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Camelia Ibrahim-Nassar
Oranim Academic College, Tivon, Israel, camelianassar@gmail.com

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When Arab Girls Break the Rules: A Qualitative Study

Camelia Ibrahim-Nassar

Oranim Academic College, Tivon, Israel
(camelianassar@gmail.com)

Abstract

Much has been written about the social control of Arab girls as one of the parental practices in a collective culture. Most girls are subject to strict rules and modesty codes and only a few dare to confront their culture by breaking the rules and engaging in risky unacceptable behavior. In this study, we interviewed eight such girls to examine why, when, and how they defied acceptable social norms and the consequences they suffered. Interestingly, the experience of risk taking yielded narratives that revealed a search for personal, social, and gender identity and highlighted the effect of the strictness of the family and the legitimation of the peer group. As I show in this paper, the participants in the study paid a heavy price for their actions and suffered severe emotional and social consequences, mainly because of the harsh reactions of their families and schools. Furthermore, they expressed anxiety regarding their future status in their collective culture. Our findings help explain how Arab girls in a collective culture bargain with the patriarchy, and will help educational counselors and therapists to understand better the needs of Arab girls and to intervene more effectively in such cases. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first qualitative study that has been conducted among young female Arab citizens of Israel. The definition of risky behavior needs to be revised in the context of authoritarian collective cultures to include disobedience that endangers the vital needs of girls. "Istighaba" (expressing personal opinions and needs secretly), which is a legitimate social coping mechanism, is a very risky behavior that exposes some of the girls to serious punishments.

Introduction

Arab culture is authoritarian and collective, and collective norms and values override the individual's needs and self-actualization. Thus, individuals who adhere to the rules and relinquish self-actualization receive support, love, and protection, and the close social and familial relationships that are a vital component of a happy life (Abu-Alnaja, 2003; Dwairy, 1997; Haj-Yahia, 2005; Sharabi, 1978). Conversely, individuals who dare to disobey, in particular, females, are subjected to rejection, imprisonment, and punishments that may include death when the "honor of the family" is threatened. Thus, in this culture, mothers are expected to teach their girls to be compliant and to respect and abide by the norms and values of the society. Within this cultural system, people survive by virtue of social coping mechanisms: *Mosayara* (pleasing others to *get al*ong), identifying with the oppressor, and *Istighaba* (expressing personal opinions and needs secretly) (Dwairy, 2006).

Risk-taking behavior

Western literature refers to risk-taking behavior as engaging in careless, uncalculated, activities (Berger, 1995). Actions of which the costs and benefits in the physical, economic or psycho-social aspects are uncertain can be considered risk-taking (He, Kramer, Houser, Chomitz, & Hacker, 2000). Risk-taking can be related to an action it-

self (speeding in a car, using violence, smoking) or to a certain negligent behavior (not using a condom, avoiding wearing a seat belt in a car) (Furby & Beyth-Marom, 1992; Igra & Irwin, 1996). Risky behavior can be associated with a one-time event or reflect a consistent tendency of the individual to undertake tasks that are considered either unsafe or unhealthy.

Different approaches have offered explanations of the phenomenon of risk-taking behavior among adolescents, including psycho-biological (Igra & Irwin, 1996), psycho-dynamic (Green, 1994), cognitive (Furby & Beyth -Marom, 1992; Elkind, 1967), developmental (Erikson, 1968), and social (Coleman, 1992). The explanations range from internal personal factors, such as moods and emotions, dimensions of self-esteem, and coping patterns, to external social factors, *i.e.*, environmental factors, such as parenting style, relationship with parents, the family atmosphere, and peer pressure. Patterns of risk-taking behavior among adolescents are diversified and multi-dimensional, and therefore, literature clusters them into several categories, such as excitement, rebelliousness, carelessness, and antisocial behavior (Gullone *et al.* 2000). Since adherence to the collective society is vital for survival in the Arab culture, disobedience, breaking the cultural rules, and *Istighaba*, when disclosed, appear to be risky behaviors, as they put the girl at risk and expose her to physical and psycho-social costs.

The Present Study

Since Arab culture is authoritarian and collective, this study seeks to examine in a culture-sensitive way risk-taking behavior among Arab female teenagers that involves breaking the familial and the social rules. Its objective is to understand their narratives concerning the factors that drove them to take risks and to expose the social and familial consequences of the risky behavior. Thus, this study is based on in-depth interviews conducted with eight seniors from Arab schools located in Arab villages in Northern Israel, who were referred to the school counselors by their teachers, the school principal, or their parents on the grounds of their risky behavior. Each counselor received an explanation regarding the research and the concept of "risk-taking behavior." The concept was defined according to theoretical and clinical findings as follows. 1. Initiating contact with a male despite being engaged to another man. 2. Meeting a person known only through the Internet. 3. Possession of alcohol on a school trip. 4. Starvation dieting. 5. Making statements about suicidal thoughts. 6. Possession of a mobile phone provided secretly by a male (without the parents' knowledge). 7. Acting disrespectfully toward a teacher and/or a principal.

