

Saudi Arabian International Graduate Students' Lived Experiences Studying for the First Time in a Mixed-Gender, Non-Segregated U.S University

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Abstract. Enrollment of Saudi Arabian International students' in United States institutions of higher learning has increased substantially over the years since King Abdullah initially launched the Saudi scholarship program in 2005 that was renewed in 2010 and funded an outward flow of Saudi student, including females, to universities worldwide. A commitment to education for women is evident in that the program also provides funding for an accompanying male relative for every Saudi female awarded a scholarship. As a result, a number of Saudi females are able to receive a similar cross-cultural experience along with their male counterparts. The majority of Saudi students are sent to English speaking countries, with the U.S. universities having the largest number of enrollees. Consequently, there is a social and cultural impact as well as an academic one results as these Saudi international male and female students move through the acculturation process that accompanies their studies in the U.S. Since Saudi women were not encouraged to study abroad prior to 2010 they have not been the focus of multiple research studies. Given that male students have been both scholars and participants in multiple research studies in the past decades, the inclusion of Saudi Women International Graduate Students in this study, along with their male counterparts, has presented a unique opportunity for findings to emerge regarding gender-related issues in society and academia between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia as these female SA students are studying for the first time in mixed-gender environment and male SA students are interacting for the first time along with SA females in a mixed-gender environment.

Introduction

The late 1970s saw a rapid increase in international students from Saudi Arabia (SA) entering universities in the United States (US). In the late 1970s, the number of international students from Saudi Arabia (SA) in the United States (US) increased rapidly 10,440 reaching a high of 10,440 in 1980/81. A period of student population fluctuation followed until 1993/94, which was followed by increases until 2001/02. In the 2002/03 academic year, enrollments dropped 25% and continued to decline, reaching a low of about 3,000 students in 2004/05. In 2005/06, when participants in the newly-formed King Abdullah Saudi Scholarship Program (KASP) began enrolling in US universities, the number of Saudi students rose by 14%. With the scholarship program in place, the number of students showed a dramatic rise in 2006/07 and SA appeared in the list of top 25 places of origin at #12. The years 2015/16 marked the first time since 2004/05 that Saudi students did not experience double-digit growth. In the 2015/16 academic year, 61,287 students from SA were studying in the US, up 2.2% from the previous year with 2014/15 at 59,945 students (International Institute of Education, 2016).

Although studies about male Saudi students in higher education exist, there is a lack of studies about female Saudi students in higher education. As a result of the KASP's focus on international education for both males and females, along with King Abdullah's personal approval and support, and in spite of the male guardian accompaniment requirement, 19,000 Saudi females were studying at US universities and colleges in 2012 as compared to 800 in 2004 (Kono, 2013). Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU), an approved institution under the Saudi Arabia Cultural Mission (SACM), saw a significant increase in the number of Saudi male students in graduate programs in 2010/11 along with a comparable increase of Saudi females in 2013. Currently, more than 1,200 Saudi students are enrolled at MTSU. The Saudi government has reported that KASP will run until 2020 which raises the question as to how (and if) these globally mobile Saudi male and female international students will impact the social, economic, and cultural transformation of Saudi society after acculturation experiences in the non-segregated, mixed-gender society and academic contexts of the US (Ahmed, M. A., 2015; International Institute of Education, 2016). As a result, this study focused on the naturally-occurring experiences of Saudi male and female international students living in the US and studying for the first time at a US university.

Methodology

Because of the nature of the inquiry, the investigators utilized the action research process and took a qualitative stance in examining and analyzing the responses of SA international graduate students regarding adjustment experiences that emerged during the acculturation (cross-cultural transition) process over the first semester at MTSU. The qualitative approach in the action research process necessitated that naturalistic inquirers employ various collection modes to gather data from and about individuals within given contexts. As a result, the qualitative approach taken in this study utilized

multiple forms of data for triangulation and coding processes and analysis procedures in order to identify emerging themes and patterns of thought resulting from examination, analysis, and categorization. Lastly, findings are reported in a narrative that provides descriptive, interpretive accounts of the naturally-occurring acculturation experiences of the SA international students as they interacted in the non-segregated, mixed-gender society and academic contexts of the US (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Craig, 2009; Craig & Young, 2009; Young, 1994).

