

Waithood and Face: Morality and Mobility Among Lower-Class Youth in Iran

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Published online: 12 July 2015
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Abstract Studies of marginalized youth in the Islamic Republic of Iran have focused almost exclusively on how structural constraints operate to thwart these young people's transition to adulthood. There has been comparatively little work that has examined how disadvantaged youth actually cope with precarious structural conditions. The result has been unbalanced hypotheses that argue that youth become stuck in long stretches of time during which they wait with uncertainty for an autonomous life, all the while neglecting the productive micro quests that youth engage in to resolve this uncertainty. The pursuit of face by lower-class youth in Iran speaks to this gap in existing studies. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in two cities in Iran, this study finds that through their engagement in this face system, some young people create an alternative basis of social differentiation to improve their lives. By following the four moral criteria governing face behavior—self-sufficiency, hard work, purity and appearance—these youth are able to accrue moral capital, which subsequently enables them to win incremental gains in the social and economic spheres. These findings have important implications for research on youth mobility in the Middle East.

Keywords Face · Morality · Culture · Moral capital · Socio-economic mobility · Iran · Poverty · Youth · Exclusion

Lower-class youth in Iran present a valuable lens with which to come to a more complete understanding of how marginalized people in the global periphery cope with precarious socioeconomic conditions. Young people between the ages of 15–29 years in the Islamic Republic of Iran comprise the highest share (35 %) of 15–29 year olds in the total population of any country in the world (Salehi-Isfahani 2010). A wealth of quantitative research has shown that formal labor market rigidity coupled with Iran's high youth cohort and the inability of existing educational models to effectively provide youth with the skills they need for

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productive employment have created a situation that thwarts young people's successful transition to adulthood (Salehi-Isfahani and Egel 2007; Salehi-Isfahani 2010). Without the ability to acquire stable, formal sector jobs upon graduation and without the subsequent ability to afford marriage, studies have argued that Iranian youth are ill-equipped to fulfill the "most basic of societal contracts" (Mulderig 2011, 1) by fully transitioning from school to work and from work to marriage and family formation (Salehi-Isfahani 2010). They become stuck in what scholars have termed "waithood" (Dhillon and Yousef 2009; Singerman 2007), a period in time during which young people wait with uncertainty for productive employment, housing and marriage—socioeconomic benchmarks that have traditionally defined adult status in the Middle East (Hoodfar 1997).

This phenomenon is even more pronounced among lower-class youth who have little capital to start with and must cope with meeting basic needs before they can attain more education and acquire superior employment prospects. For example, comparing the unemployment status of lower-class and middle-class young men in Iran over the past decade, Salehi-Isfahani (2010) found that men from lower-income groups have higher unemployment than their more advantaged counterparts. This increases the period of time that these youth must spend in waithood before they can fully transition from adolescence to adulthood.

Yet we do not know what this period of waithood looks like for many of those youth who are caught in its throes. Are they simply waiting to be included in the socioeconomic fabric of their society, as these current studies suggest, or are they bypassing formalized institutions to create their own forms of social and economic participation?¹ Indeed, while we know much about the ways in which this period of waithood has been brought into being in the Islamic Republic, we know little about the cultural practices that some Iranian young people—and especially those from the lower classes—engage in and the role these practices may play in shaping alternate paths that can bring youth measures of social and economic mobility.

In this article, I investigate the practices that some of Iran's disadvantaged youth use to cope with their precarious circumstances. I take as my point of departure Harold Wilensky's (1966) argument that individuals climb up numerous ladders throughout their lifetime and that "falling behind on one...may neither cause an irrevocable loss of social position nor yield much sense of deprivation" (1966, 110–111). Drawing on participant observation data gathered in two cities in Iran, I find that in the presence of socioeconomic deprivation, some low-income youth create an alternative basis of social differentiation to improve their lives. This is done by engaging in a process of facework,² wherein these youth follow certain cultural norms or rules of behavior revolving around saving face to present themselves as good, responsible and financially secure individuals in front of those whom are in their personal social networks.³ This allows youth to maintain their dignity in the face of degradation by providing them with moral boundaries or benchmarks by which they can judge themselves in relation to others, and by which others in their social circles can evaluate their moral worth.

¹ Herrera (2009) argues that the participation of youth in the Arab Spring coupled with their extensive use of technology has enabled them to create "horizontal forms of participation" that they can subsequently use to construct their own path toward adulthood (369).

² Goffman (1955) first used the term "face-work" to describe the work that individual actors must undertake in social interactions in order to present an image of themselves and to protect their face.

³ Using Fischer's (1982) definition, I refer to personal social networks as the people that individuals are directly involved with in a relation of interaction and exchange, for example, neighbor/neighbor, employer, employee, and friend/friend. As Fischer describes, "A person is involved with people with whom he or she shares activities, who provide material and emotional assistance, or both, and who receives the same in return" (Fischer 1982, 35).

Those youth who are able to save face are able to lay claim to moral capital (Sherman 2009). By outwardly exhibiting their moral worth by attempting to save face, these young face-savers are able to increase their stock of moral capital, which they can subsequently exchange for certain social and economic benefits. Subjective measures of moral worth made by others, as evaluated through these youths' ability to save face, provides face-savers with the ultimate "success," which is the opportunity to gain entrée into Iran's local economies and social networks. These findings show how some lower-class young people's daily struggles for maintaining dignity do not always manifest themselves in participation in cultures of opposition, but in acceptance of dominant cultural norms, a finding that has important consequences for research on youth-hood and mobility in the Middle East.

Saving Face, Moral Capital, and Mobility

The existing literature on "waithood" in Iran largely employs quantitative methods to document the extent of the trend, the demographic characteristics of the youth who are caught in it, and the general consequences of this period in young people's lives (Salehi-Isfahani and Egel 2007; Salehi-Isfahani 2010). A large part of the analysis focuses on waithood as a symptom of the exclusion of Iranian young people from quality education, from decent employment and from the power to shape their communities. Scholars who have used qualitative methods to study these "excluded" young people have focused their analysis on youth in the upper and upper-middle classes of Iranian society. The emphasis here has largely been on the various subcultures that have arisen among these youth that undergird their exclusion from formalized institutions of power (Basmenji 2005; Mahdavi 2008; Varzi 2006). Given the attention that scholars have placed on understanding the factors that give rise to youth exclusion in Iran and the ways in which this exclusion is reaffirmed by the practices of privileged youth in the country, there are practically no qualitative studies that address the experiences of lower income youth groups in Iran.⁴ Consequently, we know very little, besides snippets of anecdotal evidence,⁵ of how lower-class young people in Iran cope with the uncertain structural conditions in which they find themselves.

An exception is the work of Asef Bayat (1997), who has approached this question by looking at the everyday struggles of ordinary people in pre- and post-revolutionary Iran. Bayat stresses the central role that cultural beliefs about *aberou* (face) and the desire to maintain dignity play in shaping how Iran's lower class goes about obtaining public goods and improving their lot in life. As Bayat states, "This idea of dignity is very closely associated with the public judgment, with the community or friends and foes determining its meaning" (1997, 13). Being judged as someone with *aberou*—as evidenced by the ability to provide for oneself and for one's family and to conceal shortcomings—enables the poor to maintain a dignified life in the eyes of others. While "the rich may also share similar values...the poor have a lower capacity to conceal failures, thus making their dignified life more vulnerable"

⁴ Olzewska (2013) addresses this issue by examining the status aspirations and mobility experiences of lower income youth groups in Iran. However, her focus is on young Afghan men and women, whose experiences often diverge from their Iranian counterparts due to the legal denial of citizenship and other social rights to the former.

