What it Looks Like to be in a Mixed Gender Society: the Essence of Transitioning Experience from Gender Segregated Environment to Mixed Gender Environment

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Abstract

This paper draw of a large project concerning of the educational and social experience encountered by Saudi international students while they are studying in a mixed gender environments in Australia. The paper discusses how the experience of transitioning from absolute gender segregated society to absolute mixed gender society appears to Saudi students. It reports on a phenomenological investigation of that phenomenon. Conclusions are drawn on how such an experience may contribute to the transformation of Saudi Society, economically, politically and culturally. The specific focus of the paper show the students see the phenomenon of transitioning from a segregated gender environment to a mixed gender environment and implication this might have for policy makers and educational providers. To facilitate this aim, the paper addresses the following questions: what does the transitioning experience from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment look like for Saudi students in Australia? How could this experience be improved? A phenomenological approach, influenced by a qualitative paradigm in social science research, was developed to allow the participants to describe their encountered experiences. Significant indications were found to support the research assumption that dialogical and dialectical influences occur between international students' cultural identity and the formation of the cross-cultural transitioning experience. This research has implications for both KSA and host countries about the management of the KASP, pre-departure preparation, and host countries arrangements for diverse student groups.

Keywords: Saudi international students, transition, managing experience, gender-segregation environment, gender-mixed environment

Introduction

Saudi Arabia has put a huge investment into education via a scholarship programme known as the King Abdullah Scholarship Program (KASP). Today, about one precent of Saudi citizens are experiencing cross cultural transitioning, as the program has sponsored many young Saudi students to experience new educational and social environments in a range of host countries. Today, young Saudi students are increasingly travelling overseas to experience new educational and social environments in a range of host countries. In 2009 Saudi Arabia was listed as the fifth highest country – after China, India, Korea, and Germany – to have students studying overseas (Deputyship for Planning and Information, 2010). According to a report by the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Higher Education in 2011, the number of Saudi students abroad went up from 25,441 in 2006 to 119,592 students in 2010 (Ministry of Higher Education (MOH), 2011). Other statements made by officials in this Ministry of Higher Education indicated that there will be about 200,000 Saudi students studying abroad by the end of 2015 (Al-Shutayly, 2011; Alshayban, 2011). Therefore about one precent of Saudi citizens are experiencing cross cultural transitioning.

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This huge influx is due to the Saudi government decision in 2005 to establish a national programme to provide scholarship opportunities for Saudi citizens to study overseas. The main aim of the programme wasto meet the needs of Saudi Arabia in relation to developing a professional and academic workforce that willbe internationally competitive. Five goals have been cited for this programme: 1) to sponsor qualified Saudis for study in the best universities around the world; 2) to work to bring about a high level of academic and professional standards, in Saudi educational institutions, through the foreign scholarship programme; 3) to exchange scientific, educational, and cultural experience with countries worldwide; 4) to build up qualified and professional Saudi staff in the work environment; 5) to raise and develop the level of professionalism among Saudis(Ministry of Higher Education, 2011). It is an ambitious project as it is designed to contribute to the international exchange of scientific, educational, and cultural experiences. Observers of the program and supports offered by the government suggests that the Saudi Arabian government had determined to expose Saudi culture to globalisation as it has given Saudi students a presence across the globe. Further some can read into such a decision steps towards the development and reform of Saudi institutional and social-cultural structures. This programme requires large numbers of young people to adapt to strange environments that are especially challenging because they are mixed gender societies. Early studies of Saudi international students tended to address issues of language, religion, and administrative difficulties. This research adds to knowledge of Saudi international student's experience by specifically addressing the question of gender segregation. It could be argued that Saudi Arabia as a state is a 'theo-monarchy' (Al-Atawneh, 2009, p. 733), an integration of a theocracy and a monarchy. Al-Atawneh also suggested that '[t]he fusion of religion and politics is clearly recognised and acknowledged by Wahhabi scholars, who believe that religion and state are inseparable' (p. 733). BothUlama (religious scholars) and the royal family as rulers are 'those in authority among you'.

