



## Views on Wellbeing Research, Policy and Practice:

### An Interview with Dr. Sherif Arafa

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**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 in the field. Here, we discuss with Dr. Sherif Arafa, political cartoonist and MAPP graduate, his thoughts on the role of humour in individual and social wellbeing, as well as the need for more humour research in the region.

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 شريف عرفه، رسام الكاريكاتير السياسي أفكاره حول دور الفكاهة في الرفاهية الفردية والاجتماعية، فضلاً عن الحاجة إلى مزيد من البحوث في دور الفكاهة في المنطقة.

**Keywords:** positive psychology; humour; culture; Arab; political cartoons

**About the Author:** Dr. Sherif Arafa is an editorial cartoonist, self-development author and public speaker. Dr. Arafa holds an MBA in Human Resources, an MS degree in Applied Positive Psychology and a Bachelor's degree in Oral and Dental Medicine. His books and cartoons focus on increasing wellbeing awareness, fostering open-mindedness, tolerance and opposing extremism. Arafa has published six books, with his last entitled, "Updated Human" becoming a number one bestseller according to Al-Ahram Newspaper.

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**MEJPP:** You are a recent graduate of the University of East London's Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) (2015) program, but came to the field as an unlikely candidate! You are a dentist and political cartoonist; tell us how you decided to move into positive psychology?

**SA:** It all started out of curiosity; a love of learning to develop my own self. In the late 1990s, I worked as a professional political cartoonist in Rosa-Elyoussef magazine and this was my first early exposure to journalism, which made me learn the skills to becoming an interesting writer. When I started publishing my thoughts in self-development and soft skills, I found that readers were highly engaged with my work. They attended my public speeches and made my first book a



best seller. At this time, my sources of knowledge were the classic self-help books, like Dale Carnegie (1937) and Stephen Covey (1989), the humanistic psychology literature, such as Abraham Maslow (1970) and Carl Rogers (1995), as well as the social psychology literature (e.g., Gerrig & Zimbardo, 2012). Yet, this was not enough for me. I felt obligated to widen my knowledge and study this field academically, so I decided to earn a Master's degree in Business Administration (MBA) specialized in Human Resources as this was the closest study to what I wanted to learn. Then, I decided to earn a Doctoral Degree in Business Administration until I read the book that changed my life. Dr. Martin Seligman's (2002) 'Authentic Happiness', was my first exposure to Positive Psychology, and I decided to study it.

The career shift away from dentistry was one of the best decisions I've made in life. Being an awarded political cartoonist and a best-selling positive psychology writer is very fulfilling. Studying dentistry helped me understand scientific methods and the basics of human physiology, the knowledge I still use in my books and lectures.

**MEJPP:** You contend that humour can fight extremism. How? Can you give an example?

**SA:** I think it can in many ways and I presented this idea in my last book, *Updated Human*, by proposing a developmental model to understand how people use humor. Humour comes in many packages that vary in their benefits. Some can be harmful (e.g., self-defeating humor: Stieger, Formann & Burger, 2011), while a more mature humor style relies on perspective taking and is more beneficial (Lefcourt & Shepherd, 1995). This kind of humour can be an indicator of a more mature personality as it signals the ability to understand the world from different perspectives and notice the paradoxes of life (Hy & Loevinger, 1996). The extremist's worldview lacks perspective in understanding other's intentions (Baez et al., 2017) and this becomes the active ingredient in the epistemology of extremism and lack of empathy for others. Extremists can appreciate humour targeted only to others to feel better about themselves (i.e., hostile humour) while a more mature person can appreciate humor targeted to their own life or even laugh at their faults (i.e., existential and perspective-taking humor). When people appreciate a good joke or cartoon, regardless of to whom it is targeted, this can desensitize the irritation caused by seeing the world from one rigid point of view and can act as perspective-taking training. These advanced humor styles are indicators of maturity (Hy & Loevinger, 1996) and less authoritarianism and anthropocentrism (Lefcourt, 1996; Lefcourt & Shepherd, 1995), therefore, less extremism.

