

30th World Summit on Positive Psychology, Mindfulness, Psychotherapy and Philosophy

March 18-19, 2019 | Chicago, USA

VIDEO PRESENTATIONS

CLINICAL AND EXPERIMENTAL PSYCHOLOGY 2019, VOLUME 5 | DOI: 10.4172/2471-2701-C1-002

On the importance of culture in understanding child development, attachment and the promotion of happiness

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Child psychology theories and child-rearing practices described in psychology textbooks mainly emerged in Western countries; however, the role of culture in their application is undeniable. Only recently have culturally-sensitive findings emerged in the Arab world: “What does happiness mean to you?”, “What comes first, your happiness or that of the group?” or even “What does attachment security look to you in terms of your relationship with your child?” The cultural meanings we tend to ascribe to these questions lead to a reevaluation and refining of “appropriate” attachment and parenting styles, as each culture conceptualizes closeness, connectedness, and happiness

differently. More specifically, the Middle East has been construed as more collectivistic, promoting interdependence in the family and regulating emotions during the conflict in a way which would promote harmony within the group. The individual self is thus constructed as part of the collective. Some scholars, therefore, argued that, although withdrawal and disengagement are likely features of avoidant attachment in the Western societies, it is unlikely to pinpoint these behaviors in the Arab world, where interdependence and preoccupation with interpersonal relationships are central to the daily routine. In this talk, I hope to map and discuss a few premises to consider in promoting the child’s healthy development from infancy to adolescence, zoning on the role of cultural understandings of happiness and the parent-child relationship. The focus will be on the following factors in their shaping of the abovementioned constructs

(1) individualism versus collectivism, (2) independence versus interdependence, (3) essentiality of mother and alloparenting, (4) role of fathers, (5) parental control, (6) gender roles, (7) emotion expression and (8) the role of the environment, more specifically having been an adolescent during the war.

Biography

Pia Tohme Khalaf graduated with a Ph.D. from University College London, investigating parental mentalizing capacities with regards to their adolescent identical twins and its effects on attachment security. She is also trained in the Approach to Parenting Teenagers from the Open Door Young People’s consultation services and in Mentalization-Based Therapy for Children and Adolescents, as well as its application in a school setting, from the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families. She currently works with children, adolescents and their parents in private practice, based on attachment and mentalization principles and teaches on a part-time basis at the Lebanese American University. She also consults at the Association of Justice and Mercy, working with prisoners and their families. Her main research interests focus on the cross-cultural application of the construct of attachment in Lebanon, as well as the role played by mentalization in our culture, in promoting healthy development from infancy through to adolescence.

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