

# Developing a measure of contentment in an Arab Muslim country: implications for cross-cultural research in social work

تطوير مقياس للشعور بالرضا في بلد عربي مسلم :  
تطبيقات للبحث عبر الثقافات في الخدمة الاجتماعية

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*This is one in a series of papers that report on a programme of research focusing on the psychosocial consequences of Kuwaitis in the wake of the 1990 invasion and occupation by Iraq. The research team chose to focus on contentment as the obverse of trauma effects and develop a new measure that more closely represents Kuwait society due to cultural sensitivity. The paper briefly discusses the programme of research and the need for a new measure of Kuwaiti contentment. The Kuwaiti Raha Scale (KRS), was developed to serve as the primary dependent variable for a post-war national survey of mental health in Kuwait. The KRS emerged from a multi-method approach first administered to a convenience sample of 560 undergraduate university students enrolled in eight different classes. The results reported here note that no differences were found according to the variable of gender, as was expected. Four factors emerged, with Cronbach's Alphas ranging from 0.850 to 0.709 after eliminating three items. The total twenty-eight-item KRS measure yielded a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.906. Conclusions: The present findings suggest that the four subscales are a psychometrically sound measure of contentment, and would be useful in studies of Arabic-speaking cultures by social workers, and other investigators, concerned about culture-based well-being. Implications for European social professions are discussed.*

*Keywords: Contentment; Kuwait; Scale Development*

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## المخلص

هذه الورقة ضمن سلسلة من الأوراق العلمية والتي تتحدث عن برنامج للبحث والذي يركز فيه على الآثار النفسية والاجتماعية للكويتيين نتيجة أحداث الغزو والاحتلال العراقي في عام 1990. ولقد أختار فريق البحث التركيز على الشعور بالرضا **Contentment** مقابل تأثيرات الصدمة وبالتالي العمل على تطوير مقياس جديد يمثل خاصية ثقافة المجتمع الكويتي. والورقة باختصار تتحدث عن برنامج البحث والحاجة إلى مقياس جديد لرضا الكويتيين ومقياس لراحة الكويتيين (KRS) والذي يعتبر المتغير التابع الرئيسي للمسح الوطني لما بعد الحرب. ومقياس الراحة الجديد (KRS) انبثق من اتجاه متعدد الطرق والذي أسس في البداية من عينة متاحة تتكون من 560 طالب جامعي على مستوى البكالوريوس في ثماني صفوف مختلفة. والنتائج المعروضة هنا، تشير إلى أنه لا يوجد اختلاف نوعي (ذكر و أنثى) كما متوقع من الباحثين. ولقد انبثقت أربع عوامل من خلال استخدام معامل الثبات (كرونباخ) والذي كان مداه ما بين 709 - 850. وذلك بعد التخلص من 3 بنود ولقد كان مجموع بنود مقياس الراحة (KRS) 28 بنداً بمعامل ثبات (كرونباخ) 906. وهذه النتائج تقترح أن المقاييس الأربع الفرعية جيدة كمقاييس نفسية لقياس الرضا، وذا فائدة للأخصائيين الاجتماعيين وغيرهم من المهن المساعدة والذين يهتمون بالثقافة والحالة العامة **well-Being** في دراسات الثقافات التي يتحدث أفرادها اللغة العربية. والورقة تشير كذلك إلى تطبيقات للمهنيين الاجتماعيين الأوربيين.

المفاتيح : الشعور بالشعور بالرضا، الكويت، تطوير مقياس

Kuwait was invaded by Iraq in August of 1990 and occupied until February of 1991. There have been several threats to their border since then. Since 2003, Kuwait, as both a country and as a people, appears to have recovered from the invasion and occupation. By the start of this programme of research, in the spring of 2004, Kuwaitis had begun to move back to their homeland in large numbers; land values had increased. A recent government report indicated that growth in the State of Kuwait GDP accelerated by 35.1% compared to a 22.5% growth in 2004 (Central Bank of Kuwait, 2005). Indeed, Kuwait is unlike its Middle Eastern neighbours to the extent that its citizens are wealthier and far more educated (Human Development Report, 2006).

