

Saudi International Students in Australia and Intercultural Engagement: A Study of Transitioning From a Gender Segregated Culture to a Mixed Gender Environment

Ahmed Alhazmi

PhD candidate, School of Education

RMIT University

Melbourne, Australia

Email: ahmed_alhazmi@student.rmit.edu.au

Senior supervisor: Dr Berenice Nyland

Senior lecturer, School of Education

RMIT University

Melbourne, Australia

Email: berenice.nyland@rmit.edu.au

Abstract

This paper draws on a PhD study that explores the experience of Saudi international students in Australian institutions. The paper discusses how the gender segregation culture in Saudi Arabia may impact upon Saudi students' engagement within the Australian community. The research methodology utilized a phenomenological approach and data was generated from in-depth interviews. The findings from a pilot study are reported in this paper. The pilot involved interviews with two Saudi international students, male and female, who are studying at Australian universities. The preliminary analysis indicated that the Saudi culture of extreme gender segregation has impacted on the experience of these students, particularly in their ability to relate to their peers in a coeducational environment.

Key words: Saudi international students, international education, intercultural engagement, gender segregation, cross-cultural transition, Saudis overseas

Introduction

This study attempts to understand how Saudi international students experience being in a mixed gender environment during their period of scholarship at Australian universities. The motivation for this study is threefold; 1) the significant increase in the number of Saudi students at Australian universities; 2) the paucity of literature that addresses the experience of this particular group; 3) the phenomenon of transitioning from a segregated gender environment to a mixed gender environment makes the Saudi international students experience unique. This research has been conducted to answer the following question: *How do Saudi students experience being international students in a gender mixed environment.* The study was designed to achieve two particular aims: First, it was designed to explore the experiences of Saudi international students in a mixed gender environment; and the second was to investigate how this experience may impact on an individual's cultural identity. The research began in March 2009 by the development of a proposal, a review of the relevant literature, and conducting pilot interviews. Already critical aspects of students' experience have emerged from the preliminary analysis of the pilot interviews. This paper presents the meaning that the two Saudi students have made of their experience since being in a mixed gender environment. Therefore, in order to contextualise the presented findings, the paper provides, first, an overview of Saudi international students in Australia and provides a background picture of the gender segregation phenomenon in Saudi Arabia. This is followed by a discussion of the relevant literature, relating to Saudi international students and the findings of the preliminary analysis of the pilot interviews are presented.

Saudi International students

The scholarship program of King Abdullah was established by the Ministry of Higher Education in Saudi Arabia in 2010. Since the start of this program the number of Saudi international students has increased significantly. This year (2010) has seen more than 80,500 Saudi students studying abroad (Deputyship for Planning and

Information, 2010). This number however, is expected to increase to more than 140,000 sponsored students by 2015 (Mahboob, 2010) due to a recent decision to extend King Abdullah's scholarship program for another five years starting from 2010 (Ministry of Higher Education, 2010). Consequently, the number of Saudi international students has increased in Australian educational institutions too, in 2010, approximately 12,500 Saudi Students (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2010).

It could be argued that Saudi international students in Australia are in a unique position, compared to other international students, for two reasons; first, most of these students are sponsored by the Saudi government and are offered financial and academic support. They therefore have less issues relating to such concerns as finding accommodation, employment and struggling with course fees. The second reason is that this student cohort has come from the most gender segregated environment in the world. Therefore, Saudi international students may have a serious challenge and encounter difficulties in adjusting to a social environment that is extremely different and might be, in some ways, contradictory to their home social environment. However, since conducting the pilot study for this research it would appear that there are issues on two levels. One, Saudi students share the experience of being international students and two, there are specific cultural challenges. As a Saudi international student I found coping with a gender mixed environment one of the biggest problems I encountered at the beginning of my journey in Australia. It was a strange situation for me to be taught by a female teacher and to study with female classmates. To give context to the question and the issue being explored the following section contains a description of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia at the present time.

