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Understanding Acculturation, Stress, and Adjustment in International Students

from the Middle East and North Africa: A Qualitative Study

Senior Honors Thesis

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Introduction

When people, including international students, leave behind their home country and culture to go live in another country, they encounter an entirely different environment that requires change and adjustment. International students, as well as tourists and overseas posts, who are living in the new host culture temporarily are called "sojourners" (Brein & David, 1971). The process of acculturation is not limited to long-term residents of a host culture; many studies have shown that sojourners go through the process of acculturation as well (Church, 1982; Brein & David, 1971). According to Berry (2005), acculturation is "the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members." Acculturation results in change. While on the group level, acculturation changes cultural customs and social institutions; on the individual level, change occurs to the person's behavioral repertory (J. W. Berry, 2005).

According to Berry (1997), there are four strategies for acculturation: assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization. The assimilation strategy is used when an individual moving to the new host culture, such as a sojourner, does not "wish to maintain [his/her] cultural identity and seek[s] daily interaction with other cultures" (J. W. Berry, 1997). Integration is utilized when an individual has an "interest in both maintaining one's original culture, while in daily interactions with other groups" and so, "there is some degree of cultural integrity maintained, while at the same time seeking to participate as an integral part of the larger social network" (J. W. Berry, 1997). An individual will use the separation strategy if they "place a value on holding on to their original culture, and at the same time wish to avoid interaction with others" (J. W. Berry, 1997). Finally, an individual utilizes the marginalization strategy when "there is little possibility or interest in cultural maintenance (often for reasons of enforced cultural loss), and little interest in having relations with others (often for reasons of exclusion or discrimination)" (J. W. Berry, 1997).

The process of acculturation impacts the individual moving to the new culture as well as the lives of people in the host culture (J. W. Berry, 2005). In culturally plural societies, such as the United States, the acculturation and cultural

changes continue long after initial contact between the sojourners, such as international students, and the members of the host culture (J. W. Berry, 2005). Therefore, in the process of acculturation, when individuals are adapting to the new host culture, there are several long-term adaptations for both groups in contact: the sojourner and the people from the host culture (J. W. Berry, 2005). These may include: adopting social interactions of each group, learning each other's languages, and sharing each other's food preferences (J. W. Berry, 2005). While these adaptations may be easy for the groups in contact, they may also cause cultural conflict or "acculturative stress" for the sojourner (J. W. Berry, 2005).

There are many studies that have shown that the process of adjustment and adaptation to a foreign culture can be stressful (Sandhu &Asrabadi, 1994; Kaczmarek et. al, 1994; Church, 1982). Stress caused by the process of acculturation is entitled "acculturative stress" (J. W. Berry et. al, 1987). Acculturative stress has been found in refugee, immigrant, as well as international student populations (J. W. Berry et al., 1987). According to Berry et. al (1987), there are several factors that moderate the relationship between acculturation and stress: the natures of the larger society, the type of acculturating group, the modes of acculturation, demographic and social characteristics of the individual, and the psychological characteristics of the individual.

In a review of the literature by Berry et. al (1987), the researchers found a pattern of greater female acculturative stress. However, the authors mentioned that they weren't sure if this pattern truly reflected greater female stress or another situation not revealed by the literature (J.W. Berry et al., 1987). For example, females may have a greater tendency to agree with the personal statements provided by the researchers (J. W. Berry et al., 1987). In the review of the literature by Berry et. al (1987), the researchers also found some predictors of acculturative stress. They found that education was consistently predictive of lower acculturative (J. W. Berry et al., 1987). They provided two possibilities for this pattern in the literature. First, the type of education was typically European and this may have provided the individuals with preliminary acculturation prior to contact with the host culture (J. W. Berry et al., 1987). Or, it may be that individuals with more education

have more resources available to cope with change such as cognitive, economic, or even social resources (Berry et. al, 1987).

In the literature review by Berry et. al (1987), the researchers also found that the experiences prior contact with the host culture as well as contact experiences with the host culture and its members were related to acculturative stress (J. W. Berry et al., 1987). With regards to experiences prior to contact, in a research study by Berry and Kostovcik (1983), they found in a sample of Malaysian students that intercultural experience played a critical role relating to stress. They found that the degree of prior travel, knowing more languages, and having lived in an urban setting were predictive of lower stress (J. W. Berry & Kostovcik, 1983). Also, Berry and Blondel (1982) found that, for Vietnamese refugees, knowing English and Chinese prior to contact with the new host culture was predictive of less acculturative stress post arrival.

Certain experiences during the time of contact with the new host culture are also linked to acculturative stress (J. W. Berry et al., 1987). According to the review by Berry et. al (1987), they found a general pattern in the literature that the greater the participation in the host culture, the less the experience of acculturative stress. The final factor related to acculturative stress is the mode of acculturative strategy adopted by the individual, such as the sojourner (J. W. Berry et al., 1987). According to a review by Berry (2005), for acculturative stress, it is very clear that choosing the integration acculturation strategy is the least stressful, while marginalization is the most stressful. In addition to acculturative stress, there are many other difficulties that may face an international student when moving to a new host culture. In a review by Church (1982), he concluded the difficulties that the international student faces: "language difficulties, financial problems, adjusting to a new educational system, homesickness, adjusting to social customs and norms, and for some students, racial discrimination" (p. 544).

