

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

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Scientific research aims to improve theory. Theory has three functions, namely, describing, explaining, and predicting a phenomenon or a construct. Theory improvements could be accomplished in two major ways: by generalizing it to new populations, situations, and contexts; and by making it more specific to include new explanatory, moderating, or consequential variables related to the phenomenon or the construct. This study's objective has been limited to the description of the phenomenon of wasta.

The study is a brave effort to use a new tool in researching an old phenomenon. The tool can only assist in achieving the research objective. The study's objective is defined as to "*explore* the phenomenon of wasta, a form of nepotism deeply embedded in the socio-cultural fabric of the Arabian Peninsula, particularly within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states." "Exploration" is usually associated with a new construct, phenomenon, situation, context, or geographic or cultural area. A search for the word 'wasta' on Google Scholar yielded 14,100 hits, suggesting that wasta is a well-studied and well-documented phenomenon. Thus, the word 'explore' does not do justice to scientific research that investigates an old and theoretically well-grounded construct. Since the phenomenon has already been described, explained, and predicted in over 14K sources, the contribution of this study to theory development is limited.

The research question, which is more specific, asks: "How is wasta perceived by the population of the Gulf states—primarily as a societal mechanism that generates social capital, or as a practice that compromises fairness and meritocracy?" The question is loaded as it already includes the assumption that possible perceptions of the social phenomenon are bi-polar, meaning wasta generates social capital OR creates injustice. As a social construct, wasta could not be tangibly or mathematically described, and using perceptions is a fair way to describe it. However, the capacity of this study's samples to represent "the population of the Gulf states" is questionable. Both sources of data, namely, YouTube and Reddit, are visited by a specific group of users, who do not necessarily represent a population of 56.4 million (2021) Gulf states' citizens. For example, "According to recent data, Reddit users are typically young, male, well-educated, and tend to lean more liberal, with a significant portion being Gen Z and Millennials; a large percentage of Reddit users hold at least a college degree." Moreover, the method selected for answering the research question could not provide an answer. The Gadamer approach does not provide weight to the various components (successfully described in the article) of the construct, and in the absence of weights, we cannot answer the question of the level of significance of the social capital and the equity aspects of wasta.

The scholars correctly conclude that the "Gadamer's approach does not seek to provide definitive answers but rather

guides the researcher towards understanding through the dynamic interplay between the parts and the whole of a text or phenomenon.” This study’s results provide some description of the “parts and the whole” but could not provide any suggestion as for the “dynamic interplay between” them, beyond what we already know. Consequently, this research tool should probably be reserved for “explorations” of new phenomena and constructs that are not well described and could still benefit from a rudimentary description and a beginning of a new line of research.

Alternatively, this research tool could be employed to investigate differences between two (or more) groups of users of different data sources. For example, one could find out whether the readers of the *Wall Street Journal*, considered business-oriented, and *The Guardian*, considered socially oriented, adopt different attitudes towards *wasta*. Background information about the two groups of users available on the Internet may provide explanations - a second and more advanced objective of good theory development. As it stands, the study does not meet its own authors’ objectives, nor the objectives of the academic community.