GULF REGION STUDENTS' COPING STRATEGIES OF THEIR CULTURAL CHALLENGES AT U.S. UNIVERSITIES

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Abstract

The present study examines social and cultural challenges Emirati and Saudi students face at U.S. universities, and investigates Emirati and Saudi students' coping strategies to face their challenges. Based on a sample of 219, a mixed methods approach was used to analyze responses from participants who responded to a questionnaire that had been posted online (Qualtrics). The results of the questionnaire instrument reveal that Emirati students are more comfortable than Saudi students in working with a different gender in their classes. Also, the survey shows that Emirati and Saudi students felt comfortable in discussing cultural issues related to their regions in class. However, the interviews results indicate that Saudi male student tried to adjust to the challenges of American culture, which requires independence and completing household chores. Emirati and Saudi female students face communication challenges with male classmates. Giving Saudi female students more freedom to deal with personal life in the U.S. is different than their country-of-origins' traditions. Having parents accompany female students during the first experience in the U.S. helps accommodation. Also, having dependents with female students smoothen their transitions. Further analysis used in-depth interviews to expand the analysis of the lived experiences from six participants 'interviews. Some categories that are produced from the data are related to cultural adjustment and gender issues. In general, results show more similarities between Emirati and Saudi students because UAE and Saudi Arabia are global countries and have strong connection with U.S., and have similar history of education system reform.

Keywords: Social adjustment, Cultural Adjustment, international students

Introduction

This study is a story of a personal journey. It is about my long-time quest to pursue graduate study in the United States. Upon arrival to my destination, I realized that I was not adequately prepared or nearly ready as I

should be for the new challenges that lay ahead in academia. One of the many challenges had to do with how to deal with my own culture shock in this new environment. Though culture shock is expected every time someone changes one's cultural environment, the impact varies from person to person and the experience can alter one's perception of anticipated outcomes.

This study analyzes my story and the stories of socialization and acculturation of students from the Gulf States (e.g., UAE and Saudi Arabia) pursuing post-secondary studies in the United States. My goal in this study is to explore what their social and cultural challenges and coping strategies to succeed in their study. The following sections in this study tell this story and analyze what the findings mean for future studies in higher education in the Gulf countries and the U.S.A.

Literature Review
Cultural Adjustment Socialization

Cultural adjustment is about learning to bridge, alter, change, or adjust to cultural differences. In order to understand adjustment strategies, this literature review seeks to define cultural adjustment and explore its variations, including social, linguist, and identity adjustments, and the interface of these adjustment with academic socialization. As explained, adjustment is a complex and multi-faceted concept, referring to the dynamic processes that can ultimately lead the achievement of appropriate fit between the person and the new environment.

Definitions of cultural adjustment within international education, international business, cross-cultural studies, and sociological literature tend to be very ambiguous (Brein and David, 1971; Church, 1982; Ward and Searle, 1990), since definitions of adjustment has varied throughout the years. For some scholars the terms adjustment, acculturation, and assimilation are interchangeable (Kagan and Cohen, 1990).

Other researchers, however, defined adjustment as satisfying one's needs, satisfaction with daily activities (Brislin, 1981), accommodating and coping with a new environment, interacting freely and accepting hosts, developing a sense of well-being , mood states (Feinstein and Ward, 1990), functioning with minimum strain, developing appropriate habits, skills and behaviors (Bochner, Lin, and McLeod, 1980), achieving academic and personal performance and satisfaction, and evaluation of job performance (Harris,1972).Other researchers also related adjustment definition to psychological distress (Befus, 1988), developing a positive attitude toward hosts/host country (Noesjirwan, 1978), and obtaining psychological comfort and familiarity for the new environment (Black, 1988; Oberg,1960; Nicholson, 1984). Perkins, Guglilmino, and Reiff, 1977) incorporate many of

these variables in a broader definition of cultural or sojourners' adjustment, including them as essential parts of the adjustment process.

