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Understanding Saudi Student Integration in the U.S.: A Study on Saudi Students at a Southeastern Institution

Carrie Melius

Abstract

Over the past decade there has been an increase in the number of Saudi students studying in the United States. Most recently, Saudi Arabia moved from fourth to third in country ranking for student enrollment in the United States. This study focuses on the experiences of Saudi students at a Southeastern institution in the United States by examining the perspectives of Saudi students studying in English as a Second Language (ESL) programs and undergraduate programs. In order to gain a deeper understanding of issues faced by Saudi students, domestic students as well as instructors were also included as participants in this study. Mezirow's (1996) transformative learning theory and Barker's (1981) neo-racism theory were incorporated into the theoretical framework of this research. Through in-depth interviews, there were five emerging themes present, including: religion, appearance/clothing, language, media, and culture.

Key Words: Saudi students, United States, culture, social, discrimination

Introduction

According to IIE (2015), students from Saudi Arabia are ranked third in the U.S.-based on enrollment. In the 2015-16 academic year, 61,287 students from Saudi Arabia were enrolled in higher education institutions in the U.S., which was a 2.2% increase from the previous year with 11 consecutive years of increases. (IIE, 2016). The opportunity for most Saudi students to study in the U.S. has been made possible by the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP), initiated by the government of Saudi Arabia in 2005 (Hofer, 2009; Heyn, 2013). In 2010, KASP funding provided over 70,000 scholarships in the previous five years to Saudi students to study in U.S. higher education institutions as well as in other countries (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010). This scholarship gives students the chance to study abroad while promoting positive relations between Saudi Arabia and the United States.

Even with the increase in Saudi student enrollment, there is a lack of descriptive data on this student population regarding integration in U.S. higher education systems (Heyn, 2013). Most current research explores the adjustment issues of international students as a whole, including issues such as English language proficiency (Yeh & Inose, 2003; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006;), social support (Poyrazli et al., 2004; Sumer et al., 2008) and perceived discrimination or

prejudice (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Araujo, 2011), but few studies provide evidence of how students from Saudi Arabia are affected by adjustment issues in U.S. universities. The following study provides insight to this specific student population's social and cultural adjustment and will conclude with ways in which we can better assist these students during their transition into U.S. higher education settings.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to examine the lived experiences of students from Saudi Arabia while simultaneously learning about how they are perceived by domestic students and instructors. This study uncovers issues experienced during integration (i.e. negative generalizations, discrimination) and seeks to improve the experiences of Saudi students studying at a Southeastern institution. The need for this study is relevant in order to educate higher education institutions on the adjustment challenges faced by this growing student population in order to improve their overall experiences.

Theoretical Framework

This study adapts Mezirow's transformative learning theory as part of the theoretical framework. Mezirow (1996) defines this theory as "the process of using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (p. 162). Mezirow's theory involves rethinking your frame of reference, or "assumptions or expectations that frame an individual's tacit points of view and influence their thinking, beliefs, and actions" (Taylor, 2008, p. 5), based on critical self-reflection in order to create a perspective transformation. The transformation of perspective usually happens when there is a significant personal or social issue which can force individuals to reconsider their existence and experiences (Taylor, 2008). This theory is pertinent to this qualitative study because the participants are asked to self-reflect on experiences that may have caused personal stress or uncomfortable feelings in order to understand the core of the issue and how it can be resolved.

This qualitative study also utilizes Barker's neo-racism theory (1981) in order to describe and explain the direct and indirect forms of racism and discrimination exposed within this study. Neo-racism is defined as rationalizing "the subordination of people of color on the basis of culture, which is of course acquired through acculturation within an ethnic group...it functions to maintain hierarchies of oppression" (Spears, 1999, p. 12-13). According to Lee & Rice (2007), neo-racism links cultural and national supremacy with growing motivation for marginalizing groups in a globalizing world. The Patriot Act is described as an example of national discrimination because it "allows for the detention without limit and denial of due process for some and other violations of personal freedoms,

cumbersome yet ineffective foreign student tracking procedures...” (Lee & Rice, 2007, p. 389). A more specific and relevant example includes “mistreatment of Middle Eastern peoples in the U.S., who have endured longer security checks at airports, questionings and detainments without charge, and insults, accusations, and physical violence for the terrorist attacks of 9/11” (Lee & Rice, 2007, p. 389). Neo-racism is evident in the higher education setting, which creates obstacles to establishing positive relationships and friendships among international students and the host society.

