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

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Appendices

Summary in English

Mainstream research on parenting has revealed only part of the parenting picture as it mainly focuses 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 in to subgroups within countries and regions for which 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 general 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.

Study Objectives

Because this is the very first study of its kind in Yemen, the first aim was 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. The second aim was to answer questions about factors related to parenting in that context and examine if they would yield similar results to the available Western-sample-based research. We investigated a) Whether parental education and intelligence are potential unique predictors of parental sensitivity in mothers in deprived slum areas in Yemen, and further tested 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 the association between harsh physical parenting and child behavioral problems.

Yemen Background

The Republic of Yemen is located at the southwest tip of the Arabian Peninsula. It is bordered with the Red Sea in the west, the Sultanate of Oman in the east, Saudi Arabia in the north, and the Arabian Sea in the South. In January 2011, Yemen became part of what was called ‘Arab Spring’ where protesters were calling for the end of the 33-year rule by the president Ali Abdallah Saleh. However, since 2015, Yemen, which was already one of the Arab world’s poorest countries, has been shattered by a war between forces loyal to the internationally-recognized government of the president and those supporting the Houthi rebel movement. Yemen is now facing the world’s largest humanitarian crisis where 82% of its population needs humanitarian assistance and protection (United Nations office for the coordination of humanitarian Affairs, 2017).

Yemen’s social structure preserves a distinctive split between the public and private spheres. As part of their culture and religion, women in Yemen cover their bodies from head to toe – heads with a scarf and their faces with a veil called Hijab – when they are outside their homes and specifically when men are around. In a veiled culture, photographing women is a taboo and using a video camera to film women at home is a great challenge.

Informal settlements in Yemen, which are usually labeled as “ashwa’i” (El Shorbagi 2007) harbor 61% of the population of Yemen (World Bank, 2014). Multidimensional deprivation characterizes those “Ashwa’i” settlements.

Sample of The Current Study

This study’s sample consisted of 62 low-income mothers with children aged 24 – 60 months (2 – 6 years) of whom 71% lived in an urban slum and 29% in a rural slum area in Taiz governorate, in the southwest of the Republic of Yemen. . Participants were recruited via a local NGO that strives to achieve social justice through projects that can create equal employment opportunities, reduce unemployment and improve living condition for the poor. The NGO was selected based on the fact that this organization was already working in the selected slum settlements. The head of the NGO conducted data collection for this study as part of the NGO’s current work in the slums. This implied that once the NGO decided to terminate its own field work for security reasons associated with the current war in Yemen, the data collection for this study was terminated as well. After collecting data from 62 families, the NGO decided to terminate its primary

activities for security reasons, thus also ending data collection.

Maternal Sensitivity Observational Measure

In this study, the non-Western micro-context of the family was studied where mothers and their children were observed using a common Western video observational parenting measure. In that context, completely veiled mothers were filmed and observed while interacting with their children in a naturalistic setting. In Chapter 3, we found that this Western-based video observation measure of sensitivity was a feasible measure in the “off the beaten track” non-Western Arab Muslim culture although we encountered some challenges. Maternal sensitivity scores showed significant variation and were independent of some of the variables that might be influenced by the video procedure. Results revealed that 58% of the mothers showed predominantly insensitive behavior, which is in line with the literature on parenting styles in traditional countries such as Yemen that tend to be more authoritarian (Dwairy, 2006), and in line with results from low-educated/poor Western samples (Mesman, van IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2012).

Moreover, similar to the Western-based literature, maternal sensitivity was found to be positively related to maternal education, maternal social support, and negatively to partner conflict, as is shown in Chapters 3 & 4. Mothers with more education, more social support and less partner conflict were more sensitive than mothers with lower education and social support and more partner conflict. In most of the Western literature, education and intelligence are highly correlated so it is difficult to interpret the findings of the association with maternal sensitivity. In the Yemeni context, intelligent mothers are not necessarily educated, and because of a lack of access to education could even be illiterate in spite of their general intellectual ability. However, in contrast to the available literature, which is based on Western samples, we were able to study the independent roles of maternal education and maternal intelligence in predicting maternal sensitivity. Our results showed that maternal education rather than maternal intelligence predicted maternal sensitivity. Our results revealed that maternal education and maternal intelligence reflect more distinct variables, where education is the driving factor in the association with maternal sensitivity rather than intelligence. It seems that schooling of mothers helps them to be able to respond sensitively to their child, perhaps through better problem solving skills, increased knowledge that can help mothers in their parenting,

or – as we have shown in Chapter 4 – a decreased risk of partner conflict. Future studies within the Yemeni context should delve into the mechanisms of the effects of schooling to test the causal role of schooling in predicting sensitivity to gain more knowledge about those two constructs and whether those results are particular to the Yemeni context or can be generalized to other developing countries as well.