⁵ Kazemi (1980) shared the personal narratives of a couple of poor, migrant youth in Iran in his seminal work on poverty in pre-revolutionary Iran. However, these accounts were anecdotal and he conducted no qualitative, systematic research into their coping strategies. Further still, post-revolutionary qualitative research into the lives of poor youth in Iran is sorely missing.

(1997, 13). What is missing in Bayat's analysis, however, are the specific, everyday cultural practices associated with *aberou* wherein Iran's poor attempt to attain a better life. This study examines these practices and finds that certain lower-class Iranian youth, whom I refer to as face-savers, consistently use a particular set of moral norms that enable them to save face and to differentiate themselves from their peers. This, in turn, facilitates their access to social and economic opportunities that make possible a slow and steady climb within poverty.

Particularly unique about face-saving among these youth is the challenge that it poses to traditional conceptions of social marginalization and resistance among lower-class youth. Subcultural studies have long documented how poor youth who are similarly excluded from broader structures of opportunity elsewhere in the developed and developing worlds turn to deviancy (Becker 1963), drugs (Bourgois 2003), gangs (Cohen 1955; Sanchez-Jankowski 1991; Whyte 1955; Willis 1977), oppositional values (MacLeod 2008; Matza and Sykes 1961), music subcultures (Hebdige 1979), and religious radicalism (Smilde 2007) as a way to deal. These paths constitute a series of mediated responses to social marginalization that are predicated on poor young people's resistance to dominant value systems in an attempt to lay claim to the status, respect and dignity that is denied to them in the course of their daily lives. Alternatively, the young men and women who are the subject of this study actively engage in cultural practices of acceptance, rather than opposition (Bourgois 2003), in their search for dignity and fulfillment. Among these youth, the pursuit of dignity encompasses cultural definitions of face-saving incorporated around community concerns for self-sufficiency, hard work, purity, and appearance. Through their pursuit of saving face, face-savers simply try that much harder to ingratiate themselves into the broader fabric of Iranian society. As the stories of these youth will show, a life lived on the margins does not always lead to repudiation of dominant ideologies, but can also lead to acceptance and accentuated conformism.

There are several reasons for this. In a country that has, up until the 1979 Revolution, been marked by centuries of monarchic governance, aristocratic influence and elaborate court behaviors, there is a strong significance attached to status recognition (Beeman 1986; Olzewska 2013). As Olzewska (2013, 10) has noted, even after the revolution, "status recognition remains encoded in, and a crucial part of language, comportment and social etiquette" in Iran. Consequently, to be perceived as *ba kelas* or as someone with class and moral character as opposed to being perceived as *dahati* (i.e., hillbilly) is the ultimate marker of one's person and the manifestation of one's claim to status and dignity (Olzewska 2013). In an extension of the historical importance of status recognition in Iran, the commodity boom that defined the country during the mid-2000s opened Iranians' access to the global marketplace (Harris 2012) and forged a pattern of noticeable consumption of luxury goods among Iran's elite and of "knock-offs by the less wealthy" (Olzewska 2013, 10) in their attempt to pursue the status quo. Cultural mimicry, rather than cultural resistance, became the defining feature for many of those pursuing a better life. Finally, for the face-savers in this study who were looking to gain status, radicalization—whether in politics or in religion—had little magnetism. In a country where open resistance to religious, social and political norms is met with immediate suppression, resistance in the form of marches, protests, collective violence and other radical behaviors is not common. These young people calculated that their chances of gaining socioeconomic status through daily practices that revolved around the pursuit of face were higher than through antagonistic behaviors, and this awareness served to temper their

involvement in collective acts of resistance.⁶ As Kazemi (1980) and Bayat (1997) have shown in their empirical research on poor populations in Iran, collective acts of radicalism are not a common feature of daily life due to the poor's everyday concerns with obtaining a better life for themselves and their family members. As Bayat has noted, “Localized struggles for concrete concerns...that are both meaningful and manageable...are the stuff of the urban dispossessed” (Bayat 2013, 201). Overall, the crucial significance of status recognition buttressed the importance of localized struggles for saving face among the upwardly aspirant lower-class young men and women in this study and decreased the desire for alternative subcultures, drugs, radicalism and crime to maintaining one's dignity.

The findings of this study not only augment the existing literature on youth-hood in the Middle East and on youth subcultures, but also contribute to the sociological literature on symbolic boundaries, which are characterized as the “lines that define and include some people on the basis of certain cultural attitudes and practices while excluding others” (Epstein 1992, 232).⁷ This article shows how the practices associated with saving face enable some lower class youth to maintain their self-worth in the face of degradation by providing them with moral benchmarks by which they can judge themselves in relation to others and by which others can evaluate them (Lamont 2000).

The works of Gretchen Purser (2009), Sandra Smith (2007), Michèle Lamont (2000) and Katherine Newman (1999) have been influential in showing how ordinary individuals in the United States use moral criteria as measuring sticks to define themselves vis-a-vis others. These qualitative studies are important in their finding that marginalized individuals create stratification systems based on moral, rather than economic, status to save face and to maintain their dignity. However, with the exception of Smith,⁸ these studies largely neglect how acceptance and working to demonstrate certain moral categories simultaneously enables certain individuals to move up within the socioeconomic hierarchy of their particular communities. In focusing primarily on how moral boundaries are drawn toward different others (Lamont and Molnar 2002), these studies do not take the analysis one step further by examining the *socioeconomic* implications of being judged within this *moral* micro-stratification system.

In this article, I show that the appeal of abiding by certain moral criteria and being judged favorably is not simply to *maintain* one's face, but can also *augment* one's socio-economic standing. I argue that daily struggles to keep face in order to fit in cannot be viewed separately from desires to get ahead and to be on the “up and up.” In Sherman's (2009) study of socioeconomically disadvantaged residents of a small rural Californian town, she describes the mobility experiences of her informants as a consequence of their adherence to particular approved social norms. The men and women in her study who manifest morally acceptable coping strategies such as avoiding alcohol and engaging in low-wage work are often the first to receive job opportunities and socio-economic aid from others in the community. Morality thus becomes a form of symbolic capital that can subsequently facilitate access to social and economic capital. My qualitative data similarly reveal that positive evaluations of one's moral

⁶ It is only when the poor are mobilized by leaders under extraordinary circumstances do they engage in collective acts of radicalism (Kazemi 1980).

⁷ Epstein (1992, 232) as cited by Lamont (2001, 1).

⁸ In her study of low-income, young black men and women from Michigan, Smith finds that a strong work history and work ethic is a decisive factor in determining whether or not community members provide job placement assistance to young people.

worth provide some young people with increments in status that allow them to gain certain social and economic benefits that are denied to those who appear to lack face. In highlighting the socioeconomic implications of face-savers' claims to morality, my data demonstrates the significant role of what Jennifer Sherman (2009) has theorized as "moral capital" in low-income settings. By outwardly presenting an image of themselves as morally worthy individuals, face-savers are able to accrue moral capital, which they can subsequently "trade in" for social and economic benefits.

The next section provides a description of my research methodology. I subsequently turn to how the select group of youth in this study attempted to pursue face and how they capitalized on their ability to save face. I conclude by describing what the findings of this study reveal for research on youth, poverty and mobility in the Middle East.

