



## Conceptions of Happiness and Identity Integration in Iran: A Situated Perspective

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**Citation:** Joshanloo, M. (2015). Conceptions of happiness and identity integration in Iran: A situated perspective. *Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology*, 1(1), 24-35.

**Abstract:** Iranian social identity is influenced by three dominant cultural trends, namely, ancient Iranian, Islamic, and Western. It was hypothesized that priming each of these identities would affect the degree of endorsement of two conceptions of happiness (i.e., eudaimonism and transformative suffering scales) among Iranians. Participants were randomly assigned to three experimental conditions. In each condition, a single aspect of Iranian identity (i.e., ancient Iranian, Islamic, or Western) was made temporarily salient through exposure to photo primes. The results showed that exposure to the identity primes affected individuals' scores on the two conceptions of happiness. For example, exposure to the Western prime (vs. other primes) predisposed the participants to endorse transformative suffering less strongly. Moreover, identity integration (i.e., the degree to which a person sees consistency among the three aspects of Iranian identity) and the Western identity prime interacted in their effect on the conceptions of happiness. These results indicate that conceptions of happiness can be experimentally manipulated.

**ملخص البحث:** هناك ثلاثة عناصر ثقافية تساهم في تشكيل الهوية الاجتماعية الإيرانية، وهي الحضارات الإيرانية القديمة، والإسلامية والغربية. ومن بين الفرضيات المقدمة في هذا الجانب هو أن إعطاء الأولوية لأي من هذه العناصر دون الأخرى يؤثر في درجة دعم مفهومين اثنين للسعادة لدى الإيرانيين (وهما مفهوم eudaimonism ومفهوم درجات العذاب التحويلي). وفي إطار هذا البحث، تم تقسيم المشاركين بشكل عشوائي إلى ثلاث مجموعات تجريبية مختلفة. خلال كل تجربة، تم إبراز جانب من جوانب الهوية الإيرانية بشكل مؤقت عبر مشاهدة صور مختلفة تمثل عنصر من عناصر الهوية الإيرانية. وقد بينت النتائج تأثير مكونات الهوية الثلاث (الإيرانية والإسلامية والغربية) في مفاهيم السعادة لدى المشاركين. فمثلاً تبين النتائج أن المشاركين الذين تعرضوا لصور عن الحضارة الغربية أكثر يدمون بشكل أقل مفهوم العذاب التحويلي. كما أن اندماج الهوية أي الدرجة التي يعتبر فيها الشخص وجود توافق ما بين العناصر الثلاثة المكونة للهوية الإيرانية والعنصر الغربي تداخلت فيما بينها في تأثيرها على فهم السعادة. ويبين البحث أنه يمكن التحكم في مفاهيم السعادة لدى الناس بطرق إجرائية.

**Keywords:** conceptions of happiness; eudaimonism; identity integration; suffering

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**Contemporary Iranian culture** is believed by many to be multifaceted, and under the influence of three major cultural streams: ancient Iranian, Islamic, and modern-Western (Latifi, 2006; Zahed, 2005). The three aspects of Iranian identity can be incompatible, with each emphasizing various values and various solutions to social problems. Therefore, an Iranian may have a difficult time integrating these aspects into a meaningful coherent whole. Identity integration “is an individual difference measuring the degree to which two [or more] seemingly conflicting social identities are perceived as compatible or in opposition to each other” (Cheng & Lee, 2009, p. 53). If an individual achieves a high level of identity integration, they perceive various aspects of their identity as largely compatible. In contrast, a low level of identity integration indicates that a person has not been able to integrate various aspects of their identity successfully, and their identity aspects are conflicting (see also Mok & Morris, 2009, 2012).

People can choose from among a number of possible strategies to organize their multiple identities. For example, one strategy of dealing with multiple identities is called *merger* (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). In this strategy, various social identities are simultaneously “recognized and embraced in their most inclusive form” (p. 91). Some Iranians seem to adopt this strategy to integrate the three aspects of their identity. That is, they accept all the three aspects as important, and try to strike a balance among them. These individuals are likely to achieve a high degree of identity integration. Another strategy is called *compartmentalization* (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). In this strategy, multiple identities are isolated from each other, and any one of them can be activated in certain situations. Unlike the merger strategy, in this strategy, no attempt is made to integrate all alternative identities into a meaningful whole. Some Iranians adopt this strategy. This group is likely to achieve a low level of identity integration. For these people, multiple identities are separated into different compartments. It is important to note that with this strategy of identity structure, social identities are context-specific, i.e. in certain situations one identity becomes salient, and in other situations, other identities do.