Parental Discipline and Religiosity

In Chapter 5, we specifically examined the potential role of maternal religiosity in harsh physical parenting and child behavioral problems in a deprived slum context in Yemen. Religion – which is considered as one prevalent aspect of culture (Decety, 2015) – was examined as a cultural factor that could influence the association between harsh physical parenting and child behavioral problems. The findings showed a moderation effect of maternal religiosity in the association between harsh physical parenting and child outcomes. In children whose mothers showed a higher level of religiosity, harsh punishment was more strongly related to child behavior problems in comparison to their counterparts whose mothers showed lower levels of religiosity. This finding contributes uniquely to the literature on religion in relation to parenting, which has so far mainly focused on Judeo-Christian religions (Mahoney, et al., 2008; Mahoney, 2010), by providing insight into the role of religion and how it may shape parent–child relationships in a Muslim population. This study has also contributed to the literature by highlighting the idea that the association between parenting and child development depends on contextual factors. These results may imply that culture is the key in the child–parent relationship. For future studies on Muslim culture and parenting, one can suggest interventional research on the causal role of positive aspects of the Muslim parent–child religious teachings and test how that would play a role in harsh parenting. This can be done by educating mothers on parenting practices using positive parenting skills driven from religious teachings that highlight warmth, support, and care towards children and investigating whether harsh parenting practices would decrease as a result.

Challenges

Future research could build on the results attained in this dissertation but also address some of this study’s limitations. Applying Western parenting measures like the video observational measures has never been tested previously in a veiled culture that is

strict towards women and where filming women is taboo. The environment in the slum areas in Yemen is characterized by restrictions in terms of video observation location and setting due to the veiled culture where women spend most of their time at home, and object to being photographed or filmed even when veiled. Because mothers in Yemen spend most of their daily lives in the home, the video observation took place at home. This had many implications for the observation of some mothers and their children alike. Even though the veil was supposed to make mothers feel more comfortable in front of the camera, some mothers still showed behaviors that indicated they were not comfortable being filmed. For future studies, naturalistic observation can be adopted by prolonging the filming time where mothers would get used to the camera and most possibly forget about its presence.

Another challenge of the observational measures was the number of people present while filming. People present were not only family members (i.e., other children of the mother, her husband, relatives) but also curious neighbors and acquaintances who for the first time came in close contact with a video camera. This however, created some awkwardness for some mothers as they were being observed not only by the video camera but also by other people present who were standing behind the camera. As a solution for future studies, the timing of the filming can be changed to the evenings when visitors are usually not around. Another option is to prolong the filming time in which visitors might eventually leave and more one-on-one mother-child interaction might occur.

One last challenge of the observational tasks was the nature of the tasks. Mothers were observed during two different video observational tasks. One was more or less naturalistic observation to measure maternal sensitivity and the other was the 'don't touch' task to measure maternal discipline. In the naturalistic observation task, mothers were asked to do what they would normally do with their children. However, Yemeni children usually play outside the home in the street. Mothers do not spend much time with their children at home doing activities such as playing, conversing or simply spending time together. Thus, the observation task created a challenge for some mothers as they often did not understand what type of activity they were expected to do or did not know what to do. For future studies, more pre-investigation within the slum community of what type of activities mothers do with their children would be helpful. This could be done by simply having a female researcher who would mingle with mothers before data collection, to have a closer view of what type of activities they usually do with their children.

The other observational task was the ‘don’t touch’ task, which aimed at measuring maternal discipline. Despite great efforts from the research team to select task toys that fit within the slum context, yet the toys presented a challenge for the children and mothers alike as they may have been too attractive and/or completely unfamiliar to them. This resulted in some mothers themselves exploring and playing with the toys while their children would watch them in frustration. For future studies, the ‘don’t touch’ task can be adapted to better suit the cultural context. This could be done by asking mothers to prevent their children from touching something they already have at home and the children like, but are usually not allowed to touch, like a mobile phone, tools that are used in the kitchen, or for sewing, etc.

Conclusion

This dissertation shows the applicability and some challenges of the video observation of parenting in the non-Western Arab Muslim slum context in Yemen. To our knowledge, this is the first attempt to study parenting using video observation in a veiled culture. Moreover, the studies in this dissertation have yielded some meaningful results on factors that play an important role in child development such as maternal sensitivity, education, religiosity, harsh parenting and partner conflict. Even though the results of this dissertation raise a lot more questions, its studies are first steps in the direction of getting more knowledge about parenting and child development “off the beaten track”. We hope with its valuable results, this dissertation opens the door for future research using naturalistic video observation measures which can help to increase our knowledge on parenting and child development in that context in general and to be able to contribute to parenting support and child development in Yemen in particular.