A local example that comes to mind is of Bassem Yousef, the satirist called the Egyptian version of John Stewart after the Egyptian revolution. Some people loved him when he was making fun of their rivals, but turned against him when he made fun of their team. This is a clear sign of tribal thinking and the lack of perspective-taking humor. The good joke is supposed to be good regardless of its target object. Such controversial comedy shows can be shocking and annoying in conservative societies, but I believe that when people get used to this type of humour, it can teach them how to lighten up and see how relative their point of view can be when seen from a different satirical eye. This, over time, can potentially decrease political tension and promote perspective taking and tolerance. A good example of this is Lebanon, the only Arab country that has such political comedy shows nowadays and it seems to be the country with the highest degree of religious tolerance in the region (Gallup, 2011).



**MEJPP:** In positive psychology, humour has been put forward as a character strength, the thoughts and behavioral patterns enacted by individuals that lead to greater wellbeing. How do you see humour contributing to greater wellbeing in Arabic societies? It is something that can be taught or do we simply need permission to be a little lighthearted sometimes?

**SA:** The leading Arab scientist Professor Ahmed Okasha, the former president of the World Psychiatric Association, has a deep admiration of the satirical arts and editorial cartooning specifically. There are dozens of editorial cartoons hanging in his office and he once stated that, “Developing attitudes such as passion and humor give meaning to suffering” (Okasha, & Okasha, 2012). Indeed, humour is a highly adaptive defense mechanism (American Psychiatric Association, 2005) that can play a role as a stress moderator (Lefcourt et al., 1995) and it is viewed a virtue and character strength in positive psychology (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). In many countries in the region, I think humour is crucial for people's mental health! I mean, humour is a coping mechanism, laughing at one's problems allows people to feel they can overcome their tragedies. The target of sarcasm can be a bad economy, corruption, life conditions or even a suppressing political figure. Humor makes people more human because it can restore self-esteem, self-worth and help to internalize one's locus of control. It gives the person the feeling that he or she is bigger than their adversity and minimizes its psychological impact. It also promotes creative thinking that may help people solve their problems (Huang, Gino & Galinsky, 2015). In many Arab spring countries, cartooning was effectively used to break the psychological barriers against authority figures. As an Egyptian, I have always been fascinated by the early satirical cartoons made by ancient Egyptians.



*Figure 1.* A partial image of the papyrus with satirical vignettes, artist unknown, circa 1250–1150 BC, Museum No. EA10016,1, is from the collection of the Trustees of the British Museum. CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

In this partial ancient Egyptian papyrus drawing displayed in the British Museum (ca. 1250–1150 BC), we can see a flock of ducks shepherd by predator animals led by a lion. It is the



first illustration of the famous proverb "the fox guarding the henhouse". The ancient artist may be trying indirectly to oppose authority by saying that some top officials don't deserve to be in charge! I really love this painting as it is the first political cartoon in history. Beyond psychology, editorial cartooning is a crucial indicator of freedom of speech and the degree of people's empowerment in any society. In dictatorships it can be used as a coping or confronting method.

**MEJPP:** There is interesting work being done in the field of humour within positive psychology and there was a good stream of research coming from Lebanon under Dr. Shahe Kazarian's (2011) direction until he retired. He was researching the ways in which the use of humour differs in Lebanon and other areas of the Middle East compared to Western nations. Do you see differences in how humour is used? Do you see any regional differences too?

**SA:** Humor is a rich subject because it can indeed be used in many different ways. Different humour styles can cause different effects; hostile humor can be insulting, while affiliative humor can enhance relationships (Martin, Puhlik-Doris, Larsen, Gray & Weir, 2003); self-deprecating humour can be beneficial while self-defeating humor can be harmful (Hoption, Barling and Turner, 2013; Stieger et al., 2011). There are few formal studies done in the region on this and it would be interesting to see more. But certainly, that humor is used and expressed differently throughout times in history and among civilizations is an appealing research topic, not only for psychology researchers but for sociologists and anthropologists as well.

**MEJPP:** We can't pass up an opportunity to see your work! Tell us about the cartoons below and what they mean socially and culturally for readers.