Gender Segregation in Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, gender segregation is a cultural norm that is evident in almost every public and private institution. Education sectors, including schools and universities, and most places of entertainment, as well as parks, forbid the mixing of the genders (AlMunajjed, 1997; Mayer, 2000). For example, a single-sex school is the only available system of school in Saudi Arabia (private, public, general and religious schools); the situation is the same in universities and colleges (except the KAUST University which was established for international graduate-level research. The University has been criticized severely by some of the spectrum of the Saudi society because of its co-educational system). Most restaurants usually have two sections: one for men and one for families (where each family is seated in a separate, partitioned arrangement). Some restaurants cater for men only; there are none that cater for women only. This phenomenon of gender segregation is central to most people's social, educational and political activities. One of the important questions that I attempt to address here, in the context of this study, is why are Saudi people segregated according to their gender? Further, how do Saudi people regard the mixing of the genders? To answer these contentious questions we need to look more closely at the phenomenon of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia and try to understand the historical context. The history of gender segregation can help to understand the contemporary Saudi discourse on this issue.

Arabs in general and Saudis in particular have a very traditional view on the role of gender in society. They believe that a man is responsible for work outside of the home and for providing a secure and safe life for his wife and other family members, while a woman takes responsibility for inside the home, looking after her husband and children, and providing love and warm-heartedness for the family. This worldview has nothing to do with Islamic principles (Abu-Ali & Reisen, 1999; AlMunajjed, 1997; Fanjar 1987; Zant 2002); it was, in fact, structured on a traditional historical view of gender roles that existed several hundreds of years ago. A traditional worldview often creates a masculine society in which gender separation is prominent and there are quite different roles for the sexes (Marcus, 2005); authority and domination are vested in men (Kabasakal & Bodur, 2002).

Saudi social life is divided by men into two separate worlds: the public world and private world. The public world is the area of business and political activity which is the man's domain (AlMunajjed, 1997). Therefore, economic, political and religious activity is associated with the male. Women belong exclusively to the private domain. This space is associated with the home, kinsmen or family members, family life, intimate relationships, and gardens. The private world is usually considered as a retreat, and sanctuary that man should keep safe and secure (Deaver, 1980, p. 32). Therefore, Arab people are usually very sensitive to what belongs to the public and what belongs to the private domains (AlMunajjed, 1997). Another concept has developed from the notion of "sanctuary": *Ired*, referring to a woman's chastity and family honor. From my perspective, as a Saudi, and cultural member of Saudi society, it is the concept of *Ired* that has been most responsible for the practice of gender separation. However, this notion of *Ired* seems complex.

According to Patai (1983) the concept of *Ired* appears to have a secular value rather than a religious one. The term does not appear in the Quran, but it existed among the pre-Islamic Arabs and has been mentioned in *Hadith* (the prophet's speeches). According to Baki (2004) Saudis are more sensitive to *Ired* than to anything else,

therefore their society has been structured to keep *Ired* within strictly defined limits that make it difficult for it to be lost. Thus, many restrictions were made on women because the tribe's and family's honor is connected strongly with *Ired*. A woman will lose her *Ired* if she conducts adultery or even attempts to do so and if the *Ired* is lost it cannot be regained even after many generations.

As a result, there are many restrictions on Saudi women in society. One of these restrictions is keeping a woman away from a man who is not a family member, which is what gender segregation achieves. *Wahhabism* scholars argue that gender segregation is an Islamic teaching because Islam encourages chastity and virtue and the importance of respecting a person's *Ired*. For *Wahhabism* scholars this implies gender separation; the importance of protecting *Ired* has led them to a belief that gender separation comes from basic Islamic teaching (AlMunajjed, 1997; Baki, 2004; Fanjar 1987; Patai, 1983; Zant 2002). Accordingly, gender segregation practices in Saudi Arabia have been formed and enhanced to protect people's *Ired* or perhaps to block all passable roads that might lead to women losing their chastity and virtue. In other words, gender segregation has come about as a means of preventing people from committing adultery. In practice, in Saudi Arabia today, a loss of *Ired* is only associated with female – and not male – chastity. It has been argued that this perception of *Ired* has led to a woman being considered as an “erotic creation” (Jawhari, 2007), and also provides a sexualized depiction of women who live in mixed gender environments.

