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SELF-ESTEEM AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS FROM FOUR ARAB COUNTRIES¹

AHMED M. ABDEL-KHALEK

Kuwait University

ADEL SHOKRY KORAYEM

Alexandria University, Egypt

MAYSSAH A. EL-NAYAL

Alexandria University, Egypt

Summary.—This study had three objectives: (a) to compare undergraduates from four Arab countries on self-esteem, (b) to explore the sex-related differences in self-esteem in these four Arab countries, and (c) to examine the association of self-esteem with both per-capita income and unemployment rate. Four samples of 2,643 students were recruited from Egypt ($n=576$), Kuwait ($n=674$), Lebanon ($n=826$), and Oman ($n=567$). They responded to the Arabic version of the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Kuwaiti and Omani men had a significantly higher mean score on self-esteem than did Egyptian and Lebanese men. Egyptian women scored significantly lower than the Omani women, but the effect size was small. Regarding the sex-related differences in self-esteem, Kuwaiti men had a significantly higher mean score than did their female peers, but the effect size was small, whereas there were no significant sex differences in the other samples. The sex-related difference in self-esteem is a controversial result and it may not be replicable in different countries. It was suggested that self-esteem is associated with high per-capita income and low unemployment rate.

Self-esteem is a construct that underlies and often helps to explain human thoughts, feelings, and behavior. There is a general consensus that high self-esteem is associated with better psychological health, well-being, and functioning, and that low self-esteem is undesirable, because it is associated with lower psychological health and functioning (Glaus, 1999). Self-esteem is the evaluative dimension of self-knowledge, referring to how a person positively or negatively appraises himself (Baumeister, 1994). Researchers have affirmed the importance of self-esteem as indicating a person's subjective quality of life, because self-esteem is related to behavioral competence, positive self-experience, and self-actualization (Ng, Tam, Man, Cheng, & Chiu, 2003). Additionally, researchers have considered it an important aspect of self-development, because it reflects the evaluation of one's competence and affects emotional experiences, future behavior, and long-term psychological adjustment (Nagar, Sharma, & Chopra, 2008).

Although self-esteem is generally stable, it can fluctuate from time to

¹Address correspondence to Ahmed Abdel-Khalek, Department of Psychology, College of Social Sciences, Kuwait University, P. O. Box 68168, Kaifan, Code No. 71962, Kuwait or e-mail (aabdell-khalek@hotmail.com), Adel Shokry Korayem (amywn2003@hotmail.com), or Maysah A. El-Nayal (mayssah.mayssah@gmail.com).

time, a phenomenon which is referred to as global versus situational self-esteem (National Association for Self-Esteem, 2010). Robins and Trzesniewski (2005) suggested that self-esteem could be both trait-like and stable or state-like and change in response to different environments and situations.

Several studies have investigated the relationships of culture and self-esteem (see Chan, 2000; Hermann, Lucas, & Friedrich, 2008; Szeto, Sorrentino, Yasunaga, Otsubo, Kouhara, & Sasayama, 2009). Watkins, Akande, Cheng, and Regmi (1996) compared college students from four countries: Hong Kong, Nigeria, the USA, and Nepal, on self-esteem. They found a tendency for participants from non-Western cultures to report higher academic but lower non-academic self-esteem. It was found also that sex differences, whether favoring males or females, were inconsistent across cultures; however, in the literature there is general agreement that, typically, men have higher self-esteem than women (Baumeister, 1994; Francis, 1998; Joshi & Srivastava, 2009).

The majority of published studies in this field have been carried out to compare Western with Asian (mainly Chinese and Japanese) participants. Therefore, the comparison between Arab participants recruited from four different sub-cultures allows expansion of the culture research to a new region with different religion, political systems, and history. A dearth of research exists in this domain. The main objectives of this study were: (a) to compare Egyptian, Kuwaiti, Lebanese, and Omani undergraduates on self-esteem, (b) to assess if there were differences between men and women in these countries on self-esteem, and (c) to examine the association of self-esteem with both per-capita income and unemployment rate.

These Arab countries share language, geographical region (Middle East), history, culture, and dominant religion (Islam). However, there are major differences in gross national income (very high in the cases of Kuwait and Oman), as well as large differences in the rate of unemployment (high in Lebanon and Egypt). It was suggested that high per-capita income and low unemployment rate would have a positive correlation with self-esteem. College students in any given society with high per-capita income and low unemployment rate might be more optimistic and hopeful of obtaining a secure job after their graduation, leading to a high quality of life, and this may enhance their self-esteem. Furthermore, tribal and family relations are stronger in the Kuwaiti and Omani than in the Egyptian and Lebanese cultures.

