

The Sudanese Sufis' Views of Normal and Abnormal Development of Children

An Exploration of Cultural Perception

Introduction:

It was generally believed that the exploration of the belief systems of a society or a culture is important to a better understanding of human development and psychopathology. Judgements about children's behaviour will be mediated by adults' views of what constitutes normal and abnormal development (Stratton, 1990).

These views are mostly influenced by cultural perceptions. In turn, these conceptions are likely to be bounded by world views held in different cultures, their goals and ideals. This means certain behaviours which are acceptable in one culture will be unacceptable in others. Behaviours that are deemed not to be a serious problem in one culture may be seen as positively harmful to the child in another. Adult's perceptions in different cultures might also differ in the factors that they deemed to be responsible for the development of problems. While in themselves these perceptions and their origins are of academic interest, an understanding of them is also required before parent's judgements about behaviour can be properly interpreted. In this regard, investigators and developmental theorists (e.g., Stratton, 1990; Wertsch & Youniss, 1988) have examined some of the ways in which socio-historical contexts influence the formulation of issues in developmental psychology. They felt that it is important to examine the social, political, religious, and historical forces of culture when trying to understand the discipline. For instance, parental beliefs may be organized in terms of smaller subsystems that are interrelated within a larger, more global system (Badri, 1997; Mc Gillicuddy, Sigel, & Johnson, 1979; Wertsch & Youniss, 1987)). In addition, the uniqueness of cultural orientation and practices of a certain society or community might have shaped norms of behaviour, concepts of development, and ideas of abnormality in a way that characterize that particular society. In line with this approach, the cultural theory of personality and psychopathology suggests that since the cultural world precedes the birth of the individual, culture will pattern the individual's development and his psychological make-up (Lewis-Fernandez & Keinman, 1994).

Having recognized the link between cultural ideals and expectations and perceptions of disorder it was deemed necessary to explore the sorts of views held by Sufis living in the central part of the Sudan about children's psychological development and behaviour problems. A Sufi is a religious person well known for his influence on traditional religious education and has a leading social role in his area. He is regarded by Sudanese people as an example for wisdom, piety, integrity, success, and social recognition. In the present study, Sufis were consulted for more than a reason. Historically, Sufis are often seen as the main representative and exponent of the traditional model that has largely contributed to the build-up of the Sudanese culture (Mekki, 1996). They also represent a source of advice for psychologically troubled people and they have been frequently asked by psychiatrists and psychotherapists to participate in the treatment of some mentally disturbed people (Baashar, 1982; Badri, 1979). Moreover, Sociologists and psychologists alike are aware of the influence that the sufi culture has exerted on the Sudanese collective conscious (Baashar, 1982; Badri, 1972).

Significant religious Sufis in the Sudanese society were interviewed about children and development. The main purpose of this was to develop an understanding of the Sudanese Sufi's attitudes to psychological development and behavioural deviance. In particular, from where it does originate, which factors affect the developmental processes and what are the norms that determine ideas of behavioural abnormality. In other words, the interviews investigated the role of culture and religion in determining ideas about normal and abnormal behaviour of children in the Sudan.

Method Subjects:

Fifty Sufi Sheikhs (traditional education & religion leaders) from both Khartoum and Central regions were interviewed. The Sufis were expected to hold extremely traditional views by which Islam and the Quran are thought to be a literal guide to parenting. Usually, a Sufi has his own confined place known as 'Maseed' where he practices his spiritual activities and has his school for teaching children Qur'an and the basics of Islam. Inside the Maseed all people are involved in religious activities and learning. Children also reside in this Maseed to be trained and disciplined in its spiritual atmosphere. In particular children get up early in the morning to join their classes for reading, memorizing, and reciting Qur'an and after a short break they are ready for Arabic lessons. This also in order to learn simple arithmetic and listening to religious stories in addition to supervised playing and other social activities. After having some rest at the Maseed, children

are encouraged to join the elders in farming and cultivating the Maseed owned land. In the evening, Qur'an classes are resumed. Meals and classes are scheduled around the prayer times. The Sufi (senior Murshid⁽¹⁾) is assisted by several junior Murshids in teaching and administrative tasks. The general atmosphere conveys respect, kindness and love. The senior Murshid appears every morning in the Maseed's yard to inspect, direct, and advice junior Murshids and pupils. The senior Murshid is regarded by children and others as an example for wisdom, piety, integrity, success, and social recognition.

