**Wasta as an Example of Informal Social Networks in Emerging Markets: Research Status and Suggestions for Future Directions**

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**ABSTRACT:**

Research on informal social networks is gaining momentum. However, there is still much we do not know about these networks and how they impact business practices in the countries in which they operate. This chapter presents the authors’ perspectives on the current state of *wasta* (as a case study of informal social networks) research and the future directions that need to be explored in relation to *wasta* to further unpack this practice and to capture its complexity in a way that allows both researchers and practitioners to manage it. It is observed that *wasta* research is currently too reliant on short timeframe case studies which are mostly qualitative. Whilst these have improved in their theoretical, practical and methodological rigor, it is suggested that there is a need for more mixed methods longitudinal and statistical modelling research. We conclude this chapter by suggesting ways in which *wasta* researchers can ‘borrow’ from other disciplines to enhance our understanding of this practice.

**KEYWORDS:**

1. *Wasta*
2. Informal Social Networks
3. Business Practice in Emerging Markets
4. Business in Arab Countries
5. *Guanxi*
6. Network Analysis

**Main Body:**

**Introduction:**

In Arab *countries* wasta describes networks rooted in family and kinship ties which individuals, acting through their connections, use to bypass formal bureaucratic procedures and to ease the process of achieving a goal (Cunningham & Sarayrah, 1993; Hutchings & Weir, 2006a, 2006b; Smith, Torres, Leong, Budhwar, Achoui, & Lebedeva, 2012a). *Wasta* is also known as *ma’arifa* or *piston*, which denote similar practices in North African nations such as Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco (Iles, Almhodie, & Baruch, 2012; Smith, Huang, Harb, & Torres, 2012b).

In the past decade wasta has come steadily out of the research shadows and, if not into a completely centre stage positioning, as a leading topic in business research in the emerging countries of the Arab Middle East. In the 1990s the first author of this chapter was reprimanded by a leading figure in Organisational Research for wasting precious research time on such marginal topics as “that strange Wasta stuff”.

The publication of this book reflects the development of our understanding of the importance of studying informal social networks, particularly in emerging markets where there has been a flurry of research on indigenous informal social networks such as *guanxi* in China (Bian, 2018; Taube and Horak, 2021); *blat* in Russia (Ledeneva , 2008), *wasta* in Arab countries (Ali & Weir, 2020; Alsarhan, Ali, Weir, & Valax, 2021; Al‐Twal, 2021) *jinmyaku* in Japan (Horak, 2018), *jeitinho* in Brazil (Lee Park, Fracarolli Nunes, Muratbekova-Touron, & Moatti, 2018) and *sifarish* in Pakistan (Nadeem & Kayani, 2017).

The strength of network analysis as a central theme in organisational study is recognised by overviews like that of Walther (2015) who comments “Over the last decades, social network analysis has evolved from a relatively peripheral area of research to a formalized body of theories, concepts, and methods related to the social ties among people and the ways in which their interactions produce network structure.” (Walther, 2015, p2)

The practical importance of this topic is reflected in Rank’s (2008) study of the higher strategic levels of decision-making in German companies which reaches a conclusion that surprises by being no longer surprising when concluding “The results from applying QAP and ANOVA analytical techniques reveal—against widespread assumptions—that managers participating in strategy-making not only use informal cooperation ties in addition to their formally designed relationships, but they also disregard their formal work contacts to a surprising extent.” (Rank, 2008, p 145).

Despite the increase of research on *wasta* and other forms of informal social networks, there is still a lot to be learned about these interactions, why they happen, how to navigate them. *Wasta* can be used as a good case study on how research on informal social networks in emerging markets is developing and what needs to be developed in the future to better our understanding of these networks.

**Informal Social Networks: observations on past approaches to research**

As highlighted above, research on informal social networks has gained an increased importance in the last 30 years. Management scholars have moved from an initial focus on how business approaches developed in the UK, US, and Western Europe can be applied in different contexts towards what organisations can learn from business practices in emerging and developing economies (Hutchings & Weir, 2006a; Horak & Klein, 2016; Weir, 2003).