According to the annual Open Doors report published by the Institute of International Education, in the academic year of 2011-2012, there were 764,495 international students enrolled at universities and colleges in the United States, 44% of which were women (Education, 2012). The total number of international student enrollments had increased 6% and, for the first time since the academic year of

2000-2001, undergraduate international students outnumbered graduate international students (Education, 2012). In the same academic year, there were 56,664 international students from the Middle East and 5,456 international students from North Africa(Education, 2012). Saudi Arabia, alone, had a 50% increase in the number of Saudi students in the U.S in the academic year of 2011-2012(Education, 2012). These reports portray the large and increasing number of people from the Middle East opting to pursue higher education in the United States. This is a significant and growing international student population in the American culture.

However, while there have been many research studies about the adjustment of international students as well as refugees and other populations moving to a new host culture from Asian countries such as Malaysia (J. W. Berry & Kostovcik, 1983), Vietnamese (J. Berry & Blondel, 1982), and Korea(Oh et al., 2002) as well as European countries (Fritz, Chin, & DeMarinis, 2008) the research on the adjustment of international Arab students from the Middle East/North Africa is extremely limited. Most studies that include Arab students only have very few participants. For example a study investigating international student adjustment, which included students from Asia, Europe, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East, only had two participants from the Middle East (Abe, Talbot, & Gellhoed, 1998). There are even less studies that focus on the experience of Arab female international student in the United States (McDermott-Levy, 2010). Therefore, with the increasing number of the Middle Eastern student population in the U.S. (Education, 2012), the research supporting the experience of acculturative stress among this population(Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994; Kaczmarek et. al, 1994; Church, 1982) and its links with mental health symptoms and depression(Oh et al., 2002; Yang & Clum, 1994; Constantine et al., 2004; Lee et al., 2004), as well as the greater incidences of acculturative stress among women(J. W. Berry et al., 1987), we aimed to describe the experience of female international students, from the Middle East and Northern Africa region, studying in the United States. These students' "experience[s] in the United States must be placed within the context of Arabian culture" (McDermott-Levy, 2010). Because they come from conservative, collectivist societies that highly value family and traditions, which differ vastly from the individualistic American society that will host them (Hamdan, 2009).

Methods

Study Procedures and Participants

For this thesis, a sub-sample of 4 participants was included through random selection. The subsample lived in the Arabian Gulf in the Middle East, specifically Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and Kuwait (ages: M = 20.75, SD = 0.96; religions: 3 Muslims, 1 Christian). The parent study is a qualitative study that included15 participants aimed at studying the attitudes Arab-Muslims in the United States hold about help seeking when faced with stress or mental health issues and identify potentials facilitators and hindrances to seeking formal mental health treatment.

Participants were recruited through flyers emailed to Arab and International clubs in Boston. To be included in the parent study a participant must have been a female, 18 years or older, have lived and have the nationality from one or more of the countries in the Middle East and/or Northern Africa, and is an undergraduate student living in the United States.

The Northeastern University Institutional Review Board Institutional Review Board approved all study procedures before beginning data collection. A written consent for was obtained from all participants prior to the interview. Data was collected from April to June2013through individual face-to-face interviews.

An exploratory, qualitative study was conducted using 15 individual face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The semi-structured interview was written as a list of open-ended questions and topics. In addition, based on the participant's responses during the interview, supplemental probes were added by the interviewer. Interviews typically lasted between 90-120 minutes. The interviews were conducted in a private room at Northeastern University. An interviewer, who was an Arab Muslim female psychology student from Northeastern University, conducted the study. The interviewer was fluent in English and Arabic, so when participants spoke in Arabic, their responses were translated to English when they were transcribed. Study participants received no financial compensation for the time they devoted to the study. The interviews were audio-recorded and were transcribed verbatim by the interviewer. Transcriptions were anonymous and

assigned only a number.

Data Analysis

Data analysis occurred concurrently with data collection using a modified constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The NVIVO software application (International, 2008) was used to facilitate data management. First, two transcripts were reviewed line by line and coded by the interviewer for categories, constantly comparing emerging categories to each other to determine their nature and significance (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This resulted in an initial codebook that was modified subsequently based on the coding of an additional two interviews. Data collection and analysis ceased when no new information or insight was forthcoming.

Results

Independence

All participants discussed how moving to the United States to pursue undergraduate education, without the company of their parents or other family members, required them to entirely depend on themselves for the first time in their lives. Back in her home country, each participant was accustomed to having her parents make the final decisions, take care of her, and always be available to help her out. However, living alone in the United States meant that when the participants needed to get something done, to solve a problem, or take a decision, they had to depend on themselves to get it done.

"But coming here, I knew that something has to change since...I have to stand up for myself in any case or situation...and I had to do a lot of things for myself. No one's here to do anything for me... no one's gonna be there to ask for me and I have to ask questions and know what's the deal in any situation."

Participants stated that living in the United States provided them with unprecedented freedom, control, and opportunities that would not have been

available to them back in their home countries. The women believed this independence helped them grow and mature over their time in the United States.

"Setting up everything. Now paying my own bills, you know, budgeting my own money. I feel some much more mature and I feel like that built up a lot of my character and, you know, just taking my responsibilities seriously, which I never thought I would've done if I stayed back home."

In addition, the women, having all lived in the affluent region of the Arabian Gulf, were also dependent on maids to do the cleaning, cooking, and other household chores. Many participants said that this dependency on help and unfamiliarity with doing chores was challenging in the beginning of their time in the United States, when they had to do these things themselves for first time.

"And the things that changed from here [United States] to there [back home] is being independent from your maids and drivers... that didn't help me in my transition was being very spoiled back at home."

