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Toward an Ecological Sufi Guidance and Counseling Framework of Tadabbur Alam: Evidence from Ethnic Variations in Self-Esteem in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT
Self-esteem is a key dimension of college students' mental well-being, yet studies on its ethnic variation and its implications for Islamic counseling remain limited. Existing research on Sufi-based counseling in Indonesia has addressed several psychosocial issues, but has rarely examined how ethnic differences in self-esteem can inform a culturally responsive and ecologically grounded counseling framework. This study investigates self-esteem profiles across ethnic groups in Indonesia and examines their implications for the development of an ecological Sufi guidance and counseling framework based on tadabbur alam. A quantitative survey design was employed with 64 guidance and counseling students from Universitas Muhammadiyah Buton and Universitas Indraprasta PGRI representing the Betawi, Javanese, and Butonese ethnic groups. Data were collected using an adapted Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory and analyzed through the Rasch model to identify overall patterns and aspect-level variations across ethnic groups. The findings show that the overall self-esteem of students across the three ethnic groups is generally moderate. While no substantial ethnic differences were found in overall self-esteem, variations emerged in the dimensions of significance and ability, indicating that cultural background may shape students' sense of personal worth, interpersonal acceptance, and perceived competence in facing challenges. These findings contribute to the development of Islamic guidance and counseling theory by providing an empirical basis for an ecological Sufi counseling framework that integrates ethnic sensitivity, spiritual reflection, and human–nature interaction through tadabbur alam. The study thus offers a culturally responsive conceptual direction for designing counseling interventions to support student self-esteem in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

Self-esteem is a central dimension of psychological development during the college years, a period in which students are required to negotiate academic demands, social adaptation, and identity

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formation simultaneously. In higher education settings, self-esteem influences how students evaluate their personal worth, respond to challenges, and position themselves in interpersonal relationships. A positive sense of self esteem has been associated with adaptive functioning, academic engagement, and psychological well-being (Choi et al., 2019), whereas low self-esteem is linked to vulnerability to stress, depression, and other mental health difficulties (Hou et al., 2019; Ramon-Arbues et al., 2020; Ouyang et al., 2020). For this reason, self-esteem is not only a personal attribute but also an important concern in student development and counseling services.

Despite its importance, self-esteem among college students is often discussed in general psychological terms without sufficient attention to the cultural contexts in which it develops. In a plural society such as Indonesia, self-esteem is not formed solely through individual experience but is also shaped by values, norms, and patterns of social interaction embedded in ethnic communities (Garcia & Serra, 2019). This issue is particularly important in counseling, because students' perceptions of self-worth, interpersonal acceptance, and competence may be influenced by culturally specific meanings. However, studies on self-esteem in higher education have rarely examined ethnic variation as an empirical basis for designing culturally responsive counseling approaches, even though Indonesia's social reality is marked by extensive ethnic diversity.

At the same time, Islamic and Sufi-based approaches to guidance and counseling have gained increasing attention as meaningful alternatives for promoting mental well-being (Rozikan et al., 2021; Taghavi & Rahimi, n.d.). Previous studies in the Indonesian context have shown the relevance of Sufi counseling for issues such as social phobia, moral development, death anxiety, and spiritual formation. Yet this body of literature has largely focused on specific psychosocial problems and has not adequately addressed how Sufi-oriented counseling can be theoretically informed by empirical differences in students' self-esteem across cultural backgrounds (Arifin, 2022; Farmawati et al., 2019; Fauziyyah, 2019; Sakdiah et al., 2023). More specifically, the application of tadabbur alam as an ecological mode of Sufi guidance and counseling remains underdeveloped in relation to student self-esteem in higher education. Thus, while Sufi counseling has been recognized as spiritually meaningful, its cultural and ecological grounding has not been sufficiently formulated in a way that responds to ethnic diversity.

In this study, tadabbur alam is positioned as an ecological Sufi counseling orientation because it connects inner reflection with engagement with the natural environment. Through contemplation of nature, students are encouraged to integrate cognitive, emotional, spiritual, and relational dimensions of the self. Such an approach is relevant to self-esteem development because it not only addresses intrapersonal meaning but also situates human growth within broader social, spiritual, and ecological relationships. From this perspective, ecological Sufi guidance and counseling does not merely offer spiritual consolation; it provides a conceptual pathway for linking self-understanding, cultural sensitivity, and reflective interaction with creation as a medium of personal transformation (Abd Rasyid, 2020; Mona, 2012).

