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# Material Culture and Social Behavior: Reconstructing Social Behavior and Personality According to Late Islamic Material Culture in Yazd, Iran

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**Abstract**

Cultural and social phenomena in our society have deep roots in the past. In other words, at least in part, the social behavior of current societies has its roots in their past, institutionalized in the subconscious memory of the citizens for hundreds or thousands of years. The cognition of social behavior of past societies and their structures could lead to a deeper and better understanding of contemporary social behavior. One of the most important ways in reconstructing social behavior of people in the past is the study of architectural and urban spaces. Considering Iranian cities with historical heritage, the historical texture of the city of Yazd is well preserved. The reconstruction of the social structure of Yazd (emphasizing social communication) according to the remaining spaces from the past, with the use of space syntax, will be discussed in this paper. It seems that compact neighborhood, and some public spaces such as neighborhood mosques could have increased social interaction among neighborhood residents. Increasing the level of social communication, can not only increase the cohesion and solidarity between the residents, but also lead to the creation of a kind of informal social control. However, some other architectural spaces left by them, and some principles of Islamic religion like privacy, indicate the emergence of a different type of social behavior like pretention and dual character among residents.

**Keywords**: Social Behavior, Archaeological Evidence, Islamic City, Late Islamic Period, Yazd.

**Article Type:** Research Article

## Introduction

Although the past cannot be present, the traces of it surround us (Shanks & Tilley, l987:7) and is visible in our contemporary social life. In fact, the main part of our background and present identity have deep roots in our far and near past (Newman, 1997: 21). So, finding the hidden codes in the present social behavior, which are heritage from the past and institutionalized in the subconscious memory, can lead to a basic criticism and deeper understanding of contemporary social behavior (Trigger 1980; Martin & Plog 1973; Childe 1946). We express what we have in our mind via the things we make and use. Material culture and architectural features can reveal social behavior and personality psychology to some extent (Clark 1957; Renfrew 1984; Preucel & Meskell, 2007: 3; Nassaney 2010), having the ability to accomplish social goals (Hodder 1990). Due to the large number and variety of material culture of recent centuries compared to some other periods, including prehistory, and also their closeness to the contemporary period, their study can be very useful and valuable. Material culture and residential spaces in the late Islamic period have the special potential to create a more comfortable and tangible connection with today's local communities. In the meantime, knowing the near ancestors and recent past is of particular interest to today's society (Young, 2019: 189; Hicks & Beaudry, 2006: 3; Leone 1999). Accordingly, if it becomes possible to study and examine the archeological sites, in which life is still going on, it will be even easier to establish a connection between the present and the recent past. Yazd is one of the cities which its late Islamic texture (corresponding to the Qajar period from 1785 to 1925) is remarkably preserved (Figure. 1). Because of this, the historical fabric of Yazd has been considered by UNESCO for

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a long time and has been among the oft-discussed urban centers with respect to cultural heritage. Due to the intact character and, most importantly, the flow of life in this late Islamic texture, this texture is one of the great examples for fitting data together (Hodder, 2007: 28) and studying and exploration of social behaviors and psychology of personality using the surviving material culture. In addition to showing the behavior and social relations of the past society to some extent, material culture in this texture has the potential to enable exploring and criticizing today's social behaviors as well. Since little attention has been paid to the historical roots of social behaviors, and the important role of material culture in deep and better understanding of people behaviors and personality, and thereby, in gaining a better understanding of the social structure and personality of people, an attempt is made to analyze the behavioral structure of the past society of Yazd on the basis of material culture left by them.