Some participants stated that, in their home countries, their only responsibility was studying. However, in the United States, the participants said that they were responsible for their education as well as every other aspect of their lives, which taught them to prioritize their responsibilities and take them seriously. One participant elaborated on this point:

"I think I felt like my responsibilities were very...a lot less back then...and then coming here I felt like that definitely came into, you know, into perspective...'Cause I felt like here I'm responsible for so much more. I don't just go to school and, you know, have someone pick me up and go home and lunch would be ready, my room would be tidy. Like I had to do all of that. If there isn't food, like I had to stop and buy groceries before going home and even being at home it wasn't the same 'cause I'd had to cook and then, you know, wash the dishes. So time for homework was never just that one thing

that I was worrying about... when I get sick or something or another just tired, I just feel the importance of it even more. Because...some things don't get done....and I felt like regardless of whether or not I liked to do these different chores, I felt like that taught me well to manage my time...and I just felt like I became better at it, the more I did it... And I feel like that definitely is something I notice."

All the women also stated that they were financially independent for the first time in their lives. In the United States, they were in charge of allocating their finances to where they see fit as well as obligated to stay within the bounds of their allowance, rather than ask their parents for money whenever they needed it.

"I've learned...money management too. Like back home, I did not understand the value of money at all. That is not something I'm proud of, but is definitely true."

All the participants felt empowered by their ability to take their own decisions and be responsible for their lives. They appreciated and enjoyed their newfound independence. A participant, who used to live in Saudi Arabia, talked about her ability to leave her house and go anywhere by herself, without the need of a driver, in the United States:

"I would wanna say being able to drive, but at the other hand I don't feel like it's a huge deal not driving in my own country. But I think it's one thing that makes life easier...since I've been independent on myself that whenever I want to get something. I'll just go and get it."

Most participants stated that, after moving to the United States, they no longer depended on their parents or other family members to get things done. Participants talked about booking flights for their parents, taking care of themselves even when an older/male family member was around, and filing government papers without the

help of their fathers. Many participants said that their family members now see them as more autonomous and capable of handling things alone.

"Even though my brother was here, I basically did everything for myself."

A few participants expressed their concern about losing their independence and their ability to make their own decisions when they move back to their home countries after completing their education. They were worried that their freedom was temporary and that going back to their societies, where women are not as independent as American women are in the United States, would force them to lose their independence.

"It's gonna be very difficult once I go back... you've seen a precedent of like people deciding their own lives and so now when you go back... it's gonna be it's a struggle, I think, of compromise needed on both sides. I have a sense of independence and freedom that...I think I'll have to explain to my parents to accept. And I think...I'll have to also accept the fact that, you know, I'm *still* at the end of the day Middle Eastern, I'm *still*—just because I went to America doesn't mean I could forget everything and...So it works on both parts I would say."

However, many participants believed that they would remain independent and be able to make their own decision when they move back to their home countries.

Familiar Friends

Most participants strongly endorsed that they preferred having close friends who were Arab, for many reasons. They said that they were more comfortable around fellow Arabs, connected with them on a deeper level, and shared common interests.

"Ok. Let me start out by saying, I am more comfortable with my Middle Eastern friends. Or from the Gulf, specifically, the Arabian Gulf... I feel like when you're introduced, you're just so much more familiar, even though, you

know, you've just met a person. And then also like with a lot of similarities with family and, you know, values, you just feel like you're in a good place and more comfortable."

Only one participant stated that her close friends were not Arabs, but rather international students from various countries. However, she explained that it was necessity, rather than personal choice, that caused her to befriend internationals because she attended a university with very few Arab students.

"And I think it's partly because of the university that I was in, very small international community, very small Arab community as well. So I was one of the few, few, few Arabs. Whereas like all of my other friends were in schools where there were a lot of Arabs, where there were a lot of internationals.

And so from the first year, they were making a lot of friends and I felt that I was making friends, but I was making a different type of friends."

This participant felt very fortunate and pleased to have had to opportunity to expand her preferences and develop true friendships with diverse individuals.

"But then once I pushed myself outside of myself, or I was forced to push myself outside of myself, from there onwards it was just one of the most brilliant experiences of my life. I *met many* people, great people, some of my closest friends. And now wherever I go in the world, I have someone I could call up."

Many of the participants stated that they had at least a few international friends. Some participants stated it was easier and more comfortable to befriend other international students as opposed to American students.

"I think they were much more perceptive to the things that I saw than some of my American peers were...so that's I guess [that's] why we related... perhaps it's because we're all coming to the States for the first time."

However, these participants said that when choosing their international friends, they choose religious and conservative international students because they could relate to them more.

"And perhaps it's because there's a more discreetness about them. There's a closer sense of belonging to the family. And not so much that individualistic culture that a lot of my peers have of, you know, not being obliged to their parents after they're out of the home."

Nonetheless, the majority of the participants felt that they couldn't become too close to international students or American students. Participants felt that international and American students asked very intrusive questions about Arabs/Muslims and they were tired of constantly explaining themselves and their beliefs. The participants said that it would be too difficult to become close to a person who constantly asks them to talk about their culture, traditions, and personal rules.

"Because it's interesting to them to know like how huge difference it is and how am I living there. Like, a lot of questions that I've get—that I've got is "do you wear hijab while sleeping?" I'm like, no. And again the question of "why do you wear it there but not wearing here?" So I'm like...ugh! I don't want to deal with it."

Also, some participants said that international and American students had preconceived notions about Arabs/Muslims and the women were tired of being responsible of correcting stereotypes. The participants said this was a major hindrance to their ability to become friends with non-Arab students.

"But you just you get tired of just walking around and explaining yourself to try and fit in or try and make someone understand Arabs a little more. Or break a stereotype here and break a stereotype there."