Since scholars from different disciplines have an interest in this multi-faceted topic, an apparent consensus among them as to what transpires during such adjustment processes is absent. For example, Ramsay, Jones, and Baker (2007) suggested that sometimes adjustment involves ongoing learning cycles, usually triggered by significant, often negative experiences. They insisted that these experiences broadly focus on the environment (e.g. particular interactions with staff members or with other students) or on the person (e.g. lack of confidence, homesickness), reflecting the person-environment-fit perspective. While the characteristics and quality of the environment are important, in most cases people appear to be active agents who can potentially influence or change their environments and even contribute to their own adjustments (Ramsay , Jones, and Baker , 2007).

Researchers found several factors that influence the cultural adjustment of international students. These include language differences and skills (Klineberg and Hull, 1979), motivation for coming to study to the United States (Gardner and Lambert ,1972), general attitude toward the host country and its hosts(Norris, 2001), age and maturity of the student (Brett and Stroh, 1995) , and length of time in the United States (Pinder and Klaus , 1987). The most important factor, however, is social interactions within the host country (Church, 1982).

Social Adjustment

The way in which informal relationships influence the sojourner's attempts to cope with uncertainty and change has had research consideration (Albrecht and Adelman, 1984; Feinstein and Ward, 1990). One finding suggested that loneliness predicts a sojourner's psychological distress (Ward and Searle, 1991). Sojourners who feel helpless in a new culture might seek to communicate with those they believe can assist them to find answers to their questions. Albrecht and Adelman (1984, 1987a) found that the underlying function of social support is to reduce uncertainty, and defined social support as the "verbal and nonverbal communication between the recipients and the providers that reduces uncertainty about the situation, the self, the other, or the relationship, and the functions to enhance a perception of personal control in one's life experience" (1987a, p, 19). According to Adelman (1988), people also seek to feel they have control over a particular situation through social support, which, apparently, influences the sojourner's psychological well-being (Ward and Searle, 1991).

When individuals move to a new country, they find disruption to their old support networks (e.g., family and friends), and they would need to create new support systems. International students, arriving in a new culture, experience culture shock express anxiety through behavior such as trying to

avoid the hosts and looking for company from their co-nationals (Church, 1982). In an attempt to feel safe in the new environment with new cultural values, they also seek to feel comfortable by speaking their native languages, and giving value to their own culture and ethnicity.

Support from co-nationals can help alleviate the feelings of homesickness and stress during the adjustment process; at the same time, such associations help international students reaffirm their cultural values, since the associates experience essentially the same problems when they arrived (Bochner, 1981; Furnham and Bochner, 1982; Kim, 1987). According to Giordano and Giordano (1976), ethnicity fulfills a psychological need for security, identity, and a sense for historical continuity. Co-nationals represent a "low-risk informant" (Adelman, 1988, p. 188) who can offer answers, while reducing the student's uncertainty for affecting the relationship by the help-seeking process. In other words, international students feel more comfortable asking questions of those felt to be non-judgmental. Sojourners who do not have the support of a group of co-nationals, apparently, have greater problems of adjustment (Torbion, 1982). Kagan and Cohen (1990) believe that the relationships with co-nationals are important to students; however, those relationships might negatively affect cultural adjustment.

When confronted with stressful conditions, as in a new culture, internationals students might also seek the companionship of other new co-nationals (Wills, 1983), and to share resources and information to cope with their adjustment problems. In this kind of informal support groups, members self-disclose their fears and concerns and participate in mutual problem-solving (Greenberg, 1980). Support systems among those who are experiencing similar cross-cultural stresses, however, could also interfere with satisfying the needs of these individuals (Fontaine, 1986). Stressed individuals can negatively affect those who are vulnerable (Adleman, 1986; Albercht and Adelman, 1984, 1987b), when sharing tensions and concerns. Also, co-nationals might unintentionally worsen the stress and anxiety of the new sojourner, as they share information from home (Adelman, 1988).

