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The Cross-Cultural Experiences of Saudi Sojourners in the United States: A Study of Intrapersonal Identity Conflict

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Abstract

What are the cross-cultural experiences of Saudi sojourners studying in the United States that lead to intrapersonal identity conflict? Sojourner identity conflict is a foundational issue in culture shock and can promote or limit positive relationships between Saudi and American students. It is important to study Saudi sojourners' cultural backgrounds and the factors that inhibit or promote assimilation into their host culture to ensure the success of cultural exchange through providing data needed to learn how to best ameliorate the dissonance caused by identity conflict. By employing a phenomenological approach, this research provides findings relating to acculturation strategies of sojourners to analyze these processes and their impact on intrapersonal identity conflict. Key themes are discussed in the areas of: perceptions of the United States, study experiences, living experiences, successful versus unsuccessful coping strategies, extent of social support networks, perceptions of the United States and its people, and perceptions of those of the opposing sex.

Key Words: Identity conflict, Sojourners, Saudi students, Cross-Cultural Experiences

1. Introduction

Sojourner identity conflict is a foundational issue in cultural shock that inhibits the opportunity for cooperative, beneficial, and harmonious relationships between Saudi and American students. By employing interviews, study respondents provide detailed

information about how they had, to varying degrees, struggled with culture shock and acculturation, in addition to trying to stay focused on their studies.

The central research question for this proposed study is, "What are the cross-cultural experiences of Saudi sojourners studying in the United States that lead to intrapersonal identity conflict?" This question is of both theoretical and practical importance as addressing it advances the literature on the socialization and cultural implications of studying abroad, specifically relating to interpersonal identity conflict, but also stands to improve relationships between students and their respective host cultures. Intrapersonal conflict—the internal struggle of one's own identity—is theorized to arise from clashing cultures, which cause individuals to overcome competing demands (Erikson, 1950; Leong and Ward, 2000). This study assesses the competing demands experienced by Saudi Arabian students as they adapt to American culture. These students resist or accept their host culture to varying degrees. This research uses a qualitative approach to present the experiences of participants' interpersonal identity conflict using a phenomenological design.

Identity conflict impacts interactions between individuals on different cultures (Slocum-Bradley, 2008). Individuals of different cultures often find it challenging to engage with individuals of other cultures without fear of losing their own culture or acting in a manner offensive to the opposing culture (Slocum-Bradley, 2008). The result is often that such interactions are anxiety inducing and result in intrapersonal identity conflict (Salhi, 2006; Slocum-Bradley, 2008).

Given the striking differences between Saudi and American culture (e.g., different primary languages, religiosity, political culture, and gender dynamics), the case of Saudi sojourners studying in the United States is exemplar for advancing the research on intrapersonal identity conflict and sojourners. Saudi sojourners are predisposed to potential cultural clashes with their hosts (Huntington, 1996; Haas, 2012; Said, 1977; Ward and Kennedy, 1999). This predisposition was only exacerbated by the World Trade Center bombings of February 26, 1993 and September 11, 2001. At current, the research on multi-culturally based conflict is scarce (Rosinski, 2003), but even more so for Saudi sojourners (Shaw 2010).

The King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP) began in 2006. Since its inception, thousands of Saudi students have travelled to the United States to received American higher education and experience American culture. It is important to study Saudi sojourners' cultural backgrounds and the factors that inhibit or promote assimilation into their host culture to ensure the success of KASP through providing data needed to learn how to best ameliorate the dissonance caused by identity conflict.

This study begins with the premise that not individuals experience socialization in the same manner and thus, not all individuals experience intrapersonal identity conflict in the same manner (Erikson, 1950; Habernas, 2003). However, by virtue of intergroup relations being formed by homophily, it is also expected that there will be commonalities amongst the interviews based on shared identity (Brewer, 1999; Tajifel and Turner, 1996; Triandafyllidou, 1998). This observation, which is supported by social identity theory

(Weiss, 1978; Ashforth and Mael, 1989), entails that group behavior, dynamics, and social psychology are born from shared membership (Tajfel and Turner, 1996).

Acculturation theory describes the process of adapting to the host culture (O'Guinn and Faber, 1985). Students, as explained by this theory, often find it difficult to balance their own culture with that of the host culture. Lin and Yi (1997) find that this is particularly difficult for Asian students studying abroad.

Persons (1987) provide that the three steps of acculturation are contact, acculturation, and assimilation. Therefore, the Saudi sojourners first come in contact with American culture through studying in the United States, they then adapt to the culture, and finally, they adjust their own culture based on the new culture. This process limits the cultural differences between two groups (Persons, 1987). Not all individuals, however, experience the process of acculturation equally or at all. Thus, it is important to consider the acculturation strategies of sojourners to analyze these processes and their impact on intrapersonal identity conflict (Berry, 2005). To this effect, this research interviews Saudi sojourners to assess these processes. The detailed methods by which the interviews were designed, conducted, and analyzed are provided in the next section.

2. Methods

2.1. Design. A phenomenological design was used to produce a rich textual description of the Saudi sojourners' lived experiences in the United States through the interpretation of reports of their experiences. Qualitative research seeks to understand how a social experience is created by giving meaning to phenomena and a voice to a particular population (Corbin and Strauss, 1990; Denzin and Lincoln, 2008). This study investigated

the issue of identity conflicts as experienced by Saudi student sojourners through hearing their diverse stories.

