MIDDLE EASTERN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN U.S. PROJECT-BASED ENGINEERING AND SCIENCE UNIVERSITY CLASSES: ACCULTURATION ISSUES

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Abstract- This qualitative research describes the acculturation experiences of 10 Middle Eastern students as they integrated with American host students during project-based, team learning assignments within engineering or other science university courses. Findings reveal the encompassing effects of language deficiencies, lack of understanding of the local culture, difficulties adjusting to a mixed gender environment, neo-racism, and general behavioral differences between the individualistic culture of host students and the collectivistic culture of Middle Eastern students. Findings also reveal the valuable role that such project-based teams play in the acculturation process.

Index Terms- Acculturation, Higher Education, Internationalization, Project-Based Learning

I. INTRODUCTION

International students bring diversity to a university that can enhance cultural understanding and improve relationships between nations. Not only can a positive visit enhance the education of the international students, it can also forever change the understanding and attitude of host students, administrators, faculty, and staff who interact with them [1] [2].

The benefits of international student exchanges, however, are often spoiled by fears, insensitivities, and bigotry [3]. International students bear the burden of adapting to a new culture; often while coping with an unwelcoming administration, faculty, host student body, and society. Amid feelings of homesickness, isolation, academic stress, language anxieties, and discrimination, the richness afforded by the international experience can be sabotaged [4]

Despite obstacles, many international students come to the United States for their undergraduate studies, often seeking degrees in engineering or other science-based programs. One Middle Eastern country sending many students abroad in the past few years has been Saudi Arabia, as this country further develops their knowledge-based economy [5]. Language, culture, racism, and even world events, however, impose substantial threats to a constructive international experience for Middle Eastern students studying outside their country. Indeed, intense political scrutiny by the media of that region, and fears associated with Islamic extremism, result in Middle Eastern students being highly vulnerable to neo-racism, a form of racism rooted in cultural rather than in racial differences.

Cultural norms in educational institutions can also effect perceptions of these students [6]. For example, the classroom environment can present unfamiliar norms that challenge the learning and performance of Saudi international students, whereby active participation typical in the American classroom may conflict with accepted classroom etiquette of the visiting students. Research has shown that Saudi students are more accustomed to relying on their instructors to provide information which they are expected to accept and memorize, and that decision-making is delegated to the authoritative figure [7]. In contrast, western education expects students to be questioning, critical thinkers who have much greater ownership in their learning.

As a result, Saudi students' lack of interaction within the classroom may be perceived by both instructors and classmates as being disinterested or being academically inferior to American students. These factors are exacerbated by language deficiencies and generate substantial barriers for Middle Eastern students to adjust socially and to form meaningful relationships. Indeed, real and perceived prejudice can affect the psychological wellbeing of the visiting student and interfere with acculturation [8].

International students who have greater interaction with the host culture, however, have a more enriching and satisfying experience [9]. Moreover, studies show interactions between the international student and host student benefit both the international student and the host students [10]. In fact, failure to interact and begin an acculturation process can result in substantial psychological health issues, such as depression and identity confusion in international students.

Much research has been done to address barriers that interfere with the international students' ability to interact with host students, and some research has been done on the role project-based learning can play in acculturating international students. Such project teams can be a medium to negotiate cultural values [11], and can foster interaction and acculturation [12]. However, few qualitative studies had been conducted that examine the process of cultural integration of Middle Eastern students within their host institutions, and none could be found that examined this within project-based team situations.

To this end, our research explored how Saudi students understand their experiences as they engage with host

students in project teams within the framework of engineering or other science university courses. Such teams are charged to complete course-related projects which require members to interact, resolve conflicts, contribute to problem solving, and exhibit leadership.
Similarly, this study explored cultural integration as Saudi Arabian students sought to acculturate within a new project oriented, team-based learning environment. Interactive acculturation is where both the majority and minority cultures may realize change during the assimilation process [13]. If interactive acculturation was occurring between the Saudi students and the host students it was expected to emerge through the personal experiences and meaning making of those experiences conveyed by the participants in this study.