From my experience as a Saudi citizen, I think that Saudi international students need to be prepared for the mixed gender experience. I grew up in an environment that all of my friends were males and I attended all male school and university. My relationships with females have been limited to only my family members and my wife. Therefore, the first exposure to mixed gender environment was critical experience. People in Saudi Arabia are rarely able to see unrelated females. I have only seen females in hospital as a doctor or nurse and some families have female servants. So the important question is how an individual who lives in such an environment experiences the transition to an environment where the genders mix freely.

Overview of the Literature on Saudi International Students

Many different aspects of international education have been discussed and examined in the literature. For example, issues such as cultural shock (Cullingford & O'Neill, 2005; Furnham, 2004; Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008), academic and social adjustment (Andrade, 2006; Grayson, 2008), intercultural sensitivity and competence (Bennett, 1993; Gill, 2007; Volet, 2003), international students' security and rights (Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, & Forbes-Mewett, 2010), and internationalization (Baker, Creedy, & Johnson, 2009; McTaggart & Curro, 2009). Most of these aspects, however, can be divided into two major categories. The first is; international students' experiences, including their social and academic experiences, their psychological and sociological needs and also their rights and security. The second category is business and marketing; in this literature researchers look at international education as a product and are concerned with how to export education to the global market, how to internationalize the product, and the quality and reputation of individual universities and providers. In this literature review, my focus is on the first division: international students' experiences.

There is a wealth of literature that has documented personal, academic and social problems that international students face while trying to adjust to an unfamiliar academic and cultural environment. In Australia, most of this literature is focused on students from East Asia and India, simply because of the huge number of students from these regions compared to students from other regions. After reviewing the relevant literature it would appear that only a few studies exist about Saudi international students and most of these were conducted in the 1980s and early 1990s in the United States of America (USA). According to Shaw (2009, p. 49),

“This lack of early research may be due to historical factors . . . Saudi Arabia was characterized by isolationism, and a significant percentage of its population was nomadic Bedouins . . . Oil money . . . dramatically changed Saudi Arabia's deeply traditional society. The nation opened its doors to outside influence and began sending its students abroad a decade later”.

Another reason why Saudi people preferred not to study overseas in the past was the restrictive religious discourse that did not permit travelling to “the lands of the infidel” (Abu-Sahlieh, 1996; Ibn Baz, 2000). Thus, this current study will help to address the absence of Saudi students' voices in the international education literature. The existing literature on the Saudi international students' experience has provided the following insights.

Firstly, most of studies that have examined the Saudi international students' experiences have attempted to test hypothesis and correlate variables quantitatively (Al-Banyan, 1980; Al-Nassar, 1982; Shabeeb, 1996) in order to

identify students' academic difficulties, their attitudes toward their new academic environment, and their perception of the facilities and services offered by a university (Akhtarkhavari, 1994; Al-Dakheelallah, 1984; Al-Jasir, 1993; Al-Nassar, 1982; Basfar, 1995).

Secondly, in relation to the current study, there has been no published research specifically about the experience of Saudi international students living in a mixed gender environment. However, there is published material relating to Saudi international students' general problems (Al-Jasir, 1993; Al-Shedokhi, 1986; Alkhelaiwy, 1997; Hassan, 1992; Midgley, 2009b), academic problems (Gauntlett, 2006; Shehry, 1989), adjustment issues (Jammaz, 1972; Midgley, 2009a; Shabeeb, 1996), perceptions of achievement (Al-nusair, 2000; Shaw, 2009), motivation (Gauntlett, 2006), engagement (Midgley, 2009a) and home-stay experiences (Fallon & Bycroft, 2009).

Thirdly, quantitative studies reported that Saudi international students consider the English language to be one of the most difficult adjustment areas (Jammaz, 1972; Rasheed, 1972; Shabeeb, 1996; Shehry, 1989). These studies found that students' age (Jammaz, 1972; Shabeeb, 1996), marital status (Jammaz, 1972; Rasheed, 1972; Shabeeb, 1996; Shehry, 1989), courses of study (Jammaz, 1972; Shabeeb, 1996), and gender (Shabeeb, 1996; Shehry, 1989) were associated with their perceptions of the difficulty experienced in adjusting to the English language. The literature reported that social relationships with local students and the community also had a significant effect on the student's ability to overcome language difficulties and hence increase academic success (Jammaz, 1972; Shehry, 1989). In 1986 Al-Shedokhi reported that the greatest concern for Saudi international students was financial assistance and of least concern was an interaction with the opposite sex. Different historical factors may have been operating here, for example, at the time many students who travelled overseas to study came from privileged families and this presented problems of a particular kind. Today, students from Saudi Arabia represent a broader cross-section of the society made possible through King Abdullah's scholarship program. Certainly, Al-Shedokhi's findings are not supported by present research.

