Positive Psychology from Islamic Perspective

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Abstract

Introduction: The aim of the current study was to investigate positive thinking in Islamic spirituality and to develop a theoretical model based on Islamic view.

Methods: The research method in this study was based on qualitative approach. The study used a content analysis design with a hermeneutic approach to collect and analyze the data. In order to do so, sacred texts especially holy texts (i.e. Quran and Ahl al-Bayt's performance and oral tradition) were reviewed through hermeneutic understanding.

Results: Findings demonstrated that positive psychology in Islamic spirituality mostly centers on the following topics: Islamic positive view of human, believing in Divine benevolence, gratitude, Tawakkul, and universal man. Also, based on the attachment theory, positive thinking was interpreted and its applications were explained for individual's thinking about past events, interpretations of present events, and future expectations. Positive thinking in this paradigm was discussed in a way that included individual's relationship with transcendental beings, others, nature, and self.

Conclusion: The Islamic approach is very optimistic about human nature and its capacity for growth. It is also optimistic about the relation of human beings with God. The fourfold relational paradigm of positive thinking in Islamic spirituality has been accepted as a base for all relations. Approaching this paradigm and orienting thoughts, feelings, and actions towards this view may be achieved through an ontological gnostic worldview.

Keywords: Attachment, Fitrah, Islam, Positive Thinking, Model

Introduction

   Psychology has long been focusing on helping individuals to face illness, adversity, and calamity [1]. In the second half of the twentieth century, psychology had a great deal of instruction about depression, racism, violence, and disorders. This is while it had much less to say regarding personal abilities and virtues. According to a metaphor, it has been said that psychology deals with educating how to raise people from minus eight to zero point; but, it is not sufficiently able to understand how to take people from zero to plus eight [2].

   In pathology-oriented psychology, before studying the reasons that make people have positive feelings like hope and happiness, the focus is on the reasons that lead to depression and anxiety. On the other hand, positive psychology deals with helping individuals achieve mental well-being [3]. Positive psychology studies the conditions and processes that lead to self-actualization and optimized performance [2].

   Sin and *Lyubomirisky* performed a meta-analysis on positive psychology interventions for reducing depression and enhancing happiness [4]. Forty-nine out of 50 studies have revealed an enhancement in well-being, happiness, and life satisfaction. Twenty-five cases of these studies have shown high effectiveness in reducing depression symptoms. According to positive psychology, loss of positive emotions in life may lead to different types of mental disorders [5].

It is just a few decades that positive psychology has had significant development in theorizing and determining the components effective for positive thinking. The outstanding models in this area include optimism model [6], *Scheier and Carver's* model [7], hope model [8], and attachment model. A brief explanation for these models has been presented below:

Optimism

Optimism refers to the hope-creating expectancies in a particular situation and indicates positive general experiences [9]. Optimism and pessimism have been recently applied to the methods that people usually use in order to explain their life events [6]. Peterson and Seligman considered individual's expectations about future as a basis for defining optimism. They claimed that if a failure is stated as a reflection of stable factors, more failures are expected in future [10]. However, if a past failure is stated as a reflection of unstable factors, this undesirable event may not be repeated in the future. The optimism model originates from the helplessness model, and its structural redefinition [11].

Hope

Hopefulness is defined based on the extent to which an individual's goals are achievable [12]. In a recent definition of hope, this construct includes pathways towards goals and their fundamental motives [8]. Therefore, hope can be defined as purposeful thoughts in which the person uses strategic thinking (an ability to find a way to achieve desirable goals) and agent thinking (the required motive to utilize those ways) [13]. According to Snyder *et al.* [14], in order to achieve goals, individuals should develop and find functional ways; this process is called strategic thinking. On the other hand, agency is the motivational component in the hope theory. Agency thinking is important in all purposeful thoughts; but, when facing problems, its function becomes more important [8]. Agency sparkles strategic thinking and this process is repeated until the desirable goal is achieved [14]. Individuals with higher levels of hope interpret obstacles as a challenge and try to find other ways. Hopeless people cannot find new ways and their negative emotions prevent them from following up their goals [3]. Snyder believes that hope is learnt and hopeful thinking is acquired in social contexts [8].

