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Unveiling parenting in Yemen : a study on maternal parenting practices in slums in Yemen

Alsarhi, K.M.H.

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General Introduction

Parenting Off the Beaten Track

Research on parenting has become the centerpiece of social scientists' established efforts to understanding child development for the past decades (Morris, Cui, & Steinberg, 2013; Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington & Bornstein, 2000). However, the mainstream research on parenting has revealed only part of the parenting picture as it mainly focused on Western high-income countries, with far less research in low- and middle-income countries (Knerr, Gardner, & Cluver, 2013; Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). The scarcity of parenting research is even more apparent when trying to zoom into subgroups within countries and regions where it is still unclear whether findings and models from mainstream research can be generalized to low-income families (Hill, Burdette, Regnerus & Angel, 2008) and specifically to low-income families in the developing world. The aim of this thesis is to shed light on parenting in slums in the Muslim Arabic culture of Yemen. Being one of the least developed countries in the world where the vast majority of its population live in rural and tribal areas (World population Review, 2018), having the 30th highest fertility rate in the world (World Population Review, 2018) at 4.45 children per woman (World Bank, 2019) and being a country where women are fully covered in a conservative gender-segregated culture, Yemen provides a truly 'off the beaten track' context for the research on parenting. The findings of this study will help to address the knowledge gap in parenting research on cultures "off the beaten track" in comparison to the available mainstream Western research.

Parenting and Child Outcomes

The concept of parenting in this study refers to the parent's everyday behavior towards their children. Effects of parenting on child outcomes are well documented in the literature, showing that parents' behaviors are associated with their children's physiological health, social, behavioral, emotional skills and educational achievement (Roopnarine, Krishnakumar, Metindogan, & Evans, 2006; Kiernan, & Huerta, 2008; Spera, 2005; Berg-Nielsen, Vikar, & Dahl, 2002). Two central dimensions of parenting that play important roles in child development are parental sensitivity, which is more on the relationship side of parenting, and discipline which is more on the control side of parenting. According to Mary Ainsworth's definition, sensitive parenting is the ability of a parent to notice their child's signals, correctly interpret those signals, and respond to those signals promptly and appropriately (Ainsworth, Bell & Stayton,

1974). Sensitive parenting is associated with the development of a secure attachment of the child (De Wolff, & Van Ijzendoorn, 1997; McElwain, & Booth-LaForce, 2006). Further, maternal sensitivity has been found to relate to more positive social (Heinicke & Guthrie, 1992), emotional (Kemppinen et al. 2006) and cognitive (Landry, Smith, Swank, & Miller-Loncar, 2000; Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson & Collins, 2009) development. For example, Kochanska (2002) found that parental sensitivity contributes to the child's positive, happy temperament, which increases the child's willingness to behave prosaically. Another study shows that maternal sensitivity is related to children's ability to regulate their emotions' expression or their externalizing problem behavior (Eisenberg, 2001). Studies also show that maternal responsiveness is associated with children's early language achievements (Tamis-LeMonda, Bornstein, & Baumwell, 2001).

Parental discipline refers to how rules and limits are imposed on the child (for a review, see Coie & Dodge, 1998) which could be implemented by using confrontive practices such as reasoning and negotiating or by using coercive practices such as punitive discipline (Baumrind, 2012). Research shows that confrontive parental discipline practices are associated with fewer child behavior problems (Kotchick & Forehand 2002), more self-confidence, and positive peer relations (Conger et al., 1992), while coercive parental discipline practices are associated with internalizing and externalizing problems (Alink, Cicchetti, Kim, & Rogosch, 2012; Taylor, Manganello, Lee & Rice, 2010; Rothbaum, & Weisz, 1994). Positive child outcomes of the confrontive practices, or what traditionally is referred to as authoritative parenting, are explained by the parents' ability to assert power in combination with warmth, nurturance, or open parent-child communication whereas parents who use authoritarian practices tend to be low in warmth, but high in control (Baumrind, 1971, 1978, 1997).

In the study of parenting and child development in the context of a religious community with a low average socioeconomic status, the literature points to several other parent factors that are relevant to consider as they are related to parenting quality, including maternal education (Diehl, 1997; Ispa et al. 2004; Tamis-LeMonda et al. 2004), maternal intelligence (Bacharach & Baumeister, 1998; Baharudin & Luster, 1998; Menaghan & Parcel, 1991; Yeates, MacPhee, Campbell & Ramey, 1983), and the marital relationship (Belsky, 1984; Conger et al., 1990; Levendosky & Graham-Bermann, 2000, 2001). Finding regarding religiosity show both positive (Carothers, Borkowski, Lefever

& Whitman, 2005; Mahoney et al., 2008) and negative associations (Bornstein, et al., 2017) with parenting quality, and warrants more study, especially in a religious community.

