

# **AN EDUCATIONAL VIEW OF CHANGE IN FAMILY LIFE \* AND DEVELOPMENT OF CHILDREN IN THE ARAB STATES**

**by  
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1. Perhaps for most children, the family is the primary context in which their emotional, social and cognitive development takes place. But in order to give depth and substance to such an assumption one should reflect on factors affecting development of children in addition to family life. Our position is that such factors are various, dynamic and changing. Health, schooling, neighbourhood kinship, relatives, religion as reflected in activities taking place in and outside houses of worship, radio, television and press, societal conditions and family life, are all factors affecting development of children. These factors are interacting, dynamic and relative. The importance of any one of these factors is relative to the role it plays in the life of a certain child or group of children. A subtle but effective role may enhance the prominence and importance of a given factor. Factors playing minor roles will be off-set by the compensatory inflation of other factors.

For a particular child, a family that is understanding and loving and devotes enough time to him, would have an impact more effective and lasting than a schooling with limited contact time, poor facilities and disinterested teachers. Conversely, dynamic, loving, qualified teachers in a school with an innovative administration, pleasant atmosphere and decent facilities may play a greater role in the life of a child and in affecting his development, if a vacuum exists at home where the child is neglected because of a father absorbed in his business and a mother occupied with her career. By analogy one can go on citing other cases such as wholesome mass media programmes being available for children who are otherwise culturally deprived or physically restricted, or a crippled culture

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versus a warm, rich family life, etc. Of course, the ideal situation is when all factors are suitably balanced, all active and proper, and interacting in such a way that they will reinforce each other and enhance the output for the child.

But in other than such an ideal situation we cannot claim that a single factor or group of factors are more or less important than others in an absolute sense.

In an illiterate society, if the average family is not sufficiently enlightened, the role of school education should be postulated with such a consideration in mind, and the role of family should be expected to be limited in effect and importance. On the other hand in a relatively educated society, we would expect the family to play a greater role and may be co-ordinate the roles of other factors in the direction of the positive constructive development of children in different areas.

2. Since in this symposium we are addressing ourselves particularly to the changing family in a changing world, it is incumbent upon us to discuss this dynamic process and to emphasize not only that the world is changing but also that the speed and direction of that change are in a state of flux as a result of certain forms of interaction of factors and inputs which are shaping the body of interacting elements that we call "the world."

Centuries ago, before the years of the dominance of the western way of life, diversity of cultures was the rule, with some historical exceptions. Due to physical distances and the lack of fast transportation and communication systems it was possible that, because conflicting cultures could keep apart from each other, the world could tolerate different ways of life as long as interaction among these cultures was kept to a minimum.

Thus cultures, even subcultures, were able to develop on their own and at their own pace with the minimum outside interference and impact. These cultures had stability, rules, regulations, laws and codes. The family had its structure, tasks and role. Religion existed as an institution as well as a way of life. There was also the school, for those privileged with regular schooling, and the book for the literate children and adults. Of course mass media were very limited. The world was changing so slowly that, for centuries, most people lived without the realization that significant changes were taking place. Children were developing and socializing within the family as the primary context in which such development took place.

The later years of this century are associated with the predominance of the western way of life. Modern western philosophies produced by social change and interacting with it produced, and were identified with, industrialization and further interacted with that phenomenon to synthesize newer and faster economic and social change.

3. Under such conditions, forces such as stronger economic power and stronger

culture, were ready to express themselves including military might. Conflict became inevitable between developed western culture and the faster developing western societies on the one hand and less developed and slower developing societies on the other.

Part of the outcome of that conflict is what we call westernization of non-western people. But, when westernization — which is just a model of development — is tried out of context, it turns into something else, less meaningful and never universal. It produces just a few pockets of westernized communities and settlements in the midst of traditional cultures. Those cultures, when aware of what was going on, were limited to observing the overt signals without the abilities or means to acquire anything but a superficial westernization.