The most famous Sufis in Khartoum and Central regions who are well known for their religious and traditional education influence were selected for the study. The interviews with the Sufi's in many ways took place in a somewhat ceremonial atmosphere.

The Interviewing Schedule:

The interview was semi-structured and consisted of five sections. In brief, section one inquired about attitudes and concepts of normal development in the Sudan. Section two investigated ideas and notions of abnormal development. Section three was concerned with family structure and its links with child development and parenting strategies. The last section examined the role of culture and religion in the child's normal and abnormal development.

Procedure :

The interviews were carried out either in the place of residence or in the Maseed yard. On entering the interview location, the interviewer explained the general aims of the interview to the subjects who agreed to participate in the study. All interviews were tape recorded for transcription and analysis.

Data Analysis :

The subjects' responses to the questions were submitted to qualitative analysis. Content analysis was used as a sensible method for analyzing data because it has the property of dealing objectively with meaning and conceptualization. Content analysis is generally defined as any technique for making inferences by objectively identifying specific characteristics of messages (Holsti, 1969). Although content analysis is primarily associated with written communication, it may be used with any form of messages including television and radio programs, speeches, films,

⁽¹⁾ The word Murshid is an Arabic term which means a guide person. It is particularly popular in the field of religious education

and interviews (Shaughnessy & Zechmeister, 1990). There are three steps to follow in conducting research using content analysis. First, the identification of a relevant source; what is relevant depends on the aims of the study and the questions the researcher is raising. However, in the case of interviews the researcher may have some ideas in advance of questions to ask or topics to pursue. So initial or emergent issues will provide some guidance to the categories worth developing in the analysis of data (Dey, 1993). The second step must involve an appropriate sample selection from this source. The goal of sampling is meant to obtain a sample that is representative of all the data of interest or should reflect the issues on which the researcher is seeking evidence. The final step is coding which requires that relevant descriptive categories and appropriate units of measurement be identified. What determines a relevant descriptive category is related to the goals of the study. It is known that in many content analytic studies the communication is written. In this case, the units of classification generally include single words, characters, sentences or paragraphs, themes, or particular items (Holsti, 1969). Accordingly, the present analysis will focus on themes as units of classification and will run through two levels: At the first level, recurring themes in the responses of each group to each question will be identified. From these, major themes will be selected. The second level will examine the content, significance, and explore the relationship between these themes. So the analysis will move from descriptive at the first level to an explanatory and interpretative approach at the second one.

Results

Description of Text and Preliminary Themes:

The aims of this level were to characterize the text as accurately as possible and to describe and differentiate the subtleties of themes. With these two aims in mind the five areas were surveyed. These were the nature of human development, adjustment and maladjustment, child-care, the family and development, culture and religion. The subjects views on each of these will be described.

1.The Nature of Development :

Among the Sufis there was unanimity of view on what constituted healthy development. They all agreed that healthy development produces a good person who keeps the remembrance of Allah and effectively interacts with his society. They all mentioned that this goal of development is achieved through the religious (Islamic) way of life. Subject A was typical of this position.

“Healthy development means that the child ends up with a well balanced and integrated personality whose ultimate aim is to worship Allah as well as to relate and contribute to his people and society. In our society, this could be achieved mainly through a religious way of life which enhances a person’s good human nature- that is his Fitra” (S-A).

This religious way of life was indicated by the Sufis’ idea that the parents or the family, in which the child was reared, would have a religious style of living complying to commands related to all aspect of development.

“A person , or a family, is said to be religious if he performs his religious duties such as prayers, learning and reciting Qur’an, doing good and refraining from bad deeds, and obeying the religious teachings relating to personal, social and public life” (S-B).

Two of the Sufis (A, D) added that this religious way of living would help children actualize their own “Fitra”; This is the Islamic idea that a new-born child is endowed with the natural tendency to do good and to aspire for the knowledge of the divine. Although all the Sufis mentioned the religious style of living as essential for healthy development, subject D considered that favourable family conditions (where co-operation, cohesion and satisfaction of the basic needs were met) were also important .