Fourthly, there is an absence of qualitative research about the Saudi international students' experience (Midgley, 2009a, 2009b; Shaw, 2009). Only five qualitative studies were found relating to the Saudi international student' experience and these consisted of one unpublished research project (Shaw, 2009) and four published research papers. The first two papers were conducted by Midgley (2009). Both papers are based on ongoing PhD research about the experiences of male Saudi Arabian nursing students at an Australian university. The third study was conducted by Gauntlett (2006) who reported ongoing research about the academic expectation of Gulf-sponsored students in Australia. The fourth study was conducted by Fallon and Bycroft (2009) to develop materials for Saudi Arabian home-stay students. All of these papers have focused on Saudi international students in Australian institutions. In addition, Shaw (2009) undertook a PhD study to examine the educational experiences of Saudi Arabian students in institutions in the USA. In general, qualitative research demonstrates the following findings:

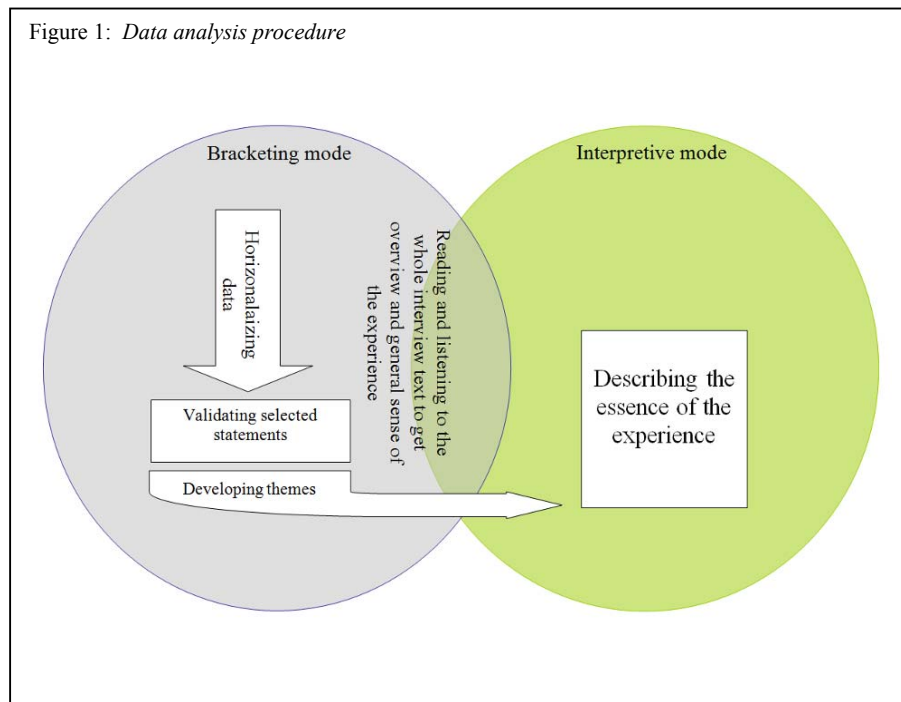
- Some Australian home-stay research reported that some Saudi male students show a lack of respect for women (Fallon & Bycroft, 2009)
- Culturally, a Saudi male must take responsibility for his family members, particularly women who depend on him completely, therefore Saudi students relative to males from other cultures tend to have a 'higher' level of concern about their wives while they are studying and this might have a negative impact upon their experience (Midgley, 2009b).
- Some Australian home-stays, who hosted Saudi students, have reported positive experiences. They perceived Saudi students as "being reliable, respectful, caring, polite, honest, and involved in family life" (Fallon & Bycroft, 2009, p. 5).
- Amongst Saudi students themselves there was a range of different experiences and approaches to living in Australia deriving from each student's individual personal relationships that epitomize "unique and highly complex internal networks of attitudes, values, experiences, abilities, beliefs and convictions" (Midgley, 2009a, p. 93).
- Personal adaptation resilience and intercultural competence are the most fundamental characteristics for Saudi students if they are to have a successful international experience (Shaw, 2009).
- Saudi sponsored students might lack motivation to take responsibility for their studies compared to other international students (Gauntlett, 2006).