In the beginning of an experience in a new culture, international students tend to avoid interacting with hosts and seek the company of co-nationals (Church, 1982); however, upon arrival, while the interaction with co-nationals is important for new international students to feel supported, eventually, seeking interaction with hosts becomes equally important. Apparently, detachment from one's co-national community facilitates cultural adjustment (Bruner, 1956; Kagan and Cohen, 1990; Masuda, Matsumoto, and Meredith, 1970; Montgomery and Orozco, 1984; Spiro, 1955;Weinstock, 1964;Yao, 1985), and the interaction with representatives of the host culture positively facilitates cultural adjustment (Bruner, 1956;

Fugita and O'Brien, 1985;Kagan and Cohen, 1990; Roskin and Edleson, 1984; Smith, 1976;Weinstock, 1964). Kagan and Cohen (1990) found that students who had close American friends were more likely to have an easier shift to the new culture than those without the same relationships.

Adjustment Complications of International Students

Several studies on the topic of international students' cultural adjustments found that through social interaction with hosts, international students have a better opportunity to develop skills and behaviors that can help them adjust to their new cultural environment (Furnham and Bochner, 1986; Shaffer and Harrison, 2001). Most research devoted to understanding the experiences of international students indicates that these students often face problems with acculturation, and decreased access to their existing or familiar support systems add to the challenges (Charles-Toussaint and Crowson, 2010; Kagan and Cohen, 1990). However, research of adjustment and assimilation of international students studying in the United States, in particular ethnic sub-groups, such as the Gulf region international students, appears limited.

Despite the recognized importance of international students' participation in higher education in the United States, few studies explored the adjustment process of Gulf region international students, who arrive in the country with myriad looming challenges, such as attitudes towards religion, language, study habits, dress code, and not to mention, food, all of which require adjustments. For these reasons, these students encounter many changes and difficulties in adjusting to colleges and universities in the United States. Easing the adjustment of the Gulf region international students to college life has become an increasingly important concern of administrators in recent years due to the potential impact of adjustment problems on student attrition (Al – Sharideh and Goe, 1998).

Cultural adjustment of international students is cause for concern for educators and college administrators throughout the United States, mainly because the negative impact the lack of adjustment or unsuccessful adjustment to the new environment can have on international students' academic careers, personal satisfaction, and general well-being. Anecdotal stories gathered during a recent pilot study recount students' adjusting to college with many of them sharing feelings of anxiety, confusion, and homesickness, among others concerns. International students, however, have the additional burden of confronting prejudice and cultural differences, which may hinder or prolong their adjustments.

These concerns are not unique to students from the UAE and Saudi Arabia, but they seem to face many particular challenges since they are geographically distant from familiar environments and support, and English is not their first language. Students' experiences in the host country diverge

from their own cultures in terms of norms, roles, attitudes, values, and expectations, with the host cultures 'greater differences expected to create greater difficulties and stress (Al – Sharideh and Goe , 1998). Moreover, Gulf region's students may suffer from loneliness due to loosing of social ties with people in their native countries. Faced with these problems, Gulf region international students must develop strategies of adjustment for coping with the exigencies of their new social environments, meeting their personal needs, and performing satisfactorily in their academics. These challenges make the current research relevant but also very complex and thought-provoking. Bochner (1972) categorizes the complications of adjustment for international students into some aspects: a student adjusting to the general stress of college; a foreigner with special culturally-related learning problems; a maturing, developing individual, and a national representative, sensitivity to native speakers' background and national status.

Ward and Searle (1990, p. 210) proposed dividing adjustment into two aspects: physiological, which "refers to feelings of well-being and satisfaction," and socio-cultural, which "relates to the ability to 'fit in' in the host culture. Ward and Searle (1991) explained that sojourner adjustment has attracted three main theoretical positions for the aspects that influence the adjustment: clinical perspectives (e.g., personality, life events and social support), social learning models (e.g., acquiring appropriate skills and behaviors, cross- cultural experience and training), and social cognition approaches (e.g., variables such as attitudes, values, expectations and self-concept). The literature suggests that these three dimensions and all the variables they include influence international students' adjustment problems. Notably perhaps, some of the most important are language difficulties, financial problems (Klineberg and Hull, 1979), homesickness (Hull, 1978; Jammaz, 1973; Klineberg and Hull, 1979; Shepard, 1970), discrimination (Chruch, 1982), adjusting to a new educational system, and adjusting to new social customs and roles.