Positive thinking from the perspective of attachment model

Positive thinking is strongly related to the attachment quality [15-17]. Individuals with secure attachment think themselves as qualified people and have positive expectations about themselves [18]. These individuals believe that they can convert stressful situations into opportunities. They also believe that challenges of life lead to the actualization of hidden talents of humans [16]. Having positive expectancies gives them a positive perspective, which itself makes them more successful and optimistic through the expectancy law [19]. Those parents who do not frequently respond to their children's

physiological and psychological needs, grow children with anxious attachment [20]. A person with anxious attachment is not likely to be optimist, because his/her past experiences which have formed his/her mental schema do not give him/her such a permission [18].

Recently, psychology scholars have been influenced by the capacities that spirituality and religious teachings provide to human beings (e.g. introduction of mindfulness, ACT, religious copings, etc.). Islamic spirituality may be an intact source which has not be comprehensively investigated in terms of its focus on positive thinking. The current study intended to scrutinize the Islamic positive constructs so as to present a conceptual framework for an Islamic positive outlook.

Method

In terms of purpose, the current study is a basic research. Research method in this study was based on qualitative approach. The study utilized a content analysis design with a hermeneutic approach to collect and analyze the data. In order to do so, sacred texts especially holy texts (i.e. Quran and Ahl al-Bayt's performance and oral tradition) were reviewed through hermeneutic understanding.

Results

Investigation of positive psychology in the perspective of Islamic spirituality resulted in the following topics:

Islamic positive view of human

The Islamic positive view of human beings can be perceived in creation. According to the Holy Quran, the human creation has been done by blowing of God's spirit (al-Hijr: 29) [21]; and after creating human beings, God has praised himself (al-Mu'minun: 14). These account for God's compassion and benevolence toward humans. The second point representing God's positive perspective towards human beings in creation is the acceptance of Adam's repentance (al-Mu'minun: 14) [21]. Accepting Adam's repentance is not limited only to the Original Sin; in Quran (al-Zumar: 53), there is also a good news about forgiving all sins. Additionally, God has represented himself as a secure attachment figure. For example, God considers himself available to believers and he says wherever you are, he is with you and is also aware of whatever you do (al-Zumar: 53). Makarem-Shirazi *et al.* [22], in interpreting this verse, mentioned that God's availability and omnipresence give humans glory, grandeur, and courage. This evidence suggests that God wants to introduce himself as a Secure Base to humans.

Believing in Divine benevolence

Believing in Divine benevolence is defined as optimism and positive thought [23]. In other words, it refers to having a positive view of Allah, and favorable interpretations of annoying events (namely, viewing these events as God's blessings). Quoting Imam Reza (PBUH), Majlesi states a narration in which God has addressed Moses: ''Tell offspring of Israel that people attract God's blessings according to their favorable presupposition

about him; if they have a good presupposition about God, they find him compassionate and helping" [24]. Quoting God, Imam Sadeq (PBUH) states: "Wherever I turn to the believer , he/she will find the favorable; therefore, he/she should be pleased with my will, tolerate calamities, and thank my blessings; then, I register him, O' Muhammad, as the honest servant" [25]. According to these quotations, positive view and favorable expectance of God leads to spiritual flourishing and a satisfactory life.

According to verses of the Holy Quran, benevolent attitude about God in this world has been stated in benedictory phrases. For example, believers have asked God in a prayer, "Our Lord, after that you guide us, do not let our hearts be subject to deviation and give us your blessings since you are merciful"(Al-i Imran: 8). In Hereafter, after God's promise is fulfilled, the believers confirm their benevolent attitude about God; viewing God's favor, they say "Praise be to God who promised us his favor and blessing and made us heir of the whole earth (heaven) in order that we reside wherever we want" (al-Zumar: 74). There is an emphasis on good presupposition to the extent that it is considered a basis for other services; Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) says that good presupposition about God is the best service [26].