In addition, most participants didn't believe that they could connect deeply with non-Arab students because each led very a different lifestyle. Most of the participants didn't drink alcohol or go clubbing. Therefore, they couldn't go out with students who engaged in these activities.

Adjustment

When discussing their experience of studying and living in the United States, the participants talked about how they had to adapt to the unfamiliar American culture, what helped them adjust to American society, and how they adjusted to the American academic system.

Culture Shock

When talking about their adjustment, most participants stated that they faced many difficulties in the beginning of their time in the United States. They moved to a culture that was very different from the one they grew up in. As a result, many of the participants believed they went through culture shock.

"Initially it's a difficult experience because it's so different from every other place that you've been in before. The people, while you feel like are very familiar because they are the people—it is a language that we speak, it is—they are the people that we read books about, they are the people that we see in movies, they are the people that we travel to. And yet so different. Because now you're interacting with them not at that level."

One participant elaborates about how she was keenly aware of how different she was from everyone else.

"Being an international student, I feel like I'm always reminded of it. I definitely don't just blend in. At the beginning I feel like when I moved here it—I felt it the most. [Because] I felt very misplaced, very...you know, just I felt like I stood out all the time. And I felt like all the people around me

weren't trying to fit in, but I felt like I was! And it was tough 'cause at the time I didn't know anyone, you know. And I was trying to understand how everything worked."

Most participants felt like the norms and lifestyle in the United States were very foreign to them.

"I need to buy groceries, I need to get in the cab, and deal with like the whole tipping situation, where people get angry about in a way that we didn't have to tip back [home] because we didn't have cab drivers. We didn't have to tip at restaurants because we could *elect* what tip we wanted to put, as opposed to like that 15 or 20. And these are all minor things, but for—as a first year student, you know, I was always shocked at why people were so angry at me all the time! And so all these little things add up. The first year, your mind makes things much bigger than they are. And it's a tough experience."

A participant, who was living in the dorms during her freshman year, also mentioned being shocked and feeling uncomfortable about the freshman activities, such as parties. She felt conflicted about these activities because they weren't congruent with her values as an Arab Muslim.

"I felt difficulties ...so there were like dances and like social events that basically back home I wouldn't be part of and as a undergraduate coming into school with those events, a lot of people would come up to me and be like, "are you going to this?" Or you know, "why aren't you going to this?" or "who are you going to this with?" and within like just within myself I was...I was not just worrying about that. I was worrying whether or thinking about whether if I was back home I would have done it. Just to understand, you know, or make up my mind whether or not this is the place for me to be. And whether, you know, my values and my traditions would have accepted it if it was back home."

Another participant elaborated on how she felt discomfort and surprise about some of the norms of the college students in the United States:

"I think one of the issues that I struggled with was that the nature of the conversations were very different from the ones that I had at home. So at home, it's taboo to like talk about stuff like who are you with or do you...I don't know. Some of the first questions that I was asked by my roommates who I'd never known or never met, and I thought it was the most superficial thing I could be asked, was like, "have you hooked up with anyone?" And I thought I don't even know you! First of all, I haven't hooked up with anyone, that's not a topic of conversation back home. But, two, I don't know you at that level to discuss this. And I was kind of shocked at the level of intimacy people thought they had the right to. And it was very normal for the people here I guess."

Most participants talked about being scared at the beginning of their time in the United States. The women said they were afraid of being robbed or attacked as well as walking alone or going back to their homes at a late hour.

"Like I was very terrified...so I wouldn't go out at night...I always think someone was gonna rob me."

However, all these participants characterized their fears as irrational and attributed their reservations to unfamiliarity to a new environment. They stated that they overcame their fears after adapting to their new lifestyle in the United States.

"You realize that it's okay nothing's gonna happen. So you understand the situation and you understand when to go out and when to come back and who to talk to and who to trust. You like you know how to deal with situations. Even when you're in a bad situation, you know how to deal with it."

All the participants believed that the initial difficulties they faced due to culture shock decreased or disappeared when they adapted to living in the United States. Participants credited their adaptation, and subsequent positive adjustment, to many reasons including forming close friendships as well as understanding and becoming accustomed to life in the United States.

"It's just the transition. Everyone is having difficulty... the difficulty then decreased."

When asked how she would describe her overall adjustment, one participant, reiterating the sentiment of all the other participants, said:

"Very forwardly progressing."

Helpful

When talking about their adjustment to studying and living in the United States, the women listed various things that they believed helped them in their transition. Many participants talked about experiencing culture shock, but also went on to explain some things that helped lessen this shock. All participants said that they were at least somewhat familiar with the culture in the United States. Many participants were acquainted with American culture through visiting the United States as tourists, watching American TV shows and movies, and reading American books. They believed that these activities allowed them to know and understand some aspects of the American society prior to living in the United States.

"We used to travel each summer. We used to watch a lot of movies and series...So me knowing those things and me traveling each summer, I know a lot of the American background or let's say how they live and the way they live. And so I know when I came here I was—I exactly know what to expect."

Almost all participants had their parents, or sometimes other family members, travel with them to help them settle in when they first moved to the United States.

Participants strongly believed that this helped ease their transition to living independently and reduced the stress of moving to a new country. The participants' parents helped them purchase furniture and other necessities for their apartments or dorm rooms. Their parents also helped them set everything up, including phone lines and billing plans. Participants appreciated this help, especially since they had never lived on their own and had been in charge of any chores or bills before. The participants were completely dependent on their parents before moving to the United States, so having their parents with them during this major transition really helped.