***Figure. 1:*** *Map of Yazd*

## Methodology

For better understanding of the most through-movement[1] and to-movement[2] potential of paths inside Yazd's neighborhoods, one neighborhood was selected as the main case, and its architectural elements including mosque, bazaar, neighborhood bazaars and narrow alleys were identified and recorded. Then with the space syntax approach was used to uncover the facts behind the movement patterns and accessibility of the routs. Space syntax theory offers several techniques to investigate how pedestrian movement in public spaces is restricted or facilitated in relation to pathway configurational characteristics (Zhai & Baran 2016). Among the different technical options offered by space syntax, integration and choice measures were applied regarding the research objectives. Integration sheds light on the accessibility of each path segment compared to all the others and, therefore, how much potential it has as a destination for movement. Choice reveals the through-movement potential of each path segment within a given radius (Hillier *et al.* 1993; Hillier 2007). This type of analysis attempts to understand in which part of the neighborhood there is a higher degree of social communication between people. Then, to better understand the private life and some concealment and hypocrisies, some historical houses were identified and their decorations were investigated. Some decorative motifs at these houses, such as half-naked women, were used to better understand the personality and social behavior of the residents.

[1] indicates how much potential it has as a destination for movement.

[2]Indicates the accessibility of routes in Golchinan district

## Historical Texture of Yazd

Not only historical texts offer a wealth of information about the city of Yazd during the Qajar period, the concomitant architectural evidence is also preserved in the historical texture of the city. It can be stated emphatically that Yazd is one of the best cities in Iran in terms of its historical fabric for systematic studies, and due to this very fact it has been registered as a world heritage site. Based on the available evidence, Yazd began to take up the characteristics of a city during the Kakuyid kingdom (eleventh century AD). The southern part of the Fahadan neighborhood and the northern part of the congregational mosque perhaps constituted the initial core of the city (Khademzadeh 2007). Results of several surveys suggest that numerous quarters existed in Yazd during the past centuries, each occupied by groups of a particular profession, social class, or religion (Tavassoli 2002). However, the association of different social or religious groups in a single quarter was not unlikely (Afshar 1975; Khademzadeh 2007; Azizi & Khavarian 2019). In the Qajar period, social distinctions were not so evident. Although there were some rare neighborhoods with the concentration of some noble class, members of the upper class lived together with the middle class in many quarters of the city (Tavassoli 2002; Soltanzadeh 1985; Samizay 2012). Based on the studies, there are 77 quarters

remaining from the Qajar period with the total area of 743 hectares. Each neighborhood acted as a small city in the heart of the main city in the period in question (Figure. 2). Thus, each neighborhood housed a collection of religious, public, economic as well as residential buildings. The dense texture of these neighborhoods were characterized by narrow, winding alleys (Tavassoli, 2002: 27).

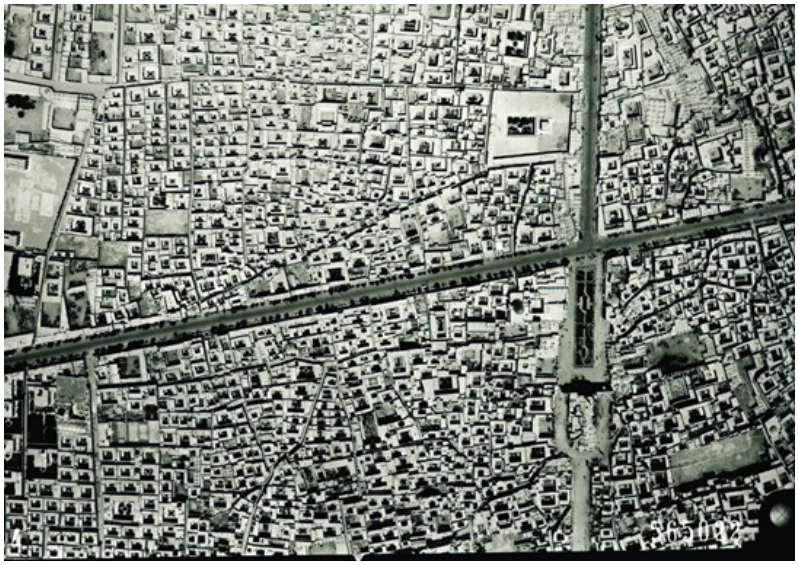


***Figure. 2:*** *The dense historical texture of Yazd with winding and narrow alleys*

*(After: Arial image in the year of 1956, Cultural Heritage and Tourism Base of Yazd)*

**Buildings, Neighborhood Residents, Social Behavior**

Among the most important elements of each neighborhood were the residential houses and the daily life of the people living in those houses. To understand the power of domestic space as a social construct, one must go beyond the ritual action and grand cosmological belief systems to look into the practical actions of daily life (Pader, 1993: 114). As children and adults learned an important part of social rules and behaviors as they moved around the architectural spaces, specially their settlement houses (Bourdieu 1977), studying them as a main place for daily life can give a deep cognition of social behavior and structure of the late Islamic society. In addition, their relationship with some architectural elements in the neighborhoods, like religious and economic complex, perhaps played an important role in the formation of their social behavior and personality.

