

Educational Experiences and perceptions of American Students toward Arab Students in the US: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

The study aimed at identifying the social and cultural perceptions of American students toward Arab international students at a Midwestern university. To achieve the objective, the researcher conducted individual interviews with 15 junior and/or senior American students in the business college (13 female and 2 male). Study participants were selected through purposeful sampling. The main questions that led the study were: How do American students describe their social and cultural experiences with Arab students? And what factors influence their perceptions toward Arab international students? The results of the study indicated that most participants lacked accurate or in-depth knowledge about who Arabs are as ethnic and cultural people. Participants held many misconceptions about Arabs and assumed they did not like to interact with Americans on campus due to some factors such as language barriers and cultural clustering. Because of these assumptions, Americans were hesitant to approach Arabs or build social relationships with them.

Key words: University, diversity, social, interaction, international students

Introduction

Many Arab students seek to pursue their studies in the United States. The most important reasons for Arab students to enroll in English-speaking countries such as the US is to improve their proficiency in English and develop educational and cultural experiences with American people (Beaver & Tuck, 1998). The main incentive for studying abroad is the perceived value of a foreign degree, such as better opportunities in finding jobs after graduation, lower tuition costs, and immigration.

Arab students expect college life in the US to bring them important opportunities for intellectual, personal, and social development. Many of these expectations are realized while other positive feelings characterizing students' precollege life are replaced by negative feelings after spending some time at college (Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt, & Alisat, 2000).

Student experiences at college are often harder and more stressful than what many of them expect (Compas, Wagner, Slavin, & Vannatta, 1986). In their first academic year, Arab students learn to adjust to new requirements, such as independence and coping with a new environment that differs from the one experienced in homelands. They usually move away from their families and friends for the first time during this period and live away from their social support system (Rice, 1992).

The transition from secondary to university education is a challenging experience for both domestic and Arab students. In this study, the term domestic students refer to students attending college in their native country, that in this case is the United States. International students refer to students native to countries outside the U.S. enrolled in courses at American colleges or universities. Similar to International students, Arab students are usually admitted under a temporary visa that lasts for as long as they are in school (Skinner & Shenoy, 2003). There is a common expectation that, as part of the college experience, both domestic and Arab students will develop new ways of thinking, learning, and communicating. The vocabulary of a new academic discipline will also be as different to domestic students as it will be to Arab students and getting acclimated to the academic styles of American post-secondary institutions will be equally required to become active and independent participants in their learning (McLean & Ransom, 2005).

Arab students start their academic life full of hope and enthusiasm to explore the new educational environment and mix up with their peers in the US. However, most of their expectations are not met, which leads them to lose interest in interacting with American students gradually. On the other hand, they feel discouraged to take the initiation to build a relationship with American students assuming that American students do not prefer to befriend them due to some stereotypes associated with Arabs.

The importance of this study is to understand the nature of the educational experiences of American and Arab students from the perspective of American students. Most studies addressed

the educational experiences of Arab and international students from their perspectives but rarely discussed it from the domestic student's perspective.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore American students' perspectives regarding interaction with Arab international students. The growing number of international students in U.S. colleges and universities represents a valuable opportunity for cross-cultural interaction and communication (Volet, 1997). Knowing how American students view Arab students when they are together on or off-campus will illuminate the nature of cross-cultural communication within a university context. Thus, such an investigation also has the potential to reveal why open social and educational interactions may or may not be occurring.

Research Questions

The critical question guiding my study is, "What are the perceptions of American college students regarding intergroup relations in a shared classroom experience with Arab students?" Accordingly, the research questions framing my study are:

1. How do American students describe their experiences with Arab students?
2. What are the beliefs and attitudes of American students toward Arab students?

Literature Review

Educational Experiences

Studying abroad can serve different social and cultural goals for the host country and its students. Studying alongside international students may diversify domestic students' perspectives about other countries and increase their understanding and appreciation for different cultures and languages inside and outside the classroom (Bevis, 2002; Harrison, 2002). Such diversity has the potential to encourage cross-cultural dialogue and foster the educational experiences of domestic students through a friendly learning environment (Ward, 2001). The presence of international students can also motivate domestic students to attain better social and cultural outcomes, such as helping others, developing new friendships, and improving their interpersonal skills in dealing with and learning from diverse cultural groups of students (Smith & Elliott, 2013). Similarly, when international students return to their home countries, they can serve as ambassadors to promote an exchange of cultural values and understandings between the different countries (Lee & Rice, 2007).

