Original Article

Positive and Negative Conception of God and Its Relationship with Student's Self-Esteem and Mental Health

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this study is investigation of the relationship of positive and negative conception of God with self-esteem and mental health among high school students. The sample of this research includes 300 students (149 girls and 151 boys) in grade two at high school in different fields of study. The students were selected by the use of simple random sampling method and were evaluated through three instruments, mental health questionnaire (GHQ, 28), Cooper self-esteem questionnaire and the questionnaire of conception of God. For analyzing the collected data, three statistical methods of correlation coefficient, multi-variable variance and step by step regression were used. The findings of the research showed that a significant positive correlation is seen between positive conception of God with mental health and self-esteem. Moreover, the results of the findings have shown that a significant positive correlation is seen between self-esteem and mental health. Additionally, the result of step by step regression test showed that the first factor having a determining contribution in predicting mental health is self-esteem factor and the second factor is negative conception of God.

Key words: Positive conception of God, Negative conception of God, Self-esteem, Mental health.

INTRODUCTION

Mental health is in fact a general aspect of health concept. In spite of the attempts that have been made for providing more health by pioneers of mental health in the world, still, it can be said that we have taken the first step [1] and the problems of mental hygiene is one of major increasing troubles of societies.

On the other hand, every day the number of people who believe "spirituality" is the treatment of psychoneurosis and mental helplessness, also the experts who focus on beliefs and religious behaviors for treatment of psychological diseases and mental hygiene is increased [2]. Tendencies have flourished among psychologists. They say there is an extraordinary energy in belief in God and it gives a religious man a kind of spiritual power and helps him tolerate hardships of life and protects him from worry and anxiety, from which lots of people in our century suffer. One of the first people who proposed this issue was Williams James. He says: "There is an inseparable relationship between us and God. If we accept the dominance of God and surrender to him, all our wishes and aspirations will be fulfilled [3]. But one of the factors affecting man's relationship with God is his conception of God [4]. God of the Quran shows two different complexions which fundamentally oppose each other. However to the pious intellect of a believer, the two complexions are not but two aspects of one God; but for logic of normal intellect, they seem contradictory. In fact for adjusting these two complexions to each other, some thinkers have experienced discomfort. In one of these two complexions, God presents himself as the God of endless benevolence and the God of infinite love and kindness and generous and forgiving God. Elsewhere, God is the strict God in spreading justice, the inflexible judge on the Day of Judgment and severe in punishment and vindictive. The one on whom his wrath comes down is succumbed [5]. Thus for logic of normal intellect, the formed conception of God is divided into positive and negative conception. In positive conception of God, God is imagined kind, protective and guide. This concept can give tranquility. And in negative conception of God, God is imagined with negative expressions such as rejecting, unkind and strict. This concept causes

people to experience hopelessness, hatred and negative mood [6]. Of course, considering this point is important that, in general, the term "conception of God" can be defined as man's emotional cognition of God and is mostly on the base of an individual's emotional and affecting experiences [7]. Firmly accepting religion as an effective factor in achieving mental health, Pargament [8] also writes: "What should be regarded important and focused on is the type of conception and definition that individuals have of their religion and God". He emphasizes when we get very close to people, we see they have specific and multiple perception of and inferences about religion in their mind and heart. Some of them are helpful and useful and some disappointing and harmful. He found that people's almost all definitions and perceptions of God are embodied in two general models. In the first model, people know God as a source of sheer anger, violence and vengeance, and imagine human as a guilty person suffering from descent and a prisoner in this angry God's hands. Understanding God in this model willingly or unwillingly is frightening and distressing. Those who communicate with God according to this model are taken away more from their relative mental health every day. In contrast to this group, there are people who obey the second model in communicating with God. In this model, they consider God forgiving and as their friend and communicate sincerely and warmly with him through making a loving relationship. In this model, God is very close to man. This group regards most of hardships and sufferings in fact as opportunities for growth and excellence. Those depending on this model experience more sustainable mental health and enjoy their lives more. On the other hand, most experts consider having self-esteem as the central and basic factor in an individual's emotional-social adjustment; and as the level of self-esteem has a great contribution in mental health, they emphasize its importance. Some people like Brown, [9] claim that positive self-esteem is our most valuable psychological need and is a prerequisite for mental health. This is while Spilka, Odinson and Ruzonson [10] propose that concept of God has a relationship with self-esteem. On the base of cognitive coordination theory, individuals' conception of themselves has an impact on how they see God.