The interview guidelines covered several open questions regarding the respondents' risk-taking behavior: the factors that led them to experience risk-taking behavior; the family, peers, and school's reaction and intervention; the perception and evaluation of the family's response and actions resulting from the risk-taking behavior; the impact of

the family intervention on self-perception; and the insights following the experience.

Results

The examination of the participants' emotional experiences showed that three main factors drove them to become involved in such behaviors.

Need for self-actualization

The respondents shared the same need to feel authentic regarding their feelings and to feel that their self-identification was not dictated by adults. The literature shows that the individual's psychological separateness in Arab society is limited (Dwairy, 1997; Dwairy, 2006). The self-esteem and self-image of the individual depend largely on family status and on the degree of support received within the family (Dwairy, 1997). The characteristics of family dependency and mental health significantly affect the adolescent's life. While, in general, values of individual separateness and independence are common in Western culture, adolescents in Arab family continue to be an integral part of their family and adhere to it (Dwairy, 2004). Therefore, the need for self-expression is perhaps even stronger in adolescents who grow up in the Arab society in Israel, a society that is in transition from a traditional and collectivistic to an individualistic modern society.

> Ahlam[1].- *"I think that I wanted to do something I belive in... do not have to accept things that are dictated to you, sometimes you feel the need to be yourself..."*

This participant's remark shows that she does not want to yield to the accepted social norms. She reflects that girls, as opposed to boys, in particular feel the social pressure, and also states a need for social change. This quote is significant in terms of its content. It reveals two contextual layers, a universal adolescent narrative and a specific Arabic female adolescent's narrative. A female adolescent in the Arab society who decides to defy the social norms, experiences a dual struggle, as a rebellious adolescent in an adult society and as a young woman in a patriarchal society.

Family strictness and atmosphere

As the literature shows, the family atmosphere and the assessment of the adolescent's opinions is one of the most significant factors for the prediction of risk-taking behavior (Andrew, Sharon & Matthew, 2013; Haavet, Saugsted & Straand, 2005). As our results show, the participants described their family atmosphere as "typically Arabic, strict, and traditional" and as playing a central role in their taking part in such behaviors:

> *"In our family, there is a traditional atmosphere... as long as we obey the parent's ruels- it's all going well. As soon as we disobey those rules, they begin to shout and claim that we don't appreciate them... we"* (Leila)

> Ahlam: *"We usually don't talk about intimate stuff. We talk like in every family… about grades, school, everyday stuff…actually, it's not "talking" at all…."*

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1 All personal names used in this paper are pseudonyms

A similar description appeared in all the interviews: the participants described the normal communication atmosphere in their families in terms such as "underestimation," "coldness," and "alienation." The participants stated that peace and quiet were attained by keeping their emotions and actions under control and lasted "as long as they did not violate the requirements of the family." The father is perceived as an intimidating figure who dictates a certain order in the family, which includes normative behavior that follows the tradition. Family communication does not include an emotional inner world, or individual thoughts and dreams. Verbal communication addresses concrete subjects, such as academic achievements and family duties.

The effect of the peer group

Peer support is an important factor in making a decision to initiate risk-taking behavior. Acceptance of the participant's action by her peers legitimizes her decision and makes her "normal," representing valuable support in a turbulent reality and when she feels alienated from her family. The manifested need for social acceptance, together with a need for self-actualization and "to be a maker of social change," stresses the contradictions that characterize these adolescents in general. In addition, gender identity makes a considerable contribution to the experience of engaging in risk-taking behavior and has implications for life quality in general, in this particular, for young females (Hart, 2001; John, 2008; Michael & Ben-Zur, 2008).

Haifaa, a respondent who went on a strict diet stated:

"I think, other girls who went on a diet influenced me [having a strict diet]...Boys always want a thin chick... It's in the air, you know?! I just wanted to be like everyone else, to be thin and beautiful".

This quote emphasizes the insecurity following the transformations in gender identity of a female Arab adolescent. The respondent is rather confused as to who influences her more strongly to engage in risk-taking behavior, boys or girls. However, this is of less importance, and the main issue in her statement is that she "wanted to be like everyone else," as if her identity is completely dependent on the opinion of her peers.