Thirty SA graduate students enrolled in a Master's in Education Degree were invited to participate in the study by investigators (one male / one female). Eleven SA international graduate students (seven males / four females) out of a possible 30 agreed to take part in the study and signed a release form agreeing to be surveyed, participate in a focus group discussion, write personal reflections, and be interviewed. All participants completed a short demographic survey in writing (English) regarding gender, major, and country of origin. Next, participants took part in five open-ended interviews conducted orally and recorded in written form (English) by a research team member. A male researcher was paired with male SA students and a female investigator was paired with female SA students. Oral interview questions solicited information regarding: expectations prior to arrival and reality as compared to expectations, significant differences in cultural practices in the US versus SA, gender roles within the university classroom and society in general in the US as compared to SA, most / least enjoyable activities, challenging or surprising happenings, experiences with discrimination or stereotyping, communication with Americans, changes in self, and level of well-being at various time intervals.

In addition, subjects participated in a focus group discussion and recorded reflections in personal journals describing their experiences as international graduate students living in the US for the first time and studying at MTSU. The personal journal format encourages depth of reflective discourse and is a form of personal reflection, thought, and reaction that differs from face-to-face interaction and provides an opportunity for sharing personal thoughts and ideas in an authentic and non-threatening format (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Investigators utilized coding for in-depth analysis of data sets. All data sets were transcribed, coded, and organized according to emerging themes and patterns (chunks of meaning) that revealed what participants thought and felt about their naturally-occurring lived experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Craig, 2009; Young, 1994) in the mixed-gender social and academic contexts in the US as compared to society and academia in SA. These findings provided an authentic glimpse into the complex experiences of both male and female SA international graduate students studying and living in the US regarding first-time interactions within non-segregated, mixed-gender social and academic contexts with each other and also with other graduate students.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of data sets revealed that all 11 SA international graduate students participating in the study, regardless of gender, experienced a plethora of challenges and / or barriers to their success within the social and academic contexts during their acculturation process. All participants mentioned various cultural and social differences including: gender-related differences, dietary foods, socially acceptable dress for females, religious practices, behavior of youth, friendliness of Americans, variety of activities and academic programs of study available to students, social and academic language difficulties, academic progress difficulty, lack of resources in place for international students on university, community, and personal levels, especially in terms of English language supportive measures for non-native speakers of English.

As a result, data analysis revealed specific emerging themes and categories of meaning which included (1) personal beliefs / expectations about the US culture and population versus the reality, (2) acculturative stress and adjustment, (3) cultural differences in general between the US and SA, (4) gender-related differences in society and academia between the US and SA, (5) experiences of discrimination and / or curiosity, (6) English language proficiency difficulties, (7) relationship issues, (8) lack of resources for support and help-seeking, and (8) freedom and decision-making opportunities. Further analysis allowed for “chunks of meaning” to be derived from the emerging themes and patterns of meaning. These “chunks of meaning” were grouped and labeled by the investigators under the following categories: (1) Challenges and / or Barriers to Success within the Biological Context, (2) Challenges and / or Barriers to Success within the Psychosocial Context, and (3) Challenges and / or Barriers to Success within the Academic Context. Furthermore, the participant’s level of English proficiency as well as issues surrounding gender norms and prejudices emerged as both Challenges and / or Barriers to Success impacting all three contexts: Biological, Psychosocial, and Academic.

Challenges and/or Barriers to Success within the Biological Context

Data emerged indicating specific *biological* Challenges and / or Barriers to Success which included difficulties resulting from adaptation to a new time zone and its impact on the sleep / wake cycles as well as eating time preferences, drinks and foods which violated dietary cultural practices or caused gastrointestinal distress, and differences in climate resulting in skin care issues as well as dehydration requiring adaptation to seasonal weather changes and traditional clothing adaptation to fit climatic changes.