"My parents were with me and they like set up everything, the furniture and the cable and the internet and everything...the plan was they'd come here and they all stayed for a month...so it was a transition. And it was easier. It helped me get to know people while they're here, so I still have a backup system."

Only one participant didn't have her parents or other family members travel with her to help her transition to living in the United States. She stated that this made her transition very difficult.

"I think my transition was a lot tougher than I thought it would be because I came here on my own. As opposed to other friends of mine that came with family members that, you know, helped them settle in. So a lot of things I felt like I had to make out on my own. So I had to, you know, look for a place to live. I had to just you know shop for furniture, which a lot of the things or most of the things I've never done before. You know, start a phone contract, which I mean it might sound very silly to other people, but to me it was a huge deal!"

Most participants talked about how some school activities—which were organized to bring together freshmen, international students, and others—were helpful to their adjustment. In these events, many participants met people who later became their

closest friends. These activities reminded the participants that they weren't all alone in their college experience. Participants believed that these school events helped ease their initial transition into college life.

"We also had like school programs... where you had all of the international students come together and mix. And I think was very good because we were all going through the same thing at the same time. For some people, it was their first time in the States."

Some participants also talked about how they learned many important and practical tips about college life in the United States.

"And some of the stuff that they were explaining to us were like very, you know, trivial things, but that mattered. Like three years after, I look back and I think oh these lessons still stick."

Academic Adjustment

All participants attended American college preparatory schools in their home countries. They were taught American curriculums in the English language. When talking about what was helpful to their academic adjustment, all participants stated that they believed going to a school that used an American curriculum eased their transition to the academic system in the United States.

"We were already exposed to it, as a system...unlike if we were in an English [British] system, it would be totally different."

Back in their home countries, the participants experienced an academic system similar to their American peers who attained their secondary education in the United States, which they believed helped their academic transition in the United States.

"We use to study SATs as our curriculum for high school and TOEFL as well."

Most participants believed that the rigor of their secondary education made it easier for them to adjust to their demanding university education in the United States.

"Like for school, like academically I don't think there was a huge difference since I was in a school that's very restrict and I had to study a lot. And it like the amount of work here and there was the same."

When talking about things that made their academic adjustment challenging, some participants talked about being more used to memorizing, as opposed to critical thinking, in their secondary education.

"The studying is different where it's more of memorizing and just applying it on like the exam paper or whatever. Coming here the studying system is a bit different where you have to think and do a lot of things. Especially that I am studying something that's not... like not studying books and then memorizing them and going to an exam. It's more of projects."

One participant believed that her secondary education was very easy compared to her college education in the United States. She stated that not being challenge in her secondary education caused her to develop poor studying habits and a lack of discipline, which caused her to really struggle academically in the beginning. Eventually, she overcame her initial academic maladjustment, and learned how to adapt to the difficult rigor of her university.

"I was used to getting As without trying so hard. But here you'd have to study more, you *actually* have to study. So that was one of my biggest challenges here."

None of the participants had any issues with language. They were all used to studying in English and were fluent in English, which eased their transition to their American university education.

Arab

When talking about their experience as Arab students in the United States, some participants felt that they were unlike other international students in some aspects. They mentioned that many of the customary campus activities, such as parties, which were meant to involve students in the college life, left the participants isolated due to their beliefs and values.

"An Arab international student...like I feel like a lot of things that I can't do since an Arab and Muslim. So a lot of activities that I think would be fun and I would be more involved in the school life or with my friends in school. But I choose not to because...it's just not me. So like night life activities. Or...I don't feel comfortable in mixed parties or whatever. So I think a huge deal of being Arab and Muslim."

A participant talked about the reaction of other students when they learned that she was Arab.

"When I first met people, they thought I was Indian...but then when I would correct them..."no, I'm actually *Arab*"...they would always have this taken back type of reaction like, "ohh really?!"...it's just about being Arab... it just takes them back or you know surprises them."

Most participants believed that sometimes they were treated with discrimination because they were Arabs and/or Muslims. One participant said that she was treated with discrimination in the airport. Another participant explained one incident, among many others, where she was treated rudely because she was an Arab.

"This guy... I was introduced to him and, you know, straight away he was like, "oh, where are you from?" And I was like, "I'm from Bahrain, which is in the Middle East"...and he said something about like, "Oh! Like, cash money!"...it was just so rude."

Most of the women felt that many people had preconceived notions and believed stereotypes about Arabs and/or Muslims.

"And once I was at an event where everyone was introducing their selves and two guys that I know aren't from the Middle East introduced themselves as from the Middle East and they were told to give a fun fact about their country and one guy was like, "I live in a tent, I ride a camel."

One participant blamed the media for the inaccurate and negative image of Arabs and Muslims. In addition, a few participants stated that they were disappointed that people didn't know that the stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims were incorrect and unrepresentative.

"I feel a lot of the times, you know, I'm here for that. If I'm different and I'm an Arab, like I want people to understand that the stereotypes they have about Arabs are not always true ... [sometimes] you feel a lot of the times if that person was even at an intellectual stage or, you know, where he really wanted to understand whether or not that was true, he wouldn't have made that comment. So you feel like it's just not worth the energy in just talking back."

Most participants believed that people were confused about Arabs and/or Muslims and didn't know a lot of accurate information about them.

"There was confusion at times, Palestine was confused with Pakistan multiple times."

Nonetheless, although they were frustrated by some things that happened to them because they were Arab and/or Muslim, most participants did not believe that it had significantly made their experience in the United States negative.