Methods

The primary method for data collection in this study employed the use of interviews. The purpose of this study and the method for data collection concentrated on two components. The primary focus involved interviews conducted with students from Saudi Arabia to better understand their lived experiences as students in the U.S. These students included undergraduate students as well as students from an Intensive English Program in the Southeast. The secondary focus contained interviews with domestic students and instructors who have interacted with Saudi students to understand their perspectives regarding Saudi student adjustment. By implementing maximum variation sampling (Creswell, 2013), the study provided extensive data which allowed for a more comprehensive analysis of Saudi student integration.

The research questions (See Appendix A) pertain to the three groups of participants: Saudi students, domestic students, and instructors. The central question involves the general experiences and interactions that Saudi students have had with domestic students/instructors and vice-versa. The supporting questions focus on topics such as general views of students, experiences involving discomfort or discriminative behaviors observed or experienced, involvement in international support organizations, and ways to resolve challenges faced by the Saudi student population. Self-reflection was a significant element within the interview process in order to aid in a deeper understanding of the participants’ frame of reference in order to allow for change (Taylor, 2008). The study involved completion of thirteen hours of interviews, including seven hours with Saudi students, three hours with domestic students, and three hours with instructors. Each interview was recorded and lasted approximately one hour. Each participant chose individual pseudonyms to keep anonymity within the reporting.

Findings

During the data collection process there were prevalent, emerging themes that were discovered within the responses of the participants. The themes included religion, appearance/clothing, language, media, and culture. These themes are salient in that they expose experiences where Saudi students have felt

they were being perceived negatively or were being discriminated against in some way. The following portion details each theme and includes an analysis of the findings.

Religion

Religion had a major impact on this study and was brought up by the participants in each interview. When asked about difficult or uncomfortable interactions with American/domestic students, every Saudi student responded that they had experienced negative interactions or had other Saudi friends who experienced negativity involving the discussion of religion initiated by domestic students. In many cases, students found that what they had originally assumed to be initial forming of friendships turned into an attempt to focus on religion. While participating in a student organization for international friendships, Karom, an ESL student from Saudi Arabia, stated that his new American friend showed up with a bible and wanted to discuss Christianity during their first meeting. Many students mentioned that upon arrival they felt targeted by domestic students in an effort to educate them about Christianity while a few even reported that some domestic students told them that Islam is wrong and not true. Furthermore, students felt like some domestic students were trying to force their religion on them. Beedy, an undergraduate student from Saudi Arabia, mentioned a time when a Saudi female student was told by an American that she should convert to Christianity so that she would have more freedom. She was very upset about it. In regards to domestic student responses, some mentioned feeling tension when discussing religion with Saudi students simply because of differing views but none of the domestic participants felt like they were ever pressured to change their way of thinking by Saudi students.

In other instances, Saudi students have felt like they have been dismissed or treated unfairly based on their religion. Fo, a Saudi student in the ESL program, said “There are some students that if they know you’re not a Christian, they won’t want to hang out with you.” In this case, students are being rejected based on religious background. In another situation, Beedy described an incident where his Saudi friend was praying outside of his gym before entering and was stopped and questioned by the police. They targeted him based on what they saw as suspicious behavior and asked him to go to the police station for questioning. The police took his photo and asked what he was doing and why he was doing it. These examples provide evidence of neo-racism in that the students felt unwelcomed and mistreated due to being part of a different cultural norm (Lee & Rice, 2007).

Appearance/Clothing

Most of the Saudi students brought up clothing and appearance as another factor that caused some level of discomfort for them at times. Fo reported an

experience where he decided to wear his thobe, the traditional clothing worn generally by Muslim men, on campus. While some students gave positive remarks on his traditional attire and seemed very interested in it, he said “other students said I might do bad things...like have guns”. When asked if he would ever consider wearing his thobe on campus again, Fo said “probably only for special celebrations or cultural events”. Karom shared an experience where he went downtown in his thobe and was verbally harassed by other students. “They called me Osama bin Laden and were laughing about it”. He noted that it was Halloween and he seemed less bothered by this incident. However, another time when dressed in his traditional clothing off-campus, one student called him out and asked if he was making a bomb, which caused him to feel more upset. Karom felt that people will ultimately have negative views if he wears his thobe on regular days. These examples show obvious reasons why many Saudi students may not feel comfortable wearing their traditional clothing in public. Most of the negative experiences involving discrimination occurred outside of campus, and according to Poyrazli and Lopez (2007), students tend to face different forms of discrimination when off-campus.

