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Investigating Favoritism from a Psychological Lens



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Abstract

The aim of this conceptual paper is to discuss the association between favoritism -which includes nepotism- and the individual psychological well-being. Becker (1957) distinguished between two kinds of discrimination namely, a positive one which is discrimination in favor of, such as nepotism and a negative one which is discrimination against (Graham, 2013; Taylor & Turner, 2002; Williams, Yu, Jackson, & Anderson, 1997). Importantly, Becker (1957) highlights that “the social and economic implications of positive prejudice or nepotism are very similar to those of negative prejudice or discrimination” (p. 7). The consequences of being discriminated against have been studied for several decades, which allows one to investigate the relationship between favoritism and mental health by utilizing the discrimination literature as an initiating guide.

Introduction

Favoritism and nepotism are forms of discrimination and sources of corruption (Bekker, 1991). *Favoritism* is present in both individualistic societies and collective ones; it is a common behavior across the world that has been defined as “preferential treatment of relatives, friends, and neighbors or other acquaintances. It is a widespread pattern of social interactions in many parts of the world – known as *blat* in Russia, *guanxi* in China and *wasta* in the Arab world” (Loewe, et al, 2007, p. 3). In surveys of 318 American HRMs and 126 Jordanian HRMs, Abdalla, Maghrabi, and Raggad (1998) showed that few managers in both countries agreed with statements supporting nepotism as a practice; rather, many managers sided with statements supporting anti-nepotism.

Wasta is an Arabic word that is used in reference to both favoritism and nepotism (Hutchings & Weir, 2006). The Arabic root for the word “*wasta*” means connectionism (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993; Taha, 2011; Yaghi, 1991); in practice, it is favoritism (see Loewe, et al., 2007). There is a clear connection between *wasta* and discrimination. Goldberg (1982)

proposed racial discrimination is not a dislike for individuals of color but instead favoritism towards Caucasians. In a book that provided numerous examples of *wasta* in practice, Cunningham and Sarayrah, (1994) demonstrated that Middle-Easterners view *wasta* as favoritism that leads to discrimination against individuals who do not have connections. Overall, discrimination in the western countries has been recognized as denying opportunities to deserving individuals or applying unjustified punishments to individuals as a result of belonging to an unprivileged group (Zick, Pettigrew, Wagner, 2008). Likewise, favoritism and nepotism (*wasta*) in the middle-eastern countries are perceived as providing opportunities to those who do not necessarily deserve them and withholding punishments from those who deserve them (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993).

Favoritism and Job Satisfaction

Favoritism has been investigated from an administrative perspective to show how it predicts job satisfaction. In collected surveys from 222 full-time employees of 8 different Pakistani public sector organizations, Sadozai, Zaman, Marri, and Ramay (2012) revealed that favoritism had a positive relationship with job satisfaction. These results might be from individuals who are likely to benefit from favoritism as they collected the participants in this study by using convenience sampling and they indicated that several individuals in the organization obtain positions that they are not qualified for and obtain positions through individuals they know (Sadozai, et al., 2012). Conversely, in a collected survey from 257 hotel employees in Turkey, Arasl, Bavik and Ekiz (2006) showed that favoritism has a negative association with job satisfaction and work environment. Arasli and Tumer (2008) investigated job stress in relation to favoritism through surveys from 576 respondents who worked for a banking industry in Turkey. The study revealed that favoritism was perceived as a stressor for the organization's personnel, which lead employees to look for another job because *wasta* resulted in their job becoming a source of stress and discomfort.

Favoritism and Work Productivity

Through surveys that were collected from 166 Jordanian and 345 Egyptian human resource managers, Hayajenh, Maghrabi, and Al-Dabbagh, (1994) demonstrated that high levels of favoritism and nepotism were associated with lower long-term goal achievement, lower effectiveness of organization policies and high levels of stress and frustration amongst the workers. In surveys of 376 male and female students in Kuwait University and the Public Authority for Applied Education and Training in Kuwait, Almuhanha (1999) showed favoritism was linked to a lack of objectivity in the hiring processes and a lack of clarity in the job description which according to MacLeod's (2003) study leads to subjective evaluation that reduces the motivation level of the employees who are discriminated against. In addition, perceiving favoritism and nepotism in an organization has been found to have a relationship with having an intention to quit. According to Porter (2011), losing employees costs an organization a substantial amount of capital when taking into consideration new employee preparation such as training, orientation, the hiring process, and interviewing.

