

Review of: "Wasta: The Culture of Nepotism on the Arabian Peninsula"

Amr Adly¹

¹ Political Science, American University in Cairo, Egypt

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The article is interesting and timely given the major socio-cultural changes that several GCC countries are undertaking with the aim of diversifying their economies away from depending on fossil fuels.

Despite its points of strength, I have some serious conceptual, theoretical, and methodological concerns that I think the authors need to adequately address before the article can be published.

To start with, the authors subscribe too much to the outdated modernization theory, invoking quasi-orientalist terms like tribalism and traditional norms, especially when talking about such values being deeply ingrained in "Arab" Gulf societies. In doing so, they miss the modernization processes that reshaped the Gulf societies since the assumption of large-scale oil and gas production.

Conceptually, I don't quite get why wasta is always seen as corruption, which is an abuse of public office or resources or both. Wasta can definitely include connections in the private sector. Are the authors confining their approach to wasta to jobs in the public sector? If so, they need to say so as clearly as possible because other than that, wasta would simply be a system of inter-personal information transmission and cannot qualify as corruption even if it discriminates against non-wasta holders.

The macro-structural context is also very important. Are expats competing in the same job market with nationals in the oil-rich GCC countries? The literature on labor markets in the GCC is adamant about the deep split between a national-dominated public sector and an expat-dominated private sector. How they are competing is something the authors need to tell us clearly and systematically. I am afraid the discrimination in favor of nationals is much broader and has served as a cornerstone in nation-building and clientelism in the GCC, going way beyond wasta as personalistic favoritism.

Theoretically, I find a major incoherence between invoking some of the biggest names in hermeneutics like Heidegger, Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur while keeping a positivist research design based on content analysis. As far as I understand, hermeneutics requires deep discourse interpretation with the aim of understanding how the respondents or subjects understand and construct their world representing power relations. Conversely, content analysis is about assigning keywords that are deemed important and are given meanings by the authors. I don't think both paradigms could be possibly combined. I found a very thin justification for combining an inherently interpretative non-positivist method like hermeneutics with a large number automated study

Methodologically, why the English-speaking videos at all? To whom do they refer, and what about the context of the videos themselves?

I noticed “Bribe” appears as a keyword. But bribery is not nepotism, which is based on some kind of kin or as-if kin solidarity.

Maybe the authors can use more qualitative means like personal interviews or even a focus group to complement their content analysis while addressing the theoretical coherence of combining hermeneutics with content analysis.

I hope this review is helpful, and good luck.