Regarding positive thinking about God, Imam Baqer (PBUH) states that "If a believing servant believes in the benevolent nature of God, he will be as his servant thinks, because God is merciful and possesses all the goodness and he becomes reluctant when his servant thinks .him benevolent. Have a good intention about God and ask Him!" [27]. Regarding optimism about others, Hor-Ameli quotes Imam Sajad (PBUH): "It is your partner's right that you treat him/her gently, talk with him/her moderately, forget his/her errors, remember his/her good deeds, and tell him/her nothing except good things" [28].

Gratitude

Gratitude is another aspect of positive thinking in Islamic context. Gratitude means thankfulness and appreciation for a person's kindness and beneficence. In Mulla-Ahmad Naraqi's view, gratitude refers to recognizing beneficence and favor and thanking the beneficent person [29]. Ghobari-Bonab has defined gratitude as a cognition of blessing, beneficence, happiness (appearing in the heart and soul of humans due to this cognition), and movements (appearing in human's organs in order to thank the beneficent) [30]. Sensing the favor may originate from positive thinking towards God; namely, a positive person is able to understand what has been given to him/her as a blessing. The hope for the repetition of this blessing (which is a factor of thanking for that blessing) may also be associated to another aspect of positive thinking that is called expectancy of desirable events.

Quoting Solomon, Holy Quran reads, "And if any is grateful, truly his gratitude is (a gain) for his own soul. But if any is ungrateful, truly my Lord is free of all needs, supreme in honor!"(al-Naml: 40). In the surah of Ibrahim (Verse 7), Almighty God says, "If ye are grateful, I will add more (favor) on to you"; in motto 236, Imam Ali (PBUH)

states, "By whatever gift from God, there accompanies an obligation. Whoever fulfills that commitment, God bestows more on him/her; and failing to fulfill that commitment puts him/her in the risk of missing the blessing" [31].

The other benefits of gratitude can be interpreted from psychological aspects: 1) If a person knows that a blessing has been given to him/her, he/she considers himself/herself under the supervision of a trustful care-giver who has provided him/her innumerable blessings; such a feeling leads to a sense of trust and calmness; 2) The purity of the soul and thought is another psychological outcome of gratitude which has been mentioned in the Holy Quran (Ma'idah:6): "Allah does not want to place you in difficulty, but He wants to purify you, and to complete his favor on you which you may be thankful about".

Tawakkul (Reliance on God)

Tawakkul has been defined as surrendering some of one's affairs to God's will [32]. Ansari considers Tawakkul (reliance on God) as entrusting the affairs totally to its owner and trusting in the owner's agency [33]. It has been mentioned in the Holy Quran that God knows himself the only suitable one on whom the believers should have Tawakkul (Al-i Imran: 122; Ma'idah:23). In Tawakkul, an individual believes in the everlasting power of God as the creator and supervisor of everything and also believe that his will is superior to other wills (al-Zumar: 62). The person is sure that, by having trust in God, the best situation occurs to him/her and he/she asks Allah the Exalted to bestow success on all affairs (Hud: 88). These may suggest that individuals with high potential of Tawakkul have more positive attitude about God. Peace and mental health are some of the outcomes of positive thinking about God. Ghobari-Bonab believes that a person who has Tawakkul, considers God's presence in all of his/her states and tempers, and as a result of this presence, he/she becomes peaceful in heart and will find a secure base when being encountered with challenging life events [34]. He/she is sure that God will help him/her to attain the desired thing. Finally, God has promised that whoever has Tawakkul to him, Allah will suffice him/her (Talaq: 3).

