

Interparental differences in attitudes to cultural changes in Kuwait

M. Fakhr El-Islam, Taha H. Malasi, and Sanaa I. Abu-Dagga

Department of Psychiatry, Faculty of Medicine, Kuwait University, Kuwait

Summary. Interparental conflict is an example of interpersonal disagreements that arise between those who adhere to the traditions of the indigenous Arab culture and those who accept the more liberal attitudes conveyed by the imported Western culture. Interparental attitude conflict over family relationships, methods of marriage and emancipation of women is positively associated with Kuwaiti nationality, urban residence and greater interparental age difference. It is the degree of conflict in attitudes rather than liberal attitudes as such that is associated with an excess of reported psychiatric symptoms.

Conflict between individuals can take the form of disagreement in ideas and attitudes or of overt behaviour. Members of the same family e.g. parents may adopt different attitudes in areas of common interest, the study of which should throw light not only on the nature of conflict but also on its possible antecedents, correlates and consequences. Intergenerational conflict, i.e. parent-child conflict, has been extensively studied in Western countries, but has only recently received attention in Arab communities (El-Islam 1983; El-Islam et al. 1986). Interparental conflict, on the other hand, has been very little investigated in nonpatient samples. Marital discord was examined by Emery (1982) and Rutter (1982) in relation to the risk of child psychiatric disorder rather than to the health of the parents themselves.

Clinical observations during family therapy (El-Islam 1983) make it clear that the parents of a patient differ not only from their children but also from each other in attitudes to recent cultural changes in society. Therefore studies of interparen-

tal differences should be included with studies of intergenerational differences in family investigations of attitudes to cultural changes.

The recent rapid cultural change in Kuwait is a correlate of the rapid acquisition of wealth through oil discoveries; it was not a gradual build up of revenue and prosperity like the situation associated with industrialization in other countries. The change was felt earlier in urban than in Bedouin (nomadic) areas because of easier access of the former to new information through occupational, educational and communicational (mass media and touristic) opportunities.

In Kuwait, non-Kuwaitis come from the more westernized Mediterranean Arab countries to work, mostly in professional, technical or skilled jobs. They bring with them not only their expertise but also their patterns of relationships and life styles. They are not allowed to become permanent residents in Kuwait, but they can reside in Kuwait as long as they are employed. Non-Kuwaitis form about 60% of the total population (1.7 millions) of Kuwait. All Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaitis speak Arabic as their only or first language. For the children of Non-Kuwaitis to be admissible to government schools in Kuwait, their parents must either have resided in Kuwait for more than 15 years or be currently in professional employment in Kuwait.

In some marriages among Kuwaiti natives the interparental age differences are very large because of the tradition of acquisition of additional wives in this polygynous community. On the other hand, non-Kuwaiti Arabs seldom take additional wives when they are elderly. They are also required to leave the country once they are too old to be employed. Therefore large interparental age gaps are unusual among non-Kuwaiti Arabs in Kuwait.

The present study explores attitude conflicts and the prevalence of psychiatric symptoms among parents in Arabian families in Kuwait. It is hypothesized that

1. interparental attitude conflict is greater in Kuwaiti than non-Kuwaiti Arabs,
2. interparental attitude conflict is greater in urban than non-urban residents;
3. interparental attitude conflict is greater in parents with larger age differences;
4. it is interparental attitude conflict, rather than the adoption of new (non-traditional) attitudes as such that is associated with an increase in psychiatric symptoms in parents.

Material and method

A stratified random sample of high school students was obtained from government schools in the main provinces of Kuwait in proportion to their population density in order to investigate attitudes and psychiatric symptoms of students and their parents (El-Islam et al. 1986).

The age, nationality, residence, and level of education of parents were recorded. The age differences between parents is referred to as the 'age gap'. Only biological parents in two-parent families were included. The parental residence was classed as urban if the first 10 years or more of the life of their selected child (student) was spent in the city of Kuwait, the only town in the country. Parents were otherwise classed as Bedouin residents i.e. mainly resident in non-urban, nomadic areas of Kuwait. The level of education was used to assign an education score: 0=illiterate, 1=standards 1-4, 2=standards 5-8, 3=standards 9-12, 4=higher standards. The interparental education gap was defined as father's education score - mothers education score.