When discussing the hijab, the head covering worn by Muslim women, one female Saudi student stated “it would be easier if I didn’t wear it for friendships because people don’t understand or are scared”. One ESL instructor, Ted, mentioned an instance where one of his Saudi female students reported to him that she was mistreated by an employee in the university cafeteria. The student assumed the employee was having a bad day, so she went back another day and received the same rude service while she observed the other domestic students were treated in a friendly manner. The student believed she received this treatment due to her veil and looking different. When asked if he would recommend his family or friends from Saudi Arabia to attend college in the U.S., Karom replied that he would not recommend Saudi women to study here because of the hijab. These examples illustrate the widely misunderstood practice of veiling by many Westerners. Some view the hijab as a symbol of oppression or religious fundamentalism which results in negative perceptions and misunderstandings. According to Cole and Ahmadi (2003), fear and suspicion surrounding the hijab is caused by lack of religious and cultural exposure. Even further, the authors state that “misinformation or a lack of sufficient information maintains alienating stereotypes and misconceptions” (p. 58).

Some Saudi students reported incidences where they were treated differently based solely on their physical appearance and nationality. Beedy shared several accounts, including:

I went to Subway one morning with a Saudi friend. While I was ordering my sandwich, the guy who was making it asked where I was from and I told him. He said “Look, if you have a gun or you want to shoot me or anybody, I have a gun and I’m going to shoot you first.” I didn’t respond to him because I was shocked. He experienced a similar situation where he was sitting outside his home with other Saudi friends when his neighbors were having a party one evening. One

guy at the party came up to them and said “Hey, if you’re going to kill me, I’m going to kill you first.” They didn’t respond to him because they knew he had been drinking. Beedy mentioned that this incident bothered him more than the Subway encounter because he felt like maybe the guy wouldn’t have said it if he hadn’t been drunk; therefore, maybe his true feelings came out this way and it made him question how many other people may be thinking the same thing but not saying it out loud. Mazen, an ESL student from Saudi Arabia, also expressed “Some people in (name of city) don’t have an open mind when they see someone who isn’t American. They will stay away from them.” Other Saudi students mentioned general feelings of discomfort from facial expressions they encounter in public and feel it’s due to looking different or Middle-Eastern. The previous examples reflect neo-racist notions based around false accusations regarding Middle-Easterners and terrorism.

Language

Most international students agree that studying and trying to adjust socially in a foreign language is one of the hardest aspects of the transition (Li et al., 2007). Language has proven to have a significant influence on Saudi student adjustment due to how greatly Arabic contrasts with the English language. Many students stated that their lack of English proficiency caused them to struggle more to make friendships with domestic students. Poyrazli et. al. (2004) indicates that students with lower levels of English proficiency face higher levels of acculturative stress. Moreover, international students who study in ESL programs feel more intimidated or isolated in English-speaking classrooms (Kwon, 2009). This was evident during an interview with Abd Aullah, a Saudi student, who stated that he felt it was difficult to make friendships with domestic students due to being separated on campus in the ESL program.

Another language aspect significant to this study more specifically relates to the Arabic language. Some students discussed experiences where they felt like they were being viewed negatively by others when they spoke Arabic in public. Mazen mentioned that the tone of Arabic sounds stronger or more aggressive which could be a reason why some people are fearful or react negatively when they hear it. Some instructors revealed an incident where another domestic professor heard some Saudi students talking in Arabic near his office door and felt threatened by the conversation. The domestic professor claimed they pounded on his office door. Based on one witness’s account, they did not threaten the instructor in any way, but perhaps based on the tone or the unfamiliarity of the language, the instructor responded negatively to the conversation. According to the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), many instructors and the public are not fully sensitized to the issues of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim stereotyping. In fact, this particular professor responded to the situation by stating that “these (ESL) classes must be taught in a secluded area away from

other classes". Educators should be spreading awareness of how to stop cultural stereotyping and insensitivities instead of conforming to them.