II. RESEARCH METHODS

Phenomenology was used to understand the lived experiences of Saudi Arabian students attending a Midwestern U.S. university and who were participating in the project-based, team learning assignments required by courses in engineering or technology-based programs. These Saudi participants were in the first year of their degree program and were studied during a semester in which they worked alongside host students as a project team focused on fulfilling course requirements.
Study participants were purposefully selected from Saudi Arabian students enrolled in an engineering or technology-based programs at a Midwestern U.S. university. Following approval from our respective university's human subject research institutional review boards, students were recruited with assistance of the Saudi Student Organization at the host university. Interested Saudi students were provided an explanation of the purpose of the study, how data would be collected, and how results would be reported. Those students volunteering to participate in the study were provided consent forms, written in both Arabic and English.
Ultimately, 10 Saudi Arabian students agreed to participate in this study, each enrolled in a course requiring technical or scientific lab projects. Seven were from the College of Engineering Technology, one was in the Computer Information Technology program in the College of Business, and two were in College of Health Professions. Note: during the year of this study, only 4% of this Midwestern U.S. university's students were international, including 169 Saudi Arabian students (about 1%), revealing the lack of international diversity at this institution.
The design sought to individually interview each student three times during a given semester. Interview questions were open-ended, presented in a semi structured format, and each interview lasted about an hour. The first interview focused on anticipations, expectations, and trepidations as they entered into their courses. The second interview focused on their experiences and perceptions regarding cultural difference with host team members. The final interview was held following the course completion, and encouraged students to provide an introspective reflection on their experiences.
Through the period of one semester, 27 total semi-structured, open-ended interviews were conducted. Of the 10 students, eight completed the three interview sequence, one could not be reached for the third interview, and one left the country prior to the second interview.

Participants were also asked to journal their on-going reflections, as prompted through a weekly email. Although journal responses lacked regularity from most participants, they were helpful for capturing otherwise lost or forgotten experiences and filled in gaps in the participant's acculturation process.
Data were explored both chronologically and thematically to enable an analysis of the progression of attitudes, events, experiences, and perceptions. Each interview was recoded, transcribed, and then analyzed along with journal data to isolate experiences associated with cultural integration. These experiences were extracted, coded and then grouped into categories, from which themes were then extracted.
As with any qualitative research, trustworthiness was important and accomplished via several strategies. First, prolonged engagement with the participants occurred via three in-depth interviews providing greater assurance that the answers were understood with their intended meanings. Second, triangulation across multiple forms of data was used as was cross verifying of themes chronologically and thematically. Finally, providing a "rich, thick" description in the larger study's report can assist other researchers to better assess its validity, and its application to other settings.

III. FINDINGS

Four categories and associated themes were identified: (a) academic experience, (b) cultural sharing, (c) socialization, and (d) neo-racism. Tightly woven into each category and resulting themes were issues associated with deficiencies in English speaking skills. This article summarizes the key findings and offers a few illustrative quotes. See [14] for detailed descriptions of each theme, including participant profiles and numerous illustrative direct participant quotes to support the themes.

It should be noted that pseudonyms were given to participants, and In order to better convey the struggles of these Saudi students to express their experiences and to help render their deeper thought process, the interview quotes provided in this article are mostly verbatim. While many excerpts clearly reveal language deficiencies, the messages context holds a greater sense of meaning.

A. Theme Category 1: Academic Experience

The interviews exposed many essential ingredients of the Saudi students' academic experiences and ultimate successes. The importance of each of these were, as hoped, magnified when these students were challenged to perform in a group environment made up of one or more host students. As students grappled with understanding course content, they simultaneously were working to understand and adapt to an unfamiliar classroom culture that challenged them to move away from the comfort of remaining a silent and unnoticed observer into an active participant who was expected to contribute to classroom discussion and problem solving. The concepts of the classroom were then expected to be applied to projects requiring the Saudi students to work side-by-side with American students.

The interviews exposed the struggles faced by both the Saudi and American students as, under pressure to complete their work successfully, they developed a team structure that was sufficiently functional to complete project objectives. Whether the group consisted of one or several host students, the social dynamics were often the most perplexing for the students. The interviews brought out both very positive experiences, and some that resulted in completed project expectations, but were disastrous as intercultural experiences. The interviews also provided a valuable illustration of how faculty can help to set the stage for the success or failure of the Saudi student through the environments they create, their sensitivity to student needs, their willingness to communicate with students, and their availability to assist students as required.

Theme 1.1: The cultural differences of the course environment impacted the Saudi students' academic experiences, including differences in faculty and other classroom interactions as well as lack of cultural acumen. One of the most notable topics which emerged was how different the relationship was between the instructor and the students in the U.S. The friendlier and approachable faculty in this U.S. university represented an unfamiliar contrast compared to the formal and hierarchical relationships that most of the Saudis were accustomed to. As noted by one participant, Karima, during his third interview: "I think here in the United States students with their instructors are more casual and you know there is no walls they have to break to communicate with each other. But in my country you know we have to … respect the instructor very much."