Thus, obeying them is religiously essential because total union and interrelation between religion and politics is the correct way of life. Saudi Arabia's 'theo-monarchy' is also characterized by tensions between more liberal and conservative views. Given this opinions are divided about the efficacy of the KASP programme. Some express caution and suggest that these experiences, mainly in Western countries, might have negative effects on the cultural identity of the students (see, for example, Aldossary, 2011; kokbz7l, 2011). Others amongst the decision-makers in the Ministry of Higher Education argue that the programme is a step forward and that it was devised in order to bring about effective reform in the country (see, for instance, Abouammoh, 2009; Clary &Karlin 2011; Marginson, Kaur, Sawir, & Al-Mubaraki, 2011; Mazi & Abouammoh, 2009). The impact of Western influences will, in the end, rely heavily on how the group of returning international students, dubbed 'reformers', have changed and what they bring back from their international experience. Such changes are often subtle and some even unexpected, so it is a complex task to try to examine and evaluate the influence of international study and the role such activity can play in the Saudi government's plans for economic and educational reforms. There is also the potential that the influence of international education will lead to social change within Saudi Arabia. This research contributes to this argument by showing part of the picture that includes the lived experience of these students. The questions:

1. What does the transitioning experience from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment look like for Saudi students in Australia?
2. How could this experience be improved?

As a Saudi international student myself, I found coping with a mixed-gender environment to be one of the biggest problems upon my arrival in Australia. It was an extremely strange situation for me to be taught by a female teacher and to study with female classmates. When I arrived by myself (my wife and children joined me several months later), I stayed in a home with a woman and her children; this experience was initially confrontational for me. I should acknowledge also that these social and cultural differences were real challenges that affected my international experience on both the personal and academic levels. My experience raised critical questions for me, which I think should also be asked by those who are interested in studying Saudi students' experience: how does an individual who has spent most of his or her life in a segregated-gender environment experience a mixed-gender environment? Hence the questions posed in this paper exploring an awareness of the situation and the possibility of improving the experience. Any academic response to such questions may provide valuable information to the body of international education literature and may also furnish useful data that might indicate the influence of the transitioning experience on Saudi cultural identity. This paper consists of four sections; 1) the context of the investigated phenomenon; 2) Theoretical and methodological assumptions; and 3) the transitioning experience, 4) the questions and implications.

Context of the Investigated Phenomenon

The context of this research is the gender segregation environment of Saudi Arabia and the impact this has on Saudi citizens transitioning to gender mixed environments. In Saudi Arabia gender segregation is evident in almost every public and private institution. Educational sectors, including schools and universities, and most places of entertainment, as well as parks, forbid the mixing of the genders (Mayer, 2000). For example, a single-sex school is the only available kind of school in Saudi Arabia (including private, public, general, and religious schools); the situation is the same in universities and colleges, except for the KAUST University, which was recently established for international graduate-level research students by King Abdullah. The university has been criticised severely by some Wahhabi scholars because of its co-educational system reflecting the ongoing transformation on the state at social and political levels (see Meijer, 2010). Medical schools and institutions allow for a certain level of mixing between sexes because of the shortage in female doctors and nurses. Most restaurants also have two sections: one for men and one for families (where each family is seated in a separate, partitioned arrangement). Some restaurants cater to men only; none cater to women only as there are no female waiters. Obviously, the phenomenon of gender segregation is central to most people's social, educational, and political activities. Gender segregation, as currently practiced in Saudi Arabia is a new phenomenon, but it has its root in the Arabic traditions. Arabs most likely have a very traditional view on the role of gender in society. They believe that a man is responsible for working outside of the home and for providing a secure and safe life for his wife and other family members, while a woman takes responsibility for inside the home, looking after her husband and children, and providing love and warmth in the family. Even prior to the appearance of Islam, the Arabic tribes held these views about females, which had a significant influence on the role of women in these tribes. As mentioned in the Quran, some Arab tribes considered that having a female child was shameful and/or a cause for shame, and this view about female children has been pointed out as a vice that Arab Muslims need to change. For example, in Ayah (verses) 58-59 (Surat An-Nahl16:) Allah said,

