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An Emic Approach To An 'Indigenous' Concept Of Business And Social Networking

1. Introduction

Contemporary cross-cultural management (CCM) theory and practice is western-centric as it tends to rely on theories, practices, concepts and methods drawn from research conducted in Europe and North American, geographically, mostly located in the Northern Hemisphere (Leung et al., 2005). There is a dearth of indigenous research on alternative social concepts from other regions, and culture-specific (emic) concepts such as guanxi (relationship management) in China, blat in Russia or caste in India are described from an outside (etic) perspective, even if apparently culture-neutral theoretical frames like "intersectionality" are used as framing devices. The call for "the concurrent analyses of multiple, intersecting (and interacting) sources of subordination/oppression" (Denis, 2008, p 677) is often derived from contemporary feminist discourse that is itself heavily western-infused and thus implies an etic approach. Knowledge hierarchies impact upon CCM, and for a more balanced and inclusive CCM theory and practice, we would need to discover specific cultural concepts from the Global East and South, and to view them in their own inside (emic) terms.

This paper sheds light on *wasta,* a specific social and organizational phenomenon in Jordan which is explored in the score of the Jordanian banking industry. The literal translation of *wasta* is mediation, or also intermediary. In daily usage, *wasta* refers to the use of connections in order to get something done. Someone who 'has *wasta'* either has a degree of influence, or has access to those who do (Hutchings and Weir, 2006). A Jordanian might seek out someone with influence, who is then also called 'a *wasta'* in spoken dialect Arabic or *'waseet'* in classic Arabic, in order to find a job, secure a place at a university, or navigate the bureaucratic red tape that is so common in Jordan (Cuninngham and Sarayrah, 1993; Jones, 2016). W*asta* refers thus both to the action and those facilitating it. It has been suggested that *wasta* impacts nearly every facet of a Jordanian's life, and it is also a common source of discussion, and complaints among Jordanians (Ali, 2016). Yet, how *wasta* is practiced in this context, and how it is experienced, remains a largely unknown phenomenon.

As a practice, wasta is wide-spread and influential throughout the region (Cunningham and Sarayrah, 1993, Barnett, et al., 2013, Weir et al., 2016), and also exists in other Arab countries. As a cultural phenomenon, it is not remote from other practices and ideas of a reciprocal social relations, such as guanxi in China or the general idea of a relational give and

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take in the business world (Smith et al., 2011). The etymology of *wasta* as an action and a person, is generally associated with the notion of occupying a middle place in a network. When one looks further into the linguistic roots of the word, one can simply understand it as the ability (or the person) "to get things done through the use of social connections".

In Jordan, *wasta* impacts upon different social and business issues ranging from applying for trade licenses and government services to securing governmental bids. In particular, it influences recruitment and selection: job seekers use *wasta* as a medium to secure employment, and organisations use it to secure qualified employees (Ali, 2016). From a westocentric perspective, *wasta* tends to be perceived as favouritism or nepotism which contrasts the idea of a 'modern' (implicitly 'Western') workplace. Also, within Jordan, there is a widespread debate whether *wasta* should be abolished for the sake of Western-style 'modernization' and in order to ensure equal employment opportunities for all (Al.Harbi et al., 2017).

Jordan is often described as a 'tribal' society (Sharp, 2012), and this can be considered the first etic concept which we need to deconstruct in order to view *wasta* in its own terms. Whilst Western literature often treats tribalism as a primitive 'lifestyle' associating it with an underdeveloped culture or society, Rowland (2009) argues that tribalism can be viewed as an intangible emotion that entails a varying degree of loyalty to a tribe, as well as the social sense of belonging to a certain people which predates the advent of Islam and Christianity (as Jordan's majority and minority religions). Indeed, Chua (2018) claims that Western society is becoming increasingly tribalised in the sense used by Ibn Khaldun as *asabiyya*, an Arabic word conveying something stronger than mere social solidarity. If we wish to understand why such affiliations are of importance in Jordan, the Bedouin experience of the desert and its harsh environment can help to understand the strength of values of friendship, mutual support and trust which it is generally argued must have been foundations of survival in such an environment (Branine and Analoui, 2006; Sharp, 2012). Weir (2018; 11) recently referred to *wasta*, which he argues is a product of tribalism, as one of the "pillars of Arab leadership".

