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The Stigma of Wasta

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Competence and Morality

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Abstract

Wasta is an Arabic word that means the use of social connections to obtain benefits that otherwise would not be provided. Wasta plays a very important role in securing of employment in Arab countries. This paper attempts to study the attribution effects of wasta on perceptions of competence and morality. The main hypotheses is that those that use wasta to obtain employment will be perceived as incompetent and immoral irrespective of their true competence and morality. Data gathered from an Egyptian sample supports the hypotheses. Thus, we conclude that wasta may tarnish the image or stigmatize its user.

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INTRODUCTION

One of the Arab region's management issues that require attention from scholars is *wasta* (literally, connection, mechanism or intercession). *Wasta* is defined as the intervention of a patron in favor of a client to obtain benefits and/or resources from a third party. The word *wasta* can be used as a verb (the act of intercession) or as a noun (the patron). Although the degree of *wasta* use varies between Arab countries, *wasta* permeate many aspects of life in the Arab world (Cunnigham & Sarayrah, 1993; Kilani & Sakijha, 2002). In most Arab countries conducting simple tasks such as getting a driving license without a *wasta* can become an exercise in futility and frustration. *Wasta* makes people powerful, hence the nickname Vitamin WAW (Al Maena, 2003). *Wasta* plays a critical role in hiring and promotion decisions in Arab organizations. Before applying to a position, applicants may seek out a *wasta* to improve their chances of being hired. A person with poor qualifications but a strong *wasta* will be favored over a person who is more qualified but does not have a *wasta*. Because many people may apply with *wasta*, the applicant with the most important *wasta* often gets the position. Forms of displaying *wasta* may be explicit as in attaching a business card of the patron to the client's resume.

Arab *wasta* has been compared to the Chinese concept of *guanxi*. Both *wasta* and *guanxi* use social networks to influence the distribution of advantages and resources. However, while *guanxi* is based on Confucian ethics which focus on strengthening collective ties (Hutchings & Weir, 2006a; Hutchings & Weir, 2006b); *wasta* violates Muslim ethics which prescribe hiring the most qualified. Additionally, while some researchers have argued that *guanxi* may benefit organizational competitiveness and performance, no such claims are made for *wasta*. Indeed, *wasta* is blamed for Arab world's poor economic performance and brain drain (Al Maena, 2003; Cunnigham & Sarayrah, 1994). Kilani and Sakijha (2002) stress that *wasta* is becoming a burden on its seeker, its granter and the government. Makhoul and Harrison (2004) have characterized *wasta* as inefficient and warned that it may lead to poor job performance and economic decline. They also hinted that practicing *wasta* hiring may feed feelings of injustice and frustration among those who are qualified for the job but do not have a *wasta*. *Wasta* is also different from the more popular nepotism and cronyism. While nepotism involves hiring of relatives and friends, *wasta* is not restricted to such groups and may involve strangers. As such, nepotism is only one part of *wasta*.

Although understanding the role of *wasta* in staffing decision is important, no empirical studies have been conducted on it in the context of HRM (Hutchings and Weir, 2006a; Whiteoak, Crawford, & Mapstone, 2006). The purpose of this study is to investigate some of the consequences of *wasta*. Specifically, the study examines the effect of using *wasta* in hiring decision on the perceived competence of the client.

Literature Review and Hypotheses

Very little work has been published in Arabic or English on *wasta* in the Arab world. The earliest study on the phenomena was conducted by Cunnigham and Sarayrah, (1993), who identified two types of *wasta*; intermediary and intercessory. Intermediary *wasta* is utilized to facilitate the resolution of intergroup or interpersonal conflicts. In this system, *wasta* improves human relations and reinforces social norms. Intercessory *wasta* on the other hand, involves someone intervening on behalf of a client to obtain an advantage or

overcome a barrier from an authority figure. It is this type of wasta that affects hiring decisions.

A review of some Arab cultural proverbs clearly demonstrates the mindset behind intercessory wasta. Table 1 provides examples and explanations of some of these proverbs. These proverbs either encourage the use of wasta or hail its advantages to the user.

