How Do Americans Perceive Arabs? Social and Cultural Experience of University Students

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ABSTRACT

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

Keywords: University, diversity, social, interaction, international students.

Introduction

The majority of international students comes from developing countries to study in developed western countries (Altbach, 2004). Beaver and Tuck (1998) found the most important reasons non-domestic students enroll in English speaking countries is to improve their proficiency in English and develop social relationships with domestic people (Beaver & Tuck, 1998). The reasons students seek international education can be classified as push and pull factors (Skinner & Shenoy, 2003). The push factors refer to circumstances that encourage students to pursue their education in countries other than their homeland and include poor education, social injustice, limited job opportunities, and a range of economic and political circumstances. The pull factors refer to attractions that invite international students to study in host countries and include scholarships, high quality of the education, political ties, and the anticipation of finding rewarding jobs in a competitive labor market (Skinner & Shenoy, 2003).

Most young adults about to start college approach this transition with a mixed feeling of happiness and anticipation (Jackson, Pancer, Pratt, & Hunsberger, 2000). They expect college life to bring them important opportunities for intellectual, personal, and social development. Many of these expectations are realized while other positive feelings characterizing students' precollege life are replaced by negative feelings after spending some time at college (Pancer, Hunsberger, Pratt, & Alisat, 2000). Student experiences at college are often harder and more stressful than what many of them expect (Compas, Wagner, Slavin, & Vannatta, 1986). Students in their first academic year learn to adjust to new requirements, such as independence and coping with a new environment that differs from the one experienced in high school. They usually move away from their families and friends for the first time during this period and live away from their social support system (Rice, 1992).

Transition from secondary to university education is a challenging experience for both domestic and international students. In this study, the term domestic students refer to students attending college in their native country, that in this case is the United States. International students refer to students native to countries outside the U.S. enrolled in courses

at American colleges or universities such as Arab. Arab students are usually admitted under a temporary visa that lasts for as long as they are in school (Skinner & Shenoy, 2003). There is a common expectation that, as part of the college experience, both American and Arab students will develop new ways of thinking, learning, and communicating. (McLean & Ransom, 2005). Current research sheds light on international student issues but it rarely does so from the perspectives of domestic students (Jon, 2009). For example, many studies address the economic benefits international students bring to higher education institutions (Lee & Rice, 2007). Unlike most studies addressing international students' issues from their perspectives, this study will try to understand the nature of interaction between American and Arabs students but from the domestic students' perspectives. Learning about the perspectives of American students, who represent almost 95% of the higher education population, will potentially inform college administrators about how to increase the frequency and quality of the interactions between these student groups. Improving intergroup relations should make the college experience more rewarding and beneficial for everyone involved.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore American students' perspectives regarding interaction with Arab international students. The growing number of international students in U.S. colleges and universities represents a valuable opportunity for cross-cultural interaction and communication (Volet, 1997). Knowing how American students view Arab students when they are together on or off campus will illuminate the nature of cross-cultural communication within a university context. Such an investigation also has the potential to reveal why open social and cultural interactions may or may not be occurring (Cruickshank, Chen, & Warren, 2012; Leask, 2001; Volet, 1997; Wright & Schartner, 2013).

Literature Review

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

Ethnic diversity on campus provides domestic students with an ideal opportunity for deepening cross-cultural communication and interaction with international students. According to Volet (1997), this interaction is vital to enhancing the culturally sensitive emotional intelligence for building and cultivating positive relationships with diverse social groups.

Lack of interaction, however, between domestic students and international students hinders achieving the social and cultural goals of international education. Therefore, one of the main challenges facing international students and the focus of this study is their limited interaction with Americans (Al-Sharideh & Goe, 1998). International students increasingly desire to interact and befriend the domestic students with whom they attend school (Smart, 2000; Ward & Masgoret, 2006) and are frequently disappointed when they are unable to interact with domestic students or cross the hidden barriers that impede establishing cross-cultural friendships. One unintended consequence of this failure that makes it even more difficult to establish rapport is each party assuming the other does not want to initiate relations with them (Le, 2010). Low levels of interaction between domestic and international students limits the benefits both groups can achieve (Ward, 2001). Research suggests these interactions are critical to achieving social, cultural, and academic

goals, such as the development of unanticipated and rewarding friendships, exposure to new cultures and ways of thinking, and bringing new perspectives into classroom discussions. (Clark & Maharey, 2001; Halualani, Chitgopekar, Morrison, & Dodge, 2004; Ward, 2001)

