Self-Esteem in Adolescent Girls: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Background: Adolescence is a critical period of life for all people. Self-esteem is also a basic human need that affects one's growth, development, and identity. This study aimed to explain 12-14 year-old female adolescents' experiences regarding self-esteem.

Methods: In this qualitative content-analysis study, adolescent girls aged 12-14 years were selected by the purposeful sampling method. The data were gleaned using individual interviews and focus group discussions. The recorded audio files were transcribed and the information was compared and merged with available related literature. The derived ideas were compared and the codes were integrated to form categories. Ultimately, we extracted more abstract categories and sub-categories.

Results: The concept of self-esteem in adolescents is defined as an intellectual approach to oneself. Adolescents considered perceived benefits and good feelings as the outcomes of high self-esteem. From their perspective, interpersonal and intrapersonal influencers contribute to self-esteem.

Conclusions: Attention should be paid to adolescents' self-esteem and its effective factors, including interpersonal and intrapersonal influencers. Therefore, appropriate conditions should be provided for adolescents to promote their self-esteem.

Keywords: Adolescents, Self-esteem, Qualitative research

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1. Introduction

Adolescence is the phase of life stretching between childhood and adulthood. Adolescence encompasses elements of biological and growth and major social role transitions (1). Adolescents are highly subjective and their physical, social, and emotional capabilities are at the maximum level; however, unfortunately, many of them are not able to put this level of ability into use (2). In adolescents, the perception becomes more complex, more organized, and more stable (3). Self-esteem, as one of the basic human needs, affects the growth, development, and identity of individual (4). It is one's own imagination formed during their social interactions (5). Self-esteem, a person's evaluation of his or her value, lays important groundwork for successful life span development. Self-esteem in earlier life predicts later physical and mental health, satisfaction with relationships and work, economic prospects and longevity (6). It is a symbol of mental health (7) that improves the individuals' performance in academic and social life (8). The prevalence of antisocial behaviors such as smoking, substance abuse, educational problems, competitive anxiety, lack of effort to improve the situation, and suicide are related to low self-esteem (9). Given the importance of self-esteem during adolescence and the potential of qualitative research in deep understanding of a phenomenon, this qualitative research was conducted to investigate the female adolescents' experiences about self-esteem. The findings of this study can be applied by authorities to take appropriate measures to improve self-esteem in adolescent girls. Furthermore, our results can help parents, teachers, health workers, and psychologists to more effectively communicate with adolescents and help them to improve their achievement in life.

2. Methods

Study Design

We conducted this qualitative study using a content-analysis design to extract concepts related to self-esteem in adolescent girls. For this purpose, we collected the data through interviews, determined the contents, created the semantic units, and categorized

the collected data (10). We systematically analyzed the texts' contents to meet the data reduction and data structuring goals (11).

Participants

This qualitative research was conducted in Birjand City, South Khorasan province, Iran in 2019 to gain a deep understanding about self-esteem (12). The study participants included high school girls aged 12-14 years in Birjand City. We applied the purposeful sampling method to select the participants and collected the required data through conducting nine semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions with 15 individuals. The data saturation was achieved after 15 interviews where no new code was determined.

Students with more information about self – esteem were selected according to the viewpoints of the school managers and teachers. The researcher introduced herself and explained the study goals. Prior to the interviews, we ensured the participants about information confidentiality and asked them to sign the informed consent forms. They were also allowed to withdraw from the study at any time.

Data Collection

We gathered the data based on self-esteem guideline questions. The questionnaire contained open-ended general questions about self-esteem and adolescents' experiences about self-esteem. We held the interviews and group discussions at school in order that the participants could feel more comfortable. We recorded the interviews following the consent of the interviewees. Afterwards, the recorded contents were transcribed verbatim. At the beginning of the group discussion, the researcher explained the rules and participated in the discussions as a facilitator in order to create a positive interactive atmosphere throughout the discussion. In this regard, the students expressed their ideas freely and comfortably for two hours. The individual interviews, which lasted about half an hour, continued until data saturation was reached. Interviews and group discussions focused on general questions as follows:

1- Have you ever experienced high or low self-esteem? How did you feel? Can you explain?