For the purpose of this investigation a questionnaire was designed to study traditional versus non-traditional (liberal) attitudes in three areas: family relationships, methods of marriage, and emancipation of women (see appendix). These areas were selected because of their prominence in clinical material wherever attitude conflicts were implicated in patients' presentation and symptomatology (El-Islam 1974, 1976, 1979; El-Islam et al. 1983). Traditional attitudes enforce obedience and respect of older and male members of the family, favour arranged marriages (especially cousin marriage), and undervalue women's education, restricting their role to marriage and mothering. Liberal attitudes associated with recent social change, on the other hand,

challenge these traditions, as they support the adoption of more 'democratic' patterns of family relationships, and favour love marriage and emancipation of women from their restricted traditional role in order to perform roles outside the family.

The attitude questionnaire consists of 36 statements derived from accounts of patients in whom attitude conflict was involved, and from the accounts of their relatives when asked to describe traditional and non-traditional attitudes in the current society in Kuwait. 16 statements deal with family relationships, 12 statements cover methods of marriage and 8 statements relate to the emancipation of women. Each parent was asked to say whether or not they agreed with these statements, and a liberal (non-traditional) score was compiled (range 0-36). Half the statements in each area expressed the traditional attitude while the other half conveyed the non-traditional attitude; their order was randomised. Within each area, traditional and non-traditional scores derived equally from agreement and disagreement answers to the statements provided. (Both Arabic and English versions of the attitude questionnaire are available from Professor El-Islam on application). Interparental attitude conflict was estimated as the total number of father-mother differences in response to the questions of the attitude questionnaire, regardless of whether there was overt conflict or altercation based on the attitude differences. Possible conflict scores therefore extended from 0-36.

We produced an Arabic form of Goldberg and Hillier's scaled version of the General Health Questionnaire, i.e. GHQ-28 (1979). It has 4 scales of 7 questions between them covering somatic, anxiety, social dysfunction and depressive symptomatology. The questions are simply scored as 0 if never experienced or experienced no more than usual, or 1 if slightly or definitely experienced out of keeping with what is usual. The Arabic version was produced by translating the meanings of the questions of the English original GHQ-28 in ways that suit common Arabic methods of verbal expression, followed by independent iterative back translation. The condensed layout of the four alternative answers on one line in the original GHQ-28 was spread on four separate lines to facilitate the choice of an answer. Since our aim is not to define a global assessment of the mental health of subjects examined, GHQ-28 was not validated against clinical interviews. GHQ-28 is simply used as a method of reporting symptoms which are not necessarily indications of poor mental health.

Both the attitude and GHQ-28 questionnaires were completed by parents. Trained social workers

read the questionnaires for illiterate parents and noted their answers.

All statistics were carried out nonparametrically, using the Mann-Whitney test for pairwise comparisons of median scores.

Results

The main demographic characteristics of parents studied are shown in Table 1. Kuwaiti parents were significantly less liberal, had significantly more attitude conflict than non-Kuwaiti parents, and reported more GHQ symptoms. However, their GHQ score was significantly different from non-Kuwaiti parents only in the case of mothers. The interparental education gap was significantly greater for non-Kuwaiti parents (Table 2).

Two hundred parent pairs were urban residents, 162 had Bedouin residence and 19 could not be assigned to either residence category because they had lived outside the country for a major part of the specified period. The last group had to be excluded for statistical purposes on account of its small size. Parents of urban and Bedouin residence did not differ

significantly from each other in their liberal scores. Mothers from Bedouin areas had significantly less conflict with fathers than mothers from urban areas and reported significantly less symptoms. The two groups did not differ significantly in interparental education gaps (Table 2).