The assumption of this theory is that the data which oppose implicitly with individuals' perception of actual self-create cognitive disharmony. To reduce psychological derangement created by such disharmony, individuals may use techniques such as denial, distortion or selective comprehension for ensuring that the data is compatible with their perception. Therefore, conception of individuals' selves can have an impact on individuals' ability for seeing God as the fosterer, the acceptor, the rejecter and the maintainer. In addition, in researches investigated in relation to religion and attributive styles, it has been observed that when people involve in critical events, in relation to normal events, they attribute these events more to God and His vengefulness aspect [11] Now, given that thought of God is one of basic religious thoughts [12], the issues of love and punishment in communication with God have been constantly repeated in Holy Books and both issues are quite fundamental and important. For this reason, these two dimensions have been selected for this study. It has not been assumed that these conceptions of God are completely bipolar but relative priority of each of these conceptions in the mind of the respondents at this time and its relation with mental health and self-esteem have been examined; and accordingly, the following hypotheses have been formulated and investigated: The positive conception of God has a positive and significant correlation with mental health. The positive conception of God has a positive and significant correlation with self-esteem. Self-esteem has a positive and significant correlation with mental health. And conceptions of God and self-esteem have a determining contribution in predicting mental health.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Statistical community of this research includes all students of state high schools in Minab. The students were studying in three fields of human sciences, experimental sciences and mathematics. Through the use of the table of sample size estimation on the base of Krejcie and Morgan, 300 students (149 girls and 151 boys) were selected through simple random sampling. In the present research, the following instruments have been used.

Goldberg mental health test (GHQ-28): This test was offered by Goldberg in 1972. It can be considered as a series of cases which consist of the lowest levels of common symptoms of illness that exist in different mental disorders. This test mainly means to create distinction between mental illness and health [13]. The data concerning the scale of physical symptoms, anxiety, impairment in social function and depression can be achieved from this questionnaire. On the base of Likert method, test grading has 4 options from 0 to 3. In this grading method, the higher grades are indicative of poorer general health and the lower ones indicative of better general health. Yaqubi [14] has reported 0.88 as the total reliability coefficient of this test. He has reported the retail reliability coefficient between 0.50 and 0.81. In test-retest method, Taghavi [15] achieved 0.73 as the total reliability coefficient of this test and the retail reliability coefficients of the tests were between 0.57 and 0.68. In the present study, Cranach's alpha coefficient for the entire questionnaire was achieved 0.90 and for subtests of physical symptoms, anxiety and insomnia, impairment in social functioning and depression, the coefficients were achieved 0.77, 0.80, 0.63 and 0.85 respectively. Also, correlations between these subtests with general grade of mental disorder were achieved 0.80, 0.84, 0.70 and 0.85 respectively.

Cooper Smith self-esteem test: Cooper Smith formulated self-esteem test on the base of the revision he made on Rogers and Diamond's self-concept scale. This scale includes 58 cases. Eight cases of its test are lie detectors. This test

consists of 4 subscales of general self-esteem, social self-esteem, familial self-esteem and educational self-esteem. Grading this test is done in the form of zero and one. That is for test items indicating high self-esteem, the positive answer gets one and the negative answer zero, and other test items are graded vice versa. In investigating the construct validity of the questionnaire with correlating this questionnaire with its homonymous questionnaire; that is, Aizant questionnaire, Zolfaghari [16] reported correlation coefficient of 0.84. In the second method, factorial analysis method was used. For doing factor analysis in this research, first, they reported the level of KMO equivalent to 0.83 which is the indication of adequacy of sampling. Then, Bartelt test was used and its amount was achieved equal to 6363.07 which statistically was significant and justified doing factorial analysis. In factorial analysis, they made use of two analyzing methods of main components (PC) and probability record (ML). Given the PC method, the dominance of a general factor on the questionnaire was confirmed. This general factor is the same self-esteem construct. Alpha coefficient of this questionnaire was achieved 0.85. In the present study, Cranach's alpha coefficient of Cooper Smith self-esteem test was achieved 0.80.