To sum up, it is obvious that most of the research on Saudi international students' experiences is quite old, and many changes have occurred in both the international education sphere and Saudi socio/culture sphere. Therefore, more recent research is necessary and this present research could add to our knowledge by investigating the phenomena of how Saudi international students experience being in mixed gender environment.

Methodology

To explore the Saudi students' experience of being in a mixed gender environment I used a (qualitative) phenomenological approach. This approach has been derived from Husserl's philosophy of phenomenology (Edmund Husserl 1859-1938), known as a descriptive phenomenology (Creswell, 2007; Lopez & Willis, 2004; Todres, 2005). One of the major reasons for utilizing such approach is it allows participants to describe their actual experience as it emerges and, at the same time, assists the researcher in structuring the meaning of these experiences within a social and cultural context (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Crotty, 1996; Lodico, Spaulding, & Voegtler, 2006 p.16; Moustakas, 1994).

Four in-depth interviews have been planned with four participants in order to provide rich descriptive data for the phenomenon being researched (Crotty, 1996; Moustakas, 1994; Seidman, 1998). To date, only one interview each has been conducted with two participants and it is these interviews and the analysis that formed the pilot study for this research and is presented in this paper. The two interviews were conducted in April of this year (2010) with two Saudi international students – a male and a female – who are currently studying at different Australian universities. Participants for the study were selected according to the following criteria; (1) they are studying in a mixed gender environment; (2) they are Saudi-sponsored students; (3) they have lived in a segregated gender environment most of their lives and have been here for more than one year; (4) they are willing to share their experience voluntarily and can participate in more than one interview (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994).



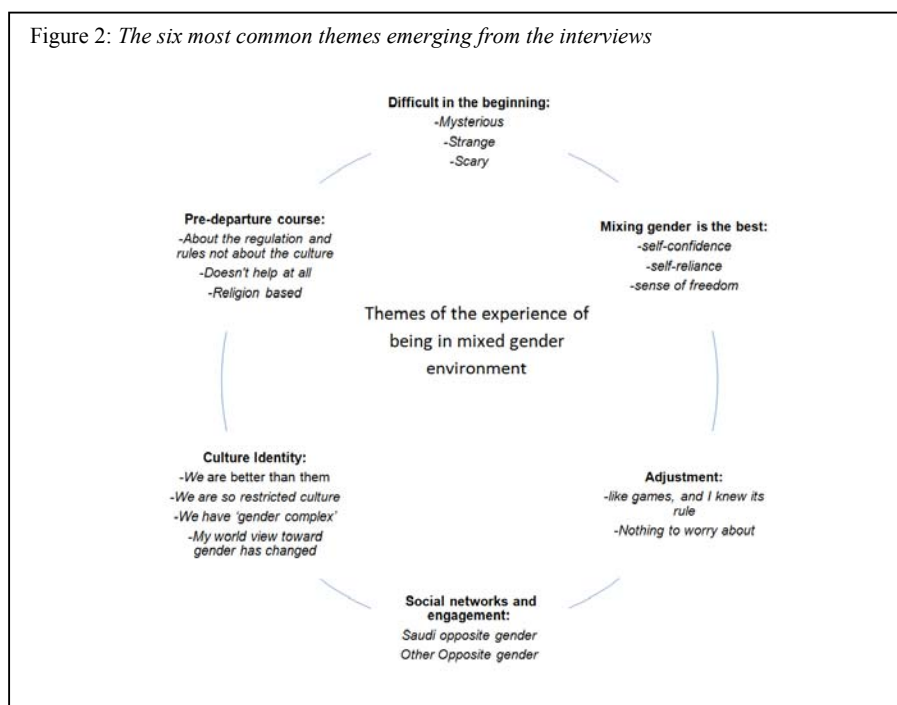
Findings and Discussion

During the interviews, descriptions were provided by the participants regarding their studying and living experience. For example, language and communication difficulty was one of the major challenges that participants shared with me. Participants also encountered some difficulty in adjusting to the new academic system and "fitting in" the new lifestyle. However, the current research seeks to explore the essence of the experience; it focuses on the meanings derived from the individual's experience. During the analysis process, I was looking to provide an answer for the research question which is *how the Saudi international student experiences being in mixed gender environment*. However, I realized that there are two phenomena involved in