Universal Man

The concept of the universal man in Islamic Mysticism has been evolved through decades as a result of Sufis contemplation on Quran in reference to the creation of Adam and giving him a special position in the creation (i.e. The Caliph of Allah). Allah created Adam and taught him his divine attributes (i.e. Divine Names) (Al-Baqara: 31). Granting Adam the knowledge of Divine Names, Allah made him his vicegerent on the earth. Although he descended from his previous position as a result of eating from the forbidden fruit, Adam found his previous position due to his repentance and gained the capacity to ascend again. The notion of the universal man in Islamic mysticism shows that human nature has a great capacity to evolve spiritually and encompass the attributes of knowing macrocosm and microcosm [35]. Reviewing the

characteristics of the universal man and his evolution is one of the richest topics in positive psychology.

### Conceptual definition of the positive thinking construct in Islamic spirituality

In the attachment model, cognitive schemas are examined based on the interpretation of past experiences and expectation of the future relations [16]. Attachment to parents, peers, and God may describe the individual's relationships with others and may also specify positive thinking about self, others, God, and the nature. Therefore, in order to develop a theoretical model for positive thinking, the basis of positive thinking construct could be considered to be people's expectation of future events and their interpretation of the past and present events. People with secure attachment, love themselves and expect beneficence and kindness from others, while people with insecure attachment (anxious and avoidant styles) feel themselves worthless and are suspicious about others [15]. In the attachment model, the following points are of importance [36]:

1. Childhood experiences are very important, particularly in relation to object relations and in the form of interpersonal relations.

2. Individuals' modeling of the method of interpreting events has a basic role in the formation of schemas. The children grown up in optimistic families will have optimistic view points about future events.

3. Optimists, who interpret events according to their own schemas, have positive expectancy about future events.

From the information that was presented so far, positive thinking is to have positive orientation in the interpretation of the past and present events and positive expectation of future in areas like self-estimation of one's abilities, relationship with others, relationship with God (or Deity) and the whole world of existence. According to this definition, events and outcomes may be divided into four parts: First, those that are in the area of self-estimating one's own abilities; it can be restated as the relationship with self. The second part refers to the affairs in which others participate (by "other", we mean friends, family members, teachers, and those who have a close interaction with the individual). The third part indicates those events related to the natural and surrounding environment (e.g. natural events, like earthquake and flood, and the future of the earth and universe). The last part refers to human's relationship with the holy and supernatural entities. This may be manifested in constructs such as prayer, the hereafter, accepting repentance, and death. According to what was mentioned, positive thinking may be demonstrated in a schematic model according to its relational and time dimensions.
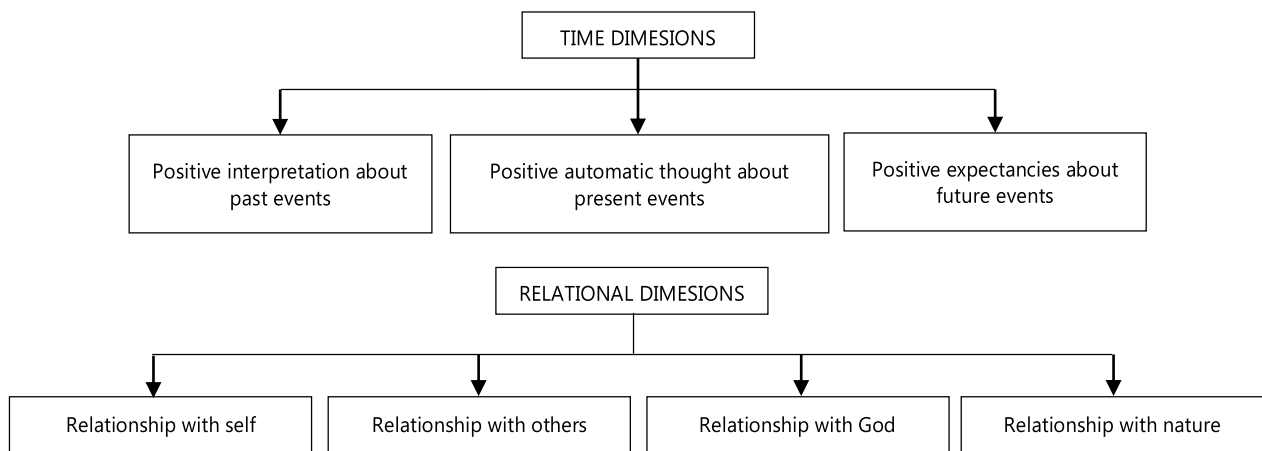
A) **Relationship with self**: Optimists have a positive thought about their abilities [1]. These people attribute their success to their own abilities. One of the important issues in Islam that reinforces being optimistic to human nature is the notion of Fitrah. Fitrah refers to the human nature and inner predispositions in the state of perfection and uprightness according to which Allah created it [37]. Fitrah includes the idea that human nature is good as well as benevolent and it grows towards flourishing and actualizing unless he/she deviates by a misleading environment and a polluting ecology [38]. One of the major differences of the Islamic spirituality compared to other religions (e.g. Christianity) is the Muslims' beliefs in fitrah. Human nature has never been contaminated by Adam's sin. Although Adam and Eve made a mistake in eating from the forbidden fruit, they repented and Allah accepted their repentance [21]. Therefore, fitrah is a construct that contributes to the primordial innocence, never distorted by the first sin. The predisposition of human may be considered as the primary generator of attitude towards self and other individuals. If we believe in fitrah, we can be receptive to divine intuition, revelation, as well as religious and spiritual exaltation [38].

