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Asma Al-Attayah & Ramzi Nasser

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Gender and age differences in life satisfaction within a sex-segregated society: sampling youth in Qatar

Asma Al-Attayah^{a1} and Ramzi Nasser^{b*}

^a*Department of Psychological Sciences, Qatar University, POBOX 2713, Doha, Qatar;*

^b*Department of Educational Sciences, Qatar University, POBOX 2713, Doha, Qatar*

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Recent decades have witnessed a surge of interest in the measures of subjective well-being, including mental and physical health, happiness and life satisfaction. The purpose of this study was to determine if there are differences between Qatari males and females with respect to their satisfaction with life and if there are relevant age differences among youth with regards to their level of satisfaction. A convenience sampling technique was used, and of 319 Qataris from Qatar University and other governmental schools who participated in the study, 151 were male and 168 were female. The participants were divided into early adolescent and late adolescent groups. There were attrition in the data as many youth did not report their age. In small group sessions or in whole school classes, participants were administered and responded anonymously to the life satisfaction scale, which was designed by Ed Diener and his colleagues in 1985 and was translated to Arabic by Taisir Abdallah in 1998. Results revealed a significant difference between males and females, but no significant differences among age groups. This is the first study to be conducted in Qatar to address life satisfaction among adolescents. Further studies are encouraged to address socio-economic and health factors with respect to satisfaction.

Keywords: life satisfaction; sex-segregated; age; State of Qatar

Introduction

Over the past two decades, there has been a surge of research interest in the measures of subjective well-being, including mental and physical health, happiness and life satisfaction (Levin & Chatters, 1998). While most of this published work has been conducted in the Western context; more recently, studies from the Arab world have begun to slip into mainstream publishing venues. For example, some of the new studies in the field have used Arabic-speaking participants recruited from Kuwait and have recently been published in Western Journals, revealing some of the findings of life satisfaction among youth (Abdel-Khalek, 2008, 2012; Abdel-Khalek & Lester, 2008).

Questions related to happiness and life satisfaction have been studied by ancient philosophers dating as far back as Aristotle in 350 BC. Contemporary life satisfaction, however, is rooted in eighteenth century enlightenment thinking, which harvested philosophical debates regarding the purpose and the existence of life. A contemporary meaning of life satisfaction is conceptualised as a cognitive, global appraisal that people make when considering their level of contentment with their life as a whole (Suldo & Huebner, 2006, p. 180). A more common philosophical perspective from realism suggests that society shall provide the greatest happiness to its people and that the best society is

*Corresponding author. Email: ramzin@qu.edu.qa

one that provides the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people (Veenhoven, 1984). As society is seen to be the provider, the environment for well-being; individuals generally judge whether they are happy in that environment. In essence, life satisfaction is a subjective assessment of the quality of one's life (Diener, 1994; Sousa & Lyubomirsky, 2000). It is also considered to be an evaluation of one's daily experiences because everyday problems and stressors contribute to how an individual rates his or her satisfaction with life (McKnight, Huebner, & Suldo, 2002).

The construct of global life satisfaction reflects dispositional tendencies of individual norms, values and self-beliefs. When people are asked to evaluate specific or more concrete domains, individuals are often more constrained by how they feel and think about the actual domains (giving an explanation of what others think). Thus, positive life satisfaction depends on how 'good' the individual perceives the various life domains to be and the extent to which the individual judges global issues as being more positively specific and personal.

Commonly, research has addressed the relationship between personal characteristics and life satisfaction. For instance, sociologists have focused on the relationship between life satisfaction and those factors related to social conditions, including the individual's living conditions, social status, social circumstances and working conditions (Martikainen, 2009). Research among children and adolescents has suggested that perceived quality of life has a wide ranging homological extension that includes variables related to personality, environment and activity. Positive relationships between a sense of control and explicit 'life satisfaction' or self-assessed 'quality of life' are further implied, while satisfaction with one's life implies contentment with or acceptance of one's life circumstances, the fulfillment of individual needs or having a sense of control, which contribute to people being more satisfied with their lives (Duncan-Myers & Huebner, 2000; Lai, Wing-Leung, & McDonald, 1995).

