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Parent Practices and Identity Outcomes in Arab Youth

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Abstract

Completion of developmental tasks, such as identity formation, are of particular concern as Arab Americans navigate a complex bi-cultural environment. Cultural and political changes may also impact Arab youth in the Middle East. Children and youth, particularly from Arab cultures, are highly influenced by parenting practices. For young children, authoritarian parenting practices typical collectivist in Arab cultures impact children differently than might be expected in Western societies. For adolescents and young adults experiencing cultural change, the nature of parents' acculturation, the degree of parental openness, as well as the level of parental control all play a role in adjustment of youth as they experience cultural change (Henry, Stiles, Biran, and Hinkle, 2008).

Keywords: Arab. Arab-American, youth, child, adolescent, parenting styles, identity, acculturation

Completion of developmental tasks, such as identity formation, are of particular concern as Arab Americans navigate a complex bi-cultural environment. Similarly, cultural and political changes may also impact the development and well being of Arab youth in the Middle East. Children and youth are highly influenced by parenting practices as they navigate these changes. The following presentation, will address some cultural distinctions in parenting practices and outcomes in families in Arab countries as well as immigrant families. Parenting styles as well as parent control and acculturation will also be considered.

Focus of Parenting Across Cultures

Regardless of cultural origin or geographic location, parents play an essential role in the enculturation and socialization of the child (Berry, Poortinga, Segall, & Dasen, 2002). Across the globe, and in varying settings, some universal aspects of child training emerge. These include the 6 Central Dimensions of Child Training, which can be grouped into two common threads, namely Pressure Towards Compliance and Pressure Towards Assertion (Barry, 1957; 1959, cited in Berry et al., 2002).

6 Central Dimensions of Child Training

1. Obedience
2. Responsibility
3. Nurturance
4. Achievement
5. Self-Reliance
6. General Independence Training

Two common threads,

1. Pressure Towards Compliance
 - a. Obedience
 - b. Responsibility

2. Pressure Towards Assertion
 - a. Achievement
 - b. Self-Reliance
 - c. General Independence Training

A group may focus on one or the other because it is functional to the adult life of the culture. In other words, there is an awareness of likely outcomes that may be consistent with the general culture of a group. At the same time, parents individually develop their own “ethnotheories,” which may link their child-rearing practices more specifically within a context, either ecological or cultural (See Harkness & Super, 1996). It stands to reason that cultures varying in sociopolitical orientations may vary in the degree of compliance and assertion emphasized in parenting. It is also logical that parents in a state of transition, such as immigrants or those experiencing rapid cultural change, may manifest some shifts or inconsistencies in their parenting approach.

Parenting Styles in Collectivistic vs. Individualistic Cultures

One overarching set of dimensions that both defines cultural groups and impacts parenting goals and choices includes Collectivism and Individualism. In collective cultures, the emphasis is placed on avoiding uncertainty, obedience, and fostering behaviors which both benefit and promote harmony within the group (Dwairy & Achoui, 2006). In contrast, parenting

within individualistic cultures is more apt to emphasize and reinforce individuality, independence, and self reliance. When Western based paradigms of “good parenting” are applied and examined across groups, the outcomes of parenting practices may vary, yet there is some debate regarding how distinct these outcomes are and how applicable these paradigms are across groups.

Studies of parenting practices frequently utilize the Baumrind typology to differentiate parenting styles. In the 1960’s Baumrind originally classified parenting styles utilizing three basic patterns, differing in the amount of warmth and the degree of control (Baumrind, 1987). These patterns are deemed authoritarian, permissive and authoritative, as defined below.

- Authoritarian - Parent emphasizes obedience and parental control, with restriction of autonomy. They expect rules to be followed without question, and are low in nurturance and affection.
- Permissive - Parent emphasizes autonomy and allow the child to regulate their own actions and make decisions. They are high in nurturance, but low in control.
- Authoritative - The parent utilizes a moderate degree of control and fosters increasing levels of autonomy in the child. Limits are set, but they are accompanied by verbal explanations and flexibility rather than expecting obedience without question.

(Subsequently, a fourth pattern, the neglecting-rejecting parent was identified, typified by low warmth and low involvement.)

When parents are categorized in this way within Western cultures, the developmental outcomes consistently favor the authoritative style. Additionally, negative outcomes, including

mental health disorders tend to be associated with the authoritarian approach. Yet early application of this typology in more collectivistic cultures suggested that the detrimental outcomes linked to an authoritarian approach did not generalize to all groups. Additionally, some would argue that the authoritative parenting style does not have the same benefits within a collectivistic society (Chao, 2000; 2001, cited in Sorkhabi, 2005).