Methods of Inquiry

The data for this study derive from two years of participant observation among young men and women from low-income families in Iran. The majority of my fieldwork occurred in low-income areas in the northern capital city of Sari in Mazandaran province, located near the Caspian coastline. I also conducted participant observation in south Tehran, the poorest district in the national capital. Using south Tehran as an additional site of inquiry allowed me to verify the patterns in thought, discourse and practice that I was observing in my data in the more provincial locale of Sari. To this end, the data I present in this paper reflects shared patterns of thought and practice that I found in both Sari and in Tehran.

All of the youth I observed were between the ages of 15 and 29 and came from low-income households.⁹ Most of the youth I encountered were either high school graduates or currently in high school. Some were high school dropouts. For those who were working, occupations were diverse: peddlers, to low-wage service workers, to shop apprentices.

During fieldwork, I "hung out" with youth on a daily basis. This meant watching, listening and talking to youth wherever I happened to be (Dohan 2003), all the while paying particular attention to patterned ways in which these youth thought and lived their everyday lives, as evidenced through their conversations and daily practices (Bourdieu 1984; Sanchez-Jankowski 2008). As a participant observer, I spent every day in local sites where I knew sizeable numbers (anywhere from around five to 30) of low-income youth worked or frequented in both Sari and in Tehran including certain bazaars, street corners, salons, parks and mosques. I used my own personal networks and pre-existing friendships in Iran to establish my legitimacy as a trusted member of the community. In so doing, I was able to create rapport with low-income young men and women, thereby enabling me to hang out and engage in conversations with them. I also served as a tutor, providing English language lessons and homework assistance free-of-charge to high school students, which helped me to engage with an even broader cross-section of youth. The young people that I came to know during my fieldwork knew that I was writing a book on how they lived their lives and were ever willing to share details of their day-to-day lives with me.

I made my way from one group of youth to another, seeking to position myself in a way to learn as much as possible about the ways that they managed their daily lives and attempted to

⁹ Many of the youth in this study came from households whose median monthly income was around 400,000 tomans/month (approximately 150 USD/month) at the time of fieldwork.

improve their lot in life. I shared meals and endless cups of hot tea with the youth and their families. I walked with them as they went about their daily errands. I listened to young men and women as they joked, worried, and formulated strategies to deal with school, money, recreational activities, employment, friendships and relationships. I observed the environments in which they lived, ate, worked and interacted with community members, with neighbors, with parents and with siblings. I listened to them as they talked about their desires, hope, dreams and expectations.

To be able to navigate within Iran's maze of cultural nuances and its social life, in particular, takes a great deal of perseverance. My own background as an Iranian greatly facilitated this process. My shared identity and language with my informants and my own experiences growing up in the country helped me to gain acceptance and trust within communities. It further enabled me to be sensitive to cultural cues embedded within my informants' behaviors that facilitated my analysis of general patterns in thought and behavior that are the center of this study (Abramson and Modzelewski 2010; Sanchez-Jankowski 2002). At the same time, however, the fact that I was an Iranian female also prevented me from being privy to certain conversations and from gaining access to certain sites that someone not from my background may have been able to observe. I was not able to engage in many conversations with groups of young men, to sit in teahouses, or to enter sports arenas, which were the exclusive domain of men. Access to these domains would have certainly added more detail to my ethnographic accounts. Nevertheless, I believe that my attempts to reach as broad a cross-section of low-income youth as possible enabled me to present findings that objectively addressed the central question of this study (Dohan 2003).

There were many times when it was not possible to take notes during the course of normal interactions and observations (e.g., during religious services or in the midst of casual conversations). During these times, I resorted to writing down detailed, systematic notes immediately after the conclusion of the activity, thus averting any lapses in memory that could misconstrue my subjects' thoughts and speech patterns. I analyzed my written observations by coding patterns in my informants' behaviors and speech that were instilled in them and repeated through continuous everyday practices and interactions (Bourdieu 1984). As the relationship between saving face and socio-economic opportunity emerged as a dominant theme in the observations, I continued to categorize the data based on general patterns of behavior and the meanings that individuals attributed to these practices (Sanchez-Jankowski 2002). All of the narrative examples and quotes used in this article are representative of these observable patterns in the data. To facilitate the organization, coding and analysis of data, I entered all of my notes and transcriptions into ATLAS.ti, a computer assisted qualitative data analysis program.

Similar to other researchers (Kidder 2013; Strauss et al. 1964), I use standard quotation marks for narrative examples and quotes that are verbatim and that derived from my occasional impromptu use of a recording device during unstructured conversations when the informant was providing a fascinating, detailed narrative. Due to the unplanned nature of these recordings, consent forms were not provided to informants. Informants, however, were aware of the presence of the recording device and provided no objections to its use. Single quotations are used for quotes that are approximately verbatim. When I was not able to capture in my fieldnotes exact sentences and words, but rather only the kernel of what was said, I use no quotations (Kidder 2013). As the fieldwork was conducted among native Persian speaking young men and women, all of the quotes in this paper are my own English translations of the original Persian. Following sociological conventions of informant confidentiality, I use pseudonyms for all of my informants.

Face as Moral Capital

In this section, I first provide a description of face in the Iranian context. Second, I describe the four practices associated with saving face that the selected lower-class young people I came to know attempted to pursue: *self-sufficiency, hard work, purity, and appearance*. These rules governing face behavior served as moral touchstones by which these youth evaluated their own self-worth and by which others close to them judged the young person's reputation. I then move on to discuss how these youth were able to capitalize on their ability to save face. Finally, I offer an explanation of what understandings of face can add to our general social-scientific understandings of socio-economic mobility within conditions of relative deprivation.

What is Face?

Face is not distinctively Iranian, but is rather a universal that is “distinctively human” (Ho 1976, 881). Face is conceptualized as the way a person presents herself vis-à-vis others and as her claim to respect and deference. In Goffman's (1972) notable essay on the topic, he describes face as the approved social image or front that a person presents of herself to others. In this way, face is a concern that individuals, regardless of their cultural background, are keen to maintain.

However, the practices or rules that govern facework vary both across and within cultures. As Goffman writes, “Every person, subculture and society has its own characteristic repertoire of face-saving practices (1972, 13).” In Iran, there are differences in face-saving practices or rules among men and women, rich and poor, and young and old that are based on a set of evaluative criteria. The face system in Iran among the youth that I studied was anchored in personal interactions among individuals in their social or economic networks and was dependent on a very public evaluation of the young person's morality or goodness, as measured by his performative success. In other words, the face system could only enforce behaviors that were seen on the surface by socially or economically near others. What was done or not done behind closed doors, in a “back region or backstage” (Goffman 1956, 69) far away from the gaze of one's community was impossible to monitor unless youth were caught in the act.

The case of Qasim, a 28-year-old informal laborer that I met near Tehran's grand bazaar, is particularly evocative. Struggling to make ends meet to provide for his family and to not lose face in front of his own brothers, Qasim told me how he would often “commit wrongdoing” such as swindling customers in order to make his “life go round.” However, while this was something he readily admitted to people that were not in his social networks (including myself), he was reluctant to have anyone in his social circles know of his circumstances and misdeeds. “Don't mention my name,” he stated. ‘I have acquaintances here and it would be really bad for me if they found out.’

As Qasim indicates in his comments, face is only an issue among those who are perceived to be in one's social or economic networks because they have the same set of expectations for each other and can thus theoretically compete with one another (Peristiany 1965). If Qasim were to be caught committing “wrongdoings” by people in his personal networks, he would be sanctioned; for example, neighbors would gossip behind his back, they would be less willing to form ties with him or help him, and Qasim would not be considered a good candidate for an informal loan by friends or family.