International studies

A plethora of international studies have studied life satisfaction. However, few studies have evaluated the level of life satisfaction among children and adolescents (Huebner, Gilman, & Suldo, 2006). Some of these studies suggest that adolescents with high levels of life satisfaction demonstrate significant but less external behaviours, such as blaming others or attributing adverse life events to external factors, relative to students who are dissatisfied with their lives (Suldo & Huebner, 2004). These results have been replicated in various cultural contexts among American (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), Brazilian (Gouveia, Milfont, da Fonseca, & Coelho, 2009), Portuguese (Neto & Barros, 2007) Canadian (Greenspoon & Saklofske, 2001), Spanish (Casas, Figuer, González, Malo, & Subarroca, 2007), Russian (Balatsky & Diener, 1993) and Chinese adolescents who demonstrate high levels of life satisfaction (Shao & Diener, 1992).

International studies couched within individualistic and collectivistic cultural frameworks have compared Korean and American adolescents. Korean adolescents reported lower levels of global life satisfaction, as well as lower levels of satisfaction with family, friends, school, self and living environment, compared with American adolescents. Although satisfaction with family, self and living environment contributed significantly to the global life satisfaction of adolescents in both cultures, satisfaction with school contributed significantly to the global life satisfaction only for Korean adolescents. Furthermore, the level of satisfaction with self was a stronger correlate of global life satisfaction for American adolescents than it was for Koreans (Park & Huebner, 2005).

A similar study compared Irish and American adolescents with two recognised collectivist Chinese and South Korean samples. The mean scores revealed positive ratings among adolescents from all four nations across all domains with the exceptions of satisfaction with school experiences (Ireland, South Korean, USA), living environments (China, South Korea), self (South Korea) and general life satisfaction (South Korea) (Huebner, Drane, & Valois, 2000). In addition, a cross-cultural comparison of American and Chinese samples, which employed a path analysis model and item response theory, revealed that when weighting unbiased items higher than biased items (items that were directional viz. items that suggested respondent had experienced an unsatisfactory life), the Chinese respondents' latent mean life satisfaction scores were substantially lower than the scores of the American student sample (Shigehiro, 2006). Particularly, these findings suggest that students situated in environments where there are greater opportunities for individual control may experience greater life satisfaction.

Impact of gender and age on life satisfaction

Gender-related differences have been found in a number of international studies. Diener (1984), for example, provided findings from a review of 13 studies that compared men and women on the level of subjective well-being and found that there was a mean difference between genders. Similarly, differences between males and females regarding their satisfaction with life have also been reported (Dost, 2007); however, a significant number of studies have reported higher male satisfaction (see Goldbeck, Schmitz, Besier, Herschbach, & Henrich, 2007). Nonetheless, such studies have been largely inconsistent because of the different instruments that are used in the field and the different age groups that are represented in the samplings.

More recently, through model confirmation (Martin, Fabes, Hanish, Leonard, & Dinella, 2011), it was suggested that 'the more children believe they are similar to their own gender group, the more likely will they prefer same-gender partners because of the increased likelihood of enjoyment, satisfaction and mutuality that they believe will result from these interactions' (p. 422). Additionally, studies have shown that girls are more satisfied with school than are boys (Okun, Braver, & Weir, 1990). While other studies have reported similar results (e.g., Epstein, 1981), in general, there is a lack of substantive and conclusive evidence on this matter.

Further, gender differences in peer relations have frequently been the object of research. From the reported results, it appears that boys report peer victimisation more frequently than girls (e.g., Smith & Shu, 2000; Whitney & Smith, 1993). Boys are more often the victim as well as the perpetrator of victimisation. In addition, some evidence suggests that boys are more likely to stress their independence from others, whereas girls are more likely to emphasise their relatedness with others (see Cross & Madson, 1997). Hence, boys may be less satisfied with school than girls because boys develop more deleterious relationships with classmates and need to express and exalt their independence.

Sex segregated society

According to Eliot (2011), various advocacy/participatory research studies suggest that the biological differences between genders due to hormonal effects are solid reasons for promoting sex-segregated classrooms. Popular among educators who advocate segregated schools is the premise that such hormonal effects could drastically impact cognition. Hyde

(2005), in her meta-analytic review of 124 studies that addressed differences between males and females, found smaller differences. While many of these studies were conducted in coeducational settings (schools), few studies have addressed the difference between genders in segregated environments, likely because few societies in the world have highly segregated societal structures where most of the public institutions, especially schools, are segregated according to gender.