Emotional and social consequences of the experience

As expected, the main findings show that all the girls paid a heavy price for their actions, and they bore severe emotional and social consequences. They were punished, humiliated, and controlled by their father and elder brother. It is not surprising that the mothers suffered harsh reactions from their husbands and were blamed as failures. Mothers were identified by the girls with the oppression, since they blamed their daughters and asked their husbands to punish them severely. School counselors were the only persons to support, not judge, and understand the girls.

Amal: *"[there was] A lot of shouting at me and my mother. My father started to terrorize her,*

saying that she must have known I had the mobile from the beginning and she kept it a secret. My brother started shouting and beating me like I told you..."

The daughter had to pay a heavy price for her violation of the family rules and the family's honor. We see a pattern of projection of the responsibility for the daughter's behavior on the mother figure. The reaction of the father is rather open aggressiveness, supported by his elder son, toward the daughter and mother, a situation that creates a "war" atmosphere inside the family: men vs women. It reflects that women and men still play contrasting roles in a traditional society, despite, or perhaps because of, the "modern" influences (Abu-Baker, 2003; Barakat, 2000; Haj-Yahia, 2005). Children grow up in this reality and become used to accepting these roles or resisting them, as we see in the present study.

Another reaction can be described as parental avoidance and denial of responsibility following the exposure of the daughter's actions. This pattern is related to "less severe" types of risk-taking behavior that is "less threatening" to the family honor, such as strict dieting or behaving disrespectfully toward an educator and/or the principal.

Heifaa: *"My father hardly intervened in these matters... he asked my mother to go with me to a doctor to get an explanation why I'm losing so much weight..."*

This quote shows that the participant's decision to follow a strict diet does not violate family honor. This is a matter that should be taken care of, however, by a mother figure and someone who has professional authority, a practitioner. The father does not involve himself in the emotional aspects of his daughters' experience, nor does he have any personal thoughts or opinion on this matter. He orders her and her mother to do something to "solve the problem."

Mother's reaction

As the participants mentioned, they experienced their mother's responses regarding risk-taking behavior quite differently as compared to the reactions of the fathers. The mother was perceived as a weak figure and submissive to her husband and as showing no support and understanding of her daughter's development process. The findings show congruence between the findings reported in the literature (Abu-Baker, 2003; Haj-Yahia, 2005) and the participants' reports. As seen in the following quotes, the mother's response has three dimensions: *accepting* the husband's attitude, *taking the blame*, and *moderating* the husband's behavior. Their responses were not as supportive, warm, or accepting as their daughters expected them to be

Huda: *"My mother and father united against me. It seems to me as if they had [finally] the opportunity to unite against me. She didn't spare her anger for sure."*

Sausan: *"My mother did not respond, because my father yelled at her too and accused her of causing my behavior. It made me feel sorry for her too!"*

As can be seen from these fragments, the mothers accused their daughters and de-

nied their emotional experience. In both cases, the mothers assumed the "male" role and took care of the situation in an instrumental way. Perhaps it was their way of moderating their husband's harsh reaction and supporting their daughter.

Emotional consequences: "damaged identity"

The narratives yielded that the participants bore severe social and emotional consequences: they were rejected by their father and by the environment for transgressing the traditionally accepted mode of behavior for a young woman in Arab society, for violation of family honor (Hassan, 2002; Sharabi, 1988).

The interviewees' experience as described by them in the following quotes is similar in its nature to a universal sensation created under pressure (Lazarus & Folkman, 1994). This involves three processes: *initial cognitive evaluation mode, awareness of the meaning of the situation*, and *choosing the response according to whether it constitutes a threat or a challenge.*

> Ahlam: *"[I felt] Awkward at first, and then I was scared because I knew that something like this would not go down well at school and with my parents too... Today, I feel acute pain because of what I went through... the most difficult thing to bear was what they would think of me at school. Afterwards, it was quite difficult to bear the sharp and insulting words I heard from them, even from the school management and my parents."*

The respondent describes her experience on three different emotional levels as a response to the stress that she encountered. On the first level, first there is an initial response to the situation – confusion, and then, an understanding of the threat and danger involved in exposure of the deed to her parents and the school. Later, as a secondary evaluation, awareness of the existing threat is followed by a strong sense of fear in the knowledge that such an act will not be received well by the family. When she felt acute pain as a result of the insulting words following her family and the school management's reactions, she reconstructed a deeper emotional reaction to her experience.