Social Capital

Capital is usually associated with benefits, assets, or investment returns. It is connected to one's wealth, as in financial capital. Students have three forms of capital that can help them achieve academic goals: financial capital associated with tangible things such as money for fees and tuition; human capital, such as students and faculty members; and social capital that is a form of interaction among students themselves and between students and faculty members (Roberts, Clifton, & Etcheverry, 2001). Among the three types of capital, researchers have prioritized the importance of social capital for improving a student's academic experiences (Prado, 2009; Tramonte & Willms, 2010).

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

Scholars suggest a distinction exists between two dimensions of social capital: formal and informal social capital. Formal social capital refers to participation in formal community organizations (Putnam, 2000) and informal social capital refers to social links between individuals and their personal surroundings, such as friends, colleagues, family, and neighbors (Lin, Cook, & Burt, 2001). Putnam (2000) also distinguishes between two types of social capital and the networks formed by them. He defines bonding social capital as relationships formed between homogenous groups (i.e., American students), whereas bridging social capital is shaped across heterogeneous social groups (i.e., American and Arab students).

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

Racial and Cultural Diversity

Luo and Jamieson-Drake (2013) pointed to the importance of increasing the number of international students in

college to encourage interactions among students. Domestic students had better chances of engaging in recurrent international interactions, in addition to gaining more openness to the different perspectives international students bring to classroom discussions. They acquired intercultural awareness as well as tolerance and acceptance of others. They were also more ready to challenge and evaluate their own beliefs. However, Luo and Jamieson-Drake indicated that the number of international students enrolled in a university does not guarantee cross-cultural interaction. When interactions take place, there is always a chance for misunderstanding. Thus, educational institutions have to take a critical role in reinforcing international diversity through a friendly learning environment for international students, such as providing a welcoming and caring learning atmosphere, one free from prejudice and discrimination and providing fruitful cultural experiences for domestic students. Regular contact with faculty, extracurricular activities, and involvement in cultural organizations were also important factors encouraging interaction between domestic and international students (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2013).

Arab Stereotypes

Negative stereotypes and biases against some cultures prevent domestic students from interacting with some international students. International students have different experiences in the U.S. and Britain associated with their origin home countries. Some of these experiences can be attributed to stereotypes people in the host countries have about other cultures and ethnicities (Lee & Rice, 2007). In his study, Beoku-Betts (2004) found white teachers in Britain suspected educational abilities of African graduate female students and criticized their dialect. Consequently, the students had negative feelings toward interaction with people from the host culture. According to the researcher, the faculty behavior stemmed from common views of Africa as an unimportant continent (Beoku-Betts, 2004).

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

"Arabs" is a term first used in the pre-Islamic era to depict groups of people who lived in the Arabian Peninsula and Syrian Desert (Patai, 1973). The 'Arab world' and/or the 'Arab nation' are terms used to describe 22 Arabic speaking countries distributed between the Middle East and North Africa (American - Arab Anti Discrimination American - Arab Anti Discrimination Committee, 2009). The Arab countries in the Middle East are: Jordan, Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, and Yemen. The Arab countries in North Africa are: Egypt, Sudan, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco, Mauritania, Somalia, Algeria, the Comoros Islands, Eretria, and Djibouti. Arabic is the main language for these countries, but it is not the only language. Many common features unite the Arab world, such us language, history, culture, and religion. Even though Islam is the religion of the majority, there are thousands of Jewish Arabs and millions of Christian Arabs (American - Arab Anti Discrimination American - Arab Anti Discrimination Committee, 2009).

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

Overtime, some of these stereotypes might have changed recently and events in the world might alter existing stereotypes.