Face-savers, like Qasim, made a bid to follow a certain code, which consisted of a set of four specific moral practices or “face rules,” that enabled them to reduce the likelihood of

these sanctions and that allowed them to present an image of themselves that was consistent with social expectations. Each rule had different weight or importance depending on the young person's own background and where he was in the life course. These rules became moral standards that these youth would consistently follow in an attempt to gain a favorable public evaluation of their value.

Face Rules

During my first venture into the field, I did not go looking specifically for how young, poor Iranians save face. However, what I found was that deeply embedded beliefs revolving around how one should present himself in front of others exerted a strong influence on certain young people's choices and coping strategies, and the way others reacted to them. In short, culture, as manifested through saving face, structured social life among these youth.

These youth embraced four unspoken rules in order to maintain face. The youth that I observed and spoke with came from a variety of backgrounds. For instance, participants included an artist, a farm laborer, a high school student, a street vendor, and a hair stylist. Despite their diversity, they were all deeply aware of the fact that they had to protect their face from loss in order to effectively maintain their various standings in society (Ho 1976, 871). This consciousness served as a constant organizing force in their lives (Abramson and Modzelewski 2010). It shaped their inter-personal relationships, the way they approached work, and the way they presented themselves to the outside world. Despite the all-encompassing influence that efforts to save face wielded in their day-to-day lives, face-savers knew that to lose face was to lose their claim to competence and integrity (Smith 2007). Consequently, they followed a moral code that enabled them to reduce the likelihood of threats to their face. The rules encompassed by this code—self-sufficiency, hard work, purity and appearances—provided them with evaluative benchmarks by which they could measure their own integrity vis-à-vis others in their community. In the next section, I will show that the attraction of these rules was nothing less than their ability to confer social and economic privilege to those that followed them.

Self-Sufficiency

The importance of face among some low-income youth in Iran who are of working age hinges primarily on their ability to become economically self-sufficient and to provide for themselves and their families without financial reliance on others. While women do work—particularly, if their household circumstances necessitate an additional salary—in Muslim gender ideology, it is men who are primarily responsible for providing for their families, regardless of the women's ability to earn (Hoodfar 1997). Consequently, in being seen as someone who earns money, these youth—and particularly young men, whose masculinity hinges on their ability to provide—are able to gain the admiration of those around them. As one's ability to provide decreases, so does the respect that one receives from others in his social circles. Bahram, a resourceful 17-year-old who worked in his uncle's small housewares store in south Tehran, told me:

That kid you say who got married when he was 14 is really unfortunate. His wife expects something from him, she didn't just come from nowhere. What if she asks him for a coat tomorrow? How is he going to pay for it? He is still a baby, his breath still smells like milk!

The youth that Bahram was referring to was a 17-year-old street peddler, Amir Hossein, whom I met a few minutes prior by the train station in south Tehran. Amir Hossein sold petty goods, including tissues, toothbrushes and gum laid out on a blanket by the train station. As I spoke with Amir Hossein, I discovered that he had dropped out of school and had gotten married; his small enterprise was the only way he could think of to provide for his small family. And yet, it was not enough—he could barely make ends meet. When I interrupted Bahram to tell him that Amir Hossein was a street vendor, he responded, “Oh, well, then, he’s not that bad off. You know they make a lot of money. If they sell one toothbrush for 2000 tomans [\$2] and 50 people buy it in the day, then guess how much that is? If you make 40,000 tomans/day, is that bad? Of course not!”

What Bahram’s comments and Amir Hossein’s story underline is the importance of being seen as financially self-sufficient even if that perception does not square with one’s reality. Indeed, Bahram did not know how Amir Hossein struggled to make a living. Marriage is seen as perfectly acceptable (even for someone as young as Amir Hossein) as long as one is believed to have amassed the means to provide for himself and his family before marriage. For these young men, the ability to become self-sufficient *prior* to getting married is the mark of their character and an indicator of their adult status. Otherwise, like the narrative above indicates, they risk losing face because they will be considered incapable of being responsible enough to provide for a family. Without financial independence, they are deemed the equivalent of an infant.

Given the consequences that come with being seen as someone who, like an infant, is reliant on the good will of others to survive, being able to find and work in a job that pays relatively well becomes a high priority. Accordingly, many of the male face-savers worked in invisible, informal sector jobs that paid better than more prestigious but less paying jobs in the formal economy (which were more difficult to come by in the first place). As a case in point, Qasim, explained to me, “I know how to do every technical job you can think of, like welding, mechanics, whatever. But when I see that it doesn’t bring home the bread, I’ll quit the job. I’ll do whatever work I have to in order to make my life go round. I just want to secure my child’s future so that I won’t lose face in front of my brothers who are doing well for themselves.” In other words, it is not about the type of work, but about bringing home enough money to provide for the needs of one’s family and to be judged as economically self-sufficient. Whether the work itself is morally ambiguous—such as dealing illegal goods in the black market or in Qasim’s case, quoting customers exorbitantly high prices—is not important for maintaining face as long as these young men can get away with a lie. Indeed, keeping their jobs a secret from friends and family and lying about their line of work is a commonly used tactic that these youth employ to keep up their reputations and keep “bringing home the bread.”

Hard Work

While economic self-sufficiency provides some low-income young men with the ability to save face, these face-savers’ attraction to work cannot only be explained by the money it can bring. Rather, it is equally important for these young men to give the impression that they work hard. This serves both an instrumental and performative function. In its instrumental form, working hard shows others that one has the ability to eventually attain the socioeconomic rewards necessary to successfully achieve self-sufficiency and the semblance of a middle-class identity. As multiple face-savers told me, ‘God helps those who help themselves.’ A person has to first use his senses and work hard, and only then will he become lucky (economically

speaking). In its performative manifestation, showing that one works hard indicates the young man's moral purity. Those face-savers who do not explicitly manifest a work hard ethic are deemed lazy by others, which is considered to be the moral opposite of responsibility.

During my time in the field, I witnessed many male face-savers, both those who were in school and those who had dropped out, engaged in some type of physical labor, either during the week or during their summer breaks. Whether paid, as in Bahram and Qasim's case, or unpaid volunteer work for family members and friends (particularly if one was still in school), it was important that these youth were seen exerting effort in the public sphere. While not all of these jobs provided monetary incentives, they did provide a means for them to build their moral credentials before the public gaze.

A useful example comes from 17-year-old Karim, a high school junior that I tutored every week. Karim was a soccer player in Sari's junior league. When he was not in school or in my class, he was on the soccer field, practicing several hours a day. In the little free time he had, Karim would hang out at a neighborhood grocery store, owned by a family friend, Mr. B. As Karim explained, 'I watch over the store when Mr. B is gone...it's a productive way to spend my free time.' Due to his assiduousness, Karim was eventually able to establish himself among neighbors as a hardworking and honest young man. By participating in the performance of work, young men like Karim demonstrated that they did not idle their days away; rather, they were industrious young men serious about their futures. In this way, certain youth and members of their community implicitly created an important distinction between those who, like Karim, effectively exhibited a commitment to hard work and those who did not. As a local woman noted, 'There's something wrong with a kid who doesn't work....maybe he's on drugs or involved with the wrong people.' Distinctions between those who manifest a strong work ethic and those who do not become important when a young man decides to get married, as community members and the future bride's family use evidence of the youth's industriousness as indication of his ability to be a successful breadwinner.