The first though an observation about the topic that could be taken as contentious on the one hand or merely a genuflection to a neglected statement of the obvious on the other hand. This topic, that of the importance of informal social networks in business life, has been neglected because of the hegemonic dominance of the paradigm that has dominated economic analysis and business school theory for at least the past two centuries which has centred around the rational economic agency of dislocated individuals seeking to maximise the expected financial outcomes of some optimal course of behaviour. These assumptions, which were almost certainly never in accord of the fundamental social beliefs of Adam Smith, Thomas Marshall or even John Maynard Keynes have been responsible for an emaciated way of looking at business behaviour as merely a subset of calculation and thus subject to formal logical discourse and algorithm-structured calculation. But sociologists, ethnographers and psychologists have often started from different axiomatic bases in which informal relationships and irrational motivations in only partially coherent structural formations can form the basis of explanations as equally legitimate as those derived from the rational actor paradigm. Thus the study of informal networks operating as conduits in negotiating interests has often been assumed as evidencing only illegitimate outcomes so designated as “corruption” a priori. This constrains the researcher’s choice of modes of discovery of what actually happens in informal networking in business relationships and whether these outcomes operate better or less adequately than do other types of structuration.

A fortiori, the dominant grammars of research in business schools in the main prioritise the logics of counting, measuring, formalizing and modelling above those of practitioner-derived experiential and judgmental wisdom gained from both successful and unsuccessful business performance. And yet in political worlds, the memoirs of a former prime minister may be rated as more valuable in the interpretation of what actually happened and how it occurred than those of the typical voter, however articulate.

**Wasta research: Where are we now?**

In the past decade there have been a steady stream of publications that describe and identify the existence of *wasta* and how it impacts business practices, starting from Cunningham and Sarayrah’s (1993) book on *wasta*, describing it as a hidden force in the Middle East, up until the recent systematic review of research exploring *wasta* published by the authors of this chapter (Ali and Weir, 2020). Whilst mainly published in ‘western’ journals, the data collection for most of these studies has been undertaken within the core countries of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and inevitably most of these describe business and management organisations and sectors located in the Arab world, dominated by frameworks of Muslim values, familial, often patriarchal networking (Hitchings and Weir, 2006a;b). Whilst earlier research on *wasta* lacked academic and methodological rigor thus escaping the attention of more prestigious journals, there are more and more recent studies appearing in higher ranked journals in different business fields such as Management (Ali and Weir, 2020; Alsarhan et al., 2021; AL-Twal, 2021), Human Resource Management (Metcalfe, 2007; Smith et al. 2012a; Aldossari & Robertson 2015; Harbi, Thursfield, & Bright (2017), Economics (Barnett, Yandle, & Naufal, 2013) and Marketing (Shaalan, Tourky, Barnes, Jayawardhena, and Elshaer, 2020).

Whilst the recent research is more theoretically rigorous, building on ‘grand theories’ such as social capital, institutionalism and social exchange theories, many of these studies take for granted an understanding that *wasta* practices are “traditional” and sometimes this assumed “traditionality” is justified by evidence of *wasta* behaviours in historical records from past times.

Such dismissive characterisations may be open to criticism as casual stereotyping to cover up a lack of evidence. Most current studies are small-scaled projects, often springing from PhD theses which utilise one methodological approach and are focused on one sub-domain of management. The literature seriously lacks evidence-based studies subject to the usual criteria of historical research that could serve to substantiate these assumptions. *Wasta* may indeed be a “traditional” practice but it has not been substantively demonstrated by empirical and evidential procedures to have been so in other times , where the cautionary recommendation of “autres temps, autres moeurs” would be cautionary restraint on convenient but flaccid assumptions.

The mono-disciplinary nature of these studies has also restricted our understanding of how this practice impacts business in the real world, often resulting in over-simplification in understanding *wasta*. Indeed, *wasta* has often been treated as an umbrella practice which is the same in every Arab country, neglecting the geo-socio-political structure of these countries.