Qatar, located in the Middle East, shares its societal structures with other Gulf nations, and there is evidence of sex segregation in most of its public institutions. Accordingly, such a setting or environment is more conducive to female sense of belongingness and control of their immediate surrounding regarding whether the implementation of sex segregation provides a sense of well-being. Some sociologists and educators may argue that because of this sex segregation, women are limited in their opportunities to fully participate because Middle Eastern societies are patriarchal. As positive life satisfaction is significantly correlated to personal control over one's daily life (Huebner, Suldo, Smith, & McKnight, 2004), females in Qatar may be hindered in their ability to take control of life events, which may, in turn, reflect a lower level of life satisfaction. On the other hand, sex segregation may overcome some of the limitations of control, as females in sex-segregated societies are generally sheltered within a gender-defined social unit. Accordingly, females may see themselves as being empowered by the collective gender-defined role, which mediates control, thus leading to the feelings of considerable satisfaction with life. Therefore, one major hypothesis in this study is that female youth in Qatar are more likely to be satisfied with life than male youth in Qatar.

Studies have also found a strong relationship between boys' and girls' level of health-related life satisfaction and age (Goldbeck, Schmitz, Besier, Herschbach, & Henrich, 2007). Additionally, youths with higher academic standing were found to exhibit a more positive level and higher global satisfaction (Salmela-Aro & Tynkkynen, 2010). Longitudinal studies have also addressed life satisfaction. For instance, Casas et al. (2007) found that adolescents between the ages of 12 and 16 maintain a consistent overall level of satisfaction with life. Although this level of satisfaction decreased slightly, scores did not vary significantly from one year to another. That is, life satisfaction in the first year did not add due to the development to the prediction of the second year (see Antaramian & Huebner, 2009; Martin, Scott, & Valois, 2008). Moreover, Lewis, Huerber, Malone, and Valois (2011) found a strong positive relation over time between cognitive engagement and life satisfaction, but a non-significant relation between emotional and behavioural student engagement and life satisfaction. While there are various opposing differences in gender, findings regarding age differences in relation to life satisfaction have, in general, been inconclusive. Accordingly, we addressed these two specific independent variables, gender and age in the context of Qatar.

Cultural context: collectivist society

As mentioned above, Qatar, similar to other Gulf Arab nations, is sex-segregated. However, it is also considered a collectivist society whereby individuals operate collectively and perceive their own well-being to be a part of the well-being of the community as a whole. Within that context, the meaning of life satisfaction may differ significantly (Diener, Lucas, & Oishi, 2002). The theory of life satisfaction as embedded in the realist philosophy suggests that the society can shape individual and group behaviours. In a collectivist society, the socio-psychological orientation of the individuals is more inclined to align with group goals at the expense of individual interests for the well-being

of a group. In contrast, in individualistic societies, personal goals are emphasised over the group's goals (Triandis, 1989). Thus, different cultural conditions may lead to different attributions for one's evaluation of life satisfaction. The sociocultural factors and sex segregation in Qatar provide the opportunity to suggest that females in a society such as that of Qatar are rooted in the social fabric that supports the natural domain in which they operate.

This study is unique because it is grounded in a context where life satisfaction operates in a collectivist sex-segregated society and no study thus far has emerged that addresses life satisfaction among youth in sex-segregated societies. The main hypothesis as mentioned in this study suggests that females demonstrate higher levels of satisfaction with life than do their male counterparts. While the research literature has been inconsistent in terms of gender and age differences, we contend that Qatari adolescents in the later stage are more satisfied with life than younger adolescents because they are more accepting of the conditions within their own domain.

The main objectives of this study are as follows:

- (a) to determine if there are differences between Qatari male and female students with regard to life satisfaction, and
- (b) to determine if there are differences among youth with respect to levels of satisfaction with life according to age.

Methods

Participants

A sample of 319 Qataris, 151 males and 168 females from Qatar University as well as other governmental schools, participated in the study. The sample was divided as follows: early adolescence ($n = 197$) and late adolescence ($n = 68$). Their mean age was 13.5 years ($SD = 5.86$). A convenience sample was used to identify Qatari adolescents who participated in the study. The participants responded anonymously to a questionnaire administered in small group sessions in schools either outside class time in a small groups or in whole school classes at the various school sites.