B) **Relationship with others**: Carver, Scheier, and Segerstrom have reported a probable relationship between optimism and interpersonal relationships [39]. Optimists have a philosophy based on altruism; they believe that, if humans become mentally secure and healthy, they are naturally altruist and like to adhere to others positively to form a reciprocal emotional relationship between themselves and others [3]. Optimists know that forgiving others leads to their own freedom from pessimism, sufferings, and distress. Optimists do not

consider other people's evils as a natural element; but, they think that these evils are due to a loss or deficiency in controlling the spiritual system [40].

Psychologists believe that people's interpretations about events have a main function in their emotional management [4]. Since optimists view events of life and behaviors in interpersonal relationships from a positive perspective, they can observe positive behaviors while collecting data from other people's behavior (because they expect such behaviors) [41]. Optimists pick the positive aspect of other people's behaviors, because they always see the glass full half of the glass (a famous Iranian saying) [39]. For example, instead of becoming angry, they use other people's constructive criticism and change their behavior in order to adapt with the social environment [41]. Additionally, fitrah or primordial predisposition to benevolence, altruism, and helping others motivates human beings to be optimistic towards others in mutual relations [30]. Although egoistic tendency and interest conflicts can cause crashes in our relationship, individuals with deeper insides are leading towards spiritual, social, and psychological maturity [42].

C) Relationship with nature: In Islamic spirituality, adherents believe that the whole existence takes steps in an evolutionary process and undesirable events have their own meanings [43]. Optimists' expectancy of natural events may be expected to be positive and directed towards perfect spirituality. They look at the nature with praise and awe and consider natural events in harmony with the goal of creation [25]. Human beings, who regard nature as the sign of God, drown in nature's beauties, feel spiritual astonishment, and rejoice with existence. In their point of view, existence and nature are reminders of God [30].

D) Relationship with God: In challenging situations, real Muslims use religious reaction methods like Tawakkul and Salat [21]. Prophets had positive expectancy from God and those positive expectancies helped them fulfill their duties without any fear of their enemies [44]. The Holy Quran has introduced an image about Abraham being thrown into fire [21]. Abraham had such a positive thought about God and his favors that he saw the fire as if it was a garden of flowers. Then, this positive thinking about God appeared in reality and the fire became cool and peaceful to Abraham (al-Anbiya: 69). Such a positive thought about the creator provides the person with a kind of power and immunity that he/she considers himself/herself embraced by God and knows that he will save him/her from problems and difficulties [44].

