, we just have to understand it.

***Keywords**: Self-Esteem, Tazkiyat Al-Nafs, Muslim Psychology, Western Psychology, Nafs, Self-Worth, Comparative Analysis*

Introduction

In psychology, one of the most fundamental constructs is the concept of "self". A person's mental health, relationships, behaviour and their overall wellbeing is affected by how they evaluate, define and relate to themselves. Questions about self like who I am? What's my

value? Am I good or bad? Has been extensively explored in psychology and fundamental to human experience.

According to a Western perspective, for understanding the healthy relationship of people with themselves, the most prevailing concept is the self -esteem. Rosenberg (1965) defines self -esteem as a person's subjective or global evaluation of their own value. It's basically, whether someone perceives oneself as good or bad person, feeling worthy or unworthy.

From humanistic psychology, especially from the work of Rogers (1959), this Western perspective of self- esteem has emerged. According to Rogers each and every individual, exhibits actualising tendencies, which is an inborn motive to fulfil their potentials, grow and develop further. Under this view, self-concept is defined as an organized collection of personal beliefs and subjective perceptions that a person holds about themselves. Rogers differentiated real self (i.e., what a person actually or currently is?) from an ideal self (what a person wants to become). Rogers (1959) argued the congruence between real self and ideal self is necessary for attaining good mental health. A person will experience different psychological problems i.e., anxiety and depression when the distance between the real self and ideal self is very large. According to Rogers when a person is receiving unconditional positive regards, love and acceptance from others, which is not dependent on certain specific behaviours, enables the person to fill that gap between two selves and develop a high self -esteem. For example, when a child receives regards which is conditioned or contingent upon certain behaviours (mama will love you only when you behave properly) then they will start denying or disowning, their real self which has not approved, which will further direct them to fragmented sense of self and chronic anxiety (Rogers, 1961).

Later, self -esteem was operationalised by Rosenberg (1965) as a measurable psychological construct. According to him, high self -esteem is a feeling that a person is good enough (Rosenberg, 1979, p.54). Rosenberg Self -Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg,1965) as developed by him, contains 10 items, widely used in psychology to measure self -esteem. Rosenberg viewed self-esteem as a trait that doesn't change much and remains stable overtime and also helps with mental wellbeing, encompassing motivation, happiness, initiative and bouncing back from setbacks.

Functions of self -esteem across distant cultural contexts was evaluated by Laird and Uskul (2023), their comprehensive review concluded that Western emphasis on high self -esteem i.e., feeling good about yourself is not found across all cultures. Self-worth is often embedded in the relationships with others, membership of the group, approval of community and transcendent believes not just individual self-evaluation in collectivistic religious societies. Joshanloo (2022), found something similar that the link between self -esteem and subjective wellbeing is weak in religious societies because there, the people get their sense of self-worth from God and social roles not from the self alone.

Muslim psychology sees the self in alternative way. Grounded in the Qur'an, Hadith and classical Islamic scholars, it's not just judging self as an object of negative and positive appraisal rather it is something to be understood, disciplined and purified. Nafs is the Arabic term used for the self which is mentioned more than 250 times in the Qur'an and it can range from the lower self that lean towards wrongdoings to calm and tranquil self that is at peace with God (Rothman and Coyle, 2018). Early Muslim thinkers like imam al-Ghazali (11th century) and ibn Qayyim al Jawziyya (14th century) built comprehensive maps of the self-

identifying it's diseases like pride, envy, miserliness, cowardice and greed and their treatment through Tazkiyat-al-nafs, spiritual and psychological purification of soul (Al- Ghazali, n.d.; Ibn Qayyim, n.d.). Modern Islamic psychologists have extended this tradition. They are showing how Islamic views of self can actually guide mental health practice (Rothman, 2021; Keshavarzi et al., 2021).

According to Qur'an "He has succeeded who purifies it [the soul], and he has failed who corrupts it" (Qur'an 91:9-10, Saheeh International translation). Purification i.e., Tazkiyah is not focus on cultivating feeling of worthiness but about actually becoming better through moral struggle (mujahadah), the inner struggle to do right (muhasabah), self-accountability and tawbah the sincere repentance (Rothman, 2021). The goal is tranquil self nafs-al-mutma'innah, is depicted in Qur'an as "well pleased and pleasing [to God]" (Qur'an 89:27-28) embodies ideal psychological and spiritual health.