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يتوارى من القوم من سوء ما بشر به أيمسكه على هون أم يدسه في التراب ألا (58) وإذا بشر أحدهم بالأنثى ظل وجهه مسودا وهو كظيم ساء ما يحكمون

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'And when the news of (the birth of) a female (child) is brought to any of them, his face becomes dark, and he is filled with inward grief! He hides himself from the people because of the evil of that whereof he has been informed. Shall he keep her with dishonour or bury her in the earth? Certainly, evil is their decision. Thus, it could be argued religiously that such a worldview has nothing to do with Islamic principles (Abu-Ali & Reisen, 1999; Al Munajjed, 1997; Fanjar 1987; Zant 2002); it was, in fact, structured on a traditional historical view of gender roles that existed several hundreds of years before Islam. Such a traditional worldview often creates a masculine world in which gender separation is prominent, there are quite different roles for the sexes (Marcus, 2005), and authority and domination are vested in the men (Kabasakal & Bodur, 2002). Historically the tribes of Saudi Arabia have practice different levels of segregation a different times. However, the new Saudi Arabian society, is traditionally divided by men into two separate worlds: the public world and the private world. The public world is the area of business and political activity, which is the man's domain (AlMunajjed, 1997). Therefore, economic, political, and religious activity is associated with the male. Women belong exclusively to the private domain. This space is associated with the home, kinsmen or family members, family life, intimate relationships, and gardens. The private world is usually considered as a retreat and a sanctuary that a man should keep safe and secure (Deaver, 1980, p. 32). Therefore, Arab people are usually very sensitive to what belongs to the public and what belongs to the private domains (AlMunajjed, 1997). This provides a brief description of the background context for this research

The Research

This paper was designed to address thequestions: What does the transitioning experience from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment look like for Saudi students in Australia? How could this experience be improved? To explore these questions a phenomenological approach was adopted. The following highlightsthe key theoretical perspective that lends support to conceptualising the transitioning experience. According to Crotty (1998), the theoretical perspective usually offers 'a context for the process involved and a basis for its logic and its criteria … [because] different ways of viewing the world shape different ways of researching the world' (p. 66).

Therefore, it is important to explicate these perspectives in order to provide a ground for the conceptual framework and the research design adopted for the study (Macdonald et al., 2002). It could be argued, accordingly, that identifying the theoretical perspectives by which the phenomenon has been considered and conceptualising the enquiry contribute to an increased level of trustworthiness and transparency in the research approach. The conceptual framework of the study was guided by three perspectives as follows: sociocultural theory, which has been developed from Vygotsky's works (e.g. Cole, 1995; Doelling & Goldschmidt, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, Del Rio, & Alvarez, 1995); symbolic interactionism theory, which draws on the works of Mead, Blumer, and others (e.g. Blumer,1979, 1986; Clammer, Poirier, & Schwimmer, 2004; Denzin, 1992; Kuhn, 1964; Mead, 1967; Urrieta, 2007); and Al-Jabri's theory of the formation of Arab reason (Al-Jabri, 2011). These three perspectives informed the conceptualisation of the research phenomenon and how the phenomenon has been approached methodologically. The findings of the investigation were grounded in descriptive data collected via interviews with four international students from Saudi Arabia. The students were asked to participate in this investigation and to assist me by sharing their personal experiences and reflecting on my interpretations of their descriptions. The interview questions were designed to explore how the participants experienced living and studying in the new mixed-gender environment. The collected data was reduced from the large transcripts of the dialogical interviews into two essential structural meanings that appeared to be the general and common constitution of participants' transitioning experience.

The Transitioning Experience

This phenomenological investigation sought to uncover the essential structure (essence) of the experience of transitioning to a mixed-gender environment which was encountered by the Saudi international students in Australia. The explication of the data consisted of three levels of layered description. These were biographical details, textural descriptions and essential structure of individual's experience.   In this paper I present the synthesis of the structural descriptions According to Giorgi's (1985) term, the aim of the synthesis was 'to communicate' (p. 20) the most general meanings that emerged from the participants' descriptions of the phenomenon. Eight structures were derived from the participants' descriptions, and these structures were categorized using   the expressions   taken from participants interviews.