Not many of the girls turned to religion as a remedy for emotional wounds; most did not want to take this path and "locked themselves away" from parents and the school. None of the girls mentioned her peers as a supportive factor in their personal drama.

> Leila: *"I was very fightened and I was very afraid of my dad's reaction... now I really feel remorse, I feel guilty... I really thought about suicide..."*

Following the interview, the respondents constructed a script containing a retrospective view of their experience. This script of remorse has a therapeutic meaning for their damaged selfhood and identity as an individual. The girls' actions have a strong psychological effect on their ego. Consequently, they interpreted their behavior in terms of a holistic experience, which changed their life and selfhood: suicidal thought symbolizes a strong wish to diminish one's ego.

Having become aware of their fears and worries and the price they will have to pay for violating social norms and family expectations, the girls can realize much more clearly their own wishes and desires.

Insights following the experience: A different motherhood - "I'll be a different mother."

Following the harsh reaction from their closest environment and the school, the participants realized a few things regarding their parents and the Arabic society in general. The image of a compassionate and supportive mother was shattered and yielded realization regarding the inferior status of women in their family and in the Arabic society in general. The mother reflects the submission of women to their husband's power, strengthened by traditional roles and values. Despite the daughters' expectations that they would understand their development process, the mothers "united against" them with their husbands in order to maintain "the family honor." The girls' experiences show the paradox of the patriarchal family in general: although the mother is perceived as a supportive and warm figure, whom a daughter can trust at a crucial moment she denies her daughter her protection. Accordingly, the participants come to understand that their mother is a victim, exactly like themselves. This awareness causes much shock and despair following the realization that this is the accepted role of women in the society in which they are growing up.

In each of the narratives, a similar disillusionment regarding the status of women in Arab society in general and the status of adolescents in their society was evident. This disillusionment led to the girls' desire to be a different kind of mother and construct their womanhood in their own authentic way.

> Amal: *"In the future I want to have a closer and open relationship with my daughter. I will refer to her as my friend."*

They see themselves as strong, supportive, and protective future mothers, who will understand their daughters' emotional needs and their wish for freedom. Their narratives also contain a statement regarding social and economic inequality between men and women in their patriarchal society: it should be changed in the future for the sake of the next generation of women.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the inner experience of Arab females who dare to confront their culture by breaking the family and society's rules and engaging in risky unacceptable behavior. Our findings shed light on the emotional needs of female Arab adolescents who live in a traditional Arab society, but at the same time, are exposed to secular Western values, and on the three factors that led the participants to engage in risk-taking behavior. First, the participants showed that, as for adolescents in a Western culture, such "risky" behaviors are of importance in their search for self-actu-

alization and personal, social, and gender identity. The necessity for authentic and emotional development was also manifested. However, this behavior encounters very strong resistance and leads to restrictions being imposed by the family and society. As stated previously in the literature, in a traditional Arab family "family honor" is considered highly important and leads to a correspondingly high degree of restriction of the freedom of individuals and of women in particular (Barakat, 2000).

The second factor was, as found in Ben-Zur and Michael (Ben-Zur, & Michael, 2007), the effect of the strictness and the harsh atmosphere. The third was the legitimation of such behaviors given by the peer group. Although within this cultural system, people survive by virtue of social coping mechanisms, *Mosayara* (pleasing others to g*et al*ong), identifying with the oppressor, and *Istighaba* (expressing personal opinions and needs secretly), in the case of females, *Istighaba* seems to be a risky behavior that exposes some of the girls to punishments and heavy sanctions.

Important findings were related to the emotional and social consequences of the girls' experiences. Young women endure severe social and emotional consequences of risk-taking behavior: they are rejected by their fathers and by the environment for transgressing the traditionally accepted mode of behavior for a young woman in Arab society, for violation of family honor. Another reaction can be described as parental avoidance and denial of responsibility following the exposure of their daughter's actions. This pattern is related to "less severe" types of risk-taking behavior that are "less threatening" to the family honor, such as strict dieting and acting disrespectfully toward an educator and/or principle. The girls evidenced great disappointment that they did not receive support from their mothers, who as victims of gender inequality are blamed for their daughters' violation of the rules since they are perceived as the person responsible for her socialization process and for her "inappropriate" conduct. School counselors are in a unique position to provide support, since they have the ability to observe students closely via parents (mothers, mostly) and peers, and are visible. This continuity of presence allows school counselors to develop strong, trusting relationships with students.

According to our findings, we suggest that the definition of risky behavior needs to be revised in collective cultures to include disobedience that endangers the vital needs of girls.

Author note

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