“I understand healthy development in the context of religion. Bringing up children and their education should be in the context of religious values. This will help the child develop his Fitra reflecting natural goodness which is reinforced by good family conditions such as good food, good parenting and rearing styles, and good example. This will result in a well adjusted person who is religiously motivated to worshipping Allah and willing to participate in, and contribute to, his society” (S-D).

They mentioned this conception in relation to the religious style of living explaining that its comprehensive and all-embracing characteristics shadow every aspect of life. In addition to this, subjects A, B, and D, believed that having good company and exposure to constructive social experience in the context of religious values were necessary for healthy development. Subjects A, B, and D mentioned that “conforming to social norms and contributing to society” are characteristics of healthy development. Subject C put it in a different way stating that only the

religious way of living will lead to the best emotional, social, and cognitive development. It is important to note that most of the Sufis had emphasized the religious, social, and psychological aspects of development while two of them added the importance of the physical aspect.

The Sufi subjects all felt that they themselves had responsibility for the healthy development of children as long as they were concerned with religious education in their community. They shared the view that they have to educate children in the Maseed to learn Qur'an and the basics of Islam and to be influenced by its atmosphere. They also declared their responsibility to extend advice to parents because they believed that every Sufi has a special insight and knowledge about people's behaviour.

S-D went on to state:

“When children are admitted to Maseed at the age of 3 or 4, they have to be well catered for, disciplined, taught Qur'an, and see a good example in front of them. In addition to that, I'm also concerned with helping and advising parents particularly those who have troubled children” (S-D).

2- Adjustment and Maladjustment :

When asked which characteristics they would like to see in children's behaviour Sufis gave the following qualities: being religiously motivated, brave, honest, confident, sociable, truthful, obedient, and grateful to parents.

“I would like to see in my children those characteristics always appreciated by our religion such as: honesty, telling the truth, obedience, confidence, courage having good communication with people, cleanliness, and showing respect to parents and other”(S-A)

Subject C added creativity, and reciting Qur'an, while Subject D added attention, humour, and intelligence. The Sufi group shared the view that if a person had no religious feeling, he would not be able to have good characteristics.

“I want to tell you something brother, about the roots of good behaviour. I believe that good characteristics are the fruits of a good level of religiosity and if a person does not have this religiosity he will be devoid of these good characteristics” (S-D)

The entire group agreed that lying and cheating, shyness, stealing, aggressiveness, disobedience, being religiously undutiful and ungrateful to parents are among undesirable

characteristics. In addition to these subject A mentioned quarrelling, laziness, and inattentiveness while subject F added destructiveness and truanting. When Sufis were asked about the upset these undesirable behaviours might cause, all the respondents expressed that they will be upset by these symptoms because they reflect signs of failure in acquiring the appropriate behaviour in accordance with the societal and religious norms. This notion is clearly spelt out by subject G's response:

“I feel very much annoyed when I touch some of these bad characteristics in children's behaviour because they indicate a deep-seated problem in the child's acquisition of the suitable behaviour anticipated by our society and dictated by our religion” (S-c). Subject D added that he was

“Also upset by these problems as they indicate failure in bringing up children which parents are responsible for before ‘Allah’”

The Sufi group declared its ability to detect worries and anxiety felt by children

“From my experience I can easily detect any kind of behaviour problem shown by children and I expect most Sufis can do the same,” (S-E).

When asked about the causes of these behaviour problems, Sufis enumerated the causes of these disturbances as bad family conditions, bad example, and an unfavorable surrounding environment (bad influence of peers, neighbours or other contacts).

“In my opinion, the causes of these problems go back to family life-the type and amount of care children received, how parents materialized their beliefs and the way adopted in child-parents interaction. Moreover, an important factor is the influence of neighbours and other children in the street” (S-A).

“The main cause of (these) problems is the failure in bringing up children in the religious frame of values” (S-C).

And according to him:

“An irreligious way means that parents or the family at large are not paying attention to the religious teachings regarding child-care or themselves are failing to set a good example for their children to follow in terms of performing prayers or any other religious duties”.