Saudi international students' lived experiences. The first is the phenomenon of being 'international students'; the lived experience of 'foreigner' who use different language; studying in different academic system. This phenomenon also contains the experience of being 'far away' from social and friendship networks. The second phenomenon is the lived experience of Saudi students in a mixed gender environment itself; the phenomenon of how individuals, who spent most of their lives in a segregated gender environment, experience the transition to a mixed gender environment. It is not an easy task to distinguish between these two phenomena, since the experience of being in a mixed gender environment is strongly tied to, and is involved with, the participants' experiences of being 'foreign'.

Six essential themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews that describe how Saudi international students experience being in a mixed gender environment. These themes are difficult in the beginning, positive and good, adjustment, social network and engagements, cultural identity, and pre-departure course (Figure 2). In this paper, two of these themes, difficult in the beginning and cultural identity, are discussed. Each theme is relating to the two purposes of the research:

1. To explore the essence of Saudi international students' experiences of being in a mixed gender environment
2. To investigate how this experience may impact on an individual's cultural identity.



First theme: Difficult in the beginning

The analysis from the pilot interviews uncovered that being in a mixed gender environment for Saudi international students involves some difficulties. Participants provide different reasons that caused the difficulties. One of the common and logical reasons is because it is a new experience that they hadn't been exposed to it before. The new cross cultural experience is usually a challenge to navigate through it. It was described as "strange", "mysterious", "scary" and "nightmare". For example, Zahra described her experience in the first week as a "horrible" time. It was so difficult being in the classroom with unknown or 'foreign' males.

"Explicitly, the first class was horrible; was very bad. It is probably because I have not been in such position [mixing with males]. So, I was silent most of the time; I didn't talk with any one most of the time; and I isolated myself in corner. . . Mixing [with unknown males] is difficult for me because I have to deal with foreign men and I don't know them . . . I do not have a problem to speak with men. But the problem for me [is that] sometimes I think what if this man cross the limits between how I can deal with such behavior. So I

preferred to stay away from the men. . . In the first time it was hard, I couldn't do any thing by myself. Many times I just cried. The life [here] was mysterious in the beginning"

Being in a mixed gender environment was a difficult experience for the female. Therefore, she preferred isolating herself rather than engaging with her classmates, particularly the males. The problem in Zahra's case was that the presence of male classmates was considered a source of difficulty and anxiety. Being in mixed gender environment for Saudi female is like being under threat from males in the class. Therefore it was considered as "scary" experience. This is possibly a result of how Saudi female is enculturated to perceive members of the opposite sex who are not relations. It has been argued that in segregated gender societies, girls are brought up with 'intimidation' and 'warning' about boys and mixing with them. The boys are portrayed as sexual and evil and not as friends or classmates and they are described to the girl as human wolves ready to attack her (Fanjar 1987; Jawhari, 2007).

Engaging with opposite gender in a mixed gender environment was associated with some concern and hesitation for Saudi male. Therefore, he thought carefully before talking with females. This hesitation was caused by what Ali called 'women's complex'. The 'complex' is created by the restrictions and limitation on females which have been enhanced by the culture of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia. However, the difficulty was very significant in the beginning, from participants' arrival, particularly in the first three months and the getting used to it along with the time. According to Ali:

"I think nothing to be worry about it here in terms of dealing with women except that we have 'women's complex' [that impacted] our dealing with women. ... We have culturally restrictions in dealing with women; women does not appeared in our society . . . in our society I am not allowed to see any women except my close relative who permissible for me to see them. However, when we come here I see women I see what I haven't seen before! ... We coming from an environment that is closed, so at the beginning I have faced a difficulty in dealing with the opposite sex. . . [This difficulty] in the speech. . . For example, I was very careful choosing the right words when speaking with female. This is because it is new experience. . . The most difficult time for me is the first three months in dealing with female. . . however, 'the women's complex' is still continuing."