***Economic Centers***

Economic centers in the neighborhoods such as neighborhood bazaars were among the most important places where people living in neighborhoods used to travel a lot on a daily basis. These bazaars mostly served the daily needs of the residents in each neighborhood (Modarres 2012). The activity scope of each of these small bazaars was limited to a neighborhood and it included a bakery, a butcher's shop, a traditional apothecary's shop, greengrocery, one or a few small workshops, a mosque, and a cistern. In addition to such daily needs as bread, fruit and dairy products, an important part of the residents of the neighborhood also procured their drinking water from the reservoir inside such bazaars. Some neighborhood bazaars also had a small mosque. This religious space which was commonly used by the shopkeepers and, of course, some neighborhood residents, increased the amount of commuting and face-to-face recognition of the neighborhood people. Based on a study by the present author using space syntax approach on the movement pattern of people in one neighborhood of Yazd ( Golchinan), the paths leading to economic centers like neighborhood bazars(which were usually located on the public routes of the neighborhood), and some commercial Caravansaries in the neighborhood bazars of this quarter, had the most through-movement(Figure.3) and to-movement (Figure. 4) potential (Azizi & Khavarian, 2019: 495).

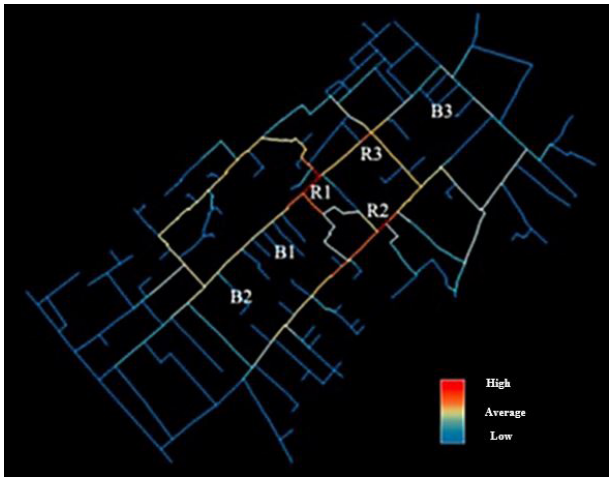



*Figure. 3. The choice map at the radius of 320 m. (The lines are coloured in a scale from red to blue, to indicate the high-to-low range of values)*

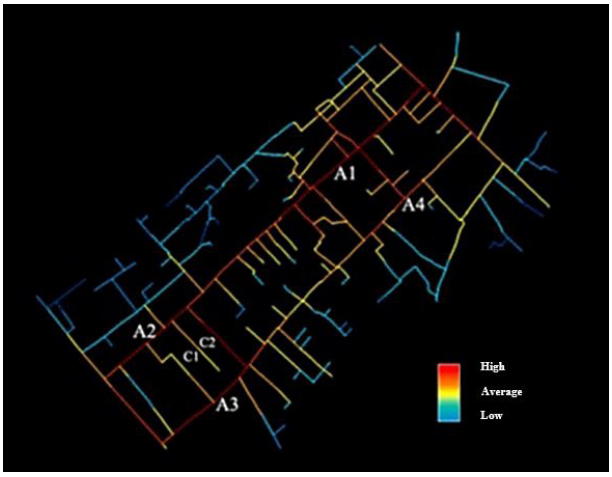



***Figure. 4:*** *The integration map at the radius of 320 m. (The lines are coloured in a scale from red to blue, to indicate the high-to-low range of values)*

