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Comparing disciplinary methods used by mothers in Palestine and Qatar

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores child disciplinary methods used by parents in Qatar and Palestine. In this study ICAST-P, an internationally recognized tool, was used with mothers reporting on one of their children up to their 12th birthday. It questions about disciplinary methods: nonviolent; physical: moderate and severe; and psychological methods that had been used in the previous year on the index child in the family. A comparative national cross-sectional household survey of mothers aged 25–50 years old was conducted in both Qatar and Palestine, both Arabic Muslim states, but with very different socio-economic and political contexts that place Qataris in a much more advantageous position. Our results show that the 1299 Palestinian mothers interviewed were younger, had more children and less education compared to the 1018 Qatari mothers. Fewer mothers from Palestine were working. The index child in Palestine tended to be younger with 60% being under 5 years, while 73.7% of Qatari children were over 5 years of age. Severe physical disciplinary methods were reported significantly more often, in Palestine, e.g. Kicking the child (P value < 0.001), using hand or pillow to prevent breathing (P value < 0.001) and hitting child with object or fist (P value < 0.001). Moderate as well as psychological disciplinary methods were also significantly higher among Palestinian mothers (P value < 0.001). Our results suggest that challenging circumstances that Palestinian mothers experience, as compared to their Qatari peers, are associated with greater prevalence of the harsher forms of discipline. Our findings have policy implications and preventative strategies for child maltreatment in both countries.

1. Introduction

The terms discipline and punishment are often used interchangeably when applied to children. As defined by several professional organizations: (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2013; Canadian Paediatric Society, 2004) child discipline is intended to teach what is acceptable and appropriate behavior, while eliminating undesirable behaviors, with the aim of promoting self-discipline, so that

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children can grow into responsible and social adults. Conversely, according to the AAP (1998), “Punishment is defined as the application of a negative stimulus to reduce or eliminate a behavior. There are two types typically used with children: punishment involving verbal reprimands and disapproval and punishment involving physical pain, as in corporal punishment.” The United Nations Children’s Fund’s (UNICEF) considers both physical punishment and psychological aggression to be violent forms of discipline (UNICEF, 2016).

Research has depicted that corporal punishment is pervasive around the world (Zolotor & Puzia, 2010). In a recent survey of parents of young children, 30% of them admitted to using spanking (Zero To Three, 2016). In Jamaica, an average of 60% of mothers believe in corporal punishment (Smith & Mosby, 2003), whereas in Latin America, 30% of parents hit their children (Lopez Stewart et al., 2000). A survey was conducted in Egypt and 37% of children reported that their parents disciplined them physically (Youssef, Attia, & Kamel, 1998b; Youssef, Attia, & Kamel, 1998a).

Factors that have been reported to be associated with greater use of physical punishment include cultural acceptance of the practice (Gershoff, 2008; Runyan et al., 2010), political stressors (Haj-Yahia & Abdo-Kaloti, 2003; Haj-Yahia & Ben-Arieh, 2000), rural setting (Alyahri & Goodman, 2008; Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002), larger family size (Alyahri & Goodman, 2008; Haj-Yahia & Abdo-Kaloti, 2003; Halileh & Saleh, 2010), family’s economic disadvantage (Alyahri & Goodman, 2008; Krug et al., 2002), parental belief in physical punishment (Alyahri & Goodman, 2008; Ateah & Durrant, 2005), parental experience of such treatment in childhood (Gershoff, 2008), younger parental age (Gershoff, 2008; Straus, 2003), lower parental education (Alyahri & Goodman, 2008; Halileh & Saleh, 2010), child’s male gender (Haj-Yahia & Ben-Arieh, 2000; Halileh & Saleh, 2010) or younger age (Youssef et al., 1998b; Youssef et al., 1998a).