The research team wished to address two inter-related questions: (1) how are Kuwaiti citizens functioning now in the wake of the post-Sadam period?; and (2) what are the factors that most contribute to their functioning? It was quickly decided that a survey focusing on trauma and traumatic stress would not be acceptable in Kuwaiti society. The research team was interested in investigating the psychosocial consequences, remnants of war-related fear and trauma, but decided that a more culturally sensitive approach was required Figley, Al Nassar & Ridha. It was determined that Kuwaitis would be more willing to discuss the degree to which they are contented or comfortable in life rather than their degree to which they experience traumatic distress and risk giving the impression of weakness (Al-Rowaie, 2001).

The first task was to select an existing measure of contentment or an equivalent measure. A thorough review of the literature on contentment (Parse, 2001), well-being (Lucas *et al.*, 1996), happiness (Diener, 2000), subjective well-being (Headey & Wearing, 1992), emotional comfort (cf. Tutton, 2003) and life satisfaction (Pavot & Diener, 1993) is beyond the scope of the paper. However, it is important to note that it is part of a larger literature on positive psychology that has, as yet, escaped the focus of social work (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). All are synonymous with the Arabic concept of *Raha*, which in Kuwait, and other Arabic countries, means a state of personal comfort and satisfaction with life, that is, contentment.

### **The need for a home-grown measure of *raha***

We sought and secured funding to complete a national household survey of Kuwaiti citizens about the level of national contentment, or *Raha*, in the wake of such national trauma. The study of national *Raha* in Kuwait, however, required a reliable and valid measure. Although, as noted above, numerous measures were available, none met the four standards, set by the research team, to qualify for a national household survey of Kuwaitis. The standards were that such a measure would: (i) have good psychometric properties; (ii) be in Arabic; (iii) reflect the condition of *Raha* that is the opposite of traumatic stress; and (iv) reflect the Kuwaiti culture. The first standard is attainable through the numerous measures the research team reviewed. However, the research team found that meeting the other three criteria was not attainable, as most available measures were simply inappropriate, given that they were originally developed for Western societies and could not be directly translated for, and applied, to Middle Eastern cultures such as Kuwait. Therefore, the first task of the programme of research was to develop a valid and reliable measure of the dependent variable of *Raha*.

### **Initial instrument development Kuwaiti measure of well-being**

As noted elsewhere (Ridha, Naser & Figley, 2004, 2005), the research team, as a result of consultation with a wide variety of Kuwaitis (covering gender, age, SES, locality, and level of education), decided that the dependent variable for the national survey should be a measure of *Raha*. The closest English translation of *Raha* is 'a sense of complete personal comfort'. It is both a transient state, such as 'eating the chocolate means automatic *Raha*', and an end state, or even trait, such as 'he is always *Raha*'. It is an ancient Arabic word probably because it is onomatopoeic; that one utters the word '*Raha*' when feeling *Raha*. Although perhaps not useful outside of Arab-speaking countries or communities, the investigators hoped that this measure might be a contribution to the social sciences generally, and might challenge current theories about the nature of well-being, and other societal outcomes, that rely on cultures and traditions alien to the one they are studying.

The investigators were well aware of the challenges of questionnaire construction and the need, in the end, to produce a *Raha* scale that would meet the three criteria noted earlier. Thus, the extent to which our scale actually measured *Raha* with both internal (questions asked clearly and logically from the point of view of Kuwaitis) and external validity allowed us to generalize our findings to all Kuwaitis.

To achieve these criteria, the *Raha* scale would need items that were both relevant and representative of *Raha*, and instructions that were clear and logical. To do this, we would need the assistance of experts who consider *Raha* and related conditions of well-being. For the role of expert panelists, we selected undergraduate students from Kuwait University (KU). Though not yet worldly and wise, the undergraduate student population is well aware of public perception and appearance in an effort to discover their own place and identity in the world. A second-order meta-analysis was

conducted (Peterson, 2001) to assess the implications of using college student subjects in social science research.<sup>1</sup> In general, responses of college student subjects were found to be slightly more homogeneous than those of non-student subjects. Moreover, effect sizes derived from college student subjects frequently differed from those derived from non-student subjects, both directionally and in magnitude, and were consistent with the research team's intention to expand the research to include non-students. The plan was that, once the initial version of the Kuwaiti Raha Scale (KRS) emerged, we would conduct a pilot study of a representative sample of the Kuwaiti population to further refine the measure and how it relates to other select measures of well-being.