According to Creswell (2007), the phenomenologist focuses on describing what all participants have in common as they experience the same phenomenon. Campbell (2011) states that such methodology will: 1) identify the shared experience of the Saudi sojourners, 2) locate the collective nature of their experience, 3) identify experiences that are common among numerous participants, 4) locate the core of their experiences, and 5) investigate how they experience the phenomenon. The phenomenological approach is designed to let subjects 'speak for themselves' rather than to allow the research to be guided by an overarching conceptual design. "Phenomenology is concerned with the study of experience from the perspective of the individual, 'bracketing' taken for granted assumptions and usual ways of perceiving. Epistemologically, phenomenological approaches are based in a paradigm of personal knowledge and subjectivity, and emphasize the importance of personal perspective and interpretation" (Lester 1999, p. 1). When studying subjects from the Saudi Arabia in an American context it is particularly important to let the participants speak for themselves given the extent to which persons from Middle Eastern cultures have been objectified and essentialized in the past.

A wide variety of cultural texts and cultural artifacts are drawn upon to analyze the experiences of the participants, making discourse analysis less appropriate. Although verbal responses will be important, other sources of information are drawn upon (including non-verbal texts such as clothing, artistic media, music, and other naturalistic observations of the culture). In fact, one of the guiding assumptions of the research is the need to

transcend the purely verbal to paint a full picture of the culture. The focus is likewise broader than with narrative research, which focuses upon how human beings tell their stories—although the how's and why's of the individual's story-telling are important, the broader lens of phenomenology will also allow the researchers to incorporate objective data into this holistic study of a multifaceted phenomenon.

Finally, intuitive inquiry is inappropriate given the extent to which it emphasizes the subjective experiences of the researcher. Intuitive inquiry is defined as "an epistemology of the heart that joins intuition to intellectual precision in a hermeneutical process of interpretation…informed by feminist theory, heuristic inquiry, hermeneutics" (Blake, 2012). Once again, rather than emphasizing the researcher in this inquiry and the researcher's biases and assumptions (or attempting to access the researcher's intuitive 'heart'), the focus will be upon the lived experiences of the participants in a broader fashion. It is their words and perceptions that will be chronicled and examined, rather than a more self-reflexive emphasis on the perspective of the researcher.

2.2. Research and interview questions. The central research question for this study is "What are the cross-cultural experiences of Saudi sojourners who have been studying in the United States that lead to intrapersonal identity conflict?" Interview questions designed to provide meaningful information to addressing this question include the following:

- Explain your past and current experiences of living in Saudi and American societies with as much detail as you can.
- Please describe how cultural differences as manifested in Saudi Arabia and the United States affect your identity?

- Please list and explain which strategies you utilize or have utilized to balance your cultural identities.

- What are the positive and negative aspects you have found in American culture that made you question your Saudi identity?

- Discuss your current thoughts about living in the United States.

- Before coming to the United States, what were your thoughts about the United States?

- Please describe how living in the United States can affect your reintegration in Saudi society.

- How do you believe you can improve Saudi Arabia's future?

2.3. Sampling. This study employs a judgment sampling approach. Marshall (1996) defines judgment sampling as a non-random sample that selects participants based on the researcher's "practical knowledge of the research area, the available literature, and evidence from the study itself" (p. 523). Using this form of sampling can give more accurate results as compared with other sampling approaches. According to Marshall (1996), researchers usually use this type of sampling if they want to study subjects who have specific experiences or have special expertise in order to present a critical case sample or key informant sample. A satisfactorily representative and targeted sample was used for two main reasons: 1) the researcher has a practical knowledge of the study's context and 2) the researcher wants to connect his research with participants who have the special qualifications indicated. The selection of the sample included different samples from a number of subgroups, such as sex, age, and location, in order to give equal representation for those subgroups.

2.4. The sample. After setting the inclusion criteria, potential participants were contacted. This researcher contacted an acquaintance to be both a participant in this study and act as a key informant. After completing the preliminary forms, the informant, a Saudi sojourner studying in the United States, agreed to participate in the study as well. The key informant met all the criteria for inclusion. Creswell (2007) claims that phenomenological design calls for the researcher to "interview from five to 25 individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon" (p. 61).

2.5. Data collection. The data collection method was a semi-structured tape-recorded interview. In a qualitative study, the researcher is the primary instrument for collecting data (Creswell, 2006; Marshall and Rossman, 1999). Furthermore, interviews are one of the most appropriate methods in collecting complex social interaction and human behaviors data (Miller and Crabtree, 2004). Kvale (1996) states that the purpose of selecting the interview format is to "obtain a qualitative description of the life world of the subjects with respect to their interpretation of meaning" (p. 124). By using semi-structured interviews, participants had the opportunity to generate new ideas about the topic through a process of self-reflection.

The interview questions were based on two core topics: 1) the participants' hidden social, educational, and cultural difficulties in their host culture(s) and 2) the varied experiences of the participants in dealing with identity conflicts, which arose during their acculturation in the United States. Each participant shared thoughts and experiences about those two main topics.

Open-ended questions were asked throughout the interviews. According to Daymon and Holloway (2002), open-ended questions can be used to engage participants fully and naturally in conversation with the researcher. Berg and Lune (2011) support that claim by stating that open-ended questions can guide the interview to reveal experiences without forcing a participant into one direction.