### *Religious Places*

A review of previous studies reveals that religion has a major role in organizing urban spaces and different aspects of residents' lives (Bailey and Sood 1993; Walter 2001). Among the most important religious elements in the neighborhoods of the Qajari cities of Iran, including Yazd, are mosques and Hussainias. Mosques are one of the most socially important elements in any neighborhood because people in each neighborhood would gather at least two or three times a day to say congregational prayers at this place. According to the surveys by the present author, at these mosques were held not only the five daily prayers but also some religious ceremonies and other rituals such as night prayers. Basically, for their popularity in the religious community of the Qajar period, these place were one of the bases with which people living in the neighborhood were closely associated to the extent that it was not possible to imagine a neighborhood without one or more mosques inside (Ettinghausen *et al*, 2002; Winchester 2008). According to the space syntax analyses on the movement pattern of people in one neighborhood of Yazd ( Golchinan), the paths leading to religious centers like neighborhood mosques had the most through-movement(Figure. 3) and to-movement (Figure. 4) potential after economic centers (Azizi & Khavarian, 2019: 495). Influential people in the neighborhoods such as capitalist merchants and clerics paid special attention to the mosque as a very important base, because, in addition to having close social connections with each other and through neighborhood mosques, both groups gained much of their legitimacy among other members of society from this religious base (Ashraf 1989; Bonine 1987; Keshavarzian 2007; Smith 2004). During different hours of the day and night, many people were always on the move to different religious places inside the neighborhoods, especially mosques, which increased the extent of recognition and face-to-face communication of neighborhood people as well as social interactions between people on the route and in the place (Figure. 5). In addition to the mosques within the neighborhoods that played a key role in the daily life and social structure of the late Islamic community in the neighborhood, other religious sites in the neighborhoods, such as shrines and Hussainias, although not routinely used by residents, played a significant role in the social context of the society.

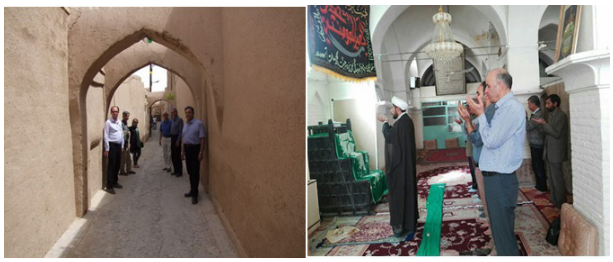


***Figure. 5:*** *A mosque in the bazaar and the alley next to it with high through-movement*

### *Residential Houses*

Residential houses are among the very important parts of the neighborhoods of Islamic cities, because people spent a lot of time in their daily lives in them. Accordingly, an important part of their personality and identity could be formed in this environment (Bourdieu 1977). Certainly, in the formation of

houses in Yazd in recent times, as in other Islamic cities, various factors such as climate, economy and Islamic laws and regulations have been influential (Abu-Lughod 1987; Bosworth 2007; Eickelman 1974; Azizi & Khavarian 2018). Here, it has been attempted to explore the universal and almost integrated factor of Islamic law and Sharia that is almost pervasive throughout the Islamic world (Hakim 1986, Saleh 1998, Carvajal *et al.* 2018, Azizi & Khavarian 2018). Certainly, the role of this factor as an influential factor on material culture and social behavior of society can be considered.

Yazd's houses are characterized by a central courtyard (usually rectangular) surrounded by different architectural spaces, including large and small rooms and porches in the four sides. These houses have very high walls. The main and large porch is located on the south side and behind the sun, and is very suitable for summer. The northern front, which was used in the cold seasons of the year such as winter or autumn, had large and small rooms, while the east and west fronts contained large and small rooms. In some cases, there was a small porch on the east side. The important point about these houses is the great emphasis on privacy, on which Islam places special emphasis (Quran, 24: 27). Therefore, this factor has always been very important in urban spaces and architecture as well as the Muslim community (Uthman 1997).

For this reason, the windows and apertures should be high enough to preclude the view of the inside to the neighbor houses. In addition, the height of the windows facing the street should not reveal the view of the inner space of the house to the on-foot or mounted passers-by (Memarian 2008). Besides, windows and doors are not positioned against each other (Abu-Lughod 1987). The compliance with this law has had a direct impact on the pathways and streets' landscape in Muslim cities (Hakim 2008).