Research Design and Method
The focus of this research is a comparative study of Saudi and Emirati students who transition into U.S. universities. To attain the main purpose of this study requires responding, the constituents of this inquiry are: What cultural and social challenges do Emirati and Saudi students face at U.S. universities? What are the Emirati and Saudi students' coping strategies to face their challenges? This is a mixed-method research design that combines quantitative and qualitative strategies involving surveying 250 students followed by interviews. The present qualitative strategy provided an opportunity for the voices of Emirati and Saudi students to emerge. It gave a descriptive analysis of the cultural and social experiences of six Emirati and

Saudi students who were selected for interviews. The interviews were coded to categories and themes for analysis. This study is part of a larger study that examines academic socialization process of Emirati and Saudi students in the U.S. Universities.

Results
        This section presents some of the findings of the questionnaire and the interviews.

Survey results
        The main two results that the questionnaire indicates are as followed:

Social and Cultural Challenges
        When the participants were asked about their comfort level of working with the same gender, Emirati students (29.0 %) were very comfortable working with the same gender; 26.0 % of the Saudi students were comfortable working with the same gender (See Table 1).

Comfort of Discussing Cultural Knowledge
        When Emirati and Saudi students expressed their comfort levels in discussing cultural issues in class, the same percentage of Emirati students (43.0 %) felt both "very comfortable" and "comfortable" discussing regional issues. Most Saudi students (48.0 %) felt "comfortable" discussing topics related to their region with classmates (See Table 2).

Interview Results:
        This section presents some of the interview analysis to its categories and themes, and organized based on the first and second research questions.

Research Question1
Category 1: Cultural Adjustment
Theme 1: Cultural and Social Challenges
        The Gulf region culture protects women. If a daughter is not married, the father remains responsible for his daughter. Culturally, men do most of the work and women stay at home as a princess. Women must have permission from their guardians for most issues. When Sheikha, a Saudi student, wanted her father to obtain an apartment for her in the US, the rental office refused to give him the keys and requested to make his daughter available, which is different from the cultural expectation in Saudi Arabia. Sheikha commented:
        I was at Huston and my father came here to my apartment. My father paid the rent for the first month. The rental office manager told him that I

have to be available to give him the apartment's keys. In Saudi Arabia, my father has to be with me to receive the keys of an apartment.

Hoor adjusted to the American culture faster. She did not notice a big difference between the American culture and Abu Dhabi culture, which is a global city in the UAE. Hoor commented:

When I came here, I did not feel of culture shock. I was living in Abu Dhabi which the life a little bit similar to the culture here. However, I know some students who were shocked when they arrived here and saw women wearing shorts.

However, Hoor misses her family members whose relationship is a close tie among Emirati extended families; different from American families. Hoor commented

Even though I have some family members in the UAE such as my aunts, I still feel expatriated. My relationship with my aunts is not close like my relationship with my mother and sisters.

Changes in male's role

Men in the Gulf region once received service and respect from women. Men do not cook or care for the house, normally women's work. Hassan, a Saudi student, came to the U.S. and received a cultural shock. He has to care for himself; he commented on the situation in America:

It might be the person's status in his country is changed and decreased. I mean I was in Saudi Arabia, others serve me. Here, I have to do my stuff by myself. This makes a psychological stress.

Theme 2: Lack of Cultural Knowledge

Jokes in a new language are difficult to understand jokes because students have to learn the needed vocabulary in order to appreciate the humor and the culture. Emirati and Saudi students find difficulty following some classroom discussions and socializing with American students because they miss the meanings of the American jokes because of the language barrier or the meaning of certain words in the context that the word or phrase is being used. Zayed commented specifically about such situations.

Sometimes American students tell jokes in classrooms but we do not understand the jokes because it is cultural. There are some issues related to American traditions which I do not understand that complicates understanding the classroom discussions."