It is important to know that "Arab" is primarily a language distinction, certainly not a racial one, and that there are considerable variations in the nature of the people and sub-cultures that comprise "Arabs." The Arabic language is spoken by around 300 million persons. The League of Arab States comprises 23 states. In the present sample, the vast majority of

Egyptian college students were Muslims, whereas all students from Kuwait, Lebanon, and Oman were Muslims.

METHOD

Participants

A convenience sample of 2,643 volunteer undergraduates from different faculties at universities in Alexandria, Egypt (213 men, 363 women), Kuwait (332 men, 342 women), Lebanon (274 men, 552 women), and Oman (207 men, 360 women) took part in the study. Their ages ranged from 19 to 27 years. All samples responded to the scale in Arabic, anonymously, in small group sessions in their respective classrooms and countries.

Measure

The Rosenberg (1989) Self-Esteem Scale (SES) is a 10-item Likert-type scale answered on a five-point scale with anchors 1: Strongly agree and 5: Strongly disagree. Scores can range from 10 to 50, with higher scores indicating higher self-esteem. Abdel-Khalek (2007b) translated the scale into Arabic. Then, the preliminary translation was carefully evaluated by three Arab psychologists to check comparability in terms of meaning. Suitable revisions and corrections were carried out accordingly. Internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach alphas) were acceptable in Arab men (.88) and women (.87) ($N=450$). Criterion-related validity of the Arabic version of the scale has been supported by correlations of .54, .61, and .42 with the Love of Life Scale, Satisfaction Self-rating Scale, and the Hope Scale, respectively (Abdel-Khalek, 2007b, 2011; Abdel-Khalek & Snyder, 2007).

Based on problems in the translated versions of the SES (Cheng & Hamid, 1995), and problems in understanding the double negatives (Carver & Scheier, 2000, p. 47; Schirriesheim & Hill, 1981), the five negatively-worded items in the scale were changed to affirmatively worded ones.

Statistical Analysis

Mean, standard deviation, t test, Cohen d for effect size, two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), Scheffé test, and Pearson correlation were used (SPSS, 2009) in data analyses.

RESULTS

The items were examined for skew ($-.79$, $-.81$, $-.82$, and $-.56$) and kurtosis (1.21, 1.24, 1.91, and .17) for Egyptian, Kuwaiti, Lebanese, and Omani samples, respectively, to ensure that the data were acceptable for further analysis. The two-way ANOVA indicated that there were statistically significant differences in self-esteem among the eight male and female groups and for the interaction between sex and groups (Table 1). Cronbach alpha reliabilities of the Self-Esteem Scale ranged between .82 and .91 in these subgroups, indicating good internal consistency reliability. The 1- to 3-wk.

TABLE 1
TWO-WAY ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE FOR SELF-ESTEEM AS A DEPENDENT VARIABLE
BY SEX AMONG UNDERGRADUATES FROM FOUR ARAB COUNTRIES (8 GROUPS)

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	M Square	F	p
Corrected model	5,887.26	7	841.04	22.56	.001
Intercept	3,664,188.23	1	3,664,188.23	98,296.59	.001
Sex (A)	46.48	1	46.48	1.25	.264
Group (B)	4,801.82	3	1,600.61	42.94	.001
A * B	397.39	3	132.46	3.55	.014
Error	98,075.42	2,631	37.28		
Total	4,105,022.00	2,639			
Corrected total	103,962.68	2,638			

Note. — $R^2 = .06$ (Adjusted $R^2 = .05$).

test-retest reliabilities of the scale were: .84, .86, and .84 for Egyptian, Kuwaiti, and Omani samples, respectively, indicating high temporal stability. Descriptive statistics were computed (Table 2). The only significant sex-re-

TABLE 2
MEANS, STANDARD DEVIATIONS, *t* VALUES, AND EFFECT SIZES OF THE SELF-ESTEEM SCALE AMONG UNDERGRADUATES FROM FOUR ARAB COUNTRIES

Sample	Men				Women				<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
	α	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	α	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Egypt	.84	213	37.06	7.41	.86	363	36.54	5.85	0.93		
Kuwait	.91	332	40.34	6.42	.90	342	38.88	6.24	2.99	0.003	0.23*
Lebanon	.90	274	38.37	6.45	.88	552	38.69	6.02	0.70		
Oman	.83	207	40.57	5.57	.82	360	41.12	5.17	1.19		

*Small effect size.

lated difference on self-esteem was in the Kuwaiti sample with men scoring higher than women, but the effect size was small. Table 3 presents the *post hoc* Scheffé comparisons by sex. Tables 2 and 3 indicate that the main differences were relevant to the lower mean scores of Egyptians and Lebanese versus the higher mean scores of Kuwaiti and Omani male samples. Among women, the main difference was related to the low mean score of Egyptian and the high mean score of Omani samples. However, there was no statistically significant difference between mean scores of Kuwaiti and Lebanese women.