This difficulty that both male and female experience when they were exposed to the mixed gender environment could be understood better in the context of the second theme.

Second theme: Cultural identity

In the interview participants noticed that some changes have occurred to their cultural identity. They reflected on how their belief about themselves, in relation to their cultural identity, has been impacted. However, I have seen the identified changes in their cultural identity as an essential phenomenological interpretation for how the phenomenon of being in gender mixed environment is difficult and scary for the Saudis. In order to understand this theme, we should examine what the Saudi cultural identity looks like and the role that gender segregation values play in their cultural identity.

Cultural identity, in this, context refers to a complex set of beliefs that people have about themselves in relation to their cultural and historical context and this includes transmitting and inculcating knowledge, beliefs, values, attitudes and traditions (Berry, 2002; Boski, Strus, & Tlaga, 2004; Jameson, 2007). Accordingly, it could be argued that the gender segregation practice with its attached values and associated beliefs and ideological discourse has contributed, in some way or another, to fabricating and constructing the Saudi cultural identity. In relation to the Saudi international students in Australia, there are three 'types' of identities that interact to constrict the students' cultural identity: tribal identity, religious identity and the national identity (Baroni, 2007; Doumato, 1992; Kumaraswamy, 2006). For Saudi international students the religious identity is the most superior, identifiable, and overlapping identity (Baroni, 2007; Kumaraswamy, 2006). Religion is in the prime position because Saudis consider their religious identity and national identity intertwined since the Saudi state's authority is not accomplished without supporting the Islam in its Wahhabi version (Baroni, 2007; Ochsenwald, 1981). Another reason is because the significance of the tribal identity is not so noticeable in Australia compared to its' presence in the home country. Therefore most Saudi international students attach themselves culturally to the Islam; they identify themselves as Muslim *who does whatever Allah commanded and avoids whatever Allah prevented*. For the Saudi international student religious identity is a central affiliation in terms of cultural identity. This type of identity has been supported and enhanced by the Saudi governmental sources and even the pre-departure course offered by the Saudi Ministry of Higher Education emphasizes the importance of maintaining cultural identity as more important than assimilating into the culture of the host nation.

As it mentioned earlier, most of Saudi considered gender segregation practice is not only a governmental regulation but, before that, it a religious order by 'Allah' which all Saudi should respect and follow without any

hesitating. If it is one of Allah's commands all Muslims must accept it and do it as Allah said in the Holy Quran (Yusuf Ali, 1994):

It is not fitting for a Believer, man or woman, when a matter has been decided by Allah and His Messenger to have any option about their decision: if any one disobeys Allah and His Messenger, he is indeed on a clearly wrong Path (33:36)

Therefore, a person who believes that gender segregation is part of the Islamic teachings does not only feel regret and guilt by disobeying his God if he/she practiced otherwise, but he also believes that he/she is on a 'wrong Path'! Another attached value to the gender segregation, in the Saudi mind, is that separating sexes is a protection and screen that prevents people from falling into 'vice' or 'sin'; it is prevention from conduct of adultery which is one of the major great sins in Islam (see the Holy Quran, 17:32). The concept of adultery is not only the physical relationship but also goes beyond that to include non-innocent glances, talk and touching. For example, in his *Hadith* book (Volume 8, Book 74, Number 260,) Al-Bukhari reported that the Prophet- peace be upon him- said:

"The adultery of the eyes is the sight (to gaze at a forbidden thing), the adultery of the tongue is the talk, and the inner self wishes and desires and the private parts testify all this or deny it."

In other words, gender segregation also protects tribal identity which is embodied in *Ired* and the tribe's honor. It is seen as a valuable practice for person's tribal identity and the religious identity as well since it keeps *Ired* (female's chastity and virtue) safe and pure.