Lack of interaction, however, between domestic students and international students hinders achieving the social and cultural goals of international education. Therefore, one of the main challenges facing international students and the focus of this study is their limited interaction with Americans (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998). International students increasingly desire to interact and befriend the domestic students with whom they attend school (Smart, 2000; Ward &

Masgoret, 2006) and are frequently disappointed when they are unable to interact with domestic students or cross the hidden barriers that impede establishing cross-cultural friendships. One unintended consequence of this failure that makes it even more difficult to establish rapport is each party assuming the other does not want to initiate relations with them (Le, 2010).

Social Capital

Social capital includes different aspects of social organizations, such as networks, trust, and norms (Putnam, 2000). It also refers to ties and communication among individuals of the same network and presents an important source of achieving members' goals by creating shared norms, values, and reciprocal trust. When social capital is lost, other forms of capital (financial or human) are not sufficient for making effective cultural and economic progress (Baker, Smith, & Cowan, 2003). Student social capital is shaped by educational institutions and can influence their academic accomplishments (Putnam, 2000). Therefore, student academic experiences are enriched when they are challenged intellectually and academically and when they have social support (Roberts et al., 2001). In other words, students who have social capital are more likely to achieve successful academic and cultural outcomes (Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2011). Putnam (2000) distinguishes between two types of social capital and the networks formed by them. He defines bonding social capital as relationships formed between homogenous groups (i.e., American students), whereas bridging social capital is shaped across heterogeneous social groups (i.e., American and Arab students).

Although friendships between domestic and international students represent a prime example of bridging and bonding social capital and an influential structure of positive or high-quality interaction, students face obstacles to initiate friendships with each other (Davies, Tropp, Aron, Pettigrew, & Wright, 2011). Some international students have trouble in making cross-cultural friendships (bridging); nevertheless, they persist in their attempts despite receiving little interest from domestic students. Domestic students are less interested in connecting with international students and are more apt to bond with students from their cultural group (Brown & Daly, 2004). As a result, some international students tend to bond with friends from the same culture or students who belong to countries other than the host culture (Furnham & Alibhai, 1985). Some Arab students in the United States prefer to live in an insular cultural environment similar to that back home (Alreshoud & Koeske, 1997). Saudi students, for example, live in small communities in the U.S. and prefer to interact with each other. They recruit their families to live with them and thus have their organizations and places to celebrate social occasions and perform religious ceremonies. All of these factors encourage Saudi students to replicate the lifestyle they had in their home country. On the other hand, this bonding behavior leads to less interaction with Americans compared to other international ethnicities. The lack of interaction with the host community might reinforce the unfriendly image the Arab students have about American culture (Alreshoud & Koeske, 1997).

Arab Stereotypes

Negative stereotypes and biases against some cultures prevent domestic students from interacting with some international students. International students have different experiences in the U.S. and Britain associated with their origin home countries. Some of these experiences can be attributed to stereotypes people in the host countries have about other cultures and ethnicities (Lee & Rice, 2007).

Discrimination against international students influences their interaction with peers, staff, faculty, and the community (Hanassab, 2006). In a study to assess international students' experiences with discrimination in an American university, Hanassab (2006) found students from the Middle East and Africa were stereotyped more negatively than students from other regions. These negative stereotypes stemmed from the September 11, 2001, tragic event and its association with people from Arab and Islamic countries (Hanassab, 2006). On the other hand, international students from developed countries might have negative stereotypes about the culture of the country where they chose to study. Some American students studying in Middle Eastern and South African universities had perceived the region in a distorted stereotype before interacting with local Arab students in these countries. They expected to meet people full of anger and riding on camels amid huge sand dunes. These images of the Middle East are derived from the widespread negative portrayal many people in America have about this region (Lane-Toomey & Lane, 2012).