Hence, main focus of Western psychology, is on subjective evaluation of Self-worth as self-esteem, and Muslim psychology is focused more on the purification of self as a part to inner tranquillity. Both traditions address the same basic question "how should I relate myself"? yet they proceed from different theoretical and philosophical premises.

Rationale of the study

An influential Western psychological concept of self-esteem exhibits notable limitations that constraints its relevance to mental health, particularly in Muslim population. First, self-esteem frequently depends on external stuff: how will you do in school, how you look or whether people like you, making it unstable, shaky and inherently fragile and volatile (Crocker & Park, 2004). Second, elevated self -esteem can look a lot like narcissism and may foster entitlement and aggression rather than true well-being (Baumeister et al., 1996). Third, the whole self- esteem model is secular and exclude any transcendent or space for God or spiritual basis for self-worth, even the empirical researchers linking religion to better mental health Koenig, 2012). Fourth, it provides no systematic framework for addressing moral failure, there by offering no path to restore self-worth following transgression. Fifth, extensive meta- analysis indicates that high self -esteem doesn't actually reliably predict better grades, reduce violence or curb substance abuse (Baumeister et al., 2003). Because of these problems, certain Western psychologist have advanced self-compassion instead, yet it still remains secular and lacks a transcendent dimension.

By contrast, the Islamic concept of tazkiyat al -nafs - the purification of self actually engages and addresses each of these gaps. In Islam self-worth doesn't derives from transient achievement but from the dignity God has conferred upon all human beings (Qur'an 17:70). The objective is not self-evaluation but the self-purification. Pride is not a virtue to be fostered but a disease of heart which is actually treated like a sickness of heart (Al-Ghazali, n.d.). The spiritual or transcendent grounding comes from dhikr remembrance of God and putting your trust in Him (Qur'an 13:28). This practice is also supported by empirical research. Among Muslim adults, Hamza (2022) found that regular dhikr is positively correlated with self-worth and self-esteem. Moral failure has a clear remedy that is repentance (tawba), where by divine mercy reconstitutes self-worth (Qur'an 39:53). The ultimate aim is reaching the peaceful self the nafs al- mutma'innah the tranquil self, finding lasting tranquillity in God rather than from different self-assessments (Qur'an 89:27-28). Modern Islamic psychologist have further

elaborated these constructs and show how they actually work in therapy (Rothman, 2021; Keshavarzi et al., 2021).

The basic objective is to take an objective look at Western idea of self -esteem and inspecting if any limitation or space it leaves for the Islamic concept of Tazkiyat al -nafs, then undertake comparative analysis of both paradigms i.e., Muslim and Western perspective and explore their convergence divergence and integrative potential for clinical work with Muslim clients.

Methodology

This study utilizes a comparative theoretical approach using journal articles, classic Western psychology texts on self-esteem, the Qur'an (Saheeh International translation), Hadith, writings from classical Islamic scholars like Al-Ghazali and Ibn Qayyim and alongside contemporary Islamic psychology literature. This analysis puts both paradigms side by side to elucidate their respective conceptualisations of the construct self- esteem and examine how they overlap or connect

Discussion

Through multiple theories and models the understanding of Western self -esteem has developed, which took about more than a century. James (1890) defined self- esteem as a success divided by aspirations, thereby positing that self-worth fluctuates in accordance with outcomes. That idea became the foundation for contingent self-esteem; the prospective that self-worth is contingent upon external achievements and how you compare yourself making it inherently unstable. Self -esteem is conceptualized as an individual's global, subjective evaluation of whether a person is valuable or not (Rosenberg, 1965). It reflects the extent to which persons perceive themselves as positively or negatively or as worthy or unworthy. According to Rogers (1959, 1961) each person has a capability of self-actualization. In humanistic model, he described self as having two parts; i.e., real self; which the person actually is an ideal self; which a person wants to be. Psychological health depends upon congruence between these two selves of a person and that the conditional positive regards produce self -fragmentation, chronic anxiety and low self- esteem. Rosenberg (1965) operationalised self-esteem into measurable global scale and made a Rosenberg Self -Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg,1965) which has ten items, it is still most widely used self-esteem test in modern psychology. According to him, high self-esteem is "a feeling that one is 'good enough'' (Rosenberg, 1979, p. 54). He regarded self-esteem as relatively stable subjective trait and contribute positively to psychological well-being. Maslow (1943) positioned esteem needs within his hierarchy of human needs and split them into two kinds; wanting respect from others i.e., recognition, status and appreciation and wanting self-respect like confidence, mastery and competence. He argued that these needs arise after basic needs has fulfilled. Yet, because esteem needs are mostly externally oriented, it can lead people to fixate on maintaining a positive self-image. Baumeister and his colleagues (1996, 2003) critically assessed self- esteem movements. In a comprehensive review Baumeister et al. (2003), they found that low self -esteem line up with depression and anxiety but high self- esteem does not reliably lead to better grades, reduced violence and lower substance abuse. Very high self -esteem often overlap with narcissism: a grandiose ego that is fragile and need constant external validation. Neff (2003; Neff & Knox, 2023) proposed self-compassion as an alternative or add on to self-esteem. She argued that it comprises three components: self-kindness; being kind to oneself while in struggle, common humanity; remembering that