Additionally, traditional Iranian houses would not permit a stranger to directly enter the inner and private sections of a house. There was a vestibule after the entrance, called "hashti." It is one of the most famous sections of the Iranian house. The design of vestibule is as a stopping point with a transition function for managing and controlling access to various house sections. Usually, some platforms were inserted all around a vestibule to make it usable as a temporary reception room for the people who did not need to enter the house. The visitors would encounter another transition door, named a hallway or "miyan dar" before entering the corridor or "dalan" (Pirnia 1993). Besides serving a security function, it would not allow a direct view of the private house sections. Then, a corridor right after the hallway existed which after a twist, would give a non-direct access to the courtyard (Figure 6). Then, the courtyard would have been a safe and totally a private place for the family members (El-Shorbagy 2010). Accordingly, not only the greatest emphasis in Muslim houses in Yazd has been on privacy and concealment of private life from public view in recent times, and this factor has been observed 100% in almost all houses, but also, even now, according to the questionnaire and calculations of AHP software, these factors are the most important in today's society of Yazd (Aziz & Khavarian, 2018: 15, 16).

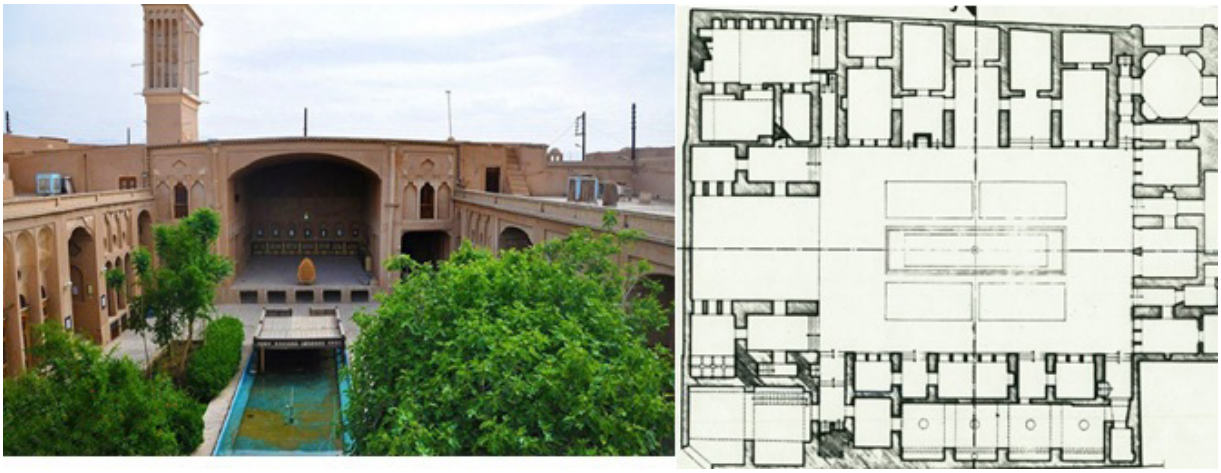


***Figure. 6:*** *A historical house in Yazd with its plan*

*(After: Image: by author, Plan: The National registration file of lariha house, Cultural Heritage and Tourism organization of Yazd)*

Manifestations of hiding one's private life from public view can be seen even in the few surviving material culture of the recent times, which in itself can indicate a different kind of life that was hidden from public view. Notable among them are the mirror rooms in some of the aristocratic houses which were completely hidden from the public and were reserved only for the people living in the house. These rooms, sometimes decorated with the paintings of European landscapes, and even naked women (Figures. 7, 8), were probably built for private parties. The existence of these spaces is another emphasis on a kind of life in secret that due to the Islamic laws governing the society, it was not possible to address it in public at all.