Against this background, the present study examines self-esteem profiles among college students from three ethnic groups in Indonesia such as Betawi, Javanese, and Butonese and explores their implications for an ecological Sufi guidance and counseling framework based on tadabbur alam. Rather than treating ethnicity as a demographic descriptor alone, this study considers ethnic variation as a meaningful context for interpreting differences in self-esteem, especially in the dimensions that relate to self-worth, interpersonal acceptance, and perceived competence. By employing a quantitative survey design and Rasch analysis, this study seeks to identify patterns of self-esteem that may inform a culturally responsive counseling framework for higher education settings.

The contribution of this study is twofold. Empirically, it extends the literature on student self-esteem by demonstrating the relevance of ethnic variation in understanding specific dimensions of self-esteem in the Indonesian context. Theoretically, it contributes to the development of Islamic guidance and counseling by proposing that ecological Sufi guidance and counseling grounded in tadabbur alam should be formulated not only as a spiritual intervention, but also as a culturally responsive framework informed by empirical patterns of students' self-evaluation. In this way, the study bridges psychological measurement, cultural context, and Islamic counseling theory, and offers a clearer foundation for future intervention design in higher education.

METHODS

This study employed a quantitative research approach using a survey design to examine self-esteem profiles among college students from different ethnic backgrounds. The survey method was selected because it is appropriate for capturing variations in individual responses and for analyzing patterns of self-esteem across groups. Data analysis was conducted using Rasch analysis, which allows simultaneous estimation of item characteristics and respondent abilities within a single measurement model. Rasch analysis is particularly suitable for survey based studies because it evaluates both item difficulty levels and individual performance probabilities when responding to questionnaire items (Planinic et al., 2019).

In this study, Rasch analysis was applied to generate person measures, item measures, and Differential Item Functioning analysis. The use of Differential Item Functioning enables the examination of measurement invariance across specific respondent characteristics such as ethnic background, gender, and age, ensuring that the instrument functions consistently across groups (Wu et al., 2017). The analysis focused on comparing self-esteem levels based on students ethnic origin and on examining differences across self-esteem aspects. Conceptually, Rasch measurement operates as a unidimensional model in which the probability of a response to a particular item is determined by the relationship between the respondent ability level and the difficulty of the item being measured (Mari & Wilson, 2014).

The research population consisted of college students enrolled in the guidance and counseling study programs at Universitas Muhammadiyah Buton and Universitas Indraprasta PGRI who identified as belonging to the Betawi, Javanese, or Buton ethnic groups. A purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure that participants met the predefined criteria related to ethnic background and academic program. Based on this selection process, a total of 64 students participated in the study. Demographic characteristics of the respondents are presented in the following table.

Table 1. Demographic Data

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Semester	2nd Semester	35	55
	4th Semester	4	6
	6th Semester	16	25
	8th Semester	9	14
	Total	**64**	**100**
Ethnicity	Betawi	20	32
	Javanese	22	34
	Butonese	22	34
	Total	**64**	**100**
Age	18–24 years	59	92

	25–29 years	3	5
	More than 30 years	2	3
	Total	**64**	**100**

Data were collected using a self-esteem inventory developed on the basis of Coopersmith self-esteem theory. The instrument was constructed to measure four dimensions of self-esteem, namely strength, significance, virtue, and ability. The data collection procedure involved distributing the inventory through an online questionnaire, which was completed by respondents in July 2022. This procedure ensured consistency in data recording and facilitated efficient participation from students across both universities.

To illustrate respondent response patterns to the self-esteem items, the results of the Rasch analysis are presented in Figure 1.