The tragic event of 9/11 against the Twin Towers in New York City has increased the prejudice of some Americans against Arab people (Inayat, 2002). According to a study by Tummala-Narra and Claudius (2013), some Arab students have experienced prejudice in the United States because they perceived a feeling of isolation in the host country. To reduce this feeling, they felt they needed to clarify their Islamic values to other nationalities, but they were cautious to discuss these issues due to the stereotypes linked to their homelands and religion (Tummala-Narra & Claudius, 2013). Over time, some of these stereotypes might have changed recently and events in the world might alter existing stereotypes.

Methodology

Research Context

This study was conducted at New Century University (NCU). NCU is a public, four-year, coeducational institution located in Middletown. There were 15,000 students enrolled in 2015. Of this total, there were 1,716 international students--962 undergraduate and 754 graduate. The majority of international students (823) studied engineering, followed by students enrolled in the Intensive English Language Center (245). There were 446 Arab students--382 undergraduate and 64 graduates. The largest portion of Arab students came from Saudi Arabia (406) and these students received support from the King Abdullah scholarship program (Leggett, 2013). A breakdown of Arab international students according to country of origin is included in Table 1.

Table 1: Arab International Students at New Century University in spring 2015

Country	Undergraduate	Graduate	Total
Egypt	6	3	9
Jordan	6	5	11
Kuwait	9	0	9
Lebanon	4	0	4
Libya	2	0	2
Morocco	1	1	2
Saudi Arabia	352	54	406
Syria	2	1	3
Total	382	64	446

Research Participants and Selection Process

Study participants were selected through purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling helps researchers develop a deep understanding and gain insights into the phenomena they study. A major advantage of purposeful sampling is selecting information-rich cases to study intensively. Patton (2002) argues that information-rich cases are those that help a researcher “to learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry” (Patton, 2002, p. 230). For this study, information-rich cases were American students who had the opportunity to interact with Arab students during their undergraduate life. The purposeful selection of participants helped me understand in greater depth the nature of the interactions that took place between the two groups (Creswell, 2012). More specifically, I used criterion purposeful sampling because it identified participants who best reflected the purpose of the study and were in a position to answer the research questions by providing rich information about the nature of the interaction between American and Arab students (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 1990). The criteria for selecting participants who best provided relevant and comprehensive information included American students whose first language was English, who was born and raised in the U.S, who were not of Arab ancestry, who were undergraduate students in their third or fourth academic year, and who had attended one or more classes with Arab students.

The individual interviews were conducted with American students in the business college (13 female and 2 male) at a Midwestern university. Four of the 15 students were first-generation college students and 14 had traveled outside the U.S. for tourism or with parents who worked abroad for a while. One student was homeschooled. To assist in locating participants who might meet my selection criteria, the associate dean for academic operations and undergraduate programs at NCU business school sent an email to all junior and senior American students (1428), inviting them to participate in the study. Students who responded to the invitation emailed me directly. Then I conducted the interviews in a place and a time agreed upon by participants and me. Most of the participants were from the Midwestern region (10), three were from the South, and two were from the West. Nine resided in urban areas and six were from

rural areas. Three students were online students and 12 were full-time students on campus. The age of participants ranged from 19-45 years.

The Qualitative Interview

The primary data source used in this study was face-to-face individual interviews. Interviewing domestic students was the strategy I used to gain insights into the nature of the interactions between American and Arab students. In qualitative research, interviewing tends to be less structured than asking sequential questions and relies more on open-ended questions that help participants talk about the world from their emic perspectives

I conducted the interviews with 15 junior and/or senior American students in the business school. The sample size in purposeful sampling is “determined by informational considerations. If the purpose is to maximize information, the sampling is terminated when no new information is forthcoming from new sampled units” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 202). Thus, I stopped gathering information when saturation was reached; that is when the interviews presented repeated information and no new knowledge was gained (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Padgett, 2008).

Audio digital recording and transcribing was the technique used in collecting interview data. This technique helped me concentrate on participants’ responses and ask probing or follow-up questions that prompted them to elaborate on the things they said. Moreover, audiotaping gave me a chance to take notes during the interview. Note-taking helped in formulating new questions and facilitated analysis later on about what was discussed (Patton, 1990). Thus, I began the process of data analysis during the interviews, paying attention to phrases that required further clarification or follow-up questions. During the interview sessions, I took notes and reread them before listening to the audio-recorded interview.