Favoritism in Tribal Societies

Favoritism has been investigated from sociological (Faisal, 1990; Faisal & Abdella, 1993). Administrative (Al-Taweel, 2011; Loewe, Blume, & Speer, 2008) perspectives in an Arab tribal society. In interviews with 175 people from governmental and non-governmental organizations, citizens and foreigners, and 180 anonymous standardized surveys in the

Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Loewe et al. (2008) declared that individuals associated favoritism with unity and trustworthiness among relatives and friends. In addition, the interviewees indicated that it was hard to get things done without depending on *wasta* because it was impossible to overcome bureaucratic obstacles by following another way. In addition, the notion of helping others and being generous were significant features of Arab culture; a person who was known to not to help their relatives and people who knew them would be considered a person who was lower in status, and lacking in generosity.

Similarly, two decades ago, favoritism as a sociological phenomenon was studied from the perspective of male college students, which showed that favoritism was a social norm (Faisal, 1990; Faisal & Abdallah, 1993). In a survey of 214 male Saudi university students, Faisal (1990) attempted to study favoritism, *wasta*, as a social norm that individuals engaged in as an attempt to create a balance between traditional social structures and new social structures. A high percentage of the participants believed that the complexities of life were the reason why favoritism appeared, and favoritism is not “social deviance.” Moreover, the participants highlighted that *wasta* was a standard to measure loyalty to the family and the tribe and more than half of the participants believed that it was a standard to measure friendship; and a lack of *wasta* signified that an individual would be lost and people’s businesses would be interrupted or stopped.

Investigating Favoritism from Psychological Lens

The existing literature about favoritism has neither investigated being favored nor favoring others in relation to psychological well-being (Mohamed & Mohamad, 2011). It is important to note that “[p]sychological well-being is a fundamentally micro-level construct that conveys information about how individuals evaluate themselves and the quality of their lives” (Ryff, Magee, Kling, & Wing, 1999). Self determination theory can be a great psychological lens to investigate the consequences of favoritism from a micro level on the individual who is being favored and the one who favors others (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Ryan & Deci, 2001).

Investigating Favoritism through Self-Determination Theory

Self-determination theory (SDT) is a macro theory of human motivation, which considers the innate psychological needs as a key to gain a deep understanding of human motivation; it is a concept that can be used to conduct inquiries about behavior, individual motivation and psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). It stands upon the concept that human beings have three psychological needs; autonomy, competence and relatedness that are the foundation for self-motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2001; Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, & Ryan, 2000). These needs are universal and applicable across gender and culture. The autonomy need is defined by Deci and Ryan (2000) as an individual’s innate desire while conducting a task to experience choice and freedom which can be done through giving the individual psychological spaces (Broeck, Vansteenkiste, Witte, Soenens, & Lens, 2010). For instance, individuals are autonomous when they willingly devote time and energy to accomplish tasks. The competence need is defined as an individual’s innate desire or wish to be operative in interacting with their surrounding environments and be involved in difficult tasks in order to assess the individual’s abilities, which provides a feedback to the individual regarding his/her effectiveness (Deci & Ryan, 2000). For example, individuals are competent when they feel able to handle or meet daily challenges. Ryan (1991) defined the relatedness need as an individual desire to feel connected with others, especially the significant ones in their lives.