Participants	Structure of the description
Ali	Golden time
	Women complex
Zahra	Fear of male
	Reshaping of personality
Salem	Journey toward natural human life
Khamees	Misinterpretation of the practice
	Threat of ird
	Healthy experience

Table 1: Structures of Experience for Each Participant

As can be seen from the table above for Ali, the transition looked like a constructive experience and a golden time in his life. The transition for him also constituted identifying and overcoming a woman complex; therefore, it involved some challenges. For Zahra, the transitioning experience was difficult, and it looked like facing her fear of males. The other structure was that the transitioning experience looked like a reshaping of personality from a dependent to an independent self, and from other-reliant to self-reliant. For Salem, the transitioning experience looked like a journey toward a natural human life. For Khamees, the transitioning experience appeared to hold three structures. It looked like a misbehaviour led by a misinterpretation of the practice, asall involved parties appeared to Khamees to be subject to misinterpretation of issues. Khamees' experience also looked like facing a threat to the ird (Ird refers to the chastity of female and the honour of the family) and these two structures presented the most of difficulties, as addressed in Khamees' description. However, it appeared also as a healthy experience that allowed him to learn how to deal better with females either from his family or outside his family. The above structures were revisited in the textural descriptions, see example in the next section of the paper. Reflecting on the entire dialogue of participants with the researcher has paved the way to capturing the common structural meanings of the phenomenon that kept emerging repeatedly in the all accounts.

Two meanings appeared during this investigation as common structures of the transitioning experience lived and described by the participants: the first is developmental experience, and the second is a psychological gender complex, meaning that constant awareness of a person's gender can be a constraint. These two meanings are unpacked in the following sections and this discussion is relevant to the first question posed in this paper.

Developmental Experience

The first common meaning among participants' descriptions of their transitioning experiences was that it was a developmental experience. The development was observed in two aspects: development in personal attributes and development in perceptions toward others. Although all participants had gone through various events so that in their descriptions they stressed a variety of changes, they all considered the changes as positive, which appeared in their description as helping them move forward. To avoid excess repetition, a few examples follow to show the developmental experience perspective. Zahra experienced development in personal attributes, such as gaining confidence, being self-reliant, and becoming independent. It appeared from her textural description (cited below) that the transitioning experience to a mixed-gender environment reshaped her personality positively, as described in the structural description of her experience. Reshaping personality positively can be categorised under personal development. Such a meaning emerged in many statements presented in the textural description. In her own expression, translated into English, she noticed that the transitioning experience had 'completely changed [her] personality; there are so many positive aspects... it would be impossible to count all the advantages, but the most important one is that it has reshaped [her] personality and [she] started depending on [her]self'. Ali also experienced some development in his personal attributes. He learned how he could be mature in dealing with others. The maturity in his account referred to being independent and responsible. The transitioning experience for him was a developmental experience in the sense that he discovered his ability to interact with the opposite sex without the need for social maintenance. As he said, I feel that I am Ali, the human being. Honestly, here Ali, the human being, has shown up. This does not mean that I was not alive (in Saudi Arabia), but I mean that I considered this period as one of the growth periods when a person starts to become mature. I don't say to mature, but I mean to start maturing… I feel that I am living my own life as I want…

Salem and Khamees both saw the transitioning experience as a developmental experience informing their perceptions towards others, either other people like Westerners, as Salem admitted, or the other gender, as they both experienced. In his description, Salem emphasised how his transitioning experience was like a journey toward nature and being natural. In the heart of this journey was the development of his perception about a mixed-gender society and Western society in particular, and his statement demonstrates this meaning: Comparing my previous experience in Riyadh and here in Melbourne made me reflect on my ancestors' life rather than our current life [in terms of] searching for identity. When I think about our grandfathers' way of life in our original areas, they were tolerant and simple [in terms of the female role]. If compared with other [societies], they were such normal people, acting normally and having manners similar to the other people in the world. They had the same manners which allow women to mix with men in the farm fields, stores, and markets. They dealt normally with each other. And once a person made a mistake, the society would judge him if he or she violated its rules and traditions. There were no limitations to which each person should be kept restricted, and one found it difficult to create private space as well. This has helped me to have more knowledge about the different things Saudi Arabia has. Saudi Arabian areas are not the same. The predominant thought is the governing religious thought, which takes advantage of these things. Regardless of how correct this thought is, this party leads it.