Sheikha also commented regarding the difficulty of really understanding certain conversations because of the cultural context.

When American students tell a joke and laugh, I do not laugh because I do not understand the meaning of the metaphor of the phrases. I do not understand their idioms.

Lack of the cultural knowledge decreases Hoor's understanding of her test questions, which influences her grades. Hoor commented regarding the difficulty associated with communication challenges on written exams.;

Sometimes, my mistakes in tests resulted from my misunderstanding of the language. If I did not understand a word, I cannot contact the teacher because the test is controlled by a computer program. American students know most of the words which I do not understand because they relate to their tradition or history or economy.

Category 2: Gender issues
Theme 1: Women's communication challenges with men

Conservative cultural attitudes lead Gulf region female students to avoid any kind of communication with men. At one time, female and male Emirati and Saudi students studied in separate schools and classes in their native countries. The communication between women and men is very limited even in work. Moving to American mixed classes triggers communication difficulties especially for female students. Comments from male and female Emirati students explaining their attitudes regarding this issue are.

Zayed commented:

In my classes, I have an Emirati female student who I work with. There are some other Emirati female students who avoid talking with male Emirati or gulf region students even if they are in same classes.

Hoor regarding how she attempts to avoid interacting with all male classmates regardless whether they are from the Gulf or whether they are American males.

I try to avoid male students in our discussions in our classes. It does not matter if the male students are American or Arabs. I will prefer to speak with American male students instead of male students from the Gulf region because I heard a lot that male students form the Gulf region talk about the girls.

Hoor added:

We have an Emirati association. Female Emirati students do not want to be members because they do not want to mix with the male Emirati students. We design activities for female Emirati students separate from the male Emirati students' activities.

Women in the Gulf region did not leave their homes alone. They usually have their fathers or brothers accompany them. To see a native woman who bikes in Saudi Arabia or UAE, outside her home is a wired view. Hoor expressed her annoyance when she moved to Penn State University whose Arabs community is greater than she expected. She feels that those Arabs limit her freedom:

When I was in the langue preparation program, I was relaxed more than Penn State University. There were no Arabs. I bike and do whatever I want but here if I do anything, everyone will know. It is like I am still at UAE. Arabs men talk about girls more than women, which is weird.

Research Question 2
Category 1: Cultural Adjustment
Theme 1: Family support in the U.S.

The Gulf region supports protecting women. Very few women travel by themselves. Guardians usually travel with Gulf Region women. In the case of Saudi female students, their government obligates them to have dependents such as a father, brother or husband, which pays their language preparation tuitions and living expenses. The UAE government does not obligate female students to have dependents. However, few UAE sponsors pay for husbands only to be guardian for his wife. The participants provided examples of family members' supporting Emirati and Saudi students' residing in the U.S. and opinions on the dependents issue.
Hoor commented:

The first time, I came to the language preparation program; my father came with me to settle down. When I came to Penn State University, my mother came with me and stayed two weeks and then she went back to UAE. I have my aunts in California and Ohio. I call them when I need them.
Hoor added:

The husband is the only dependent who can come with a SCO student. If the scholarship provider could offer a dependent for the students like the father or brother, it will be nice. However, I think the expense will increase. That money is better offered to another student not a dependent. If SCO will help in the visa process of the dependent, that will be good.
Sheikha commented

ARAMCO did not obligate students to have a dependent like a father. I think there is no need to have dependent.

Theme 2: Gulf Region Students' Support

Emirati student "Zayed" prefers to work with particular Emirati students who are dependable. He seeks their support if he does not understand classroom materials.
Zayed commented:

I work with specific Emirati students who I know are active, and they do their work well. I do not work with students who depend on us to do their work.
Zayed added:

Sometimes, if I do not know or understand some points from the class materials, I will ask my Emirati classmates.

Emirati and Saudi students seek help from Gulf region's senior students who have more experiences in an academic discipline when completing writing assignments. Also, they seek help from students who are at the same level and exchange papers for peer reviews.