To avoid the developmentalist connotation which 'tribal' and 'tribalism' might have, we therefore understand the term neutrally, as the idea of identifying with and drawing on certain in-group affiliations based on a combination of ancestry, religion, ethnicity and extended family networks to achieve one's social, political and economic needs.

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By making this point for the specific cultural phenomenon of *wasta*, we contribute to a more intersectional approach to culture in CCM, because we show how a seemingly merely nepotistic practice actually fulfils multiple roles, and is also balanced by other requirements. We do so for the banking industry, as a highly internationalized business sector of Jordan, which at the same time is also linked to specific cultural requirements, such as the ideals and regulations of Islamic banking (Syed et al., 2014). The banking sector illustrates the complexity of cultural phenomena as being both different and related, and as both global and local, which is an underlying implication of an intersectional approach to culture.

2. Methodology

Our main objective was to understand *wasta* in-depth and from the inside (emic) point of view, so to uncover the meaning given to it by those involved, and to also better understand the power-implications of the concept. To this end, the first author conducted 17 semi-structured qualitative interviews with managers from 14 banks operating in Jordan. When interpreting the material, we looked for how the interviewees perceived *wasta*, how they had experienced it, and whether they believed it to be positive or negative and for whom. In methodological terms, adopting this approach offers an opportunity to be reflexive and critical whilst also adding a sense of authenticity to the data (see for instance Clarke and Weir, 2018)

3. Case presentation

In this section, we first present the wider socio-political and economic context wherein *wasta* in Jordan is situated. We also highlight the role of the banking sector in Jordan. Next, we present quotations from the interviews that let us approximate *wasta* from an emic perspective.

3.1 The wider context

Jordan is a hereditary monarchy led by King Abdullah II since 1999. Whilst the parliament is elected by the people democracy is limited by the intervention of the state, the secret service 'mokhabarat' and the one-vote system which was used from the 1993 elections up until the 2015 where reforms where implemented. These reforms were critiqued for reducing the

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voting process into a tribal and family-based election and limiting the role of the Parliament members (MPs) into service providers to their area, family and tribe rather than community representatives (Jones, 2016). Furthermore, the king has extensive powers as he appoints governments, approves legislation, and can dissolve parliament.

Over the past few years he has been facing growing demands for political reform, especially in the wake of the popular uprising in Tunisia that led to political turmoil in many Arab countries after 2011. King Abdullah dismissed his government at the time and appointed the first of a series of prime ministers to oversee the introduction of political change, which included reforming the voting system in the 2015 elections, but concerns over the cost of living and income tax reform have led to regular street protests (BBC, 2018).

In-group and out-group differentiation can be found in various areas of Jordan society and organizational life. The population is usually classified by Jordanians into two distinct groups: East Bank Jordanians, West Bank (Palestinian-) Jordanians. The former lived in Jordan before the 1948 and 1967 Arab-Israeli wars, and, historically, can be linked more explicitly to tribalism (Rowland, 1999). The latter are Palestinian-Jordanians who immigrated to Jordan as refugees from Palestine after these wars and whose lives tend to be more urbanized (Ali, 2016). It is important to understand that identity is more complex and that Jordanians do not in their everyday discourse limit themselves to "East Bank Jordanians" or "Palestinian Jordanians". Indeed, religion, city of birth, economic status all play a role in setting these different inner-outsider groups which most previous research on *wasta* neglects (Ali, 2016; Jones, 2016).

Jordanian leadership styles have been described as paternalistic (Weir, 2003) but this simplistic interpretation is changing as Jordanian society becomes increasingly complex and in some ways more contested (Al Kharouf and Weir, 2008; Mettap et al., 2016). There is a relationship between paternalism and leader-member exchange (Scandura and Pellegrini, 2008) and it is also suggested that loyalty by employees is exchanged with benefits provided by the leader/ manager (Cunningham and Sarayrah, 1993; Hutchings and Weir, 2006). This could be linked to *wasta* as a mechanism to distribute 'favours' to loyal employees and family members which enables them to 'get things done' and which requires and constitutes in-group relations between those involved (Cunningham and Sarayrah, 1993).