Conception of God test: In this test, special items concerning God have been selected from the questionnaire of religious status (RSI) and have been used [6]. This test has 27 items and 3 subtests of presence of God in life, God's care and negative conception of God. Finally, subtests of presence of God in life and God's care are combined and form the scale of positive conception of God. In this research, Farsi translation of this test, done by Khosravi in 2005, was used. Grading this test is according to Likert method and the items 4, 6, 8, 9 and 11 are graded from 1 to 5 from right hand side and the rest are graded in reverse. Kline quoted by Grinvi et al, [6] has achieved the internal reliability of the three subtests of presence of God in life, God's care and negative conception of God 0.86, 0.82 and 0.69 respectively and regards it as the sign of the good internal reliability of this test. Through the use of Cranach's alpha coefficient Alavi [17] achieved the test reliability in case of the factor of presence of God in life 0.77, God's care 0.89, positive conception of God 0.86 and negative conception of God 0.57. In the present research, through the use of Cranach's alpha coefficient, the test reliability was achieved in case of the factor of presence of God in life 0.60, God's care 0.64, positive conception of God 0.61 and negative conception of God 0.58. In addition, correlations of the factor of presence of God in life and God's care (subsets of positive conception of God) with positive conception of God were achieved 0.77 and 0.72 respectively.

Through the use of Cranach's alpha coefficient, Khosravi and Feiz Abadi [18] report the test reliability for subsets of negative conception of God 0.76, positive conception of God 0.85, presence of God in life 0.83 and for the entire test 0.79 and they report the retest 0.79. Also, for investigating the test validity, simultaneous validity method was used. They calculated the test correlation of conception of God with the test of the individual's religious attitudes concerning God's help. They reported the correlation coefficient equal to 0.67 which is significant. Moreover, the face and content validity of the test of conception of God have been confirmed by 3 experts of psychology.

RESULTS

In this research, Pearson correlation coefficient and step by step regression have been used. Given the test hypotheses, the achieved results of the present study are presented as follow.

The results of table 1 show that there is a significant correlation between the grade of positive conception of God and the total grade of mental health test and the subsets of mental health except for anxiety subset. That is, the more positive conception of God is, the higher mental health is and the probability of outbreak of mental disorders becomes less. There is also a significant relationship between the grade of positive conception of God and the grade of self-esteem; that is, the higher positive conception of God is, the higher the grade of self-esteem also becomes. There is also a significant positive relationship between self-esteem and mental health. In other words, the higher the level of individuals' self-esteem is, the higher the level of mental health gets and the lower the rate of mental disorders becomes.

The achieved results of variable correlation coefficients of mental disorders, self-esteem and negative conception of God in the first and second steps As it is noted in table 2, the correlation between mental disorders and self-esteem has been 0.53 and the correlation between mental disorders with self-esteem and negative conception of God 0.54.

The achieved results from the coefficient concerning regression of mental disorders on the base of self-esteem and negative conception of God Based on the results of variance and statistical indicator of step by step regression between mental disorders and self-esteem and negative conception of God, the amount of t achieved in table 3 is significant.

The results achieved from variance analysis concerning prediction of mental disorders on the base of self-esteem and negative conception of God. As it is observed in table 4, in the second step, when both predicting variables, that is, self-esteem and negative conception of God entered regression, the achieved f was significant at the level of 0.01. It can be concluded that self-esteem and negative conception of God can predict mental disorders.