Participants were asked to read the questionnaire and sign ethical consideration agreements, such as consent to be recorded. Prior to each interview, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the estimated time the interview would take, and the process of the interview. A sixty to eighty minute interview was enough to gather sufficient information. Interviewees were contacted via phone or email in order to confirm their willingness to participate. If the participant was located within the geographical region of the researcher, then the interviews took place at the interviewees' homes in order to make them feel comfortable, with the exception that if the participant would feel more comfortable somewhere else, then different arrangements were made. If the participant was not in the same region as the researcher, then Skype software was used. The call was recorded using Call Graph, software designed to record Skype calls. In the Skype interview the video option was used so that each person could see the other. However, in some cases the researcher did not use the video option if the quality of the participant's Internet connection affected the quality of the transmission. Skype was used for two main reasons: 1) Skype is free to all users and 2) it is routinely used by Saudi students to call their families and friends in Saudi Arabia and is therefore a mode of communication comfortably used by such students. Each interview was recorded and transcribed immediately after the interview and then analyzed by using the appropriate data analysis software. The

transcribed data was reviewed several times in order to ensure its accuracy (Creswell, 2006).

Mauthenr, et al. (2002) states "qualitative research relies upon gate keepers as a route of initial access to participants" (p. 55). The key informant acted as the gatekeeper by providing the names of the students currently studying in the United States. Engaging the key informant and the participants was not a problem since this researcher and the key informant share the same background as the participants. This was an advantage because it was easy to share and understand the needs, language, goals, and desires of the participants.

2.6. Data analysis. This study used Moustakas' (1994) approach to phenomenological data analysis (revised from the Van Kaam method). Analyzing phenomenological data begins with horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994). For horizontalization the transcribed data was read several times until it became familiar. For the first reading, a comprehensive understanding of the participants' responses was sought. Next the transcribed data was read for the second time using note taking along with memos of short phrases, ideas, or key concepts that could offer knowledge and insight. Then the transcribed data was reread in order to discover any deeper meanings (Creswell, 2007). Any overlapping, repetitive, and vague expressions that did not contain reflections of the Saudi sojourners students' experiences of identity conflict were removed from the final transcription (Moustakas, 1994, p. 121).

The next step in analyzing the data was generating clusters and themes of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). After this researcher became fully familiar with the data, the data was

analyzed and coded by developing themes, interpreting and describing them in detail, and then placing them in categories. Open coding was used in order to avoid forcing the data to be a part of a fixed coding scheme. The codes were examined in order to assess each code in a related theme or category and then those themes were used to write both textural and structural descriptions. The textural description provided an account of what each participant experienced. The structural description indicated how the contextual environment in the United States affected or re-shaped the participants' identities. The last step in analyzing the data was providing a composite description of the meaning and essences in order to represent the targeted population as a whole.

2.7. Validity. A number of researchers (Maxwell, 1996; Kvale, 1996; Hammersley, 1998; Silverman, 2001) suggest that the consideration of validity with qualitative research is important as a tool to evaluate the research's quality. Maxwell (1996) defines validity in qualitative research as "the credibility of description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or other sort of account" (p. 87). These criteria were used to examine validity in order to decrease and limit the subjectivity issues.

To ensure dependable quality of the data in this study, the researcher dealt with the validity issues in the following ways. First, s a current Saudi student sojourner in the United States since 2006, the researcher has a good understanding of the study context and, therefore, he is more likely to present a convincing explanation of the Saudi student sojourners' perspective. It is expected that he is more likely to be seen by the participants as a member of their group, one that can be trusted more than an outside researcher (Daymon and Holloway, 2002). Second, comprehension of the collected data was achieved by submitting

it to the participants for their reactions. This strategy enabled the researcher to "provide feedback to participants, enables [the researcher] to check the [participants'] reaction to the data and findings, and helps to gauge their response to your interpretation of the data" (Daymon and Holloway, 2002, p. 95). Third, the researcher employed an ongoing peer review strategy by allowing his colleagues to discuss his analysis and interpretation of the collected data. According to Daymon and Holloway (2002), this strategy helps the researcher to detect bias and receive alternative explanations. Finally, this study provided rich descriptions about the processes, contexts, and participants in the current research. This enabled a view of the comprehensive setting (Daymon and Holloway, 2002).

3. Findings

This section details the participants' opinions as revealed through the research questions. Moustakas' (1994) methodology was applied in this study to collect the responses of the Saudi sojourners. The interviews were successfully carried out per the methodology, which is described in the previous section. The key themes identified when applying Moustakas' (1994) methodology include the following: perceptions of the United States, study experiences, living experiences, successful versus unsuccessful coping strategies, extent of social support networks, perceptions of the United States and its people, and perceptions of those of the opposing sex. To comply with Moustakas' (1994) methodology, this researcher collected all the data for examination and treated the data as having equal weights. All the pieces of information had an equal value at this stage, which complies with horizontalization. Next, in the reduction stage, this researcher transformed the collected interview responses into alphabetical, ordered and simplified forms. At this stage, themes were identified from the vast amount of data. For the clustering of the data, the un-

supervised data items were clustered into meaningful groups. Sub-themes also emerged. Validation was satisfied with an in-depth, semi structured format, which allowed this researcher to easily distinguish similarities and differences among respondents' answers, while also being flexible enough to allow further exploration. A short description was given to describe the identified themes, including what they aimed to assess. The themes were structurally arranged to highlight the frequency of responses given to each theme. The next section describes the coding and theme identification stages in detail based on the above process.