Purity

While self-sufficiency and hard work provide indicators of some youths' (and especially, young men's) ability to be responsible and diligent future providers, purity is an indicator of their morality in the here and now. Both young men and women who pursue face have to continuously demonstrate that they are morally pure individuals in order to prevent threats to their face. As I will explain in greater detail in the next section, being perceived as a trustworthy, honest and clean person is also a criterion for receiving job assistance and being hired. Without purity, the face-saver's ability to become self-sufficient is seriously jeopardized.

Because purity is a manifestation of one's inner "goodness," family members disciplined the youth I spoke with to be hyper-vigilant in their behaviors. Sakineh, a housemaid and mother of two sons, was perhaps the exemplar of setting strict parameters of behavior to regulate her children's interactions. Sakineh did not allow her younger son (the eldest was in the military at the time), Ashkan, who was a student of mine, to spend much time with his friends outside of school hours. She worried that too much leisurely time spent with other boys would expose Ashkan to polluting ideas, get him 'caught up in the wrong crowd' and lead him down the path of drug use and crime. Sakineh was so successful in her efforts to control Ashkan's behaviors that his classmates knew him as a *bacheh mosbat* (i.e., someone who does everything he is supposed to). 'Ashkan has the imprint of a turbah stuck to his forehead,' his friends would say to explain to me why he would not hang out with them. As they saw it, Ashkan was too busy

spending his free time praying on the turbah and doing what he was told to hang out with them. Youth, too, knew how important it was to be morally “good.” As one 22-year-old woman stated, ‘Wealth and those types of things aren’t that important. I want to be someone good so that when I die, people think I’m good. I had a relative who died. When people heard about his death, they were all rushing to bury him. I don’t want to end up like that.’

In order for people to ‘think they were good,’ face-savers took pains to prevent themselves from being seen in a bad light. An afternoon I spent with 16-year-old Yas, a high school student, provides a useful example. That particular afternoon, Yas accompanied me on one of my field excursions to one of the poorer neighborhoods in Sari, where, according to Yas, ‘everyone is a drug dealer and addict.’ While both of us were wearing the mandatory head covering required of Iranian women in public, I noticed that Yas had pulled the ends of her scarf over her face as soon as we entered the neighborhood, exposing only her eyes. ‘Someone might recognize me. I don’t want them to think that I hang out here,’ she explained. In a similar vein, young men like Karim often avoided playing football or hanging out with friends near the railway tracks in their neighborhood, knowing that it was where, according to Karim, all the ‘drug addicts hang out.’

Strategies to prevent threats to one’s morality did not just revolve around avoiding impressions of drug use. A face-saver’s character, and particularly that of a young woman’s, was also intertwined with judgments of her sexual cleanliness. To be viewed as dirty or unclean not only inflicted a blow to the young woman’s face, but also to that of her family’s since her family’s face largely laid in securing her modesty. Because of this, many of the families of the face-savers I came to know largely restricted the movements of their daughters in public spaces for fear that their daughters would be evaluated as “loose” women by others. If the young woman lost face by appearing to be unclean, the most common response among her family would be to marry her off as soon as possible so that she could embody the values of purity and loyalty and be able to regain some of the face that she lost.

Of course, a sustained focus on being seen as “good” can also prevent face-savers like Ashkan from developing more extensive collective networks of social ties, an outcome that can prove essential for fostering future socioeconomic growth. As Goffman notes, “Fears over the possible loss of face can often prevent a person from initiating contacts in which important information can be transmitted (1972, 39).” This, however, does not take away from the fact that the strategies that these youth and their families deploy to save their moral face can represent a “potent resource in exercising power” (Trouille 2013, 14) in the face of socioeconomic degradation. This self-control, in turn, can serve as a more manageable and meaningful means of achieving socioeconomic mobility.

Appearance

For face-savers, the risk of losing face among those in their personal networks hinges primarily on being exposed as poor. The stigma associated with wearing unkempt clothes, having a low-status job, or living in a barely furnished home lead these youth to take calculated steps to secure a middle-class image in front of those with whom they have regular interactions. To this end, appearing to consume certain material goods or to practice a particular lifestyle becomes imbued with high-status connotations (Olzewska 2013). An encounter I had with Masoud, a young fruit vendor, provides a useful example. When I inquired about his father’s line of work, Masoud was quick to state that his father worked in an insurance company. ‘Oh, so he’s an office worker?’, I asked. ‘No, he brings tea and stuff,’ Masoud admitted after some hesitation.

This exchange was not unique. In fact, over and over again, I witnessed face-savers who, in an attempt to give the impression that they were from a solidly middle class background, use dissimulation tactics similar to the one Masoud used to lie about the line of work that they themselves or that their families were engaged in.

Dissimulation through physical posturing, however, was most effective in presenting a middle class front to others. As 23-year-old Nina, a freelance artist explained, “I never wanted kids in my school to think that we were poor, so I dressed nicely.” Nina even went so far as to secretly work as a dishwasher at the age of 16 in order to afford the nice, trendy items of clothing that she wore whenever she was out in public. ‘I would tell my mother I was going to the library,’ Nina explained. ‘See, look at my hands, they’ve already wrinkled.’ Another young man, a laborer in a chicken coop on the outskirts of Sari, would ‘do his hair and these kinds of things’ whenever he ventured into the streets of Sari.

During my time in the field, I rarely witnessed face-savers not groomed to perfection or dressed in anything but their finest clothes in public. As Yas, who I noticed was well dressed on a daily basis, explained to me, ‘My mom’s side of the family is rich, while my dad’s is low class. My mom always encourages us to buy the more expensive items of clothing so that we can save face in front of her family.’ When these youth could not afford an expensive item of clothing or accessory, they often relied on loans from friends and family. On more than one occasion, I noticed Yas wear outfits that were right on trend. I later found out that she would conveniently borrow these outfits from her friends. ‘If you change your outfit daily, people will think you have a lot of money!’ she explained to me. This deliberate tweaking of the self extended to the costly gifts that face-savers purchased for family and friends. It extended to the rhinoplasties that they would undergo (a well-sculpted nose was a marker of middle-class status) at the expense of buying a home. It extended, too, to older, married face-savers’ acquisition of valuable household furnishings and electronic goods that meant that they would have to sacrifice in other, less publicly visible expenses, such as proper meals and diapers for their infant children.

It is through these deliberate manipulations of self—the donning of fashionable clothes, the wearing of expensive perfume, the enhancement of one’s physical features, and the decorating of one’s residential space—that face-savers are able to both reduce the likelihood of becoming vulnerable to threats to face and to signal to their peers and to those whom they consider *ba kelas* (classy) that they are on the “up and up,” even when, in reality, they are not. Without taking care of one’s appearances, face-savers cannot lay claim to the respect that is offered to those who do, thereby losing face in the process. Yas, for instance, derided a young woman who was wearing boots in the middle of summer. ‘She probably can’t afford another pair of shoes!’ she exclaimed to me. Similarly, Nina would make fun of a cousin for not wanting to wear a different coat every year: ‘We went shopping and she wanted to buy a coat that she could wear next year as well! She just doesn’t take care of herself.’ As I will show in the next section, these projections of taking care of oneself through tactical alterations to one’s appearance become nothing more than “chips in the high-stakes game of social mobility” (Olzewska 2013, 3).