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Often, organizations in various sectors in Jordan are family-owned. In small organisations, typically the father is the owner/manager and the rest of family are employees. In larger organisations, the oldest male member of the family tends to assume the role of the Chief Executive Officer (CEO)/ General Manager (GM) and the management of different functions is allocated to immediate family members with a tendency to hire members from the 'in-group'; extended family, tribe or individuals of the same city or area of origin (Al-Rasheed, 2001). This also affects the way employees are selected in organisations, small or large, as many employees are selected on the basis of their relationship to the ownership/ management of an organisation. Thus, many organisations are *tacitly* connected to certain families and tribes (Al-Rasheed, 2001).

This is particularly true in the Jordanian Banking sector. Officially, banks are classified by the Central Bank of Jordan as national or foreign or based on their financial ethos as Islamic or commercial. Nonetheless, tacitly, the majority of banks are viewed by Jordanians in terms of ownership as Christian, Muslim, Palestinian or Jordanian where each bank is affiliated with the identity of the family or families who have majority ownership or control of the management of the bank. We must therefore assume that these tacit connotations of 'in-group' and 'out-group' have a substantial impact on the way these banks recruit and select employees. As such, this case study has set to explore how *wasta* practice 'plays out' in employee selection in banks operating in Jordan.

3.2 Insights from the case interviews

During the interviews, the interviewees discussed the process of *wasta* in detail offering individual definitions for it and their insights on its origin, its use, and its impact on banks operating in Jordan, often derived from their personal experience. A theme which came strongly across most interviews is the interviewee's association of *wasta* with the ways people identify themselves and identify with others. Indeed, this was viewed to be so prevalent that even certain banks were associated with particular families. Interviewee A said:

> "Actually, we have some banks in Jordan that are family business which is actually some kind of wasta, a couple of them actually".

This family and tribal identification was understood as having an extensive impact on the hiring practices of these banks. According to Interviewee C:

> "Look, my manager is from one of the tribes in Jordan and I am from one of the tribes in Palestine but I as an HR keep distance from my family [in hiring] and I even notice that my manager does the same. Now sometimes there is a certain pressure. What I mean is that sometimes he comes to me and tells me… [Manager C's name] we want that person. But not always…What I see in other banks in a lot more".

Despite the acknowledgment of hiring based on familial relations in the organisation she works at, the interviewee, who is female, seems to indicate that this is done on a very small scale and is due to pressure from her manager who acts as an intermediary for his relatives. However, it was felt that the interviewee may be distancing herself from *wasta* practices by downplaying the scale of *wasta* practice in the bank. This can be related to the negative implications of using *wasta* to hire candidates from the same family or tribe who might not merit the position given to them (Mohamed and Mohamed, 2011). This negative view from society and colleagues is not limited to the hired candidates who are viewed as not qualified for the job but also extends to the organisation which is viewed as an unjust place where powerful association with in-group members precede qualifications in importance. Another reasoning for trying to alienate oneself from being associated with this practice is that it might be perceived as contradictory with Islamic Work Ethics (IWE) which call for transparency in business dealings and dictate that the most qualified person is the best to be hired (Ali and Owaihan, 2008; Abuznaid, 2009) rather than family and tribal associations.

Despite the negative view of society and religion on hiring based on such criterion it appears that this method is still dominant in the sector and the country. Indeed, it appears that it not just limited to family and tribal ties but exceeds it to other forms of in-group association. Interviewee N, who is female, explains:

> "If you go to some banks you would see most of them are Christians or if you go to the Islamic bank of Jordan you will see almost 100 percent of employees are Muslims. If you go to X bank in Jordan you would find that most of them are from Palestinian origin".