### Conceptions of Happiness

Individuals and cultures vary in the ways they conceptualize happiness. The present study focuses on two concepts of happiness: eudaimonism and transformative power of suffering. A eudaimonistic formulation of a good life emphasizes functioning well as a human being. Eudaimonism holds that human beings can live a good life only when they actualize their potential, as opposed to hedonism which defines happiness based on pleasure, good feelings, and the satisfaction of bodily needs (Devettere, 2002). Aristotle (one of the earliest proponents of eudaimonism in the West) says: “The many, the most vulgar, seemingly conceive the good and happiness as pleasure, and hence they also like the life of gratification. Here they appear completely slavish, since the life they decide on is a life for grazing animals” (Aristotle, 1985, p. 7). Eudaimonism has been conceptualized and assessed in various ways in the psychological literature (Huta & Waterman, 2013). In the present study, Joshanloo’s (2014) scale of eudaimonism is used, which focuses on the basic idea that the fundamental component of well-being is virtue rather than pleasure.



People and cultures also vary regarding the degree to which they see suffering as consistent with happiness. Suffering is predominantly seen in a negative light in Western culture, and thus is usually not included in the concept of happiness (Joshano, 2013a, 2014). Yet, some individuals and cultures show positive attitudes toward sadness and suffering. In some traditions such as Islam, suffering is considered a divinely intended experience leading to personal growth. In the present study, Joshano's (2014) scale of transformative suffering was used to measure this concept. This scale measures the extent to which an individual endorses the views that suffering has positive and transformative powers, and can be an ingredient of a good life.

### **Cultural Trends and Conceptions of Happiness**

Each of the three cultural streams prevalent in Iran has a different approach to happiness, and gives varying degrees of support to eudaimonism and transformative suffering beliefs. Ancient Iranian culture was dominated by Zoroastrianism. Zoroastrianism emphasizes virtues and righteousness in defining happiness and a good life (Joneydi, 1999). It also prescribes positive emotions, legitimate pleasures, laughter, and avoidance of sadness and crying (Hartz, 2009). Therefore, the ancient Iranian version of happiness emphasizes both hedonia (pleasurable experiences) and eudaimonia (acting in accordance with virtue). It also advocates positive emotions, and is less tolerant of suffering and sadness compared to the Islamic view.

Islam in general advocates a spiritual version of happiness. It does not define happiness based on positive emotions. Instead, it emphasizes virtues, satisfaction of basic spiritual needs, and development of positive character strengths (Joshano, 2013a, 2013b). The Islamic conceptualization of happiness resembles the eudaimonistic conceptualization of happiness, which emphasizes virtues and positive functioning (vs. positive emotions and pleasures) as the main ingredients of happiness (Ryan & Huta, 2009). Islam is also more tolerant of sadness and suffering than contemporary Western culture (Joshano, 2013a). One of the reasons could be that "According to Islamic faith, endurance of emotional suffering may be conceived as qualifying for religious blessing and reward" (El-Islam, 2004, p. 9). Therefore, an Islamic conception of happiness in the Iranian context would be basically eudaimonistic. This perspective also emphasizes the value of suffering as a significant factor in the process of moral development.

In contrast, the modern Western understanding of happiness largely focuses on hedonistic pleasures, positive states of mind, and high-arousal emotions (Joshano, 2013a). That is, in the contemporary West, the hedonic aspects of happiness are more strongly emphasized (Triandis, 1995). Another important point about the Western conceptualization of happiness is that, considering the relative dominance of hedonism, Westerners are more likely to dislike suffering and negative affect. In American culture, for example, to be optimistic and happy is a cultural demand whereas pessimism and sadness are seen in a negative light (Held, 2002). Therefore, a Western conceptualization of happiness is one with emphasis on hedonia, pleasure, optimism, and one which is less tolerant of sadness and suffering.



## The Present Study

Previous research has not explored whether or not conceptions of happiness can be experimentally manipulated. To explore this possibility in the context of Iranian culture, the present study sought to manipulate the conceptions of happiness (eudaimonism and transformative suffering) by priming various aspects of Iranian identity. Specifically, I examined whether providing cues that make various identities salient would lead to the endorsement of identity-congruent beliefs.