In the higher interparental-age-gap (≥ 10 years) group fathers were significantly less liberal and parents had significantly more conflict. The education gap was also less, and fathers had significantly more symptoms compared with those in the lower interparental-age-gap (< 10 years) group (Table 2).

Although mothers generally tended to have higher liberal attitude scores than fathers, father-mother differences in liberal scores were not significant for the whole group or in any of the subgroups studied.

Table 3 shows that parents who scored above the median in liberal attitudes tended to have less symptoms. However, those who scored above the median in attitude conflict had significantly more symptoms than those scoring below it.

Discussion

Whereas traditional attitudes are based on the Arab culture and the Islamic religious heritage, liberal attitudes are viewed by many individuals as a Western cultural invasion (Kuwait-Times 1983). Interparental conflict between traditional and liberal attitudes is an example of conflict between the indigenous and imported cultures. In the Arabian Gulf region Westernization following the acquisition of petroleum Wealth has taken place so rapidly that conditions more typical of the eighteenth century have become those of the twentieth century over a few decades (El-Sendiony 1981). Kuwaiti parents' lower

Table 1. Description of parents

	Kuwaiti parents (<i>n</i> = 223 pairs)	Non-Kuwaiti parents (<i>n</i> = 158 pairs)
Parents of male students	123	88
Parents of female students	100	70
Median age	44	43
Median education	1	2
Urban residents	61	139
Bedouin residents	162	00

Table 2. Median scores of liberal attitudes, conflict, GHQ and education gaps in association with nationality, residence and age gap categories

	Liberal attitude		Parental conflict	GHQ father	GHQ mother	Education gap
	father	mother				
Kuwaiti (<i>n</i> = 223)	15.4	15.7	8.4	3.4	3.9	0.6
Non-Kuwaiti (<i>n</i> = 158)	17.5	18.2	6.5	2.7	2.6	0.9
<i>P</i> ^a	<0.001	0.002	<0.001	NS	0.031	0.045
Urban (<i>n</i> = 200)	16.5	16.9	8.3	3.8	4.4	0.7
Bedouin (<i>n</i> = 162)	16.2	16.6	6.7	2.5	2.7	0.9
<i>P</i> ^a	NS	NS	0.003	NS	0.004	NS
Age gap < 10 years (<i>n</i> = 247)	16.8	17.0	7.3	2.5	3.2	0.9
Age gap ≥ 10 years (<i>n</i> = 134)	15.8	16.3	8.6	3.9	3.9	0.5
<i>P</i> ^a	0.009	NS	0.011	0.022	NS	0.006

^a Mann-Whitney test

Table 3. Differences in median GHQ scores associated with categories of liberal and conflict scores (Numbers of individuals in brackets)

	GHQ father	GHQ mother
Liberal score		
> median	2.0 (184)	3.0 (198)
< median	4.0 (197)	4.0 (183)
<i>p</i> ^a	0.042	NS
Conflict score		
> median (200)	4.0	4.0
< median (181)	2.0	2.0
<i>p</i> ^a	0.003	0.014

^a Mann-Whitney test

liberal attitude scores and higher attitude conflict scores related to this rapid social change, whereas the higher liberal attitude scores and lower conflict scores in non-Kuwaiti parents are in keeping with the more gradual process of Westernization in the countries they come from e.g. Jordan or Egypt. Our first hypothesis has therefore been confirmed.

Since the attitudes studied relate more to changes in females than males, this may account for the tendency to higher liberal attitude scores in mothers than fathers and for the urban mothers when compared to other mothers. The new attitudes which seem to offer females the promise of liberation from their 'serf' status seem to be more attractive to mothers, but more conflict-inducing at the same time.

Urban residence exposes parents to greater social changes than residence in the outlying Bedouin areas. It is not surprising therefore to find higher conflict scores among urban residents, confirming our second hypothesis. The presence of significant differences in fathers' rather than mothers' liberal attitude scores in the various subdivisions of our sample suggests that the father's attitude is more important in determination of the differences between these subdivisions in conflict and symptoms.