The need for relatedness is an individual's innate desire to be associated, connected, linked to a group and be an active member of that group, a part of something, and being cared for (Van den Broeck, Vansteenkiste, Witte, Soenens, & Lens, 2010). The essential notion of this theory is that satisfying the basic psychological needs will predict positive results on the individual and drive him/her to reach the ideal stage of performing and well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Scholars who utilize the self-determination theory (SDT) as a theoretical framework of their studies have showed that satisfactions of the basic psychological needs predicted optimal well-being and high levels of job satisfaction and performance (Lynch, Plant, & Ryan, 2005; Sheldon & Filak, 2008; Sheldon, Ryan, & Reis, 1996). Studying employees (186 staff from all administrative levels: 54% women, 46% men) of a psychiatric hospital via collected surveys, Lynch, Plant, & Ryan (2005) demonstrated that the satisfaction of each need was found to be positively correlated with optimal psychological well-being such as a high level of well-being, job satisfaction, and vitality. In using a 2 (autonomy need) x 2 (competence need) x 2 (relatedness need) factorial design within a game-learning experience, Sheldon and Filak (2008), found that all the basic psychological needs had a main effect on participants' motivation, performance, and mood. After collecting surveys from 60 college students to examine daily fluctuations in well-being, Sheldon, Ryan, and Reis (1996) used hierarchical, multiple linear modeling to demonstrate that within-person, daily variations in the attainment of competence and autonomy were associated with maximal well-being – such as demeanor and vitality.

Similarly, Baard, Deci, and Ryan (2004) suggested that there is a relationship between satisfaction of the basic needs and the well-being (anxiety, depression) indicated by a study of 59 employees who work for operation centers of a major banking corporation. Additionally, the more autonomous the workers were, the higher association with positive results in terms of performance and well-being. Also, results from in-person interview surveys with 87 residences at a nursing home showed that receiving autonomy support was associated with lower depression and higher levels of wellbeing and vitality. Also, residents' satisfaction of their autonomy need and relatedness need were linked with less symptoms of anxiety and depression (Kasser & Ryan, 1999). In another study that was conducted by receiving daily reports for two weeks from 76 college students, Reis, Sheldon, Gable, Roscoe, and Ryan (2000) revealed that the satisfaction of the basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness) was strongly linked to greater psychological well-being in terms of stress, depression, anxiety, and other components.

The previous studies showed that *wasta* is a critical phenomenon that individuals engage in as a way to feel related to others (Loewe, Blume, & Speer, 2008), a concept which Deci and Ryan (2008) called the "need for relatedness." In other studies, the results showed that benefiting from *wasta* is associated with being perceived as incompetent, leading the individual to question his or her ability (Mohamed & Mohamad, 2011). This can be linked to the need for competence in the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2008). However, there is no study about *wasta* that links to the need for autonomy. Utilizing self-determination theory will increase understanding about *wasta* in relation to the need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

The current study proposes that benefiting from favoritism is more likely to make the individual feel a high level of choice/freedom as the beneficiary has more options which results in satisfying the individual's autonomy need. Additionally, the present study proposes that the favored individuals were more likely to perceive themselves and their abilities

positively as they would exert their efforts, but regardless of the results, they would have several plans and supports as well. Thus, such individuals would achieve the satisfaction level of his or her competence needs. Furthermore, the beneficiary is more likely to feel connected to others and feel that individuals who are surrounding him or her care which results in the individual satisfying the relatedness need. Similarly, an individual who has connections to provide favoritism might feel a level of competence in terms of accomplishing a task, unlike another person who cannot provide favoritism to others. Also, providing favoritism might be the predictor of the level of relatedness that an individual has towards the people to whom he/she shows favoritism as well as to people in positions of power within the surrounding societies and organizations. Finally, lacking or having the ability to provide and receive favoritism may predict negative consequences with respect to the individual's basic psychological well-being and mental health in comparison to others who have the ability to do so.

Discrimination and Well-being

Turning to the literature regarding racial discrimination in the U.S. will inform this proposed study on *wasta* as a form of discrimination by highlighting how discriminatory practices are related to well-being (Becker, 1957; Fershtman, Gneezy, & Verboven, 2005). Understanding the literature related to racial and socioeconomic discrimination will elucidate the association between *wasta* and well-being. Racial discrimination in the U.S. has a similar history with *wasta* as once being accepted as the social norm. Scholars who have inquired about discrimination from a psychological lens demonstrate that being perceived as treated unfairly is accompanied by negative well-being such as stress, depression, and anxiety (Moomal, et. al 2009; Nyborg & Curry, 2003; Klonoff, Landrine, & Ullman, 1999; Rivas-Drake, et al, 2009). While research has showed that favoritism and nepotism are primarily perceived as negative practices (Almuhanna, 1999; AL-Shamari, 2012; Aydogan, 2009; Yaghi, 1991), and discrimination has a relationship with the individual's well-being (Moomal, et. al 2009; Nyborg & Curry, 2003; Klonoff, et al, 1999; Rivas-Drake, et al, 2009), there is a need to understand the potential relationship between positive discrimination and psychological distress. There are several studies that have investigated negative discrimination which is discrimination against one such as racial discrimination (e.g., Graham, 2013; Nyborg & Curry, 2003; Taylor & Turner, 2002; Williams, Yu, Jackson, & Anderson, 1997) or socioeconomic discrimination (e.g., Gee, Lively, Larsen, Keith, Stone, & MacLeod, 2007; Bower, Thorpe, Roland J, & LaVeist, 2013) in relation to well-being. For instance, in a meta-analysis of 134 articles, Pascoe and Smart Richman (2009) showed a strong relationship between perceived discrimination and a variety of mental health symptoms (e.g., depression, anxiety, stress, etc.).