In the case of India, Iran, The Philippines, and the Arab world, instances in modern history show, in addition to the failure of universal development, the kind of impact that inhibits the development of the more original culture.

4. The Arab states occupy a vast geographical area extending from Morocco in the west on the Atlantic, to Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States in the east, and to the Sudan and Somalia in the far south, covering an area of about three billion acres and with a population of around two hundred million, the majority of whom are Moslems. All of them write and speak the same language and share almost the same history up to modern times.

However, these countries represent a great variety of climatic and geographic conditions, including deserts and forests, river-irrigated agricultural land, and semi-arid and arid lands. They vary in their development, industrialization and production and in their patterns of culture and exposure to westernization, as well as distribution of wealth. In some places they represent very low per capita income, while in oil producing countries the per capita income is among the highest in the world. Illiteracy rates range between 30% and 90%. Population density ranges from 2.5 to 400 per square kilometre.

5. Basically, customs and institutions are quite similar, as is the development of family structure and its functions and tasks performed. There are however expected variations due to degree of exposure to westernization. Such exposure started in Egypt as early as 1798 when Napoleon first landed in Alexandria. A few years later a modern state was tried and education along western lines — albeit for a limited portion of the population — took place side by side with the traditional education system. In other places such cultural contacts started in a significant way at different dates. Some started as late as twenty years ago in the sixties of this century.

Modern conditions, with special reference to advanced technological aspects, affected the phenomenon of mass production and made it possible for normally

deprived masses to look forward to an easier life and even to a relative affluence. The latter aspect has been strongly reinforced by the world mass communication media and its use of satellites which enable it to bring to the eyes and ears of millions of TV viewers and radio listeners worldwide, new insights into the ways of life prevailing in industrialized societies.

With higher expectations, especially among children, greater pressure has been applied on the family, primarily the father, for greater consumption of goods and services than would be normally relevant to the limited resources or productive abilities of a less industrialized society.

As a result of the desire and eagerness for higher levels of consumption, which is not necessarily equal to a higher standard of living, a need has been created for exerting greater effort in the acquisition of income by, for example, the taking of a second or part-time job, and by the entry of women into the workforce. This latter practice has been detrimental to the performance of household and child care duties.

The price of such forced social interaction and change has been the building up of tension inside and outside the family structure, social and political unrest and outmoded world monetary and political systems. It also contributes to the weakening of the image of the parents, especially that of the father as a figurehead, because of his frequent absence and because it often puts him on the defensive.

6. Unless social change can be regulated and integrated with basic educational reforms, serious training programmes, universal health and physical fitness improvement, and economic programmes to improve productivity on a large scale, most of the financial resources, limited as they are, will be channelled into subsidizing irrational consumption and the payment of interest rather than on projects for effecting better productivity.

With respect to the family as an institution, it is not enough that it still stands in "form" when the substance is changing so greatly in depth and shape. If, due to housing problems, members of a family are forced to live together, patterns of interaction will inevitably change. Either interaction will slow down to a minimum (like in the case of a group of strangers sharing living space) or forms of conflict and violence will become frequent. Such conditions will have an impact on the family as an institution as well as on the individual components of the family.

It is an elaboration of the obvious to insist on or press for the importance of co-operation between the West and the Third world and for a completely different orientation and spirit in international politics and trade. Such an orientation and spirit is a necessary background for national projects for integrating education at all levels, manpower planning and economic measures and other actions.

7. Again, as an elaboration of the obvious, ready-made solutions are not readily available or applicable, and trial and error based on impressions, individual whims and crash programmes is not the correct course. Search and research for valid answers make surveys, valid statistics and basic research necessary prerequisites. Even when responsibly recommending research as an orientation for finding valid, reliable answers, we should not pretend that we are starting with a tabula rasa; we have some idea of our limitations especially with respect to the "time" factor.

For some time yet the role of the family in socializing the young will continue to be far less than what we consider as healthy. That is, of course, referring to a more complicated future social interaction on a national level.