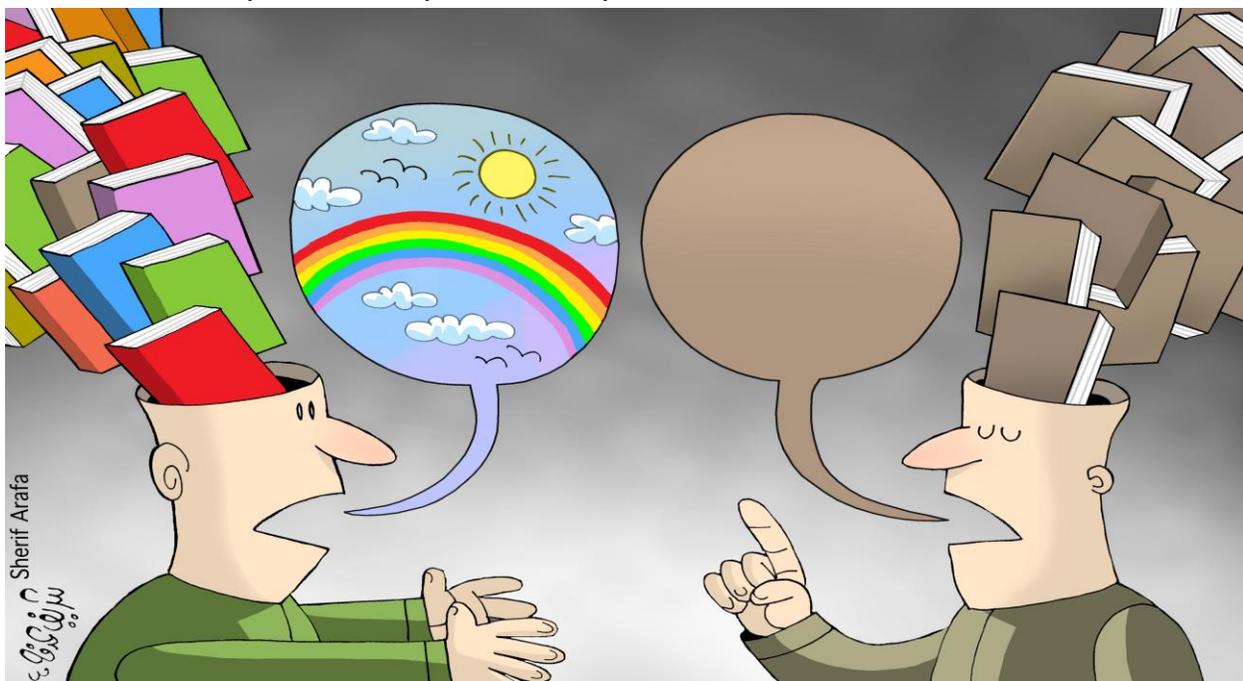


Figure 2. 'Open-mindedness' (Arafa)

**SA:** The above cartoon illustrates open-mindedness, being open to different sources of knowledge and learning to see the world from different perspectives to create a more mature and



civilized personality. Notice the body language of the extremist, his eyes are even closed; he is absolutely certain and doubtless of what he is saying, but the other guy seems to have more intellectual humility, which is a favorable mental virtue (Spiegel, 2012). In this cartoon, I'm trying to show the difference between the cultured person and the close-minded one. How beautiful, colored and diverse the first mentality is and how flat and dull the second one is.