Media

Based on the study's results, the Saudi students' comments on how Westerners view Saudi Arabia and the Middle-East were overall negative. Abd Aullah reported "Most Americans seem to think that all Muslims or Arabs are terrorists because of what they see on the news." Karom added "The news only reports on the bad things...killings...especially Fox News. It makes people generalize negatively." Some students said that many people in the U.S. seem to trust the news and government too much. Mazen discussed how the news only reports on hard topics in order to get more viewers, which is why you never hear about the positive aspects of the Middle-East. The domestic participants' responses were all in agreement with the Saudi students regarding the negativity and stated that they do not hold these generalized feelings toward the student population. However, they also admitted that they do believe that many Americans make negative generalizations and stereotype Arabs. When asked about talking with other domestic students about news reporting in the Middle-East, Saudi students generally agreed that they would rather not talk about the news and prefer to stay on positive topics.

In regards to friendships, Fo reported on what his domestic friend told him once. He said "My family says to be careful with this person (Fo) because you are a Muslim and you might kill me...We have been friends for a long time...." These accusations may be based on selective media coverage which feeds into the negative generalizations. According to Spears (1999), another strategy of neo-racism uses "mass media, which, through selection, emphasis, and omission portray groups of color (not to mention women, the working classes, and other oppressed groups) in negative and stereotyped ways" (p. 13). A poll by the Council on American-Islamic Relations found that "25% of Americans believed negative stereotypes about Muslims to be true and that Muslims 'teach their children to hate'" (Abu-Fadil, 2005, p. 4). Mezirow (1990) also mentions how television has had a significant influence in "perpetuating and extending the hegemony of mainstream ideology" (p.16). This can cause what he refers to as "socio-cultural distortion" which happens when people assume that a specific interest of a subgroup is the general interest of the entire group. This can be observed in the negative generalizations made based on selective media coverage on extremist groups in the Middle-East. Responsible journalism could assist with more positive portrayals of coverage to help eliminate these generalizations.

Culture

One significant cultural element included the differences in individualistic vs. collective societies. Saudi students gave examples of how it was difficult to

make friendships with American students because the domestic students seemed to be too involved in their own lives and seemed very busy. Some students mentioned that the friendships that they have made with Americans didn't feel as deep or authentic as friendships made with other international students. All of the domestic students and teachers discussed how Saudi students were so hospitable towards them. They mentioned how the Saudis enjoy inviting them over for dinner and making them feel welcomed. Daniel, a domestic undergraduate student, commented on his friendships with Saudi students in the ESL program "They are so refreshing to be around...their loyalty as friends...they seem to communicate 'I'm here for you'...there is a desire to be close friends." While the domestic students interviewed shared examples of reciprocating the hospitality, many Saudi students felt like Americans were not generally as hospitable. Many Saudi students do not witness Americans desiring to learn about other cultures and some domestic students seem to have their own perspectives of other cultures without any real exposure. This may make some international students feel like their cultural identities are being rejected or a sense of alienation (Lee & Rice, 2007).

Upon further discussion of cultural differences, one domestic undergraduate student in particular, Levi, had a lot of insight on Saudi culture as he has befriended many Saudi students over the last few years. Levi discussed societal differences based around the notion of innocence/guilt in the U.S. vs. honor/shame in the Middle-East. He stated that Saudi students are not only representing themselves in the U.S., but this extends beyond that to their families and tribes within different regions. He shared that there are many different groups of Saudi students within the population as a whole, based on where they are coming from and their own personal beliefs. They are still one collective group, however. On discussing cultural topics, he stated that "once you become genuine friends, everything is a lot more open". Saudi students indicated that domestic students shouldn't group them as one type or generalize without getting to know them personally first. "You can't paint everyone with the same brush" as Ted stated.

Implications

This study provided opportunities to address issues facing Saudi students at an institution in the Southeast. It also promoted personal reflection on the concerns confronted by this student population. By implementing self-reflection of personal experiences, students and instructors, both international and domestic, can transform their own learning of an experience to find future solutions (Mezirow, 1990). Participants shared their personal advice on how these issues can be resolved. The biggest suggestion was to open up the dialogue on different levels across the campus to provide better cultural education. Ted mentioned having a cultural component added to the first year experience courses offered to incoming freshmen students as a way to promote and respect

differences, including religion. Fo suggested using social media and the internet to educate people on Arabic culture in order to reduce cultural stereotypes. Students also mentioned that the news should promote education of Arab culture in order to familiarize more people with it. Abu-Fadil (2005) mentioned a few resources relating to this, including a USA Today article “Q & A on Islam & Arab Americans” (<http://usatoday.com/news/world/islam.htm>) and a series of online articles on topics such as “Understanding Ramadan” and “Covering Muslims in America” by the Poytner Institute in Florida (<http://www.poynter.org/>). Other participants mentioned offering Arabic language courses as a way to share the language and culture with domestic students. Many students felt their institution could improve advertising social/cultural events and organizations. Peach, one ESL instructor, even mentioned that many of the cultural events weren’t truly helping students adjust, but instead, falsely alluded to the idea that the institution values diversity.

