



Views on Wellbeing Research, Policy and Practice:

An Interview with Dr. Nausheen Pasha-Zaidi

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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. Nausheen Pasha-Zaidi, her thoughts on religion, culture, and wellbeing, as well as her upcoming research on the development of a positive Islamic identity.

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 الدكتورة نوشين باشا زيدي، أفكارها حول الدين والثقافة والرفاهية، وكذلك أبحاثها القادمة على تطوير هوية إسلامية إيجابية.

Keywords: wellbeing; identity; culture; Islam; religion; positive psychology; diversity; positive Islamic identity

About the Author: Dr. Nausheen Pasha-Zaidi now teaches Psychology at Houston Community College and the University of Houston-Downtown. She spent almost eight years in the United Arab Emirates working as an educator and teacher trainer, specializing in English language learners. Her research focuses predominantly on Muslim culture and practices. Most recently, she co-edited an anthology of personal narratives on hijab and veiling (Pasha-Zaidi & Pasha, 2017) that reflects the experiences of contributors from around the world, including many from the MENA region. Her upcoming work will focus on the development of a Positive Islamic Identity concept.

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MEJPP: From where, when and how did your interest in wellbeing begin?

NPZ: My research interests actually began with culture and religion, in particular the ways in which Muslims interact with Islamic symbols and practices across cultures. As Western media interest in Islam and Muslims is often geared towards promulgating negative images and rhetoric, I felt the sting of Islamophobia that accompanies the experiences of many Muslims who live or have lived in non-Muslim majority regions. My conviction as a practicing Muslim who finds peace in the Islamic faith led me to begin investigating alternative ways of understanding Muslim experiences—



how this religion that has 1.6 billion adherents around the world can provide a path to wellbeing. Although this was something that I felt within myself, it was not until I began having conversations with experts in the field of positive psychology that I envisioned the possibility of studying the intersection of culture, religion and wellbeing. I am at the very beginning stages of this line of enquiry, but it excites me because I see so many ways now in which to explore wellbeing.

MEJPP: What views are absent in the field of wellbeing at present and do you think the field of positive psychology attends enough to issues of diversity? In fact, are ‘issues of diversity’ a misnomer, especially in the MENA region?

NPZ: The study of wellbeing is quite broad and has many subcategories, and the study of happiness is really just the tip of the iceberg. However, most of the studies that we learn about are conducted with either American college students or with Western populations. Recently, the term “WEIRD” has gained popularity in the social science literature. WEIRD is an acronym that stands for Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic. These are the populations that make up the majority of research participants, even though they represent only about 12% of the world (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Even more alarming is that American psychology continues to be considered mainstream, even though Americans only represent about 5% of the world’s population. Issues of diversity are often, therefore, limited to the diversity that is found within WEIRD countries. As a result, we can find research on culturally-diverse groups within the United States more readily than we can find research on international populations. As the most prestigious conferences and journals also tend to focus on English-language research, the ability to disseminate information on wellbeing in non-WEIRD countries is also limited. As a result, that research has a more difficult time becoming part of the wellbeing conversation. The MENA region, unfortunately, is not well-represented in the literature. However, as regional conferences and psychology associations specializing in the region become more popular, I think we will be able to focus more on the diversity within the region. Issues of diversity are highly relevant in the MENA region as it is a unique area that is constantly evolving as a result of migration, economics, technology, and socio-political realities.

MEJPP: As a result, what research questions are you currently pursuing and why is it of local and/or regional interest?

NPZ: I have a few different studies that I am currently working on. One is a study of positive Islamic identity (PII) and positive Islamic experiences (PIE). Because I tend to work on international comparative research, I am collecting data from Muslims living in Muslim majority countries like the UAE and others in the MENA region as well as from Muslims living in Muslim minority countries like the United States and Canada. I have also been working with colleagues and graduate students on an international study of academic resilience among university students. The participants in that study hail from Turkey, the UAE, and the US. Notably, all the participants in that study represent non-WEIRD populations, even the American students, who were recruited from a minority serving university where the majority are non-traditional students. Interestingly, so far we have found that grit (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007), the sustained passion and effort towards long-term goals, is the most robust factor related to academic resilience in all three cultural contexts. Hopefully, you’ll read more about that study in an academic journal soon!