"I don't think it's difficult to be an international student as everyone come from an international base. No one's actually American. So you'd easily fit in. But it's the way you perceive like, "oh Americans, how they treat us!" If you're think that way, that's what's gonna happen to you. But if you treat it as a normal thing, nothing will ever happen to you. It was *very* easy to fit in and find your way. People are very nice, in my opinion."

Personal Growth

All participants believed that their experience in the United States had led to significant personal growth. They felt that living and studying abroad caused them to become stronger, more confident, and more mature than when they first moved to the United States. They said that being surrounded by a different environment, undergoing new experiences, and meeting diverse people had created a significant change in their character.

One participant talked about how attending university in the United States gave her experiences and opportunities that she wouldn't have normally had if she had pursued her university education in her home country. Living abroad, she is not only responsible for her education, but also of her household, finances, among other things.

"But I also feel like a lot of my building up my character came from non like school activities....education I could've gotten it somewhere else. But, you know, just studying abroad and that experience is what basically was important to me. And I definitely feel like up until now, I've learned so much."

Many participants felt living in the United States allowed them to express themselves and in the process discover who they truly were, without the constraints of society. The women had the liberty to express themselves and live their lives without the constant judgment of society.

"I used to be this person if I had a thought I wouldn't say it because I don't how people with react to it. So no that's not the right thing and that's not the way to live. I would wanna say whatever I wanna say and if people had problems with then it's their problem. It's not my problem... I realized that, especially seeing how practical Americans live, I feel like these are very small things that we worry about....not having this pressure of judgment that I used to have back home, allowed me to be myself in anyway that I am myself."

Many participants talked about how being exposed to people leading very different lifestyles than theirs had made them more open minded and accepting of diverse cultures and people.

"I think being here has changed me a lot as a person. It's made me much more open minded—not open minded in the sense of like being religious and not being religious—but in the sense of just being willing to accept a lot of different lifestyles from the type that I was accustomed to...it's really expanded my comfort zone."

One participant discussed how having a roommate who led an extremely different lifestyle than hers and who did things that the participant was very uncomfortable with. The participant talked about how she overcame this challenging experience.

"It's not that I would do it what she did, no way. But I think I'm—wherever you throw me in the world right now, with whatever type of people I end up with, I'm much more able to manage the situation in a way that I might now have been able to had I been surrounded by my same circle of people, by the same problems of that circle of people."

Other personal changes that some participants experienced over the course of their time in the United States included aspiring to make a difference in their home country, developing a better work ethic, and becoming more confident.

"Just the confidence, strength, and, you know, just voicing out my very different opinions. Wanting to make a change. I never really cared."

One participant talked about how, due to the personal change that they go through, Arab females who lived and studied in the United States are vastly different from the women back in their home countries, who didn't study abroad.

"But it's difficult to explain that unless they've undergone the same experience, I think it's very hard—it's very, very hard for people who are outside and have not experienced America as like as college students have to understand the change that happens to you mentally when you come here...you see the world differently once you're here. And even when we go back to our like friend groups...you feel that, you know, we're not able to mix on some levels with the same people that we used to mix with, because we just evolved in very different ways... so you go back and even though you love the same people, it's just it's very—it's a different evolution. ..it's just that you're intellectuality is at a much different level that your mind cannot absorb some of the other stuff, and nor can their minds absorb what you enjoy talking about."

Advice

The participants were asked to provide future Arab female international students who will pursue their university education in the United States with advice.

Participants were asked to give academic, social, and practical advice. The women used their experience to benefit future students.

Academic

The most common academic advice provided by the participants, for future students, was to put their education first. Many participants stated that the purpose of an Arab student's time abroad is, first and foremost, to pursue higher education. Some participants believed that studying and attaining a good education should take precedence over everything else.

"I think it's important to be focused and to come here and not to forget why you came here predominantly."

One participant suggested that future students be studious from start of their university education and cautioned against slacking in the beginning.

"You have to have a very strong commitment from the beginning that, you know, this is why I came here in the first place. Because if you start off on that loose track from the beginning, I feel like you'll just...for the rest of your four years, no matter how much you try to correct it, it's like that."

Another participant warned against her own mistake of not taking her education seriously and not having good study habits at the beginning of her time in the United States.

"Slacking, like when studying, thinking that when you listen to the professor you'll know it automatically, that was one of the issues."

The participants provided many other academic advices for future students; such as to try their best and accept the grades they receive rather than worry too much about attaining perfect grades, to network, and to read books written in the English language.

"I would definitely recommend them to read as much as they can in English. I never liked reading and...coming here I definitely had difficulties a lot more than I might have now just talking all the time in English. Even though I went to an international school since kindergarten, it was a bilingual school since kindergarten, you know. But still I did not like to read. And I did homeworks in English because I had to. But reading and being just very familiar with different terms is so much easier than, you know, trying to make it work when you actually arrive here."

Social

A common social advice provided by some participants, for future students, was to avoid restricting themselves to befriending only Arabs. One participant talked about how she wanted future students to befriend international and American students, even though, she never did. Another participant recommended that future students befriend international students particularly, because she wanted future students to have a similar positive experience to hers.

"Try to get out of yourself, try to meet as many people as possible...maintain your group, but don't stay within it all the time because then you won't the richness of experience here, you won't understand it when people like me discuss how excited they are about being here. And you'll feel like you missed out on a lot. But you won't know like what it was."

The participants provided many other social advices for future students, such as to be open minded, to not forget who they really are when having fun, and to not be afraid of voicing their differences with other people.

"Not be afraid to voice their differences, not necessarily in a very negative...like they're defending theirselves 'cause it's never really that tough of a conversation. It's just if they're bringing it up very respectfully, people will also respect them for their differences and how they stand up for it."