3.1. Participant Demographics. Age, sex, and educational qualifications were important criteria in selecting the participants so as to acquire a cohort that could most comprehensively answer the research questions. The participants' demographics are listed in the following table:

Table 1: Interviewee Demographics

Sex	Age	Location (State)
Female	24	California
Male	25	Pennsylvania
Male	49	Florida
Female	26	Pennsylvania
Female	27	Florida
Male	39	Florida
Male	38	New York
Female	26	Oklahoma

3.2. Horizontalization and Coding. According to Moustakas (1994), the coding of data includes three main stages, including, namely, open, axial and selective coding. This researcher constructed the categories and subcategories during the coding process, which were then sorted during the open coding stage to support the categorization of emerging themes.

To identify relevant themes, this researcher first analyzed the data to highlight words that were repeated and based on those words, themes were identified. Word repetition was analyzed informally by investigating the text and noting the words that were used most frequently by respondents during the interviews. Second, the data was comparatively analyzed, which helped in identifying differences and similarities in each individual's responses. Third, the data was evaluated to present any analogies that would represent thoughts of participants. Based on those analogies, themes were highlighted. Last, a contrast approach was used to look methodically at words and phrases that could be indicative of meaningful conceptual relationships. This was accomplished by extracting words and phrases such as "because," "since," and "as a result," which helped in identifying factors that made it difficult for students to adjust in new culture. This researcher thoroughly analyzed the content of the interviews, which were conducted with students, their parents, and teachers. The data was then categorized according to factors pertaining to school life, home life, and community life. This assisted in analyzing the data more effectively and separately evaluating the responses of each individual. The researcher was able to uncover the challenges that the four students faced and may continue to face in their school and home lives. This also helped with assessing the various approaches

adopted by their parents and teachers in overcoming these challenges, which have resulted from cultural differences.

3.3. Interview Transcripts and Coding. The researcher adopted an open coding methodology, which required the constant comparison of the responses emerging from the interviews and then making abstractions. This was accomplished by bearing in mind that every response indicates an underlying top-level concept. This was the reason that the transcripts were re-read and coded to a conceptual code. The codes were sorted and resorted to illustrate conceptual patterns about the cultural identity of the sojourners. During the coding process, the researcher employed self-inquiry to assess which categories the emerging responses best illustrate and what similarities or difference exist among them.

From the transcripts, the key points were determined and coded. The significant points from the unique identities were labeled for comparison to the rest of the interview transcripts. "Unique identities" refers to the fact that each respondent was his or her own autonomous person answering various questions, without noticeable pressure or coercion to respond in certain manners. This researcher then analyzed the codes and grouped those that were linked to the common themes followed by the patterns that resulted from this grouping to determine the most frequently found concepts. The emerging ideas were then regrouped into a higher commonality order (subcategories) that were regrouped further into the highest order of commonality (major categories).

Table 2: Major and Sub-Categories

Major Categories	Sub-Categories
Perception of the United States before leaving Saudi Arabia	Ideas about "positive perception," "negative perception," and "neutral perception"
Study experience	Notions about "language barriers," "feeling of embarrassment and inadequacy"
Living experience	Perceptions around "missing culture and family life," "extent to which prejudice and racism was experienced," "independent living," "culture shock"
Personal strengths and primary motivators	Ideas regarding "primary motivators to succeed" and "personal strength"
Social support networks/ Processes	Notions highlighting aspects of "support from professors," "religion," "family," and "other Saudi Arabian international students"
Understanding of United States and its people after spending time in the host culture	Perceptions about "safety and freedom"
Cross sexual relationships	Perceptions about the "opposite sex"

4. Textural Description

4.1. Perception of the United States. Saudi sojourners' perceptions about the United States before and after studying in the United States were mixed and at times included negative, positive, or neutral perceptions. After studying in the United States, respondents overall reported viewing the country positively. Such an overall respondent-reported positive perception is consistent with the literature pertaining to international students as provided by the National Association for Foreign Student Affairs' (NAFSA) 2007 meta-analytic publication. According to that work, students and non-students in many countries consider higher education in the United States to be preeminent. A study by Constantine et al.'s (2005) found that the participants thought that the USA would offer international students increased opportunities for personal and academic success. In the same manner, Bornsztein (1987) found that common reasons for which students apply to study in the United States include the educational resources and the advances in technology in learning and development. In one of the studies in the NAFSA publication (2007), international students held four, negative, pre-entrance perceptions of American students and attaining an American education. These perceptions were that Americans are not welcoming and friendly, higher education is expensive, the higher education system is complex and difficult to navigate, and Americans do not accept international students into their communities.

Before coming to United States, said students were mostly afraid of the perceptions and attitudes of the locals toward them, especially after the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Some of their family members thought that they should not go to the United States and rather, find other places since they were afraid of how Americans would view and

interact with their relatives subsequent to the terrorist attacks. For some other participants, the collective perception was not as negative as in the previous example. Conversely, they considered the United States to be a great country and as the one with different and developed public spheres of interaction such as business, education, technology and many more. Participant 7 believes that:

United States has the best people in all of those different sectors. I didn't have any negative thoughts or stereotypes about the United States and I still hold the same position today. This student thinks that media has played an important role in developing various stereotypes about Americans that Americans and non-Americans begin to believe. Subsequent to seeing movies, for instance, they also believe that it is dangerous to go out by themselves due to high crime rates. However, this phenomenon did not apply to the interviewed participants of this study. In contrast, what they found was that Americans do not care about what others think, and they respect the personal space of others.