I predicted that priming the ancient Iranian identity would predispose Iranians to be less tolerant of suffering. Another hypothesis was that priming the Islamic identity would predispose Iranians to endorse a more eudaimonistic concept of happiness, and to see suffering in a more positive light. Finally, I expected that priming the Western identity would predispose Iranians to view suffering less positively, and to emphasize eudaimonic aspects of happiness less strongly, compared to the Islamic and Iranian primes. Given that there is no prior study upon which to base the hypotheses, I made no prior prediction concerning the interaction between identity integration and the identity primes.

## Method

### Participants

The online sample used in this study consisted of 275 Iranians recruited from a number of Iranian Facebook pages ( $M$  age = 28.04,  $SD$  = 7.55). The sample consisted of individuals from various cities and from different socio-economic backgrounds.

### Materials

**Eudaimonism.** Joshanloo' (2014) scale of eudaimonism was used to measure this variable. This scale has three items that are rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). A new item ("Only our soul and not our body can achieve true happiness") was added to this scale in Joshanloo (2014) to improve the internal consistency of the scale. The factorial validity of the scale was established by Joshanloo (2014) in two Iranian samples. Cronbach's alpha in the present study was .59 (item-total scale correlations ranging from .36 to .46).

**The transformative power of suffering.** Joshanloo' (2014) scale of transformative suffering was used to measure this variable. This scale has five items that are rated on a 7-point scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The factorial validity of the scale was established by Joshanloo (2014) in two Iranian samples. Cronbach's alpha in the present study was .66 (item-total scale correlations ranging from .42 to .62).

**Identity integration.** Participants were asked to specify to what extent they saw various aspects of Iranian identity as consistent or inconsistent using a 7-point scale ranging from 0 (*completely inconsistent*) to 6 (*completely consistent*). The three items used were "Being Iranian and being Muslim", "Being Iranian and being Modern", and "Being Muslim and being Modern". The responses to these three items were summed up to obtain a total score of identity integration for each individual. Cronbach's alpha in the present study was .60 (item-total scale correlations ranging from .28 to .57).



## Procedure

Users of popular social media sites were invited to take part in a study on happiness. Participation was voluntary, and no incentive was offered to participants. They were given the study link and were asked to complete the study in one sitting. At the beginning of the experiment, the participants were randomly assigned to Islamic, ancient Iranian, or Western priming conditions to complete a picture evaluation task (Mok & Morris, 2009, 2012). In this task, the participants are asked to type the ideas that come to their minds when viewing a number of photos. Completing this task has been shown to effectively activate aspects of identity, no matter what the content of the responses are and thus, the content of responses is not analyzed in this line of research (Mok & Morris, 2009, 2012). Three pictures were used in each condition to prime specific identities. The Islamic prime consisted, for example, of photos showing a Shiite leader's shrine and a portrait of a key Shiite leader. In the ancient Iranian condition, the participants viewed, for example, pictures showing ruins of the Achaemenid era and a portrait of Darius the Great. In the Western condition, they viewed photos of McDonalds, a landscape of an American city (i.e., Chicago), and the Hollywood sign.

After the primes, the respondents across all the conditions were asked to describe themselves by responding to six random questions from the Big Five Inventory, which measures five major traits of personality (e.g., "I tend to be lazy" and "I have a forgiving nature") (John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991). This was done to prevent participants from guessing the purpose of the study and making self-regulatory efforts to reduce the effects of primes in answering dependent variable scales (e.g., Bickart, 1993; Labroo & Mukhopadhyay, 2009). The responses to Big Five Inventory items were not analyzed in this study. The participants then answered the dependent variable scales of the study, followed by the demographic questions and the Identity Integration Scale. They were also asked to guess the purpose of the experiment, with none of them guessing the main purpose of the study correctly.

## Pilot Studies

The Identity Integration Scale has not been used in previous research and its validity is not established. Joshanloo (2014) provides initial findings establishing adequate validity of the eudaimonism and transformative suffering scales in two Iranian samples. However, considering that these two scales are newly developed, more information on their validity is required. Towards this end, two pilot studies were carried out to examine the factorial validity of the scales.

