Culture Shock and Adaptation: A Narrative Analysis of Saudi Arabian Students' Experiences at Tertiary Education Institutions

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Abstract

The United States has seen considerable growth in the number of Arabic speaking students over the last few years (Mitchell, 2020). Given the global rise in anti-Muslim sentiments in the world, however, many international students from the Middle East face complex challenges. There is an inevitable cultural shock that requires adaptations and adjustments. The authors of this paper conducted in-depth interviews with seven Saudi Arabian international students. We examined their shared narratives to gain insight and perspective into the challenges they face. They reported a variety of challenges, including the absence of family ties, lack of sense of community, religious practice differences, and difficulty navigating differences in verbal/nonverbal language differences and gender role expectations. This is consistent with the dimensions of cultural adjustment discussed by Kim's (2001; 2005; 2017) Integrated Communication Theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation. The results of this study can be applied to help orient international students.

Introduction

Culture is a pattern of meaning, a way of defining the world and living in it. Different cultures create quite different worlds (Nolan, 1990). As Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010) claim, culture is like a software of our mind, which is shared among a group of people. Culture provides us with a framework for our worldviews, impacts perception, forms expectations, and shapes the shared reality of how members of a given group should be acting in a given context. When functioning within a mono-cultural context, we can be oblivious to these cultural differences. However, when one enters a different culture, all of the cultural differences become salient.

Moving to a new country is not an easy transition and can sometimes result in culture

shock. Culture shock is a multifaceted experience. One would experience culture shock at multiple levels - affective, behavioral, and cognitive (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). When one plunges into a different culture or stays in another country or a culture for an extended period, it can result in various stressful and depressing situations. An altogether different culture, language, customs, traditions, and people, requires adjustment in various contexts; it often demands that individuals enter new cultures to learn how to "acculturate" or adjust to a new culture. (Kim, 2002; 2005; 2017).

International students face this particular issue as they choose to navigate their academic career. International students who move abroad for their higher education are vulnerable to a variety of challenges related to cultural changes and language barriers. These international students need to know the cross-cultural differences in navigating both their academic and social lives (Morin, 2007). Although international students are prepared for academic tasks, they are not particularly familiar with differences in the use of nonverbal cues such as eye contact, gestures, facial expressions, paralanguage, and proxemics (Yang, 2015). Given entirely new circumstances in an unfamiliar environment, they may experience anxiety, confusion, depression, acculturative stress, conflicts, and various adjustment issues.

The number of Arabic-speaking English learners in the United States is on the rise (Mitchell, 2020). Adjusting to a new culture is difficult enough, but students from the Middle Eastern cultures face several challenges. Since the terrorist attack of September, 2011 (9/11) in the United States, anti-Islamic sentiment has stirred up, fostering anti-Muslim rhetoric in the media, and resulting in various instances of anti-Muslim violence (Gerteis, Hartmann, & Edgell, 2019). Abunab, Dator, Salvador, and Lacanaria (2017) reported that Arabic students, especially Arab-Muslim students who practice religious and restrictive cultural practices, face challenging times in the non-Muslim countries encountering discrimination, stereotyping, and basic misconceptions about them. Although it seems that the American society is embracing diversity and accepting multiculturalism, it seems that many minority members continue to face subtle forms of racism called microaggression (Sue et al., 2007; Sue, et al., 2009).

Arab-Muslim students are often at the receiving end of these microaggressions in the climate after 9/11. They are often a visible target due to their choice of faith, visible nonverbal cues such as head-coverings, or other religious practices. Given this background, the current study examined Saudi students' experiences of culture shock and adaptation, as they navigate adaptation in their academic and social lives in tertiary education institutions in the United States.

Cross-Cultural Adaptation Process

Kim (2001, 2005, 2017) proposed the Integrated Communication Theory of Cultural Adaptation, which explains the process of cross-cultural adaptation. When an individual enters a new cultural environment for an extended period of the time, Kim (2001, 2005, 2017) claims that one will go through a continuous cycle of stress-adaptation process, during which one will gradually enjoy interpersonal and psychological growth. In a new cultural environment, one may experience some periods of stress. Then, one learns to adjust to a new environment as they learn to engage in a new way of processing information, handling problems, and behaving. Kim explains that "each stressful experience is responded to with a temporary setback, which, in turn, activates adaptive energy to reorganize and re-engage in the activities of cultural learning and internal change, bringing about a new self-reintegration. (Kim, 2017, p.934)."