Comparative studies of wasta with other forms of informal social networks in other parts of the world such as *guanxi*, *jeitinho* and *svyazi* (Hutchings & Weir, 2006a,b; Smith, Torres, Leong, Budhwar, Achoui, & Lebedeva, 2012a; Smith, Huang, Harb, & Torres, 2012b) are also increasing but it seems fair to suggest that these have not so far created a consistent trail of studies comparing and contrasting in appropriately rich detail how these informal social networks may be similar to or different from *wasta*. It is again reasonable to assume such similarities, but this may no longer be sufficient to explain their existence in economies and political systems that are very different from those inhabited by *wasta*. For instance, Horak and Taube (2016) compared the networks of g*uanxi* in China and *yongo* in Korea using social capital and institutional theory. They observed some similarities: both networks are society-spanning constructs; they are relatively closed to outsiders; and they are developed and maintained through reciprocal action that creates trust and trustworthiness, which serves as a major factor in network cohesion. Nevertheless, the two networks evince several fundamental differences, most significantly the fact that *guanxi* can be characterised as utilitarian (purpose-based), whereas *yongo* is, in principle, based on cause-based ties (Horak & Taube, 2016). Comparative research on wasta needs to show evidence and move to explanations rooted in other aspects of social structure and economic functioning. There seems little doubt that *wasta*-like practices are everywhere; however, there is a need to understand the similarities and differences that make each practice unique.

**From structure to process: “How” before “Why”?**

Much of the research on *wasta* and indeed similar informal social networks has been interesting enough but somewhat restricted in aspiration and constrained by practical considerations around time-horizons, budgets, measurable outcomes and narrow disciplinary boundaries. It is time to take both a larger and a longer-term perspective. So we can look for studies that report on structural differences between different types of networks, interdisciplinary studies that can capture *wasta* from multiple lenses and studies conducted over time, both on a cohort basis and on an evolutionary foundation, possibly going where the data takes us, through the techniques of snowball sampling for example.

One likely route would be studies that look over time, in detail, based on first hand and secondary evidence at how informal social networks function in their richness, informality, mess, loose ends and all, and to develop as a result a vocabulary of process as well as of structure. Networks can be vehicles of knowledge generation, enriching the organisation’s grasp of relevant bases for decision, or as researchers have also reported, opportunities for sectionalism, knowledge-hiding, decisional secrecy and self-enrichment tactics. What types of structures prioritise which outcomes? Which processes potentiate which structures? Changing structures alone does not necessarily change behaviour (Weir & Hughes, 1985)

Some topics that are probably under-researched are at either end of the social hierarchy. So we have far too few published accounts of studies that can intrude into the network practices of the power elites in the manner of the earlier contributions like “The Insiders”, based on secondary sources available to researchers who were at the time Oxford undergraduates. Likewise the research of Lupton and Wilson into the membership of the Bank Rate Tribunal Inquiry raised interesting questions that could have been more definitely decided had the research team been able to call on members of the Inquiry directly. Being in the room creates a stronger connection with reality than hearing about what happened only much later on as recalled events. Curiously, for reasons perhaps derived from the physics-derived models of scientific enquiry that have dominated much social science research, contemporaneous eye-witness accounts are often discounted for bias and incompleteness, as if minutes of meetings should never be accused of the same partiality, and history as recorded could never be suspected of prioritising the preferred story of the victors.

A type of writing that is underrated in the social sciences is that of the structured memoir, possibly this is because good memoirs are relatively rare. Too often they are exercises in self-promotion and self-exculpation. But when well done, that is to say with clarity of exposition, straightforward recounting of well-remembered events can be very useful to the researcher. The first study of *wasta* by Cunningham and Sarayrah (1993) adopted the story telling methodology and it is suggested that there could be much more use made of the memoirs of *wasits*, of deal-fixers, of participants and even bystanders, privileged by the fact that they were there. In the literature of Wasta there could be much more use made of the memoirs of *wasits*, of deal-fixers, of participants and even bystanders, privileged by the fact that they were there.

There is a need also to understand the ecological frameworks in which networks inhere and to discover in what environments differing types of network structures develop and what the outcomes are of apparently similar structural and processual network solutions in different ecologies. In this respect field researchers and theorists will go beyond the simplistic linear directional models that imply agency and suggest bases for causation in diversity, complexity, multiple causation, and construct explanations of network phenomena that are evolutionary in both adaptive and expiative ways.

These considerations have methodological implications; to understand the “how” dimensions there is a need for more studies that are ethnologically strong, seek to understand social processes over longer time periods rather than being capable of being captured through one-off snapshot survey methods or formal models.

