

Saudi Arabian University Student Cultural Integration: An Analysis of International Student Experiences and Domestic Student Perceptions

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ABSTRACT

How can we encourage social and cultural exchange among domestic and international student populations to encourage empathy, thoughtfulness, and strong international relationships? I use mere exposure and social exchange theories with interviews and surveys to qualitatively and quantitatively study the barriers to cultural integration of Saudi Arabian students and domestic students. 1) Mere exposure to Saudi Arabian students correlates with domestic students perceiving Saudi Arabian students more positively; 2) Mere exposure to Saudi Arabian students correlates to the fostering of a sense of relatability among domestic students 3) Mere exchange could lead to greater socialization between Saudi Arabian international students and domestic students at UW-Stout.

Key Words: University Integration, Saudi Arabia, Socialization

INTRODUCTION

Today at the University of Wisconsin-Stout Saudi Arabian students make up the majority of all international students enrolled. The total population of international students at UW-Stout is 240, and of that 127 are from Saudi Arabia. Across the nation, international students make up a sizeable portion of higher education students, and the number of international student enrollment in United States universities is steadily growing (Olivas & Li, 2006; Rai, 2002; Lubell & Brennan, 2007; Phibbs & Young, 2009). Many questions should be asked regarding cultural integration, acceptance, experience, and domestic student perception of the Saudi Arabian student presence. Cultural integration refers to one's ability to assimilate into or adapt to a culture other than their own. Cultural exchange refers to the passing of cultural traditions, practices, ideologies and ways of looking at the world, between people of different cultures. Finally, social exchange simply refers to the act of socializing. Specifically, for the purposes of this study, the scope of social exchange is narrowed to exchange between domestic students and Saudi Arabian international students. The interactions that Saudi Arabian students

encounter on a daily basis can inform us as to whether cultural integration is successfully taking place through social exchange. Further, domestic students' perception of Saudi Arabian students can inform us on what conditions encourage social and cultural exchange between the two populations. A major goal of this exploratory is to identify factors that can inform us on how we can encourage cultural exchange between domestic students and Saudi Arabian students at UW-Stout. This provides benefits in the form of encouraging domestic students to engage in more empathetic, open-minded thinking to strengthen relationships with their contemporaries from Saudi Arabia and vice versa.

Lithereature Review

Previous research in the area of international student integration focuses on barriers to adjustment. Compared to their domestic counterparts, international students tend to experience greater adjustment difficulties and more distress during their initial transition into the university. These barriers include feelings of social loss due to exposure to an unfamiliar culture, and a lack of English language skills, which are necessary to integrating into American culture. (Paltridge & Schapper; Fincher & Shaw 2009; Rai, 2002; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Barratt & Huba, 1994). Past research identified positive correlation between international students' experience and oral English language skills (Barratt & Huba, 1994; Coles & Swami, 2012). University of Wisconsin-Stout addresses this issue with the English as a Second Language (ESL) Institute. The program offers year-round English immersion courses to non-native English speakers, including free tutoring services, small class sizes, and a conversation partner program. The inability to effectively communicate with host nation locals is not the only potential barrier that international students face when attempting to adjust to academic life in a new country.

The attitudes of others and the extent to which host nation locals make an effort to provide traditional options for foreign students must be examined. Upon arrival to the host nation, international students need to secure housing, a general food supply, and gain a general knowledge of the educational institution. Further, they are usually under pressure to settle in quickly in order to begin their academic work. Finding accommodation can be difficult. (Obeng-Odoom, 2012). International students arrive with less than a month to find housing. It is particularly difficult given their limited knowledge of local housing markets. This is made even more difficult when one takes into consideration international students' limited knowledge of local housing markets. Research in Sydney, Australia reveals that international students' knowledge of the housing market in Sydney was not, on average,

as good as local students (Obeng-Odoom, 2012). For these students, setting up house in the U.S. is a major task because of the supplies needed-everything from bed linens to furniture (Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). Past research shows that housing plays a critical role in the process of obtaining quality education for both international students and their domestic counterparts. (Lubell & Brennan, 2007; Phibbs & Young, 2009) As a level of relative security is expected, university accommodations or on-campus housing often fosters a feeling of physical security among international students (Paltridge & Schapper, 2010). Many international students, however, prefer to live off campus.