everyone suffers and mindfulness; the balanced awareness of own painful thoughts. Her research shows that self-compassion is associated with more stable and less contingent self-worth than self-esteem. Laird and Uskul (2023) and Joshanloo (2022) suggested across cross cultural perspectives on self-esteem that Western self-regard is not universal. In collectivistic and religious societies, self-worth is often grounded in relationships, group memberships and transcendent believes not from judging their own self. Joshanloo (2022) also found that in religious societies, self-esteem exhibits weaker association with well-being, where personal worth is derived from the God.

The Western conceptualisation of self- esteem centres on the person's subjective evaluation of personal worth. It is usually measured with self-report questionnaires and tend to contingent upon external or outward things such as grades, physical looks and how much a person is approved by people. This Framework operates in secular framework. The Western concept of self-esteem does not address the spiritual, transcendent or religious dimensions of self-worth. It omits how God, divine purpose or religious believes might shape self-esteem. It also ignores structured framework for responding to moral and spiritual failure like sin or transgression and it does not distinguish levels of self beyond global evaluation.

Muslim psychology addresses self-worth through concepts such as nafs; the self, fitrah; innate disposition and Tazkiyah or purification and persons relationship with the God. The Qur'an says that human beings possess inherent worth conferred by the God. As the Qur'an says: "And indeed We have honored the children of Adam" (Qur'an 17:70). This honour is not contingent upon achievement nor fortified through failure but it is a divine gift from the God. The Qur'an further references the pre-covenant (mithaq) in 7:172, showing every soul has innate knowledge of God called fitrah. Fitrah functions as an internal compass for recognizing one's purpose. According to Rothman (2021) people who maintain strong connection with their fitrah experience greater self- acceptance and higher self-worth.

Qur'an describes three states or levels of nafs (self). The first is nafs Ammara bis-su; the commanding self that incite to evil, Qur'an 12:53 describe it as self that goes towards base desires in absence of discipline. The nafs al -lawwama; a self-reproaching self, and God swear by it in Qur'an 75:2. This self-experience guilt following sin and reproaches itself. In Islamic psychology, that guilt is not a sign of low self-esteem rather as a sign of living conscience that drive repentance. The nafs al-mutmainnah; the peaceful self and is described in Qur'an 89:27-28 as a culmination of spiritual growth, a self that found tranquillity through surrendering to the God.

The prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) said: "The strong is not the one who overcomes the people by his strength, but the strong is the one who controls himself while in anger" (Sahih Bukhari, Book 73, Hadith 135). This reference strength is self-control. Another hadith says: "The wise person is the one who takes account of himself and works for what comes after death" (Sunan al-Tirmidhi, Hadith 2459), there by establishing self- accounting or muhasabah a way to grow wisdom.

A comprehensive model of self was developed by Al Ghazali(n.d.). He differentiated between nafs, qalb (heart), ruh (spirit), and aql (intellect). He described Pride (kibr), envy (hasad), and greed (tama') is a disease of heart. According to him, these diseases are the actual cause of psychological distress. He established practices for purification i.e., Tazkiyah: muhasabah

(self-accounting), muraqabah (spiritual mindfulness), mujahadah (struggle against the self), and riyadah (training).

Islam provides a structure response to moral failure through repentance or tawbah. It means stopping the sin, feeling real regret, deciding not to go back to it and making amends if others were harmed. The Qur'an gives hope too: "Say, O My servants who have transgressed against themselves, do not despair of the mercy of God. Indeed, God forgives all sins" (Qur'an 39:53). This let a person to acknowledge failure without losing self-worth. Ahmed and Amer (2024) demonstrated that tawbah (repentance) helps Muslims feel less shame and improve psychological well- being thereby directly help in rebuilding sense of self-worth.

