



## Views on Wellbeing Research, Policy and Practice:

### An Interview with Dr. Habib Tiliouine

Tiliouine, H.

**Citation:** Tiliouine, H. (2017). Views on wellbeing research, policy and practice: An interview with Dr. Habib Tiliouine. *Middle East Journal of Positive Psychology*, 3(1), 1-6.

**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. Here, we discuss with Dr. Habib Tiliouine of the University of Oran, Algeria, his thoughts on the current state of wellbeing in the Middle East and North African region, his own research results and future projects.

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 والصعاب الموجودة. هنا، نناقش مع الدكتور حبيب تيليويين من جامعة وهران، الجزائر، أفكاره حول الحالة الراهنة للرفاهية في منطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال أفريقيا، ونتائج أبحاثه الخاصة والمشاريع المستقبلية.

**Keywords:** history of wellbeing; children; subjective wellbeing; culture; Arab World; MENA nations

**About the Author:** Dr. Habib Tiliouine is Professor of Social Sciences and Head of the Laboratory of Educational Processes and Social Context (Labo-PECS) of the University of Oran<sup>2</sup> in Algeria. His research interests and publications include quality of life in Islamic societies, well-being research, child development and education, education reform and management and educational policies. Dr. Tiliouine has collaborated with UNICEF and many international research institutions and groups. He has more than 50 published works in English, Arabic and French, and is an editorial board member and reviewer for many academic journals. He recently coauthored a chapter in the 2017 World Happiness Report. Dr. Tiliouine received the 2015 Research Fellow Award of The International Society for Quality-of-Life Studies for his contributions and was elected Vice-President for External Affairs of the same international society.

**Address correspondence to:** Dr. Habib Tiliouine, 7 Coopérative Bahia Avenir, Belgaid, Oran 31000, Algeria. E-mail: [htiliouine@yahoo.fr](mailto:htiliouine@yahoo.fr)

**MEJPP:** You write about a diverse and complex topic; that of wellbeing in the MENA region. It is complex because of the different paces of development, availability of resources,



cultural, religious and linguistic diversities, and historical and colonial trajectories that distinguish several nations from one another. But, let's look at the big picture first; if you had to sum up the status of wellbeing in the region, what would it be and why?

HT: The wellbeing of the MENA region is currently under a lot of pressure. It is volatile and highly challenged because of social turmoil, armed conflicts, unsatisfied or poorly satisfied basic life necessities, such as health care needs and education opportunities. There is also a high prevalence of unemployment and poverty, in addition to the unsatisfied yearnings towards democratic systems of governance, a lack of respect for basic civil liberties, widespread corruption, huge socio-economic inequalities and so forth. Of course, the scale of these issues differs from one country to another, but these exist to a degree in most of the MENA countries.

This is sad when during the 1970s and 1980s the region was to a good extent, quite successful. It had achieved its independence from European dominance and made large gains in terms of health care provisions (e.g., life expectancy increased from an average of 67.53 years of life in 1990 to 73.42 years in 2012) and adult literacy (e.g., gains increased by 9.1 percentage points in just 25 years from 74.5 % in 1986 to 83.6% in 2011). But, soon after, the region entered a new phase of conflict and instability, mainly after the American invasion of Iraq. In 2011, Gallup used a measure called the Negative Experience Index to record the level of sadness, stress, anger, physical pain and worry in many of the world region. They found that Egypt, Iraq, Palestine, and Bahrain occupied the highest ranks on those measures. Morocco had the best ranking, but it was nonetheless far below the world average. This means that people of the MENA region in general have low levels of subjective well-being, low satisfaction with their lives or in short are less happy than many of the other world regions.

The Arab Spring revolts which started at the end of December 2010 were expected to help ease the hegemony of long standing political regimes and lead to positive changes in the lives of the populace, but most of those revolts ended in civil wars. The rise of terrorist movements, such as Daesh (ISIS), which reign over large parts of Syria, Iraq and reached Lebanese and Jordanian borders, was a big surprise to many of the region's people. Similarly, the situation in Yemen, Libya and Sub-Saharan Africa at the borders of North Africa is not much different. As a result, the world witnessed the largest refugee crisis since the Second World War with more than 15 million displaced persons and refuge seekers. Thousands of people continue nowadays to risk their lives crossing the Mediterranean Sea fleeing conflict, instability and poverty in Africa and the Middle East to reach European territories.

Unfortunately, even the rich oil producing countries have seen their investments shrink and incomes reduced due to recent falls in oil prices. The majority of Arab countries are facing harsh economic difficulties which will lead to even more poverty. Maybe the picture of the current Arab World as a whole looks gloomy! Yet, there are huge opportunities from which to reverse these situations and consequently, the region is full of unexploited and underexploited natural resources. Its inhabitants are mostly young and have good education levels. If they are appropriately put to work, they would produce miracles. Also, many of the political regimes have reached the conclusion that sharing power with the people is the only way towards genuine growth and development. Many of these countries are also offering greater opportunities to women and



allowing further civil liberties. These changes are expected to drive levels of well-being in the MENA region.