**Pilot Study 1 (Identity Integration Scale).** A sample consisting of 311 university students (68% females,  $M$  age = 21.54,  $SD$  = 3.27) was recruited in Iran to examine statistical properties of the Identity Integration Scale used in the main study. Other scales related to other research projects were also included in the questionnaire. A principal axis factoring (followed by promax rotation) was conducted on the three identity items. Only one factor emerged with an eigenvalue above 1.0. The scree test, too, indicated that one factor would be the best solution. All identity items loaded on this factor (eigenvalue = 2.13, explained variance = 71%), with all factor loadings being above .67. This three-item scale yielded an alpha of .80. These results confirm the



unidimensional factor structure and good internal consistency of the Identity Integration Scale among Iranian students.

**Pilot Study 2 (concepts of happiness scales).** An online sample consisting of 248 Iranians (62.1% females,  $M$  age = 29.30,  $SD$  = 8.64) was recruited from various Iranian websites and social media pages to further examine the statistical properties of the two dependent variable scales used in the main study. Fifty-nine of the participants (23.8%) reported that they were living outside Iran. A confirmatory factor analysis on the items of the two scales was conducted using Amos 19. A two-factor model for transformative suffering and eudaimonism items was tested using the Maximum Likelihood estimator. Factor loadings are shown in Table 1. The model fitted the data well ( $\chi^2 = 35.830$ ,  $df = 19$ ,  $p < .01$ . CFI = .962, RMSEA = .060). The alphas were .75 and .72 for the suffering and eudaimonism scales respectively. These results show that the scales used in this study for assessing the conceptions of happiness and suffering have acceptable statistical properties.

Table 1

*Factor Loadings for the Two-factor Model of Eudaimonism and Transformative Suffering*

	Unstandardized coefficients	Standardized coefficients
Eudaimonism		
Item 1 <sup>a</sup>	1.000	.750
Item 2	.758	.678
Item 3	.758	.611
Transformative suffering		
Item 1 <sup>a</sup>	1.000	.638
Item 2	1.134	.711
Item 3	1.042	.635
Item 4	1.124	.622
Item 5	.832	.466
Covariance		
Btwn the two factors	.856	.519

*Note.* Maximum likelihood estimation was used. All coefficients were significant at  $p < .001$

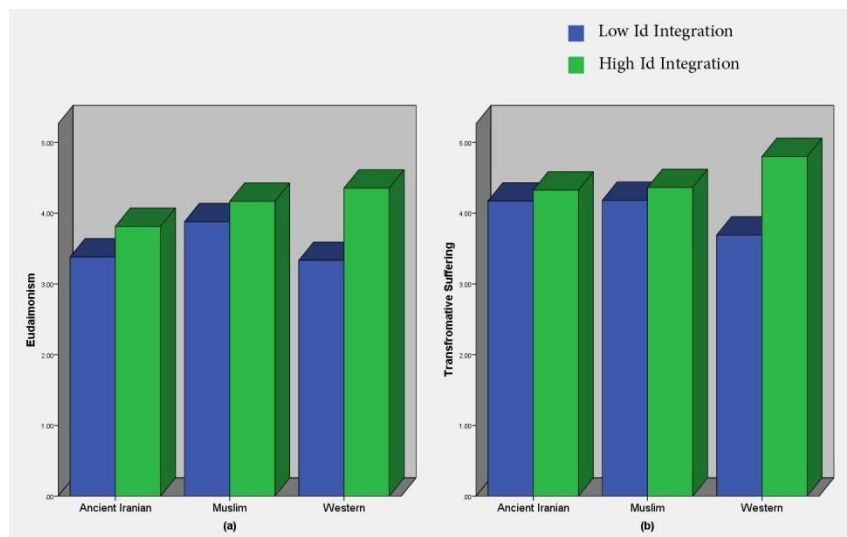
<sup>a</sup> referent indicator.