The scale

The 5-item life satisfaction scale (SWLS) was designed by Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985) to measure global life satisfaction. The SWLS has been administered to many different groups and has been found to have a high internal consistency and reliability across gender, ethnicity and age. This measure also exhibits high convergent validity. For example, it correlates well with clinical ratings of satisfaction, a memory measure of satisfaction, informant reports of satisfaction and scales assessing self-esteem (Abdel-Khalek's, 2012). The response format of the SWLS consists of five statements measured using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1 = strongly disagree, 4 = neither agree nor disagree, 7 = strongly agree).

The Arabic version of the SWLS was used in this study, the scale was translated by Abdallah (1998), who first used the Arabic version of the instrument. Abdel-Khalek (2012) used some of the items from the SWLS and reported that the internal consistency coefficient for the Arabic version of this scale was 0.79 for the Palestinian sample, with a test–retest score of 0.83. Abdel-Khalek's (2012) test–retest items yielded a score of 0.85 for happiness and a score of 0.81 for satisfaction. The language of the instrument was in

simple Arabic and age appropriate. Abdel-Khalek (2012) has reported its Arabic use among adolescents and Abdallah (1998) used the Arabic SWLS among the adolescents in Palestine. No difficulties in the content and administration of the SWLS reported by Abdallah (1998) and Abdel-Khalek (2012).

Analysis

The SWLS was rated using a Likert-scale. These variables were then factor-analysed without the gender variable. Using principle component analysis with unities on the diagonal and an eigen cut-off value of 1.0, a varimax rotation was used to validate the factors, the preconceptualised factor structure of the questionnaire. We ran a mean difference test for each item to determine whether any differences appeared between the mean ratings and the median score of 4 and we performed a 2×2 ANOVA to determine the main and interaction effects of gender and age on life satisfaction. We classified two age groups (early adolescents and late adolescents). The classification was based on development theories in which 12–17 year adolescents build a sense of confidence and independence. Once they have a sense of productivity they adopt a positive role that crystallises into a clear sense of identity and self-awareness in relation to others. The second age group 18–25 years classified older adolescents; in face of failure or crisis and specifically in building relation and intimacy and mixing with people, leads to isolation and limited social relationships and possible life dissatisfaction (Alln, 2006; Evans, 1976).

Results

The reliability coefficient (Cronbach's α) for the Qatari sample was 0.85, thus suggesting a favourable internal consistency coefficient. We also performed a statistical t -test and compared the mean score for each item with the ideal mean score (the median score of 4, which is the mid-point of the rating scale between 1 and 7). All of the item ratings were significantly higher than the mid-point at $p < 0.001$. However, Qatari youth rated the last item, 'If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing', below the mid-point, but the difference was not significant (Table 1).

The second analysis included a factor analysis, which resulted in a single factor model. These results reflect the findings of Abdallah (1998) and Diener, Emmons, Larsen, and Griffin (1985); their studies also reported a single factor model. Furthermore, the five items explained 66.58% of the variance. Table 2 reports the unrotated component loadings.

Table 3 reports the descriptive statistics of life satisfaction. As shown, females obtained a higher mean score than did their male counterparts. With respect to age group, the early adolescents age group obtained higher mean scores than did their counterparts in the lower age group.

Table 1. Mean scores and t -test mean difference from the midpoint for each item of SWLS.

Items	Mean	SD	t
In most ways my life is close to my ideal	4.70	1.920	6.40*
The conditions of my life are excellent	5.35	1.857	12.78*
I am satisfied with my life	5.33	1.857	12.62*
So far I have gotten the important things I want in life	4.93	1.719	9.53*
If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing	3.90	2.033	-0.86

Note: * $p < 0.05$.

Table 2. Component analysis.