***Figure.7:*** *A mirror room*

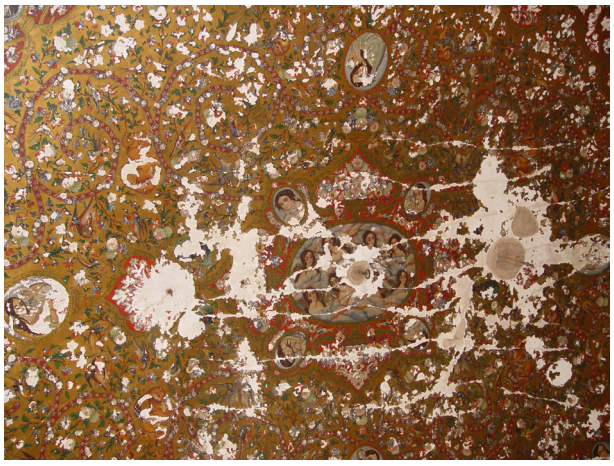


***Figure. 8:*** *A painting with female depictions*

## Discussion

Although the construction and use of different material culture by communities might stem from the interaction with the environment or external communities, the impact of social mechanisms and social agents on material culture and social behavior of society (Childe 1939; Hodder, 2007: 24), especially in long term, could have played a major role in the lives of past societies. Material culture is also active and can have significant effects on the social context of society (Boric 2003; Hodder 2007: 33, 34; Carvajal, 2013: 63). In other words, in addition to the society playing a major role in the formation and use of material culture, material culture can also have profound implications in the behavior and personality psychology of the next generation. Accordingly, the behaviors of today's society can be examined and critiqued.

According to space syntax analyses and what was mentioned, it seems that due to the important role of economic and religious spaces in the neighborhoods of Yazd, these places and the routes leading to them had the highest amount of through-movements and to- movements. At least, a significant number of neighborhood residents went to the neighborhood mosques two or three times a day for congregational prayers. As the time for prayer approached, the residents came to the mosque from different parts of the neighborhood through the narrow and winding alleys, where they greeted each other along the way. On the other hand, some of the residents even got together at a certain time and went to the mosque in groups of several people. In addition to praying, they had strong social interactions in the mosque. When leaving, they usually walked in small groups and talked about different issues and then separated and went home. Here, the mosque served as a base for the people of the neighborhood to get to know each other better over time along the way and establish a significant social connection with each other at the site of the mosque. The repetition of this action caused almost all the people living in the neighborhood to know each other face to face, and of course, there was more participation and social cohesion among them. The Hussainias also served almost the same function in the neighborhoods during Muharram, which doubled the social connection and cohesion among the local residents.

Economic spaces such as neighborhood bazaars told the same story. Because, the people of the neighborhood saw each other when they came to shop and spent some time in addition to shopping, talking to each other, and this also provided more social connection and cohesion. Residents of the neighborhood, who usually obtained their daily needs such as bread, dairy, or fruit from the bazaars, had face-to-face meetings

and social interactions almost every day or every few days. On the other hand, the landscape of historical texture also had a significant impact on the degree of integration and social cohesion of the neighborhood and its inhabitants. As stated above, the historic neighborhoods with their dense texture and winding narrow alleys as well as the same mud-brick walls throughout the neighborhood (although sometimes the entrances of the aristocratic houses were somewhat different) provided a compact and relatively uniform atmosphere, which was not ineffective in bringing the people of the neighborhood closer to each other (Figure 2). The combination of these factors created a kind of trust and empathy between people and made people feel a sense of belonging and responsibility to their small community in the neighborhood (Putnam 2001; Forrest & Kearns, 2001: 2140). Accordingly, each person felt a sense of responsibility towards other people in his neighborhood, a fact that created a sense of care and protection for the residents and the neighborhood itself. Because of this behavior, a kind of intangible control was prevalent in the city and the neighborhood by the residents.