The Appeal of Face

I have shown that some low-income young men and women can expect to lose face if they are unable to fulfill the four rules governing facework: self-sufficiency, hard work, purity and appearances. These face rules are a composite of ideas that are drawn from cultural, religious

and social norms in Iran: notions that God will help those who help themselves; ideas of what constitutes a good, pure Muslim; belief that one needs to stand on his own feet and not be dependent on the charity of others; and notions that one needs to put up a front of well-being in front of others are all prevalent in mainstream Iranian culture. Indeed, these norms can also be found among the middle and upper classes in Iran.

Why are these norms so important among the select group of low-income youth I knew? Why did these young men and women try to follow them so closely? The face rules hold the sway that they do because they enable some young men and women who consistently experience extreme economic stress to make sense of their lives and to maintain their dignity, to configure their social worlds and, most importantly, to obtain limited forms of social and economic success. This quest for social and economic success is the key driving force behind face saving; the appeal of saving face for these youth is not simply to validate themselves, but to augment their reputation and socio-economic standing. These face rules serve as symbolic boundaries that youth who have few other forms of distinction available to draw from can use to distinguish themselves from their peers (Lamont 2000) and live a dignified life in the eyes of others. While middle- and upper-class youth may also share similar values, face-savers are less capable of hiding failures because of their lack of economic resources and capital, which make them more vulnerable to threats to their face and their dignity (Bayat 1997).

In the absence of clear economic distinctions, the face system and the moral rules it encompasses become an alternative measuring stick by which some youth can judge themselves vis-à-vis others and find a way to incrementally move up the proverbial ladder. These youth understand expectations of self-sufficiency, hard work, purity, and appearance as the means by which they can facilitate their quest to improve their lives.

Indeed, the face rules provide youth who are able to successfully abide by them with a form of symbolic capital that they can then “trade in” for social and economic capital (Sherman 2009). In the following sections, I will demonstrate that for face-savers, the pursuit of face serves as a mechanism by which they can secure a positive image of themselves as moral individuals. The greater their perceived moral stock, the greater the ability of these youth to use this “moral capital” (Sherman 2009) to expand their social networks. Expanded social ties, in turn, bring social and economic opportunities that function to incrementally increase the face-saver’s status.

Face-Work and Mobility

The type of mobility that undergirds the appeal of face-work is defined by two key elements that are shaped by the face-saver’s network of personal contacts. The first is an increase in the young person’s social opportunities; the second is an increase in the youth’s economic opportunities. The consequence of achieving both is an incremental rise in the face-saver’s standing in the community. I now turn to each of these in detail.

Social Opportunity

The people that the youth in my study were directly involved with on a day-to-day basis were usually 1) immediate family members and 2) members of their extended family that lived nearby. These involvements or relations were largely formal, consisting of “socially recognized roles with reciprocal rights and duties” (Fischer 1982, 35), and were with people that the

young person felt close to. For youth who had little by way of connections outside of their families, then, one of the appeals of being evaluated as someone who had fulfilled social expectations was the ability to expand their personal networks to include relations with non-kin. These connections generally functioned as relations of interaction or exchange with economic unequals.

Nina, the well-dressed 23-year-old freelance artist, for example, was able to form close friendships with young middle-class women whom she met through school and through her membership in a local gym. By way of her appearance and mannerisms, Nina established connections with these other women and subsequently gained access to the burgeoning art scene in the city where she lived, forming acquaintances with writers and emerging artists. In time, Nina's engagement in middle-class society led her to become acquainted with and eventually marry a young businessman whose father was a bank manager. 'Everyone was surprised that I married into a relatively well-off family,' Nina told me. Nina, however, knew that it was not luck, but rather her steadfast adherence to a middle-class way of life—defined by the donning of fashionable clothes, expertly applied makeup, engagement in artistic production, and involvement in literary and artistic circles—that gave her an edge over her working-class peers who were not as vigilant in expressing their adherence to the symbols of middle-class status.

By following the rules associated with saving face, youth like Nina find a way to ingratiate themselves into the social worlds of their middle-class counterparts. Connections with the middle class, in turn, enable face-savers to increase the diversity of people they know and the activities they engage in. Face-savers consider this to be important because as Amin, a 16-year-old high school student explained, 'You have to be friends with people who are well-dressed, organized and rich. These friends can then be useful to you in the future.'

This notion of usefulness is a particularly salient incentive. Face-savers' ties with those who are doing better in some socio-economic dimension than themselves often prove to be exceedingly valuable in enabling them to secure various non-economic resources. Nina's middle-class friends, for example, had bought Nina her first paint set and would give her leads on various art shows in the city. Yas' excursions to the seaside villa of her mother's upper-class employer are another fruitful example. I accompanied Yas once on these trips that she would make every summer, by virtue of her mother's position as a housemaid. During my time with her, I noticed how Yas would participate in otherwise expensive recreational activities without having to pay a dime.¹⁰ The activities—swimming, biking and shopping—that Yas engaged in not only provided her with a form of social entertainment, but also functioned as opportunities for her to observe the behaviors of affluent youth at the seaside resort. From these advantaged others, Yas was able to learn the fashions and cultural cues of Iran's upper and middle classes, including the types of clothing that were in style that season, the exercise routines and gyms that were in vogue, and even popular courting rituals. As Yas explained to me while we were walking around the resort, 'Guys here usually follow girls around! Guys will drive up to girls that are driving and try to talk to them and do a car race with them. Just drive and see what happens!' This type of knowledge not only helped Yas among her own peers by allowing her to give the semblance that she was "with it," but it also helped her navigate the world of the middle class by giving her a common language through which she could communicate with socioeconomic unequals like myself.

¹⁰ In this particular seaside resort, one has to pay fees (approximately 7 USD) in order to go to the seaside or to rent out bikes.

The lower the face-savers' socio-economic standing, the more vulnerable they are to changes in their household income or external shocks and the more reliant they become on these networks with more advantaged individuals to provide various social opportunities. Indeed, securing concessions through networks of interaction and/or exchange was pivotal for these youth. In order to flourish within this context, however, face-savers knew that they had to cultivate ties with people in positions of influence. The time that Karim spent at the grocery store of Mr. B, for example, allowed him to foster close ties with Mr. B, who—by way of his connections—got Karim into one of the best high schools in the city. Karim knew that Mr. B, by way of his extensive connections, could help him yet again in the future. As Karim explained, 'Mr. B knows everyone.'

Face-savers actively seek personal networks of interaction and exchange, and their realization is rewarded with some form of social protection and support. But these types of support are only possible to achieve *after* these youth abide by one or more of the rules associated with saving face, depending on their background and station in life (e.g., female versus male; adolescent versus young adult; in school versus in the workforce). For instance, since Yas consistently demonstrated her moral purity, her mother's employer, who described her as 'good, nice girl' had no qualms about inviting her to their outings. Similarly, Karim was well known in his neighborhood as being a hard-working student who never hung out with the wrong crowd. His reputation often preceded him and this made individuals like Mr. B that much more willing to help him.

As multiple members of the neighborhoods and communities I observed indicated, fortuitous opportunities only come to those who are able to abide by the rules governing the face system. When I told a local neighborhood taxi driver that I was tutoring a young 15-year-old high school student, Hamid, he responded, 'It's alright to help him. They are a good family. They're not into drinking and drugs. They work hard to make a living and never stretch their hands out for help.' Youth like Hamid earn the respect of members in their community according to the standards of behavior that govern face. Community members, in turn, relay the information onto socio-economic others (like myself) who are in a position to provide youth with certain benefits. In communities where jobs, connections and general opportunities for advancement are limited, the face system provides a way for members to decide who is worthy of help (Sherman 2009).