Findings and Discussions

Interactions with Arab students

American student participants had an insignificant amount of interactions with Arab students outside of class. They sometimes met to work on projects at home and had occasional conversations in the library but rarely socialized in public places. Cross-cultural interactions did not extend beyond asking for directions about how to find something or someplace or asking their colleagues for recommendations about courses and professors. Unless it pertained to a class requirement, the American students in this study did not routinely interact with international students. Clarified one student, “Just if we have a class project.”

American students had their preferences when it came to selecting their social surroundings. They preferred to spend time with familiar people who shared the same cultural background. One student explained, “Americans are very cliquy, liking their group and resisting change or outside ideas.” Visiting Arabs in their homes allowed one male American student to learn more about Arabic culture and traditions. He described his visit to an Arab home to work on a class assignment: “I got there, took my

shoes off at the front door, and noticed two of his friends on the couch smoking a hookah. It was the first time I had seen this

A female student experienced several good opportunities to socialize with international students in the dorm. She believed the dorm was a good place for cross-cultural interactions because the students there “feel both groups are away from home--American students from faraway cities and Arab students from their country.” As a result, it allowed American students to be “exposed more and possibly become friends with each other as they become more comfortable with international students. Living together can help expose Americans to other cultures,” explained the student.

American students who anticipated beneficial outcomes from befriending Arab students extended themselves beyond their familiar social networks to meet new people with new perspectives about life, work, and culture. Among the rewards they sought was an improvement in their social skill when interacting with Arabs and learning more about Arab lifestyles and social standards. Unlike most Arabs, American students worked either on or off-campus to earn money to go to school. Some also had other priorities such as taking care of their children and supporting their families. Arab students usually had more free time because many were full-time students or supported by scholarships from their governments. Because American students often had little time to meet other students face-to-face or have virtual discussions on Blackboard, they chose to invest their limited free time with familiar group members. This finding is supported by Fukuyama (1995) who found that socializing consumes an individual’s time and may substitute for other activities one needs to do. For several American students, participation in intercultural activities and interactions with Arab students competed with important social, educational, and work responsibilities.

Obstacles Preventing Interaction

Hesitancy to Interact

Participants discussed the mutual hesitancy of American and Arab students to initiate interactions with the other. This hesitancy seemed related to perceptions and presumptions about the other that closed off avenues of communication rather than opening them. One student stated, “When talking to Arab students, I feel they are reluctant, hesitant, and not encouraged to talk more. The same thing can be said about us [Americans] because we don’t have many common topics to talk about.”

Arabs kept to themselves in closed groups that made it difficult for American students to penetrate these groups. Clarified one student, “You are only one individual which makes it hard. Because they already are a group.” This hesitancy also shaped American student expectations about the willingness of Arab students to communicate with them. They stick to people they already know and are comfortable with.” Another student noted, “I have observed that many international guys interact only with each other and don’t want to socialize outside their groups.”

The cultural clustering of Arabs was the main reason why interactions were hindered. Because of the language barriers, some Arabs tended to select seats in the back of the class and preferred to be surrounded by other co-nationals most of the time. Many participants justified this behavior and thought they would act the same way if they were studying abroad with students who spoke

a different language. Several participants viewed this behavior negatively by assuming Arab students did not want to mix or initiate contact with them. Similar to other international students, Arab students concentrate more on grammar, reading, and writing than speaking and listening. One participant recalled her visit to Korea where she noticed that Korean students were good at using mobile phones to text friends or their computers to send and receive emails. However, they were less proficient when it came to conversations with Americans.

Misconceptions

American students revealed limited knowledge about Arab culture and religion. For example, Arabs were assumed to be wealthy people. The appearance and status of women generated other misconceptions frequently expressed in the interviews. War and conflict were dominant images that surfaced for students whenever the word Arab was mentioned.