Table 1. Correlation matrices between study variables

correlation	physical	anxiety	social function	depression	mental disorder	God	God care	positive	negative	self-esteem
physical	1	.057**	0.43**	0.57**	0.80**	-0.17**	-0.14**	-0.20**	0.15**	-0.34**
anxiety	.57**	1	0.46**	0.62**	0.84**	-0.11*	0.02	-0.06	0.13**	-0.40**
Social function	.43**	.46**	1	0.46**	0.70**	-0.16**	-0.07	-0.15**	0.11**	-0.147**
depression	.057**	.62**	.46**	1	0.85**	-0.20**	-0.03	-0.16**	0.23**	-0.148**
Mental disorder	.80*	.84**	.70**	.85**	1	-0.22**	-0.05	-0.18**	0.20**	-0.53**
God	-.17**	-.11**	-.20**	-.20**	-.22**	1	0.12*	0.77**	-0.26**	0.22**
Care God	-.14**	.02	-.16*	-0.03	-0.05	0.12*	1	0.72**	0.101	.09
Positive	-.12**	-.06	-.15**	-.16**	-.18**	0.77**	0.72**	1	-0.1	-0.21**
Negative	.15**	.13*	.11*	.23**	.20**	-0.126**	0.1*	0.10	1	-0.19**
Self-esteem	-.34**	-.4*	-047**	-.48**	.53**	0.22**	0.09	0.31**	-0.19**	1

N = 300   *P < 0.01** P < 0.001

Table 2. The result of step by step regression in predicting mental health by self-esteem and negative conception of God

Steps	Dependent variable	Independent variable	R	R²	R²	Std error
First step	Mental disorder	Self-esteem	0.0053	0.0279	0.277	10.44
Scond step	Mental disorder	Self-esteem of negative conception of God	0.54	0.0289	0.284	10.39

Table 3. Analysis of regression variable self-esteem and negative God conception on predictors mental disorder

First Step	Dependent Variable		Standardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	T
			B	Std Error		
Second Step	Mental Disorder	Intercept	43.8	4.28	-	**10.2
		Self-Esteem	-0.90	0.08	-0.50	**-10.17
		Negative Conception Of God	0.33	0.16	0.10	*2.04

Table 4. Analysis of variance variable self-esteem and negative God conception on predictors variables mental health

Steps	Dependent variable	Independent variable	SS	Df	MS	F
First	Disorder Mental	Self-Seem	Regression 12576.48	1	12576.48	1150.302
			Residual 32503.76	298	109.073	
			Total 45080.250	299	–	
Second	Disorder Mental	Self-Esteem And Negative God Conception	Regression 13027.74	2	6513.87	60.358
			Residual 32052.51	297	107.921	
			Total 45080.250	299	12576.48	