Therefore, the transitioning experience looked like a developmental experience for Salem, an experience which developed his identity and the way he identified others. In terms of the development in his perception about the opposite sex, many statements indicate that a development did occur: 'I have no problem in shaking hands [with women], and I also touch them on the cheek, I mean cheek to cheek [as males do with males] like in our greetings … I have overcome my closed idea about physical contact [like shaking hands and touching cheeks]'. This was a change from what he had experienced earlier: The issue of mixing between men and women was a source of timidity, not because of the mixing itself but because I was afraid of being impolite [in such a situation] … I was wary because I might make a mistake, and mistakes in our culture mean something very big!

Particularly mistakes toward females – anyway, I have discovered the truth … I mean, I was not cautious of dealing with females … I was just afraid to look rude! These statements reflected change in Salem and how he considered the changes as positive and developmental. Khamees' account also presented the transitioning experience as developmental, particularly in how he came to perceive the other sex. Such a meaning can be seen clearly when he said, I call it a healthy experience, which I had lost. … My view towards women was changed from the negative side; I am now more daring in terms of raising my daughters in the future, which means my daughters will grow bolder. I will teach my daughters the best by virtue of the fact that I lived here and had successful experiences. Considering the transitioning experience as a developmental experience also leads to examining how participants generally considered the experience to be constructive, positive, enjoyable, and healthy. It could be argued that all the positive elements described as part of the transitioning experience can be read and understood within this structural common meaning that emerged from the participants' descriptions. Thus, part of the answer to the first research question is that the transitioning experience looked like a developmental experience for Saudi international students in an Australian context, and although complex was generally positive.

Psychological Gender Complex

The second structural and common meaning can be referred to as a 'psychological gender complex'. To describe the anxiety and concern he experienced during his transitioning experience, Ali used the term 'woman complex'. Here, I have modified Ali's expression to embrace the whole phenomenon. For all of the participants, the transitioning experience looked like facing a type of psychological gender complex. This complex involved fear of males and females, as noticed by all participants, and fear concerning ird, as noticed by Khamees. One of the essential aspects of the transitioning experience was its difficulty in the beginning. All the participants encountered challenges and experienced anxiety. Ali was hesitant, Zahra was afraid, Salem was worried, and Khamees was threatened. These forms of concern and anxiety were discussed in the interviews. Reflection on these concerns has shown that the fundamental source of this concern is the concern about meeting people of the opposite sex. The practice of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia was developed to maintain minimal sexual interaction between the sexes. Transitioning to a mixed-gender environment broke this maintenance and left the Saudi students to interact with members of the opposite sex according to a different set of rules rather than the rule of segregation and separation. Therefore, the transition was difficult and challenging until the participants could resolve the psychological gender complex, either by feeling mature, as Ali did, or by feeling strong and confident, like Zahra. It was also resolved through an understanding that the interaction between the gender is a natural activity that a person should not worry about, as Salem indicated. Thus, part of the answer to the first research question is that the transitioning experience looked like facing a psychological gender complex; therefore, it was challenging and difficult until and unless the complex was resolved.

Questions and Implications

This investigation brought to light some striking aspects of the cross-cultural transitioning experienced by the Saudi international students, with a significant emphasis on the adaptation experience in a mixed-gender environment. The findings of this investigation can generate practical recommendations with implications for three parties: the students themselves, international education providers, and policy makers in Saudi Arabia and the host country. The first question, "what does the transitioning experience from a segregated to a mixed-gender environment look like for Saudi students in Australia?", was substantially answered through the descriptive analysis of the interviews above. These indicated the participants generally positive about the transition however, the question of psychological gender complex is problematic. The rest of this discussion deals with question two and practical implications for improving the management of the transitioning experience. For Saudi students, the findings provide insight into the essence of the transitioning experience that they will encounter or have encountered. Considering the identified essential aspects of the experience, these findings are applicable for Saudi students in terms of understanding the nature of their experience and increasing their awareness about the transition to a mixed-gender environment. The findings also suggested that a positive adjustment can be reached according to student levels of stress control, skills, and knowledge acquired, and that students should maintain a positive reflective attitude. Such a recommendation would support Saudi students in adjusting positively and in navigating their adaptation journey successfully and peacefully. The study findings also can contribute to the development and management of the international student environment. Understanding the nature of the issues encountered by Saudi international students in relation to gender can help students to avoid harmful experiences.