The expectation of many faculty for students to actively participate in classroom discussion also represented both a different cultural norm as well as an intimidation factor for Saudi students. This was especially acute with those Saudi students who were insecure in their ability to speak English.

Transfer skills deficiencies were exacerbated by lack of cultural acumen. Although all of the Saudis spoke about difficulty in English communication, a subtheme focused on other academic deficiencies that Saudi students confront in the classroom due to differences in either learning or unfamiliarity with culture. Transfer skills that affected the academic experiences of Saudi students included: differences in building materials, regulations or processes, differences in tools or software, differences in terminology used in the discipline that may not have found its way into dictionaries, and/or differences in measurement units or techniques.

Theme 1.2: Interacting with the opposite sex as equals was a new and sometimes uncomfortable experience for Saudi students. Although Saudi culture varies across the Kingdom's demographics, its societies are unified in their separation of males and females. Several participants in this study explained that males and females are not allowed to interact unless they have close family association. Only those participants who had previous workplace experiences would have had other interactions with the opposite sex prior to leaving Saudi Arabia. As an example, Butrus in his first interview noted his unfamiliarity in communicating with females: "… And it's a huge difference. …Sometimes I'm shy to talk to the females, so that's also maybe because of cultural background. [In Saudi Arabia] we talk with females….but, they have a scarf that cover their hair, and that's something you don't have here."

Theme 1.3: Project group expectations for Saudi students were mostly the same as other group members by the end of the semester. Each of the 10 participants provided valuable perceptions of how their group viewed them as contributing members. Initially, most of the Saudi students expressed concerns that reflected their perceptions of inferiority. Some of these were founded on their lesser communications skills that hindered their ability to read instructions, understand technical terminology, or produce reports and presentations. In other cases, it was lesser familiarity with laboratory equipment or culturally unique project associations. For example, Hikmat in his third interview voiced: "Yes, so in the beginning, I can see like from their faces. Like they yeah, like ok yeah, like we have an international student. Like yeah, ok, let's work on this….I joke with the guys since the beginning when I meet the group and all that stuff. So they get comfortable with me as the international student."

Theme 1.4: Attitudes and behaviors of both Saudi and host students affected their academic experience, whereby their self-confidence was improved throughout the semester, group leadership was not desired, collectivistic behaviors were demonstrated, and tardiness was a cultural norm they coined as "Saudi time." Participants described not only how they perceived themselves as part of their group but also how they began to adapt as a result of their experiences in the host environment. Their attitudes towards working with their American team members often reflected a resolve to achieve recognition for their

ability to contribute to their team's success. For example, in his second interview Ihab noted: "…When I found out that we can do like we can get a great result by working as a groups it some kind of influenced me like when I talk to my friends back in Saudi Arabia they studied college over there, I told them the importance of teamwork and the importance of like getting the work done by, by a group."

They also viewed themselves as contributors to the tasks and execution of the projects themselves, not necessarily the leaders, and they also remarked on the more independent nature of the American student. They noted how Americans will work very arduously on their own in order to understand an experiment, while the Saudis will seek assistance from the professor if they do not understand something. As an example, in his second interview, Ihab voiced: "… Also, like when we [Saudi students] deal with things, like sometimes, like we give up. But I see many of my American friends, they like do lots of hard work. Like if they don't understand like one experiment, they do lots of hard work to get it understood. But someone, especially like me, sometimes when I do it like one or two times, I always go and ask for help."

Also, a somewhat unexpected topic re-appeared across several of the participants when discussing culture – Saudi Time. Four of the ten participants made a point in mentioning tardiness of Saudi's as a cultural trait. While these students did not condone being late, some did make the point that being on time was important in American culture and to their academic experience.

B. Theme Category 2: Cultural Sharing

During the interview sessions, each of the participants shared freely about their cultures and their perceived contrast with those they experienced in America. The interviews produced a wealth of experiences and perceptions associated with cultural interchanges. As discussed earlier, an important criterion for a positive international experience is to bring about a deeper intercultural understanding between the international student and the host. This was found to have occurred, some which took place within the groups through normal interaction and observation and then some through intentional discussions that mostly occurred outside of the project's environment.

Theme 2.1: Cultural sharing was limited and mostly unintentional within the project environment. There was little or no intentional conversations within the project environment that focused on sharing culture. Despite this, several of the students noted how valuable that experience was in helping to bring about a more comfortable relationship between Saudis and the host students. One important reason for this may be that both, the Saudis and host students, were forced to confront their stereotyped images of each other through those relationships necessitated by the projects' requirements. For example, Saudi participants recognized and felt deep concerns over media induced images that Saudis and Americans may hold of each other based on movies and news reports. The Saudis believed that many of the host students type casted them as rich, militants, tent dwellers, or terrorists. Similarly, some of the Saudis confessed their images of Americans were formed from John Wayne or other violence saturated movies.