Economic Opportunity

If part of the appeal of engaging in facework is expanding their networks of personal contacts to attain social opportunities, an equally significant part of the draw for face-savers is using these networks to attain economic opportunities. Not only do connections to individuals in positions of influence enable face-savers to engage in certain activities or attain non-monetary resources, but it also enables them to attain job-placement assistance, capital, and many times, relatively well-paying jobs. For these youth, the painstaking efforts they place to save face in front of others stem partly from the belief that it is who they know, rather than what they know, that will ultimately help them in getting ahead.¹¹ As Karim put it, 'One of my uncles only studied until the second grade and now he is a nurse making 600,000 [approximately 600 USD at the time of fieldwork] a month. He had connections. You just need connections.'

¹¹ This corroborates Sanchez-Jankowski's (1991) finding that low-income individuals in the United States believe that it is who a person knows, rather than what they know, that will help them get ahead in life.

While face-savers embrace the notion of advancement through sheer hard work, they also know that their economic progression is very much contingent on their ability to save face. These youth, therefore, attempt to consistently act in ways that present themselves in a good light in front of those who can potentially place them in a more economically advantageous position. Ariana, a 26-year-old lingerie vendor, exemplified this rather poignantly. A divorcee with a 9-year-old daughter, Ariana was reluctant to tell her boss that she was divorced because, as she explained, ‘It’s bad if people here find out.’ By pretending to still be married, Ariana prevented the possible economic backlash that would occur if she lost face and her boss and coworkers found out that she was actually divorced.

In developing networks that can provide economic assistance, face-savers often build associations with people whom they or their families have some prior acquaintance: family friends, employers, colleagues neighbors, or extended family members with a wide range of contacts. As these people often know of the moral character of the face-saver, they are much more willing to extend economic assistance to the youth as compared to formal organizations or very powerful others who do not have this prior knowledge. A useful example comes from an afternoon I spent with Sakineh and her middle-class employer, Zohreh, in Zohreh’s house. That particular afternoon, Zohreh was preoccupied with finding someone who could add additional shelving to a closet. Sakineh suggested that Zohreh hire her 20-year-old son, Pejman, and his friend, a freelance carpenter that Pejman worked with. Pejman moonlighted as a carpenter and Zohreh knew that he was considered to be a ‘good egg’ among his neighbors; he had finished high school, enrolled in the military and was not involved with the ‘wrong crowd.’ Without hesitation, Zohreh called Pejman that afternoon and hired him on the spot.

Having connections, as in Pejman’s case, however, does not always guarantee economic incentives. Contacts often face the dilemma of deciding whom—among the many individuals they know—to provide economic assistance. An event during my field research at a woman’s hair salon illustrates this clearly. During the time I spend conducting observations at the hair salon, I befriended 29-year-old Leila, one of the four apprentices who worked in the salon. An articulate, fashionable and hard-working young married woman, Leila trained several days a week at the salon in order to expand her own small freelance salon business that she had set up at her home. One morning, the salon owner, who was to retire in a few short months, pulled Leila aside and had a long conversation with her. ‘She chose me to head up the salon after she leaves,’ Leila explained afterwards. When I asked Leila about the logic behind the owner’s decision, she asserted, ‘You need someone chic and classy to run a place like this. Bahar isn’t like that...Fateme is grumpy...[and] Sahar is too lazy.’¹² Given the strong, latent competition that exists among face-savers for economic opportunities, face-savers often have to prove their moral worth in all of the various dimensions of the face rules—as Leila and Pejman did—in order to be deemed worthy of the economic benefit. In other words, those in positions of influence considered face-savers who only abided by certain face rules at the expense of others as undeserving of their assistance.

Outcomes

The consequence of saving face and subsequently gaining social and economic opportunities is the incremental rise in the face-saver’s standing in the community. Small socio-economic gains create status distinctions among these youth that contribute to micro system of

¹² Leila was referring to the other girls who worked in the salon.

stratification within the social worlds they inhabit. Face-savers use interpersonal evaluations of self-sufficiency, hard work, purity and appearances to judge where peers stand on the socio-economic hierarchy. Other community members, too, evaluate these youth on the basis of these dimensions. Those youth who are able to effectively save face and use the opportunities subsequently afforded to them are able to reap the benefits of being favorably evaluated. This is exceedingly important for the face-saver's work and marriage outcomes. For example, 28-year-old woman, Fahima, was considered by her neighbors to be exceedingly pure. As a result, she was constantly asked by her neighbors to undergo religious fasts in their stead in return for a sum of money. Fahima made enough money by doing these religious fasts that she considered this her job.

In a similar vein, poor young men who are judged to be hard working and self-sufficient are able to position themselves as ideal marriage candidates. Young men who are able to find and work in a job that pays relatively well are considered to have a relatively large amount of financial capital that can protect the face of a future bride and her family in a way that those with smaller amounts of capital cannot. An example of this is Ali. Ali was a young man in his early twenties who was able to attain what few others in his family could—a steady, well-paying job in a factory and a car. During the end of my fieldwork, he fell in love with his 16-year-old cousin, Yas (whom we met earlier), and decided to get engaged. While I was surprised that Yas' family raised no objections to her impending marriage, given her young age, I soon found out that their approval was grounded in the fact that Ali had abided by the face rules and was considered a good catch. 'He has a job and a car,' Yas and her family members would constantly state to me as justification for why he would be a good husband. Yas and her relatives made a cost-benefit analysis, calculating that the benefit that would come to Yas from marrying Ali would be more than the cost of her marrying at such a young age, as she would most likely not find a better husband. Ali was seen as the best option, as he was considered to be someone who would be able to help Yas preserve her face. Rather than resist or reject the moral norms that defined the face system, face-savers like Yas, Fahima, Karim and Bahram attempted to save face as best they could secure in the knowledge that through facework, they had a chance at improving their socioeconomic situations.

However, there were youth who were unable to save face because they neglected to present themselves in a carefully calculated manner and "got caught." Nevertheless, losing face did not mean that these youth would not be able to climb up the socioeconomic ladder later on in life. Their face was not doomed to complete ruin if they failed to fulfill the rules governing face behavior. Leili, a young lower-class woman who lived in Sakineh's neighborhood, for example, had been shamed by her neighbors for committing the double taboo of having a boyfriend and running off with him. As Sakineh recounted, 'Leili had run off with him for two years. She wasn't a good girl.' When Leili returned to the neighborhood, she agreed to enter into an arranged marriage with another young man who her parents deemed acceptable. 'Leili regretted what she had done and now she's back on track,' Sakineh stated emphatically. In her new role as a devout wife, Leili was able to regain some of the face that she had lost and was considered by neighbors, like Sakineh, to have become "good" again. By demonstrating a renewed adherence to the face rules, Leili was able to regain the admiration of those who once berated her. As Leili's story demonstrates, face is not an either-or scenario: Youth are not labeled as either those with face or those without. Violations of the rules governing face behavior result in a decrease—rather than a total loss—of the amount of one's face (Peristiany 1965). The young person, however, still maintains some face and can even derive value, admiration and social standing by later embodying the moral status distinctions of facework.

As the examples above illustrate, face-savers like Yas, Karim, Ali and Leili, position themselves to win moral status distinctions that will subsequently enable them to attain elements of mobility within poverty. In so doing, these youth reaffirm the “collectively recognized virtues” (Abramson and Modzelewski 2010, 23) of saving face such as being trendy, responsible, independent, and loyal. While other groups in other contexts may value similar virtues, what makes the face system especially noteworthy among face-savers in Iran is the implications that it carries for our understandings of youth participation in the Middle East.