2- What factors have contributed to your sense of self-esteem?

Along with the respondents' answers, the researcher

asked certain follow-up questions to collect more detailed information and elucidate the ideas. The interviews ended when the participants completely describing their experiences and collection of all the required details. The interviews and group discussions continued until data saturation.

Study of Trustworthiness

Regarding the study credibility, the researchers had persistent observation and prolonged engagement in the subject.

The interviewer established a friendly relationship with the participants, such that they were able to easily express their experiences. Moreover, peer debriefing method was applied to increase data credibility. In this regard, the study supervisor and advisor supervised the data collection and analysis processes and when necessary, provided the instructions. To improve the scientific accuracy and validity of the data, we administered member checking and triangulation methods. For data collection, we conducted individual interviews and focus group discussions.

To ensure the reliability of the data, interviews were transcribed verbatim and accurately coded. Three participants were then asked to review the codes derived from their interviews, provide the researchers with acceptable feedbacks, and confirm the reliability of the data. To facilitate the transferability of the findings, we conducted maximum variation sampling and selected participants from different ages and various economic and social backgrounds. For data transferability, the participants' demographic information such as age, education level, and parental occupation were further collected. We also achieved data confirmability through accurate recording of the research procedure over time, so that other researchers could track them.

To ensure the consistency of the findings, raw information such as auditory files, texts, interview questions, classification process of the findings, and analysis of the results were considered.

Data Analysis

In this qualitative research, we conducted data analysis and data collection simultaneously. In *content analysis* method, the analysis begins with preparation for the research. To this end, we initially transcribed the interviews' audio files verbatim; afterwards, we compared these transcriptions and merged them with

the contents available in the literature. In the next stage, a classification matrix was created with respect to the constructs. To achieve the desired items and options of each category, the researchers carefully reviewed and investigated the transcriptions. The important parts were further broken down into semantic units, and the initial coding was performed based on these units. For instance, a semantic unit derived from the interviews was »We have to respect ourselves"; so, the derived code was "respect ourselves". In this way, we extracted all codes from the semantic units. The data were encoded, summarized, and categorized according to the similarities and differences existed in the information. Then, we compared the ideas and integrated the codes so as to form the categories. For example, codes of "valuing yourself / being proud of yourself / loving yourself / not insulting yourself / paying attention to your wishes / accepting yourself / appreciating your own" were classified under "respect yourself" category.

In the next stage, after making revisions and comparisons, we classified the categories extracted from the codes. For instance, the categories of "respect ourselves" and "believing in self-efficacy" were classified under the main category of "intellectual approach to oneself". Finally, we extracted more abstract categories and sub-categories.

3. Results

In this study, 24 adolescent girls aged 12-14 years participated with a mean age of 12.95 2.1 years. Based on the findings, 29.2% of the adolescents had parents with academic degrees, and 4.1% had unemployed fathers (Table 1).

The contents of the interviews and group discussions included 213 initial codes, which were merged into 41 codes. Next, six sub-categories and three themes were extracted from these codes (Table 2).

Once the categories and sub-categories were formed, three main themes were extracted: 1) Intellectual approach to oneself, 2) outcome expectancies, and 3) influencers.

1. Intellectual Approach to Oneself

This theme was initially extracted from the interviews and group discussions of adolescents regarding the concept of self-esteem. According to the participants, intellectual approach to oneself was divided into two categories, namely self-respect and believing in one's efficiency.

A) Respecting oneself included the following concepts: valuing yourself/ self-respect/ self-love/ self-honesty/ not insulting oneself/ paying attention to one's wishes/ self-love/ and self-appreciation. In this regard, an adolescent declared: "Self-esteem means valuing ourselves." Another participant stated: "We are proud of ourselves, and we care about our own desires."