Countless studies indicated that experiencing discrimination is correlated with negative symptoms of mental health; one study aimed to investigate the relationship between perceived racial discrimination and well-being by collecting face-to-face surveys from 573 Caucasians who lived in low-income neighborhoods. Bower, Thorpe, Roland J., & LaVeist (2013) demonstrated that there was a strong association between perceived racial discrimination and depression and anxiety. Similarly, in a mixed-methods study that was conducted by performing in-person interview surveys with 412 participants and carrying out five focus groups (every focus group had ten participants), Gee et al. (2007) showed that for black and white participants, discrimination was found to be associated with depression. The author assumed that this result might be due to the participants' characteristics of being

from socioeconomically-disadvantaged groups. The more participants were in need of the services, the more they felt discriminated against.

Furthermore, Nyborg and Curry (2003) investigated experiences of racial discrimination as a predictor of psychological symptoms in a cross-sectional survey of eighty-four 10-15-year-old African-American boys. Correlational analyses suggested that higher levels of personal experiences of racism (e.g., being called names because of being Black, being treated like a criminal) were associated with higher self-reported internalizing symptoms (e.g., depressive symptoms) and externalizing symptoms (e.g., aggressive behavior), and more negative self-concepts and greater helplessness. The analyses further suggested that racism might have been linked to greater psychological symptoms, in part, through the greater amounts of anger it engendered. Thus, the findings helped to highlight a number of potential negative effects that discrimination could have on individuals' psychological well-being.

Racial discrimination was strongly related to high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression. Williams, et al. (1997) surveyed 1139 adults who were 18 and older from the Detroit area and showed that there was a strong relationship between experiencing discrimination in the past year and higher stress levels. Similarly, by surveying 434 African-Americans and 463 non-Hispanic white participants, Taylor and Turner (2002) revealed that major life events and everyday discriminatory stress had a strong relationship with the occurrence of stress. Anxiety was also linked to discrimination. For example, in surveying 129 black American participants, Graham (2013) showed that experiences of racial discrimination had a significant relationship with anxiety and stress symptoms. Moreover, a study showed that internalization of racism — acceptance of the negative beliefs that an individual from marginalized groups has toward his or her group — was found to be a mediator for the relationship between racial discrimination experiences and anxiety and stress symptoms.

Discussion and Conclusion

Positive discrimination (favoritism, nepotism) has to be further investigated by utilizing psychological lenses to discover its extent of predicting psychological distress. The reviewed literature on favoritism, which is recognized as positive discrimination, has showed that positive discrimination leads to individuals who are not being favored to be discriminated against and the consequences of positive discrimination (e.g., nepotism and favoritism) are more likely to be similar to the negative discrimination (e.g., racial and socioeconomic discrimination). Negative discrimination has been studied from psychological lenses for decades and the findings show that discrimination predicts negative consequences of psychological distress. The literature suggests that favoritism and nepotism are not healthy behaviors within organizations as it predicts lower job satisfaction and productivity.

In conclusion, the aim of this article was to open a window to investigate positive discrimination through a psychological lens. There is a need to discover the potential relationship by utilizing psychological theoretical frameworks and carrying out qualitative and quantitative studies to gain insight of this phenomenon from a micro level. In order to meet the purpose of the current proposed lens, related literature on the consequences of discrimination and favoritism have been provided. In addition, potential consequences of favoritism in relation to basic psychological needs have been argued.

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