While few group relationships matured to include open discussions intended to purposefully share culture, most participants described less intentional cultural sharing. Most began simply with strained communications and progressed to the development of a functioning working relationship. In this process, most learned about the practice of prayer times, and how this religious practice helped them to share with their host group. For example, Ihab in his second interview spoke about how his team became more aware of the requirement for Muslim prayer times: "So whenever we [project group] meet, sometimes like in the first meetings, they didn't [know] that we pray five times a day and they [Sunni Muslims] have to pray in a specific time. So when the pray time come, I have to tell them that I need to go for five minutes and come back…. It was not that hard, but at first it was hard."

Theme 2.2: Intentional cultural sharing with the project team occurred mostly outside of the project environment. While several of the Saudi students built good rapport with their project groups, only two conveyed that they met frequently outside of their project environments with team members. Interviews from other Saudi students exposed frustrations from being unable to achieve that level of relationship with their project group members, and their conversations in these cases were typically limited to the scope of the project. Several reasons were provided, the most common included deficient language skills and understanding of the local cultural. Examples were provided from several participants describing how they were unable to participate in casual conversations with the host students because they did not understand the local culture. Contributing to the cultural barrier, was a fear of saying inappropriate or offensive things. For example, Karima in her second interview expressed trepidation in sharing her culture or religion with others because they may misunderstand her: "Yeah, they won't understand what I was saying they probably take it the wrong way or something. That's why I try to avoid like having those conversations."

Theme 2.3: Cultural and faith were shared with others in the university outside the project group. The interactive acculturation framework, embraced by this study, suggests that experiences from interactions within the broader university community also contributed to the overall attitudes and perceptions of Saudi students as they interacted within their project teams. Knowledge of culture sharing with others outside the project group added greater insight into group acculturation. The importance of collecting this data as a source of cultural exchange is elevated since the Saudis had experienced little intentional cultural exchange with their project groups. For example,

Emin in his second interview expressed his ongoing enjoyment in making friends across the university and talking about his culture: "… trust me when people just start to listen to you and your culture they find it interesting and I appreciate that. Most of the people that I talked with about, you know our culture, and they asked me questions you know with excitement."

Our data revealed that not all Saudi Arabian students can be homogenized as having a single language, religious practice, social norms, or culture. The interviews brought out several of the differences and how they might add barriers to acculturation with the host student. The interviews also expressed how being in America affords the Saudis opportunities to share culture between differing Saudi groups.

C. Theme Category 3: Socialization

The Saudi participants all pursued some form of socialization. The interviews accentuated the value of establishing a network of friendships. The network appeared to add both a means for socializing and security. The expectation that the friendships be acknowledged publicly also provide them a measure of self-assurance and status among their peers. Socializing with American friends was an aspiration that presented both cultural and religious challenges. These difficulties centered primarily on interacting with the opposite sex and their religious restrictions on drinking and diet. These issues presented awkward opportunities for the Saudis to experience deeper relationships, share their culture, and in some cases, test their friendships

Theme 3.1: Socializing with hosts was important for the Saudi students and hospitality is intrinsic to the Saudi culture, yet socializing with opposite sex was mostly a new experience for the Saudi students, and issues arose regarding common foods or alcohol consumption that challenged the Saudi students to conform or hold to their religious values. Most of the Saudi participants expressed socialization with host students as a desired activity, and they also found friendships that allowed them to participate in social activities. In some cases, their American friends helped to support the Saudi participants as they strove to cope in a difficult social environment. For example, Dharah in his second interview spoke of how he loves to be where he can be around and talk with others, and that although his behaviors and values conflicted with others he observed at parties he attends, he was able to adjust and enjoy the socialization: "… I love going to parties especially when I talk to people. But I don't go wild the way they go. … I don't do any alcohol so I just go have, I smoke cigarettes…So I go hang out, smoke some cigarettes, have some tea, that's it you know, this is good times for me."

The segregation of genders in Saudi Arabia, although not uniformly enforced, was a commonalty with each of the Saudi participants. Some of the students, through work experience or living in somewhat more liberal areas, had a greater comfort level communicating with females. To some extent this was an issue raised by all participants.

Another precept of the Saudi culture that appeared frequently within the interviews was showing hospitality to both friends and strangers. Data demonstrated hospitality through opening your home to strangers, opening doors for others as a sign of respect, serving food to guests, greeting acquaintances when in public, and the giving of gifts.