Table 1
Examples of Arab Proverbs on Wasta

<p>Translation: He who has a back will not be hit on his stomach. Meaning: Those who are supported by strong others will not be put down or rejected. Only the unconnected or unsupported are punished.</p>
<p>Translation: Lucky is the person who the governor is his uncle. Meaning: people who are related to important others (especially in government) are fortunate as they will have their demands or needs fulfilled. People serve those that are related to important people.</p>
<p>Translation: Seek who you know, so that your needs will be fulfilled. Meaning: People tend to serve those that they know. Without knowing anybody, you will have difficulty getting the service you want.</p>
<p>Translation: If you have a turban, you will have a safe trip. Meaning: The turban symbolizes a senior respected person. If you know a senior person, your demands will be meet. Similar to the second proverb.</p>
<p>Translation: No one can escalate except those who have a ladder. Meaning: Rising to high levels requires important connections. Receiving important privileges or benefits is contingent upon using the right connections.</p>

It is important to note here that although the use of wasta is firmly planted in the Arab culture, it is inconsistent with Muslim teachings regarding hiring practices. Islam stress the importance of hiring based on qualification and merit in several places (Abbas, 2005). In the Quran, Muslims are instructed that “the best that you can hire employee is one who is competent and trustworthy” (Quran, 28, 26). Prophet Mohamed is also reported to have said “He who is in a leadership position and appoints knowingly a person who is not qualified to manage, than he violates the command of God and His messenger”. He also stated “when a person assumes an authority over people and promotes one of them because of personal preferences, God will curse him for ever”.

In spite of its violation of Islamic teachings, using wasta when applying for positions is rampant in the Arab world. Although we do not have exact figures on the actual use of wasta, a study conducted by Kilani and Sakija in Jordan showed that 90% of the respondents believed that they would use wasta in the future. A study conducted by Whiteoak, Crawford and Mapstone (2006) showed the young UAE citizens believed that wasta is more useful than do their older citizens. This finding may imply that wasta is strengthening rather than diminishing in Arab societies. Commenting on the spread of wasta in Egypt, a senior bank official told one of the authors that up to 25% of his staff were hired only because of their wasta.

A number of factors may have led to the spread of *wasta*. First, to maintain their grip on authority, Arab political regimes tend to place close confidants in key positions even if they are not the most qualified for such positions. In Arab Gulf countries, many top governmental positions are reserved for members of the ruling families or members of their supporting tribes. In Syria, the key argument made in favor of selecting Basher Al Asad as the country's president was that he was the son of the late president Hafez Al Asad. Over time, these practices weakened the perceived relationship between competency and appointment and established nepotism as an institution. Slowly, nepotism became an official criterion in university admission programs and professions. For example, sons of police and military officers are given preference in admission to the Egyptian police academy or military college, respectively. In this environment, being connected to the right people becomes critical when seeking a position. The fear of being disadvantaged by the lack of a proper connection motivates people to seek and use *wasta*.

Second, most Arab economies suffer from very high levels of unemployment. Good jobs are scarce. This motivates applicants to use every mean possible to improve their chances of being hired. Finally, human resource departments in the Arab world depend heavily on subjective assessment tools such as unstructured interviews.

Cunnigham and Sarayrah (1994) suggest that the modern oil boom in the Arab world may have perpetuated *wasta* by reducing the need for hard work. This theory however does not explain the spread of *wasta* in oil poor Arab countries such as Jordan and Egypt.

In the public media, *wasta* and nepotism are publicly condemned. In the Kilani and Sakija (2002) Jordanian survey, 87% of the respondents wanted to eradicate *wasta*. In general, Arabs speak of *wasta* in negative terms (Hutchings and Weir, 2006a). Suggestions for eliminating *wasta* have focused on structural measures such as administrative reform and the strengthening of the control function (Cunnigham & Sarayrah, 1993). A second possible mean of reducing the spread of *wasta* is to reduce its attractiveness by exposing its harmful impact on its seekers. If *wasta* seekers understand that their use of *wasta* can harm their supervisors and colleagues perceptions of their competency, than they may think twice before using it.

HYPOTHESES

No studies have been conducted on the psychological consequences of *wasta*, particularly its attributional effect. Cunnigham and Sarayrah (1994) and Makhoul and Harrison (2004) have suggested that the use of *wasta* in selection angers unsuccessful applicants who have been passed over in favor of the applicant who has the *wasta*. Hutchings and Weir (2006a) also state that Arabs speak of *wasta* in negative terms. To investigate the attributional effects of *wasta* we employ Kelley's (1972a) attribution theory. This theory describes how people use information to explain the outcomes of others. Kelley suggested that when people are given multiple causes for a specific outcome, they use the discounting principle to make attributions. Discounting occurs when the person dismisses one cause for the outcome because another cause is more plausible (Morris & Larrick, 1995). Kelley (1972b) argued that people will discount internal causes for other people's success if more plausible external causes for the success are present. As a result of

discounting, the person is perceived to be incapable of repeating the success on his or her own. The implication of Kelley's work to the image of wasta users is clear. The qualifications of wasta users will be discounted, as people will think that they were hired only because of their wasta (external cause) not because of their abilities (internal cause). This will lead people to perceive the employee hired through wasta as incompetent. As such, wasta stigmatizes its user. Hence,

H1: employees hired with wasta will be rated lower in competency than employees without, irrespective of qualification.