The experience of poverty among face-savers certainly brought them measures of frustration and disillusionment. As one young 16-year-old street vendor, Ali Reza, remarked, ‘I wanted to get my Bachelor’s and have a job where I sat behind a desk... But I had to drop out of the 9th grade in order to meet my family’s expenses... There are no hopes when you have a job like this. Hopes are for those who have reached the top. People like us don’t have hopes.’ However, when I spent enough time to look at the unspoken vernacular contexts in which their lives and stories unfolded, I found these very youth undertaking dozens of “silent” movements that reaffirmed the importance of face and the “nuances of social interaction” (Ho 1976, 874). As Ali Reza explained to me as our acquaintanceship grew, ‘My hope is to become successful... to not be dependent on others... I’m saving up to buy my own store.’

In attempting to “not be dependent on others” and to safeguard their face, the young people I observed, like Ali Reza, created small windows of socio-economic opportunity that often became their ticket to adult life. All of these actions belie the general understanding that youth in the Middle East necessarily live in an “undignified liminal state of pre-adulthood” (Mulderig 2011, 1). Cultural practices can, and do, interact with structural constraints to create spaces where some youth can be integrated into the social networks and local economies of the communities in which they live. As this study shows, cultural practices like saving face facilitate small leaps of mobility that enable some youth to get a job, to find love, and to get married. Ultimately, despite their verbal pronouncements of not being able to escape their conditions, face-savers use the face system to their advantage to take part in the broader life of the community in which they live and to assert their autonomy. As MacLeod has noted, “Individuals are not passive receivers of structural forces; rather they interpret and respond to those forces in creative ways” (MacLeod 2008, 152). Face-savers demonstrate their agency in the face of socio-economic hardship, but through their appropriation, rather than their rejection or creative re-articulation, of prevailing social norms.

Conclusions

Studies of youth in the Islamic Republic of Iran have overwhelmingly focused on the structural power relations that lead to exclusion and waithood, on the demographic characteristics of youth who are caught in a continuous cycle of liminality, and on the general implications of waithood in the lives of marginalized youth. In so doing, these studies have overlooked the question of how some disadvantaged young people in Iran cope with uncertain structural constraints. Indeed, we know little about the cultural practices that lower class youth engage in and the role these practices might play in shaping their life trajectories.

Drawing on participant observation fieldwork among a particular set of low-income youth in Iran, this study reveals that these youth consistently engage in a process of facework, wherein they follow certain moral criteria that allow them to save face in front

of those whom are in their personal social networks. These rules, which consist of being self-sufficient, working hard, being pure and maintaining appearances serve as evaluative benchmarks that build youths' moral capital and enable them to distinguish themselves from each other. Those in their networks subsequently provide those youth who have acquired this moral capital with certain social and economic opportunities that youth take to incrementally improve their lot in life. Subjective measures of worth—as judged by these rules—thus provide some youth with objective increments in social and economic status that allow them to gain entree into the socioeconomic fabric of their communities. These findings suggest the need for further attention to the way in which moral criteria not only serve as a means by which to include and exclude others, but also a mechanism by which socio-economic mobility is constituted.

These findings do not mean that the small leaps of mobility brought on by following the face rules are necessarily enough to reverse conditions of socio-economic hardship. Indeed, facework can constrain choice and hinder action as much it can facilitate it. Take, for example, the comment of one local man who told me, 'I know a family who's in need, but it's better not to help them because they'll spend all the help that they can get on cigarettes and bad things like that.' As this man's comments illustrate, a focus on morality and saving face can hurt those who are most in need of help, often depicting individuals who have failed to follow the face rules as undeserving of help (Sherman 2009). This process of conferring certain benefits to some who have saved face while not others also works to intensify the segmentation of people within the same socioeconomic class, which leads to a micro-system of stratification within poverty. This, in turn, can reproduce cycles of inequality within communities.

Further still, an emphasis on following the face rules—for instance, on becoming economically self-sufficient as quickly as possible—can also constrain the ability of some to pursue social goods, like a college education that can prove essential for bringing about more lasting changes in the young person's life (Bayat 2003). However, given their existential constraints, face-savers followed the paths by which they believed they had the best chance of saving face and getting ahead. This calculation of chance was very much related to the importance that morality, as encompassed by the face system, had in their lives. For instance, youth who had a family to support would calculate their chances of quickly becoming financially independent through work in the informal sector as a better option than going to college and putting off making money. As Purser (2009) describes, these calculations reveal just how constrained these young people's choices are, but how important it is for their ability to maintain their self-worth to be able to make a choice. The life that comes as a result of a constant abidance by the face rules is not a life untethered by economic hardship, but a life that provides youth with a sense of agency and purpose.

The context-specific rules governing face behavior exemplify the way in which the desire to maintain one's dignity can serve as a powerful driver to move one ahead in life, however small the advances may be. This finding presents a challenge to the standard story of marginalized youth in Iran as a "generation in wait" and to studies that argue that "long periods of waiting are not spent in building human capital, saving for a home, or other activities that signal hope" (Salehi-Isfahani 2010, 7). Rather than "fatalistic" and generalist, we should take a more nuanced approach to the study of these young people's everyday lives and be attentive to the existence of cultural practices—in this case, facework—that not only limit, but also facilitate action and motivation (Bourdieu 1984;

Swidler 2000).¹³ To focus solely on the marginalization, hopelessness and exclusion of youth overlooks how cultural practices like saving face create moral status distinctions that in turn affect the distribution of material and social goods within a community. Through their pursuit of socially acceptable moral standards, face-savers revealed how marginalization does not necessarily result in resistance to dominant social norms, but to increased effort to embrace them in the hopes that it will result in upward mobility. The practice of facework among Iranian young people also challenges the idea that the moral boundaries that individuals create are necessarily and always borne of a desire to exclude others in order to simply *maintain* dignity. The appeal that these boundaries have extend far beyond simply reaffirming one's own self-worth to encompass the socio-economic rewards that come from living a life true to one's values. Boundaries serve not simply as a means to exclude but also as a means to scale up.

Ultimately, it is poverty that gives rise to the way that the face system is utilized and capitalized on by the face-savers in this study. A life lived on the socioeconomic fringes and its accompanying uncertainty makes facework a particularly appealing option for these young men and women. By providing incremental social and economic “wins,” facework provides a low-cost, high impact tactic to climbing the proverbial ladder. However, when confronted with competition by peers and the high expectations of community members, it remains unclear how far facework will take these young actors. What is certain is that facework reveals a new arena for the dispute of power—one that simultaneously revolves around claims to one's right to dignity and to a better life.

Acknowledgments I would like to thank Martin Sanchez-Jankowski, Teresa Gonzales, Florence Muwana, members of UC Berkeley's Center for Ethnographic Research, David Smilde, the reviewers of Qualitative Sociology, and the many youth who participated in this study.

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¹³ Recent ethnographic studies (e.g., Khosravi 2007; Mahdavi 2008; Varzi 2006) of upper class youth in Iran have granted power and agency to youth by analyzing the ways in which their everyday cultural practices constitute sites of resistance to the established moral and social order. However, in relying too heavily on the discourse of resistance and in generalizing the actions of Iran's young elite, these studies overlook the fact that not all youth engage in cultural practices in order to “resist” the established moral order (Olzewska 2013).

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