Challenges and/or Barriers to Success within the Psychosocial Context

Data emerged indicating specific *psychosocial* Challenges and / or Barriers to Success which included social and emotional difficulties resulting from the pace and rhythm of American way of life, the constant fluctuation of emotions, experiences with discrimination and / or stereotyping, social adaptation problems involving difficulties with forming meaningful

relationships with Americans, social isolation due to lack of meaningful communication within the social context due to unfamiliar language, homesickness, actual distance from family and friends, feelings of isolation regarding their own culture as well as feeling isolated from the new culture, frustration resulting from cultural differences involving political beliefs, social customs, religious practices, gender norms and prejudices, housing and transportation problems especially for females since typically females do not drive in SA, as well as traditional clothing and availability of shopping facilities to purchase traditional merchandise and foods, financial resources, unexpected expenses, or employment complications, and amount of time necessary for language translation within all areas of daily living experiences.

Challenges and / or Barriers to Success within the Academic Context

Data emerged indicating specific Challenges and / or Barriers to Success within the *academic* context which included difficulty adjusting to the preferred type of US classroom interaction practices involving active rather than passive participation responses to instruction. Active participation and interaction with male professors and participating in discussion with male students within the US classrooms were especially difficult practices for the SA female students. Saudi female students explained to investigators that in SA all female students are taught in single-sex classrooms by female instructors. If a male instructor is necessary for female students, the instruction is conducted via remote delivery with no face to face interaction. Classes are not mixed but are separated by gender. As a result, females experienced discomfort within the mixed-gender classroom impacting communication with male professors and / or male classmates including oral presentations, seating assignments, and non-segregated cooperative group activity. Participants also mentioned critical thinking skills, writing ability, note-taking, language difficulties involving usage and slang as well as difficulty with comprehension of lectures, readings, and testing material as being especially challenging.

Challenges and / or Barriers to Success within ALL Three Contexts

Interestingly, data analysis revealed three most notable Challenges and / or Barriers to Success mentioned in detail by all 11 SA international graduate students as significant in their acculturation process. The participants' *level of English proficiency, sense of isolation*, as well as numerous *issues surrounding cultural gender norms, prejudices, and traditional practices* emerged as Challenges and / or Barriers to Success impacting *all three contexts: biological, psychosocial, and academic*.

Cultural Gender Norms and Traditional Practices / Prejudices

Participants were most animated and decisive when interacting with inquirers during the oral interview process with regard to differences existing between Saudi and US gender-related norms and prejudices within society in

general and the academia in particular. Participants willingly shared opinions with reference to US non-segregated society and mixed-gender university classrooms in contrast to their particular experiences in SA society and academia.

Participants said SA academic settings are single-sex with males educating males and females educating females; each gender has a separate educational facility / university. For example, if a male professor were to teach a female student that professor must do it via remote delivery and vice versa for a female professor instructing male students. All participants said that females in particular were “forbidden” to teach members of the opposite sex. As a result, inquirers observed SA females with the US classroom setting to be hesitant about speaking up when male students were present within their classes. Interestingly enough, the females were observed in the classroom setting by the inquirers to be even more passive if a male SA student were in the same class. It was mentioned by two of the four participating SA females that they did not interact within the mixed-gender classroom setting if another SA female were present since the other SA female might mention their interaction to a male SA guardian. This issue was especially troubling to the females since active participation by class members is considered the norm in the US academic setting. Active classroom participation was not seen as problematic by the male SA students. Two of the male SA participants did voice that they did not “like” it if a SA female were part of a group that included American males and were required to work in that type of group setting. When asked by the inquirer as to why this was bothersome to them, both participants responded with an explanation that SA culture “protected and preserved the virtue and sanctity of women for marriage and home.”

The “freedom” that the US women have was perceived in to be positive as well as negative in various instances. Two SA women said they felt more “protected” in SA and were pleased to their male guarding traveling with them as they were not allowed to drive in SA. On the other hand, two of the women said the gender roles in the US were very different from SA where genders in universities as well as society were kept “separate but equal” with no mixing.” One of the women went on to say women in the US are free and have their own rights and not like in SA where “boys are much preferred.”