Finally, I've also begun looking at the relationship between expressive writing and wellbeing. This is something that I spoke about at a Wellness Conference a few years ago. Although there is quite a bit of research that has been conducted with expressive writing and wellbeing (see for example research by Burton & King, 2009; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011; Reiter & Wilz, 2016), this has mainly focused on autobiographical narratives and gratitude letter-writing. Having written fiction in the past as a way of healing myself and having had many conversations with fiction writers over the years, I would like to explore the relationship between writing fiction and wellbeing.

MEJPP: It seems like your definition of 'wellbeing' includes aspects of religion and culture; how is this different from mainstream models of wellbeing?

NPZ: Unfortunately, as I noted earlier, mainstream models of wellbeing are reflective of individualistic societies and WEIRD populations. Often, wellbeing is thus limited to the "self", which may not necessarily address the needs of collectivist societies. It is true that globalization has created an interesting paradox for newer generations of people living in non-Western countries such that there is a greater influence of individualistic thinking as it represents modernity in the minds of many young people. However, research shows that even with the increasing level of individualism in the constructions of the self in collectivist societies, this has not translated into a decrease in other collectivist notions, such as the emphasis on relationships and interdependency (Aygün & Imamoğlu, 2002). Emiratis, for example, may fluctuate between collectivistic and individualistic ideas depending on the social context in which the interactions take place (Al-Esia & Skok, 2014). So, it is important to understand wellbeing within a variety of cultural contexts in order to avoid stereotyping "normal" behaviors or applying inappropriate ideas about wellbeing. We cannot assume that the research conducted in the United States or other Western countries is automatically applicable to the MENA region. Given the importance of culture and religion in imparting definitions of wellbeing, it would not only be irresponsible but potentially harmful.

MEJPP: What are your hopes in terms of the impact your research will have on young Muslims?

NPZ: With the research on positive Islamic identity and experiences, my hope is to be able to help Muslim communities create educational programs and support groups for Muslim youth. Young people need safe spaces to explore their identities and develop positive social skills. This is needed not only among Muslim youth living in non-Muslim majority countries, but among Muslim youth in all parts of the world. One of the interesting and troublesome findings from my initial data set is that the negative portrayal of Muslims in Western media seems to have a deleterious impact on Muslim youth, even those who are living in a Muslim majority country! We know that members of stigmatized groups carry psychological burdens that can affect many aspects of their lives and we also know that a strong identity can serve as a buffer against societal injustices. I hope to learn more about the positive experiences that Muslims have and can use as a buffer in today's societies, so that we can begin to help the young Muslims who may feel angry, lonely, or lost.

MEJPP: If you had advice, future directions, or guidance for researchers in the field of wellbeing, what would it be?

NPZ: I think social science research needs to be more localized and less generalized. Decolonizing research may be one way of addressing the issues of mainstream psychology. The



positivistic heritage of psychology has focused so much on the generalizability of findings that we have only recently begun to question the applicability of research across ethnic groups and international borders. By decolonizing our efforts and reaching out to populations that do not have the same access to publishing venues, we can begin to create a more inclusive social science. To begin, researchers need to be willing to step down from their position of authority and take on the role of learners and collaborators with local communities, rather than coming in as the “experts”. This will also require local communities to step up to the challenge of accepting responsibility for their own narratives, which may be difficult initially as many of the countries in the MENA region are high in Power-Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance as defined by Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions (1984). As the MENA region is generally characterized by rule-oriented societies where leadership is hierarchical and experts or leaders are separated and elevated from the rest of the group as a condition of their perceived greater status. In order to work within this system, researchers may need to be vigilant about recruiting the help of leaders and educators within local communities and then training community members to continue with the work even after researchers leave. More cooperation across countries and an increased focus on lesser-studied communities can lead to more diverse voices in the literature. This is something we desperately need.

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