Khalifah commented:

When I was in my foundation year, I usually sought help from a Kuwaiti Master's Student. Once, I had to write a research paper for law class. After I had written the paper, I asked him about how to rewrite some sentences and correct some grammatical mistakes. He is better than American student because I can explain to him my ideas in Arabic. Also, he is my best friend and our relationship is informal. I am more relaxed to discuss my writing difficulties with him. I trust him.

Khaled commented:

I asked my friend to explain to me how to write a chemistry lab report because he took the course before.

Hoor commented:

I have a female friend from the UAE in my major. She was here before me. She helped me in some assignments, which I did not know how to do. We had some classes together. We spent time to study together especially for midterms and finals."

Hassan commented:

"Al hemdellah . I came here and I have English basics. My language was not that poor. For sure, there are many words I do not understand but I tried to communicate to tell them what I want. I try to ask my Arab friends or Saudi students to tell me how to structure the questions to ask for information.

Hassan commented:

I do not know about any writing center here. I have my peer who is at my level. I gave him my writing to read for me and check it.

Discussion and Conclusion:

The major findings of this study allow discussion of cultural socialization and adjustment, and gender issues.

1) Major findings related to cultural socialization and adjustment

The view that adjustment to a new culture is the product of multiple, interacting factors led to the development of various multi-dimensional models. Rosenthal and Hrynevich (as cited in Kagan and Cohen, 1990) conceptualized multidimensional ethnic identity as involving languages, religion, social activity , maintenance of cultural tradition , family life, and

physical characteristics. These multidimensional factors complicate international students' cultural adjustments.

For instance, an Emirati student, Khaled, tried to defend his religious identity: "My presentation was about the discrimination against Muslims." Arabic is Hassan's native language, a Saudi student, and it is the language of the Holy Quran. Arabic represents his religious and ethnic identity. He emphasized that Arabic does not influence his English learning negatively so using Arabic language with learning English is not a problem: "I did not feel that Arabic has a negative effect on my English learning." Coming from an extended family, in which all surrounding family members comment on behavior and decisions, is part of the Emirati female student, Hoor's ethnic identity. She misses her family members whose relationship is tie, common among Emirati extended families and differs from American families: "Even though I have some family members in the U.S. such as my aunts, I still feel expatriated. My relationship with my aunts is not close like my relationship with my mother and sisters." Hoor's feeling of expatriation is one of the adjustment challenges that Emirati students face, as indicated in most research devoted to understanding the experiences of international students. The current research indicates that these students often face problems with acculturation, and decreased access to their existing or familiar support systems add to the challenges (Charles-Toussaint and Crowson, 2010; Kagan and Cohen, 1990).

Emirati and Saudi students try to socialize with Americans and adjust to the foreign culture. They try to develop positive attitudes toward hosts/host countries (Noesjirwan, 1978). Hassan, a Saudi student, expressed his positive attitudes toward Americans: "Honestly, I like the Americans' ethics such as respecting other people and respecting the system in general."

Researchers found several factors that influence the cultural adjustment of international students. The most important factor is social interactions within the host country (Church, 1982). Zayed, an Emirati student, indicated that his socialization with American students in his courses strengthens his relationship with Americans outside the classroom and smoothes his adjustment to the culture: "I was walking on campus. Three American girls who were my classmates saw me and said, "Hi," and asked me about my classes. These students know me because I helped them when they needed some clarifications in some assignments." Zayed's friend recommended live in a dormitory to allow for more social interaction with Americans. Sheikah, a Saudi female student, emphasized that interaction with Americans decreases the expatriation feeling and facilitates adaptation to the American culture: "The first time when I communicate with American students, I felt expatriated, but now I am more comfortable to work with

American students because I started to understand their communication style."