Sorkhabi (2005) has reviewed this debate citing research from Eastern and Western cultures. She notes that the Baumrind model may not be viewed as applicable in some countries, such as China. She cites Chao, who proposes that alternative models of parenting, such as training for organizational control (or *chia-shun*), and the concept of parent investment, (or *guan*), more clearly delineate parenting approaches within the culture. In other words, there may be overlapping but unique dimensions or constructs within non-Western societies. Sorkhabi also stresses that the adolescents perception of certain practices, such as authoritarian parenting, may mediate the outcome, as they may attribute positive societal value, even when the individual treatment could be construed as punitive or controlling. Finally, it is suggested that parental characteristics of individuals classified as, for example, authoritarian, may vary across cultures. While an authoritarian parent in a Western culture may be lacking in warmth, this may not be the case in a collectivistic context, (where a more controlling approach is the accepted norm rather than a negative affective response to problem behavior).

Parenting Styles in Arab Countries

A comprehensive body of research on parenting and outcomes in the Middle East has been conducted by Marwan Dwairy and colleagues (See Dwairy, 2004; Dwairy & Achoui, 2006; Dwairy & Menshur, 2006). This group has systematically measured and examined outcomes for

parenting variables including Baumrind's types as well as other dimensions such as control, rejection, and inconsistency.

Early Single Group Studies Reveal Distinctions

Dwairy (2004) notes that Arabic societies are typically viewed as collectivistic and authoritarian. Behavioral expectations include a strict adherence to the rules of adults and disobedience is met with harsh punishment, particularly for publicly displayed social behaviors. The concept of the self for children is typically dependent upon the status and reputation of the family as well as the support and approval received from the family. When Arab youth were questioned about authoritarian practices in past decades (Hatab & Makki, 1978, cited in Dwairy, 2004), the majority reported compliance with parental direction on social decisions, and they tended to report satisfaction and fail to report suffering from authoritarian parenting styles. Yet changes in recent decades in countries experiencing more rapid social transformation may yield differing results.

The results of two early studies yielded some gender differences, and provided support for the notion that authoritarian parenting styles may not have detrimental consequences in these groups. In the first study (Dwairy, 2004), young Palestinian-Arab adolescents in Israel self-reported parental authority and discipline practices, problems in parent-child relationships, their general sense of self-worth, as well as the presence of psychological distress. While authoritative patterns were associated with more positive mental health outcomes, there was no impact of authoritarian parenting styles. Males, however, had increased psychological difficulties associated with a permissive parenting style. Similarly, when parenting style was

examined in Egyptian youth across urban and rural samples, mental health was associated with the authoritative style, but not the authoritarian (Dwairy & Menshur, 2006).

Global Studies Point to New Dimensions and Inconsistency Theory

Further evidence on parenting, individuation, and mental health comes from a series of three studies involving 2,893 adolescents across 8 Arab countries (Dwairy & Achoui, 2006). In these studies the authors reiterate the notion that Arab societies typically foster a more collective family identity, yet they propose that rapid modernization and urbanization, and the resultant exposure to Western values may have created wider variation between Arab countries, with some embracing the more liberal ways. In contrast, those exposed to Western culture through occupation may resist changes. For others, the exposure to Western culture may create an “ambivalent” parenting style, which mixes authoritarian and permissive ways.

The first study in the series examined parenting styles across country, gender, and nature of region, using the Parent Authority Questionnaire (Dwairy, Achoui, Farah, Sakhleh, Fayad, & Khan, 2006). It became obvious in this large sample that much of the variance in parenting style did not fit neatly into the 3 traditional patterns. Instead, 3 new patterns emerged:

1. Controlling - A combination of authoritarian and authoritative
2. Flexible - A combination of authoritative and permissive
3. Inconsistent – Consists of two opposite styles, authoritarian and permissive

While the three patterns were evident in all Arab countries, logical distinctions emerged between countries. Consistent with their more conservative society, Saudi Arabia was highest with regard to a controlling style. Similarly Palestinians in the Gaza Strip, facing daily threats and likely rejecting of Western influence were also more controlling in style. Flexible parenting was more

prevalent in Lebanon, Jordan, and Algeria, with more liberal and potentially Westernized values. Mixed inconsistent patterns were highest in Yemen and among Palestinians in Israel. This was attributed to recent rapid Western influence as they transitioned from a tribal system to a Democratic state in Yemen, and exposure to Israeli-Western values among the Palestinian-Israeli citizens.