Beyond previous research on foreigners' experience in a host country, research regarding perception of foreigners by those of a host country is limited. This research examines local citizens of a German town perceive foreign visitors. How one is perceived can influence how that person is treated, subsequently affecting that person's experience. Research that explores perception of foreigners in Germany concluded, "respondents living in regions with a below-average share of foreigners have a considerably higher probability to agree with the claim that foreigners are a burden on the German social security system" (Fertig & Schmidt, 2011, p. 1890). A lack of exposure seems to result in a negative perception of a foreigner. The question still remains as to how domestic students at the University of Wisconsin-Stout perceive the presence of Saudi Arabian students. What social conditions encourage social and cultural exchange between domestic students at UW-Stout and Saudi Arabian international students? I will expand on the previous research by exploring how domestic students perceive Saudi Arabian students and whether such perception is impressionable. This research will contribute to the literature on the topic of international students in university systems by examining potential barriers and contributors to creating an environment that encourages social and cultural exchange.

Theory

In order to properly answer these questions, we must view them through a theoretical lens. The research lends itself to the mere exposure theory and the social exchange theory. Mere exposure theory attempts to explain why people tend to gain a preference for stimuli to which they are repeatedly exposed. The mere exposure theory provides that repeated exposure to a given stimuli tends to foster preference toward the stimuli. Further, familiarity breeds a preference toward a given stimuli more so than it breeds contempt. Finally, people tend to acquire a taste for stimuli over time and through repeated exposure (Zajonc, 1968). This theory will be applied to Saudi Arabian international students.

This study draws upon the social exchange theory, which was developed by George Homans (1958). This theory has been expanded by many social scientists including Peter M. Blau. For the purpose of this study we will draw upon aspects of Peter M. Blau's version of the social exchange theory. Social exchange theory provides three basic principles that guide this research. First, people are rationally motivated in exchanges and weigh costs and benefits just like an economist would argue. However, people weigh the costs and benefits of gaining social capital as opposed to currency-driven cost/benefit analysis. Social capital is the social benefit one may expect from preferential treatment of another. It refers to the "features of social organization, such as trust, norms, and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions" (Putnam, 1993, p.167). Such actions as adhering to social norms, building social networks, and ultimately establishing trust will likely lead to building social capital. When alternatives are present people tend to gravitate toward social exchange among equals. It is easier to build social capital among like-minded individuals as the likelihood of disagreement is reduced. Finally, social capital, and the opportunity to gain more, is at the forefront of social exchange. As stated above, social capital is the expected social benefit that can be gained by a particular person and interaction. From these principles, two basic norms become manifest. The first is the norm of reciprocity and this will be account for a large portion of the focus in the discussion section. Reciprocity, in terms of social exchange theory, refers to one's willingness to respond or take part in another's attempt at social exchange. For one to risk social exchange, one must trust that the other participant will reciprocate. The second norm that manifests is the norm of fair exchange. Fair exchange refers to an expectation that the other participant will seek fairness for both sides in the relationship. This expectation for both parties to be fair to each other becomes more and more central as the relationship progresses. Since, predictable reciprocity is the key that links these theories together, it follows that these theories are equally important to explaining the behaviors in this study. Repeated exposure to a given individual or group will likely lead to social exchange between the two individuals or groups.

Social exchange theory provides that social exchange is distinct from economic change in four ways. First, social exchange lacks specificity whereas an economic exchange involves exact figures. Second, social exchange is dependent upon trust because of the lack of specificity. When one risks social exchange he or she must trust the other participant to reciprocate. Third, Social exchanges provide more meaning beyond themselves whereas economic exchanges mean nothing more than the value of the currency owed.