	Communalities	Factor loading
In most ways my life is close to my ideal	0.547	0.740
The conditions of my life are excellent	0.749	0.866
I am satisfied with my life	0.831	0.912
So far I have gotten the important things I want in life	0.790	0.889
If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing	0.411	0.641

Prior to performing the ANOVA, we conducted two statistical tests to determine whether the dependent variable (life satisfaction) had a random sequence. We conducted the Kolmogorov–Smirnov test to determine whether the dependent variable was normal and a one-sample run test to determine whether the average grades had a random pattern. Given the Kolmogorov–Smirnov results of $Z = 1.942$, $p < 0.001$, we rejected the normal null hypothesis that the variable was normally distributed. The test run also showed a test statistic = 4.1, $p = 0.05$, which indicates non-random runs of the variable. These results suggested that further analysis would require robust statistics and analysis to suggest plausible interpretations. Then, we ran the Brown–Forsythe test (as opposed to Levene’s test) because the non-normality of the distribution of the test was non-significant $F(1, 311) = 1.33$, $p = 0.25$, thus suggesting that the variances were equal across gender groups, which provided a level of consistency in the data.

Our main factorial 2×2 analysis consisted of variance of age group (two levels) by gender (two levels) with respect to life satisfaction. A main significant effect was found with females, who demonstrated greater life satisfaction than males $F(1, 261) = 6.77$, $p = 0.01$. A no significant main effect was found for age. The means are reported in Table 3, and the analysis of variance results is provided in Table 4.

The main effect of gender was significant at less than the 0.05 level. No significant effect was found for age and no interaction effects were found. Female youth were more satisfied than male youth in the sex-segregated society of Qatar.

Discussion

Life satisfaction, an important and essential element that contributes to one’s overall sense of well-being, is expressed as the individual’s emotional reaction and attitude towards life (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999; Hong & Giannakopoulos, 1994; Özdevecio, 2003; Shin & Johnson, 1978). Life satisfaction reflects the well-being of the individual with respect to happiness and morale (Vara, 1999).

Table 3. Means and standard deviations for males and females.

Sex	Age	Mean	SD	<i>N</i>
Male	Early adolescents	4.67	1.58	97
	Later adolescents	4.54	1.56	31
	Total	4.64	1.57	128
Female	Early adolescents	5.13	1.37	100
	Later adolescents	5.16	1.35	37
	Total	5.14	1.36	137
Total	Early adolescents	4.90	1.49	197
	Later adolescents	4.88	1.47	68
	Total	4.90	1.48	265

Table 4. ANOVA of gender and age between-subjects effects.

Source	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Age	1	0.13	0.061	0.805
Sex	1	14.64	6.773	0.010
Sex × age	1	0.380	0.176	0.675
Error	261	2.162		
Total	265			

Gender difference findings have been reported in a number of studies (Diener, 1984; Dost, 2007). According to Kapteyn, Smith, and Soest (2011), life satisfaction studies have revealed inconsistent findings and as a result, a large body of research has been inconclusive. Such inconsistencies suggest that gender differences may occur as a result of sampling errors. Accordingly, it is important to resolve these conflicting results using different samples from various educational levels. The findings also support the established hypothesis that females in Qatar may demonstrate higher levels of satisfaction because they see themselves as being appropriately situated and as complying with socially appropriate roles. Specifically, in a sex-segregated society, gender may play differentiated roles and may reinforce gender-based social or task-specific activities.

The findings also had several implications regarding age. Previous studies conducted regarding life satisfaction among adolescents have shown that most adolescents view their overall lives positively (Gilman & Huebner, 2006). In one study conducted in the US, 73% of the adolescents surveyed rated their level of global life satisfaction positively, while 11% viewed their level of global satisfaction negatively (Huebner, Drane, & Valois, 2006). We found similar results among Qatari youth, who also demonstrated high levels of global satisfaction. However, some studies that have examined changes in life satisfaction during adolescence have revealed mixed results. For example, while some have found that life satisfaction tends to decrease (Goldbeck et al., 2007), others have found that it increases during adolescence. It is also worth noting that adolescence, defined as the period of transition between childhood and adulthood, involves biological, cognitive and socio-emotional changes. Thus, a key responsibility during the adolescent period is to prepare for adulthood. Indeed, the future of any culture hinges on the effectiveness of this preparation (Larson, Wilson, Brown, Fursternberg, & Verma, 2002). Accordingly, the overall positive rating among all age groups of Qataris can be explained by the wealth, benefits and affluence in Qatar, all of which have provided a sense of security and stability to many Qataris. However, among older female adolescent category indicated greater satisfaction than those categorised as lower adolescents, potentially because later adolescent, specially among females, have a largely 'pampered' living and remain in family homes in tightly knitted social fabric and feel protected and thus engender higher life satisfaction than males. Qatari male adolescents are generally given privileges and are increasingly insubordinate, they could start to question who they are and what roles they have in their family and society, inhibiting life fulfilling actions leading to lower satisfaction. During late adolescence, these individuals also determine their academic tracks, and visions of their careers begin to take shape. Late adolescents has become more balanced, more adapted, and, hence, more satisfied with life compared with younger adolescents. However, the highest ratings regarding satisfaction with life were reported by the younger adolescents. This result may be because these youth still receive strong parental support, which was the strongest predictor of life satisfaction for adolescents in a previous study, in which parental support of children's autonomy and parental supervision