Methodology

Research Context

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

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

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

Research Participants and Selection Process

Study participants were selected through purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling helps researchers develop deep understanding and gain insights about the phenomena they study. A major advantage of purposeful sampling is selecting information-rich cases to study intensively. For this study, information-rich cases were American students who had the opportunity to interact with Arab students during their undergraduate life. The purposeful selection of participants helped me understand in greater depth the nature of the interactions that took place between the two groups (Creswell, 2012). The purpose of this study was to explore American students' educational perceptions of and interactions with Arab students at a Midwestern university, hereafter referred to as the New Century University (NCU). The individual interviews conducted with 15 junior and/or senior American students in the business college (13 female and 2 male). Four of the 15 students were first-generation college students and 14 had travelled outside the U.S. for tourism or with parents who worked abroad for a while. One student was homeschooled. To assist in locating participants who might meet my selection criteria, the associate dean for academic operations and undergraduate programs at NCU business school sent an email to all junior and senior American students (1428), inviting them to participate in the study. Students who responded to the invitation emailed me directly. Then I conducted the interviews in a place and a time agreed upon by participants and me. Most of participants were from the Midwestern region (10), three were from the South, and two were from the West. Nine resided in urban areas and six were from rural areas. Three students were online students and 12 were full time students on campus. The age of participants ranged from 19-45 years.

The Qualitative Interview

The primary data source used in this study was face-to-face individual interviews. Interviewing domestic students

was the strategy I used to gain insights about the nature of the interactions between American and Arab students. In qualitative research, interviewing tends to be less structured than asking sequential questions and relies more on open-ended questions that help participants talk about the world from their emic perspectives.

I conducted face-to-face interviews with 15 junior and/or senior American students in the business school (13 female and 2 male). The sample size in purposeful sampling is "determined by informational considerations. If the purpose is to maximize information, the sampling is terminated when no new information is forthcoming from new sampled units" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 202). Thus, I stopped gathering information when saturation was reached; that is, when

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

Findings and Discussion

This chapter presents three themes and nine subthemes. The first theme covers students' experiences with interaction outside of class and some factors influenced this type of interaction. The second theme discusses the obstacles hindering more frequent or smoother interactions between students. This theme is divided into three subthemes: "Hesitant to Interact," "Language Barriers," and "Misconceptions." The last theme, "Improving Relationships between Arab and American Students," discusses the openness of American students to improving their relationships with Arabs and the curiosity they had about their culture.

Out-of-Class Interactions

American student participants had an insignificant amount of interactions with Arab students outside of class. They sometimes met to work on projects at home and had occasional conversations in the library but rarely socialized in public places. Cross-cultural interactions did not extend beyond asking for directions about how to find something or someplace or asking their colleagues for recommendations about courses and professors.

Unless it pertained to a class requirement, the American students in this study did not routinely interact with international students. Clarified one student, "Just if we have a class project. I am so busy and my mind is so focused on the things I want to do, I don't really feel the need." Another student confirmed, "We have a study group that meets on Sunday with one international student. At least he came and we all talked and socialized and no one felt out of place."

Social life. American students had their own preferences when it came to selecting their social surroundings. They preferred to spend time with familiar people who shared the same cultural background. One student explained, "Americans are very cliquey, liking their own group and resisting change or outside ideas. I think a lot of that stems from American culture being resistant to change and pro-America." Added the student, "I think Americans are not big risk takers." Another student questioned, "Why would I step out of my comfort zone if I already have a group of people? We have our common habits and routines so why would I meet new people with a different lifestyle?" One student shared, "I am not the kind of person who will start a conversation with a stranger. I just want to go to class, finish my coffee, and get my studying done." Confirmed another student, "I am busy and when I go out, I try to get things done. Then I have to go home because I have two kids and I also work."

Only one student mentioned having an Arab friend with whom he hung out on occasion. The student stated, "His name is Ahmed. We text back and forth and meet once every two weeks. I feel I know more about him [personally]

but not so much about his culture or country." Added the student, "So, I have questions that are more about him versus the whole country [Jordan]. I ask him questions about particular issues to get an idea of how his country sees certain things."