For a while the school will continue to teach large classes without sufficient knowledge of the most appropriate methodologies for teaching large groups, with limited resources and facilities, without teacher enthusiasm and incentives and with inadequate buildings and space. All these are coupled with a very loosely coordinated communication system and mass media.

Mentioning the realities is an important reminder that any progress has to be started by the "actual", and a belief that no matter how complicated and difficult an actual situation is, hope, on solid bases, is justified.

A new concept (maybe an intellectual model subject to testing and research) of modernization and progress is awaiting groups of intellectuals working together for a breakthrough. Relevant concepts of development, parallel to that of western people, are yet to be crystalized or developed for the Third World: that is, a variety of concepts that start and end by focusing on Man: the family and the culture, and on man as an individual — not man in the abstract but in his actuality. A concept admitting that Man's diverse cultures can exist together, grow and develop.

And while individuals and cultures can interact and in fact do so, the purpose should not be to do away with certain cultures in favour of a more advanced or dominant one, no matter what the outcome of any synthesis may be. With such an approach we may hope for a relevant educational system, relevant technology and a richer life. With such an approach we may hope to proceed to a more peaceful world and to a more meaningful life.

8. With respect to the Arab family as a cultural institution, it is passing through drastic changes as a result of modernization processes, especially westernization. As the result of the trend towards nuclear families in place of extended families, the following changes have taken place in many cultures so that they have virtually become a pattern:

#### **8.1 Freedom of choice of spouse and size of family.**

While traditionally the opinions of parents and relatives are the major

consideration in deciding on the proper match for a marriage, more and more marriages are performed in spite of such considerations. With respect to the size of the family, it has become increasingly determined by the thinking and convictions of the couple.

**8.2 Higher rate of divorce.**

This signifies more difficulties in adjusting to new roles, tasks and images on the part of both husband and wife.

**8.3 Greater participation of women in economic activities and in the labour force.**

This has contributed to changing the role and image of the wife and the traditional structure of the family including the number of children and forms of interaction with them.

**8.4 Higher rate of mobility.**

The more frequent movement from location to location affects family ties.

**8.5 All these factors have contributed to the increasing independence of children from the influence and authority of parents and the older generation in general.(1)**

9. The last item also refers to the generation gap. The new generation is developing its own values, norms and attitudes which basically, sometimes at least, differ and even conflict with the traditional values, norms and attitudes generally accepted by the older generation. Such a factor contributes towards further independent living in a nuclear style, as living with the older generation in an extended family style would not be convenient or even feasible. Even when forced to live together, due to housing problems, such a forced situation will create the kind of interaction that will further keep them from each other.

In a nuclear family the roles of the male and female change. This refers not only to the father and mother, but more significantly, to the role and image of the male and female children.

10. Fifty years or so ago, the predominant pattern of the Arab family was that of the extended family performing the judicial, economical, financial, religious and educational functions. But during the last fifty years, due to sociocultural and economic changes, these functions have changed with the full or partial withdrawal of the family from performing functions that have been taken over by institutions such as courts, police, factories and schools. The lasting basic function that continues up to the present day is socialization which itself is no longer the sole domain of a modern family.

With all that has been mentioned regarding the shrinking role of the family in general and the trend towards "independent education" and faster change, it is worth mentioning that in a nuclear family the role of the father with respect to the children's socialization is growing within the new framework but at the expense of the roles of uncles, aunts and other relatives.

When change takes place smoothly, the changing roles of the father, mother and children within the nuclear family have taken place in the direction of greater respect and deeper interaction between father and mother and with a longer time being spent together, thus allowing more and more joint decisions in place of those that were traditionally taken alone by either the father or the mother.

In the aftermath, understanding and respect are increasingly taking the place of the authoritarian relationship between parents and children. Children are getting greater freedom in their own affairs such as the selection of study programmes and specialization, work and career and marriage.<sup>(2)</sup>

11. With greater exposure to western ways of life and thought, and as a direct result of the impact of modern western educational systems, the concept and substance of "independent education" gradually became the fashion and cultural receptivity was gradually built up.