### **Study 1: generation of *Raha* characteristics method**

This initial study was designed to select the preliminary version of the KRS that would contain items that met face validity. As noted elsewhere (Ridha, Nassar & Figley, 2005a), the research team chose the Delphi method (Lindstone & Turoff, 1975) to aid our expert panelists to generate a list of potential KRS items.

#### *Study participants*

This first study enlisted the assistance of the instructors of eight moderate- ( $n = 13$ ) to large- ( $n = 27$ ) sized social sciences classes students. All of the instructors were then asked to allow the research team to recruit all of their students; all students agreed to participate in the study without any apparent hesitation. A total of 120 students participated, 66 males and 54 females. Approximately 22 students were missing from class on the day of testing.

#### *Procedure*

In each class the procedure followed the same protocol. After the instructor introduced a member of the research team and ensured that his/her students would be willing to participate, he/she then left the room.

A member of the research team explained that the purpose of the study was to generate a list of characteristics of *Raha* that could be used to measure *Raha*, and that this list would be compiled in the following way: 'We would like you, one at a time, to nominate a characteristic of *Raha* until you are satisfied that the list is complete'. These descriptions would form the pool of possible KRS items. This nominating process continued until everyone had had an opportunity to nominate as many descriptors as possible.

From this point, each person could vote, in turn, on one of the nominated descriptors by raising their hand. A research team member kept track of the voting, as the number of votes would help to later determine what the group believed were the best possible descriptions of *Raha*. The voting continued until the end of the list.

The research participants were asked to vote at least five times for smaller classes, and at least three times for larger classes.

Therefore, the research team had a set of voting results from each class that represented the most and least popular nominated characteristics of *Raha*. The next task for the research team would be to consider the most popular nominated *Raha* attributes that would form the initial draft of the KRS.

### *Results*

A total of 481 items were generated from the eight classes. The research team then spent considerable time combing duplicate nominations for a total of 65 separate, unique items for the potential KRS. However, there still remained considerable overlap and redundancy. Another study was required to help the research team narrow the items to those most indicative of *Raha*. This procedure is described below.

### **Study 2: identification of the initial KRS method**

This study was designed to develop the first draft of the KRS and establish face validity, as noted previously (Ridha, Nassar & Figley, 2005a), by polling another group of students about the degree of fit between the concept of *Raha* and the top nominated characteristics.

### *Study participants*

Another group of 115 KU undergraduate students in four classes were recruited to participate in this study. The classes were composed of three male (n= 19; 20; 17) and two female (n= 28; 31) classes are segregated by gender in Kuwait. Approximately ten students were missing from classes that day.

### *Procedure*

At the beginning of the class, the instructor introduced a member of the research and explained that participation was completely voluntary but greatly appreciated. A member of the team explained the project in the following way.

We wish to adequately describe a subjective state of well-being. We will ask you to complete a short questionnaire that lists terms found to be most associated with *Raha*. We need your advice about how well each term fits with *Raha* by indicating for each a number: 4 (fits well), 3 (fits), 2 (not sure), 1 (slight fit), 0 (no fit). Feel free to write on the form if you have any thoughts [regarding] wording of the item or its degree of fit with well-being.

The 65-item questionnaire was distributed and took less than 15 minutes to complete. All participants were fully co-operative.

### *Results*

A total of 32 items were rated by the students. If an item received an overall average of 3.0 or higher (range = 0–4) were considered a good fit with *Raha* and were included in the initial draft of the KRS. Although this 32-item version of the KRS had good face validity, what was required was a final study to compute the additional psychometric properties and determine whether there were any appropriate subscales emerging from a factor analysis.

### **Study 3: factor analysis of the KRS method**

Now that the initial version of the KRS was available, the purpose of this particular study was to investigate any differences attributable to gender, and determine the factor structure and estimates of internal consistency reliability. For this purpose the team had to recruit a substantial number of research participants (at least 500) to complete the analysis.

#### *Study participants*

A total of 560 KU undergraduate students in 12 classes were recruited to complete the KRS as it pertained to them. This included 307 females and 253 males.

#### *Procedure*

Each instructor stated that participation was voluntary, testing would take approximately 15 minutes, and that the research team would appreciate their help. The specific instructions were as outlined below.