At the initial stages of entering a new culture, one often faces intense culture shock, with more acculturative stress and challenges in adaptation. With time one learns to adapt to the new cultural environment and experiences less frustration. The intensity of the stress-adaptation process decreases with the passage of time as an individual gets adjusted to the host culture.

A variety of factors can have an impact on the process of adaptation to stress. Kim (2001) mentions six structural features that influence on cross-cultural adaptation processes. They include an individual's predisposition (e.g., preparedness, adaptive personality), host environment (e.g., receptiveness to strangers), host cultural understanding and communication competence (e.g., communication competence within the host society), engagement in social communication (e.g., engagement in host's interpersonal and mediated communication), ethnic identity and interpersonal and mediated communication (i.e., communication with members of the host culture in person and in mediated contexts), and identity transformation (functional fitness, psychological health, intercultural identity).

Often, international students may not be fully objectively aware of the factors that may affect their experience of culture shock or adaptation. In the current study, we attempted to hear from Saudi Arabian students' and understand their experience of adjustment at a public university in the United States. Specifically, we inquired about the types of challenges they faced in their academic and social lives in American higher education institutions and their attempts at adjusting to the new culture. Based on the Saudi

students' accounts of these challenges and ways of coping with them, we hoped to identify solutions that might help facilitate the cultural adaptation process of incoming international students.

Methods

Participants

Seven students from Saudi Arabia, two females and five males, were interviewed between the fall of 2019 and the spring of 2020. All of the students speak Arabic and English and identify themselves as Muslims. The respondents were all between 25 and 30 years of age. They are studying English as their second language at a public university in the Southeastern United States. All the respondents come from a conservative Muslim families in Saudi Arabia. In this paper, we will use pseudonyms (Fizza, Fahim, Hanin, Suhail, Bilal, Ahmed and Rahman) to protect the identity of the participants.

Procedures

In order to gain an insight into the real experiences of Saudi students in the world of American higher education, the authors conducted a semi-structured in-depth interview with the seven Arabic international students. One of the authors teaches an English as a Second Language course at a university and recruited students to participate in this interview study using a network sampling technique. The participants were informed with an IRB-approved informed consent before the interview. Each participant took one and a half hours to perform the interview, during which the interviewer took notes as well as reflective memos.

Instruments

The semi-structured interviews consisted of four sections. The first of them contained questions about demographic information, for example, national background, cultural/religious identity, etc. The next part concerned the culture shock experience and cultural differences perceived by the informants. The subsequent section discusses the misconceptions and stereotypes that American people may have about their culture as well as those that they have about American culture. It also discusses about how they adapted themselves to the American culture, and their suggestions as to how their transition to the American way of living can be improved. Simply put, the emphasis was placed on how international students, especially students from the Middle Eastern countries, deal with the challenges in adapting to the American culture.

Results

Given the qualitative responses provided by the participants, we utilized qualitative thematic analysis steps that included, (1) familiarizing with the data, (2) generating initial coding, (3) iterative process of search for themes/reviewing themes, and naming and providing details for the themes, and (4) producing the report comprising the quotes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first author reviewed the participants' responses twice, noting repeated topics and important themes. We collected a list of six topics and challenges, namely, communication/relation, physical environment, American culture, religion/worldviews, and gender role differences.