Visiting Arabs in their homes.Visiting Arabs in their homes allowed one male American student to learn more about Arabic culture and traditions. He described his visit to an Arab home to work on a class assignment: "I got there, took my shoes off at the front door, and noticed two of his friends on the couch smoking a hookah. It was the first time I had seen this." He continued,

While I was working with him, he left the hookah and had his roommate serve us coca- cola. I've never asked my roommate to do that. They are very welcoming. His roommate made us tea, which I have never had with milk in it and then we sat down with these little cups. He served from a big golden thing and at the end, his roommate came and served us water before I left.

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

Obstacles Preventing Interaction

To understand the nature of interaction between American and Arab students, it was important to discuss obstacles that prevented interaction between them. Both groups seemed to be hesitant to communicate with the other because they did not want to step outside their respective comfort zones. The language barrier was another factor hindering fluid communication between students. In addition, misconceptions of Arabs held by Americans diminished the likelihood of improving academic and social communication.

Hesitancy to Interact

Participants discussed the mutual hesitancy of American and Arab students to initiate interactions with the other. This hesitancy seemed related to perceptions and presumptions about the other that closed off avenues of communication rather than opening them. One student stated, "When talking to Arab students, I feel they are reluctant, hesitant, and not encouraged to talk more. The same thing can be said about us [Americans] because we don't have many common topics to talk about." Commented another student, "They go, 'Oh, hi' and then just ignore you for the rest of time."

Similar to other international students, Arabs kept to themselves in closed groups that made it difficult for American students to penetrate these groups. Clarified one student, "You are only one individual which makes it hard. Because they already are a group, you hesitate about approaching or joining them." This hesitancy also shaped American student expectations about the willingness of Arab students to communicate with them. One student stated, "People in class sit together. So, I don't think either Arab or Greek students will go outside their group to meet the other." Agreed another student, "They don't open the door and let someone bring his friends in. They stick to people they already know and are comfortable with." Another student noted, "I have observed that many international guys interact only with each other and don't want to socialize outside their groups."

Some Americans were cautious not to offend Arabs by asking inappropriate questions or making insensitive comments. One student stated, "Americans live in a culture today where you can say the wrong things and you can offend somebody. And I think there is a lot of pressure not to offend anybody when you are really just curious." Another student agreed. "I think, at first, I was walking on eggshells because I was afraid of hurting someone's feelings. I didn't know what to do so I just talked like normal. It takes that kind of interaction to humanize people."

Misconceptions

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

Wealth. Wealth and oil was a perception some Americans had about Arabs. A few students thought Arabs possessed great wealth because many of their Arab classmates had governmental scholarships and owned expensive cars. One student stated, "At our university, some Arab students were very, very, wealthy students. They were the ones driving fancy cars; just insanely wealthy, insanely nice cars." The student added, "When I see an Arab international student, I feel now they are probably loaded with money." Another student affirmed this impression. "I know a couple of Arab students who have very nice cars. Like they drive very nice cars. People who drive $100,000 cars around campus, you don't see that very often." Along these lines, another student commented, "I think of the Middle East as oil. A lot of pictures on social media show a really wealthy side. They seem to have nice cars and very nice houses. These people are really rich."

The status of women. A majority of participants commented on gender separation and the status of women in Arab culture. One student explained, "I heard from a couple of people that in some places, women are not looked at as high as men." Students reported that the way women were portrayed in the media was far from flattering. Women were portrayed as oppressed, lacking civil rights, and controlled by male members of the family. One student stated, "They just don't have any rights, basically. I don't think I was really aware of it." Arab women were pictured as victims of a patriarchal society and of less value than men. Another student explained, "From the media, when you hear a bad story, you know like women get raped. They are expected to cover up their bodies more. There is a movie, *Wadjda*, that I watched for my class." Continued the student, "It was about Saudi Arabia and it talked about how women are not allowed to go outside without covering their face. I don't agree with that and they are also not allowed to drive themselves." Another student commented, "All of what I know is from that movie and the director. She was female and had to sit in a van and Skype her crew because she couldn't go outside and tell them what to do."

War and terrorism. War and conflict were the primary features most participants associated with Arabs. When asked about Arabs in the interview, one student stated, "I think of conflict in the Middle East and how that region has had a lot of conflict for years and how America has a lot to do with that. War and oil and deep, old, religious values." Another student stated, "I feel like any country associated with the Middle East is associated with being Muslim and automatically being a terrorist state, which is really hard to experience." For some, the benefits America received from being involved in the region played a role in these conflicts.