Table 1: Participants' demographic information

Variable		Number	Percent
Age	12	8	33.3
	13	9	37.5
	14	7	29.2
	Total	24	100
Mother's Education	Middle school or lower	7	29.2
	High school	10	41.6
	University	7	29.2
	Total	24	100
Father's Education	Middle school or lower	11	45.8
	High school	6	25
	University	7	29.2
	Total	24	100
Mother's Occupation	Homemaker	14	58.33
	Employed	10	41.67
	Total	24	100
Father's Occupation	Unemployed	1	4.17
	Self-employed	12	50
	Worker	7	29.17
	Employed	4	16.66
	Total	24	100

Table 2: Summary of extracted themes categories and sub-categories

Themes	Categories	Sub-categories
Intellectual approach to oneself	Respect oneself	Value/ self-respect/ self-love/ honesty/ not insulting yourself/ paying attention to one's wishes/ self-admission/ appreciating yourself
	Believing in one's efficacy	Self-confidence/ believing in one's usefulness/ ability to accept problems and solve them
Outcome expectancies	Positive emotions	Increasing your self-confidence/ feeling good / increasing hope/ thinking positive
	Perceived benefits	Accountability and doing things better/ establishing appropriate communication with others/ stress control/ gaining others' trust/ independence / being successful/ avoiding mistakes
Influencers	Interpersonal influencers	Respecting others/ having appropriate communication with others/ being encouraged by parents and teachers/ helping others / being confirmed by parents and teachers/ parents' overlooking the adolescent's mistakes/ parents' appreciation of adolescent's independence/ parents' attention to adolescent's interests/ identifying the adolescent's potentials/ treating adolescents equally / having reasonable expectations of adolescents/ showing love to adolescents/ considering the adolescent's needs/ advising adolescents
	Intrapersonal influencers	Thanking oneself/ paying attention to one's apparent condition / having fun from time to time/ being self-aware/ being realistic/ fixing one's weaknesses

B) Believing in one's efficiency included the following concepts based on the adolescents' ideas: having self-confidence/ believing in one's usefulness/ ability to accept problems and solving them. For instance, an adolescent girl said: " I feel like I can solve my problems".

2. Outcome expectancies

This category included predicting possible outcomes derived from involvement in the desired behavior (13). Regarding this category, participants expressed their positive emotions about the perceived benefits of self-esteem as their outcome expectancies.

A) Positive emotions with self-esteem: adolescents experienced increased feelings of self-confidence/ good mood/ hope/ thinking positively in this category. A participant mentioned: "Self-esteem means accepting ourselves, not humiliating each other in front of others". Another subject said:" Self-esteem means to respect ourselves."

B) Perceived benefits: this category was defined as believing in the benefits of using life skills to reduce the risk or gain benefits (13). In this regard, a participant mentioned: "If our self-esteem is high, our self-confidence increases and we can do better in life." According to our participants, the perceived benefits of high self-esteem included: accountability and doing things better/ establishing appropriate communication

with others/ having stress control/ gaining others' trust/ independence / being successful/ avoiding mistakes.

3. Influencers

The third theme was associated with influencers of self-esteem in adolescent girls, subcategorized into interpersonal and intrapersonal.

A) Intrapersonal influencers:

Intrapersonal influencers are affected by one's self and consist of the following concepts: appreciating oneself/ paying attention to one's appearance/ having fun from time to time/ having self-awareness/ being realistic/ fixing one's weaknesses. Intrapersonal influencers promoted self-esteem in adolescent girls. An adolescent said: "We have our fun, and we enjoy life" Another participant stated: "We should be aware of our weaknesses and strengths "

B) Interpersonal influencers:

Interpersonal influencers are related to other people. This concept is associated with titles such as respecting others/ having appropriate communication with others/ parents and teachers encouraging adolescents/ adolescents helping others/ parents and teachers confirming adolescents/ parents and teachers' overlooking the adolescent's mistake/ parents and teachers' appreciation of adolescent's independence/

paying attention to teenage interests/ identifying adolescents' potential / treating adolescents equally/ having reasonable expectations of the adolescents/ loving adolescent/s considering the adolescent's needs/ advising adolescents. In this regard, an adolescent said, "When I help others, my self-esteem increases."