The wearing of the traditional burka or the hijab was mentioned as a major issue by all four SA women. The women themselves did not see their cultural dress in a negative way; however, they voiced the opinion that Americans reacted in a negative way to these traditional head or body coverings in social settings, not necessarily within the academic setting. All of them mentioned prejudicial comments made to them by strangers with regard to their traditional dress. On the other hand, SA males made negative comments regarding typical dress of US female students; the lack of any rules regarding dress of women was unacceptable. Women’s bodies should be covered and not exposed by wearing “short shorts” and “short dresses” and “clothes with their midriff showing.”

The following quotes, recorded and transcribed by inquirers as closely as possible to the spoken word of participants, illustrate the significant impact of *issues surrounding cultural gender-related norms and traditional*

practices / prejudices on the cross-cultural transition experience of SA international students, especially females. Data indicated this issue presented a significant Challenge and / or Barrier to Success within all three contexts: biological, psychosocial, and academic and, especially for SA females, was most crucial to having a successful acculturation experience for these international graduate students studying and living in the mixed-gender, non-segregated US society.

Oral Interview Quotations: Gender-related quotes by Saudi Women

It was a great feeling that for the first time I studied in a different country and different people regardless of gender. They are equal.

I think we are all equal at U.S. classrooms. We have to respect another gender. They are the same in rights and duties.

They are very different. Boys are much preferred in S.A. For each gender we had separate university.

Not different between genders. All of them has the same rights. It was so perfect and they don't care about gender.

My impressions of the dress code and overall clothing style of U.S. university students girls is cool and make the student comfortable when they did not have formal dress. It is opposite what do in my country.

I think they have nice style specially girls. However, there is something I don't like for boys when their pants come down.

Many times I see some students laugh when they see me because my cover sometimes when I have presentation. I feel shy and they put me on stress.

Females do not teach males.

Here women drive. Female students are forbidden to drive and we are driven to and from school.

We do not have school with boys. No male teachers in classes except with remote delivery.

Our virtue is protected.

At home is tests and memory and different here with speaking much in class.

Students do not like hijab and stare or ignore me.

I can speak in class and sit with boys. I have no husband or S.A. males in classroom. My friend is with husband in her class and does not want to speak.

Oral Interview Quotations: Gender-related quotes by Saudi Men

It was the first time to travel out of home country for my wife. Honestly, she doesn't like to stay here anymore and I'm facing some difficulties with her. I'm trying to convince her to stay for one more year to finish her degree. My kids like to stay and they have many activities.

The gender roles are very different. I do not feel much gender roles.

Genders are completely different in my country they are separate from whole levels and every place.

In my home country the female's university is decoupled from the University of Males.

My country has a special culture and we have separate education. In my country there do not have mixing in education.

Gender roles are nonexistent in U. S. and clothing is different with body exposure acceptable for women.

I don't like sometimes U.S. men sitting next to S.A. women.

No dress code for woman. People wear whatever they want even if their stomachs show.

I don't like when women wear short shorts and short dresses and clothes with their midriff showing. A university should be a place to learn not to show your body off.

Here everyone women too can dress up any style and they don't care about specific style. It is opposite what do in my country - no rules at all for girls.

It is more open and too liberal than our community.

There (S.A.) the men and women are separate not equal and we have special universities for each gender.

Genders are completely different in my country. They are separate from whole levels and every place.

The following quotes, recorded and transcribed by inquirers as closely as possible to the spoken word, illustrate the significant role of *level of language proficiency* within all three contexts: biological, psychosocial, and academic and its impact on whether or not these international graduate students studying and living in the mixed-gender, non-segregated US society have a more positive cross-cultural transition experience. In addition, *level of language proficiency* contributed to the participants' feelings of loneliness and *sense of isolation* as communication with Americans was difficult in social as well as academic settings.

Oral Interview Quotations: Language Proficiency

Always I did not find people which I practice with them to speak English.

The challenge that I faced with English and overall communication is that speaking fluently.

Before I came here I understand some word but I was surprised when I talked with some native language.

I hope to overcome the problem of understanding the slang language.