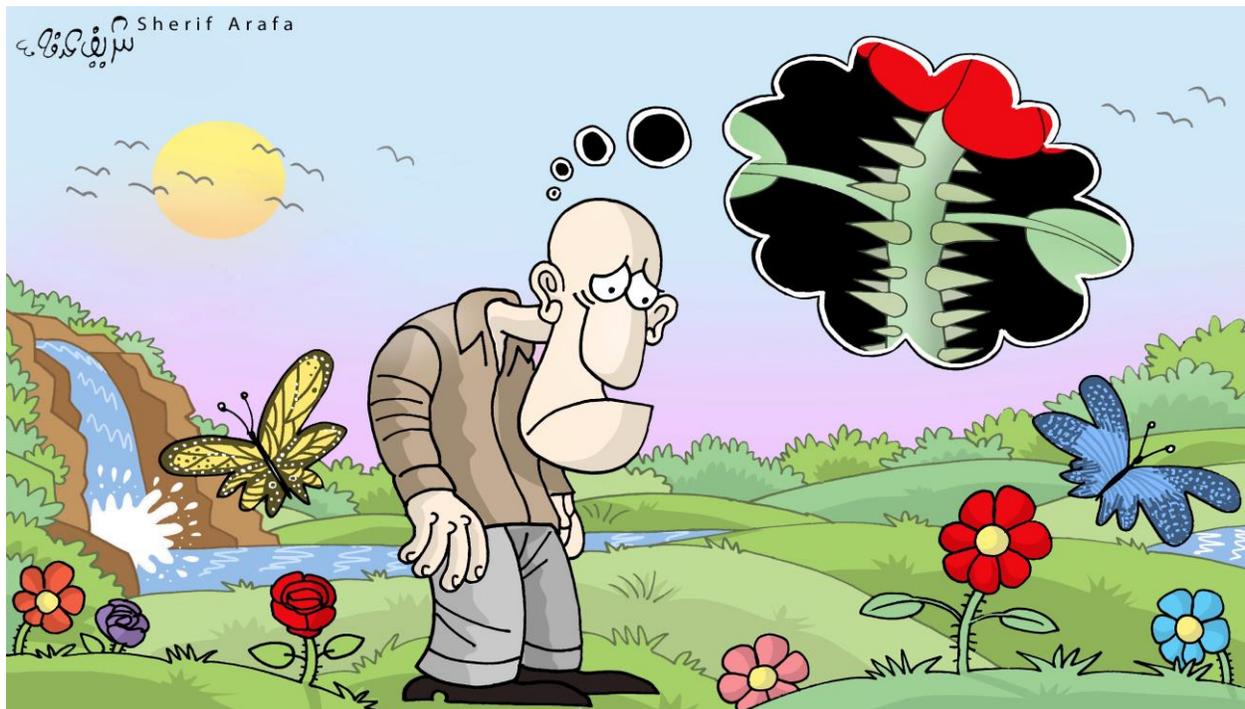


Figure 3. 'Negativity Bias' (Arafa)

SA: In Figure 3, I exemplify the “negativity bias”. When an individual is in a bad mood or affective state, the brain narrows its focus and attention to see the fine details rather than the bigger overall picture (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005). By doing so, it creates an attention bias to notice only the negative or threatening details in the environment (i.e., Lonigan & Vasey, 2009). I drew this cartoon to reflect how cognitive biases can ruin our lives and how beautiful our lives can be if we decide to savor pleasures and focus on our blessings instead.

The cartoon in Figure 4 is about economic psychology. Regardless of the saying, money doesn't buy happiness, low income for individuals and at a broader national level, does contribute to suffering and emotional pain (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010). Is money important for having a happy life? I drew this economic-psychology-cartoon in response to this question, contradicting the famous cliché that money does not buy happiness. Money can promote happiness by decreasing suffering, emotional pain and distress that can be caused by low income. It is true that most happy people are not materialistic (Van Boven, 2005), but we have to consider that unmet financial obligations can cause a stressful life. This can be the reason that increasing income is directly proportional to higher life evaluation and greater emotional wellbeing; that is until our basic are met (Kahneman & Deaton, 2010). To some extent, money can buy happiness, because poverty is

painful if you incapable of buying your kid a book for school or medicine to save her life, or even have free time and peace of mind to do something meaningful or joyful!



Figure 4. 'Money' (Arafa)

MEJPP: Being familiar with the research literature in positive psychology and humour, what outstanding research questions are not being asked that should be, especially with respect to the GCC/MENA region?

SA: Lefcourt started interesting work that needs to be re-gathered and completed. He created a cartoon scale of Larson's cartoons, which measure the degree of perspective-taking (Lefcourt et al., 1995). Unfortunately, he died before publishing these scales. I contacted many of his colleagues but couldn't gather the scale items. Also, I wonder whether we can develop effective humour interventions? Gander and colleagues (2013) developed such an intervention called three funny things, which is a variation of the three good things intervention currently used in positive psychology and it was found to be useful in promoting wellbeing. But, can we develop an intervention that promotes a mature sense of humour, like we do for gratitude or savouring? Can perspective taking be promoted? These can be interesting research questions and I hope that researchers can undertake these questions of interest, especially in our region in particular.

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