Wealth and oil was a perception some Americans had about Arabs. A few students thought Arabs possessed great wealth because many of their Arab classmates had governmental scholarships and owned expensive cars. One student stated, “When I see an Arab international student, I feel now they are probably loaded with money.” Along these lines, another student commented, “I think of the Middle East as oil. A lot of pictures on social media show a wealthy side. They seem to have nice cars and very nice houses. These people are really rich.” Because a few Arab students had scholarships from their home countries and drove expensive cars, several Americans thought of all Arabs as wealthy people. The wealthier students mostly came from oil-producing countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait. Yet, the case was different for students from other Arab countries who depended on family financial support or were self-funded to complete study requirements in the U.S. American students tended to generalize their beliefs about wealth and background to all Arab students based on these well-off examples they had known or heard about.

A majority of participants commented on gender separation and the status of women in Arab culture. Women were portrayed as oppressed, lacking civil rights, and controlled by male members of the family. One student stated, “They just don’t have any rights. I don’t think I was aware of it.” Arab women were pictured as victims of a patriarchal society and less value than men. Female study participants tended to believe Arab women were considered less important than men, a belief that made them hesitant to talk to Arab men. The popular image of Arab men as perpetrators of violence in the Middle East also kept them apart. Several students admitted choosing not to interact with Arab females because of their modest appearance. They could not avoid gazing at their head covers and did not want to appear rude when asking what might be considered inappropriate questions about their hijab or burqa.

Stereotypical images about the status of women were spread through movies such as *Jason Bourne* that displayed Arab women as victims who did not have even basic human rights. Reading and searching the internet helped American students to understand the different perspectives associated with Arab and Muslim modesty. This was similar to Cadinu and

Rothbart (1996) who found that cross-cultural interactions on campus reduced negative patterns related to stereotyped cultures. Moreover, international students representing these cultures could take steps to dispel undesirable notions associated with their ethnicities.

War and conflict were the primary features most participants associated with Arabs. When asked about Arabs in the interview, participants thought of the Middle East as a conflict region and wars for religious purposes and oil. For some, the benefits America received from being involved in the region played a role in these conflicts.

For the majority of participants, media played a key role in reinforcing negative images about Arabs, particularly those associated with the events of September 11. One student stated, "What's there in the media is not good. They say bad things all the time about extremists." One student commented about the impact of media on shaping the popular image of Arabs: "The media news always pursues negative things and never anything good." She criticized, "It is never that international students boost our economy."

The events of 9/11 and the association with people from Arab and Islamic countries invited study participants to think of Arabs as a threat to America. Media reinforced unwanted images about Arabs by concentrating on the war in the Middle East and attributing any terrorist acts to Arabs. Consequently, several American students viewed Arabs and terrorism as two faces of the same coin. The same finding was supported by Hanassab (2006) who found that students from the Middle East and Africa were stereotyped more negatively than international students from other regions.

The different political orientations of American students about Arabs and Muslims in the U.S. worked to encourage or discourage interaction between American and Arab students. The influence of local community norms and worldviews could make the efforts of educational institutions to bring mutual understanding and coexistence among students of different ethnicities and cultures more difficult. Because of the timing of this study, the 2016 presidential race between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump was a topic that influenced Arabs images among the study participants.

The prevailing values and beliefs in the larger society shaped some of the misconceptions held by the majority of American students about other ethnicities. For instance, one student mentioned, "I haven't seen any backlash against Arabs or Muslims but I won't be surprised because Trump supporters jumped on that wagon. I have my worries but I won't be surprised if some violence takes place against Arabs." Some students associated discrimination against Arabs and minorities with the level of education Americans received. One student shared, "Discrimination is more of an issue for people who are not educated. I think our male [presidential] candidate wants to be involved in the Middle East to remove our enemies." Although American students were open to learning about Arabs and their culture, most were not interested and preferred to spend their time with other domestic students. They did not anticipate receiving any benefits from socializing with Arabs and were candid about identifying obstacles

and misconceptions that prevented them from approaching them. These obstacles diminished the likelihood of engaging in constructive interactions. The findings in this study support prior research suggesting that low levels of interaction between domestic and international students limit the benefits both groups can achieve (Ward, 2001).