Today's scholars have rendered these concepts in modern language. Rothman (2021) presents a model of Islamic self and says that nafs al- mutma'innah represents integration and wholeness. Rothman and Coyle (2018) provide a Framework for Islamic psychology based on model of the soul. Ahmed and Amer (2024) found that concepts like tawakkul and sabr correlates positively with self-concept and well-being in Muslim adolescents. Tawakkul (reliance on God) involves taking appropriate means while trusting the outcomes to God. Al-Haq (2019) found that self- esteem is significantly predicted by the tawakkul, higher tawakkul significantly increases self-worth. Abu-Raiya (2021) also demonstrated that there is a positive correlation between Islamic religious coping and self-esteem. Sabr(patience) helps people to endure hardships of life without losing their sense of worth. Khan and Watson (2020) showed that sabr is positively correlated with self -concept clarity and self -worth in Muslim adolescents, indicating patience helps a person to keep a steady self-image during hardships. According to Islam, self-worth is not earned or contingent upon outcomes rather self-worth is inherent and is God given. Abdel-Khalek (2016) reported that Muslims who are more religious, encompassing prayers and worship is associated with high self-esteem, indicating that robust connection to God enhances self-worth.

In the Muslim view, the self-worth is inherent and God given not earn or contingent upon outcomes. It differentiates between different states of self; Ammara, Lawwama, and Mutmainnah. The goal is to purify self and move from the lower States to the higher levels is a process of purification. It addresses moral failure through repentance (tawbah), enabling one to restore sense of worth through the God's mercy. The Muslim perspective explicitly grounded self -worth in a transendant relationship with the God. It interprets guilt (the nafs al -lawwama) not a threat to self-worth but a healthy motivator to push a person towards change. It offers structure theology of forgiveness and the getting back on track after moral failure. Instead of evaluation, it is focused on purification as a pathway to healthy self.

The Western concept of the self- esteem and the Muslim perspective of the self-worth or the tranquil self are not inherently opposed or mutually exclusive, in fact they connect and overlap in multiple ways. Both traditions acknowledge that self-perception significantly effect mental health, they also both sees that early life Shapes self-worth of a person; Rogers noted conditional versus unconditional positive regard while Islamic psychology note that environment can support or corrupt fitrah. Both value self-awareness as catalyst for change; Western psychology leans towards self-awareness, whereas Islamic psychology emphasizes mahasabha or self-accounting plus marakbah or spiritual mindfulness. Rothman (2021) found that regularly practicing muhasabah and muraqabah is positively associated with self-acceptance and make self-esteem less contingent. Neff's concept of self-compassion is

parallel to the Islamic emphasis on God mercy (rahmah) and the Qur'anic injunction not to despair of that mercy (Qur'an 39:53).

Western concept of self -esteem is secular and lacks a transcendent dimension while Muslim view centres self-worth on God. The west focuses on evaluation; do you feel good or bad about yourself while Muslim perspective emphasize purification, becoming better and getting closer to God. The West measure self- esteem with scales while Islam assess nafs and heart. Western psychology often views guilt as potential threat to self -esteem while Islam sees guilt as nafs al- lawwama as a good sign that conscience is alive.