**MEJPP:** In your chapter on the history of wellbeing in the MENA region (Tiliouine & Meziane, 2017), you discuss various themes that have influenced levels of wellbeing. What are some of the historical, political and economic influences that contribute to high levels of wellbeing like those reported in the UAE, Kuwait and Qatar, and those which contribute to low levels like those reported in Yemen, Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq?

**HT:** When looking at the global situation, we notice that countries that are politically stable and economically flourishing are those who have reached good levels of well-being. Obviously, that is the case of the UAE, Kuwait and Qatar. On the contrary, countries which suffer from instability and war such as Yemen, Syria, and Iraq or, that are directly affected by what is happening in their neighborhoods such as Lebanon, have seen their well-being decrease. Security is among the most important factors towards a healthy social and personal life. Economic prosperity is also important because it allows countries to meet the basic needs of their populations, such as health care, education, housing facilities, employment, and leisure opportunities. All these objective factors go hand in hand with the subjective evaluations of life. Research has shown that living conditions and feelings of safety are among the most important determinants of well-being all over the world.

**MEJPP:** Is it the case that in nations where stability, safety and socioeconomic prosperity are possible, we can apportion more responsibility for wellbeing to the individual than in nations where such conditions are less salient? In other words, do unstable governments bear more responsibility for wellbeing than stable ones? If so, what next steps towards greater wellbeing are required by these governments?

**HT:** Obviously, the primary role of governments is to cater for the stability and security of people, and safeguard their families, communities and properties. This is to say that governments are there to apply the rule of law, make different institutions work efficiently for the benefit of the people and defend the country against external enemies. Governments differ in how successful they are in fulfilling these roles. Developed countries have the most successful governments in these respects and external threats to the well-being of individuals are minimized. On the contrary, most developing countries are considered 'Fragile States' described by the 'Fragile States Index' developed by the American Fund for Peace to assess states' vulnerability to conflict or collapse. They are also referred to as "failed" or "failing" states in which governments are unable to maintain national borders, provide reasonable levels of internal security, provide for at least the basic material needs for their growing populations, and the like, as is the situation currently in Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon. This situation is accompanied by what sociologists characterize as feelings of 'anomia' at the psycho-social level, which refers to the disruption in individuals levels of engagement in the life of the community and the breakdown of prevailing values and norms. In other words, a situation of deep alienation! In such a situation, governments must help populations regain confidence in their country through tangible steps taken to ensure the rule of law exists and is functional. Governments should listen to people's needs and respond to these needs through a proper plan with the participation of the population itself. Yet, in most cases, MENA countries do not lack institutions; they lack efficient institutions, those that work for the benefit of the people.



**MEJPP:** What are your predictions for the future of wellbeing in various areas of the region? Where can we expect to see increases over time and what areas might need to exert greater efforts towards wellbeing?

**HT:** It is really hard to predict anything if we take into consideration the complexities of the current international context and the realities of the nations of the MENA region. However, I think the situation will be much better in the long run if we give people a voice. A democratic leadership that guarantees civil liberties and people's participation in the management of public affairs is an important step towards people regaining confidence in their own countries. Additionally, no single Arab country can on its own, solve their problems or those of the region. We must once more find the spirit of the 70s and 80s! Arabs, who constitute a good part of the MENA region, should unite as they are mostly faced with similar challenges and share the same destiny. At the same time, Arabs must also accept their plurality and help build their multicultural and multiethnic societies. Arab countries should together invest in quality education, health care, social services and help one another develop solid and diversified economies. They should not remain victims of oil price instability. These steps should be accompanied with a sense of positivity and optimism. I am reminded of an excerpt from Winston Churchill: "*A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty*". In my view the history and geography of the region are all favorable factors towards an integrated project that lifts the region from the present state of weakness and instability towards prosperity and flourishing.

**MEJPP:** What are your next steps in terms of research? Why is this important?

**HT:** Since 2003, my team at the University of Oran and I have initiated the important project of monitoring the subjective wellbeing of the Algerian general population. We interviewed more than 18,000 participants and published many reports out of this project (Tiliouine, Cummins & Davern, 2006, 2009; Tiliouine, 2009, 2014). But, due to financial difficulties, the project was interrupted. I hope to resume work on it soon. This project is important in order to gain solid knowledge from which to inform researchers as well as policy makers on the dynamics of the population's wellbeing, and to discover the determinants of these ups and downs with respect to wellbeing in Algeria. The findings of this research can help in the formulation of appropriate recommendations and suggestions on how to generate and sustain high levels of wellbeing.

Also, as part of the International Survey of Child Well-Being (ISCWEB), we conducted two large surveys with Algerian children, aged 8, 10 and 12 years. We will continue researching this domain once again for the third wave of data collection. This is important to us because this is the first time that such a large international survey is conducted with children worldwide and also because we could look at our own children from a comparative perspective. With the collaboration of many colleagues around the world, we published many papers to situate the different facets of wellbeing of Algerian children. We also initiated an important follow-up study with children to explore which and how the domains of wellbeing in children change over time. A first paper has been accepted for publication by the journal of *Child Development* and describes some of our initial results. We intend to follow this path with the same participants in the future.