Participant 6 thinks that:

They think what they feel and they don't think twice usually. They don't lie and they hate the lies and they gone believe anything that I would say even if I told them that there are a green man in the front of my door... they are not stupid but they are just a simple people without that much of complication.

Like their relatives, most of the students were afraid of how Americans would treat them in a post-9/11 world. Some of them thought that they might be viewed as and treated as

terrorists. This was their biggest fear, but when they arrived to the United States, they felt that people treated them fairly, which completely changed their views of Americans.

However, it should be noted that Participant 1's greatest concern was Hijab. She was afraid that people would treat her as a terrorist, but her fear abated when she received a great amount of support from her peers and professors. Nevertheless, the students also relayed less positive views. For example, Participant 3 indicated that the American students with whom he interacted in class were self-centered. The participant mentioned an instance in which a classmate asked him to give him class notes, which the participant agreed to do. However, when the participant asked for the student to reciprocate, he refused.

Ultimately, Saudi students return to their native country with high hopes for the future. They believe that they will be able to utilize their newly learned skills and accumulated knowledge in Saudi Arabia for its betterment. However, they expressed a realization that there may be issues in implementing what they have learned in the United States due to various Saudi cultural and religious restrictions. The students think that the Saudi government needs to give international students the opportunities to make a difference in Saudi Arabia. Participant 8 noted that, "If we speak about changing the Saudi traditions I believe that I and other students can make a big different in reshaping the Saudi culture when we go back to Saudi Arabia."

4.2. Study Experience. The participants provided detailed responses during their interviews about their overall living and study experiences in the United States. The outcome of this study shows that one of the significant academic challenges for the Saudi sojourners relates to the ability to use the English language proficiently. One of the main

personal challenges as experienced by the Saudi Arabian sojourners while living in the United States was homesickness. The participants reported that they were negatively affected by being away from their family members and homes, places where they could always find support. However, this study did not find any participants reporting verbal insults. For the Saudi students, the lifestyle of people in the United States is totally different than that which exists in Saudi Arabia, which could have been a source of verbal insults. However, this was not found to be the case. Some of the students indicated that they like how older generations in the United States teach younger generations to pursue interest of passion. The participants especially appreciated how Americans are not afraid to freely express themselves.

Some participants noted the opportunity and freedom to experience new things as a main positive aspect of U.S. society. For example, Participant 2 stated the following:

> *What I like here in the United States the most is the older generation here teach the younger generation to do whatever they believe and encouraging them to do what they like because they believe that doing what the individual wants will add something to the society not what your family or your society wants to do in your future. What makes America a great country is that everyone here is doing what she wants or like.*

For others, as already noted, Americans' ability to freely express themselves seemed to be a welcome tradition; one that is deeply rooted in the United States' history and philosophical origins. However, some participants noted that there is no real connection among Americans like there is in Saudi Arabia, Fortunately, however, that has not affected some of the participants' senses of self (identity) because they have very strong connections

with their families and other social supports in Saudi Arabia.

Students appeared to marry this sense of connection with countrymen with a desire and even need to make the country better by using skills and knowledge acquired in the States. Students indicated that they think there are countless resources in Saudi Arabia that are not used wisely. Participant 4 noted the following: "The Human resources are the main key for any successful so we have to take care of all students who are going back and take advantage of their knowledge and ability."

The participants believe that Saudi Arabian society can be improved by advancing education and technological efforts. They also believe that accomplishing this could prove difficult due to the country's more traditional and social, rather than business-related, societal framework. The students noted that Saudi society could be improved if there was more of an easing of tradition in order to allow for progress in education, the economy, and technological advances. The participants think that the Saudi government-sponsored foreign scholarship program will have a positive, cumulative, impact on the future of Saudi Arabia. International students, specifically Saudi students in this case, can bring many benefits to Saudi Arabia.

Participant 1 indicated the following:

When I came from the Saudi Arabia I started attending an English center. That language center has a good environment for me because I found in that center a lot of other Saudi students along with many other international students. That environment made me feel comfortable. I believe that if I didn't go to that center my life would be

totally different here in the States because the University life or the academic life is different than starting in a language center. Attending the language center helped me to learn how to interact with different people. I was really not good in making conversation in English. The Language center helped me a lot. Before that I felt like an alien because I just had some basic academic vocabulary that related to my field but it was hard for me to interact with people on the street and the language center helped me a lot to overcome that issue.

Similar to the language as being an aspect of culture issue, some of the participants continued to be afraid of losing their identities. For example, Participant 4 articulated the following:

I don't like the illegal or the taboo interaction between people here. I am afraid about my kids to take this form the American culture and I am trying to protect them against such thing. Also the family relationships here in the United States are so poor unlike the Saudi Arabia. American people are so friendly but when it comes to family they have really bad behaviors toward their family members. Other than that, I found many good things in the American culture including the tolerance between people and that thing can't be found in Saudi Arabia. For example, my neighbors here in the States are coming from much different culture background such as Indian, Chinese, Asians and they have a good relationship toward each other. This thing, I couldn't find it in Saudi Arabia.

This response highlights this fear of acculturation, which as noted in the above response, specifically a fear that participants' children could be corrupted in American society

because of the relaxed interpersonal behaviors, e.g. relations between sexes, if participants were to be remain in the U.S. post-study. In the United States, these deconstructed taboos further demonstrate how Saudi and American societies are drastically different. When participants were in Saudi Arabia, they were living normal lives by their standards; they sought employment and opportunities to support their families in accordance with the family-centric nature of Saudi society. But when they came to the States, they began to appreciate how culturally different the United States is in comparison to Saudi Arabia. Instead of just studying in the States, they were able to recalibrate their worldviews in addition to acquiring the skills and knowledge needed to better help their families in Saudi Arabia.