of children were significantly related to higher levels of life satisfaction regarding adolescent well-being (Argyle, 1987; Diener, 1984). To our knowledge, none of the above mentioned studies have focused on the development of satisfaction with life across different age groups, that is, early and late adolescence, which was one of the main aims of this study. While no significant difference appeared between early and late adolescence, adolescence is still a period of development for youth during which changes regarding life satisfaction may occur.

Limitations, conclusions and recommendations

The limitation in this study suggests that the sample is small, any further study would suggest a large and random sample that we could generalise and possibly reinforce the current findings and insure normality to the data. Further, while there was no direct measure that addresses the development levels of youth. The bifurcations was established based on the ages of the youth, assuming that early adolescents and late adolescents would exhibit theoretically established behaviours and emotions corresponding to the age groups. A measure that would avail early and late adolescent behaviours and emotions would greatly benefit the research in providing a valid measure of the adolescent stages.

It is also suggested that future analyses would further explore the levels of life satisfaction among youth in Qatar by introducing socio-economic variables, individual identity and nationality. While this study is the first in Qatar to address life satisfaction, other studies in the Gulf region (for example, Kuwait) have been conducted, such as the study by Abdel-Khalek (2012). Accordingly, it would be appropriate to conduct cross-national studies that address life satisfaction among residents of other Gulf nations. As life satisfaction is an important measure of a person's health and well-being, greater impetus must be given to social factors and to understanding the individual's well-being. Statistics clearly indicate that Qatar has quickly developed into a modern and affluent nation. In fact, based on the gross domestic product measure, Qatar has become one of the wealthiest nations in the world (CIA, 2012), providing both benefits and leisure activities to its national constituents. Arguably, for many, increased leisure has led to the demise of the individual's well-being with respect to daily inactivity, whether physical or mental, and to an increased percentage of the population reporting hypertension, diabetes mellitus, hypercholesterolaemia and/or smoking-related issues (Khan, 2007). Immediately, the question arises: Are Qataris and the people of the Gulf nations satisfied with their quality of life? These and other factors must be explored when addressing the life satisfaction among youth and adults in Qatar because studies on well-being, self-esteem and the perception of control have revealed consistently that these factors are correlated with life satisfaction in childhood (Huebner, 1991; Smith, Weigert, & Thomas, 1979). Accordingly, exploration into these factors provides a fuller and more comprehensive picture of the well-being of society. As this is the first study to be conducted in Qatar on this topic, it provides the groundwork for future studies.

Note

1. AAlattayah@qu.edu.qa

Notes on contributors

Asma Al-Attayah is head of the Psychological Sciences Department and associate professor of special education at Qatar University. Dr Al-Attayah is a board member on various non-for-profit

organisations. She has received numerous awards including the 2009 Excellency and Quality Reward, College of Education, College of Education Qatar University, the Egyptian Society for the Rehabilitation of the Handicapped Award, and in 2000 The International Day for voluntarily Work Award for her effort in Special Education and individuals with disability in Qatar.

Ramzi Nasser is an associate professor of education at the Qatar University. He has held various administrative, academic and research positions at Beirut University College (Lebanese American University), United Arab Emirates University, Emirates Center for Strategic Studies, University of Balamand (Lebanon), Bishops University (Canada) and at Notre Dame University (Lebanon). He earned his Doctorate of Education from the University of Massachusetts at Lowell. His research interest and work fall in the area of geriatric assessment, institutional research and psycho-social attribution and psycho-social motivation.

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