D. Theme Category 4: Neo-Racism

Theme 4.1: Neo-racism was experienced by several Saudi Participants. Although most of the Saudi students experienced few experiences of neo-racist behaviors these occurrences surfaced in various forms, across the interviews, including avoidance by others around them in airports, assumed association with ISIS, and obvious fear and discomfort when meeting new people. For example, Hikmat described his experiences of neo-racism and how it affected him and his ability to socialize with females. Yet, he added to this account the importance of representing his family, culture, and faith, in a positive and moral manner: "Especially from the stereotype, some people think Arab in bad way, especially with the females. Some people think we never saw a females before and all the females are covered from head to toe and that's why they think if they go to a beach with a Saudi especially they think it's universal anything like this…That's why especially with my female friends right now, they said like they think I'm going to be creepy and they told me that some of the Saudi's are creepy and I told them it depends on where they come from, everyone is not the same over there. Some people they have open-minded, some people they have closed-minded……Yeah you really represent not just your parents, your culture, your religion, everything in your life."

IV. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Interactive acculturation, the theoretical framework on which this study is based, asserts that both the international and domestic cultures will be influenced through the acculturation experience. The research questions posed in this study sought to explore the integrity of that interactive acculturation through the analyzed and interpreted experiences and perceptions of Saudi Arabian students, enrolled at a Midwestern university, as they integrated with the host students on team-based projects.

Findings from this study revealed important insights into the experiences of Saudi students as they experienced team relationships within a project centered environment. A goal of this research is to apply the knowledge gained toward developing proactive interventions that assist Middle Eastern students in developing supportive relationships, reducing cultural barriers, and supporting a mutual understanding of cultures between Middle Eastern and

host students. Based on our findings, there are several interventions that could help mitigate barriers to acculturation.

1) Safe multi-cultural conversational environments are valuable for Saudi students. Data revealed that these project-based team groups better prepared Saudi students by building their communication skills, improving their knowledge of local and popular culture, and develop a comfort level in interacting with the opposite gender.

2) Educating Saudi students regarding fundamental cultural behavior differences the can expect at an American university may prepare them for a more successful acculturation. Findings illustrated that Saudi students struggle with understanding general behavioral differences between individualistic and collectivistic communities. Understanding how this affects academic and social relationship might assist the Saudi students in better interpreting the behaviors of local students.

3) Providing ample non-alcoholic spaces and services intended for socialization may help provide healthier options for both the Saudi and host student socialization. Findings illustrated that local socialization centers on drinking and parties. These represent not only a conflict for Saudi culture and religious doctrine but also a generally unhealthy campus culture. Providing opportunities for recreation and socialization spaces that are available late into evening might serve to mitigate socialization issues and built a more attractive culture for Saudi international students.

4) Faculty need to gain a deeper understanding of Saudi cultural and how it affects behaviors. This research has demonstrated how cultural differences can influence the behavior of Saudi students in ways that may frustrate or be misinterpreted by faculty. These may include tendencies such as reliance on group collaboration to perform course assignments, emphasis on social relationships, ethics founded on unfamiliar values, habitual tardiness, and tendencies to bargain. These behavioral issues are compounded by deficient communication skills, fears of communicating offensively, and unfamiliarity with cultural and religious doctrine.

5) Faculty can be influential in helping the class as a whole become more comfortable in communicating with international students. The finding of this research support the use of team project learning activities. In addition to their benefit to all students, these afford international students opportunities to learn cultural norms, develop their language skills, gain confidence in their academic abilities, develop relationships skills, etc.

Overall, the cultural interactions that, at the onset of this research, was expected to occur within the project groups, transpired mostly through unintentional means, such as frequent project related interactions and observations. While groups did not have significant cultural conversations within their project environments, members' attitudes and mental models were impacted simply through working together. Affects included: mitigating the cultural stereotypes that the Saudis believed resulted media influence; greater understand of local cultures, particularly as it regarded common outdoors recreational and socialization habits; and the host members respecting Saudi prayer time. Some behavioral contrasts between collectivistic and individualistic cultures were noted by the Saudis; such as punctuality and preference to solve problems individually. Finally, most of the Saudis also discovered that project interactions resulted in more comfortable communications, stronger relationships, and improved attitudes with the groups' host members.

These findings provided valuable insights that add understanding to how Saudis, and perhaps other Middle Eastern students, seek to acculturate at American universities. They reveal important cultural differences and how, if these are not better understood by both the host and Saudi, can inhibit a successful acculturation experience. Knowledge of these potential inhibitors better enable universities to implement proactive steps for positive intercultural experiences.

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