4.3. Living Experience. Most of the participants' experiences were similar since they all lived the lives, albeit temporary, of foreign students in the United States. As noted in the previous sub-section, they believe that Saudi culture is conservative and more family-oriented when compared to the U.S. However, some of the students like living in the country because of that clear difference. Arguably, such a difference allows students to have new and transformative experiences. Similar to what was highlighted in the previous sub-section about corruption, the respondents think that Saudi Arabia is more misleading and corrupt when compared to the United States and therefore, it is much easier to live in the United States. The students feel more empowered in the States, something that was articulated by Participant 7 in the following statement:

> *Living in the United States is much easier than living in Saudi Arabia as I can, for example, finish all my things here in the United States by Internet or phone without knowing anyone to help me finishing my things.*

Moreover, participants also agreed that the United States appears to be better than Saudi Arabia with respect to law and order as judged from a justice rather than punitive framework. One participant noted: "I prefer to live in a clear and a very strict system because no one will respect a system unless it is very strict and this one of the things that we don't have in Saudi Arabia." However, such a perception may be just that, rather than an accurate assessment of American jurisprudence since the sojourners' experiences with the criminal justice system was limited or altogether non-existent. For instance, Participant 6 provided a quite grounded view of sojourners' cultural identities and perhaps consequent perceptions, which actually contradicts the more life-changing testimonies provided by other respondents, by noting the following:

OK, I will be honest with you, many Saudi Students here are just hanging out with other Saudi students so they didn't really break the circle as they keeping speak in Arabic all the time and do all the thing that they were doing in Saudi Arabia because they didn't give them the chance to interact with the American culture or the American people. I feel that they didn't communicate as much as they should with the American people and that why if you asked them a question about their knowledge or immersion about the Americans they would not be able to answer you in a good and fair way. Actually and to be honest with you, until now I didn't meet a Saudi girl that are willing to hang out with other American girls... I think that they are not courage enough to interact and know the Americans more.

Moving on, the students believe that although studying in United States can be highly beneficial, upon arriving to the U.S., they immediately encountered an environment that was immensely different from their homeland and native culture. Beyond their initial

culture shock, they also faced language challenges stemming from the fact that Arabic is their first language. Due to the fact that Arabic and English are such different languages, the students faced a formidable language barrier that made it more difficult for them to effectively and confidently navigate the educational and social spheres in their learning environments. Moreover, the nature and extent of cultural diversity in the country also served as a challenge.

The participants indicated that their perceptions in some respects began to shift closer to those of Americans during their stays, arguably because they were, in fact, living American lives vicariously, which was both challenging and beneficial. Ultimately, their experiences in the United States were transformative and helped them to learn a lot about themselves, other people, and the United States. A significant revelation of this study was that the participants also now believe that their living and study experiences in the United States have made them more tolerant and open-minded. The participants reported that studying in the United States positively affected their concept of values and education by helping them learn new skills and by becoming more knowledgeable of other cultures. Overall, the sojourners' experiences from studying in the United States were generally positive and satisfying and they will recommend studying in the U.S. to friends.

All of the participants in the study stated that they have come to better understand American culture as a result of their time in the U.S. Principally, the students indicated that they perceive the United States to be a rather safe and free country, which is enjoyed by Americans. They found America to be safer than what they actually expected. Moreover, they indicated that Americans are kind and friendly, supportive as evidenced by peer,

professor, and friend relationships, and that such relations helped the students with overcoming culture shock. These perceptions were developed over time.

Feeling isolated is a major challenge that foreign students often have to overcome. Students may find it difficult to make friends and socialize with others with different cultural backgrounds. However, gradually, if they widen their area of interaction and leave their comfort zones, they can cope with such a challenge. Most of the Saudi sojourners in the United States display their adapted identities with only a few people, including close relatives, but when they deal with others in Saudi society, they feel embarrassed to express themselves. There have been many Saudi students who returned home and accepted the changes in their personalities and their American experiences. Unfortunately, however, a problem arises when they respect their right to alter themselves but fail to recognize the rights of others to do the same. It can be said that being in the United States affected the identity of the sojourners in a good way. They feel that they are stronger now. They always knew their rights and what should be done and what should not be done, but now they can more confidently express their feelings. They can do whatever they want without caring about what other people say about them or what they want them to do. This is, of course, the biggest change in their personalities and identities. Most of the participants believe that such change is a good thing and a source of pride. They hope that when they return to Saudi Arabia, they will bring those good things that American culture taught them.

