



Perspectives: The Dance of Love and Fear in the Middle East: An Invitation for Change?

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Abstract: This pandemic year will be remembered for many things. It has brought worldwide challenges and transformations. In the Middle East/North Africa region, it brought unique winds of change in the geopolitical arena, with the signing of the Abraham Accord between the governments of Israel and the United Arab Emirates. While the relationship continues to mature, there are many opportunities through which greater dialogue and understanding can evolve; more importantly, there is a vital role for regional positive psychologists to play. Across many areas of shared interest, i.e. large youth population, more traditional, religious cultures than those found in the Western countries that are typically studied in positive psychology, a regional research agenda can be formed and jointly pursued. Through such shared endeavors, greater wellbeing for individuals and societies alike can be fostered and promoted, alongside more interpersonal understanding and better working relationships. Positive psychology as a whole can also benefit from the development of such empirical knowledge as it adds to a greater global understanding of wellbeing in diverse cultural contexts.

ملخص: إن سنة الوباء هذه ستذكر لعدة أشياء، فقد جلبت العديد من التحديات والتغيرات العالمية. وجلبت هذه السنة رياح التغيير الفريدة من نوعها على الساحة الجيوسياسية في منطقتي الشرق الأوسط وأفريقيا الشمالية بتوقيع اتفاقية ابراهام بين إسرائيل ودولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة. وبينما تستمر هذه العلاقة في النضج، هناك العديد من الفرص التي يمكن من خلالها تطوير المزيد من الحوار والتفاهم، والأهم من ذلك أن هنالك دوراً بالغ الأهمية ليلعبه علماء النفس الإيجابيين في هذا الإقليم. بوجود العديد من المجالات ذات الاهتمام المشترك مثل: أعداد كبيرة من الشباب والثقافات الدينية الأكثر تقليدية و دينية من تلك الموجودة في الدول الغربية، والتي تتم دراستها عادة في علم النفس الإيجابي، من الممكن تشكيل أجنحة بحثية إقليمية ومتابعتها بشكل مشترك. من خلال مثل هذه المساعي المشتركة، يصبح تبني وتعزيز قدر أعظم من الرفاهية للأفراد والمجتمعات على حد سواء ممكناً، إلى جانب فهم الأشخاص بشكل أكبر وخلق علاقات عمل أفضل. بإمكان علم النفس الإيجابي ككل أن يستفيد أيضاً من تطوير هذه المعرفة التجريبية، كما يضيف إلى فهم عالمي أكبر للرفاهية في سياقات ثقافية متنوعة.

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“In this dance of love and fear, in which fear seems too often to get the upper hand, what would it take to move the world, even just one inch, from fear to love?”

In the last World Congress on Positive Psychology in Melbourne (2019), Steven Leventhal posed the question above, asking about love and fear during his opening keynote speech. I was reminded of it once more as I contemplated writing this piece over the past weeks as it seemed as relevant as ever in our current regional situation. While Leventhal’s work across India and Kenya with educators and schools prompted his own personal journey on this question, I wondered about its relevance for our own communities. What role can positive psychology researchers and practitioners play in helping societies and individuals move, even a small step, from fear to love, in the complex reality of our region?

In the Middle East, we often feel this dance of fear and love, not only at the personal and interpersonal levels but also at the national and international levels. This autumn summoned what seemed like a wind of change in this dance, as the governments of Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain signed peace agreements after years of hostility. Decades of antagonism between the governments coupled with complex unresolved conflicts, sometimes involving harsh existential and ethical issues that served as fertile soil for mistrust, stereotypes, ignorance and fear among people, remains omnipresent. Despite the skepticism, the conditions in which the agreement was signed and the general complex situation in my country, this agreement still brought a cautious hope for a transition towards a better future, at least in my heart.

Before continuing, I would like to share my reasons for writing this personal perspective paper. Admittedly, when the peace agreement was announced, I felt a sliver of excitement. The yearning for peace with Arab countries and the Gulf countries specifically was often discussed in my social and familial settings. It was also part of what I absorbed as a child, adolescent, and young adult; the narrative has been a long one. This hope was almost lost over the last decades, as violence and fear were maintained and sometimes grew due to actions and policies of groups and governments. The basic sense of shared humanity and common values was trampled upon more than once over the years, and although humane efforts were secretly maintained, the dream of peace appeared to grow more distant and less possible with time.

And yet, here we are...

It is this space that has opened between us that brings me here, as well as the belief that there is a distinct, real possibility of making a meaningful difference together. Thus, with curiosity and hope, I extend my hand to make this personal call for collaboration among positive psychologists in the region. How can we best make use of this opportunity that was bestowed upon us, together? What follows are a few areas of joint research that could be of value in exploring together to bridge the gaps not only in positive psychology as a field, but to move a small step toward mending the fractures among people in the region as well.