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

Arabs and Muslims. Most participants considered Arabs and Muslims to be synonymous and they could not distinguish between ethnicity and religion. Thus, they tended to think of them as belonging to the same kinship group. One student commented, "I feel I am not very educated about different religions, cultures, and ethnicities. So, I feel I want to lump everybody under the same tent and call them foreigners or foreign students." Another confirmed, "I think we tend to put them in one category. I don't know why we do that but we do."

Americans with limited knowledge about Islam and Arab countries were prone to confuse important distinguishing characteristics. When students were asked to name some Arab countries, they often named non-Arabic Muslim countries. Answered one student, "I believe they are from Iran, I am not sure, but I feel they are Arabic." Another

stated, "Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, and Jordan." He then questioned his answer: "Is Pakistan an Arab country?" Another student answered, "I think India is an Arab country, and Sri Lanka."

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

The prevailing values and beliefs in the larger society shaped some of the misconceptions held by the majority American students about other ethnicities. For instance, one student mentioned, "We grew up to believe what our parents believed in. I never use the N word but it's my dad's favorite word." The student elaborated,

I remember reading an article in the news about the university. They were talking about the Chapel, which was intended to be for any person from any religion and how people from outside the university community came in and tried to block anyone who was not Christian. That wasn't university students who did that; that was the community surrounding it. We had protesters who came from the outside community but we don't want them here. They went to the chapel and tried to say no one but Christians can be here.

Another student confirmed, "I haven't seen any backlash against Arabs or Muslims but I won't be surprised because Trump supporters jumped on that wagon. I have my worries but I won't be surprised if some violence takes place against Arabs." Some students associated discrimination against Arabs and minorities with the level of education Americans received. One student shared, "Discrimination is more of an issue for people who are not educated. I think our male [presidential] candidate wants to be involved in the Middle East to remove our enemies."

Altered Perceptions

This theme addresses changes in the perceptions of American students regarding Arab students. Participants had several preconceived notions about Arabs and their culture. However, spending time with Arab students either inside the classroom or in places outside the classroom contributed to changes in the image held by American students about Arabs. Exposure to Arab students in and out of the classroom helped American students to realize that much of what they heard about Arabs and their culture was not accurate. A few participants felt it was better to learn directly from Arabs themselves, not from external resources such as the media. To varying degrees, constructive interactions ignited the curiosity of some participants to know more about this controversial culture and its people.

Arabic language, history, and great scholars in various fields of science were among the first things that occurred to one student when the topic of Arabs came up. She stated, "I think about the Arabic language, the Arabian Peninsula, and the literature I've read about trade and how money used to come and go through the peninsula. Also, I think of Algebra because of when I was in trade school." Another student voiced, "It's super cool to know someone who speaks two languages; it is kind of a novelty to talk to people who know more than one language."

Another student reported having more positive thoughts about Arab students once she started meeting them in class. She stated, "My preconceived notion about them was they were wicked smart already and didn't need to spend as much time studying as I did." Some students thought Arabs in the Middletown were highly educated because they occupied important professions. One student questioned why "all the specialist doctors I go to are Arab." He wondered if something special about the culture encouraged people to succeed.

Just under half of the participants reported a decline in the influence of the media after they began learning about Arabs. They felt they more accurately understood the actual situation of Arabs in the Middle East. Stated one student, "I feel it changed a little bit. The misconceptions are a little more cleared out. You can realize how rational they are." Another student stated, "Slowly over my years here, misconceptions just deteriorated and disappeared. This is because I have been exposed to too much." Explained another student, "I think interacting with Arabs destroys the perception

the media has. The media is always betraying a culture as a bad guy but that's not always true." After talking to Arab students in the library, a couple of participants were surprised to learn that Arabs could be friendly. One student stated, "I thought they were scary at the beginning. I thought they would treat me as a subordinate or someone less than them, or maybe be sharp when they spoke." These students attributed their initial perceptions to what they had seen on TV. Added one student, "All the movies I watch about Arabs portray them as evil people. I remember bad Arab characters in movies about Jason Bourne, Indiana Jones, and James Bond." Continued the student, "A lot of the people were from Saudi and they were always the bad people, blowing things up or stealing stuff."