The students indicated that the Saudi students experienced culture shock as a result of being faced with stark differences in language, communication styles, food options, and lifestyles. The culture shock can be manifested physiologically or psychologically, and it

was emphasized that a student needs to acculturate to adapt to studying in the United States. Most of the students believe that they belong to the American culture more than they belong to the Saudi culture because the individual rights-oriented nature of the United States allows for greater introspection and new and sometimes controversial experiences and ultimately, personal growth. Per the qualitative data it is clear that the students are willing to improve Saudi society by sharing their American learning experiences. They are willing to test traditions and religion and promote freedom of speech and expression in their society. All these goals will be difficult to implement in their entirety, and the history of reactions of those in Saudi society to similar endeavors cannot be encouraging. Despite this, the students believe that Saudi Arabia has a bright future. The students love being in Saudi Arabia. They also, however, noted that they love the American political system, so they think they will try to bring some aspects from the American culture to Saudi Arabia when they return. While in the United States, male Saudi students respected women and treated them fairly and when they return to Saudi Arabia, they could likely replicate that behavior. They have started realizing that male mistreatment of women in Saudi Arabia is a cultural rather than religious phenomenon. Many Muslim men in the States do not subjugate women, which could be an eye-opening revelation. Although the students are largely open-minded, there are some students who have remained conservative, and do not interact much with Americans, choosing to finish their studies in relative social isolation.

4.4. Personal Strength and Primary Motivators. The data also dealt with successful coping strategies and personal strengths that the Saudi students used and brought with them to assist them with completing their studies in the United States. Moreover, within this area, two main ideas emerged: personal strength as demonstrated by successful coping

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strategies and sources of primary motivation to do well in the United States. It should be noted that, when the participants discussed their personal strengths and motivators, it was difficult to distinguish between the successful strategies they employed, which were part of their personal strength arsenals, from the strengths that they gained during their stays. The study participants reported being concerned about disappointing their families and their country if they were to have studied in the U.S. but returned to Saudi Arabia with little to show for their time in the States. Consequently, this fear of disappointing their families and country became a primary source of motivation to do well with their studies.

The interviewed students endeavored to cope with the challenges presented to them while studying in the United States by utilizing different (coping) strategies. The most commonly mentioned strategies included the following: focusing on the collective goal of going to the States (to study), learning English, watching Hollywood movies, accepting American culture, reading books, interacting with Americans, using technology to build friendships with Americans, and ultimately, overcoming culture shock. Primarily, the students attended workshops at local language centers to overcome their language barriers and consequently, become more able to acculturate themselves albeit temporarily in the United States. Watching movies aided students with learning about the United States – their new environment – as well as the particular cities in which they resided. The students became technologically savvy by using and becoming proficient with a variety of technologies. This was something that was not possible for most people in Saudi Arabia due to the relative scarcity of many new and expensive forms of technology. The support services that the Saudi students received from their professors, families, and through their faith, sufficiently insulated them from having any acute mental health issues related to the

potentially traumatic experience of being a foreigner in another land.

4.5. Support Process. As just mentioned, the student sojourners may have had relatively few individuals in their social support networks in the United States, but those individuals were sufficient sources of support nonetheless. One of the participants declined to pursue professional counseling to discuss academic or personal issues. This lack of interest in seeking professional help is consistent with the literature about cultural norms regarding support systems among international students. Overall, professional counseling services are not accepted as much in Middle Eastern cultures as they are in Western cultures. This phenomenon is likely because counseling as practiced in the West tends to employ a client and individual-centered approach for problem solving than that which exists in Middle Eastern cultures where there is an emphasis on communal problem solving. Furthermore, in the Middle East, there is an expectation that people are supposed to turn to their families, ethno-religious social resources and friends when they need help instead of utilizing professional (mental health or social work) services. Many in the Middle East consider asking for help outside the family to be a cultural affront and therefore, an offense worthy of social stigma.

Although the students did not report establishing any warm relations with their professors, they did, however, report that their professors cared about them and encouraged them to ask for additional support if needed. The students also reported that these non-familial relationships with the peers and friends complemented their educational endeavors and ensured that they were insulated from culture shock. By engaging in these intercultural exchanges, the students learned how to effectively communicate with people from differing

cultural, philosophical, and ethno-religious backgrounds, thus increasing their tolerance for others. The students learned from these cultural differences and tried to positively express themselves in new and sometimes tradition-bending ways, which served to further transform their individual identities. The students overcame, with varying degrees of success, culture shock by setting goals, reading books, engaging in productive tasks and increasing their interactions with the locals as already mentioned. Most of the participants tried to be themselves while also learning about American culture. They increased their interactions with locals and tried to communicate with their professors and peers on a regular basis. For example, Participant 2 articulated the following:

The good thing about the American people is that they will break the ice for you. For example, the first day that I came to Florida I found many neighbors welcoming me and greeting me, who made feel accepted by them and they want to know more about me. Other thing is when I interact with the professors in my university, most of them accepted me as an international student and they are very understanding people and they don't judged me even if I did some mistakes because they knew that this is not my original culture and they knew that English is not my first language and that made feel more comfortable.

Consequently, some students started to feel strange about their previous, as well as new cultural and religious identities. Their experiences led them to points where they were no longer "Other," yet they were still different. They seemed to no longer be sojourners simply in another country but also among dichotomous cultural realms. In keeping with such monumental changes, some students – those who did not change as much as others –had

mixed opinions about students who had undergone considerable changes. Although two of the participants reported that they are still afraid of what their cultural transitions will bring when they return to Saudi Arabia, they noted nevertheless being willing to effect positive change in their country.

4.6. Understanding of United States and its People. The Saudi students did not report having any issues with beginning their studies in the United States. Social support from those in similar ethnic communities also helped the sojourners because they all had experienced similar situations, so they were able to empathize with each other. In contrast to this, and per most of the participants, the stereotypical media representation of Arabs and Muslims initially did not make it easy for participants to feel emotionally safe even if they wanted to speak with professionals. However, ordinary Americans were found to be considerably understanding and supportive; individuals who respect cultural differences. Therefore, there were mixed signals. Ultimately, however, the study participants did not feel unwelcome during their stays in the United States. The students sought employment to help them learn more about the working environment in United States, and to also facilitate improvement in their English skills – part of a sophisticated and insightful strategy to maximize their intercultural learning.