### Results

Gender was not considered in the analyses, because the main effect of gender and its interaction with the prime conditions was not significant. The main effect of prime on identity integration was also not significant,  $F(2, 256) = 2.28$ ,  $p = .10$ ). The two dependent variable scores



were submitted separately to a 3 (prime: ancient Iranian vs. Islamic vs. Western)  $\times$  identity integration (mean-centred) ANCOVA, including the interaction between prime and identity integration. The results for eudaimonism showed that the main effect of prime ( $F(2, 256) = 2.71, p = .06, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .022$ ), the main effect of identity integration ( $F(1, 256) = 3.42, p = .06, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .013$ ), and the interaction between prime and identity integration ( $F(2, 256) = 2.86, p = .05, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .022$ ) were all marginally significant. The means and *SDs* are shown in Table 2. As expected, the mean score of eudaimonism was lower in the Western condition than in the Iranian and Islamic conditions. The results of *t* tests showed that the differences between Western and Iranian ( $t(199) = .70, p = .48$ ), and Western and Islamic ( $t(219) = .59, p = .55$ ), and Iranian and Islamic ( $t(182) = .14, p = .88$ ) conditions were not statistically significant. The interaction is displayed in Figure 1a. Further analyses showed that the effect of identity integration (1 *SD* below vs. above the mean) was significant only in the Western condition ( $F(1, 34) = 7.68, p = .009, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .18$ ). Individuals with high identity integration (1 *SD* above the mean) scored higher on eudaimonism than those with low identity integration (1 *SD* below the mean) in the Western condition.



*Figure 1*

Conception of happiness scores across priming conditions for high and low identity integration participants. High and low identity integration is plotted at 1 *SD* above and below the mean.

For transformative suffering, both the main effect of prime ( $F(2, 256) = 4.58, p = .013, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .033$ ) and the interaction of prime and identity integration ( $F(2, 256) = 4.08, p = .018, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .031$ ) were significant. The means and *SDs* are shown in Table 2. As expected, the mean score of transformative suffering was lower in the Western condition than in the Iranian and Islamic conditions. The results of *t* tests showed that the differences between Western and Iranian ( $t(199) = 1.80, p = .07$ ), and Western and Islamic ( $t(199.409) = 1.88, p = .06$ ) conditions were



marginally significant. Although, as expected, the participants in the Iranian prime condition scored slightly lower on transformative suffering than those in the Islamic condition, this difference was not significant. The interaction is displayed in Figure 1b. Further analyses showed that the effect of identity integration (1 *SD* below vs. above the mean) was significant only in the Western condition ( $F(1, 34) = 8.94, p = .005$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .21$ ). Individuals with high identity integration (1 *SD* above the mean) scored higher on transformative suffering than those with low identity integration (1 *SD* below the mean) in the Western condition.

Table 2

*Descriptive Information for the Variables and Conditions*

Condition	Identity integration		Eudaimonism		Transformative suffering	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Iranian	4.31	1.56	11.84	3.45	21.52	7.35
Muslim	4.17	1.53	11.98	3.60	21.65	7.50
Western	3.84	1.51	11.49	4.04	20.49	6.23
Total	4.08	1.54	11.75	3.74	21.15	6.97

### Discussion

The overall results were consistent with the predictions for the two conceptions of happiness, although some of the differences were not statistically significant. For eudaimonism, as predicted, those in the Western prime condition scored lower than those in the Islamic and Iranian conditions. For transformative suffering, those in the Western prime condition scored the lowest, those in the Islamic condition scored the highest, and those in the Iranian condition fell somewhere in between. These findings are in line with previous research suggesting that “psychological dispositions shaped by cultures are still very flexible and sensitive to external input” (Suh, Diener, & Updegraff, 2008, p. 12).

The findings also indicated that the Western prime and the level of identity integration interacted in their effect on the conceptions of happiness. Specifically, those with high (vs. low) identity integration, who seem to use the merger strategy in handling their multiple identities, showed stronger endorsement for Islamic beliefs in the Western condition (i.e., they scored higher on transformative suffering and eudaimonism). The high integration individuals may have regarded Western photos as an attack on the balance they try to maintain among the three aspects of their identity. This might have been brought about by the type of Western photo primes in this study. The photos used focused on non-Islamic aspects of the Western culture which may be difficult to align with Islam and Iranianness (e.g., they implicitly imply consumerism, materialism, and hedonism). For example, the dominant themes of Hollywood movies and the stereotypical lifestyles of Hollywood stars are rarely consistent with the Islamic-Iranian code of ethics. Future





studies could use Western primes that are less in opposition to Islam (e.g., photos showing aspects of Western technological advancements).