In general, participants gained a better understanding of everyday Arabian life and culture and were surprised to learn that Arabs have numerous opportunities to have fun and enjoy their free time. One student stated, "It provides clarifications about who they are and what they are about. It makes you see they are just people." Another clarified, "When I meet with people from different countries, I get to learn more about what actual life is like in their countries. We assume those countries are at war all the time." Continued the student, "I was surprised when a friend told me they go out to watch movies and attend concerts. 'Hey guys, do you have that?' Because we have a very limited view of what's happening there. We assumed they were always at war." In addition, some students realized Arab countries varied according to their conservative or liberal lifestyles. One student stated, "I continue to learn that each of them is different. For instance, Jordan and Lebanon are more progressive Arab countries and countries like Saudi Arabia and Yemen are stricter." For a few students, interacting with Arabs did not change or add any ideas. Stated one student, "One good person won't change my ideas. Another clarified, "Honestly, if someone said 'Middle East', I would still think of the same thing." Another added, "I don't think I've had enough exposure to change the way I think."

Conclusions and Implications

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

Arab students congregated in large groups with fellow Arabs either in class or in their free time on campus. This behavior discouraged their American classmates from joining their conversations because speaking in Arabic left them feeling isolated and unwelcomed. Arabs used their native language to compensate for their displaced social system, which they left behind in their home countries. An advantage to Arabs of socializing only with Arab classmates was not having to exert the effort required to interact with Americans. Societal influences about Arabs and Muslims in the U.S. also hindered academic institutions such as NCU from getting rid of stereotypes associated with Arabs. Most participants were concerned about the impact of Donald Trump's speeches that revived discrimination against certain cultures, religions, and minorities in the U.S., especially Arabs and Muslims. They explained that during the 2016 presidential campaign, President Trump made antagonistic comments about Arabs and Muslims in his speeches. His speeches echoed in the community by encouraging discrimination against Arabs and Muslims. Unfortunately, several participants thought the tone and content of his speeches affected the way some Americans viewed the presence of Arabs on the NCU campus.

Implications

In this section, I discuss the implications derived from the findings and conclusions of this study. These implications are intended to support the social capital of students and to reinforce the bridging efforts between American and Arab students. The implications I discuss are relevant to American universities, classroom instructors, and Arab students studying in the U.S.

American Universities

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

Arab Students

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

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كيف ينظر الأمريكيون إلى العرب؟ التجربة الاجتماعية والثقافية لطلاب الجامعات

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ملخص

هدفت الدراسة إلى التعرف على المفاهيم الاجتماعية والثقافية للطلاب الأمريكيين تجاه الطلاب العرب الدوليين في إحدى جامعات الغرب الأوسط، لتحقيق الهدف، وأجرى الباحثان مقابلات فردية مع 15 طالباً أمريكياً من طلاب السنة الثالثة والرابعة في كلية الأعمال(13 أنثى و2 ذكور). وتم اختيار المشاركين في الدراسة من خلال أخذ عينات هادفة، الأسئلة الرئيسية التي قادت الدراسة كانت: كيف يصف الطلاب الأمريكيون تجاربهم الاجتماعية والثقافية مع الطلاب العرب؟ وما العوامل التي تؤثر على تصوراتهم تجاه الطلاب العرب الدوليين؟ وأشارت نتائج الدراسة إلى أن معظم المشاركين يفتقرون إلى معرفة دقيقة أو متعمقة حول من هم العرب كشعب عرقي وثقافي، وحمل المشاركون العديد من المفاهيم الخاطئة عن العرب، وافترضوا أن العرب لا يحبون التفاعل مع الأميركيين في الحرم الجامعي بسبب عدة عوامل منها الحواجز اللغوية والتكتلات الثقافية؛ بسبب هذه الافتراضات، وكان الأمريكيون مترددين في التعامل مع العرب أو بناء علاقات اجتماعية معهم.

الكلمات الدالة:الجامعة، التنوع الثقافي، التواصل الاجتماعي، الطلاب الدوليين.