Another suggestion to enhance the research on *wasta* is the adoption of formal modelling and mixed methods research. An exemplary study of the working of knowledge-creation among informal social networks of health service professionals is the work of Ward et al., (2014) which uses a mixed-methods methodology described thus: “The field methods used were landscape mapping, structured data collection for network analysis and latent position cluster analysis, and semi-structured interviews for narrative analysis. Our network modelling approach used the concepts of latent position network models and latent position cluster models. We used these models to identify clusters of people within networks, and people who acted as bridges between clusters. We then interviewed middle managers who – on the evidence of our cluster models – occupied similar positions in our graphs. The latter were used to produce practice-based narratives of knowledge creation” ( Ward et al, 2014).

In the past because of IT limitations it was only for future generations of social researchers that Kemeny, Snell and Thompson (1966) introduced a style of mathematics including networks that appeared to offer especial possibilities for social and economic researchers and to some extent these models have proved their value over several decades. But although both hardware and software advances have made these approaches technically possible for organisational scientists, they have not been especially represented in the study and modelling of informal social networks themselves, although studies in other fields like political science often using mixed methods methodologies have demonstrated their potential.

In our present generation the application of high speed computing and robust sensitive devices has radically revolutionised the algorithmic potential beyond any expectation and we now face the opportunity, indeed the probability, of being able to create evidence-based models of wasta that can integrate multiple data sources including sensory data, exploring for instance the differing performance characteristics of strong and weak ties (Mahmood, Thomasin & Menezes, 2015).

**Borrowing from other disciplines**

Applications of network approaches in fields like medical and gerontological research have offered development possibilities that have often been ignored in the field of business organisation (Ward, 1985). It is suggested that borrowing from and building on this research may be the key to bring research on informal social networks such as *wasta* to the next level. As such we present a brief review and suggestions on how to do so below

The interaction between informal, *wasta*-type, networks and formal legal institutional processes may offer especially promising research interest (de Mesquita, 2006). Researchers of *wasta* can build on the work of Song, Shi, Ma and Yang, (2015) who explored the interaction of formal and informal networks in relation to consensus-forming in organisations where there are strongly divided opinions. This research points to the overlapping of formal hierarchical and small-scale and scale-free networks. Conducting empirical work on this in the context of wasta will allow us to better understand overlapping between ‘wasta groups’ (Ali and Weir, 2020).

The tendency of informal social network structures to enlarge and enrich boundlessly under favourable conditions implies that it is very difficult to pre-set determinate network boundaries if they are to be preproperate for many statistical analytical processes based on assumptions of rational human and organisational cognition. Pyka (1997) explores this conundrum and claims that “know-how sharing and the emergence of informal social networks is possible via self-organization.” (Pyka, 1997, p 207), but this assumption may be heroically optimistic. McGuire’s study of financial services workers concludes that in contradictions between informal social network links and formal considerations of status and power-difference it is the latter that still appear more dominant (McGuire, 2002). Meliciani and Radicchio(2016) demonstrate the effect of informal social network ties on what they describes as “increasing over-education” in Italy though their conclusion that “a reform of employment services in Italy is needed in order to favour spatial flexibility”(Radicchio,2016, P513 ) appears optimistic.

The impact of informal social networks and risk-taking on SME performance is explored in a study of 381 SMEs in Nigeria (Lawal et al., 2018). Drawing on network theory and social identity theory Kwon (2017) examines the impact of informal social networks based on relational ties and emotional bonds on turnover intention in South Korean organisations, confirming the hypothesis that peripheral positions in informal social networks and marginal identity in the workplace may influence higher turnover intention.

**Conclusion**

To summarise, we recognise there has been a substantial increase in the quantity and quality of research on informal social networks such as *wasta.* This development has enabled us to move away from western-centric classic economic thinking when exploring business practice in other parts of the work to more inclusive and real-world understanding.

There is now a need for *wasta* studies to move forward from mono method, short timeframe and single country focus studies to become more open to interdisciplinary perspectives, longitudinal research, more innovative methodological approaches, and astute recognition that mere description now needs to be overtaken by more sophisticated analytical, mathematical and technological techniques if we are to further enrich our understanding of the processes through which *wasta* networks operates in.

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