Sources of Culture Shock
Communication/Relation

Language. Language is an essential factor in culture shock, since the competency level in the host language is often an integral part of cultural adaptation. All of the participants of this study were taking English as a Second Language (ESL) classes. In Saudi Arabia, the use of the English language is minimal, hence all the participants had used the Arabic language in schools. It often takes some time for international students to learn and adapt to American culture and get comfortable interacting with others in their daily lives (Morin, 2007). They face many verbal and non-verbal misunderstandings on a daily basis due to differences in the culture and language. Some examples of these include the following:

- Greetings: Saying 'hello', 'smiling', or greeting to a stranger is not a customary in Saudi Arabia. They had to get accustomed to the appropriate way of greeting in the US.
- Eye contact: Eye contact is considered as a sign of confidence, respect, or show of attention in the U.S., but it is considered rude in Saudi Arabia.
- Gestures: The participants reported that they were not used to using a variety of hand gestures such as a high five, handshakes, or victory signs used in the United States. In Saudi Arabia, people greet others by saying 'Wa ʿalaykumu s-salam' which means 'may peace be upon you'. The use of curling fingers to mean 'come here' in the U.S., is considered rude in their culture.

Family Ties. Saudi Arabian culture is intertwined with Islamic worldviews. The society is highly conservative, religious, traditional, and family oriented. Saudi Arabian people stay together as an extended family, help each other, and oftentimes, domestic help is available to them. One participant, Fizza stated, 'I never had to worry about cooking food

or about the upbringing of my daughter in Saudi Arabia as we have household help and our mothers live with us. Here in America, from taking care of your children to cleaning the house, cooking, laundry, and studying, everything has to be managed alone'. Besides having domestic help, the younger family members have assistance from elders in the family. When they move to the United States to pursue their academic career, they face challenges and have to learn to handle everything independently. Buying a car, getting their driver's license, cleaning the house, doing the dishes, cooking, and grocery shopping - everything falls on their lap along with their education.

Physical Environment

Religious Practice/Sense of Freedom. The participants stated that they visited a mosque regularly in Saudi Arabia and pray five times throughout the day (dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset, and night prayers). Since moving to the United States, five participants responded that they did not have enough time to perform religious practices. They feel that they had more time for family and for following the traditions or religious customs in Saudi Arabia. As Bilal mentioned, 'I hardly get time to visit mosques or say 'namaz' here in the U.S. as there is so much homework to do'. Namaz is the holy prayer of Muslims. However, they liked the fact that in the U.S. there is a lot of emphasis on human rights and everyone has the freedom to follow their own religion. For example, Rahman was surprised to see a mosque in almost every city and that everything related to religious practice or grocery items are available in the U.S.

Social/Community Services. Currency differences and social services can be a big factor in cultural adjustment. All the respondents found everything rather expensive in the United States especially when they converted the prices into their own currency. In Saudi Arabia, education and healthcare are free for the citizens, so they found buying medical insurance and going to a doctor in the U.S. is highly expensive. Fahim mentioned that his daughter needed a dental treatment, though he was shocked with by the doctor's fee as in his country 'medical, dental, and education is all free for them'. He also stated that their education in the United States was also sponsored by their government as Saudi Arabians enjoy free education. In colleges, students are *paid* to attend school. He said, "It was shocking for us that medical is so expensive here. We took our daughter to a dentist and had to spend money even with the insurance. I find it weird that one has to take appointments to see a doctor here. We have free medical, dental and education in our country.

In Saudi Arabia, public transportation is widely available, whereas in the United States it is less common. Getting a driver's license, buying a car, and then buying insurance was indicated as requiring a lot of effort and cost a lot. When they choose to drive, they must

first become accustomed to driving on the right side of the road, as in their home country people drive on the left and they must learn all the road signs and traffic rules, unlike in Saudi Arabia where the traffic rules are not very strictly followed.

They also need to get adjusted to dealing with the differences in law enforcement. The participants liked the fact that in the U.S., 24/7 help from police is available by calling 911. On the other hand, in Saudi Arabia, the police do not intervene as frequently, especially when it comes to the case of domestic disputes. Suhail claimed that the police in his country does not interfere even if a husband is mistreating his wife as they say it is their personal matter.

Religion

Religious-Based Society. Saudi Arabia's culture is based on religion and strict rules. Judgements and personal opinions may not be publicly expressed. Often, Saudi Arabians do not choose whether to participate in the religion. Women are expected to wear an 'Abaya' in public, which is a robe that covers the face and only reveals the eyes. Women cover themselves as it brings more value to a woman to be hidden. Many women are expected to marry early and they move out of their family's house thereafter. Women are allowed to uncover their hair and faces at weddings and schools, since men and women are separated in those places. Girls have their own buildings, classrooms, cafeterias, and teachers at schools separate from boys. Instructors must be women, otherwise a male can only teach a class of girls through Skype where they cannot see the students. The 'Abaya' is only worn in public places where men are present, such as the grocery store or the mall. Companies in Saudi Arabia have separate workstations solely for women.