This paper explores child disciplinary methods used by parents with their children under 12 years of age in Qatar and Palestine. It is part of a wider study to determine and compare the nature, extent and determinants of child discipline ranging from positive to abusive practices in the two countries. The main purpose of the study was to conduct a comparison between 2 Arab countries that share a common language and religion, but are different in their socioeconomic background and political context. Qatar is a sovereign country enjoying peace and prosperity, while Palestine is occupied and subject to frequent violence. The cultural similarity between these 2 populations living in very different contexts offers a rare opportunity to try and uncover some of the underlying factors that affect the kind of discipline used by mothers on their children.

Although both countries are Arabic-speaking and predominantly Muslim, there are significant contrasts between them. The population of Palestine is almost double that of Qatar (4.4 vs. 2.4 million), and is comprised almost entirely of Palestinians, while Qataris comprise only 12% of the country’s population, which consists mainly of expatriates (Snoj, 2014). The population of Palestine is younger with almost 3 times the percentage of youth under 15 (40% vs. 14%), with a birth rate approximately 3 times that of Qatar’s (31 vs. 11/1000 population) and a death rate 4 times higher (4 vs. 1/1000 population) (Population Reference Bureau, 2014). Qatar’s Gross National Income (GNI) per capita based on purchasing power parity (GNI PPP, which uses purchasing power parity rates (PPP) to convert GNI to international dollars) is a staggering 26 times higher than that of Palestine at US dollars (USD) 133,850 versus 5080 (Population Reference Bureau, 2015). Palestinians live under Israeli military occupation and experience a high level of exposure to chronic and protracted political violence whereas Qataris enjoy peace and stability (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2016) Both countries have ratified the Convention of the Right of the Child (CRC), Qatar in 1995 (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 1995) and Palestine in 2014 (Colville, 2014) which recognizes a child’s right to be protected from violence.

The United Nations Children’s Fund’s (UNICEF) report, Child Disciplinary Methods at Home (UNICEF, 2010), describes the findings from 35 low and middle-income countries where either the Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) or the Demographic and Health Survey had been administered. It reveals that three-quarters of children 2–14 years old had experienced violent discipline while only 20% experienced non-violent discipline. The rates of physical punishment in the Arab countries that participated, which included Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, occupied Palestine, Syria and Yemen, were between 62% and 83% with Palestine ranking the highest. Another study, supported by UNICEF and carried out by the Palestine Central Bureau of Statistics in 2014, showed high rates of violent discipline and low rates of non-violent discipline, with non-violent discipline at 6% and any physical punishment at 73%, which includes severe discipline at 23% (Palestine Central Bureau of Statistics, 2015).

A study of 97 male adolescents 15–19 years of age in the Gaza strip revealed high rates of physical and emotional maltreatment. The most frequently reported physical abuse items were: being pinched, beaten or injured by an adult leading to injury in 36.5%; while the most frequently reported emotional abuse item was being shouted at by fathers and teachers (42.3%) (Thabet et al., 2004). In the occupied Palestinian territory a study of 58 governmental, non-profit and private sector institutions providing services for abused and neglected children showed that 77% of these institutions reported that physical abuse was the most frequent type of maltreatment they managed, followed by psychological abuse at 70%. Child neglect was managed moderately frequently by 41%, while 29% said they managed it frequently or rarely. According to 73% of them they rarely took care of sexual abuse (Halileh & Abdullah, 2009). The Qatar Foundation on Child and Woman Protection (QFCWP) was reported as providing support, care and protection to 17 child victims of abuse and violence in 2008 (Child Rights International Network, 2010). A recent report states the QFCWP sheltered 1638 children from domestic violence between 2004 and 2010 (Toumi, 2011). In a survey reported in 2009 on 2787 female students at Qatar University, 57% of the sample reported having experienced violence in their childhood (Al-Ghanim, 2009). The most common (62%) type of violence reported was beating, followed by humiliation, degradation, verbal abuse and finally sexual harassment at 21%. In 2012, the first survey in the State of Qatar was accomplished in collaboration with the Supreme Council for Health and Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community, using the MICS. The result showed non-violent discipline was at 36.6% for Qataris and 41.4% for non-Qataris, and any violent discipline at 53.7% for Qatari and 47.5% for non-Qataris. Those who believe that children need to be physically punished were at 14.9% for Qataris and 13.5% for non-Qataris

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