I always search the internet on how to improve my academic language. I listening to the radio and reading in English as much as we can and listening to the news and reading.

I struggle with tasks that require proficiency with academic language such as reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Some of the academic terms are words I do not know.

For me, before coming here I had some of English language but I was shocked when I started learning academic.

We started from the zero because our education was poor in English. Also, I have massive difficult to practice my English.

The challenging that I faced with English and academic language is that using APA and every using artificial in writing.

Academic language is difficult and it needs a lot of reading.

Academic journals and reading is very very difficult. However, I translate them.

Oral Interview Quotations: Loneliness – Sense of Isolation

I missed Arabic and traditional food. We have a challenge about pork. We can't eat the pork.

First week negative alone because a white male spit at my wife.

Some people don't like me because I wear hijab. I faced some bad situation with some people for this thing. My neighbor ignore me when I was sitting out my house and when I say hello. She ignore me and slam her door. Also, I understand how the mass media give them a bad picture about hijab and Muslims. On the other hand I have American friends who love me and respect me. People are different.

It is a big challenge we faced with native people such as the way they look and same times they don't understand our accent also the different interesting.

The homesick and I found it is difficult to make a friendship with American people. I miss my friends and family.

I miss my religion – religious celebrations.

There is a lot of surprising things such as take how some people care of dogs more than their children. They love dogs and respect them.

Conclusions - Implications - Limitations

Using qualitative research methods, this study explored 11 SA male and female international graduate students' Challenges and / or Barriers to Success within the biological, psychosocial, and academic contexts that emerged over the course of the first semester of study at MTSU. The findings indicated that these international graduate students faced significant transitional difficulties during the first semester of graduate study in the US at MTSU in all three contexts.

The students expressed feelings of frustration and experiencing a lack of support and / or resources provided by university personal and professors within the biological, psychosocial, and academic contexts in their reflective journal entries and oral interviews. Although students were able to develop new strategies to deal with these cross-cultural transitional challenges, a need for more support and additional resources provided by university personnel and professors was indicated by the students during this most crucial acculturation time. Since international students begin the cross-cultural transition process at the university, it makes sense that the university should focus on specific challenges faced by the international students and provide more adequate support for the international students at this most crucial time. In addition, data analysis revealed two most notable Challenges and / or Barriers to Success mentioned in detail by all 11 SA international graduate students as significant in their acculturation process and impacting all three contexts (biological, psychosocial, academic) as being (1) participant's level of English proficiency and (2) issues surrounding gender norms and prejudices.

Some may see findings of this qualitative study as limited since it focused on seven male and four female SA international graduate students at one university; however, due to the nature of the study and use of data based on human experience, sample size is not seen as a limitation by the inquirers. Although the data collected in this study from a small number of individuals cannot be generalized to a larger population, findings may however be transferable to similar settings (Cardona, B., Millan, M., Birnbaum, M., & Blount, I., 2013). Also, findings may be used in a positive manner to increase understanding and support for SA international students navigating through acculturation adjustment experiences in US academia, US society, and personal lives based on level of language proficiency and significant cultural differences surrounding immersion in the non-segregated, mixed-gender academic and social US environment for the first time.

At present, the impact of SA international students' cultural identity and its influence on the experience of being in a non-segregated, mixed-gender environment for the first time has not been the focus of many studies. Studies involving SA male and female international students and their acculturation experiences in the US are limited due to the fact that prior to 2005 very few Saudi females were educated in the US. Future such studies would provide insight and information into this complex topic that could be used to enrich and ensure a more positive cross-cultural transition experience for SA international

graduate students studying and living in the US for the first time. Future studies might focus on the cross-cultural transition experiences of SA male and female students educated in the mixed-gender classrooms of the US and their potential impact on society and / or academia in SA upon return to the home country. Furthermore, due to the lack of studies focused on SA women international students in the US, and the significant gender-related cultural differences between SA and the US impacting the acculturation process of Saudi women in particular, future studies similar to this one focusing on the acculturation process (cross-cultural transition) of Saudi international students, especially female students, are warranted.

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