The two participants clearly stated that their worldviews about themselves have been changed by being in mixed gender environment. For example, Zahra stated clearly that she is now confident 'to deal with male'— after the all the 'scariness' and 'horribleness' that she felt in the beginning. She learned from her experience in mixed gender environment how to make her own rules that male cannot cross. Zahra said:

"... Being here has changed my personality completely . . . The most important advantages from (being here) refined my personality in a good way, and I became more independent.... I refined my personality. Not only me, who realized that, but my family also said that: Zahra has changed . . . Finally, I learned how to deal with man with confidence and how to make my own rule. So When I come back to Saudi Arabia, I will be more confident"

Ali also has been changed. He says feel more 'mature' after all his 'hesitation' in the beginning. He clearly described that when he said:

"... The time spent in this experience helps person to be more mature..."After a while, I found myself deal with the female as any other "person" who I respect and appreciate... In the past, I was afraid to communicate with a female... (Being in gender mixed environment) is good experience and I benefited from having it"

These changes are associated with the participants' cultural identity if looked at it in its holistic context. Clearly, participants, in their new experience, realized that they had what Ali called "*gender complex*". The meaning that they made of the sense of *gender complex* involves two intersecting elements, fear and hesitation. The fear is , because it associated culturally in the Saudi minds that femals are weak and cannot deal with any sexual harassment and perhaps she cannot take care of the *Ired* that her family is strongly associated with. This meaning can be noticed from Zahra's descriptions of her new experinc. For example, she said :

"... the problem for me [is that] sometimes I think what if this man cross the limits between how I can deal with such behavior. So I preferred to stay away from the men..."

As a Saudi and interviewer, I clearly understood what she meant by saying: "*cross the limits*", she meant harassment. At that time of her experience she was inhibited by the traditional image about, herself as female and about the male. The traditional image suggesting that the female is weak, dependent and *Ired* and the male is a source of threat.

The other element of *gender complex* is hesitating when dealing with someone from the opposite gender. This hesitation can be noticed from Ali's statement when he described the beginning of his experience. He said:

"... we come here I see women I see what I haven't seen before! ... We coming from an environment that is closed, so at the beginning I have faced a difficulty in dealing with the opposite sex. . . [This difficulty] in the speech. . . For example, I was very careful choosing the right words when speaking with female..."

However, the sense of fear and hesitation in the beginning of their experiences can be associated with some identified aspects of the Saudi cultural identity. As a Saudi male, my cultural identity, in relation to the gender, is influenced by beliefs and values that go beyond the gender segregation practices in Saudi Arabia. These beliefs have created a sense that separating sexes is important in order to protect the female who is 'so weak' and 'cannot protect herself' from the male who is 'not confident' enough to control his sexual desires without social maintenance. Reconciling such beliefs to participation in a gender mixed society is challenging and also highlights the beliefs themselves as they are confronted on a daily basis.

Conclusion

The findings of the preliminary analysis of the pilot study revealed that being in mixed gender environment is an unfamiliar phenomenon that Saudi students encountered in Australia. Participants noticed some difficulties as well as some advantages. The data analysis identified six themes overlapping the experience of being in mixed gender environment. This paper describes two themes that participants discussed in rich detail during their interviews. It showed how the Saudi culture of extreme gender segregation has impacted on the experience of these students, particularly in their ability to relate to members of the opposite gender in a mixed gender environment. Participants indicated that being in mixed gender environment impacted on their cultural identity. Although their positive experience has not been discussed in this paper, it is clear from statements, like the one cited above, when Zahra said her personality has completely changed, that not all the experience was negative. The data analysis procedure demonstrated how complex it is to explore lived experience. It is complex because this kind of experience involves two intersecting phenomena; each of one them is structured differently by the student.

Note, another complex issue involved difficulty in working across languages. The participants wanted to describe their experience in Arabic and the researcher therefore became not just translator but also an interpreter. This created the problem of linguistic, as well as language, interpretation. This issue has been recognized by Jamjoom (2010) in her research which also entailed the use of English and Arabic. A suggestion to be interviewed in English was rejected by the participants. From this pilot the researcher has explored the view of Saudis as international students, acknowledges some common experience due to religious and national identity being, in some ways, inseparable from their own cultural identity. The issue of translation and interpretation discovered during this pilot study will be further investigated in the literature review and may lead to minor design changes of the major thesis (Jamjoom, 2010)

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