Parenting and Culture

Recent research on the role of culture in parenting shows that parenting is culturally constructed (Harkness, & Super, 2002) and that child development and well-being are strongly connected with culturally connoted parenting. Different studies showed that the effects of parental behaviors are not universal (Pinderhughes, Dodge, Bates, Pettit, & Zelli, 2000; Polaha, Larzelere, Shapiro, & Pettit, 2004; Lansford et al. 2005) as certain aspects of parenting vary across ethnic and minority groups. Moreover, the same parenting behaviors which are associated with positive developmental effects in some groups may not have the same effects in other groups (Coll, & Pachter, 2002). According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (1977), parenting and culture are considered fundamental parts of children's ecological environment. In his model, Bronfenbrenner refers to the context in which human development occurs as a set of proximal and distal "nested structures" which include the microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems. Microsystems refer to those who most immediately and directly impact a child's development, including parents, school, religious institutions, neighborhood, and peers. Mesosystems consists of the interrelations between two or more microsystems where a child is part of those systems such as the relations between the child's family and school. Exosystems encompass the relations between two or more settings, but only one contains the child; e.g. home and the parent's workplace. Macrosystems refers to the cultural context (e.g., socioeconomic context, religion, and ethnicity) in which a child lives.

Interestingly, the macrosystems in which most studies have been done is generally homogenous where people from Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic cultures (WEIRD) are mainly represented (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). However, an increasing number of studies suggest that macrosystems are different in different cultures. Therefore, in order to gain deeper understanding of child development in different contexts, different macrosystems need to be studied. To contribute to the body of literature on parenting, this study investigates the macrosystem of a non-Western Muslim Arab culture, namely the Yemeni context which will be introduced in.

Chapter 2 Within that context, we intend to focus on a subgroup that live in slum areas where to our knowledge, no study on parenting has been conducted before.

Parenting in Low Socioeconomic Status (SES) Contexts

Studies on families who live in low-SES circumstances show that negative child outcomes are associated with the socioeconomic status (SES) of families. SES generally covers three indicators which are income, education and occupational status (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Ensminger & Fothergill, 2003; Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010; Bangdiwala et al., 2004; Krieger, Williams, & Moss, 1997). It is found that children of low-income parents are at risk for a variety of adverse outcomes, ranging from health problems to compromised academic and social development. For example in their Three-City Study of the wellbeing of children and families in low-income urban neighborhoods, Coley, Leventhal, Lynch, and Kull (2013) showed that children who live in lower quality housing showed higher emotional and behavioral problems than their counterparts in higher quality homes. Another study showed that children of low-educated African American mothers performed less well on measures of cognitive development than children with parents who are highly educated (Harris, Terrel and Allen, 1999). Children growing up in poor families experience what Parker, Greer, and Zucherman (1988) call “double jeopardy” which refers to the notion that those children are not only exposed to risks in their homes like child abuse, less supportive environments, family stress, and lack of psychosocial stimulation, but they are often at risk for later compromised behavioral and developmental outcomes as adults. “Double jeopardy” can even be more envisaged in further deprived contexts, referred to as “the poor and the poorest” (Abel-Smith & Townsend, 1965) where children live in slum areas in poor developing countries.

A slum is defined as a heavily populated urban area characterized by substandard housing and squalor (UN Habitat, 2003) where dwellings vary from modest shacks to more permanent structures and where basic services and infrastructure are limited. A slum includes not only the old houses that have been deserted by the original dwellers who moved to new areas of the cities and later those houses were rented out to lower-income groups but also includes the massive informal settlements that are rapidly becoming the most visible manifestation of urban poverty in developing world cities (UN Habitat, 2003). Overcrowding, insecure residential status, inadequate access to re

sources including clean water, sanitation, health care, electricity, and education, are some of the dire circumstances of slums. Unfortunately, children, being the most vulnerable because of their age, are deprived of basic rights of survival, development and protection and are marginalized in difficult conditions (Ambey, Gaur, Gupta, & Patel, 2013). For example, slum children, who have the chance to enroll in a school, often drop out (Chugh, 2011), experience physical abuse (Swahn, Culbreth, Staton, Self-Brown, & Kasirye, 2017), poor nutritional status (Srivaṣṭava, Mahmood, Srivaṣṭava, Shrotriya, & Kumar, 2012), and high rates of communicable diseases (D'souza, 1997) which lead to long-term negative effects on their development. However, despite living under high-risk circumstances, a significant number of children living in urban slums show resilience (Kabiru, Beguy, Ndugwa, Zulu, & Jessor, 2012).