While the behavior of individuals in the public spaces of the neighborhood was in line with the Islamic law and the society's customs and completely social, their behavior in their privacy had a different story. Their houses were completely private and safe and away from the public eye, which made it possible for them to have a kind of secret life that went against the Islamic law and the social customs. Although apart from religious entertainments such as rawza-khani or ta'ziya, the Qajar community of Iran benefited from secular entertainments such as ru-hawzi, naqqali, or klhayma shab bazi (Mahdavi 2007), it should not be forgotten that almost all of these ceremonies were in the realm of Islamic law and custom. Now, if a person would look for other worldly pleasures and funs such as drinking wine, female dancing and other pastimes, he had no choice but to do it in his privacy and completely secretly. Islamic Sharia forbade dealing with these matters, especially in public spaces. Therefore, pursuing these worldly pleasures, which Islam considers sinful, was possible only in the houses and privacy of individuals, and this was the beginning of hypocrisy and pretention among the members of society. The most important thing in Islamic society was legitimacy. If you, as a wealthy merchant, did something against Islamic laws, you would lose your legitimacy among the Muslim society and, as a result, you would probably lose your status and your money. Your interests forced you to pretend. Consequently, if not all, but at least some members of society were secretly behaving contrary to the Islamic Sharia and social customs. Yet, the same people in their dealings with members of society not only pretended to observe the principles of Islamic sharia and customs, but also strongly pretended to be religious. These were the people with dual and pretentious personality. The mirror rooms of aristocratic houses in Yazd, which were sometimes decorated with the pictures of semi naked women and were completely hidden from public view, corroborate the claim. Although the nobility was more likely to engage in illegitimate activities due to their extended financial resources (Ahmed, 2015: 65–75), this does not mean that ordinary people in the community were deprived from such behaviors (Matthee, 2014: 159). Basically, the particular architecture of the houses and the social context of the society led the whole society to hypocrisy. The interesting point about the mentioned images with female depictions is that some of them were covered with plaster after the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979.

**Conclusions**

At least some aspects of the personality and social behavior of people in society can be reconstructed on the basis of the material culture used by them. At the same time, material culture itself can actively steer the social behavior of society into certain directions. Reconstructing people's daily lives and their social connections, especially in their daily living spaces, can play a key role in the better understanding of the behavior and social context of the general public.

The Qajari residents of Yazd seemingly led a dichotomic life: one in public spaces and the other in the private. This mode of dual and pretentious life affected their social behavior and personality. Their behavior in public spaces was completely along the lines of Islamic law and the customs of the society, while their secular behavior in secret and in privacy was completely contrary to the Islamic law and customs.

Islamic laws governing the community as well as the spatial organization of neighborhoods could play an important role in the type of behavior of the community. Existence of economic and religious centers in neighborhoods and their high through-

movement and to-movement potential led to stronger recognition and social connections. Based on this, almost all the people in a neighborhood knew each other and a kind of trust and empathy developed between them, so that people developed a sense of association and responsibility to their small community in the neighborhood. This sense led to a kind of intangible social control by the residents. This phenomenon is still clearly visible in the social behavior of present-day citizens of Yazd. A kind of excessive curiosity in the privacy of individuals that has occurred in recent years due to new social and religious changes seems to have created more of a kind of harassment for the citizens or at least some of them.

People's personalities and social behavior did not end there, as some behaved in complete secrecy and privacy in contrast to what they did in public. In fact, at least a number of people in the community merely pretended to be religious, because they saw their own interest in it, while secretly engaging in various pleasures and affairs that were against the Sharia. The Islamic law, the customs of the society and the introverted residential architecture (the interior of the houses was totally hidden from the eyes of the public) led the society to pretense and two-facedness. If you intend to protect your interests, you must be legitimate among Muslims. This hypocritical and duplicitous behavior is still attestable in the behavior of the Yazd population with the difference that due to the changes induced by the modernity and economic growth of the different classes in society in recent years, these pretentious behaviors have become to some extent pervasive and are being perpetrated by at least part of the middle class along with the wealthy class.

Private houses are still a secret place for various pleasures. Interestingly, everyone is aware of this contradictory and dual behavior, but given the benefits they receive in return for this duality, they place special emphasis on its continuation. Due to the fact that people achieve their goals and objectives much easier through pretense, this behavior has been imitated and encouraged by everyone and has become quite pervasive. The same model seems to apply to at least some other Islamic societies, although each society has its own culture defined by its social context, climate and economy. Now, the important question that can be considered by sociologists is: what are the bad and irreparable consequences of this hypocritical and double behavior for children and other people growing up in such societies?

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