Finally, social benefits are less detached from the source because the value of any social exchange is dependent upon the participants. Mere exposure theory works in conjunction with social exchange theory. With an increase in the frequency of exposure of domestic students to Saudi Arabian students, we see an increase in the opportunity of one interacting and subsequently the likelihood of cultural exchange. The likelihood of one gaining social capital would therefore increase.

METHODS

This study is a combined inductive and deductive quantitative research study involving University of Wisconsin-Stout students. A survey was created using Qualtrics online survey software via the University Wisconsin-Stout survey distribution clearinghouse services. Two separate surveys were created for each population. Both surveys consisted of eight questions designed to measure the different ways in which domestic students perceive Saudi Arabian students at UW-Stout and how Saudi Arabian students perceive domestic students at UW-Stout. "The questionnaire as a whole must allow you to capture all the information you are looking for" (Antonius, 2013, p. 8). The brevity of the survey was done to encourage greater participation by not subjecting participants to extended time commitments while still capturing as much pertinent data as possible.

A stratified random sample of 451 UW-Stout domestic and Saudi Arabian students was obtained from the UW-Stout Planning, Assessment, Research, and Quality office (PARQ). A stratified random sample was requested because the populations that were being studied had subgroups within them. "Sometimes the population consists of various subgroups, and we want to be sure that each subgroup is adequately represented in the sample" (Antonius, 2013, p. 30). This method of sampling allowed for both the domestic student population and the Saudi Arabian international student population to be adequately represented. The survey was sent out to the participant pool on Monday, March 31, 2014. Monday was chosen because of the assumption that students would be more likely to respond to the complete survey after two days of no classes. The survey was sent out again on Monday, April 14, 2014. Regression analysis was conducted only on the domestic student responses to focus on how domestic students perceive Saudi Arabian international students. Causal relationships were not found in the study; however, strong correlations were uncovered. The statistical significance alpha level was set at .10.

RESULTS

This study was supplemented by three qualitative interview sessions in order to provide context to the current environment at UW-Stout as Saudi Arabian students see it. Socialization does not often occur between Saudi Arabian students and their domestic counterparts. Though, many Saudi Arabian students participate in extra-curricular activities and enjoy their time studying at UW-Stout, most spend much of their free time in two major metropolitan cities: Minneapolis, MN and Chicago, IL. These cities provide diverse environments that offer traditional Saudi Arabian restaurants, grocery stores, and religious establishments. Analysis of the interviews indicated that a lack of socialization and subsequently cultural exchange occurs between Saudi Arabian students and domestic students. The quantitative analysis provides a more intimate look at how to encourage socialization.

Several statistically significant correlations were identified from analyzing survey data (see Table 1). These will be interpreted in the Discussion section. A positive correlation occurs when the relationship between two variables is such that when one increases the other increases. A negative correlation occurs when the relationship between two variables is such that when one increases the other decreases. A positive correlation exists between domestic student's age and whether they have had a class with Saudi Arabian students.

Specifically, the older a domestic student is we can expect that they have taken more classes, and thus increases the likelihood that a domestic student would have had a class with a Saudi Arabian student. This is a .27 correlation and is statistically significant at the .06 level. Thus, we reject the null hypothesis that no correlating relationship exists between domestic student's age and whether the domestic student has had a class with a Saudi Arabian student. A moderately strong .457 positive correlation exists between domestic students spending time with Saudi Arabian students outside of class and domestic students feeling that they can relate to Saudi Arabian students.