The third hypothesis associating greater interparental age gaps with higher interparental conflict scores has also been confirmed. Younger educated parents have higher liberal attitude scores, and tend to have lower interparental age and education gaps and lower conflict and symptom scores. Some fathers (especially among Kuwaitis) were more than 40 years older than their wives, and the interparental attitude conflict was really intergenerational! This may explain the prominent excess of symptoms reported by older fathers. Unlike their much younger wives, older fathers have not been exposed to the recent social change during their formative

(childhood and adolescence) years: hence their high interparental conflict scores. Older fathers are therefore very likely to reject new nontraditional attitudes as they fail to comprehend the concepts underlying them.

Greater interparental age gaps were associated with lower interparental education gaps because older fathers were less educated and hence closer to the poor educational level of their wives. The latter were traditionally allowed little or no education. On the other hand, the high education gap between non-Kuwaiti parents is a function of the high educational level of non-Kuwaiti fathers who are employed in professional and technically skilled jobs. Since the low education gap between high-age-gap parents was associated with high interparental conflict, and the high education gap between non-Kuwaiti parents was associated with low interparental conflict, no direct positive relationship between interparental education gap and interparental conflict could be claimed. It seems that the higher the fathers' education the greater their ability to harmonize (i.e. reduce conflict in) attitudes in the family. This tallies with results from our study of intergenerational conflict in relation to the intergenerational education gap (El-Islam et al. 1986).

Our findings that higher parental liberal scores are associated with lower GHQ symptom scores confirms those of Inkeles and Smith (1974) that better psychological adjustment was associated with modernization of social attitudes. On the other hand, higher parental attitude conflict scores were associated with a significant increase in the number of reported symptoms, confirming our fourth hypothesis that it is conflict in attitudes rather than liberal attitudes as such that correlates with symptom formation.

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Appendix: Attitude Questionnaire

1. Parents have the right of obedience over their children in all circumstances.
2. Parents should not interfere with their sons when they select their friends.
3. Parents should not interfere with their daughters when they select their friends.
4. It is wrong for sons to get all that they want from their parents' money.
5. Parents have the right to get all that they want from their sons' money when they work.

6. Parents should convince their children of their views before expecting their obedience.
7. Children have the right to choose their own clothes as they wish.
8. Children should not smoke in the presence of their parents out of respect.
9. Children have the right to follow the example of their colleagues.
10. Parents should supervise their children's activities.
11. Parents should give more freedom to their sons than to their daughters.
12. It is wrong to prefer the eldest son to the others.
13. Children have the right to express their disagreement in opinion with their parents.
14. Brothers have the right to direct their sisters' behaviour.
15. Parents have the right to direct their children to appropriate jobs.
16. Completing and choosing education should be decided according to the children's wishes.
17. Young people (male or female) should marry one of their relatives.
18. Young people (male or female) should have the chance to know each other before marriage.
19. It is wrong for a person to get married to somebody whose family standard is lower than his own family's.
20. The husband's age should not exceed that of the wife by more than 10 years.
21. A girl should refuse to marry a man who is less educated than her.
22. It is wrong for the girl to choose her husband by herself.
23. Family of descent is the most essential (important) factor in choice of a wife.
24. A man has the right to choose his wife without interference of his parents.
25. It is better for the girl to get married at an early age.
26. A university graduate should not marry an uneducated partner.
27. It is preferable to continue living with the parents after marriage.
28. The husband and wife should solve their problems without interference of the parents.
29. It is wrong to establish separate colleges for boys and others for girls.
30. Home is the natural place for women.
31. Boys and girls should have equal opportunities for education abroad.

32. It is wrong to keep women dependent on men for decision taking.
33. Women's work should be limited to areas where there are no men.
34. A girl should be accompanied by one of her relatives when she drives a car.
35. Educated and uneducated women have the same ability to raise a good generation.
36. All areas of work should be open to women.

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Prof. M. F. El-Islam, FRCP., FRCPsych., DPM.
Faculty of Medicine
P. O. Box 24923 Safat
Kuwait 13110