In contrast, those with low integration showed a pattern of responses which is consistent with a compartmentalized identity. That is, they showed a situation-consistent pattern of behaviour. In the Western condition, they scored lower on eudaimonism and transformative suffering than the high integration group, conforming to a Western concept of happiness. In the Islamic condition, this group scored as high as the high integration group on Islam-congruent beliefs, a finding indicating conformity to Islamic ideology. Therefore, compared to the high integration group, this group's responses were more influenced by the content of primes (i.e., the context). The low integration group seems to be able to switch more flexibly between various cultural frames in different contexts.

It should be noted that, for low integration individuals, showing Islam-congruent behaviours in the Islamic condition does not necessarily mean that they consciously and deliberately intend to think and behave consistently with Islamic teachings. They may be affected by their Islamic education and experience (made salient temporarily by exposure to the Islamic prime) without knowing that it is an Islamic response to these situations. In the context of Iran, it is not surprising that a person who is not highly religious shows behaviours consistent with Islam (Dustdar, 2004). After all, low integration Iranians are, like other Iranians, historically and morally embedded in a strongly religious context. Islamic teachings are taught in the educational system and are advertised by all national media. In fact, studies conducted in the USA have showed that a "salvation prime" (which is connected to Protestantism) affects the working behaviour of both self-reported Protestants and non-Protestants similarly (Uhlmann, Poehlman, & Bargh, 2009; Uhlmann, Poehlman, Tannenbaum, & Bargh, 2011), indicating that one does not need to be a devout Protestant to be affected by it. Uhlmann (2012) points out that this is consistent with the notion that "mere exposure to a culture leads individuals to implicitly absorb prevailing values and beliefs, regardless of whether they personally endorse those values..." (p. 386).

It seems fruitful to compare our findings with another established field of study on identity integration. Previous research on identity integration in bilingual or biracial people generally suggests that those with high identity integration show more identity-congruent behaviours when the accessibility of knowledge related to a certain identity rises. In contrast, those with low identity integration may show identity-incongruent or contrastive responses when cued by identity primes (e.g., LeBoeuf, Shafir, & Bayuk, 2010; Yang & Bond, 1980). Contrastive responses to identity cues in low identity integration individuals may reflect motivation to defend the non-cued identity, i.e. preventing leaving out the non-cued identity (e.g., LeBoeuf, Shafir, & Bayuk, 2010; Yang & Bond, 1980). However, this was clearly not the case in the present study. For example, in the Western condition, high identity integration individuals showed less identity-congruent behaviour (i.e., a stronger endorsement of eudaimonistic and pro-suffering beliefs), which is inconsistent with this prediction. Therefore, it seems that the prediction that high identity integration individuals would show more identity-congruent behaviours, which comes mainly from studies with bilingual or biracial people (mainly Asian-Americans), fails to provide useful guiding hypotheses for studies



in Iran. It is not surprising given the considerable differences among the variables, scales, samples, and the context of Iran and those of the previous research involving identity integration.

The present study has a number of limitations that should be noted. For example, given the dearth of studies on similar topics, and the relatively weak effect sizes obtained for the main effects, this study should be considered preliminary and exploratory. Moreover, in the current study, identity integration was assessed after exposure to the primes. It is possible that the identity primes influence people's responses to the Identity Integration Scale. Therefore, it would have been better if the participants' levels of identity integration had been assessed before the primes. However, this did not seem to be a good option in the context of this study because the content of the identity integration items could possibly make information related to all the three aspects of Iranian identity salient, while each of the primes used in this study was supposed to activate only a single aspect of the Iranian identity. Future studies could benefit from assessing identity integration a number of days before the priming experiment.

Despite these limitations, this study is the first to demonstrate that the element of culture made salient by primes affects individuals' conceptions of happiness. The current findings are also consistent with the proposition that identity is not a fixed, stable entity. Instead, people possess a range of identities which may be situationally elicited (Smith, 2011). Given that this study recruited mono-cultural individuals, the findings provide empirical support for Cohen's (2009) assertion that "there are many forms of multiculturalism and that all people are in fact multicultural" (p. 200).

Contemporary research on happiness focuses mainly on individual or culture-level scores of subjective well-being. The results of the present study suggest that in specific cultures there may be more than one prevalent concept of happiness. Above all, this study also showed that these conceptions of happiness can be experimentally manipulated. The results of the present study also highlight the importance of taking into account the variable of identity integration in research on conceptions of happiness in complex cultures such as Iran.

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