Finally, Islamic religiosity and its relationship to diverse facets of wellbeing constitute an important research question for me. In some of my previously published works, I developed a



measurement tool to assess this relationship and found a positive association between religiosity, wellbeing and meaning in life. Nevertheless, I feel that this area is neglected and needs further exploration and hope future researchers will take up the task. Yet, I distinguish between Islamic religiosity as a source of a huge spiritual wealth and serenity on the one hand and on the other, using religion to reach political ends.

#### References

- Tiliouine, H. (2009). Stability and change in national and personal wellbeing in Algeria: A case study of a developing country in transition. In V. Moller & D. Huschka (Eds.), *Quality of life and the Millennium challenge* (pp. 115-138). Dordrecht NL: Springer.
- Tiliouine, H. (2014). Algeria, Personal Well-Being Index. In A. C. Michalos (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of quality of life and well-being research* (pp. 133-137). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer.
- Tiliouine, H, Cummins, R. A., & Davern, M. (2006). Measuring wellbeing in developing countries: The case of Algeria. *Social Indicators Research*, 75, 1-30.
- Tiliouine, H., Cummins, R. A., & Davern, M. (2009). Islamic religiosity, subjective well-being, and health. *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 12(1), 55-74.
- Tiliouine, H., & Meziane, M. (2017). The history of well-being in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In R. J. Estes & J. Sirgy (Eds.), *The pursuit of human well-being: The untold global story* (pp. 523-563). Springer International Publishing.

#### Selected Publications of Interest

- Boussena, M., & Tiliouine, H. (2015). Children's rights in Algeria: History, achievements and research evidence. *Global Studies of Childhood*, 5(2), 132-145.
- Casas, F., Tiliouine, H., & Figuer, C. (2014). The subjective well-being of adolescents from two different cultures: Applying three versions of the PWI in Algeria and Spain. *Social Indicators Research*, 115 (2), 637-651.
- Estes, R. J., & Tiliouine, H. (2014). Islamic development trends: From collective wishes to concerted actions. *Social Indicators Research*, 116(1), 67-114.
- Moller, V., Roberts, B. J., Tiliouine, H., & Loschky, J. (2017). Waiting for happiness in Africa. In J. F. Helliwell, R. Layard, R. & J. Sachs (Eds.), *World Happiness Report 2017* (Chapter 4). New York, NY: Sustainable Development Solutions Network.
- Renima, A., Tiliouine, H., & Estes, R. J. (2016). The Islamic golden age: A story of the triumph of the Islamic civilization. In H. Tiliouine & R. J. Estes (Eds.), *Social progress in Islamic societies: Social, political, economic, and ideological challenges* (pp. 25-52). Dordrecht NL: Springer.
- Tiliouine, H. (2014). Quality of life and well-being in North Africa: Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia. In W. Glatzer, L. Camfield, V. Møller & M. Rojas (Eds.), *Global handbook of well-being and quality of life* (pp. 507-530). New York, NY: Springer.
- Tiliouine, H. (2014). Algerian secondary school students, application of the Personal Well-being Index (PWI). In A. C. Michalos (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of quality of life and well-being research* (pp. 137-140). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer.



- Tiliouine, H. (2014). Algeria, Personal Well-Being Index. In A. C. Michalos (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of quality of life and well-being research* (pp. 133-137). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer.
- Tiliouine, H. (2014). Gender dimensions of quality of life in Algeria. In L. Eckerman (Ed.), *Gender, lifespan and quality of life* (pp. 63-82). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer.
- Tiliouine, H. (2015). School bullying victimisation and subjective well-being in Algeria. *Child Indicators Research*, 8(1), 133-150.
- Tiliouine, H. (2016). Algerian children's perceptions of their rights and their self-reported personal and contextual experiences. *Journal of Social Research & Policy*, 7(2), 93-108.
- Tiliouine, H., & Bougaci, O. (forthcoming). Flourishing in adversity: Positive psychology in the Arab world. In E. C. Chang (Ed.), *The international handbook of positive psychology - A global perspective on the science of positive human existence*. Springer.
- Tiliouine, H., & Estes, R. J. (Eds.) (2016). *Social progress in Islamic societies: Social, political, economic, and ideological challenges*. Dordrecht, NL & Berlin, Germany: Springer.
- Tiliouine, H., & Meziane, M. (2017). The history of well-being in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). In R. J. Estes & J. Sirgy (Eds.), *The pursuit of human well-being: The untold global story* (pp. 523-563). Springer International Publishing.
- Tiliouine, H., Renima, A., & Estes, R. (2016). The changing map of the Islamic world: From the Abbasid Era to the Ottoman Empire of the 20th century. In H. Tiliouine & R. J. Estes (Eds.), *Social progress in Islamic societies: Social, political, economic, and ideological challenges* (pp. 53-68). Dordrecht NL: Springer.