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The interviewees detail a tacit practice of selection based on tribal and religious affiliation in many banks operating in Jordan resulting in the majority of the organisation's employees sharing the same religious or ethnic background, which in turn shapes the 'identity' of the bank as a Muslim, Christian, East Jordanian, or Palestinian Jordanian bank.

These statements also describe the different types of in-groups (e.g. being Palestinian or Muslim) that form the basis for organisation's identification with the candidate. It seems that the shared identity acts as a criterion for organisations in their employee selection, linked with the process of categorical social identification which are said to "derive from membership in larger, more impersonal collectives or social categories" where members of such groups have a common value or characteristic but do not necessarily know each other on personal basis (Brewer and Gardner, 1996). This type of social identity exists in social networks between homogenous groups of people. In these statements the individuals identify a commonality with others; being from the same ethnic background (e.g. Palestinian Jordanian), or belonging to the same religious group (e.g. Christian) and also provide psychological motivation for individuals to accept acting as an intermediary or *waseet* for job seekers despite not knowing them personally.

It is worth noting, however, that such use of *wasta* might be beneficial and have a positive impact for job seekers. Interviewee A, who is female, stated:

> "*Wasta* is a way, it's a tool, and it's an entry…way to open the door. For example, if I know someone who has authority and who knows people and is well known…according to our culture there is nothing wrong if this person recommend[s] me to work in one of the banks".

This highlights the emic view of *wasta* as an acceptable way to try and secure a job through the recommendation of a respectable mediator.

Securing candidates through wasta could also be beneficial for the organisation, Interviewee A also stated:

> "*If I want to hire a branch manager. Basically, branch managers are known in Jordan [as] Jordan is a very small market and I don't need to look for more than four or five*

banks in the main branches or the area branches, I want to hire in order to attract some people you know".

This highlights how wasta could benefit managers is securing an employee who they can trust and which reflects the importance of the long-term relationships for these managers.

The interview discussions also highlighted a description of *wasta* as a process where power plays a vital role in namely securing employment for the individual who is requesting *wasta*. This view can be exemplified by the definition offered by from Interviewee I, who is male, when asked to define this process:

> "Someone who push[es] something for another one… someone you don't know if he fits in the organisation, ok, but you use your power in order to get him on board, ok, this is a simple definition of *wasta*".

Here, some interviewees perceived wasta as a way to use an intermediary's high status or powerful position to influence a hiring decision. This reflects the important role of powerful members of the tight-knit closed social groups in securing *wasta* favours to other members which reinforces the group members categorical social identification with the group (Davis, 2014). Interviewee C indicated that she is sometimes forced by the general manager to adhere to the request of *wasta* when hiring a particular candidate:

> "The negative is when someone comes and you say 'No, this person is not good or competent', and tell the general manager 'Sorry, this person does not fit with us', and he says 'No, hire him'".

This decision maker in the selection process, who is female, perceived that she was forced to hire the candidate despite holding reservations about their capacity to perform the job. In this situation, an individual seeking employment uses her/his social ties to reach out to an intermediary in a high position with the power to procure the appointment of a preferred candidate, even though s/he lacks the required skills and qualifications for the job thus moving beyond conventional western employee selection processes. This contradicts with the understanding of Islamic Work Ethics as highlighted above (Ali and Owaihan, 2008) and as

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such would be viewed negatively by colleagues and society, leading to the negative consequences discussed for all stakeholders involved.

Interviewee I affirmed the perceived importance of a job seekers using *wasta* when seeking employment stating:

> "You cannot limit the usage of wasta because it is built in our minds. So when people say 'bamon alek'(can you grant we an 'unspecified' favour), they get hired in the organisation."

This interviewee, who is female, perceives *wasta* as something deeply engrained in the mindset of Jordanians. In explaining the perceived need for job seekers to use *wasta* to secure a job, interviewee C highlighted how such requests rely on the emotional value of the social ties between the intermediary and the decision maker. An intermediary who is seeking employment for a job seeker will play upon the emotional value that the decision maker attaches to them, in order to 'enforce' the hiring of the job seeker. This is highlighted in the interviewee's reference to 'bamon alek', which is an Arabic dialect term where somebody requests something because s/he perceives herself/himself as being emotionally valuable to the other person.