In addition, Subjects C and D directly pointed out that the lack of religious awareness was the most serious problem. It is of interest to note that ingratitude to parents was considered as a

serious behaviour problem. Then the Sufis were asked about the action they were likely to take if they saw those problems in children's behaviour. In response to this question, all subjects mentioned that they would help troubled children themselves through religious guidance and special supervised training and they might also recommend professional help (seeking the help of a doctor or a psychologist) afterwards.

“In most cases I will try first to understand the problem and its causes and then I will try to change the undesirable characteristics through a religious guide plan and training. Sometimes I used to advise parents of troubled children to take them to doctors or other child specialists” (S-B).

Subject D maintained that :

“Some of the disordered children are influenced by an evil eye or evil spirit which were to be cured by reading certain verses from the Qur'an and some rituals”

Subject A remarked that :

“ Maseed's children have less disturbances compared to their counterpart outside because they have the advantage of being socialized in a spiritually confined environment” (S-A)

Discussion

The aim of this study was to provide a window on the Sudanese mind concerning child-care and development. A group of Sudanese sufis were interviewed about a number of areas related to this topic. In the record of what they said as revealed in the results a number of themes emerge and re-emerge. In this discussion the most important of these themes will be distinguished and drawn out.

Religion and Psychological Development :

It is clear that the most powerful and pervasive theme running through the answers of whole group is the religious one. This is manifested in many ways in terms of observing religious commands defining the functions of psychological development, parenting, rearing practices, parent-child relations and father-mother relations. In fact, at one extreme the ultimate aim of human development was exclusively defined as the remembrance of 'Allah' and effective interaction with society. In line with this finding, Ahmad, (1987) postulates that religious inspiration, law and social order have shaped ideas about family processes and human development in Muslim communities.

For instance Islam has emphasized securing of the physiological and psychological needs of children as essential means of development. In that Islam has clearly defined the role and functions of the family and the necessity of providing kindness, respect, guidance, and adequate living conditions including positive influence from the surrounding environment. In the Islamic conception of environment, all the social, the spiritual, and the physical aspects are equally important. If these conditions are satisfied this will pave the way for the child to develop and maintain his own 'Fitra' which helps him to do good and aspire for the realization of the Divine (Mohamed, 1995).

Parents' Beliefs and Child-care Strategies:

McGillicuddy-DeLisi (1982) found that parents' beliefs about child development and processes were determinant of parental teaching behaviour. In the present study we found that Sudanese Sufis' beliefs are construed as a function of parents religious observance and cultural conformity. However, variability in Sudanese parents' religiosity and culturally related beliefs might be expected to affect the degree of parental responsibility towards their children and would therefore regulate the pattern and precision of child-care offered such as feeding, weaning , religious training, modeling, and socialization (Shennan & Sonuga-Barke, 2001).

The present findings could also be interpreted in terms of Stratton's model (1988) about parents' cultural beliefs and their effect on structuring children's environments. Stratton described two levels of parental beliefs: General beliefs which include gender role, moral values, political and religious views, and concepts of development. And then specific beliefs that are associated with individual children's behaviour. The model supposes that processes of general beliefs will affect specific beliefs, which in turn determine the strategies of child-care and treatment. Stratton goes on to show that cultural values may operate in such a way that different kinds of treatment will have different outcomes. He illustrates this idea by an example from Rohner and Pottengill (1985) who found that what children learn from parental behaviours may differ according to cultural values. While American youths considered a high level of parental control as indicating hostility and rejection, Korean youths associated control with warmth and low ratings of neglect.

Perception of Behaviour Problems and Modes of Treatment :

It is generally held that culturally mediated beliefs, values, traditions, and associated child-rearing and socialization practices may help outline both rates and types of child behaviour