** $P < 0.001$

DISCUSSION

In the present research, a significant correlation was achieved between conception of God (positive and negative) and mental health. The results of correlation tests show that there is a positive and significant correlation between positive conception of God and mental health. They show that the results of this test are also in the direction of the work of researches such as Phillips [19] who found in a research that when individuals considered God as a rejecting and strict God and an applicant of negative conception, this factor was related to low mental health. The results of this test are also in the direction of Pargament's viewpoints which stated, those who know God as a source of sheer wrath, violence and revenge and consider man as a guilty person suffering from descent and a prisoner in the hands of this angry God, experience fear and anxiety and are taken away from their relative mental health every day. But in the model in which individuals know a merciful God and regard him as their friend and communicate with him through a loving relationship, they consider God as the first helper who helps them in hardships. Those depending on this attitude experience more sustainable mental hygiene. Thus, it can be concluded that when individuals have negative conception of God, fear of punishment and rejection by God are implicitly considered. These individuals consider God more as a source of pain and punishment than a source of love and affection. While, when there is a positive conception of God, there is also a meaning, based on a loving relationship with God, associated with it. The one who sees himself in the aura of the grace of the beneficent and merciful God and constantly feels him near himself and even, according to the Holy Quran, nearer to himself than his neck vessel, never has a feeling of helplessness and rejection. Such an attitude induces man to feel relaxed and protects him from mental balance and internal security disturbance. In examining the second hypothesis based on the relationship of positive conception of God and self-esteem also, correlation test was used. The result of investigation is an indication of the existence of a significant positive correlation between positive conception of God and self-esteem. Given the results of this research, the individuals who mainly show positive conception of God, have higher self-esteem and who show those more negative conception of God, have lower self-esteem. Additionally, Benson and Spilka, quoted by Francis et al [20], stated that high self-esteem has a positive correlation with perceptions of the kind God but a negative correlation with negative conception of God such as rejection, coolness, revenge and control. Roberts [21] also showed that an accepting attitude of self and others is related to the belief in one accepting God. Richter [22] also found some evidence that conception of God is highly affected by self-esteem and self-conception. Like Spilka and Benson quoted by Spilka et al [10] in stating the findings, cognitive coordination theory can be used. According to this theory, individuals' conception of themselves has an impact on how they see God. The data implicitly opposing real self-conception of individuals create cognitive disharmony. To reduce psychological derangement created by such disharmony, individuals may use techniques such as denial, distortion or selective comprehension for ensuring that the data is compatible with their perception accordingly, if individuals' conception of themselves is negative, positive conception of God creates psychological derangement for them. For this reason, they either deny this conception or resort to distortion and selective comprehension for coordinating the data with self-conception. In case the individual has high self-esteem, cognitively speaking, this is compatible more with kind and accepting conception of God in relation to punishing conception of God. On the other hand according to Rogers' view quoted by Clough [23], the individuals who evaluate themselves from the viewpoint of the other side of the relationship, in case they feel they are not loving and the other side of the relation does not accept them, they are made to distort real self-conception. And if an individual's conception of God is the God who accepts man unconditionally and the God who loves him, it is natural that he considers value for himself and forms a desirable self-conception and has higher self-esteem. Moreover Eltois [24]

proposes that defect in self-esteem leads to pride, selfishness and arrogance and causes deviation from acknowledging love of God towards himself. In the third hypothesis, the relationship between self-esteem and mental health is raised. According to this hypothesis, high self-esteem results in higher mental health. This hypothesis was reviewed through correlation test and the results of the test showed that a significant positive relationship is seen between these two variable. It can be referred to Rogers' view in stating this result. Rogers believe that for having good mental health, everyone should answer the question "Who am I?" with maximum satisfaction. Therefore, this concept as an important determining construct in people's behavior has been regarded important in many viewpoints such as the views of Freud, Fromm, Horney, Maslow, Rogers and saliva. Individuals, who have positive self-concept, have a feeling of adequacy and have ability in adaptation and compatibility with their environment. They feel they are lovely, respected, useful and free. The existence of these feelings in a person brings self-esteem and feeling of being valued [25]. in the fourth hypothesis, the determining contributions of conception of God and self-esteem were investigated in predicting mental health. This hypothesis was reviewed through regression test. The results of the test showed that although both variables of self-esteem and negative conception of God are significantly important in predicting mental health, but the first factor having a more important contribution in predicting mental health is self-esteem which has allocated more variance to itself. The second factor can be negative conception of God. In stating the finding that self-esteem has a predicting role in mental health of individuals, it can be referred to the importance many theorists have cared about for self-esteem discussion. Rogers quoted by Clough [23] believes the root of many neurological disorders is in an individual's experience that he is worthless and no one accepts him. Brown quoted by Kramer and Moore [9] states that a good and desirable understanding of self, that is, positive self-esteem is our most valuable psychological need. A good feeling concerning self is a prerequisite for mental health, while lack of self-esteem is the result of psychological conflict. In this hypothesis also, the predicting role of negative conception of God in mental health has been considered and confirmed. In stating this finding, it can be said that when a person has negative conception of God, that is, he feels God does not take care of him, He has no role in life improvement, he does not receive any guidance from Him, He is punishing and strict and not interested towards him, the relationship between man and God in the atmosphere of such a fearful experience is the relationship of master and peasant. God is the absolute owner who has man's everything in His violently captured grip. He can do whatever He prefers with this weak and worthless man and this can be an introduction for directing him towards mental disorders.

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