This perception of having some value can be linked with in-group favouritism as identified by Tajfel and Turner, (1979). Social identity theorists argue that individuals will favour others who they identify as members of their in-group to satisfy the expectations of group members. So, our material suggests that in-group orientation tends to overcome the 'need' to comply with merit-based selection as viewed by western management literature (Hutchings and Weir, 2006). It also overcomes the ambition to comply with Islamic work values transparency in business dealings and dictate that the most qualified person is the best to be hired (Ali and Owaihan, 2008; Abuznaid, 2009). Depending on context, the in-group might be understood as the family, tribe or ethnicity origin; as Palestinian or Jordanian, as members of the same religion; Muslims or Christian.

From the insights provided from the interviewees and their statements discussed in this section, it seems that two aspects of *wasta* were of particular importance, namely *wasta as identity* and *wasta as power*.

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Wasta as identity denotes the role *wasta* plays is reflecting and strengthening in-group identities. Multiple in-group membership criteria such as being Muslim, Christian, East Bank Jordanian and Palestinian Jordanian play a vital role in a banks' management decision to hire a particular candidate and in the candidate's choice to apply to a particular bank. This creates tight knit groups where members support each other and help each other secure benefits but excludes people who are out of this group.

Wasta as power denotes the role of powerful members of a group in enabling other members of the group to secure benefits such as getting a job while reinforcing this power in their hands. Indeed, this provides an insightful emic view as to why *wasta* practices still prevail in Jordan and its banking sector despite being internationalised.

4. Power and CCM

The insights and statements from the interviews provide a much more balanced and emic insight into the practice of *wasta*. Indeed, when analysing the interviewees' statements discussed above it becomes apparent that *wasta* is not just a nepotistic practice which is mainly used in the hiring process as described by many western researchers. Rather, it is mediation process where mediation results in reaching an agreed outcome which is not just based on economic sense. It appears that *wasta* 'works' because society is already networked and that hiring decisions are not just based on merit but exceed that to take into consideration the long term outcome for the in-group.

However, there are also emic power-implications to this practice, for one might ask the question: who exactly profits from wasta? Based on the insight that every social setting is linked to formal and informal hierarchies, knowledge networks and frameworks of power, we therefore must also consider who is advantaged and disadvantaged by *wasta* practice. Loewe et al. (2007), for instance, conclude that *wasta* practice tends to further strengthen the *wasta* and the access to *wasta* of those who are already privileged in terms of *wasta*. They find, for example, that, in a paternalistic environment, men are more advantaged by it than women, and whilst these interviewees did not directly signpost gender as a source of insider-outsider access to wasta, it could be inferred that most interviewees who don't have access to wasta demonstrated a more negative stance to its practice which aligns with the arguments of Cunningham and Sarayrah, (1993) and Loewe et al, (2007). The access to wasta in this data

set appeared to more related to ethnic identity (Palestinian and East bank Jordanian) and religion (Muslim and Christian) but as highlighted above identity is multifaced and as such wasta can be used in different in-groups, including gender, for the same individual. It is worth noting that although only six of the interviewees were female, the were the most 'outspoken' about wasta which could reflect strong opinions about the topic.

These insights and findings are important to CCM research as it enables us to understand how *wasta*, as an example of a culture-specific concept, operates and how it is understood as a cultural concept in its emic setting. *Wasta* can have positive outcomes on the micro-level for individuals when mediating between parties helps a qualified individual secure a job though the mediation process. It is also beneficial to the organisation which can secure a qualified and loyal employee in a country where certain skills and qualifications are scares due to the brain drain of Jordanian employees to the Arab Gulf countries (Loewe et al., 2007; 2008). However, it can have some severe negative outcomes on the macro-level as it reduced organizational diversity and leads to reinforcing power pockets in particular groups. Another negative impact of this use of *wasta* is that it weakens the formal institution as it reduces trust in the political and legal institutions (Loewe et al., 2007).

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