problems (see, e.g., Lambert, Weisz., & Knight, 1980; Rutter, 1987) and the kinds of problems parents perceive or find distressing (e.g., Al-Awad & Sonuga-Barke, 2002; Weisz., Suwanlert, Chaiyasit, Weiss, Walter, & Anderson, 1988). In line with this approach, Sudanese sufis' perceptions of behaviour problems, their causes and modes of treatment were explored. Although the most frequent causes of behaviour problems perceived by the sample of the present study (bad family conditions, bad example, negative influence of the social environment (peers or neighbours), poor child-care, parental conflict and family discord,) coincided with Western or global perceptions of behaviour problems, one cause (lack of religious awareness) did not. Interestingly, a considerable majority of the subjects related this situation to parents' failure to meet the religious standards necessary for healthy upbringing of children. The good characteristics one would like to see in children's behaviour are interpreted in terms of the fruits of religious observance. The connection between religiosity and good behaviour is then seen like a plant and its fruits. In this connection, Al-Ghazzali, an ancient Muslim scholar and philosopher, is reported to have assumed that deficiency of spiritual feelings, initiated by irreligiosity, may incapacitate the healthy development of a person, and consequently put the child at greater risk for psychopathology (Siddik, 1985).

It is worth mentioning that ingratitude to parents is distinguished from disobedience and is considered as one of the more serious behaviour problems. Disobedience could be related to people in general whereas ingratitude is specific to parents and indicates a lack of religious awareness. It is clearly stated in the Qur'an that ingratitude to parents is one of the most abhorrent sins a Muslim could commit. One can easily sense the intrinsic connection between the religious theme and the concept of behaviour problems. In attempting to alleviate children's problems, all Sufis were clear in considering themselves one of the sources of treatment of these behavioural disturbances as they claim some insight into the behaviour of people in general. As a matter of fact, Baaher (1982) reiterated this role by stating that besides their religious, social, and educational practices Sufis have also therapeutic functions. In so doing "*they apply their knowledge and skills within the sociocultural context and in close harmony with patients' and relatives' sentiments and expectations*". Perhaps such a view has motivated the emergence of a trend initiated by Badri (a leading Sudanese psychologist, psychotherapist and a formerly UNESCO expert) and Baasher, (a leading Sudanese psychiatrist and WHO regional advisor) calling for the development of a Sudanese approach in psychological and clinical practice that accommodates the Sudanese and

Islamic traditions, without contradiction, in modern practices of psychology and psychiatry in the Sudan and in other Muslim countries (Baashar, 1982; Badri, 1972; 1979).

Conclusion :

For the Sufis it is quite clear that religion defines the goal of development and provides the means to that goal. They believe that Islam should both permeate and structure family life and regulate child-care practices. There is a clear belief that if the strictures of the Qur'an are adhered to in these matters then children will grow to be both happy (through spiritual consolation) and productive members of Sudanese society. Their views of healthy development were firmly grounded in tradition and emphasized sociability and filial piety as crucial values. Where development went wrong it was clear that they suggested both discipline and spiritual remedies. In this way the Sufis set a benchmark of extreme traditionality and religiosity in the Sudanese society. The practical implications of this research may be that it will give us an idea about the sources of the concepts of normal and abnormal development among the Sudanese people. As well the findings have highlighted the importance of culture and religion in shaping ideas of development. Apart from the academic interest, this research may assist us in formulating policies, training and planning of mothering, child-care, social, education, health and welfare facilities for the community. It may also intensify awareness among those people who provide services particularly those who may hold Western perspectives or have little understanding of the role of culture and religion in emotional and social development of children.

Although the benefits of conducting qualitative research to achieve a better understanding of the underlying beliefs that motivate the concepts of child development and strategies in the Sudan appears encouraging, there are a number of limitations that must be recognized. First, one limitation of adopting a qualitative approach in social research is that the context in which data are collected may shape the comments received. Second, most important in this respect are the characteristics of the interviewer, in particular his education and social background, his perceived attitudes to the respondents' category, his understanding to the relevant cultural and religious beliefs. The background of interviewers and the language used in the interview may affect responses to questions about normal and abnormal development. A Sufi, a teacher or a clinician for example might be influenced by people's perceptions of his position and role in the society. Finally, other factors such as gender, race and ethnicity, class and status, age and religion might

also affect the respondents' comments. In particular, the issue of identity formation and perseverance whether it be religious, cultural or professional is pertinent. In the present interviews, respondents made frequent reference to religion and culture in defining the concepts and practices of normal and abnormal development. This frequent reference may convey their real attitudes but also could be seen as affirming their religious and cultural identity in the face of the reality of the Westernisation and globalisation influence sweeping through their society.

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