In addition to parenting style, the degree of connectedness was addressed, with adolescents from Arab countries being higher than Americans in emotional, financial, and functional connectedness, and females being more connected to families than males (Dwairy, Achoui, Abouserie, & Farah, 2006 a,b). When connectedness was viewed in combination with the degree of consistency in parenting, there were significant implications for mental health outcomes. Authoritative parenting had a positive impact on connectedness, while the permissive and authoritarian styles of parenting had no impact. Adolescents experiencing inconsistent parenting were less connected to their families than those with flexible or controlling patterns. Connectedness, in turn, is associated with better mental health, and similarly inconsistent parenting was related to particularly poor mental health outcomes. Authoritative parenting related to better mental health, and authoritarian parenting only led to negative outcomes (in connectedness and mental health) when combined with permissiveness to create an inconsistent style.

Cross-Cultural Studies of Parental Factors, Connectedness, and Well Being

A second set of studies compared nine Western and Eastern countries, varying in level of family connectedness. In these works, dimensions of acceptance and rejection, control, and inconsistency were examined (Dwairy, 2010). Parental rejection emerged as a very robust factor

across cultures and appeared to account for a great deal of variance in mental health disorders. Logically, rejection is particularly salient in groups who maintain a high degree of family connectedness, such as Bedouins. As noted in prior studies, inconsistency in various forms was predictive of poor outcomes, with paternal consistency being more problematic in Western countries, and maternal being more problematic in Eastern countries.

While high parental control, particularly maternal was associated with poor mental health, there was also variation across cultures (Dwairy, Achoui, Filus, Casullo, & Vohra, 2010). Paternal control was more problematic in Western groups, and maternal factors played a greater role in Eastern groups. Parental control did not predict problems in Kuwait, which is a very authoritarian country. Dwairy concludes that a common thread here has to do with inconsistency. When a high degree of control is the cultural expectation, high control is not problematic. When high parental control occurs in more liberal Western settings, it is perceived as incongruent, and may foster a perception of unjust treatment (Dwairy & Achoui, 2010).

Parenting in Immigrant Families: Impact of Varied Levels of Acculturation,

Control and Support

In immigrant groups, such as Arab Americans, we might expect a complex pattern of parental variables and outcomes. Parents who have experienced immigration and rapid cultural change may maintain parenting styles true to their culture of origin, or may feel compelled to develop more Westernized forms of parenting. Similarly, as Arab families tend to be high in connectedness and hierarchical in organization, the degree of parental acculturation is likely to impact the adjustment and optimal acculturation of the child or adolescent.

Abad and Sheldon (2008) studied parental factors as they related to bi-cultural adaptation in second generation immigrants from Eastern and Western countries. Their work focused primarily on autonomy-supportive (as opposed to controlling) parenting. Given that the second generative youth already tend to favor the host culture, (for example, exaggerating how much time they spend in “American” activities), the concern here was with maintenance of their culture of origin. Consistent with self-determination theory, they expected that when parents were perceived as fostering autonomy, their children would ultimately be higher in endorsement of their natal culture, and thus higher in well being. The results suggested that this was true with regard to paternal style, but not maternal. They attribute this to the the “instrumental” role that father’s tend to play, as they are more often responsible for identifying the child’s role in society and correcting them if standards are not met. Emersion in the natal culture was positively related to well being.

Parental influences on bi-cultural adaptation was studied specifically in Arab American families by Henry and associates (Henry, Stiles, Biran, and Hinkle, 2008). Given the strong, hierarchical system of support common in Arab families they predicted that Arab American college students will be very responsive to the acculturation practices and attitudes of their parents, and that the level of control may interact with openness in prediction of well being. Openness to American culture predicted well-being when parents exerted high levels of control. Notably lower well-being occurred when parents exerted high control, but were not open to American culture. Consistent with the prior study, the preservation of the Arab culture by parents contributed to well being in the students when parents exerted less control, and fostered autonomy, allowing for an integration of both the host and native culture.

Conclusions

As noted earlier, parents may modify parenting practices to fit the specific cultural context of the family. For Arab families, both in the Middle East and as Arab American immigrants, the preservation of Arab culture helps their children retain that base of support. When faced with change either within their country of origin, or through immigration, youth may fare better when parents allow some openness to Western culture, and avoid exerting a large degree of control or expecting a rigid adherence to the culture of origin. At the same time, psychologists studying or working with Arab families clinically need to be sensitive to the fact the maintenance of the culture of origin is beneficial, and that “good” parenting may take different forms across cultural groups.

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