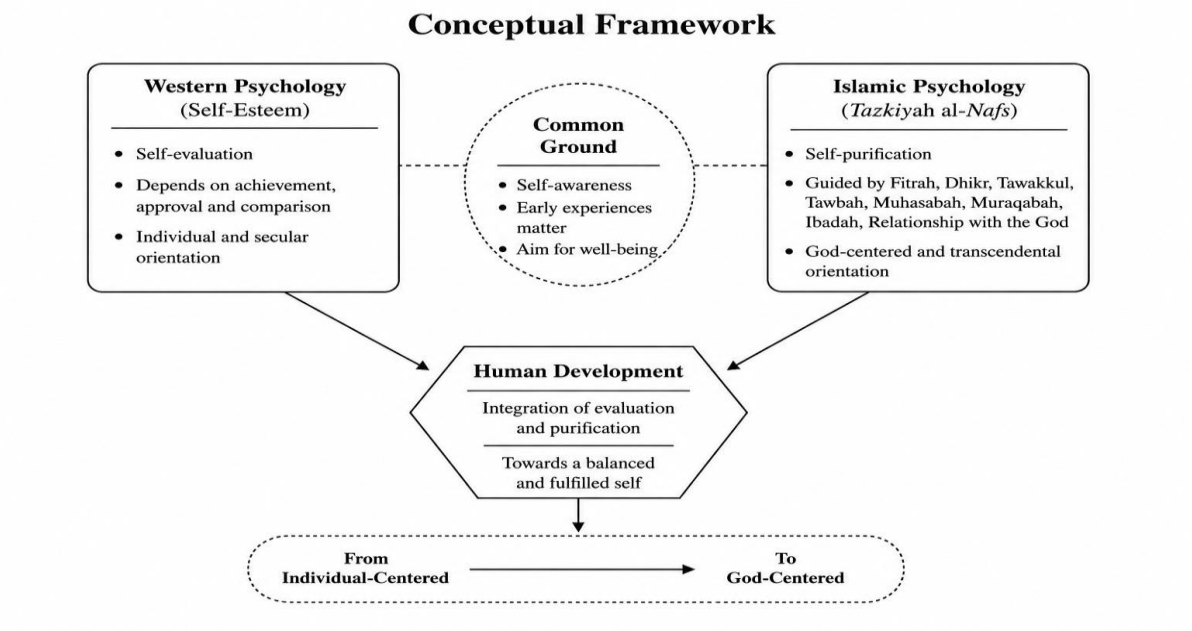
Even with those differences the two views can actually work together. The Western concept offers a rich empirical understanding of how self-evaluation develops, how it changes, how it links with mental health and how we measure it. The Muslim perspective supplies a spiritual Framework that provides meaning, purpose and direction. For instance, the Western concept of contingent self- esteem in which worth depends on external outcomes can be taken along with Islamic teachings that true worth is grounded in a person's relationship with God rather than from their personal wins and losses (Qur'an 17:70). So, a Muslim client struggling with contingent self -esteem could use Western tools like cognitive restructuring with Islamic teachings on inherent God given worth.

Western concept of self-compassion integrates with Islamic concept of *rahmah* or mercy. The Qur'an instruct believers not to despair of God's mercy (39:53). Giving self-compassion a transcendent basis: one can extend kindness to oneself because God is kind and merciful.

The Western understanding of guilt can be enriched by the Islamic concept of nafs al-lawwama. For Muslim clients, guilt that pushes you to change and make tawbah is not the sign of low self -esteem but rather a healthy conscience. The therapist can help client to differentiate healthy guilt from toxic shame.

One way to understand the interrelation is to view the Western concept of self- esteem as addressing question, "how do I feel about myself?" The Muslim perspective ask different questions like "what is my worth based on?" and "what am I actually striving for?" The Western concept offer tools to measure and boost how one can evaluate themselves. The Islam provide a foundation of self-work that is stable, a way to recover after moral failure and a purpose for self -development beyond feeling good.

Figure 1: Integrated Model of Western and Islamic concept of Self-Esteem



Note. Own work. The model should be reproduced with the permission of authors.

The conceptual model of the study contrasts two paradigms of self-worth. Western psychology is focused on self-esteem which is developed by self-evaluation and is dependent on external accomplishments, social validations and comparison with others, reflects an individualistic and secular framework. In contrast, Muslim psychology centres on tazkiyat-al-nafs (purification of self). This happens to spiritual practice like Fitrah (primordial disposition towards the God), tawakkul (trusting the God), tawbah (repentance), muhasabah (taking account of yourself), muraqbah (being aware of the God), Ibadah(worship), and a person relationship with the God. So, it indicates the God centred and transcendental orientation. Still, both sides agree on few things i.e., emphasis on self-awareness, the formative impact of early life experiences and the main goal of psychological well-being. Combining Western self-evaluation with Islamic purification can create a balanced fulfilled self and moving from an individual centred to the God centred orientation.

Conclusion

According to Western psychology, worth can be measured by self- esteem through achievement, contingency and self-evaluation. Muslim psychology argues that the worth is rooted in divine honour, purification and self-tranquillity of self. Western psychology shows the fluctuation of self-worth with success and failure. In Islamic perspective, self-worth remains stable through repentance and divine mercy. A necessary tension lies between self-evaluation and purification, which cannot be resolved; rather only understood. But it must not remain only an evaluation.

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