With or without full realization of the logical consequences, "independent education" gradually became popular. But such training also meant a deterioration of the parents' role in affecting the direction of the growth of their children; and less and less appreciation of the older generation's values, traditions and ways of life.

Such conditions of greater independence and less control might be desirable from the standpoint of faster social change, but fast change is quite upsetting to the older generation who find difficulty in adjusting themselves to it and hence could suddenly find themselves not only in a new world but in a strange one.

Without under-emphasizing the influence of the parents' greater need for adjustment to a strange, fast-changing world, we are also faced with a generation of fast-growing children in families that cannot afford to allow their role to have less direction as well as less importance while substitute agencies are not readily available.

12. The special case of the oil-producing States has been the subject of many studies by Arab as well as non-Arab writers. Huge oil production is not merely an economic factor. Although oil production, just like industry or agriculture, satisfies the community's need for financial resources and enables the community and individuals to meet the costs of living and to enjoy a higher standard of living, it differs in the sense that it relieves the members of the community from the urgency and the immediate responsibility of production. It upsets the natural equation that levels of production control levels of consumption. It releases the speed of social change from its normal bonds within manpower's dynamic ability to affect economic growth.

From the standpoint of family stability, socialization and education, it has been

found that while individuals are relatively free from financial worries, they have problems with motivation for education since a better education is not necessarily related to better opportunities for greater income.<sup>(3)</sup> New concepts of incentives and motivation achievement research should help the situation.

### 13. CONCLUSION

Obviously, it is not enough just to try to describe or even diagnose a situation. What is needed is a kind of intellectual leadership supported by the leadership of decision makers so that a concrete model of relevant societal development may be produced. Such a modern but relevant culture cannot emerge as a decision, it is a cultural process that takes place in space and time. But it certainly requires the awareness of leaders both in the intellectual and political spheres as well as cultural receptivity on the part of the community as a whole. Both, while complex, complicated and risky, could be planned and achieved. But it should be remembered that leadership is not merely a declaration, it is a quality, and cultural receptivity needs the mobilizing of efforts similar to effecting changes through relevant agents of change.

Both "good" and "bad" are value judged and value judgements. The "proper direction of children's development" is quite a loaded expression and the only educational safeguard would be a dynamic concept of effecting change through thought *guidance* and not through thought *control*.

It seems that while we still need research in almost all areas and not only in the areas of the social sciences and education, reliable data will continue to fall short, thus leaving the door wide open to a variety of interpretations and disagreement among specialists who often have to rely on their impressions and limited observations until they have better information and valid statistics.

Nevertheless, with the available knowledge that we do have about: literacy rates, growth rates, per capita incomes, national production, trends in public opinion, and development of value codes and changing attitudes, and finally, the changing pattern of family life and structure, along with areas of homogeneity and ranges of differences, it was possible for the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) to sponsor a national educational strategy that was later adopted by all Arab states.

This strategy explicitly gave education (formal, non-formal and pre-school education as well as adult, public, private and special education) the responsibility of leading the move toward relevant development based on a systemic approach integrating economic and social development with the basic Arab culture.

Lots of research and experimentation will be needed for quite some time before scientific documents giving detailed aspects of various areas affected by the new



strategy will be available for decision makers who, otherwise, will continue to make their decisions in the absence of them. Education, at this stage of development in the Arab states, is expected to have a significant role in changing people intelligently so that they may be more able to produce and consume and be better adjusted to the dynamic flow of outputs.

With respect to the future, the greatest challenge may turn out to be confronting the situation within the family in its handling of the socialization of its children and in its contribution to a sound start to their lives, or else preparing for some other institution to gradually relieve the family of this task, as has happened with other tasks before, and which have been fully or partly taken over.

With respect to tomorrow, we can only do our best and hope that it will be "better" than today. But the term "better" must be left without a definite criterion and not exactly defined.

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