The findings may also be useful for improving the materials of orientation courses to include 'mixing genders' as an aspect of introducing Arab and Saudi international students to other cultures. Are commendation that emerges from this study is that in order to support students' psychological adjustment informal gender-based activities could be provided for international students from different nationalities that could reduce the stress associated with the transitioning experience in the beginning. This can be done by introducing these rules in a non-formal, non-threatening environment. This recommendation is supported by the research of Gresham and Clayton (2011) who found that the majority of Saudi students who participated in the Community Connections Programme conducted at the University of Newcastle in Australia were single males, seeking contact with fellow male students of a similar age because they found such engagement was supportive in terms of reducing the early challenges of the new environment. Zahra reported the significant role of Emirati girls and a Chinese girl in her early introductory experiences. Salem also described with great appreciation the support of his first home stay, who involved him in such social occasions as a family wedding. The role of social support from others who were the same gender was significant in showing Saudi international students that they could overcome challenges. This professional support was considered useful in Zahra's account. Orientation courses are useful in terms of supporting the learning process of the new setting. In terms of learning about the cultural, social, and political roles of the new environment, the behavioural-based social skills are central. The literature has reported the significance of support for international students socially (e.g. Al-Nassar, 1982; Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002; Yusoff, 2011) and professionally (e.g. Parker & McEvoy, 1993; Pedersen, 1991; Sandhu, 1994).

The third stakeholder mentioned was policy makers in both countries. According to Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998, p, 2) it is impossible for individuals to arrive at definitive understandings of other cultures; 'the basis for success' with regard to cultural adjustment is derived from an understanding of our own culture and our own expectations about how people in another culture think and act. Therefore, the study provided a recommendation for the Saudi scholarship providers to take into consideration any sensitive issues in the Saudi culture that may hinder students from achieving their goals, such as the issue of gender-segregated culture. Saudi students would benefit from being sufficiently prepared to study in a mixed-gender environment. They need to know more about the differences between the Australian and Saudi Arabian social and cultural practices. In relation to Saudi international adjustment, Al-Shedokhi's (1986) study showed that participating in pre-departure orientation programmes was associated with facing fewer adjustment problems. Therefore, the study recommends the Saudi Arabia governments could provide a pre-departure course that focuses on the intercultural competence and social skills relevant to a mixed-gender environment. Issues like flirting and harassment could be introduced to the course. Saudi international students could derive benefits of an orientation course that focused on the acquisition of the behavioural skills commented on by Salem.

Gender segregation is a culture-, politics-, and ideology-based practice that has influenced the structure of Saudi Arabian society. Moving from this particular context to any other context where the genders mix freely might be a large transition. The transition would even more difficult if the gender-mixed environment contains other cultural and social differences. The assumption underlying the study rests upon the argument that gender segregation in Saudi Arabia has been driven socially through cultural and religious discourses, and politically through legislation and politics; therefore, it has actively contributed to shaping most aspects of the Saudi macro and micro social context. The relevance of this for both Saudi Arabia and the host countries has been discussed above. Each of these participants managed their transitioning experiences in different ways depending on circumstances and sense of identity. This research has the potential to provide useful recommendations to students themselves to find appropriate supports for adjusting to a culturally very different context. In addition, these recommendations can be constructive and valuable for international education providers in terms of improving their institutional practices. According to Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, and Ramia (2008), studying international students' life experiences is important not only because life experience affects their academic performance but also because the impacts from this experience are 'passed along to their family and friends and so enter the formation of country and Institutional reputations within the industry, with the potential to influence market choices' (Sawir et al., 2008, p. 3). Therefore, studying international students' life experiences can influence students themselves, their families, policy makers and educational providers to improve the management of the students transition between very different society.

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