The Role of Parenting in Resilience

Resilience is defined as “a class of phenomena characterized by good outcomes despite serious threats to adaptation or development” (Masten, 2001, P, 228). Prerequisites of resilience are the presence of adversity and of protective factors that assist a person to effectively overcome risks and achieve positive outcomes (Buckner, Mezzacappa, & Beardslee, 2003; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005). Studies show that positive attributes of social environments like connections to competent and caring adults in the family and community are usually among the main factors associated with resilience (Masten et al., 1990; Werner & Smith, 1992). In slum contexts, this has also been observed. For example, Mullin and Arce (2008) found that families who live in poverty rely not only on their immediate family for support but reach out to their extended family, their neighborhood and the community in general and by using those three social support systems as resources, those families seem to manage better. Another study in urban slums in Kenya presented case studies showing that children who had regularly received social support from their extended family did better, and emerged positively out of adversity than those who did not have such support (Ombati, & Ombati, 2016). On a more proximal scale, the quality of the parent-child relationship in general, and the parents' capacity to be sensitive and emotionally responsive specifically (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1974), is an important social factor in children's resilience when facing adverse circumstances. In their 37-year longitudinal study among children exposed to four or more major risk factors, Werner and Smith (1992) found that the children who

developed well have more likely experienced nurturing caregiving in childhood. Another study found that emotionally responsive parenting attitudes can predict children's resilient status (Wyman et al., 1999). Moreover, sensitive parenting could play a protective role against the risks associated with adverse effects of social deprivation as it was strongly related to child adjustment in school for children who live in adverse low-SES environments (Pettit, Bates, & Dodge, 1997; Herbers et al., 2011). Good quality parent-child relationship played a role in determining resilience by influencing internalizing behaviors (Fergusson & Horwood, 2003). And on an even more proximal scale, mothers were identified as the most important family member identified with resilient children and adolescents (Werner, 1990). To highlight the mother's essential role in dampening the effects of adverse circumstances, this dissertation will focus on this most proximal social source of resilience through the lens of her parenting qualities.

To have a more complete picture of the factors that play a role in children's development in general and the role of sensitive parenting in the lives of children in slum areas in particular, many questions need to be answered. How can some parents who live in those circumstances still manage to parent their children well even when challenged by many difficulties? What can be learned from those parents to help the ones who cannot manage? What kind of intervention programs can be designed for that specific group of parents to help them raise their children with fewer difficulties in those circumstances? One effective way to find answers and learn more about communities is by conducting observational methods, which are valuable methods to get a closer look on how parenting is being conducted in "off the beaten track" cultures (Mesman, 2018).

Video Observational Measures

There are not yet practical guidelines for designing parenting studies in 'new' cultures, different than the Western samples, where measures of parenting constructs have not been tested previously (Stewart, & Bond, 2002). In our study we aimed to measure parenting practices in Yemeni slums using video observational methods.

In social science observational measures are used to conduct systematic, detailed observation of behavior and talk which includes watching and recording what people do and say (Mays & Pope, 1995). Another important point about observational methods is the possibility of conducting them in natural settings, which is why this is also referred to as "naturalistic research" (Mays & Pope, 1995). However, observational

research on parenting in non-Western countries is still very rare (Mesman, & Emmen, 2013) for many reasons of which accessibility to those cultures (Mesman, 2018) and understanding what works and what does not work in terms of research measures are still challenging. It is the goal of this study to explore the possibility of using video observational measures in slums in a Muslim Arab family context where the majority of women are fully covered and therefore, filming them is a challenging task.

Study Objectives

Because this is the very first study of its kind in Yemen, the first aim is to examine if we can conduct parenting observational research in this “off the beaten track” Muslim Arabic culture context in a meaningful way, and to discuss the challenges of conducting this type of research in a different context where women are fully covered. In that context, important knowledge on whether some of the Western research measure such as the video-observational measures could be applicable in strict culture to women’s revelation of identity through filming or even audio-taping. We expect that our observations will be of value to those conducting research in any less studied culture, and may also help to offer useful guidelines for planning research in that part of the world. The second aim is to answer questions about parenting factors in that context and examine if they would yield similar results to the available Western-sample-based research. We will investigate a) Whether parenting factors like parental education and intelligence are potential unique predictors of parental sensitivity in mothers in slum areas in Yemen, and further test partner conflict as a potential mechanism within this relation; b) If maternal harsh physical parenting, maternal religiosity, and child behavioral problems are interrelated and whether maternal religiosity plays a predictive or a moderating role in that relationship.

Outline of The Dissertation

Chapter 2 gives background information on the Muslim Arab Yemeni context in which this study takes place, as well as the specific location of the current study. **Chapter 3** examines the feasibility of assessing maternal sensitivity using video within restricted veiled Muslim Arabic culture, and investigates whether maternal sensitivity scores thus obtained would be meaningfully related to other parenting dimensions and social-economic factors. **Chapter 4** tests the unique effects of education and intelligence

on maternal sensitivity and investigates if partner conflict mediates the associations between education/intelligence and sensitivity. **Chapter 5** examines the interrelation between maternal harsh physical parenting, maternal religiosity and child behavioral problems and tests whether maternal religiosity plays a predictive and/or moderator role in maternal harsh parenting and child behavioral problems. **Chapter 6** integrates the main results of the dissertation followed by a discussion, the main limitations, implications and suggestions for further research.

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