A Regional Positive Psychology: A Chance to Fill the Gaps?

Positive psychology was intended to reflect the study of human flourishing (e.g., Gable & Haidt, 2005). Over the last three decades, our knowledge about human flourishing has advanced immensely. Thanks to rigorous research, much is known about the hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing of individuals and includes the study of positive emotions, engagement, relationships, a sense of meaning, achievements (broadly construed), and the personality characteristics that encompass human potential, character strengths. Measurement tools, conditions, and interventions for fostering wellbeing and the development of human potential have been created, examined, and refined. However, several topics warrant further examination, such as cultural variations and socio-contextual factors related to individual flourishing and the conditions that promote or demote it. In fact, relatively little is known about the impact or specificities related to Middle Eastern countries and Arab populations.

My colleagues and I have conducted a few studies with Arabs in Israel, which comprise about 20% of the population. Others have also studied Arab populations in other nations across the region, but research with this population remains limited. Such inquiry is critically needed as it acknowledges our region's characteristics, which vary and differ from those of Americans and Europeans for example, that tend to dominate research findings. Expanding our research, exploring and adapting interventions to our cultural specificities, including religion, are goals that we can jointly pursue. Developing tools in Arabic, as well as a greater understanding of the processes and conditions that impact their use, are other avenues. Such research can help develop a more diverse positive psychology knowledge and practice base that is more suitable and personalized to our region and our cultures, and can provide a more nuanced understanding of the relevance of positive psychology to the Middle East with its unique geopolitical context.

Positive psychology was also aimed at exploring flourishing groups, institutions and societies (e.g., Gable & Haidt, 2005), but this arena is seldom examined despite its importance in shaping the wellbeing of individuals. Our current context may offer an opportunity to pursue such meaningful exploration and contribute to understanding and addressing the challenges our nations face. For example, across the region, we have a large proportion of youth, leading to a societal composition that has unique needs and resources in terms of economy, education and employment, unlike those found in the Western countries typically studied in positive psychology. Exploring how to best promote the development of their talents, abilities, characters, and potentials through education and towards the betterment of our societies is imperative. In fact, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child proposes that "...the education of the child shall be directed to: (a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential..." (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child; CRC, 1989/1990; Article 29; see also Perry-Hazan, 2015).

Accordingly, education is transitioning from knowledge acquisition to the development of 21st century competencies and more broadly, helping students develop as individuals. The COVID-19 pandemic has further demonstrated the importance of this transition as adjustment, creativity, interpersonal capacities, and continuous learning were essential for coping in this time. The organizational modifications and structures needed to support this change are also critical to



understand: school leaderships required transformation, moving towards more autonomy and distributed leadership to enable flexibility (e.g., Amis & Greenwood, 2020; Harris, 2020). Accordingly, how might these aims be best served by our education systems across our countries? What traditional, communal, and religious factors might be helpful in this regard? What obstacles hinder their pursuit? A regional research agenda that meets our cultural, religious, demographic and socioeconomic needs can be beneficial in responding to these challenges and helping our education systems progress.

Last, both between and within our nations, there is a wide range of socio-economic differences which influence not only happiness and the ways it is perceived, valued and pursued (Shoshana, 2019), but the availability of opportunities for personal development as well (e.g., Frantsman-Spector & Shoshana, 2020; Shoshana, 2017). Given these differences and the obstacles social gaps create for societies and individuals to flourish, it may be worth exploring the regional, national and community level factors that promote wellbeing and the development of personal potential among people from different socio-economic groups. As such, how wellbeing and the processes which lead to the fulfillment of human potential can be personalized, better promoted, and achieved for all individuals across our societies, remains of utmost importance to determine. This leads to broader questions of how societies overall can better fulfill their members' human potential in an orchestrated manner that would support public welfare and wellbeing. Such questions, and the ways in which we will manage to explore them, may have implications for several life domains in our countries.

An Open Invitation

As positive psychologists, we are interested in wellbeing, and more importantly in the flourishing of individuals, groups, and societies as a whole. My research, as well as that of others, suggests that we are interdependent, perhaps more than we would like to admit (e.g., Feeney & Collins, 2015; Lavy, 2020; Lavy et al., 2017; Lavy & Naama-Ghanayim, 2020). Thus, as individuals or societies, our ability to pursue happiness singularly, although important, is limited. If 2020 has taught us anything, it is that the wellbeing of each one of us depends on the wellbeing of all; thus, we have an interest in thinking more broadly and working together on areas of common interest. Accordingly, this article stands as an invitation for dialogue and collaboration. If we are to pursue flourishing in our respective societies as well as our region as a whole, we may benefit from helping each other in doing so. And on our way, perhaps we can move from fear to love, even if it is just an inch at a time.

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