This correlation is statistically significant at the .001 level. Thus, we reject the null hypothesis that no correlating relationship exists between domestic students spending time with Saudi Arabian students outside of class and domestic students having feelings of relating to Saudi Arabian students. A moderately strong .444 positive correlation exists between domestic students feeling that they can relate to Saudi Arabian students and whether they believe that Saudi Arabian students make an effort to get to know American students. This correlation is statistically significant at the .001 level. Thus, we reject the null hypothesis that no correlating relationship exists between domestic students feeling that they can relate to Saudi Arabian students and whether they feel that Saudi Arabian students make an effort to get to know

American students. Finally, a moderately strong .423 negative correlation exists between domestic students spending time with Saudi students outside class and whether they feel they have taken an interest in Saudi Arabian culture. This correlation is statistically significant at the .001 level. Thus, we reject the null hypothesis that no correlating relationship exists between domestic students spending time outside of class with Saudi Arabian students and whether they feel that they have taken an interest in Saudi Arabian culture.

Saudi Arabian University Cultural Integration: An Analysis of International Student Experience and Domestic Perception
TABLE 1

Table 1: Pearson Correlations for Age, Attend class with Saudi students, Interest in Saudi culture, Relatability among students, Saudi student effort, and Time outside class with Saudi students						
	Age	Attended class with Saudi Arabian Students?	How much interest have you taken in Saudi Arabian culture?	Relatability among domestic and Saudi Arabian students	Do you think Saudi students make an effort to get to know American students?	Do you spend time outside of class with Saudi Arabian students?
Age	1	0.27	-0.082	-0.011	0.157	-0.026
Sig. (2-tailed)		0.055*	0.595	0.944	0.296	0.863
N	51	51	44	46	46	46
Attended Class with Saudi Arabian Students?		1	-0.091	-0.072	-0.007	0.025
Sig. (2-tailed)		0.055	0.538	0.616	0.96	0.861
N		51	48	51	51	51
How much interest have you taken in Saudi Arabian culture?			1	-0.184	-0.093	.423***
Sig. (2-tailed)			0.595	0.538	0.227	0.004
N			44	49	48	45
Relatability among domestic and Saudi Arabian students				1	.444****	.457****
Sig. (2-tailed)				0.944	0.616	0.227
N				46	51	45
Do you think Saudi students make an effort to get to know American students?					1	0.22
Sig. (2-tailed)					0.157	0.007
N					46	51
Do you spend time outside of class with Saudi Arabian students?						1
Sig. (2-tailed)						-0.026
N						46

*<.10, **<.05, ***<.01, ****<.001

DISCUSSION

Encouraging further integration between domestic and Saudi Arabian students both in the classroom and in extra-curricular organizations will likely lead to a collegiate environment that is more enriched in cultural diversity. Social exchange does not often occur between American and Saudi Arabian students at UW-Stout. As a result, Saudi Arabian students tend to gravitate toward an exclusively Saudi Arabian social circle subsequently perpetuating a lack of social and cultural exchange. There are, however, other factors that contribute to this phenomena in regards to how domestic students at UW-Stout perceive the presence of Saudi Arabian international students, illustrated in the quantitative data analysis above.

The first positive correlation between domestic student's age and whether they have had a class with Saudi Arabian students can be explained by understanding that older students tend to have taken more classes than younger students. Taking more classes increases the likelihood that Saudi Arabian students would also take some of the classes taken. This suggests that the more established policy becomes regarding integrating Saudi Arabian students, the more likely students will eventually take a course with them and be prepared to exchange socially with them.

The second significant positive correlation between domestic students spending time with Saudi Arabian students outside of class and domestic students feeling that they can relate to Saudi Arabian can be explained by a combination of the mere exposure theory and the social exchange theory. Mere exposure theory provides that people build a preference toward a given stimuli over time through repeated exposure. The term preference in this context does not mean that a domestic student prefers to spend time with a Saudi Arabian student compared to a domestic student; rather, it means that domestic students view Saudi Arabian students positively. Spending time outside of class provides consistent exposure to Saudi Arabian students, and by building this preference one gains a deeper feeling that he or she can relate to Saudi Arabian students. Social exchange theory provides that when alternatives are present people tend to gravitate toward exchange among equals. People view other people as equals when they believe that they can relate to them because there is a sense of sameness or equality. Thus, repeated exposure may encourage domestic students to view Saudi Arabian students as equals. It may then increase the likelihood that they engage in social and cultural exchange with them on a more consistent basis.