Altered Perceptions

Exposure to Arab students in and out of the classroom helped American students to realize that much of what they heard about Arabs and their culture was not accurate. A few participants felt it was better to learn directly from Arabs themselves, not from external resources such as the media. To varying degrees, constructive interactions ignited the curiosity of some participants to know more about this controversial culture and its people.

Some participants reported having more positive thoughts about Arab students once they started meeting them in class. Spending some time with Arab colleagues changes the way American students see them. Just under half of the participants reported a decline in the influence of the media after they began learning about Arabs. They felt they more accurately understood the actual situation of Arabs in the Middle East. The misconceptions held by American students about Arabs gradually vanished when constructive links between the two sides took place. The circle of negative assumptions about Arabs diminished when a few students went beyond their initial perceptions and engaged in unplanned conversations with Arabs in class, the library, or off-campus. For example, when one female participant struck up a conversation with an Arab woman in a coffee shop, she was surprised and delighted that the Arab women welcomed her questions about the lives and treatment of women in the Middle East. The Arab woman seemed to be curious as well and had many questions about American culture she had been hesitant to ask because of these invisible barriers between the two sides. Interestingly, the American student had been homeschooled. Based on her personal experience, she assumed that others would be curious about Arabs in the same way they were curious about her experience being homeschooled. By overcoming her hesitancy and daring to cross-cultural barriers, she discovered there was much to talk about with the Arab woman. Even though the study suggested American students shared strong bonding social capital, even minimal interactions between Arabs and Americans seemed to be important for American participants in that the bridging opportunities it provided served to change the way they perceived Arab students. It also suggested that more interactions would create additional opportunities for developing bridging social capital. Participants who had interactions with Arab students wanted to clarify their positive experiences with Arabs to their friends, colleagues, and social networks. Thus, more frequent interactions with Arabs would influence the quality of relationships Americans have with them.

Limitations and Future Research

This study was conducted with 15 students from one college, whereas a sample drawn from different colleges or universities and including more participants would provide us with more insights into the nature of educational experiences of American students with Arabs. The majority of participants were females, including more male students in future research who might have different perspectives and increase the study validity. Furthermore, only one participant did not travel outside the US of the total sample. Students who did not travel outside are likely to provide different ideas.

Recommendations

In this section, I discuss the recommendations derived from the findings and conclusions of this study. These implications are intended to support the social capital of students and to reinforce the bridging efforts between American and Arab students.

American Universities

It behooves universities to find effective ways to support campus diversity by actively establishing friendly learning environments for international students. These environments should provide a welcoming and caring learning atmosphere for international students that is free from prejudice and discrimination. They should also provide fruitful cultural experiences for domestic students. Cultural events could introduce Arabs students and culture to American and other international students. The informality of food fairs would also be a good way to attract students and initiate conversations about each other.

Arab Students

Arab students should not expect American students to initiate bonding with them without being willing to step outside their comfort zones. Traveling to the U.S. to study in a college or university implies having sufficient background about the new environment and culture. When Arabs decide to leave their home country to study abroad, prospective students should search and collect enough data about the host country and its citizens. Upon arrival, they should express themselves and be open to new academic and social contexts. Thus, they had best keep the door open to Americans and American ideas, encourage Americans to ask questions and engage in conversations about different issues even if they face partial failure in the beginning. Arab newcomers can learn from the experiences of other Arabs who have spent more time in the U.S. In addition, improving English language and communication skills would help Arabs bridge with Americans and build constructive educational and social links.

Conclusion

Overall, the American students who participated in this study lacked accurate or in-depth knowledge about who Arabs are as ethnic and cultural people. The majority had only vague images of Arabs and mostly associated them with undesirable characteristics that stemmed from their social networks and environmental influences such as parents, peers, community, and media. They thought of Arabs and the Middle East as a region consumed by war and terrorism where people lived in a desert where women did not have even basic human rights. Because of these assumptions, Americans were hesitant to approach Arabs or build social relationships with them. American students preferred to meet people they were already familiar with because they sought to establish recognizable social networks to compensate for the old social systems they left behind in their hometowns. Most held inaccurate beliefs about the sensitivity of Arabs to cultural politics, wealth, the status of women, war, terrorism, Arabs as people of color, and confusion between Arabs and Muslims.

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