Practical

The most common practical advice provided by many participants for future students was to be organized. Participants suggested that future students should manage their time between studying and having fun and should have to-do lists to keep track of important dates.

Another common practical advice given by some participants for future students was to always pay their bills on time. A participant provided a suggestion for future students to help them with their bills:

"And set your bills like automatically so they would take it off as soon as you get your allowance...so you won't be broke by the end of the month."

The participants provided many other social advices for future students, such as to know their rights and responsibilities, to ask a lot questions when they don't know what they are doing, to get a cleaning lady to help them out, and to embrace new experiences.

"I would say really...like ride those bikes and get out... try to like find new places. And I think while you're discovering new places you discover new parts of yourself. I think you discover like—whenever I took those bike rides, I discovered how independent I was."

Discussion

The qualitative nature of this study provides an in-depth and holistic understanding of the experience of female Arab international students studying in the U.S. This study provides a deeper understanding of this subgroup by elucidating their experience[s] in the United States within the context of Arabian culture. This study also adds to the current literature of the experience of Arab female international students in the United States by identifying novels themes not discussed in previous research and expanding on themes that have been identified.

Autonomy was noted by the women in this study as one of the most significant aspects of their experience in the United States. Back in their home countries, in the Arabian Gulf, the participants lived in collectivist and patriarchal societies (Hamdan, 2009), where they were highly dependent on their parents and, sometimes, other family members. All of the participants had never lived independently and without their families prior to living in the United States. Like

their American and international peers, going to college in the United States usually meant living alone and without their families. However, as noted by McDermott-Levy (2010), who examined the experience of Arab-Muslim female students living in the United States, the perception of "going alone" was not found in other international students populations. McDermott-Levy (2010) stated that this notion of "going alone," where Arab female international students characterized their experience abroad by being alone and without their family, seemed to be unique to Arab-Muslim females. The significance of the experience of "going alone" to the United States for Arab females, found by McDermott-Levy (2010), is congruent with our results. However, we found that this notion does not only apply to Muslim-Arab women, but also to Christian-Arab women as well.

Some participants were worried that, when they return to their home countries, they would lose the independence and freedom that they enjoyed in the United States. The autonomy, which the participants experienced during their university education abroad, is unlike anything they had experienced back in their home countries. Thompson and Christofi (2006) found that, for many international students, the culture shock experienced upon returning home is far worse than that experienced when arriving in their host country, and that many students experience this shock in terms of a sharp dichotomy between the freedom of the prior host culture and restrictions felt upon returning home. While some of the women in this study hoped to retain some of their independence and freedom upon their return to the Arabian Gulf, and some women expressed their concern that they wouldn't, all of the women don't know if their hopes or worries will come true upon their return home. However, the research conducted by Thompson and Christofi(2006), which examined the adjustment of international students upon their return to Cyprus from studying abroad, may be concerning for the Arab female international students returning home. The participants in the study conducted by Thompson and Christofi (2006), similar to the women in this study, had much fewer freedoms in Cyprus before they lived in the United States as international students, which caused them to experience culture shock upon re-entry to Cyprus (Thompson and Christofi, 2006). This suggests that if the women in this study face restrictions and lose their

autonomy upon their return to the Arabian Gulf, they too may face culture shock and maladjustment.

The findings of this research study are congruent with previous research that found friendship to be a significant theme in the international student's experience and that friends help international students in their transition to the new host culture and reduce their loneliness (Brown, 2009). Most participants strongly endorsed that they preferred having close friends who were Arab because they connected with them on a deeper level and shared common interests. Previous research supports our finding that international students prefer to have conational friends (Bochner, 1986; Brown, 2009). Some of participants in this study also had international friends from other countries, especially international students who were conservative and shared similar values with the participants. Our finding, that international students were able to connect with other international students more than students from the host culture, is congruent with previous research (Brown, 2009).

None of the participants in this study had close friends from the host culture: the United States. The inability of international students to connect with the host culture and form friendships with students from the host country has been well documented in the literature (McDermott-Levy (2010); Bochner, 1986; Brown 2009). The women's inability to connect with the host culture is concerning because in a review by Berry et al. (1987), the authors found a general pattern in the literature that, for a sojourner, the greater they participate in the host culture the less they experience acculturative stress. In addition, studies have found that greater contact with the host culture increased international students' satisfaction with their overall student experience as well as improved their language ability (Toyokawa and Toyokawa, 2002). Nonetheless, this doesn't suggest that international students should totally "assimilate" into the host culture. "Assimilation" is a mode of acculturation where the sojourner does not "wish to maintain their cultural identity and seeks daily interaction with other cultures" (J. W. Berry, 1997). Studies recommend that sojourners employ the acculturation strategy of "integration," which is when an individual has an "interest in both maintaining one's original culture, while in daily interactions with other groups" and so, "there is some degree

of cultural integrity maintained, while at the same time seeking to participate as an integral part of the larger social network" (J. W. Berry, 1997). This recommendation is based on a review by Berry (2005), which found the integration acculturation strategy causes the least amount of acculturative stress for sojourners.

When the women left their home countries to go live in the United States, they faced an entirely different environment that required them to acculturate. All the participants talked about experiencing many difficulties as well as culture shock during their adjustment to living in the American society. The participants said that these initial challenges were the result of encountering foreign norms, such as partying and consuming alcohol, which were inconsistent with the participants' beliefs and values. This is consistent with the findings of a review by Church (1982), where he found that adjusting to the social customs and norms of the new host culture was a common difficulty that international students face. In addition, many studies have shown that the process of adjustment and adaptation to a new culture can be stressful (Sandhu & Asrabadi, 1994; Kaczmarek et. al, 1994; Church, 1982). This stress, during the process of acculturation, is entitled "acculturative stress" (J. W. Berry et. al, 1987). Therefore, our participants' accounts of difficulties and stress in adjusting to the American culture are congruent with other research studies that have found that international student populations experience acculturative stress (J. W. Berry et al., 1987).