4. Discussion

The findings resulted in three main themes, including "intellectual approach to oneself", "outcome expectancies", and "influencers" which were associated with the concept of self-esteem, the role of self-esteem, and effective factors in self-esteem, respectively.

Intellectual approach to herself consisted of respecting oneself and believing in one's efficiency. Competency and self-confidence were further related to self-esteem (14). Self-belief, self-efficiency, and self-respect were the concepts extracted from the interviews. In this regard, efficiency was defined as one's ability to control the challenges.

Outcome expectancies included the perceived benefits and positive emotions of self-esteem. To have a high self-esteem, people need to know the things that make them feel good and plan in way that these events take place in their lives (3). Adolescents pointed out some positive feelings resulted from self-esteem. This suggests that having self-esteem leads to positive emotions in the individual, and having positive emotions leads to self-esteem. The results of many studies have shown the effect of high self-esteem in promoting mental health, preventing behavioral and social problems, and increasing academic and social success (15, 16).

Iancu and colleagues investigated people with social anxiety and found that they had lower levels of self-esteem compared to the healthy group. In addition, they reported that social anxiety had a negative correlation with self-esteem score (17). Results from structural equation modeling revealed that the relation between shyness and social anxiety was partially mediated by self-esteem (18), meaning high self-esteem increases creativity (19) and self-esteem is a source of happiness (20). In this study, adolescents expressed stress control and a sense of satisfaction as self-esteem outcomes. A reciprocal relationship exists between the adolescents' abilities and their self-esteem; in other words, if a person has a positive evaluation of their performance, their anxiety decreases and their self-esteem increases as a result (21). A relationship was found between self-esteem

and social anxiety, such that individuals with higher self-esteem had a lower level of social anxiety (22). A study showed that self-esteem had an inverse relationship with eating disorders and social anxiety (23).

The influencers were of interpersonal and intrapersonal natures. Intrapersonal influencers depend on one's self, and self-esteem can be developed independently. Interpersonal influencers depend on one's relationship with others. Participants made mention of interpersonal influencers with titles such as verifying adolescents, neglecting adolescents, and so forth. We also found self-esteem to be affected by internal and external factors. Internal factors originate from within whereas external or environmental factors can be transmitted in the form of verbal and nonverbal messages to the individual (24). People determine their worth based on others' judgments and reactions, especially their near family members (3), meaning self-esteem is strengthened in a supportive and positive environment (3). Furthermore, perceived social support has an impact on self-esteem (25). All the above-mentioned ideas are consistent with the concept of influencers in the present study. Adolescents introduced their parents as important influencers of self-esteem. In this regard, parents should be a good model for adolescents and have enough knowledge and skills to promote adolescents' self-esteem.

The current qualitative study included 12-14-year-old high school girls. Therefore, the generalization of the results to other adolescents should be done with caution. Moreover, parents or teachers provided better information. Accordingly, we recommend other researchers to carry out similar studies with other adolescents, including boys, school dropouts, and adults who are in contact with adolescents.

5. Conclusions

The concept of self-esteem in adolescents is defined as intellectual trust in one-self. According to the adolescents, perceived benefits and good feelings were the outcomes of high self-esteem, itself resulted from interpersonal and intrapersonal influencers. Self-esteem plays an important role in promoting adolescents' mental health. Therefore, the factors contributing to adolescents' self-esteem should be considered.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declared no conflict of interest.

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