Several studies on the topic of international students' cultural adjustments found that through social interaction with hosts, international students have better opportunities to develop skills and behaviors that can assist adjustment to a new cultural environment (Furnham and Bochner, 1986; Shaffer and Harrison, 2001). Hoor's adjustment experience to the American culture was smooth because she had some American friends when she was in private school. She even celebrated American ceremonies: "I had American friends before I came to the U.S. I knew them when I was in private schools. I saw their pictures and discussed their culture. We used to celebrate Thanksgiving when I was in private school. When I came here, I did not find a big difference." Kagan and Cohen (1990) found that students who had close American friends were more likely to have an easier shift to the new culture than those without the same relationships.

Students' experiences in the host country diverge from their own cultures in terms of norms, roles, attitudes, values, and expectations. With host cultures, greater differences expectedly create greater difficulties and stress (Al – Sharideh and Goe, 1998). Zayed, an Emirati student, experienced attitudes different from those in the UAE for group work with American students: "I usually talk while I am working as when I was in the UAE. However, American students only focus on work. They do not like to talk."

Even though international students might benefit initially from the support of their co-nationals, eventually the international students will need to reduce their interactions and dependence on co-nationals, and increase their interactions with hosts in order to acquire the skills necessary to adjust successfully to a new environment. Restricting interaction with hosts will only inhibit learning the new language, values, and norms of the culture and will reinforce feelings of alienation (Aresberg and Niehoff, 1964; Garraty and Adams, 1959; Gullarhorn and Gullarhorn, 1966; Kang, 1972; Lundstedt, 1963). Essentially, interaction with members outside the co-nationals' group is important for integration (Kim, 1987). Khaled, a Saudi student, tried to interact with American students in his classes. He even sought assistance from them for group writing assignments. He did not restrict his interaction to co-nationals in order to learn the language and do well in school. Khaled stated: "I have the ideas in Arabic and I do not know how to write them. I try to tell the information to the American student. He does not know Arabic, so it is difficult to deliver the idea to him. I ask help from American students in our group. I tell them that I want to write this and this so, how can I write it? Another option is that I will write it by myself and then ask the American students to edit it."

Dampening of students' academic socializations and linguistic and conceptual repertoires has occurred, since international graduate students' typical training concentrates on English-as-a-second-language for cognitive or academic functions within formal contexts only. They may lack informal, culturally appropriate, social use of the language within the context of American college culture. Language difficulties cause problems to cascade. For instance, informal, casually made remarks, the use of slang and euphemisms, and a lack of English proficiency reduce socio-academic acclimatization, and international students often miss vital information. Zayed, an Emirati student, discussed his difficulty to understand American cultural jokes, thereby complicating classroom socialization: "Sometimes American students tell jokes in classrooms but we do not understand the jokes because it is cultural. It is like the Emirati cultural jokes, which I understand. There are some issues related to American traditions which I do not understand that complicate understanding the classroom' discussion." Moreover, Sheikha, a Saudi student, felt that she alienated from her classmates circle. She loses her feeling of legitimacy in her classes: "When American students tell a joke and laugh, I do not laugh because I do not understand the meaning of the metaphor of the phrases. I do not understand their idioms but now, I understand some of their jokes." Lacking the cultural knowledge does not affect negatively Emirati and Saudi students' socialization with American peers, but influences understanding classroom materials or tests questions as Hoor, an Emirati student, faced: "Sometimes, my mistakes in tests resulted from my misunderstanding of the language. If I did not understand a word, I cannot contact with the teacher because the test is controlled by a computer program. American students know most of the words, which I do not understand because the words related to their tradition or history or economy. These words might be important to understand and I got confused. I cannot use a dictionary. This affects negatively my grades." Moreover, Emirati and Saudi students expressed their comfort levels with sharing their cultural knowledge. Students may view themselves as novices or experts in their social interactions when they display some cultural knowledge (Morita, 2000). The current study shows that Emirati and Saudi students felt both "very comfortable" and "comfortable" when they discuss regional issues in their classes.