For participant 7, experiencing a less restrictive society was a major change. He noted that he will be more comfortable with and courageous to interact with the opposite sex Participant 7 articulated the following*:*

I learned that people here have the right to express their thought and to think about

what is right and what is wrong for them and I will use the same thing when I go back

to Saudi Arabia I will start peak freely and loudly. I don't have the fear anymore and I will critique anything that I don't like here... For example, I was talking to someone in Saudi Arabia about how bad throwing stuff when you are driving from the car's window and how bad that the Saudi police didn't gave a fine for such act and I told him you can't do this when you are in my car. So I started by myself by teaching myself that I can't throw stuff from the window and then I started convince other people about or at least making them follow my rules when they inside my car. Many Saudi people think I am overreacting about those things but they can't push me back and I will keep doing what I believe is right for me.

The above statement highlights small gestures that can effect positive change in Saudi society. Overall, the students note that they have learnt a lot about that which can be implemented in Saudi Arabia to improve its society. But even these positive aspects fail to take into account the challenge that lingers from cultural differences that cannot be overcome so easily and so quickly such as understanding differences in humor. The fact is that, while some students find growth and positive change in addition to a lack of unresolved identity conflicts, others either experience identity troubles or are too much part of their culture to acculturate and conversely, experience cultural confusion and a sense of being an outsider. Participant 6 noted that:

Sometime Americans laugh on jokes that I don't laugh on because I don't understand what the funny thing about that joke is but because that is there culture so they understand each other jokes very well. So now I feel like I am foreign person in Saudi Arabia as well here in United States. I become an outsider in both culture and that is

really hard for me because I can't find a place that I belong to.

In contrast to the above, Participant 5 indicated that she has changed in great part because she is more confident and unlikely to care about how people appraise her value, especially if that appraisal is negative. She noted the following:

Before coming to the United States I was caring about how people see me and I was trying to get permission from my parents before doing anything but when I came to the United States I found that people here don't care about what other people thinks about them and I loved this idea and adapt it as I believe on it now.

This demonstrates that at least some of the students are willing to do what they are supposed to do, have firm heads on their shoulders, and not care about how society views them. This is one of the more serious, enlightened, and promising pieces of qualitative data.

4.7. Cross sex relationships. The students identified numerous ways in which culture affects relations between people of the opposite sex. Per Saudi culture and society, opposite sex relations are affected by various socioeconomic, religious, and familial factors. Relations between members of the opposite sex can be limited or even strained because students prioritize family over academics and social relationships. This dynamic continues even in new settings, specifically, in this case, when the students studied in the United States. For instance, students often miss classes to speak to their parents due to the time difference or leave the country for family events for extended periods.

For women, coming to the United States is an especially transformative event. By coming to the States, they are permitted to become more independent, have more freedom, feel

more responsible, have new experiences, have the freedom to interact with females as well as males, and simply, be more confident in who they are as individuals rather than components of a family and group-centric society as is the case in Saudi Arabia. Interactions with men, in particular, are more liberated. In Saudi Arabia, females and males do not communicate as freely as that which occurs in the United States. This is due to a number of cultural reasons, which by comparison seem to allow a culture of female subjugation. In the United States, female, Saudi students were able to learn about the conceptualization of female rights as an aspect of universal human rights in a way that is consistent with Islam.

One of the participants identified the issue of communication between the sexes as one of the main differences between the two cultures. She noted that there is a big difference in how males and females communicate in Saudi Arabia compared to in the United States. Per the data, it is clear the male, Saudi students learned to respect women more and treat them fairly, which are behaviors that they plan to replicate upon their return to Saudi Arabia. The female students are now trying to use media presentations to educate Saudi women that they can be true to Islam and Saudi culture and still be respected and pursue their own passions. One female respondent noted the following:

> As a woman, if I want to ask a man in United States about anything he will be free to help me and give all the information that I want and that is something hard in Saudi Arabia. Another example, in Saudi Arabia if I was walking in the street and I smiled to a man that would be a big problem or no one can accept that but in the United States that is completely different as here it is OK say to any man on the street

something like good morning or how are you and move on... that it. When I was that

one of our biggest problems was that issue. So I was trying to apply the Saudi culture

into my life here in the United States and that didn't work at all.

5. Conclusion

This interview data facilitated the research knowledge of the cultural identity based on which it can be said that cultural identity is an important factor that can have a significant impact on reentry and readjustment of sojourns. The students who have retained the identities of their home countries will readjust into Saudi culture more easily on return than those who feel closer to the host country culture. Based on the results it can be said that not all the students necessarily assume the host country culture identities, but they retain at least some of their Saudi identities while abroad. The result show that keeping the identity intact into a new society is one of the main challenged which the Saudi students come across during their stay in the United States. More freedom of choice, and great social benefits awe the students, but they also know that their own culture is rich and more family oriented as compared to U.S.A. this where they suffer identity conflict. United states compel them to break their comfort zone because it is one of the ways in which cultural shock can be coped with, however during this process, there is pressure on the student to remember their culture, values and beliefs. Although there are some students who remain conservative in mingling into the U.S society or interacting with the people it is also hoped by these students that keeping their own values, they can bring the knowledge and learning back to Saudi Arabia.

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