Most religious beliefs, including "waiting for the arrival of the savior" that exists in all religions, have been formed based on positive thinking. Reappearance of Imam al-Mahdi may also be a manifestation of Twelver's optimism towards God. Positive thinking in relationship with God has also appeared in God's Majestic Names. Believers think God is a forgiver of sins, compassionate, merciful, and kind [45]. Death may be another example of supernatural events. An optimist's view of death is quite different from that of pessimists. An optimist conceives death as the moment of union (with God); who is enthusiastically in quest of death. This enthusiasm has been introduced in the Holy Quran (al-Fajr: 26-30)

"O soul at peace! Return to your Lord, pleased, pleasing! Then, enter among my servants! And enter my Paradise!"

Generally, those who have secure attachment to God, see the existence beautiful and expect blessing and happiness [44]. In Islamic spirituality, human's relationship with God is based on his mercy. The first verse of all chapters in the Holy Quran begins with reciting and remembering God's most compassionate and merciful name. Flourished believers in Islam rely on God, trust in his mercy, surrender to his will, and are optimistic to Allah's divine plan [46].

Individuals in Islamic spirituality have a strong belief system in Allah's mercifulness and compassionate caring of his servants. This internal belief system comes to function as an internal motivation leading individuals' attitudes towards acting mercifully, and compassionately with others [46]. A hadith qudsi reads: "Allah the most exalted said, I am as my servants think (expects) I am. I am with him/her when he/she remembers me" [47].

Conclusion

In the current study, positive thinking as a psychological construct was approached and reviewed from the Islamic point of view. It was debated that Islam demonstrates significant positive views of humans' innate nature. Discussions about humans' innate nature goes back to the theological notion of the fall of Adam and its archetypal consequences. Since Islamic scholars believe that the repentance of Adam following the Fall was accepted and its adverse consequences were not passed to his generation, humankind is destined to growth, actualization, and spiritual flourishing. Islam is a religion based on the Muslims' understanding of divine names and attributes as well as their relations with a divine being. As Ibn-Arabi narrates a famous Hadith of the Hidden Treasure from Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the creation began with divine love. According to this Hadith, Allah stated that "He was a hidden treasure, he created the reality to be manifested" [48]. According to the Holy Quran (Al-Baqarah: 31-34), Allah has created Adam from clay and blew (His) soul into him. In addition, Allah not only has chosen Adam as a vicegerent in the earth, but also taught him his Divine Attributes or Beautiful Names. Also, Adam's Tawba was accepted, and his innate nature was cleansed. Therefore, the original and primordial tendency towards actualization was not violated by the original sin. Further Quranic verses support the positive view by stating that "It may well be that you dislike a thing; but, it is good for you" (Al-Baqarah: 216). This verse states that some benign events may not look like benevolent; they may seem harsh in the first impression. In other words, the Islamic view is optimistic about human nature and its capacity for growth. This optimistic view has been reflected in gnosis and Islamic mysticism as well.

Although both schools emphasize considering positive aspects of humanity [45], the main difference between positive outlook in Islamic spirituality and western psychology seems to be based on their fundamental views. Islam emphasizes collectivism and human relations with divine and nature. Positive outlook in Islam heavily relies on the relationship between human beings and God. Allah is closer to his servants than their jugular vein. He never lets his servants to be alone. However, positive outlook in western psychology is mostly based on humanism. In the humanistic view, humans are evolving and flourishing towards the destined actualization.

Current researchers also became interested in the development of a paradigm to study positive thinking more deeply. The fourfold relational paradigm of positive thinking in Islamic spirituality was introduced as a base for all relations. Approaching this paradigm and orienting thoughts, feelings, and actions towards this view in the context of Islamic spirituality can be achieved through an ontological gnostic worldview. Applying the aforementioned approach in human relationship, the core of which relies on attachment styles, and healthy spiritual development, is the ultimate goal of the present study. The presented view in this paper has not yet been tested empirically. The empirical data may strengthen, refine, or bring some changes to its tenets or style of application.

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