Support from co-nationals can help alleviate feelings of homesickness and stress during the adjustment process; at the same time, such associations help international students reaffirm their cultural values, since associates experience essentially the same problems (Bochner, 1981; Furnham and Bochner, 1982; Kim, 1987). According to Giordano and Giordano (1976), ethnicity fulfills a psychological need for security ِ identity, and a sense of historical continuity. Co-nationals represent a "low-risk

informant" (Adelman, 1988, p. 188) who can offer answers, while reducing the student's uncertainty for affecting the relationship through the help-seeking process. In other words, international students feel more comfortable asking questions of those felt to be non-judgmental. Hassan, a Saudi student, has his co-national friends from Saudi Arabia and UAE, who support him when he needs them: "Al hemdellah . I came here and I have English basics. My language was not that poor. For sure, there are many words I do not understand but I tried to communicate to tell them what I want. I try to ask my Arab friends or Saudi students to tell me how to structure the questions to ask for information." Hassan added: "I do not know about any writing center here. I have my Saudi roommate who is at my level. I give him my writing to read for me and check it. When I finish writing my paragraph, I give it to him to read. Also, I have some Emirati students. Our relationships with the Emirati students are good. They are done with the language institute. They helped me a lot in reading.

Kagan and Cohen (1990) asserted that relationships with co-nationals are important to students; however, those relationships might negatively affect cultural adjustment. As Hassan, a Saudi student indicated: "Our problem is here we have many Arabs so we speak Arabic most the time." Also, Khalifah, a Saudi student, expressed the negative effect of Arabs fiends who increase psychological stress and complicate adjustment: "When I made mistakes, Arabs students laugh at me. Therefore, I was shy to talk in the classroom. Once, I had a fight with Arab student because he was laughing at me. I asked him: why are you laughing? He did not give me any response."

Conservative cultural attitudes lead Gulf region female students to avoid any kind of communication with men. At one time, female and male Emirati and Saudi students studied in separate schools and classes in their native countries. The communication between women and men is very limited even at work. Moving to American mixed classes triggers communication difficulties, especially for females. The current study shows that gender is not an issue among the majority of Emirati and Saudi students. They are comfortable working with a different gender. The interview findings show that Emirati male students are more comfortable with a different gender than Emirati female students are. Zayed, an Emirati student, commented: "In my classes, I have an Emirati female student who I work with. There are some other Emirati female students who avoid talking with male Emirati or Gulf Region students even if they are in same classes." Hoor, an Emirati student, stated: "I try to avoid male students in our discussions in our classes. It does not matter if the male students are American or Arabs."

2) Major Findings Related to Gender Issues

The majority of Emirati and Saudi students indicated that gender is not an issue when collaborating with other students. All students are comfortable working with a different gander. However, Emirati female students expressed their uncomforted working with male students as Hoor stated; "I try to avoid male students in our discussions in our classes. We have an Emirati association at Penn State University. Female Emirati students do not want to be members because they do not want to mix with the male Emirati students."

Higher education administrators are constantly seeking ways to boost the retention rates for all students in the U.S. universities. Emirati and Saudi students are minority populations who are in need of better social support from their sponsors and U.S. universities to smoothen their navigation to their universities.

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Tables:

I feel most comfortable working with the same gender					
Options **The country**	*Very Comfortable*	*Comfortable*	*Less Comfortable*	*Uncomfortable*	*It Does Not Matter*
UAE	29.0%	25.8%	6.5%	1.1%	37.6%
Saudi Arabia	18.7%	26.0%	13.0%	0.8%	41.5%
UAE and Saudi Arabia	23.3%	26.3%	10.2%	0.8%	39.4%

Table 1. Item 1 (Gender issue) Responses by Percentage

To what extent do you feel comfortable in discussing topics about your region in your classes?					
country	*Very Comfortable*	*Comfortable*	*Less Comfortable*	*Uncomfortable*	*It Does Not Matter*
UAE	43.0%	43.0%	9.7%	1.1%	3.2%
Saudi Arabia	35.0%	48.0%	8.1%	4.9%	4.1%
UAE and Saudi Arabia	38.8%	45.1%	8.4%	3.0%	4.6%

Table 2. Item 2 (Cultural knowledge) Responses by Percentage