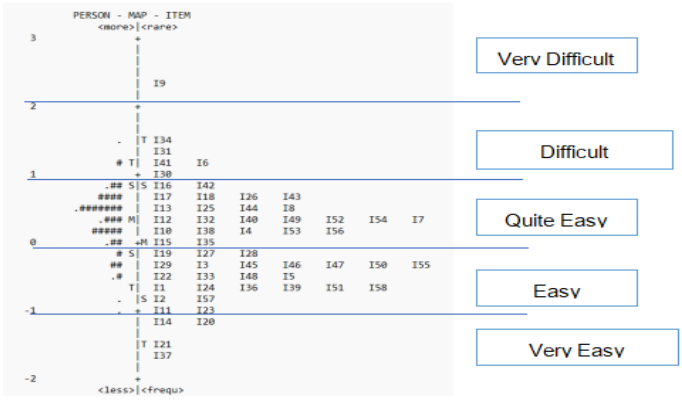


Figure 1. Students College Self-Esteem Map Item

Based on Figure 1, respondent responses to the self-esteem scale can be categorized into five levels, namely very difficult, difficult, moderately easy, easy, and very easy. The analysis indicates that the item perceived as most difficult to endorse was item I9, which states “There are many things about myself that I am going to change.” In contrast, the item most easily endorsed by respondents was item I37, which states “I really do not like being a man or woman.” The use of the Rasch model in this study was epistemologically relevant because the research sought to move beyond simple score comparison toward a measurement-based interpretation of self-esteem across ethnic groups. Rasch analysis is particularly useful when the objective is to examine how respondents with different characteristics interact with specific items and whether the instrument functions consistently across groups. In this study, the Rasch model supported the identification of ethnic variation not only at the level of total self-esteem but also at the level of specific dimensions, especially significance and ability, which later became central to the study’s theoretical implications for ecological Sufi guidance and counseling.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

Result

The Rasch analysis shows that the overall self-esteem of college students from the Betawi, Javanese, and Butonese ethnic groups is predominantly at a moderate level. Although individual scores vary, the general distribution indicates that most respondents are located in the middle category, suggesting that self-esteem among students in this sample is neither critically low nor strongly elevated. At the aggregate level, the comparison across ethnic groups reveals relatively

similar response patterns, indicating that ethnicity does not appear to produce substantial differences in overall self-esteem.

A more differentiated pattern emerges when self-esteem is examined by dimension. In the strength dimension, most students again fall within the moderate category, and the item response patterns are largely comparable across ethnic groups. This suggests that students' sense of inner stability, self-control, and firmness is relatively consistent across the three ethnic backgrounds represented in the study. A similar pattern is found in the virtue dimension. Responses related to moral self-evaluation and adherence to values do not show meaningful ethnic variation, indicating that this aspect of self-esteem is shared relatively evenly across groups.

In contrast, the significance dimension shows noticeable variation across ethnic groups. This dimension refers to students' sense of being valued, accepted, and meaningful in their relationships with others. The variation found in this dimension suggests that ethnic background may be more relevant to the relational and interpersonal side of self-esteem than to its more general or moral dimensions. In other words, while students may report broadly similar levels of self-esteem overall, they may differ in how they experience social worth, interpersonal acceptance, and emotional connectedness within their cultural contexts.

A similar pattern is found in the ability dimension. Responses to items related to ability vary across ethnic groups, indicating that students differ in how they perceive their competence, resilience, and capacity to deal with challenges. Compared with the other dimensions, this finding suggests that ethnic variation is more visible in performance-related and adaptation-related components of self-esteem. Thus, the main result of this study is not that ethnic groups differ sharply in overall self-esteem, but that ethnic variation becomes more apparent in specific dimensions related to interpersonal value and perceived competence.

Taken together, these findings show that self-esteem among college students in this study is multidimensional. The absence of strong ethnic differences in the total score should not obscure the fact that some dimensions are more culturally sensitive than others. Specifically, significance and ability appear to be the dimensions through which ethnic variation is most meaningfully expressed, whereas strength and virtue remain relatively stable across groups. This pattern provides a more focused empirical basis for the subsequent discussion on culturally responsive and ecological Sufi guidance and counseling.

Discussion

The findings of this study imply that ecological Sufi guidance and counseling should be developed as a culturally responsive framework rather than as a generic spiritual intervention. Because ethnic variation appears more clearly in the dimensions of significance and ability, counseling programs need to pay particular attention to students' relational sense of worth, interpersonal acceptance, resilience, and perceived competence. In this respect, tadabbur alam provides a relevant conceptual basis because it combines spiritual reflection, self-understanding, and engagement with the natural environment in a way that supports psychological growth and meaning-making (Abd Rasyid, 2020; Mona M. Amer & S. A., 2012).

In practical terms, the proposed framework may be organized into seven interrelated stages. The orientation stage introduces students to the ecological and spiritual rationale of counseling by connecting the inner dimensions of the self with the outer dimension of nature. The takhalli stage emphasizes the release of negative traits and emotional burdens, while the tahalli stage focuses on the cultivation of positive personal qualities. The tajalli stage deepens spiritual awareness through

reflection on divine presence, prayer, and mortality. These three stages are conceptually consistent with the Sufi process of inner purification and transformation, in which the self moves from the release of destructive tendencies toward the internalization of virtuous qualities and divine awareness (Abd Rasyid, 2020; Susanto, 2014).