Lee & Rice (2007) reported:

International students confront an array of cultural adjustments, but the responsibility is often left to the student to ‘adjust’ or ‘adapt’ to the host culture (Bevis, 2002) rather than for institutions to understand and try to accommodate their unique needs (p. 384).

It shouldn’t ultimately be left up to international students to adjust. Educators should create opportunities for students in and outside the classroom to develop and act on new and different cultural perspectives and instill the value of learning about different cultures. Domestic students should seek exposure and a better understanding of other cultures in order to be prepared for a global future by building diverse relationships. According to the transformative learning theory, students will be more likely to change their perspectives if they are exposed to new insights (Taylor, 2008). As Abd Aullah put it, “Experience the life to understand the truth.”

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Appendix A

Research Questions for Instructors:

1. Central Question: What are your general experiences/ interactions with students from Saudi Arabia? Do you have any interactions with this student population?
2. If you have taught Saudi students, what observations have you made about teaching/classroom experiences, i.e. learning styles? Have you approached this student population differently in your instructional methods?
3. What do you think about the way Arabic countries are portrayed in the media?
4. Have you ever witnessed any discrimination towards this student population?
5. There are currently students from Saudi Arabia studying in the institution's Aviation Program. What are your thoughts on this?
6. Imagine you were a Saudi student studying here. How do you think you'd feel based on news and societal views? Do you see any possible challenges this group might face here? How might these challenges be resolved?
7. Do you think the university does enough to support international student integration, i.e. cultural orientations? Do you believe cultural orientation is necessary? What do you think can be done to improve international student integration and cultural awareness on our campus?
8. Are you interested in learning more about Arabic culture?

Research Questions for Domestic Students:

1. Central Question: What are your experiences with students from Saudi Arabia in this institution? Do you have interactions with this student population?
2. What are your general views about Saudi Arabian students? What do you know about their culture, religion, etc.?
3. Are you involved with Saudi students on campus? Why/ Why not?
4. Would you like to be more involved with Saudi students on campus? Why/ Why not?

5. Do you find it difficult or uncomfortable to interact with Saudi students? If yes, what is your understanding for why you feel this way? Where do you think this comes from?
6. What do you think about how Arabic countries are viewed in the media?
7. Have you ever witnessed or admit to participating in any discriminative or negative experiences involving Saudi students on campus or off?
8. There are currently students from Saudi Arabia studying in the Aviation Program at this institution. What are your thoughts on this?
9. Imagine you were a Saudi student studying here. How do you think you'd feel based on news and societal views? Do you see any possible challenges this group might face here? How might these challenges be resolved?
10. Do you belong to any international student organizations on campus? If yes, tell me about your experiences. If no, would you like to be?
11. Do you think the university does enough to support international student integration on campus? Why/ Why not?
12. Are you interested in learning more about Arabic culture?

Research Questions for Saudi Students:

1. Central Question: What are your experiences with American/domestic students at this institution?
2. What were your general views about American/domestic students before coming to the U.S.? After?
3. Are you involved with American/domestic students on campus or off? Why/ Why not?
4. Would you like to be more involved with domestic students on campus?
5. Do you use any social support services? Why/ Why not?
6. Do you find it difficult or uncomfortable to interact with domestic students? If yes, why do you think you feel this way? How could this be resolved?
7. Have you ever experienced any discrimination/ negative experiences from domestic/American students or instructors? Please tell me about it. Why do you think this happened?
8. What do you think about news reporting on Arabic countries? How is it similar or different to U.S. news reporting?
9. Do you think it would be easier if you were studying here as an American? Why/ Why not?
10. Are you interested in learning more about American culture? Why/ Why not?
11. Do you think the university does enough to support international student integration? Why/ Why not? In what ways could your transition be made easier by the university?
12. Would you recommend any friends or family to attend college in the U.S.? Why/Why not?

13. How have your experiences at this institution influenced your personal beliefs?

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