The third significant positive correlation between domestic students feeling that they can relate to Saudi Arabian student and whether they believe that Saudi Arabian students make an effort to get to know domestic stu-

dents can be explained by the social exchange theory. People tend to view an honest effort as positive and the opposite negatively. In a sense this question requests the participant to essentially pass judgment upon a Saudi Arabian student in terms of whether the domestic student believed that an honest effort was made to get to know domestic students or not. Social exchange theory provides that gaining social capital is a major goal of social exchange. Simply relating to Saudi Arabian students encourages one to identify with that person. According to social exchange theory, Saudi Arabian students actually gain a level of social capital because of domestic students assigning a degree of importance to Saudi Arabian students. This social capital may encourage domestic students to further identify with Saudi Arabian students and conclude that Saudi Arabian students make a considerable effort to try to get to know domestic students, thus, viewing them more positively. This further suggests that policies on campus to encourage positive impressions of Saudi Arabian students will increase the likelihood of social capital gained in exchange with them by domestic students. The significant negative correlation between domestic students spending time with Saudi Arabian students outside class and whether they believe that they have taken an interest in Saudi Arabian culture can further add depth to the above finding. It is likely that domestic student spent time outside of class with Saudi Arabian students learned a little about Saudi Arabian culture. This may have made domestic students realize that they did not previously take much of an interest in Saudi Arabian culture, and thus know very little about it. Another possible explanation could be that perhaps the Saudi Arabian students put off domestic students when they interacted with them. This may encourage domestic students to become even less interested in Saudi Arabian culture. Another explanation is perhaps these domestic students recognize the unwelcoming environment toward Saudi Arabian students at UW-Stout, and feel as though they have not taken (or even should not take) much interest in Saudi Arabian culture. It is also possible that the time domestic students spent with Saudi Arabian students was coincidental and didn't provide the right circumstances to encourage direct interaction. A final possibility is that perhaps the time spent with Saudi Arabian students outside of class occurred in university sponsored clubs that only meet once or twice a semester, and therefore this limited interaction made domestic students feel as though they have not taken much of an interest in Saudi Arabian culture. Nonetheless, more research is required to answer this question. Specifically, further deductive qualitative research would likely provide the best insight into this quantitative finding.

Combined with theory, this data offers an important narrative. Mere exposure to Saudi Arabian students encourages domestic students to perceive

Saudi Arabian students more positively. This encourages domestic students to relate to Saudi Arabian students on a deeper level and thus encourages them to identify with them. This identification allows for Saudi Arabian students to gain a level of social capital in relation to domestic students. Since social exchange is likely to take place among equals and domestic students being exposed to Saudi Arabian students on a consistent basis fosters a view of equality, one can deduce that exposure encourages increased social exchange between domestic students and Saudi Arabian students. Therefore, increased exposure to Saudi Arabian students encourages domestic students to view them with preference, and perhaps encourages domestic students to risk social exchange.

By applying the mere exposure theory we can assume that repeated exposure to Saudi Arabian students both inside and outside the classroom encourages domestic students to relate to Saudi Arabian students on a deeper level. Applied to campus clubs and classroom discussion, these two theories and data from this study suggest that Saudi Arabian students can gain social capital among domestic students, which may very well encourage cultural exchange between domestic and Saudi Arabian students. Furthermore, through the consistent application of this study to policies at UW-Stout, we will likely see this exchange of cultural ideas and practices thrive.

A major motivation for conducting this research derived from the realization that as citizens of a nation we are subsequently hosts and hostesses. It is important to maintain a degree of social responsibility in this sense. The reputation of America and American citizens can either be lifted or degraded. Furthermore, this study is based upon the idea that through strengthening positive international relations we all benefit. Although, at times it can seem that international relations are only impacted by official diplomatic interaction, it is very likely that the individual citizen and the particular American academic institution can strengthen these bonds.

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