The ecological dimension becomes more explicit in the outbound stage and the stage of giving ibrah, where students engage directly with natural settings such as mountains and oceans. In this framework, nature is not treated merely as a background for activity, but as a medium of reflection, challenge, and symbolic learning. Previous research suggests that exposure to natural environments and unfamiliar ecological challenges can generate dissonance, stimulate self-reconstruction, and improve self-concept through direct experiential engagement (McKenzie, 2000; Zhang, Ferreira, & Karali, 2022). This makes the ecological component particularly relevant to the ability dimension of self-esteem, because students are invited to experience perseverance, endurance, and adaptive problem solving through embodied interaction with the environment.

At the same time, the symbolic interpretation of nature also supports the significance dimension of self-esteem. In your framework, the ocean symbolizes forgiveness and emotional acceptance, while the mountain represents focus, persistence, and determination in pursuing life goals. Such metaphors enable students to reinterpret themselves within a broader spiritual and ecological order, thereby strengthening self-acceptance, gratitude, and a sense of meaningful existence. This is consistent with the broader orientation of Sufi counseling, which seeks to foster harmony between cognition, emotion, spirituality, and life meaning (Anwar, 2022; Subhi et al., 2019).

These implications also suggest that ecological Sufi guidance and counseling is likely to be more effective when implemented in a group format. Group counseling provides a context in which participants can exchange experiences, develop trust, and strengthen solidarity, all of which are important for the development of significance and interpersonal acceptance. Group dynamics have been shown to enhance interpersonal sensitivity, open communication, and mutual respect, thereby creating a supportive climate for reflection and growth (Gençer, 2019). For college students, this format may be particularly helpful because self-esteem is often shaped within social interaction rather than through isolated reflection alone.

The success of this framework also depends on counselor competence. Counselors who implement ecological Sufi guidance and counseling need to demonstrate authenticity, unconditional acceptance, empathic understanding, and tenderness. Authenticity is important because students are more likely to engage in deep reflection when the counselor is experienced as sincere and congruent (Mayton, 2018; Nursyamsi, 2017). Unconditional acceptance helps create psychological safety across differences in background and values (Geldard et al., 2017; Meier & Davis, 2019). Empathic understanding and tenderness enable counselors to accompany students holistically across emotional, cognitive, spiritual, and relational dimensions (Hough, 2006; Murphy & Murphy, 2010). Accordingly, the practical implication of this study is not only the proposal of a tadabbur alam-based counseling structure, but also the need to strengthen counselor readiness to deliver it in culturally responsive ways.

Overall, this study suggests that ecological Sufi guidance and counseling can serve as a promising conceptual direction for higher education counseling in Indonesia. Its main implication lies in integrating empirical findings on ethnic variation in self-esteem with a counseling framework that is spiritually grounded, ecologically oriented, and culturally responsive. In this way, tadabbur alam is positioned not merely as a technique, but as a model of self-development that connects human beings with the self, with others, with nature, and with Allah SWT.

CONCLUSION

This study found that the self-esteem of Betawi, Javanese, and Butonese college students is generally moderate, with no substantial ethnic differences in overall self-esteem. However, variation appears in the dimensions of significance and ability, suggesting that ethnic background may shape how students experience interpersonal worth and perceived competence. These findings provide an empirical basis for developing an ecological Sufi guidance and counseling framework of tadabbur alam that is culturally responsive and relevant to student development in higher education. The study contributes theoretically by linking self-esteem profiling, ethnic context, and Islamic counseling, while practically offering direction for counseling programs that aim to strengthen self-worth and resilience. Future studies should test the effectiveness of this framework with larger and more diverse samples..

Theoretically, this study strengthens the development of Islamic guidance and counseling by positioning self-esteem as a multidimensional construct that is sensitive to cultural contexts, and by affirming that an ecological Sufi approach based on tadabbur alam can serve as an integrative conceptual framework linking psychological, cultural, and spiritual dimensions. However, this study has several limitations, particularly the relatively small sample size and its restriction to three ethnic groups and two higher education institutions, which requires cautious generalization of the findings. In addition, the use of a quantitative survey design has not fully captured the subjective dynamics of how students experience and interpret self-esteem and reflective practices based on tadabbur alam. Therefore, future research is recommended to involve larger and more diverse samples, to integrate mixed methods or qualitative approaches in order to explore in-depth experiences, and to experimentally test the effectiveness of the ecological Sufi guidance and counseling model in enhancing the significance and ability dimensions of students' self-esteem across various higher education contexts.

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