When talking about their adjustment to the culture of the United States, the participants also mentioned many things that helped them during this process. Most participants said that their parents, and sometimes other family members, traveling with them to the United States to help them move in was very helpful to their transition and eased their moving process. The participant, who didn't have parental support during her move to the United States, said that moving alone really distressed her and caused her initial transition to college life to be extra difficult. Our findings suggest that for Arab women, who are used to being very dependent on their parents and characterize their experience in the United States with their being "alone" and without their family, having parental or familial support during their move to the United States may be very important to them and even perceived as essential for an easy transition to college life.

There is no current research on the notion of parental or familial support during a student's transition to a new host culture. In fact, a review of the literature showed that the importance of this notion was not found in any other research study on international students. However, given that Arab women were highly dependent on their parents and family, and their experience abroad includes the loss of these strong familial ties, it seems that the importance of familial support during the transition to the host culture may be unique to Arab females.

The women talked about other things that helped them in their adjustment to studying and living in the United States, such as being familiar with the American culture before moving to the United States. Many participants were acquainted with American culture through visiting the United States as tourists, watching American TV shows and movies, and reading American books. The women believed that these activities allowed them to know and understand some aspects of the American culture prior to living in the United States. Our findings are congruent with previous research findings that prior exposure to the host culture eased the adjustment of sojourners, although they could still experience some culture shock (Arensberg, 1964).

Also, many participants also mentioned that going to freshman activities, designed to bring together international students, was helpful in their transition to the United States because they met people who later became their closest friends. These activities reminded the participants that they weren't all alone in their college experience. Our findings support previous research that found that involvement in college activities and organizations facilitated the development of friendships (McLachlan & Justice, 2009).

When talking about their academic adjustment, all participants believed that their secondary educations, which were American college preparatory schools and applied American curriculums, eased their transition to the academic system in the United States. Our findings are similar to previous research which found that education that was typically European, predicted lower acculturative stress in international student studying in Canada because it may have provided the individuals with preliminary acculturation prior to contact with the host culture (J. W. Berry et al., 1987). In addition, the participants in this study said that language

did not affect their academic adjustment because they all spoke English very well. This is congruent with previous research by Berry and Blondel (1982) that found that for Vietnamese refugees, knowing English prior to contact with the new host culture, was predictive of less acculturative stress post arrival. In addition, Carty et al. (2007) found that those students who had the best English-language proficiency were the most likely to succeed in a nursing exchange program between George Mason University and Saudi Arabia.

Most of the women in this study believed that sometimes they were treated differently because they were Arabs and/or Muslims. Our finding that Arab/Muslim international students have faced discrimination and disrespectful treatment is congruent with previous research (Brown, 2009; Horwedel DM., 2006; McDermott-Levy, 2010; Seggie & Stanford, 2010; Speck, 1997). In addition, Ward et al. (2001) found that the interactions between international students and residents of their host countries are strongly influenced by stereotypes, which is consistent with the accounts of our participants that many people they interacted with had preconceived notions and believed stereotypes about Arabs and/or Muslims. Ward et al. (2001) found that stereotypes often have a negative impact upon relations between host-country residents and international student and Horwedel (2006) found that Muslim students have reported negative remarks and other interactions, and have often been made to feel increasingly uncomfortable, the findings of both studies are congruent with the findings of our research study. Finally, Speck (1997) found that Muslim students are often misunderstood, that biased media aids this misunderstanding, and that there is confusion between the cultures of certain Arab countries and certain religious practices. The research findings reported by Speck (1997) are consistent with accounts by the participants of our study.

The women believed that their experience in the United States had led to significant personal growth. They felt that living and studying abroad, including the challenges faced and the successes they achieved, caused them to become stronger, more confident, and more mature than when they first moved to the United States. The personal growth and maturation displayed by our participants is congruent with previous research on the experience of international students (McDermott-Levy, 2010; Mirsky & Kaushinsky, 1989). Finally, the women in this study offered advice for

future international students based on all the lessons they learned over their time as sojourners in the United States.

The findings of this qualitative study must be considered with respect to several limitations. The sample included in this study was a small sample of Arab female international students who were not representative of all Arab female international students included in the parent study. This sample was drawn from a few universities in Boston and, therefore, the findings may be different for Arab female international students in other universities in Boston and the United States. In addition, the sub-sample included Arab female international students from the Arabian Gulf and may be different for Arab female international students from other countries in the Middle East/North Africa. Also, the data are based on the perceptions of a sub-sample of Arab female international students. As is true for all personal recollections, these participant's suggestions and opinions may not reflect those of other Arab female international students. Moreover, selection bias cannot be ruled out. It is possible that Arab female international students in other communities in the United States, or from other countries in the Middle East/North Africa, may differ in meaningful ways from the participants who engaged in the interviews. In addition, social desirability can be particularly problematic in studies using interviews because the participants may be answering what they thought the interviewer wanted to hear (Dillman, 1978). Therefore, interpretations of the results of this study should be undertaken with caution. Finally, future research needs to pursue the understanding of parental support in the transition of female Arab international students, the experience of female Arab international students from all other countries in the Middle East/North Africa, and the experience of male Arab international students in the United States.

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