Based on the World Factbook (Central Intelligence Agency, 2011), per-capita income in Kuwait is \$37,848, in Oman \$25,436, in Lebanon \$15,554, and in Egypt \$6,354. The unemployment rate was 10.0% in Lebanon, 9.5% in Egypt, 5% in Oman, and 1.5% in Kuwait. Moreover, unemployed persons are given a living allowance only in Kuwait and Oman. Based on Housley, Martin, McCoy, Greenhouse, and Stigger's (1987) results, the correlations between self-esteem and both per-capita income and unemployment rate ($N = 2,643$) were .17 ($p < .0001$) and $-.15$ ($p < .0001$), respectively.

TABLE 3
DIFFERENCES IN SELF-ESTEEM BETWEEN MEN (THE UPPER MATRIX) AND WOMEN
(THE LOWER MATRIX) BASED ON SCHEFFÉ TEST (*p*), *t* VALUES, AND EFFECT SIZES (*d*)

		Egypt	Kuwait	Lebanon	Oman
Egypt	<i>p</i>		.0001	ns	.0001
	<i>t</i>		5.21	2.05	5.50
	<i>d</i>		.47*	.19	.58†
Kuwait	<i>p</i>	.0001		.003	ns
	<i>t</i>	5.13		3.75	0.44
	<i>d</i>	.39*		.31*	
Lebanon	<i>p</i>	.0001	ns		.004
	<i>t</i>	5.38	.45		4.01
	<i>d</i>	.36*			.37*
Oman	<i>p</i>	.0001	.0001	.0001	
	<i>t</i>	11.16	5.16	6.50	
	<i>d</i>	.83‡	.39*	.44*	

Note. — ns = non-significant. *Small effect size; †Medium effect size; ‡Large effect size.

DISCUSSION

In this comparison of self-esteem between college students drawn from four Arab countries, it was found that Kuwaiti and Omani men obtained a significantly higher mean score on self-esteem than did their Egyptian and Lebanese counterparts, but the effect sizes were small. Several aspects can elucidate this difference. Foremost among them are the higher per-capita income and the lower unemployment ratio among Kuwaiti and Omani men in comparison with Egyptian and Lebanese men. Overall, the high income may secure high standard of living and good quality of life among Kuwaiti and Omani men. Because self-esteem significantly and negatively correlated with anxiety ($r = -.17$, $N = 499$, $p < .01$; Abdel-Khalek, 2011), the low mean score on self-esteem in the Egyptian sample would be elucidated in the light of their high score on anxiety (Abdel-Khalek & Alansari, 2004; Abdel-Khalek, 2007a). Furthermore, Abdel-Khalek and El-Yahfoufi (2005) found that wealth was associated with lower anxiety in samples of Lebanese college students. The largest significant difference in all the samples was between the Egyptian and Omani women. It is probable that the higher per-capita income and the lower unemployment among the Omani in comparison to the Egyptian women may be related to this difference.

As for the sex-related differences in self-esteem, Kuwaiti men obtained a statistically significantly higher mean score than did women, but the effect size was small. However, there were no statistically significant differences among the other samples. The statistically significant sex difference in self-esteem in the Kuwaiti sample is consistent with a host of previous studies on self-esteem (e.g., Baumeister, 1994; Francis, 1998). This differ-

ence may be related in part to collectivism. It is expected that in a more collectivistic society like Kuwait, sex roles in general may be clear and articulated. Notwithstanding this hypothesis, it is not known why this is not relevant in the Omani sample. This finding deserves a separate study.

By and large, self-esteem may differ across cultures and sub-cultures. The standard of living, quality of life, and employment possibilities, among others, are aspects of culture that may affect self-esteem. Collectivism and individualism did not seem to have a large effect in this study. Sex-related differences in self-esteem were not generalized across these sub-cultures. More research is needed on cross-cultural differences in self-esteem throughout the life course in the Arabic-speaking countries.

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