We are asking you to complete this brief questionnaire as it pertains to you as a person. Please read the directions and give us your honest answer[s]. Do not write in your name, since only your answers, along with [those of] your fellow students, are important to us and will be studied collectively.

The 32-item questionnaire was then distributed to the students. The time required for each class to complete the questionnaire ranged between 10 and 15 minutes.

### *Results*

These data from the 560 completed KRS were subjected to a principal component analysis using Varimax with Kaiser normalizations. The rotation converged in ten iterations; the rotated component matrix yielded five factors. One factor with three items was omitted, which yielded 29 items for the KRS with a mean score of 116.23, variance was 225.656, SD was 15.02, and the overall Cronbach's Alpha for the measure was 0.908. The final KRS can be found in the Appendix.

Factor 1, 'charismatic', has eleven items: honest, confident in self, cultured, social, optimistic, has confidence when he/she talks, ambitious, content, practises sport, calm, and treats family in a good way. Reliability analysis for the subscale yielded a mean of 42.544, variance of 49.941, SD of 7.067, and a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.851.

Factor 2, 'emotional security', has seven items: comfort (*Raha*) in marital relationship, not nervous, does not have problems, has a secure future, stable in social life, feels secure, and is not absent minded. Reliability analysis for the subscale yielded a mean of 28.340, variance of 19.1892, SD of 4.381, and a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.781.

Factor 3, 'religious', has six items: strong belief in God, committed Muslim, committed to religion, getting parent's satisfaction, health, and does not drink alcohol. Reliability analysis for the subscale yielded a mean of 25.579, variance of 14.957, SD of 3.868, and a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.751.

Factor 4, 'happiness', has five items: the smile, happy, lovable, gleeful, and sleeps easily. Reliability analysis for the subscale yielded a mean of 19.674, variance of 111.040, SD of 3.323, and a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.709.

## Discussion

The results indicated that the scale items had significant path coefficients and were grouped under four factors, 'charismatic', 'emotional confidence', 'religious' and 'happiness'. There were no differences in the total score in all but one of the subscales. There were small, but statistically significant, gender differences for the 'emotional confidence' subscale. This is not unexpected in a culture where women are discouraged from public displays of emotion. We view the findings as preliminary, including those Cronbach's Alpha scores below 0.80, because the participants were college students. As noted earlier, as college students are more homogeneous compared to the larger population of non-students, the research team believed that a better indication of the psychometric properties of the scale will emerge in the national household survey. A future pilot student will help the research team determine utility of the scale and provide a final opportunity to adjust the scale structure prior to the national survey of Kuwaiti *Raha*.

It is the understanding of the research team that no other measure of well-being, or any other emotion or social work measure, has emerged within an Arab-speaking country or community. The factors, or subscores, well represent the culture of Kuwait and, to a lesser extent, other Arab-speaking countries and communities.

### *Charismatic characteristics subscale*

The characteristics of being honest, confident in self and when speaking, cultured, social, optimistic, ambitious, content, participates in sports, is calm, and treats her or his family well are all valued in Kuwait, and together suggests that a person is *Raha*. The emphasis on sports participation and treating one's family well may not be

perceived by other cultures as indicative of well-being, however, particularly those that are Western, Westernized, or non-Arab-speaking societies.

#### *Emotional security subscale*

The characteristics of being comfortable (*Raha*) in one's marital relationship, not being nervous, problem-free, feels secure and has a secure future, stable in social life, and is not absent minded are also valued in Kuwait, and together suggests that the person is *Raha*. The research team would postulate that this subscale will correlate with scales, and subscales, that focus on mental health, and plan to utilize the Kuwait version of the GHQ-28 (Jaffar Hasan, 1999). Jaffer Hasan reported that the Kuwaiti version, based on a factor analysis, had seven subscales (anxiety and tension, suicidal thoughts, general illness, sleep disorders, social functioning disorder, low self-esteem, and depression).

#### *Religiousness subscale*

The characteristics of having of having a strong belief in God and being committed to religion, as well as 'getting the parent's satisfaction' and abstaining from alcohol use, which is required by the Muslim faith, are also valued in Kuwait, and together suggest that the person is *Raha*. Perhaps more than any other subscale, the measures of religiousness sets apart Kuwaitis and similar cultures from the West and Westernized cultures. There is a dearly held belief that the route to well-being, happiness, success and personal comfort in this life, and the afterlife, is through faith. It is interesting that, despite the fact that so many Americans emphasize the importance of faith and spirituality in their lives, especially in recovering from traumatic events, US journals frequently overlook this important variable (Weaver *et al.*, 2002).