This stigmatization caused by the wasta may be so strong that it may taint even the qualified job incumbent. Hence,

H2: qualified job incumbents hired with wasta will be rated lower in competency than non-qualified incumbents hired without wasta.

In addition to discounting their competency, we suggest that people may also question the morality of wasta beneficiaries. Wasta is perceived as a form of corruption that needs to be eradicated (Kilani & Sakija, 2002). Additionally, as we stated above, wasta violates the principles of Islam, which is the main source of ethics in Arab countries. Hence,

H3: Job incumbents hired with wasta will be judged as less moral than applicants hired without.

H4: Less qualified job incumbents hired with wasta will be judged as less moral than more qualified applicants hired with wasta.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of wasta on perceptions of job incumbent's competence and morality.

Participants and Design

Participants for this study are third year undergraduate students attending an Egyptian private university in Cairo. Participation in the study was voluntary and without any academic credit. The study is designed as a 2 X 2 factorial, with two independent variables; wasta and qualification. The dependent variables are perceived competency and morality.

Materials and Procedures

Participants in this study received a summary job description for a bank teller position along with the specifications of the required job holder. They also received a one-page employment record of a hypothetical employee that is working as a teller in the bank. The record contained the employee's name, demographic data, job title and education. The employee was always male and 24 years old. Participants were told that they were

participating in a study on selection. They were instructed to read the given data carefully and then answer four questions about their perceptions of the employee's competency and morality.

The presence of *wasta* was manipulated by hand writing the words "presented *wasta*" in Arabic at the bottom section of the employee record, titled for "Other Remarks". The absence of *wasta* was manipulated by leaving this area blank. Qualification for the job was manipulated by indicating that this bank employee either had a Bachelor of Commerce (qualified) or a Bachelor of Arts (unqualified)

Dependent Measures

After reviewing the employee's record, participants were asked to answer two questions about their perceptions of the employee's competency and two questions about their perception of his morality. Perceived competence was measured by asking the participants to respond to the questions "How competently do you think this person performs his job?" and "How successfully do you think this person is performing his job?" Answers are solicited on a seven point Likert type scale (very competently-very incompetently) and (very successfully- very unsuccessfully). Morality was measured by asking "What do you think is the level of morality of this person?" and "What do you think is the level of integrity of this person?" Answers are also solicited on a seven point scale (very high level-very low level).

RESULTS

A total of 250 questionnaires were distributed, of which 175 were returned complete i.e. 70% response rate. The cross distribution of returned questionnaires between qualification and *wasta* is as follows:

Table 2
Distribution of Returned Questionnaires

	Used <i>Wasta</i>	Did Not Use <i>Wasta</i>
Qualified	38 questionnaires 22%	49 questionnaires 28%
Unqualified	44 questionnaires 25%	44 questionnaires 25%

A one way ANOVA was used to compare the means of students' response to different questions. Results indicate that job incumbents who used *wasta* were rated lower in competence than those who did not use *wasta* with a significance level of 0.012. Thus, hypothesis H1 which states that "employees hired with *wasta* will be rated lower in competency than employees without, irrespective of qualification" is supported. However, results did not indicate that qualified job incumbents hired with *wasta* are rated significantly lower in competency than non-qualified incumbents hired without *wasta*. Thus hypothesis H2 which states that "qualified job incumbents hired with *wasta* will be rated

lower in competency than non-qualified incumbents hired without wasta” is not supported. These results reveal that people do discount the level of competency of employees who are hired using wasta. However, the effect of wasta stigmatization is not so severe as to discount the level competency of qualified employees even below the level of competency of unqualified ones.

As for the effect of wasta on perceived morality, results indicate that job incumbents who used wasta were rated lower in morality than those who did not use wasta with a significance level of 0.001. These results support hypothesis H3 which states that “Job incumbents hired with wasta will be judged as less moral than applicants hired without”. However, unqualified employees who used wasta were not rated significantly lower in morality than qualified ones. Therefore, hypothesis H4 stating that “Less qualified job incumbents hired with wasta will be judged as less moral than more qualified applicants hired with wasta” is not supported. These results reveal that wasta beneficiaries are perceived significantly lower in morality than employees who do not use wasta. This is valid irrespective of whether they are qualified or not.

CONCLUSION

Wasta plays a significant role in employment decision in the Arab world. This aspect of Arab human resource management has not received sufficient attention from scholars. This paper attempts to close this gap, by study the attributional effects of wasta on its perceptions of competency and morality. Results of the study showed that the presence of wasta did negatively impact how wasta beneficiaries were perceived. In other words, the results indicate that wasta causes a stigma problem. These results are important since they show that those that use wasta may harm their image.

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