



Views on Wellbeing Research, Policy and Practice:

An Interview with Dr. Richard J. Estes

Estes, R. J.

Citation: Estes, R. J. (2017). Views on wellbeing research, policy and practice: An interview with Dr. Richard J. Estes. *Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology*, 3(1), 12-15.

Abstract: In this volume of the Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology, we explore the views, hopes, and current research agendas of those working to advance knowledge in the field of positive psychology within the MENA region, or who research aspects of culture and religion relevant to it. We uncover their thoughts on the current status of knowledge as well as what opportunities and pitfalls exist. Here, we discuss with Dr. Richard J. Estes, his thoughts on social wellbeing in Islamic nations and how the threat of terrorism can be understood via this lens.

ملخص: في هذا المجلد من مجلة الشرق الأوسط لعلم النفس الإيجابي، نستكشف وجهات النظر والأمال، والأجندات البحثية الحالية لأولئك الذين يعملون على النهوض بالمعرفة في مجال علم النفس الإيجابي في منطقة الشرق الأوسط، أو الذين يبحثون جوانب الثقافة والدين ذات الصلة به. نكتشف أفكارهم حول الوضع الحالي للمعرفة وكذلك عن الفرص والصعوبات الموجودة. هنا، نناقش مع الدكتور ريتشارد جيه إستيس، أفكاره حول الرفاهية الاجتماعية في الدول الإسلامية وكيف يمكن فهم تهديد الإرهاب من خلال هذه العدسة.

Keywords: wellbeing; quality of life; social progress; terrorism; Arab Spring

About the Author: Dr. Richard J. Estes is Professor Emeritus of Social Policy and Practice with the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, USA. He has worked extensively in countries throughout the world and received a variety of research grants and inter-disciplinary professional awards for his pioneering work on social development and nation-building. In recent years, Professor Estes has directed much attention to patterns of social development and progress in predominately Islamic societies. With his colleagues Dr. M. Joseph Sirgy (USA) and Dr. Habib Tiliouine (Algeria), Dr. Estes has authored many articles and a book called, *The State of Islamic Social Progress: Social, Political, Economic and Ideological Challenges* (2016). He also has an interest in the origins of Jihadist terrorism and the formulation of more peaceful ways of settling legitimate grievances between Western and Islamic countries. He currently has four articles in press concerning aspects of terrorism directed at Western nations.

Address all correspondence to: Dr. Richard J. Estes, Department of Social Policy and Practice, University of Pennsylvania, 3701 Locust Walk, Caster Building, Philadelphia, USA, 19104-6214.
Email: restes@upenn.edu

MEJPP: You approach the study of wellbeing from a broad social view, focusing less on the individual and more on the complex relationships between the economic, social, and political influences that facilitate or hinder social progress. Tell us about how these issues influence a



society's quality of life and why positive psychologists should pay more attention to contextual issues in questions of wellbeing.

RJE: Yes, this is the case but, always, individuals and the satisfaction of at least their basic needs and wants is central to the research and social policy activities in which I am engaged. My view, is that most of the frustrations individuals experience are deeply enmeshed within the social, political, economic and even cultural and technological forces at work within individual societies. The quality of and access to at least basic and emergency health care, education, and employment serve as illustrations of the problems that can only be solved at the community and, more broadly, national levels. My view is that people working alone, especially individuals, no matter the merits of their grievances or levels of energy and self-sacrifice they direct to these issues, cannot solve the inherent issues of social justice associated with the denial of access to at least basic services. Effective governments, nongovernmental organizations, and even international aid bodies that work with people-in-groups as well as collectives are needed to address these fundamentally deeply rooted social issues. Without effective partnerships with these larger entities, people working alone can rarely untangle, let alone change, the complexities of the socio-political-cultural systems that affect both them and the larger community of which they are a part; even the limited political successes achieved by the Arab Spring offer clear evidence of the validity of this conclusion.

MEJPP: More recently, you have been focusing on the positive and negative patterns of development taking place in Islamic nations and how these contribute to terrorism. What patterns are becoming evident? Which patterns appear to be protective against the emergence of terrorism and which seem to allow it to grow?

RJE: Terrorism, in whatever forms it takes, in the end, will never achieve the goals of increased social equality between peoples and the societies in which their horrendous acts occur. Instead, such acts targeted at anonymous strangers only deepen feelings of animosity between terrorists and the societies that fall victims to their violence. This is true in both Islamic societies, in which most acts of terrorism occur, and in the capital cities of Western nations with large populations of Muslims. These acts of violence ultimately prove to be futile given the high levels of alienation, mutual distrust, and the withdrawal of mutual aid associated with acts of violence. This conclusion is a tragic reality but is, nonetheless, an accurate one.

One should also keep in mind that terrorism results in the denial of development assistance from the nations that are the repeated targets of terrorism. Such is the case with the United States and member states of the European Union which have sharply reduced their levels of financial and technical assistance to developing countries from which large numbers of terrorists originate. Humanitarian assistance may continue to be provided to these nations, but development assistance associated with nation-building and human capacity development typically is withdrawn. My own belief is that these are short-sighted decisions on the part of aid granting nations given that countries characterized by progressively higher levels of social and economic development spawn fewer terrorists than poorer or at least economically corrupt nations. The former group of nations become preoccupied with their own suffering and not that of the nations that inspire terrorism and do so to their own detriment. Clear and sensible policies concerning ways of reducing terrorism at home and abroad are needed to solve this impasse.