#### *The happiness subscale*

The characteristics of 'the smile', being happy, lovable, gleeful and able to fall and stay asleep with ease is also valued in Kuwait, and together suggests that the person is *Raha*. Plans for the national survey will include an internationally recognized measure similar to this subscale, the Subjective Happiness Scale (Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999). The research team hopes to investigate the similarities and differences of these scores to total scores on the KRS among males and females of varying ages and socioeconomic status.

There are certain limitations of the research reported here that must be kept in mind when considering the results. First, undergraduate students were utilized as research participants. The quality of the KRS can be determined only when a more representative sample of Kuwaitis is utilized later in the programme of research. Therefore, the data reported here should be considered as being preliminary. Second, no matter how comprehensive the methodology, the resulting measure is as good as

the concept it represents. The selection of *Raha* as concept representing obverse of post-war anxiety remains an empirical question until it is compared to measures of its obverse such as war-related PTSD. Third, it is important to note that generalizability of the results of the measure may be limited to Kuwait itself, because the State of Kuwait is unlike most others who share its language, religion and region. Kuwait is one of the wealthiest states in the world and its citizens among the most literate in the region. Future research must demonstrate the utility of the measure outside of Kuwait.

Despite these limitations, the KRS appears to have considerable promise as a valid and reliable measure of contentment, and as an odverse measure of distress, anxiety and discontent. With the KRS, the research team began the next phase of the programme of research in designing and implementing a national, random household survey to investigate the psychosocial factors most associated with *Raha*.

### **Implications for practice**

The investigators speculate that the KRS could help practitioners better assess the overall well-being of Kuwaiti clients in particular, and Arab-speaking cultures in general, and could supplement and provide a contrast with more Westernized measures. Perhaps the KRS could serve as an important benchmark against which various intervention programmes could be measured.

The KRS was originated and developed in an Arab/Islamic culture, and its items and subscales were more indigenous to the people of such a society, though it is most relevant to Kuwait, given its wealth and literacy. The KRS contains many items that were never considered in other Western scales (which measure personal comfort, or subjective well-being or happiness). Those items such as religiosity, getting parents' satisfaction (an Islamic requirement for admission to Heaven), and not drinking alcohol, might be considered as special areas of tension for Arabic/Islamic people who migrate, or even visit, other countries and cultures without such values. The investigators hope that understanding these fundamental differences will lead to understanding, mutual respect, and far more tolerance between Muslims and non-Muslims.

European social professions have a long and distinguished history of work in Arab/Islamic cultures, and most of the professors at the Kuwait University have been educated in European universities. We hope that, in the future, there will be greater collaboration between Kuwait and Europe focusing on this type of 'home-grown' studies and measures.

### **Note**

- [1] Four meta-analyses investigating response homogeneity (cumulative  $N > 650,000$ ) and 30 meta-analyses reporting effect sizes for 65 behavioural or psychological relationships (cumulative  $N > 350,000$ ) provided comparative data for college student subjects and non-student (adult) subjects for the present research.

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## Appendix

Kuwaiti Raha Scale [literal translation to English]

Read the following sentences and check the appropriate answer.

In general how you consider yourself most of the time	Strongly agree	Agree	Don't know	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. I am not in a good health					
2. I have a strong belief in God					
3. I don't smile most of the time					
4. I don't have problems					
5. I am not loveable					
6. I am happy					
7. I insist on getting my parents' satisfaction					
8. My thoughts are not scattered					
9. I am ambitious					
10. I am nervous					
11. I sleep easily					
12. I don't drink alcohol					
13. I speak with great confidence					
14. My social life is stable					
15. I am not optimistic					
16. I am honest					
17. I have a secure future					
18. I am committed religiously					
19. I am social					
20. I am content					
21. I am cultured					
22. I am self-confident					
23. I treat my family well					
24. I practice sport					
25. I am gleeful					
26. I feel secure					
27. I am comfortable in my marital relationship					
28. I am calm person					