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Crafting continuity and change in Saudi society: Joint parent-youth transition-to-adulthood projects

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ABSTRACT

Little is known about the transition to adulthood in traditional, developing countries such as Saudi Arabia. Previous research in other countries has revealed the importance of considering parents' support during the transition to adulthood. Thus, the purpose of this research was to examine how two generations negotiated the transition to adulthood. We asked the research question, What are the joint projects in which parents and youth plan and act on their plans for the youth's future? We used the action project method, an established qualitative approach, to answer these questions by observing the joint conversations of 14 parent and youth dyads. Our results provided evidence of an overarching higher level goal, or intentional framework, of crafting generational change and continuity within which participants' joint projects were embedded. Joint projects were organized into three groups: (a) negotiating educational and career futures, (b) promoting gender roles and marriage, and (c) shaping independence.

1. Introduction

Entry into adulthood is an incremental and complex process shaped by cultural, economic, and labour market conditions (Bynner, 2005; Fussell & Furstenberg, 2005, pp. 29–75; Lloyd, 2005; Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2016). A great deal of attention has been paid to how changes in the past 60 years have lengthened the process of entering into adulthood in countries characterized as post-industrial with aging populations (e.g., Furstenberg, Rumbaut, & Settersten, 2005; Fussell, 2002; Hogan & Astone, 1986). Additionally, attention has been paid to how youth and their families are making career and life choices in the face of evolving international competition, stagnating incomes, and increasingly precarious labour market conditions (Hardgrove, McDowell, & Rootham, 2015; Newman, 2012; Scabini, Marta, & Lanz, 2007; Young et al., 2008). In contrast, much less information has been generated about the way young people and their families construct the transition to adulthood in developing countries that are currently experiencing rapid population growth, accompanied by significant social change. With rapid population growth, the younger generation tends to be much larger than the generation preceding it. Such conditions mean that a younger, larger generation is constructing a life transition with a smaller older generation that has had access to very different resources than their children.

One such country is the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The country is young with half of the population under 25 years of age (Council of Economic and Development Affairs, Vision 2030), and of those, 4.7 million represent youth between the ages of 15 and 24,

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comprising 15% of the population (General Authority for Statistics, 2016). This youth bulge is accompanied by significant rapid social and economic changes (Haykel, Hegghammer, & Lacroix, 2015, pp. 1–10). We have, therefore, selected Saudi Arabia for this investigation as an example of how families engage with young people in the transition to adulthood under complex and changing social systems.

1.1. Background

Two important considerations of Saudi society are the prominent economic and religious positions of the Kingdom. The country is a founding member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), contributing to major production decisions and holding 18% of the documented petroleum reserves in the world (OPEC, 2016). Saudi Arabia's global and competitive economic position has generated contact with a wide range of other countries; relationships with developed Western societies contributed to changes in the Saudi cultural context. Cultural changes coincide with the importation of technology as well as experts, goods and other imports. The rapid development of mass media and transportation in Saudi Arabia has also provided citizens with wide access to the West. On the other hand, Saudi Arabia holds a key position in the Islamic world, since it has the custody of the two holy cities, Makkah and Medina, where Islam was born, and where many pilgrims visit each year. The degree of conservative practices or adherence to traditions varies by the country's regions. Riyadh, the capital city in which the data for this study were collected, is located in one of the more culturally and religiously conservative areas of the country.

Despite Saudi Arabia's global economic position, there is high youth unemployment as is consistent in countries with a youth bulge. Recently, Saudi Arabia's Council of Economic and Development Affairs released Vision 2030, a document that provides a plan to improve the education and work opportunities for youth with an aim of lowering the unemployment rate from 11.6% to 7%, and increasing women's participation in the workforce from 22% to 30%. The unemployment rates in some sectors are thought to be due to a mismatch between education and skill demand (Alfawaz, Hilal, & Alghannam, 2014; Bahgat, 1999) and the need for post-secondary graduates to gain additional work experience before taking on higher level positions (Achoui, 2009; Alfawaz et al., 2014). Currently, the government is working to “ensure that the outcomes of our education system are in line with market needs” (Council of Economic and Development Affairs, Vision 2030, p. 36), and is also offering scholarships to well-known universities outside of Saudi Arabia.

The Saudi Ministry of Labour has also designed programs to replace foreign workers with Saudi citizens in the private sectors, a process referred to as Saudization (Alfawaz et al., 2014). However, difficulties with youth employment emerge in the private sector because many Saudi youth are reluctant to take positions that have less job security, no annual wage increases, lower wages, and may entail more work than government jobs. Private sector jobs can also be problematic for ensuring gender segregation, which is both a religious and cultural obligation in Saudi society. Even if young women are content with workplace arrangements, they often require a male guardian, a family member, to sign approval papers before taking a job (Alfawaz et al., 2014). The approval process for young women is changing through Vision 2030 towards more personal decision-making.

1.2. Gender roles in Saudi society

Gender roles in Saudi society are created by Islamic teachings and traditions. Although Islam gives equal rights and obligations to both men and women, culture shapes gender roles and social expectations. Traditional Saudi family separation of the roles of husband and wife is accompanied by segregation that takes place in the house. However, Saudi society has witnessed rapid change since the discovery of oil and the resulting exposure to different societies and cultures, as well as the increase of education, and the use of mass media and social media. Therefore, the experience of younger generation is different than their parents in regard to gender relationships within the family and in the society as whole (Altorki, 1986; Moaddel & De Jong, 2013; Hamdan, 2005). However, gender roles vary between Saudi families, and there diversity in the practice of male guardianship over relative females, which can accrue according to socio-economic class, the level of education, and urban-rural background (Achoui, 2006; Alhareth, Alhareth, & Dighrir, 2015; Alhusein, 2014).

The purpose of our investigation was to examine how two generations of urban Saudi families, specifically youth and their mothers, jointly constructed the youths' transition to adulthood. We attended to mothers for two reasons. First, Saudi families are patriarchal with women primarily responsible for day-to-day parenting (Achoui, 2006). Secondly, the young women research assistants who conducted interviews with participants avoided interviewing fathers, and likely, the fathers would not have consented to being interviewed by the research assistants. Thus, the gender segregation that guides social interactions in Saudi culture (Alhareth et al., 2015) precluded the possibility of fathers being interviewed for this study.

1.3. Theoretical approach

To study how mothers and youth constructed the transition to adulthood, we adopted contextual action theory (Young, Valach, & Collin, 2002, pp. 206–250). From this perspective, we can consider the joint actions, that is, the conversations between mothers and youth about the future as goal-directed actions over time. Action is seen as embedded in the social context. Thus, this perspective has merit in studying particular cultures because action places the person within their culture. This is the world that makes sense to the person, in which they can and do act (Young, Marshall, & Valach, 2007).

Previous research has shown that the transition to adulthood can be examined as goal-directed action (e.g., Young, Marshall, Domene, et al., 2007, 2008, 2015). More specifically, the joint actions of parents and youth as they jointly discuss the young person's

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