MEJPP: It seems that nations can do a lot in terms of not only protecting citizens from the emergence of terrorism, but also promoting their quality of life through the economic, social and political decisions they make. How well are your policy recommendations being heard and acted upon?

RJE: The underlying solution to terrorism, virtually everywhere in the world, is broad-based social, political, and economic development. This includes greater social and economic opportunities for women and other often neglected populations as well. Also, more secure social safety nets which focus on children, the elderly, the disabled, and the long-term unemployed are needed in every society to ensure that these often-neglected populations are provided for. We have learned this lesson repeatedly. The Arab Spring nearly solved this problem for the nations of North Africa but, political corruption combined with a lack of clarity concerning infrastructure development brought the process to a halt. In time, one can hope that the zeal that informed that Arab Spring will re-emerge and that it will be directed at the core issues that address the needs of a nation's broad-based social needs as well. Simply removing oppressive and corrupt leaders from power without the critical needed changes in development is not sufficient to achieve the sense of fulfillment and need satisfaction that people, individually and collectively, are really seeking.

MEJPP: You've also done extensive research on the views and history of wellbeing across the world, with specific reference to Islamic nations. What were some of the highlights of this exploration? What topics of inquiry remain unexplored?

RJE: Yes, this was important and, judging by the highly favorable reviews that this research has received, ground-breaking work in portraying a more positive picture of the accomplishments that we have achieved as a community of nations, e.g., slower population growth rates, increased access to clean and safe drinking water, significantly reduced rates of infant and child mortality, dramatic improvements in reducing rates of maternal mortality, greater access of children and adults to both basic and higher education, major changes in our technological infrastructure, among many, many other critical advances in human well-being.

The challenge has been to get people to appreciate that "the glass is more than half full" vs. the continuing preoccupation with the "half empty" portion of the glass. But, we are succeeding worldwide in bringing about revolutionary changes in the ways in which societies work together and, in doing so, significantly increase the social, health, technological, and other benefits that people are experiencing because of these advances in human well-being. Development in the world's 54 predominately Islamic nations are leading the way in many cases. For instance, nations in the MENA region that are leading the way toward increased social progress for much of the Islamic world include Qatar, Kuwait, and Tunisia. This progress is occurring even as many of those 54 nations remain enmeshed in societal corruption, post-colonial indifference, and the failures of past political regimes and approach to accelerating the pace of economic development. This latter group of nations could do much to improve the social status of their citizens but, instead, remain either unable or unwilling to do so because of the high levels of political and economic corruption that persists within them. This situation can be changed to the benefit of all when, and if, governments become more people- rather than power-centric.



To conclude, because of our work on the history of wellbeing with specific reference to Islamic nations, we could set out a path for regional governments who wish to become more people-centric. We propose that those intending to continue their path to societal wellbeing focus more on improving the basic social conditions in which their populations live in contrast to preserving societal values and priorities that serve the needs of only the privileged few.

Selected Publications of Interest

- Estes, R. J. (2010). The world social situation: Development challenges at the outset of a new century. *Social Indicators Research, 98*, 363-402.
- Estes, R. J. (2012). Economies in transition: Continuing challenges to quality of life. In K. Land, A. C. Michalos, & M. J. Sirgy (Eds.), *Handbook of quality of life research* (pp. 433-457). Dordrecht, NL: Springer.
- Estes, R. J. (2012). “Failed” and “Failing” states: Is quality of life possible? In K. Land, A. C. Michalos, & M. J. Sirgy (Eds.), *Handbook of quality of life research* (pp. 555-580). Dordrecht, NL: Springer.
- Estes, R. J. (2014). Development trends among the world’s socially least developed countries: Reasons for cautious optimism. In B. Spooner (Ed.), *Globalization in progress: Understanding and working with world urbanization*. Philadelphia, USA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Estes, R. J. (2015). Trends in world social development: The search for global well-being. In W. Glatzer, L. Camfield, V. Møller, & M. Rojas (Eds.), *Global handbook of quality of life: Exploration of well-being of nations and continents* (International Handbooks of Quality-of-Life). Dordrecht, NL: Springer.
- Estes, R. J., & Sirgy, M. J. (2014). Radical Islamic militancy and acts of terrorism: A quality-of-life analysis. *Social Indicators Research, 117*(2), 615-652.
- Estes, R. J., & Sirgy, M. J. (2017). The history of well-being in global perspective. In R. Estes & M. Joseph (Eds.), *The pursuit of human well-being: The untold global history* (pp. 691-741). Switzerland: Springer.
- Estes, R., & Tiliouine, H. (2014). Development trends in Islamic societies: From collective wishes to concerted actions. *Social Indicators Research, 116*, 67-114.
- Tiliouine, H., & Estes, R. J. (Eds.). (2016). *The state of social progress of Islamic societies: Social, political, economic, and ideological challenges*. Dordrecht, NL: Springer.