Physical Appearance. Saudi Arabia is a Muslim country and has very strict Islamic laws. Everyone living there must abide by those rules. Women must wear loose-fitting clothes and cover their bodies so that no other man can see their bodies. They cover their body with an 'Abaya', i.e. a robe-like dress, and wear a headscarf called a 'Hijab', and some even cover their face with a 'Burqa', i.e. an outer loose-fit garment that covers the body and the face. They can remove it only in front of their husbands, fathers or their brothers. Tsurui, Camara, and Sorrels (2012) report that international students' clothing choices impact their level of acceptance in the host culture. In the case of Saudi Arabian students' use of head/body covering, it is partly due to their religious beliefs, which is not something they can easily change to adjust to the host culture. Saudi Arabian participants believed that wearing the head/body covering is, to a certain extent a way of protecting and

respecting women, though this type of covering is seen as putting down women in the United States.

They all have a high level of pride in their religious beliefs and national identities, although they feel that in the U.S. sometimes people around them look at them differently. They stated they had to bear discrimination or being misunderstood due to their clothing as they were stereotyped as terrorists, based on their dress. Rahman mentioned, "we are looked at with suspicion at the airports and that is the reason why [sic.] we now wear jeans/t-shirts and not traditional dresses". Post 9/11, unfortunately, Muslim students had to face discrimination and racism, adding to the stereotyping challenges based by middle eastern students in the United States.

Gender Roles Expectations. In Saudi Arabia, gender role differences are respected. Men hold more power at home and in various functions in the society, because of the very strictly religious-based society. When making decisions, often women need permission from the person they are dependent which could be father, husband or brother, in order to travel abroad. It could be their father, husband, or even brother in order to travel to other countries. If a woman works, they do not contribute to the household as that is the man's duty. Women do all the household chores, raise kids, and go to work so that only men are responsible for all the household payments. All women have a maid that lives with them and helps the family with household chores as well.

In recent years, the Saudi Arabian society has transitioned from a traditional society into more of an equal opportunity society for women. Despite the changes, the expectations related to gender differences remain strong in the Saudi Arabian society, especially compared to the American society. In the United States, men's roles are very different as they know how to cook, clean, do laundry, and perform many other household tasks that women generally do in Saudi Arabia. Having a maid is not common in the U.S. as it is in Saudi Arabia, and even those with a maid do not live with the family. Without a maid or family help, Americans depend on themselves to get things done. Given this difference, participants in this study felt that life in the U.S. keeps them very busy, and it is hard to find time to simply enjoy the company of friends/family, aside from holidays.

In Saudi Arabia, men and women have separate buildings with teachers of the same gender. It has been hard for Hanin to adapt to mixed gender classes and professors here in the United States. To cope with this cultural difference, Hanin claimed that she chose to speak only to same gender professors as it was more comfortable. According to Hofstede's masculinity index (Hofstede Insights, 2020; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010), there are differences in perceived gender role differences and expectations. The participants felt that they had to adjust to different gender role expectations in the United States.

Culture in the host country: US Culture.

Diversity/Multiculturalism. The participants stated that they would describe the culture of the United States as diverse and open. This is because the United States is a melting pot for so many different countries, cultures and backgrounds. The participants noted that the United States has pride in its culture of freedom. They felt that Americans had the choice to be whatever they wanted to be and that they have the freedom to express themselves. The United States provides citizens freedom of speech and the right of their opinion, unlike in Saudi Arabia.

The participants noted that the United States was greatly individualistic. This was reflected in the following statement: 'Having friends come over to your house at any time of day is not okay here in the U.S. In Saudi Arabia, we have people come to our houses without calling beforehand and it is normal.' It was also indicated by the interviewees that they also noted that it seems like Americans prefer to have privacy between people and focus on taking care of oneself instead of others. One participant gave an example of a situation in which he asked his American friend for someone's phone number, and he was refused to pass the number before getting the person's permission. This simple gesture was deemed unnecessary to the participants, though in the U.S. the gesture is a sign of respect.

The culture in Saudi Arabia is more collectivist, as people get to know each other by inviting them to their homes. Trust is assumed, and mutual trust is assumed throughout the culture and country. Strangers are always willing to help in the same form they would help close family members. This is consistent with the principles of a collectivistic society detailed by Hofstede and colleagues (Hofstede Insight, 2020; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov, 2010).

Cultural Adaptation Process

Misconceptions of Saudi Arabia and the United States. According to the participants, Americans perceive Saudi Arabians as angry people and potential terrorists. The participants also admitted to having misconceptions about the American culture. For example, they believed that American food is of high quality, but a considerable proportion of it proved to be fast food. Another misconception/stereotype the participants had of the U.S. was that everyone is rich. They did not expect that Americans must work really hard to make money. In addition, participants thought racism was not a continuing social issue in the United States. The participants had only seen the racial issues in movies and did

not think it existed anymore. At times, adjusting their preconceived notions about American culture was something that they needed to overcome as they experienced the host culture.

Cultural Adaptation Strategies. In the interview, we asked the Saudi students about the different actions they took to adjust to the new cultural environment. Some of them claimed that getting involved in various clubs at the university helped them. For instance, Rahman said that he joined the International Students Association and was involved in various events, which helped him to make new friends and overcome anxiety. Fahim and Fizaa spent time with their daughter, cooking food, and exploring the city together. This helped them stay busy, gain knowledge and get comfortable in the host country. Some said watching English movies, listening to podcasts, and participating in weekly conversation hours at the university helped them improve their English skills, which helped reduce the language barriers. Suhail, Bilal and Ahmed said going to the fitness center helped reduce their anxiety which also helped them maintain mental and physical stability.

Naturally, although there are individual differences as to which strategies are effective, each person attempted to find something that works for them. Kim (2017) noted three facets of internal change taking place in newcomers as they undertake the process of cross-cultural adaptation a) increased functional fitness in carrying out daily transactions, b) improved psychological health in dealing with the environment, and c) an increasingly intercultural identity orientation. The participants of this study were engaged in ways to connect with others and to figure out strategies that help reduce acculturative stress and maintain psychological health, while being functional and engaging in smoother cultural adjustment.

Conclusion

The study provides insights into the experiences of students from Saudi Arabia in the American tertiary education. Specifically, we obtained an in-depth understanding of the various factors that contribute to their acculturative stress and misconceptions. This helped us identify ways to help them with the transition. These struggles that the Saudi students shared here are also faced by other international students coming to the United States. Therefore, the insights that we obtained from this study can be useful in assisting incoming international students not just from Saudi Arabia but also from other parts of the world. Kim (2017) states that through active participation, and through cultivating the adaptive personality of openness, strength and positivity, one is more capable of overcoming temporary setbacks and attaining a level of functional efficacy one needs to pursue their personal and social goals.

Most of the participants in this study reported experiencing acculturative stress, yet they overcame the temporary setbacks and attained the level of functional efficacy they needed to pursue their personal and social goals. Their active participation in the host culture, willingness to accept new perspectives, and cultivation of strength in dealing with negative views and maintaining positivity all helped them adjust to a new cultural environment.

The current study will help us to underscore the point that it is normal to have these cultural differences and for anyone to face acculturative stress. Instead of attempting to deny acculturative stress, it is important to prepare oneself to face these challenges and adapt to a new culture. The paper will also provide some guidelines to the office, such as global affairs, to help assist the international students on the day of their orientation at any university. We believe it is critical that the colleges and universities should not only offer generic orientations for incoming students but also special orientations for incoming international students. It will not only help facilitate their adjustment in a new environment but also ensure their academic success.

By raising the awareness of these cultural differences and acculturative stress that international students face in the United States, American students can understand more about the cultural differences and to have empathy for foreign students. As the mission of many universities is to prepare graduating students for functioning in a global and diverse society, it is crucial for us to understand the struggles of international students while promote understanding and empathy among American students.

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